After Tendulkar

THE NEW STARS OF INDIAN CRICKET

Soumya Bhattacharya

A writer whose work we will read for years to come.
—Vikram Chandra, author of *Sacred Games*

Indian cricket has the most exciting batting line-up in the world today. Virat Kohli, Shikhar Dhawan, Cheteshwar Pujara, Rohit Sharma and Ajinkya Rahane, led by their captain, M. S. Dhoni, have routinely destroyed international bowling attacks. While the young bowlers in the team lack the burgeoning reputation of the batsmen, they have shone in flashes at home and abroad. The current and future brilliance of the members of this team is all the more remarkable when you consider their youth, relative inexperience and the fact that they are following in the footsteps of the golden generation—Sachin Tendulkar, Sourav Ganguly, Rahul Dravid, V.V.S. Laxman and Anil Kumble.

This book takes as its point of departure 14 November 2013, the date on which the last member of the golden generation—Sachin Tendulkar—retired from all forms of cricket. It covers the highlights of Tendulkar's last Test, as also the careers of the Fab Five before delving deep into the stories and exploits of the new stars of Indian cricket, as well as the one man who straddles both generations—Mahendra Singh Dhoni, the finest finisher in one day cricket today, and, statistically speaking, the most successful Indian captain of all time. The first major account of the future of Indian cricket, *After Tendulkar* is written with a novelist's vision and an eloquence that will be enjoyed by all those who love memorable writing about the game.

Also by Soumya Bhattacharya

NON-FICTION

Dad's the Word (2012)

All That You Can't Leave Behind (2009)

You Must Like Cricket? (2006)

FICTION

If I Could Tell You (2009)

After Tendulkar

THE NEW STARS OF INDIAN CRICKET

Soumya Bhattacharya

ALEPH BOOK COMPANY
An independent publishing firm
promoted by Rupa Publications India

First published in India in 2014 by
Aleph Book Company
7/16 Ansari Road, Daryaganj
New Delhi 110 002

eISBN: 9789383064885

To Oishi

On turning thirteen

Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

~ Philip Larkin

Sport brings us hope, in many different forms: and then, at fantastic speed, shows us what happens next.

~ Simon Barnes, *The Meaning of Sport*

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

TRANSITION IS ONE OF THE TOUGHEST THINGS TO MANAGE IN TEAM sport.

To lose players who have defined an era, who have made a team hugely successful, who have given it a certain aura and dazzle, to lose them one by one or all in one go through injury or lack of form or retirement till not a single one of them remains, and then to replace them with a new group of players, rebuild and work towards success again, turn them into experienced athletes who can shine on the world stage and hunt again for the glory that the players who are gone had given the team, surely, that must be one of the toughest and yet most fascinating things in team sport.

Ask the Australian cricket team that was hit by the retirements of Greg Chappell, Rodney Marsh and Dennis Lillee all at once in January 1984. Ask the Arsenal football team of the mid-2000s, which, soon after being christened The Invincibles, the team to have gone through one full league season undefeated—a feat last achieved in Victorian England and never repeated until Arsenal did it in the 2003-4 league season—began to lose, one after another, the players who had made that magical achievement possible. Ask the West Indies cricket team who found themselves one day without Clive Lloyd and Vivian Richards, without the fearful quartet of fast bowlers who had conquered the world.

Ask the Indian cricket team of November 2013.

On 16 November 2013, Sachin Tendulkar said goodbye to international cricket. He was the last of a generation of Indian cricketers who had in the first decade of this millennium taken India to never-before heights. Sourav Ganguly, Rahul Dravid, V.V.S. Laxman and Tendulkar were the Fab Four of our cricket. Add the match-winning, indefatigable Anil Kumble, and you had the Fab Five. Other than this group, the team was adorned with the explosive natural talent and ability of Virender Sehwag. A match winner, a batsman who could demoralize the opposition and determine the fortune of a match before a session of play had run its course, a worker of miracles, unorthodox, instinctive, unconquerable on his day. Sehwag was never considered to be part of the Fab Four, but he was a one-man army in his own right. He has a

Test average of 49.34; he has made more Test double hundreds than any other Indian; he has scored two triple centuries in Tests; and all this at a rate of scoring swifter than anyone else in the history of the game.

One by one, they had all quit the game they so adorned and adored. Tendulkar, last man standing, the bridge between that generation of unparalleled cricketers and the men who had in their eyes the dream of becoming the presiding legends of Indian cricket in the future, walked off in November 2013.

How golden was the golden generation, especially when they were all together and in their prime? For me that prime is the period between Ganguly becoming Test captain and the first departure of one of its members—Ganguly again—from the Test arena.

India have been playing international cricket since 1932. In the sixty-eight years between 1932 and 2000, India won thirteen Tests away from home. Ganguly became Test captain in November 2000. In the eight years between then and November 2008, when Ganguly played his last Test, India won eighteen Tests overseas. That is one important measure of how special they were.

Four months after Ganguly took over the captaincy, Australia, all-conquering, having won fifteen Tests on the trot, came visiting. They mauled India in the first Test at Mumbai. What happened in the second Test at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata over five days in March 2001 is now the stuff of cricket lore. It deserves a book to itself. Batting first, Australia made 445. India capitulated for 171 and were asked to follow on. A seventeenth Test victory for the most formidable cricket team of the twenty-first century seemed a formality.

And then came Laxman and Dravid.

They put on a 376-run fifth wicket stand. Laxman scored 281; Dravid made 180. They batted through the fourth day, scoring 335 runs in ninety overs, their partnership unbroken against an Australian attack which had been taking a wicket every nine overs. Ganguly declared the innings at 657 for 7, the second highest total a side batting second has made in the history of the game. Australia were bowled out for 212, leaving India winners by 171 runs. It was a Test that altered the course of the series, and of several careers, including Steve Waugh’s, as he retired three years later without having

breached what he had called ‘the final frontier’, the feat of winning a series against India in India. The Test also significantly changed one aspect of how the game is played: it put mortal fear in the minds of captains about enforcing the follow-on.

It was an epochal moment in Indian cricket. Coming as it did so early in Ganguly’s reign, it also set the tone and the template of what the golden generation was capable of, the dizzying heights it was capable of scaling. At the Eden Gardens in those five spring days, a sort of benchmark had been set. And the players showed that they could in subsequent performances match up to it.

One such performance came in December 2003 at Adelaide against Australia in Waugh’s farewell series. India were 85 for 4 in response to Australia’s first innings score of 556. Whereupon Dravid and Laxman got down to it once again. Dravid made 233 this time around, Laxman 148. Despite having conceded in excess of 500 in the first innings, India won, becoming the first team to take a lead against Australia in Australia in a decade.

In the final Test of that series at Sydney, Steve Waugh played a characteristically gritty innings to save the series, leaving it drawn at 1-1, one of the finest series in the modern game, one of India’s most memorable ever. ‘Ever so rarely comes a series that marks a turning point in history,’ *Wisden* wrote in 2004. ‘It may be years or decades before the significance of India’s tour of Australia in 2003-4 can be truly assessed, but in this series they announced themselves as a force in Test cricket, after years of living on promise and vain dazzle. They didn’t quite end Australia’s reign, but how close they came.’[1]

These two Test wins, both among India’s most significant and cherished, may have been resplendent of the brilliance of Dravid and Laxman, but each member of that generation of players has won matches on his own as well as in combination with each other. And as the first decade of the century wore on, this extraordinary set of cricketers, led first by Ganguly, then by Dravid and finally Kumble, playing with courage, audaciousness, immense resolve, style and swagger, won for India Tests in England, South Africa, West Indies and Pakistan. They reached the final of the 2003 World Cup, only to be vanquished by Australia. Playing together, their last memorable triumph was —again against Australia—at Perth, on a brutishly quick track, a Test the full duration of which they had not been expected to last, a collective effort of

gutsy determination securing a 71 run victory.

These men comprised not merely the best India side of all time. They changed Indian cricket for ever. They challenged existing perceptions, altered the way players, fans and the rest of the teams in world cricket looked at India on the pitch. From being happy to avoid defeat when overseas, they made India into a team that would look at a 1-1 series result as an opportunity wasted to win.

Tendulkar's retirement meant that the last vestige of that generation would vanish from the India dressing room. It was an unprecedented shift in India's cricket order.

If ever a team has had a problem of managing a transition smoothly, given the greatness of the team that preceded it, it would have to be the present Indian team. Fortunately, it's a team which has no dearth of young talent; all the best young players in this team have played alongside Tendulkar in his final Test. Most of them were barely in their mid-twenties. All of them had begun to make a name for themselves.

There was the scintillating Virat Kohli, already the holder of a bulging portfolio of ODI records, the man who, before he had scored his first five Test hundreds, was worth more in terms of endorsements than Dravid was more than halfway into his career; the tattooed, triceps-flaunting, moustache-twirling Shikhar Dhawan, married after a Facebook romance, seen as a kind of Virender Sehwag 2.0; the small-town wonder, Cheteshwar Pujara, vegetarian, teetotaller, devout, still living with the father who coached him and sacrificed such a great deal to make him what he is; and the reincarnated Rohit Sharma, six years ago said to be the next big thing, fleet of foot, fragile of temperament, the Mumbai man who, in his partying and lack of discipline and temperament, was never Mumbai-school in his cricket, but who finally remade himself and announced his arrival on the big stage in Tendulkar's farewell series.

They were led by M.S. Dhoni, a grizzled veteran at the age of 32; in terms of statistics, India's most successful Test captain (without having yet won, in November 2013, a Test in Australia or England); the man in charge when India reached Number 1 in Test rankings; the captain of the World Cup winning 2011 side; captain of the World Twenty20 champions in 2007; holder of the 2013 Champions Trophy; and one of the sporting world's biggest brands.

The Wankhede Test, imbued with the sense of the most historic farewell

in Indian sport, was perhaps the most watched, most talked about Test in India in recent memory. Part 1 of this book is partly a deconstruction of that Test (and to an extent of that series), and why it meant so much.

Intercut with the narrative of this Test are the stories of the group of players—in typical Indian style, all batsmen—who will comprise the nucleus of the new team that will take India into the 2015 World Cup, and further. Who are these young men who are taking on the responsibility of such a colossal transition? How are they going to respond, in the months and years ahead, as they come under the most intense scrutiny they have ever been placed under in their lives?

As the months unfolded, a couple of these players, through inconsistency or expedience, because of the pitch or conditions, occasionally lost their places in the side in one format of the game or the other. Someone else, such as Ajinkya Rahane, announced his suitability to be part of this core. Others—such as Ravindra Jadeja—began a journey of integration into first the ODI, and then, the Test team. Ravichandran Ashwin gathered as many advocates as detractors. The seam bowlers competed with each other to stake their claims in the side. Murali Vijay, in his second coming, became a more dependable and complete cricketer than he had seemed he would be when Tendulkar played his last Test.

But during those historic November days in 2013, Dhoni, Kohli, Pujara, Dhawan and Rohit seemed to be at the heart of the narrative that would shape Indian cricket. Part 1 takes a close look at their stories—who they are, where they come from, what shaped the narratives of their careers to make them the players they are, where they appear to be headed.

If India are, as the writer and former England batsman Ed Smith points out, cricket's Brazil—packed with natural talent and a symbol of what cricket can achieve both as a sport and as a nation-unifier—the rest of the cricket-playing world was curious about how the legacy of the Fab Four would be perpetuated. A posse of foreign journalists had turned up for the landmark Wankhede Test. The world's eyes had, for a quarter of a century, been on Tendulkar. From now on, they would be on these young players.

Part 2 of this book follows the performance of these young players and this new team, shorn of the legends of the modern game, in their first five key assignments between November 2013 and October 2014. Rare is the year in which India—never accomplished travellers before the Fab Five were instrumental in making them so—played such a lot of cricket away from

home. The team's first tour was arguably the most intimidating in contemporary cricket: a tour of South Africa. That was followed by a trip to New Zealand; the Asia Cup; the World Twenty20; and a full-fledged, five-Test-and-five-ODI tour of England (from where the previous incumbents, the golden generation with the sheen wearing off, had returned disgraced in 2011).

These challenges were scheduled to be followed by hosting the West Indies at home in a Test and an ODI series; there was a certain symmetry to it all as at the beginning and end of the twelve-month period the West Indies would be the opposition. In between the team would have to tackle major series that would allow us to form an impression of how ready these young men were to take on the huge task that had been assigned to them. All this would lead up to a tour to Australia and the World Cup in Australia and New Zealand over February and March 2015, a competition in which India were defending champions.

It always takes a while, but some teams handle transition well, grow strong from the experience, forge their own identity. Ask the Australian teams led by Allan Border, Mark Taylor, Steve Waugh and Ricky Ponting. West Indies cricket found Brian Lara. It unveiled several outstanding fast bowlers. But never did they come remotely close to the swagger and scintillation of the Lloyd-Richards era.

Certain teams carry on, a limited version of what they once were, neither all-conquering nor quite the bottom of the barrel, its supporters learning to come to a compromise, to think that this is about as good as it will get with what they have, and yet, as another season goes by, think with a kind of wistfulness of those trophies, those wonderful years, that had once seemed to be merely their due. Ask the Arsenal fans. After the FA Cup of 2005, Arsenal next won a trophy, the FA Cup again, in 2014.

What will India's team be like? Which of the above templates will they fit? Or will they turn out to be quite something else altogether? By looking at where these players come from, by placing them in the context of the canon of Indian greats, especially Tendulkar, and by examining how they performed in their first five assignments together, Part 2 of this book will explore where these men—from a country defined by their chosen sport and carrying on their shoulders a billion dreams—might be headed. In doing so, it will also explore what it takes to achieve sporting greatness; and how fragile is the notion of sporting glory.

Part 1

Goodbye, Hello

ONE

AT 3.25 P.M. ON THE SUN-SPLASHED MUMBAI AFTERNOON OF 14 November 2013, the moment arrived. On the eve of the twenty-fourth anniversary of his appearance in Test cricket, Sachin Tendulkar walked out to bat for India for the very last time. It was a moment freighted with more than a particular moment can reasonably be burdened with: a sense of history; wistfulness; unbridled adulation; uninhibited frenzy; salute, tribute, valediction.

Goodbye. There will never be another you.

This Test, this hastily arranged two-Test series against the West Indies, had never been about anything else. The cricket had largely been irrelevant. The West Indies were invited because you cannot have a farewell party without guests. This was the opportunity to arrange a grand farewell on a grand stage for India's greatest sporting legend. No cricketer of the modern era has been fortunate enough to have had a send-off such as this.

The paraphernalia around the series had begun to swell no sooner than the dates of the two Tests had been announced: 6-10 November in Kolkata; and 14-18 November in Mumbai. Tendulkar had requested that he be allowed to play his final Test, his 200th, at his home ground. The Indian cricket board had readily acceded to his wish.

A commemorative postage stamp. A commemorative coin for the toss. Commemorative souvenirs. Sachin masks for members of the crowd. A life-size wax replica adjacent to the dressing room door at the Eden Gardens. A plan to have 199 kilograms of rose petals showered from a helicopter on to the pitch to mark his 199th Test in Kolkata. (A plan that did not in the end materialize.)

All over Kolkata, in the days leading up to the start of the Test, expressions of homage were abundant. A tableau celebrating the great moments of his career. A photo exhibition hosted not far from the stadium. Across the city, towering billboards with quotes from famous cricketers about Tendulkar gazed down at the stream of passing traffic on the major thoroughfares.

In Mumbai, an exhibition of rare photographs spanning his career at his

old school, Sharadashram Vidyamandir. Restaurants and bars, showing the match on big screens, rolled out special menus and offers.

Hundreds of thousands of cricket fans were outraged in Tendulkar's home city. The Wankhede Stadium holds no more than 35,000 spectators. In the traditional manner of ticket distribution, most of the tickets had gone to the Mumbai Cricket Association and its affiliated clubs. Only a few thousand were on sale in the open market. The website selling the tickets crashed within minutes of going online. Unsurprisingly, tickets were available for ten times their actual prices on the black market.

Tendulkar himself had asked for 500 tickets for friends and family for the Wankhede Test. He had asked for a ramp to be built at one of the entrances so that his wheelchair-bound mother, who had never watched him play in a stadium before, could attend his final Test.

For the many millions who could not make it to the Wankhede, there was —as always with cricket in India—television. As Ramachandra Guha noted in his 2002 book, *A Corner of a Foreign Field*, when Tendulkar bats against Pakistan, the TV viewership in India exceeds the population of Europe. In the eleven years since that statistic was revealed, the viewership must have seen an increase larger than the corresponding one in Europe's population. For many years now, with the country's cricket administration making it as arduous as possible to go to watch the cricket (heavy-duty frisking at the gates; a ban on taking in food and water which has increasingly become a ban on taking in anything other than oneself; prohibitively expensive and poor food in the bowels of the stadium), grounds have remained at best half-empty during Tests. Much more than spectators inside the stadium, TV is the real source from which money is made.

Media planners and corporate bosses knew that these two Tests presented an opportunity like no other. The Wankhede Test, in particular, was far and away the most watched Test in India in recent memory. Newspapers reported that ten-second ad spots during the Test were being sold at a premium of 200 to 300 per cent.

As the frenzy began to build in Mumbai, it spilled over in Kolkata, the host of the first Test. When I arrived in Kolkata on 6 November on the first day of the match, the city's discourse—always partial to meandering discussions in general, and protracted discussions on politics, the arts and cricket in particular—was dominated by talk of Tendulkar's impending last bow at the Eden.

West Indies won the toss and batted first. The high point for the crowd came in the final over before tea. With the visitors on 188 for 6, India captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni tossed the ball to Tendulkar. It was at this ground that, as a bowler, Tendulkar had distinguished himself in one of the many stirring matches of his career.

In November 1993, in the semi-final of the Hero Cup, a tournament that might have been named with him in mind, Tendulkar, at the time only four years into his international career, wrested the ball from his captain, Mohammad Azharuddin, and bowled the final over of the South Africa innings. South Africa needed only 6 runs to win; Tendulkar allowed them 3, and powered India into the final. Ever since, the Eden has been in his thrall.

On this warm and muggy November day, there was no similar pressure. But there might have been in the master the urge to nod to that game his younger self had made his own twenty years ago. The crowd, not as substantial as one could have hoped for on a day that offices had opened again after Diwali and Bhai Phonta (or Bhai Dooj), started chanting deliriously. A leg break. A googly. And then one that went straight on, dipping on the batsman, Shane Shillingford. He tried to defend, but was struck right in front. Tendulkar had a wicket in what would be his final bowling performance at the Eden Gardens. Few would have dared to hope for this bonus.

A reversal of this dismissal would be enacted the following morning, reflecting the love that cricket has of enforcing patterns on the narrative of the game.

Having lost eight wickets for 96 runs, the West Indies were all out for 234, the kind of implosion they would make their trademark through this series. At close of play on the opening day, India had scored 36 without loss in eleven overs.

When play started on the second morning, the crowd offered Shikhar Dhawan and Murali Vijay, the two openers, the sincere but slightly impatient cheers accorded to supporting bands preceding the headline act in a rock concert.

Dhawan, after a cavalier start, first gifted the West Indies his wicket. When Shillingford bowled him, the small boy two rows in front of me pumped his fist. ‘At least till the fall of the second wicket, there will be more West Indies supporters here than India ones,’ remarked the resident wit among a group of college students who—in the manner that only college

students can afford—planned to be at the ground for every day of the Test.

The fourth ball of the ninth over of the second day's play found the crowd in full voice. Shillingford flighted one up to Vijay. He walked past the ball, and was stumped.

All eyes turned to the pavilion towards which Vijay began to walk. No one was looking at Vijay.

Forty minutes into the day's play, Tendulkar made—for what turned out to be the last time ever at the Eden Gardens—his purposeful stride out to the wicket. The applause that began rippling out from either side of the pavilion turned into a wave, then a huge wave and finally drowned it. By the time Tendulkar took guard, not a pair of hands in the stadium was left unsore.

Tendulkar's defensive shot off the first ball was met with the sort of applause that greets a century. As he judiciously left alone a ball outside the off stump from the fast bowler Tino Best, the applause repeated itself. A punch to point got him off the mark and the crowd to its feet.

The percussive calling out of Tendulkar's name, a double-barrelled chant, the vowels elongated in the first utterance, and shortened in the second, began at different points on different occasions. It was then picked up in other parts of the ground.

In the eleventh over of the day, Tendulkar drove Shillingford, with the spin, gloriously past midwicket. It was his first four. Complete strangers were hugging each other a few rows along from where I sat.

Two balls later, Tendulkar followed up with an almost identical shot, only ever so slightly straighter. The crowd seated beyond the billboard into which the ball rocketed rose as though it had received a benediction.

This is what they had all come to see. How superhuman would you have to be to concentrate on playing the ball in the midst of this solid wall of noise, noise focussed on you, a mighty fervour on display for your benefit? Former Australia opener Matthew Hayden called it 'a nation's frantic appeal to one man'. Tendulkar has dealt with it for twenty-four years. Now, in his last two Tests, with the hysteria having risen many pitches, he was dealing with it for the last time.

When drinks were called at the end of the first hour, Tendulkar was on 9; India were on 71 for 2; and Shillingford had settled into a rhythm that was testing both the master and his partner, Cheteshwar Pujara.

Three overs and three balls later, Tendulkar was gone. Shillingford bowled the doosra, Tendulkar failed to spot it, and it straightened and hit the

back thigh pad. Shillingford, whom Tendulkar had trapped leg before wicket on the previous afternoon, had meted out retribution by getting Tendulkar out in the same fashion on the second morning. Subsequently, replays from a side-on angle showed that the ball would have gone over the top of the stumps, but no one in the stands knew that. His innings had lasted forty minutes. He had faced twenty-four balls.

A hush, as in a cathedral, smothered the stadium. Three, four moments of it, and then the spectators stood, a prolonged standing ovation, swelling in its intensity and then holding it, audible from near the High Court and the river, continuing till after Tendulkar had disappeared into the pavilion.

The energy was in an instant sucked out of the crowd. With India 119 for 5 at lunch, the daze seemed to not have lifted from the Eden.

'Out so soon,' said an elderly man, clapping one of his hands to his forehead as he clung to a packet of biryani with the other at lunchtime. 'I can't believe it.'

One of the college students, buoyed with the irrepressible optimism that only young people have a reservoir of, consolingly said: 'India will bat again. We'll see him bat again.'

They did not see him bat again. The West Indies denied them the opportunity. After India scored 453, thanks to centuries from Test debutant Rohit Sharma and Ravichandran Ashwin, the visitors capitulated for 168 in the second innings. India won by an innings and 51 runs. The Test was over in two-and-a-half days.

And so to Mumbai. And to that freighted moment at 3.25 p.m. on the first day of the Test.

Arriving to take my place in the Wankhede's Sachin Tendulkar Stand nearly two hours before the start of play on the morning of 14 November, I discovered that I was likely to miss being able to see the toss. The gates had not yet opened, but the queues had wormed out on to Marine Drive, and hundreds of people, stared at enviously by the inhabitants of the houses on the road, were creating a cheerful, anticipatory din. The stiff early morning breeze, cooling and calming, was successfully withholding all signs of how hot the day would turn out to be very soon.

While waiting, you could have the India flag painted on your face for thirty rupees a pop. The man in the queue in front of me had a bright idea. 'Will you write "Tendulkar" on my cheek instead?' he asked. No sooner than he had asked—and been obliged (for the same price as the painting of the

flag)—the tricolour painting was forgotten; the number of those who wanted ‘Tendulkar’ or ‘Sachin’ or ‘10dulkar’ or ‘Tondulkar’ painted on their cheeks burgeoned by the minute.

The T-shirt sellers were doing brisk business. Other than replicas of Tendulkar’s ODI shirt, there were several new designs and motifs, each with slogans that riffed, variously, on the indivisibility of Tendulkar and God.

A huge collective groan went up inside the ground as the spectators realized that Dhoni had won the toss and chosen to field. Given the wicket, Dhoni had made the right decision, not that the crowd cared. This groan was echoed, after a beat, by the thousands still on their way in to the ground, who had found out from their smartphones the outcome of the toss.

In one more unprecedented gesture, the final forty seconds before the commencement of play were counted down—appropriately—by Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli, Shikhar Dhawan and M.S. Dhoni. (Had Pujara been added, we would have had the full complement of the core of the team to which in this Test Tendulkar would hand on the baton of Indian cricket.)

Under ordinary circumstances, it would seem odd that a player who was barely on the periphery of the action for sixty-nine of the ninety scheduled overs of the day should command so utterly the attention of the crowd.

But then, these were not ordinary circumstances.

The crowd had to make do with watching Tendulkar field, but how they make did. On giant screens inside the stadium, mobile phone companies were encouraging spectators to send messages to Tendulkar. A selection of those messages—notwithstanding their corny nature—was displayed on the screens to rapturous applause through the day.

The biggest cheer of the day while India were on the field went up when Tendulkar came to patrol the boundary in front of the Sachin Tendulkar Stand in the thirty-eighth over of play. It would probably have been churlish for him to not respond in any way, so Tendulkar smiled and waved, a touch bashfully. The spectators erupted like groupies at an Arcade Fire concert. Then, gesturing towards the pitch, he pleaded for the noise and the chanting of his name to stop. But who would listen to him on a day such as this one? Tendulkar had only to touch the brim of his white hat to make the crowd roar. It was as though twenty-four years of adulation were funnelled into these few days of intense, untrammelled hysteria.

Pragyan Ojha cleverly used the turn and bounce of the wicket to pick up 5 for 40 in 11.2 overs. (He then dedicated his haul to Tendulkar. It was just that

kind of occasion; it would be impossible to find a parallel with any other Test.) Ravichandran Ashwin, with his 3 for 45, reached a century of wickets in Tests and was an able foil. But did the thousands at the Wankhede have an eye (or voice) for them? How could they when Tendulkar was running around at backward square leg and making a routine stop?

From the second over of the day, the crowd began imploring Dhoni to give Tendulkar the ball. The captain at least seemed to stubbornly maintain the fiction that the cricket was important, that bowlers bowling well should be allowed to go on.

TWO

AMONG ALL MODERN INDIA CAPTAINS, MAHENDRA SINGH DHONI IS unique. Unlike Kumble, Dravid, Ganguly and Tendulkar, he is a small-town boy who has made spectacularly good. Born in Ranchi in what is now Jharkhand and was at the time of Dhoni's birth on 7 July 1981, in Bihar, Dhoni is the son of a pump operator in the Mecon colony. At one time in his career, he himself made his living as a travelling ticket examiner on the Indian Railways.

Unlike Tendulkar, Dhoni was never destined for greatness before he was a teenager. Unlike Ganguly, he was not born in a family that was steeped in cricket and was a part of the city's educated, affluent elite. Unlike Dravid, he is not a thinker, reader and great student of the game. Unlike Kumble, he is not a qualified mechanical engineer.

In terms of where he came from and how he got to where he has, Dhoni's story is unique. One of the most remarkable things about the story is that, on several occasions, it was on the brink of not being written at all.

His natural predilection was for football. A Manchester United supporter, Dhoni seems most expressive on the field nowadays when the India team is doing its pre-game training by way of playing football.

A goalkeeper in school, he was a regular—and regularly successful—at school-level competitive tournaments. He did play tennis-ball cricket, though, without having much affinity for the real thing. Having seen him bashing tennis balls with a bat, someone had put out word about his abilities to Keshav Ranjan Banerjee, the cricket coach of Dhoni's DAV Jawahar Vidya Mandir school, and Sanjeev Kumar, the school cricket captain. Banerjee and Kumar coaxed Dhoni to come for cricket practice when he was a student of Class 8. On the first day, Kumar told the *Hindustan Times*, he turned up in his football gear. They threw some balls at him on a concrete surface. Dhoni gathered the balls, his movements limned by his goalkeeper's technique. Banerjee and Kumar liked what they saw. Had it not been for the duo, the career of the wicketkeeper who has played more matches for India than any other in the country's history would have been stillborn. (As a result, Dhoni's keeping technique is far from classical. Former India wicketkeeper Syed

Kirmani, who is India's best wicketkeeper of all time, has remarked upon this. 'I don't like the way he stands on his heel[s] while he is waiting for the ball to be delivered. A wicketkeeper should always be on his toes.')[2]

Some seven or eight years after he first turned out on the concrete surface for practice at school, Dhoni came close to giving up cricket. He was a travelling ticket examiner in Kharagpur. He complained to his friends that his job was too taxing, there was a great deal of travel and that he was finding it hard to find the time and energy he needed to devote to cricket. Shortly afterwards, he returned to Ranchi so that he could start playing again. There would be no stopping him thereafter.

He made his Ranji Trophy debut for Bihar in the 1999-2000 season. His first first-class hundred came in the following season. In 2003-4 season, he was part of the East Zone team that won the Deodhar Trophy. Next came a call-up from India A. In December 2004 he made his international debut, playing in an ODI against Bangladesh at Chittagong.

From then on, it seemed that nothing could stand in Dhoni's way. Till India's tour of England in 2007. At the time, in a team powered by a group who had been christened India's batting galacticos by *The Guardian*, and captained by Rahul Dravid, Dhoni was struggling. His keeping, never as solid as some would have liked it to be at the international level, had got better and then again dipped. He was finding it hard to adjust to the conditions of the English summer, having dropped fairly simple chances in the tour matches prior to the first Test at Lord's. In the team, picked as an opening batsman, was another wicketkeeper: Dinesh Karthik. Were he to keep wickets, India would have the luxury of an extra batsman. For the first time in his fledging career, Dhoni's place was at stake.

He played in the end. And not only did he play, he made a bloody-minded, gritty 76, still one of his most important Test innings, to save the Test. It was an invaluable contribution; having drawn at Lord's, India then went on to win the three-Test series 1-0.

Thereafter, his ascent was dramatically swift. The narrative arc of Dhoni's career has been up and up, like the trajectory of the balls he sends into orbit as a batsman, rising and still rising as they clear the fence. It was as though, to borrow from Richard Powers's novel *Orfeo*, his life had 'gone from black and white to Day Glo in one jump cut'.

Just as dramatic as his cricketing rise has been the manner in which he has metamorphosed from the young man from Ranchi with streaked long hair

to Indian cricket's best paid global superstar.

Dhoni is conscious of his small-town origins, and what they entail. Asked in an interview on *ESPNcricinfo* in 2008 whether players who come from small towns are hungrier for success, he said: 'In a way, I believe in that, because if you are from a smaller place where the cricket infrastructure is not good, you have to struggle a lot. You don't get good practice facilities, you don't play too many games on turf wickets, and even to get into your home side, you struggle a lot. All of these things do have an impact on the guy's playing style or the way he thinks of cricket. He is very clear about one thing: if he performs, only then is he going to stay there. It's not like the guys from metros or big cities are not good enough or mentally tough: the guys from smaller states or smaller cities, they struggle a bit more.'[3]

This awareness informs Dhoni's character and demeanour, perhaps even more so now that he has moved so far away from where he began his exceptional journey. Those who know him often use the word 'humble' to describe him. *Business Today* magazine reported an anecdote in which Dhoni walked out of his five-star hotel room and asked the tired guard posted on duty especially for him to leave because, not intending to leave his room, he said he needed no security. His agent-manager-friend Arun Pandey spoke in *Anandabazar Patrika* of how, despite his staggering wealth, Dhoni would still first check if something he wants to buy has the offer of a discount with it.

In many ways, Dhoni has remained conscious of his roots—and true to them. But he has never been bashful about his origins. While not being brash or disrespectful, he has never been apologetic about where he comes from, who he is, how he plays (as we'll soon see, how he plays, or at least bats, is connected to where he comes from) and who he wants to be.

In that same 2008 interview, shortly after he had become India captain in the Twenty20 and ODI formats, Dhoni astonished many purists by saying that he could not bother to be either a student of the game or aware of cricket's history. He let on that watching cricket bored him; he said that when he was younger, he would not even watch a full innings of an ODI.

It was a telling window into how his mind works, and what goes on inside his head.

'I'm not really a keen watcher of cricket. Even in the last World Cup, [in 2007], I just watched Sachin bat. The last game we played, we lost to Australia, and I only watched Sachin bat. I cannot sit in a chair and watch. I

don’t study cricket too much. Whatever I have learned or experienced is through cricket I’ve played on the field, and whatever little I’ve watched. And statistics, I know nothing. If you ask me “Who is the first player to do this or that?” you won’t get anywhere close to a correct answer from me.’[4]

Was that because he was impatient and restless? ‘It’s not restlessness, because I get glued to video games for three or four hours. Cricket, I could never sit down for three and a half hours to watch a whole innings. When I started understanding cricket, back then it was mostly the first fifteen overs, depending on the start. If Sachin and Sourav were batting and they don’t get out for five overs then you know that till the fifteenth over the match will be interesting. If either of them carried on—they were aggressive and used to go after the bowlers—I used to watch till the game was interesting. After that I would wait for the fortieth or forty-second over. I have never watched a game from the first over to the fiftieth over.’[5]

Now it seems incredible that he would be this frank. He has stopped giving one-on-one interviews. When interviewed before a game or in post-match presentations, he has learned to hone platitudes to perfection, giving nothing away. In those performances he comes across as remote, aloof, sometimes condescending, appearing impatient and annoyed if the question is blunt and not to his liking. In those performances, on being asked about certain questionable decisions and team selections, he has developed a smirk, a sneer that communicates—wittingly or unwittingly—that he is above all this, that he cannot be bothered to be held to account.

That is a public persona Dhoni has put out. But what is the man *really* like? He is not overly sociable; he has no fixed set with whom he is seen. Several of his India teammates find him hard to get hold of on the phone. Dhoni, the person, comes across as inscrutable, unknowable.

When he first broke into international cricket, there was much talk of his love of drinking milk. (Ravi Shastri once proclaimed at a presentation ceremony that Dhoni drank four litres of milk every day. Dhoni later clarified that the figure was exaggerated.) Now he gets a new hairstyle (on one occasion, a rather ill-advised Mohawk) before each tour. He is the wealthiest cricketer in the world according to *Forbes* magazine, commanding fees reportedly in excess of ₹100 crore a year from endorsing brands. He loves riding each of his seventeen Yamaha 350D motorbikes. He owns licensed guns and is a sharp shooter, one of his New Year’s Day rituals being to visit a firing range. He gives to charity.

The path of his career and the circumstances have turned him into a more rounded, complex, often contradictory personality, although his passion for video games remains unabated. As former India coach Greg Chappell observed in the *Wisden India Almanack 2014*: 'He has become an icon of modern India. [When I first met him], Dhoni's body language suggested that he was confident without being cocky. He preferred to be approached rather than do the approaching, but he was always prepared to talk. His interests were many and varied, but generally involved power and machines. MSD loves motorbikes, knows a lot about military aircraft and has an affinity for weapons. The softer side of him is demonstrated by his knowledge and love for nature and animals. The contradictions in Dhoni make him interesting.'[6]

These traits are less contradictory than complementary. In his ambition and poise, in his leaving behind but not losing sight of his roots, in his vaulting success and metamorphosis, Dhoni exemplifies the small-town boy who turns into a national and international success, he is the bearer of the flag of small-town India that, in its aspiration and its self-assurance, believes it deserves to—and can—compete with the big cities.

Dhoni is not the first cricketer from a provincial town to play for India. Certainly he won't be the last. (Already there have been others, from similar towns in India's hinterland who have played, and are successfully playing, for India.) But no one but Dhoni has been able to come from such an obscure background and not merely sit at the highest table of Indian cricket but be at home sitting at the head of that table. In that he is again unique.

Because he emerged from a state that had so little in terms of cricketing infrastructure, Dhoni's style of batting is unique. Neither the product of a cricket academy nor the beneficiary of top class coaching at the junior level, his style is home-grown. He has often been asked about his technique. And he has often said that this is the only technique he knows, the only way he knows to bat. He has refused to change, showing again that while he was aware of the unconventionality of his methods, he was not going to go out of his way to be deferential to authority when his method seemed to him to be working well enough.

He hops on to the front foot when he is worked over by fast bowlers. His forward defensive shot is not what you would want a young player to emulate. The square cut, after having played a decade of international cricket, remains outside his repertoire. His bottom hand is phenomenally strong and imparts much of the preternatural power with which he imbues his shots. He

punches forcefully through point or the covers, rocking back on to his strong legs. He rampages down the ground to belt incoming balls inside out on the off side.

But he prefers most the arc between long-off and midwicket, a wide segment of the ground in which he hits the ball with the sort of force that threatens to cause grievous bodily harm if a fielder gets in the way of it. In this arc he clobbers the ball irrespective of where the fielders are; and he hits, cleanly, however far back the field is set because he is unafraid to play in the air, mighty heaves that launch the ball, a white orb dwindling to a speck, hurtling into the night sky.

His signature shot, the one with which he announced his arrival on the world stage, and the shot that launched TV commercials, is something that had not been seen in an international game before. It is more a tennis stroke than a cricket one. A vicious sort of topspin forehand, played with immense power, depositing a full-length ball or a yorker on his off stump over long-on. Photographs of Dhoni from his early days show him executing this. His right leg is planted firmly on the ground. His left leg is in the air, splayed, at an angle to the ground. The muscles on his right forearm are taut, rippling, evidence that that ferocious bottom hand has come into play. In a picture I was examining while writing this, the follow through is huge; the bat has described a sizeable arc and come to rest almost parallel to Dhoni's still head.

Lore has it that this shot, prevalent in tennis-ball cricket in Ranchi, was made popular by someone called Santosh Lal. It took the young Dhoni's sense of unbridled adventure and unerring attacking instinct for the international cricket world to glimpse its potent power.

Verbs associated with delicacy or elegance will not do when it comes to describing Dhoni's batting; ones that convey the strength of bludgeoning are appropriate. So 'caress', and 'glide' are absent from his batting lexicon; 'smite', 'whack', 'heave', 'scythe' and 'clobber' form the core vocabulary of his batting.

His first two ODI centuries, the second coming six months after the maiden one, are manifestations of that lexicon. The debut hundred in April 2005, scored in Dhoni's fifth ODI innings after an unexceptional start to his international career, catapulted him, with the mighty force of one of his own sixes, into the national consciousness. Batting at Number 3 against Pakistan at Visakhapatnam, he made 148 runs off 123 balls. In the innings were fifteen fours and four sixes and it was the first ODI century by an Indian specialist

wicketkeeper.

It was a murderous innings, and one that was different from anything Indian fans had seen. On show was not the unique hand-eye coordination and timing and free strokeplay that Virender Sehwag (who scored 74 in the game) treated us to. This was not the sort of assault that Tendulkar in his prime would unleash, blending classic stroke making, precise gap finding and intelligent innovation. Here we were confronted with unfettered, savage hitting, there was nothing dainty or stylish about it, this was slaughter with a lot of blood on the floor.

Against Sri Lanka in October 2005, Dhoni wreaked even more havoc. In an ODI at Jaipur, he cudgelled and pounded, bashed and hammered his way to an unbeaten 183 off 145 balls. He led the way to a victory that demanded 299 runs, in those pre-Twenty20 days not as achievable a target as it seems now. He batted again at Number 3, and he hit fifteen fours and ten towering sixes. Twice he hoicked Chaminda Vaas, the wily veteran fast bowler, for sixes over extra cover. India captain Rahul Dravid called it one of the great ODI innings of all time and compared it to Tendulkar's 143 against Australia at Sharjah in 1998.

These two redoubtable hundreds defined Dhoni's early ODI career and fixed his image as a buccaneer and a marauder, a batsman who clouted fours and sixes with the reliability and regularity of a slot machine that clatters out chocolates and chips.

It was an image that did not please Dhoni as much as one would think. As early as June 2005, he told the *Indian Express*: 'I hate it when people call me a pinch-hitter. I am more of a stroke player. I have had enough of simply hitting the ball hard in the first fifteen overs.'[7]

And, so began the transformation of Dhoni the on-demand big-hitter to Dhoni the destroyer, Dhoni the most dangerous and accomplished finisher in the ODI game.

Since his early days in the international game, Dhoni has not changed around the basics of his batting. If there is the one thing that he has changed —and it is a change that has contributed enormously to his evolution as a batsman—it is his approach to batting. Gradually he began to concentrate on playing out the middle overs, in seeing an innings through. Determined and tenacious, he focussed more and more on brisk running between the wickets, on taking fewer risks early on, and eschewing in the fledgling stages of his innings the sledgehammer blows over the fence. He aimed to keep the run

rate within manageable limits and, with a final, purposeful, explosive surge which recalled the bashing of his first two hundreds, take India over the line.

As he did this again and again, his confidence about his ability to repeat the feat grew. He backed himself to see things through even when the asking rate became—to lesser mortals—beyond the realms of plausibility. Currently, with Dhoni out there, no chase seems unattainable for India. He has brought to bear on ODI batting a particular kind of magic that shows no sign of waning.

By the time Tendulkar's farewell Test came around, Dhoni had become a sort of don of ODI batsmanship. But if he is a Godfather, he is more Al Pacino than Marlon Brando, nerveless, eyes blazing with intensity, as much fire as ice, the possibility of visiting carnage barely suppressed and simmering beneath an unflappable exterior, the violence with the bat ready to boil over when the occasion demands it.

The 2011 World Cup final was one of the occasions that demanded a title-winning innings from Dhoni. It became the most memorable showcase for how Dhoni had transformed himself. That innings, concluding with the lofted six with which he won the match, will always remain one of the most defining performances of his career.

Till the final, Dhoni had not had much of a World Cup. His captaincy had come in for some criticism. He had refused to let the team settle down to a fixed batting order. He had stuck with Piyush Chawla (who had faltered) in every game, and refused to let Ashwin have a look-in. The returns from his batting had been meagre; he had scored only 150 runs in seven previous outings in the competition. In the fourteen ODIs leading up to the final, he had scored not a fifty. His highest score in any World Cup had been 34.

He did change plans around in the final—and he again changed the batting order. Needing 275 to win under the lights at the Wankhede Stadium, India were 114 for 3 in the twenty-third over. No team had ever chased down as large a total in a final. The required run rate was inching up to 6, and there were more than twenty-eight overs left to play.

Cue, Yuvraj Singh, the player of the tournament, winner of four Man of the Match awards in the competition already, in the sort of form that makes the supporter's pulse quicken as he walks out to bat. The crowd tensed, ready to begin applauding Yuvraj.

In walked Dhoni.

He had promoted himself above Yuvraj. It was a monumental gamble.

The stakes were so high for Dhoni that it is impossible to imagine the pressure he was under as he strode out. It was on this evening in Mumbai that his nervelessness and staggering self-belief were best in evidence. It was on this evening in Mumbai that Dhoni decided to put his stamp on the World Cup.

Dhoni showed that he could at will play a long innings, one that could alter the course of a match, and play it with assurance and aplomb, on the biggest stage. He hit not a boundary in his first twenty-four balls. As Gautam Gambhir kept striking the ball fluently, finding gaps, hitting fours, not allowing the required run rate to become preposterous, Dhoni was quietly accumulating runs. He scored 2 runs from his first ten balls; 5 from fourteen; and 11 from twenty.

But he was always looking for runs, piercing the gaps, running hard. When the fifty of the partnership came up, Dhoni had contributed 23 to Gambhir's 25, hardly much of a difference between the two. He hit only two fours in his first 30 runs. After which he decided to unveil the four-and-six-on-demand version of himself.

When Gambhir was on 88, Dhoni was on 31. In the following period, as Gambhir added 2 more runs to reach 90, Dhoni stormed to fifty, unsmiling, merely raising his bat in salute after crashing a short and wide ball through extra cover.

Yuvraj came in after Gambhir was dismissed for 97. From the final forty-two balls, India needed 43. For his first six of the innings, Dhoni uppercut Perera over point. India needed 27 runs from the last twenty-four balls. Twenty-two of those 24 came from fours and sixes. Dhoni smote four thunderous blows: a drive past mid-off; a flick to square leg; another flick to square leg; and the final, lofted, towering six with the ball flying over long-on, to secure the World Cup for India twenty-eight years after they had won it on a sun-drenched summer's evening at Lord's.

Yuvraj had been India's most outstanding player in the tournament. Tendulkar had offered the inimitable dazzle of two centuries. But it was that unbeaten 91 in the final, a gamble that worked a treat, an innings that erased twenty-eight years of hurt, which made sure that the country would forever associate Dhoni with this unforgettable triumph.

The image that has come to define him—just as the image of both arms aloft, face raised to the sky after scoring yet another century defines Tendulkar—is of that final strike in the final. The expansive backswing, the

pupils dilated at the point of ferocious impact, the enormous follow through of the bat, the ball soaring like a white bird and clearing the fence and the jubilant players tumbling on to the field and the crowd a seething, shrieking mass of insanity. India world champions again. And Dhoni, imperturbable, still betraying not much emotion, beginning to walk off. Job done.

Would that his Test batting exploits were so rich and variegated. In this format of the game, Dhoni is not a patch on the two illustrious wicketkeeper batsmen of his day, Adam Gilchrist and Kumar Sangakkara.

All the holes in his technique haunt him in Tests, especially outside Asia. The edges that fly to the boundary in ODIs tend to go to the slips in Tests. The lack of a proper forward defensive stroke makes him vulnerable. When opposition captains attack with aggressive field settings and the pitch aids pace, swing and bounce the almighty clouts are not good enough to muscle his way through. Finding gaps becomes difficult, the runs dry up, the big scores refuse to come.

Consequently, after having played nearly a century of Tests, he has only six hundreds, only one of them away from home, and none outside Asia. That hundred, a bold innings in which he took on Shoaib Akhtar and won, an innings that came when India most needed it, was at Faisalabad in January 2006. Since then, Dhoni has not made a century away from home. For someone who bats at Number 6 or 7, and is meant to shore up the innings by batting with the lower order, that is an abject record.

Batting at home, he has had his moments. On the flat Indian wickets when the ball rarely rises above the stumps, when the attacking threat of opposition fast bowlers are more often than not nullified, the flaws in Dhoni's technique are easier to hide.

His most memorable Test innings came against Australia at Chennai in February 2013. It was an innings of fearsome counter attack, lasting for more than five hours, wresting the initiative for India in a match that seemed to hang in the balance when he came in to bat, terrorizing and brutalizing the opposition, throwing their bowling, field settings and plans into such disarray that they not only lost this particular Test but were so scarred by the experience that the fight went out of them for the rest of the series. Dhoni scored 224 runs—his highest in Tests—from 265 balls and hit twenty-four fours and six sixes.

In response to Australia's first innings score of 380, India were 196 for 4 when Dhoni arrived at the crease. Nathan Lyon was bowling well, the pitch

held out promise for him, and Australia were sniffing a quick run through India's lower middle order and tail. Dhoni first proceeded to unsettle Lyon, lofting him over mid-on, sweeping him from outside the off stump, driving him past mid-off and punching him past point for boundaries. Lunch found Dhoni on 37 from forty-two balls. A purposeful Kohli was at the other end.

Three overs after lunch, when Australia captain Michael Clarke took the second new ball, Dhoni used the pace available to launch into a particularly savage attack. First, James Pattinson and Peter Siddle were under the cosh. Mitchell Starc, when he came on, was welcomed with three fours in his first over. Moisés Henriques was brought into the attack, and Dhoni bashed him over extra cover for a six and then high over mid-on for a four in his opening over. The first seven overs with the new ball yielded 54 runs.

When Kohli departed after having got to his century, Dhoni refused to let up, furthering his assault in partnerships with the lower order. Having gone to tea on 95 not out, he emerged in the final session intent on mayhem. Shortly after tea, he crashed Siddle over square leg to get to his hundred off 119 balls. And then, after India lost three wickets, with Bhuvneshwar Kumar as his partner, Dhoni decided to mangle the opposition. There was no bowler that he did not flay. An avalanche of 147 runs buried Australia between tea and close of play. By the end of the day, he had put on a 109-run stand with Kumar, of which the bowler made 16. He got to his double century with a single, his second hundred faster than his first. At stumps, he was unbeaten on 206, India were 514 for 8, a lead of 134, which as it turned out was substantial enough for them to go on to win the Test.

It was an innings that defined the whole series, one which India won 4-0, the first time that they had won a series by so comprehensive a scoreline. No one missed the point that a little over a year ago, India had lost by an identical margin when they had visited Australia. Dhoni was the captain on both occasions. And to have reversed the result in this manner, with his own magnificent effort setting the tone for the series and leading the way in the first Test, would have pleased his competitive instincts no end. True to self, he played down all talk of 'revenge' having been taken after the series was over.

I like to divide Dhoni's career as India captain (he is India's longest-serving and most successful skipper) into two distinct phases: the first phase would cover the time from when he became captain for the World Twenty20 in 2007 to the 2011 World Cup; the second would be the years that followed.

He came to the job less than four years into his international career. When the seniors pulled out of the World Twenty20, he was handed the challenge of leading the team into the tournament. Dilip Vengsarkar, who was at the time chairman of selectors, was said to be responsible for the decision. There was talk also of Tendulkar having recommended his name and pushed his case. Dhoni made a grand success of the job, with India winning the inaugural Twenty20 competition. With Dravid having stepped down, Ganguly no longer a possible candidate and Tendulkar not interested, Dhoni was the only other alternative at the time.

He was fortunate in that he was phased into the job of leading India in Tests. While he assumed the mantle in the limited-overs formats, it was thought that making him begin his Test captaincy with a daunting tour of Australia might break him before he had quite got started. So Kumble, uncomplaining and full of purpose and resolve, became the Test captain knowing full well the interim nature of the measure as well as the reason for it. Dhoni took over the Test captaincy after Kumble retired after the home series against Australia in November 2008.

Dhoni prospered in his first overseas ODI assignment in February 2008, a thrilling tri-series in Australia, featuring the hosts, India and Sri Lanka. Having kept Dravid, Ganguly and Laxman out of the side and peopled it with young players such as Rohit Sharma, Sreesanth and Praveen Kumar, India beat Australia 2-0 in the best-of-three final.

The victory in the second final was followed by unforgettable scenes at the Gabba in Brisbane. Sreesanth with the flag and his exaggerated, faux-movie star air; Harbhajan Singh, twirling his souvenir stump above his head, thumping his chest, screaming ‘Go, India, go’ to the TV cameras as though he were endorsing a credit card; Praveen Kumar, the young find, the surprise package, the Man of the Match, with a goofy grin that suggested he couldn’t believe he was a star in the sort of thing he used to watch on TV; and Dhoni, very collected, very pleased, saying, ‘It doesn’t get better than this, beating the top side in the world.’

There was another man out there: stubbled and smiling, whose century settled the first final: Sachin Tendulkar. Already he was beginning to seem like the bridge between the senior citizens of the Test side who weren’t part of the team celebrating at the ground and the new lot of players who had done what no other Indian team had done ever before: won a tri-series in Australia.

This was a significant triumph in an overseas ODI captaincy debut.

Leading India to the 2011 World Cup victory win is seen as the apogee of the first phase of Dhoni's captaincy. He has other achievements to be proud of. These would include the Test series win in New Zealand in 2009 (the first time India had won in New Zealand in thirty-three years) and the 1-1 draw in Tests in South Africa in 2011.

In the second phase, things unravelled substantially. There was the 0-4 loss in Tests in England, the 0-4 loss in Tests in Australia; the failure to make the finals of the 2012 Commonwealth Bank tri-series in Australia (the very same tournament Dhoni won in 2008); the failure to make the final of the Asia Cup in 2012; and the 1-2 loss in Tests to England in 2012 (the first Test series India had lost at home to England in twenty-eight years and the first Test series India had lost at home to any team in eight years).

As Tendulkar's farewell series got underway, Dhoni had just presided over a few redeeming displays of the second phase of his leadership: the 4-0 blanking of Australia in Tests at home; and victory at the Champions Trophy in England in 2013.

Many of the things that represented Dhoni's strengths in his first phase as captain began to be seen as the very qualities that were dragging down the team and becoming responsible for loss after humiliating loss, especially in Tests. His impassiveness and unflappability on and off the field were perceived as composure in the first phase. In the second phase, particularly in big-ticket Test series away from home, this began to more and more seem like a lack of urgency in his demeanour, a refusal to be proactive, an inclination to be removed and aloof from the action. If making a plan and sticking to it had worked on several occasions in the first phase, not changing tactics when things were not going to plan in the second phase showed up Dhoni's stubbornness and inflexibility. The self-belief that made him promote himself above Yuvraj in the World Cup final and win the match appeared to have transformed in his second phase—particularly in the light of the shocking results in overseas Test series in England and Australia—into a conviction of his own infallibility, bordering on arrogance, hubris even.

Unlike other international captains, Dhoni on some occasions in his second phase did not face the media himself but sent other members of the team to do the job. Whether by coincidence or not, several of these instances happened to be on occasions when he—and the team—was under intense scrutiny.

Too often in the second phase of his captaincy, Dhoni came across as

someone who was not quite as answerable to the media and the public as other captains. This may well be merely a perception, but then a lot of the Dhoni story has to do with how he wants us to perceive him.

In November 2013, Dhoni the captain was at a crossroads. The legends who had made up teams he had captained would, with the departure of Tendulkar, emphatically become figures from the past. In the young team that he would now lead, he would be the mentor and the guide. What he would accomplish would be his enduring legacy.

THREE

PERHAPS AWARE OF THEIR DUTY TOWARDS THEIR HOSTS, THE WEST Indies—in spite of some cringe-inducing catching from India—offered a spectacular post-lunch collapse. When they were all out for 182 after having lasted merely fifty-five overs and two balls, the crowd could scarcely believe its luck. So Dhoni had not been able to ruin their day by choosing to field. Thirty-five overs of play remained. The chance of being able to watch Tendulkar bat was promising.

Vijay and Dhawan began India's reply with verve and aplomb. Drives, sweeps backward of square, pulls behind midwicket and square cuts were unsheathed as though India, scoring at nearly a run a ball, were looking to take the lead by the close of play.

Dhawan in particular was imperious, offering an oxymoronic mix of savagery and elegance. He delicately glided past gully and played an impeccably timed push drive for consecutive fours off Darren Sammy. In Sammy's next over, he played two explosive cuts off the back foot, belting the ball past point for two more boundaries. When Tino Best came on to bowl, Dhawan gleefully greeted him with three fours in the first over: a cover drive; and two vicious pull shots. He sped away to 33 from merely twenty-six balls with seven fours. The joyful abandon with which he played, the display of brutal hitting laced with elan, put one in mind of his sensational debut Test against Australia in March 2013.

FOUR

ON 16 MARCH 2013, SHIKHAR DHAWAN APPEARED, AS THOUGH FULLY formed as a cricketer, on the Test scene. It was a debut the likes of which no one had ever seen before.

Something other than his audacious play struck fans on that day. It was his appearance and demeanour. His body, built to perfection, muscles sculpted in high definition, was adorned with tattoos. It takes a lot to make a hairstyle statement with a rat's tail emanating from a buzzcut, but it takes even more to carry it off with aplomb. Dhawan did that. His moustache was carefully cultivated; its downward turns perfectly symmetrical on either side of his lips. He twirled it from time to time, something that, before his first day in Test cricket was over, came to be associated with him as a signature gesture. Quick to smile, his grin was broad and affable.

No previous Indian Test opener had had such an unorthodox appearance. Supremely fit and agile, smilingly swatting aside records, utterly comfortable in his skin, Dhawan was an exemplar of the confident, poised, contemporary urban Indian youth who is at home on the world stage no sooner than he has arrived on it. Looking at him that spring day in Mohali, it was neither possible to tell how new he was at this rarefied level of the game, nor how arduous his journey had been to get there.

In February 2005, Dhawan scored a rampaging century for India Seniors against India B in the Challenger Trophy. His partner in crime that day had been M.S. Dhoni, who had just broken into the India Test team. By the time Dhawan made his Test debut, Dhoni had been captain of India in Tests for five years.

All through his early years, Dhawan saw players who had once been his peers stride ahead of him. In the Under-19 World Cup in 2004, in which Dhawan had emerged as the Player of the Tournament, Suresh Raina had been one of his teammates. In the time it took Dhawan to make his Test debut, Raina had gone from a wannabe to a has-been in Tests; he had clocked up nearly 200 ODI appearances.

Not merely peers. Virat Kohli, the captain of India's Under-19 World

Cup team in 2008, was (by the time Dhawan played in Mohali) already a barnstormer in ODIs, had scored a Test century overseas, and had become the most coruscating young star in the firmament of Indian cricket.

Dhawan had played for India before. His ODI debut had come against Australia in Vishakhapatnam in October 2010. He had lasted two balls, and scored a duck. Recalled in the ODI series against the West Indies in the Caribbean in 2011, he had made 51 in the opening game at Port of Spain. He had followed it up with scores of 3, 4, and 11. Sixty-nine runs in five games. It was a disastrous flirtation with international cricket, ending with his being dumped from the India squad.

Nevertheless, Dhawan might yet have been given another chance but for the fact that his prospects were impeded because of the success of the formidable opening pair of Virender Sehwag and Gautam Gambhir. His call up at Mohali had as much to do with the waning performances of this duo as with his own stellar performances in the first-class season preceding his Test debut.

For nine years before his Mohali appearance, Dhawan had plied his trade in the first-class circuit. He was known as an attacking batsman, a dasher, as someone with potential, but also as a player who often frittered away imposing starts with rash strokes. As a result, his first class performances had not been weighty enough to propel a surge into the India team.

He was selected for the Mohali Test after a first-class season in which he finally played with as much with consistency as flair, scoring 833 runs, his four hundreds outnumbering his three fifties, at an average of 55.53. His Delhi coach and teammates noted that he had at last got into the habit of converting his good starts into big scores, had overcome his habit of giving his wicket away, had got stronger while playing off the front foot, and was wiser about choosing which shot to play when in his innings.

The years of grind on the domestic circuit had made him mentally tougher. His marriage to Ayesha, a divorced mother of two, after a Facebook romance, had given him stability and succour. In other words, Dhawan, at the age of 27, was ready for the big time.

A left-handed opener, Dhawan most enjoys playing square of the wicket on the off side, placing the ball in the segment between point and cover. His stance is upright, his head still. He punches, he cuts, he flays, he drives. He has a fondness for the lofted shot. And on Indian wickets, where he played most of his cricket till his debut, he loves pulling the ball, front or backward

of square, if it is short. His batting communicates a sense of adventure and verve, of enthusiasm and joie de vivre, a sense of having and providing pleasure and fun.

Watching him play, you would find it hard to imagine the toilsome road he has taken, the painstaking manner in which he has worked on improving his game, the net sessions, the discussions, the playing back to himself, over and over again, video footage of his innings, the noting down of weaknesses and strengths, the repeated run-throughs of what works and what does not, all the backroom stuff that goes into the making of a player.

That day in Mohali, Dhawan opened his scoring in Test cricket with two boundaries. The first was a sweetly timed cover drive, the second a pull of the front foot to a ball that did not rise high enough. Impudent as those two strokes were, one could not have foreseen that they were the harbingers of a display that would fetch Dhawan the fastest Test century in history by any debutant.

As it turned out, those two fours were the platform from which Dhawan launched his spectacular attack. He off drove, he straight drove, he cover drove, he square drove, he cut, he flashed, he steered, he punched. His pulls were decisive, rocketing past bewildered fieldsmen. There was a reverse sweep and a paddle sweep in the same over, both shots getting him fours. (He hit four fours in that particular over.) He eschewed his beloved lofted shots, playing not a single intentional shot in the air till he reached his hundred. There were a couple of streaky strokes, a half chance that went to ground. But Dhawan had been so brave. What could fortune do but favour him?

He reached his fifty (with a four, what else?) off fifty balls; forty-four of the runs had come in boundaries. After that, his strike rate jumped to above 100 as he continued to play a sort of fantasy cricket, unerringly finding the gaps in the field, every stroke that he tried coming off, disintegrating the opposition, leaving the bowlers and fielders shaking their heads as much in dismay as in disbelief.

Given the context of the innings, the bringing up of the hundred had to inevitably produce some drama. Batting on 99, Dhawan pushed a ball towards cover and set off for what could have been—should have been—a suicidal single. He dove full length to make his ground, the fielder missed the stumps, the overthrow whizzed past a sprawled Dhawan for 4 extra runs.

Hauling himself upright, he raised his bat, a smile of childlike joy enveloping his face.

Everyone in the dressing room was on their feet, ecstatically applauding; Kohli, who has spoken of how as a youngster he went to watch matches in Delhi in order to see Dhawan bat, was the most exultant and expressive, pumping his fist and high fiving his mates. Dhawan held his pose, the wattage of his smile refusing to dim as his partner on the field, Murali Vijay, hugged him.

With his second fifty taking just thirty-four balls, the hundred had come off eighty-four balls; 84 of the runs had been garnered in boundaries; and all the runs had been made in a single session between lunch and tea. His opening partner, scoring at a respectable rate, had got 37 in this time.

Dhawan opened his assault after tea with an inevitable four, dancing down the wicket to drive Nathan Lyon between cover and mid-off. The favourite aerial shots were now unveiled from his arsenal. One of them played over cover thudded into the fence; another clouted over the bowler's head resulted in his first six; his footwork twinkling, he lofted over midwicket, finding the boundary time and again; yet another loft, inside-out, fetched him his second six over long-off.

At close of play, he was unbeaten on 185, and walked off twirling his moustache and providing an image with which India fell in love as quickly as with his batting. His name naturally lent itself to a barrage of headlines ('Shikhar's Da One'; 'Dhawan scales never-before *shikhar*'; and so on). He added only two more runs on the following morning. He ended his first foray into Test cricket with 187 runs from 174 balls, an innings studded with the glittering gems of thirty-three fours and two sixes. It was a virtuoso performance, executed with exuberance and glee, brimming with braggadocio.

Injured, he batted neither in the second innings nor in the following Test, allowing us to savour the memory of that scarcely believable innings, those images of the resplendent strokeplay, and that sense of undimmed joy with which Dhawan went about his job.

He next played for India in the Champions Trophy held in England in the summer of 2013, a tournament in which the minnows of world cricket take no part, and one which is blessed with an exciting, fast-paced, knockout format.

Against South Africa in the opening match, Dhawan scored a 94-ball 114,

a match winning innings that set India off on a sizzling run in the competition. So at home did he seem under conditions he had never before encountered and bowling of the quality he had never faced, that it was hard to tell that this was his maiden ODI century. For the first time in more than two years, an opening stand in excess of a hundred had been put on against South Africa's formidable ODI bowling attack.

Playing with the zest and zip we have so quickly learned to associate with him, he starred in India's victory over the West Indies in the very next match with an unbeaten 102. His 48 against Pakistan, 68 against Sri Lanka in the semi-final, and 31 in a rain-curtailed final reduced to twenty overs a side gave India the sort of starts that they had been missing for a while in limited-overs cricket. His opening stands of 127, 101, 58 and 77 with Rohit Sharma (on whom India's gamble as an opener had gloriously succeeded in this tournament) set the tone and tempo for each outing. India emerged champions by beating England in the final. When it came to choosing the Player of the Tournament, Dhawan had little competition.

His first extended run in international cricket had turned into one of those golden periods in which nothing could possibly go wrong. Finesse and flair bedded down together in his game; the memory of all those long years in the first-class circuit and the wretched beginning in ODIs for India not so long ago had vanished like wispy cigarette smoke. Dhawan was the one. He seemed unstoppable.

And he was not done yet. Back home in an ODI series against Australia, he scored an 86-ball 95 and a 102-ball 100, both innings going a long way towards fashioning successful mammoth run chases by India. Between the Champions Trophy and this series against Australia had come, like a throwaway aside, a century in an ODI against Zimbabwe.

Such was the aura that surrounded Dhawan, had come to surround him so swiftly, that it was easy to forget that Tendulkar's farewell Test was only the third of his career.

FIVE

AS TENDULKAR'S LAST TEST WOUND ON, THE CROWD CHEERED Dhawan's, and, indeed, Vijay's exploits, but there was a restive nature to the applause. A certain emotion, in equal parts anxiety, keenness, excitement and restlessness was buzzing around the ground.

Suddenly, Dhawan lofted Shillingford down the throat of the square leg fielder and it was 77 for 1. One ball later, Shillingford got Vijay.

The delirious cheering threatened to blow the roof off the stadium. It was 3.25 p.m. There was a minimum of twenty overs and two balls to be played.

There he then came, trotting down the steps of the pavilion, as he had done in Tests on 328 previous occasions, from the shade and out in to the field under an enamel sky. Bat under his left arm, he slipped on his gloves, left one first, then the right. He loosened his body as he walked towards the wicket, did a few stretches, and then broke into a little jog. A touch of shadow practice involving the push drive, the sunshine sliding off his bat, as he reached the wicket.

The sense of infinite possibility that he brought with him to the crease, the sense that, while he was out there, anything, simply *anything*, was conceivable, had dwindled in the latter stages of his career. And yet, this sequence of moments, repeated over and over, hundreds of times, was unique on this occasion because it would never happen again.

As the West Indies team gave Tendulkar a guard of honour as he walked out, the crowd offered one of its own, refusing to let the noise level slip, refusing to sit down. If Kolkata had drowned in an ocean of noise, this was a tsunami of sound of an utterly different order. Tendulkar belongs to India, and to the rest of the world. But this November day at the Wankhede showed that the claim Mumbai can stake on him is unrivalled. That is why he wanted his farewell Test in Mumbai. That is why his wish had been granted. It was just as it should have been.

When Tendulkar made his Test debut in November 1989, fans inside the stadium would keep up with things by having mini transistor radios glued to their ears. Now, in his final outing, there was a sea of glowing tablets and

smartphones all around, taking pictures, recording videos and putting them up instantly on Facebook and Twitter. Admired by men old enough to be his father when he started out, Tendulkar in his farewell Test realized again that he is now worshipped by boys younger than his son, all members of a generation which do not consider an event to have occurred till they have posted images of it on social networking sites.

With two wickets in the over, Shillingford was on the attack. Cramming four fielders around the bat, he bowled his first ball to Tendulkar. A defensive pat drew a standing ovation; standing, because no one had taken their seat ever since Tendulkar had begun his walk down the steps of the pavilion. The second ball spun sharply, and Tendulkar, seemingly calm and impervious to the torrent and tumult of the adulation for him, defended again.

Pujara at the other end cracked two sumptuous fours in the following over. And then, Tendulkar slog swept a good length ball from Shillingford, the first of the next over, the third he had faced in his innings, to get off the mark with a single. The ending was not to be like Donald Bradman's, who was bowled without scoring in his final innings. Bradman's teammates had wondered if the Don had been so distracted and moved by the ovation he received during his final Test at the Oval in 1948 that he had trouble concentrating and was consequently dismissed for the most famous nought in the history of the game.

What must it have been like for Tendulkar? We can't tell. He carried on amid the primal cheering, like a passenger who, in a sealed pod of an aeroplane, remains oblivious of what is happening, beneath the flat stacks of clouds, 35,000 feet below on earth.

In the eleventh ball of his innings, again from Shillingford, Tendulkar rocked on to his back foot and, with impeccable timing, stroked it past cover for four.

Anyone who has ever been on a cricket pitch with Tendulkar will tell you that when he is in good nick, a certain sound emanates when his bat hits the ball. It is a sound that strikes terror in the hearts of the opposition, a sound that is both exhilarating and reassuring for his teammates. Crisp and clipped like a rifle shot, that sound now rang out with this stroke, implausibly audible above the din in the stadium. Three balls later we heard it again. On this occasion, as Tendulkar despatched a well-pitched-up ball from Shillingford, against the spin, past mid-off for four.

A nation's frantic appeal to one man. SAAACHIIIINNN. SACHIN.

The 18-year-old behind me, leaping up and down in an uncontrollable frenzy that threatened to send the phone clutched in his right hand flying, would vote for the first time in the Lok Sabha elections in 2014. He has seen no Indian cricket that does not involve Tendulkar. His elder brother voted for the first time in 2009. He, too, has seen no Indian cricket without Tendulkar. Tendulkar's career has spanned their lifetimes.

His last batting partner in his final Ranji Trophy innings had been born the day he made his Ranji debut. When he made his international debut, the Babri Masjid was still intact; the Berlin Wall had just about fallen; Nirvana was two years away from recording 'Smells Like Teen Spirit'; Orhan Pamuk was barely known outside his native Turkey; Roger Federer was nine years away from winning his first Wimbledon title; Virat Kohli was one year old; and India had neither mobile phones (of which India now has more than the population of America) nor the Internet.

The next ball Tendulkar faced, from Shannon Gabriel in the following over, saw one of his trademark shots. With a big stride forward, he leaned into the cover drive, the ball meeting the sweet spot of his bat at just the precise instant, and racing away no sooner than struck, for four. That transference of weight from the back to the front foot, that transmission of power to the shot as the tensile strength of his body leaned in, resulting in the bat connecting with the ball at the ideal instant, was exemplary, as much innate talent as instinct as a reflection of the many thousands of hours spent honing his craft to perfection at the nets, contriving to produce that unmistakable rifle shot at the moment of connection. Tendulkar had scored 16 from sixteen balls. He had hit three fours.

Shillingford was extracting a good deal of turn from the surface. Circumspect but at ease, Tendulkar garnered his next 2 runs from singles. The justly famous forward defensive shot came out, Tendulkar at full stretch, head still over the ball, feet in perfect position, a statement of imperturbable, immovable force.

An extra thunderous round of applause, atavistic, ambient, a subset of cheering, as it were, within the larger, continual torrent of appreciation, greeted Tendulkar as he flicked Shillingford with soft hands, took another single and reached 25. It was odd to be congratulating on reaching a quarter century a man who has scored a hundred international hundreds. For the Wankhede crowd, however, simply any excuse was excuse enough.

Shillingford and Samuels had the measure of the pitch. From having

scored his first 16 runs from sixteen balls, Tendulkar had taken a further twenty-five balls to get his next 9 runs.

His two scoring shots after having completed this tiny landmark, though, were delectable boundaries, both off Marlon Samuels: a flick off his hips that rolled back the years; and a punch past point.

In his wonderful long essay on Roger Federer, the American novelist David Foster Wallace spoke about how 'a top athlete's beauty is next to impossible to describe directly. Or to evoke.' This is in part because the spectator can't really tell how preternaturally talented one has to be to become a legend in one's game, what extraordinary reflexes, speed, powers of decision-making and execution are demanded of him. It takes 0.41 seconds for a 130 mph serve to reach the player on the other side of the net. Which, Wallace tells us, is about the time is takes to quickly blink twice.

'The upshot is that pro tennis involves intervals of time too brief for deliberate action. Temporally, we're more in the operative range of reflexes, purely physical reactions that bypass conscious thought. And yet an effective return of serve depends on a large set of decisions and physical adjustments that are a whole lot more involved and intentional than blinking, jumping when startled, etc.' What this means is that while a physical response is being made in the blink of an eye, that response encompasses complex adjustments and decision making born of instinct and experience.

'Successfully returning a hard-served tennis ball requires what's sometimes called "the kinesthetic sense," meaning the ability to control the body and its artificial extensions through complex and very quick systems of tasks. English has a whole cloud of terms for various parts of this ability: feel, touch, form, proprioception, coordination, hand-eye coordination, kinesthesia, grace, control, reflexes, and so on. For promising junior players, refining the kinesthetic sense is the main goal of the extreme daily practice regimens we often hear about. The training here is both muscular and neurological. Hitting thousands of strokes, day after day, develops the ability to do by "feel" what cannot be done by regular conscious thought. Repetitive practice like this often looks tedious or even cruel to an outsider, but the outsider can't feel what's going on inside the player—tiny adjustments, over and over, and a sense of each change's effects that gets more and more acute even as it recedes from normal consciousness.'[8]

It is just the same for cricket. It takes 0.5 seconds for a ball bowled at 145 kph to reach the batsman. Add to the speed the vagaries of length and line,

the nature of the pitch (a factor that is so vitally important in cricket and matters not a jot in other sports), and the variations of swing, seam, bounce and lateral movement. So while the batsman responds with a purely physical reaction that seems to bypass conscious thought, he is doing by feel, by a combination of instinct and experience, what simply cannot be achieved by conscious thought. He is moving his feet, selecting his shot, on occasion apparently changing his mind in that half a second and playing a stroke that is different from what he had initially intended to play. All in the time it takes to blink.

Which is what Tendulkar proceeded to do once Tino Best had cranked up his speed to 143 kph. Untroubled by the extra pace, he made the necessary adjustment as Best worked up a head of steam. In the anthology, *Sachin: The Man Cricket Loved Back*, Rahul Dravid wrote about how, over and over in his career, Tendulkar could make adjustments in his game at will, a quality that inspired the awe and disbelief of his teammates. 'In the middle of a tour, in the middle of a Test, in the middle of an innings, in the middle of a session, in the middle of an over, he could change his game, the width or the direction of his stance, the spot he tapped his bat on when he took stance. And he could do it without anxiety.'[9]

Best was by no means the most distinguished of fast bowlers that Tendulkar had faced in his career. Imagine what it took to pull off all-out assaults against Allan Donald, Shoaib Akhtar, Curtly Ambrose, Courtney Walsh and Brett Lee in their prime.

Soon after, against Darren Sammy, Tendulkar unfurled that most gorgeous of on-drives, the timing again magnificent, just a caress sending the ball on its way to the fence. That boundary off Sammy was the last attacking shot Tendulkar hit on the first day. Choosing restraint, he closed the day on 38 not out. He had faced seventy-three balls, and had hit six fours. The crowd stayed behind till the last ball had been bowled, applauding him off the field.

In his last five Tests at the Wankhede, Tendulkar had scored 243 runs at an average of 27 (his career average is 53). He had made not a fifty in those innings. Already in this innings he had bettered that average. The following morning, twenty-four years to the day that he had first faced a ball for India, Tendulkar would face his last.

At the other end, Pujara was constructing a flawless innnings. Unbeaten on 33 with four fours at stumps, he had played with assurance and accomplishment. Rahul Dravid has written of how, while batting with

Tendulkar, he felt he had breathing space and could focus better because the attention was all on his partner. Pujara may have felt that. Or did he feel slighted because the crowd seemed to not notice his existence? On one occasion, the spectators booed the West Indies for allowing a misfield that gave Pujara an extra run and kept Tendulkar away from the strike. They would, if they could, have Tendulkar bat at both ends.

SIX

IN A PHOTO ALBUM TUCKED AWAY INSIDE A DRAWER IN THE LARGE house that Cheteshwar Pujara shares with his father, Arvind Pujara, is a picture of Cheteshwar aged 4. The little boy is playing cricket with a plastic bat. Something about the photograph caught and held Arvind's attention when he first saw it more than twenty years ago. 'His eyes. They were still and focussed. He was watching the ball. And his feet were perfectly placed,'[10] Arvind told me. 'I felt that he was a natural. I decided to coach him. We started with underarm bowling from the time he was 4 years old,'[11] recalled Arvind, himself a former Ranji Trophy player, coach, and an astute reader of the game. 'Even at that age, he would come to the line of the ball to play it.'[12]

By the time Cheteshwar was 8 years old, Arvind was convinced that the boy was the real deal. But he wasn't sure whether the fact that Cheteshwar was his son was affecting his objectivity, making him exaggerate his boy's ability. 'I needed a second opinion. I wanted to be clear in my head,'[13] he said. So father and son made the journey from their hometown of Rajkot to Mumbai to meet Karsan Ghavri, former India opening bowler and a reputable coach in the maidans of the city that had thrown up more cricketing legends than you could count.

Ghavri told Arvind that Cheteshwar was the genuine article. It was clear even at that age that he had the potential. Whether he made it in the end depended on a host of factors: discipline, adaptability, honing of skill, hunger, mental toughness, competitiveness, commitment, circumstance, good fortune, the ability to settle in for the long haul.

So began the transformation of Cheteshwar Pujara. From an 8-year-old boy with a talent for cricket into a world-class batsman who would succeed Rahul Dravid as India's Number 3.

Driven and yet never losing their sense of proportion, the Pujara parents invested all they had into turning Cheteshwar into a top class cricketer the best they knew how. Arvind's coaching sessions, having moved from the house to the nearby Railways ground (Arvind had been a clerk with the Indian Railways and played first-class cricket for the Railways team), grew

more intense.

During school holidays, Arvind would take Cheteshwar to Mumbai. They would stay there for a month or more, friends and acquaintances arranging accommodation that was cheap or free. On one occasion, they slept in the waiting room of a railway station. On each trip, Cheteshwar played in a couple of local matches every week as a guest player to gain the experience he could never have acquired in Rajkot.

Already, in an Under-14 match against Baroda, he had scored an unbeaten triple hundred for Saurashtra. 'Former India wicketkeeper Kiran More, at the time a national selector, watched him bat that day,'[14] Arvind said.

At home Cheteshwar's mother, Reena, enforced a certain discipline on her son. When the boy wanted, like most teenagers of the time, to play video games, she said he would be allowed to do so only if he prayed first. 'At the time I used to tell Reena that she was blackmailing the boy. But she said, no, prayer is essential,'[15] Arvind told me. 'She was right. Praying became ingrained in Cheteshwar's daily schedule. Today, wherever he is, he prays everyday. That gives him balance of mind. That balance of mind is tremendously important. It makes him who he is. It is something no university in the world can teach you.'[16]

Junk food was banned from the house. As was any food that was not vegetarian. 'After practice, Cheteshwar had lots of coconut water. We bolstered his diet with cow's milk and ghee,' Arvind said. Cheteshwar grew up—and remains—utterly devout, a vegetarian and a teetotaller.

When Cheteshwar was 17, Reena died from cancer. His mother's death devastated Cheteshwar. At the same time, it ignited his resolve to make something of his life as a professional cricketer. It would be the highest homage he could pay to his mother. The loss bound Cheteshwar and Arvind even more tightly together.

Days after Reena's death, Cheteshwar went out to bat in an Under-19 match for Saurashtra. He scored a hundred.

Runs were coming in a torrent in junior cricket. When the Under-19 England team toured India, Pujara scored a double century at Jamshedpur. In the Under-19 World Cup in 2006, he was the top scorer and Player of the Tournament. Picked for Saurashtra for the Ranji Trophy on the strength of his performance in junior cricket, Pujara effortlessly made the transition to playing with the big boys.

In his second full season of first-class cricket in 2007-8, Pujara made 728 runs—more than any other player. He was reeling off big hundreds almost at will. But he was from one of the least developed cricketing states of the country. He was a small-town boy, with no connection to the influential, no one to push his case, no one important to monitor how swiftly he was improving, and to take note. The Rajkot wicket, his home ground, was notoriously flat. As he continued to pile up his runs, the national selectors looked the other way. He had to work at least doubly hard to have a chance of prospering.

Pujara is a Test cricketer in the classic mould more for his attitude and temperament than his technique. He is bottom-handed, not top-handed, as the classic Test batsman ought to be. One of the things that make him such a reliable batsman in Tests is his insatiable thirst for runs. He loves to bat and bat, comfortable in constructing long innings. Always ready to be patient, rarely losing concentration, blessed with composure, Pujara delights in being at the wicket. There is a sense of serenity in his play.

But he is no dour accumulator. Loose balls he will unfailingly punish, irrespective of at which point of his innings they come. Break any Pujara big innings into segments of fifty runs each, and you will see how his strike rate surges as he motors along.

He is at ease playing off both the front and back foot. He loves the off side. Pujara's repertoire of shots is large, and his execution is exuberant. He drives forcefully through the covers. He punches with power and precision through point. His cuts off the back foot are as ferocious as they are elegant. He can straight drive to perfection. And he plays an effective pull, a handy weapon against the short ball.

Indians are better players of spin bowling than most, but Pujara stands out in this respect even among his compatriots. His footwork is quicksilver as he goes down the wicket to meet the ball, looking not to clobber it to oblivion, but drive with conviction along the ground. His wrists are loose and fluid at the time of contact, which allows him to place the ball at will.

'Cricket is a game of situations. Your cover drive may be very good but you don't play it if the ball is stopping because then the ball will go up into the air after it has made contact with the bat,'[17] Arvind said. 'Cheteshwar is a perfect reader of these situations. That is why he can play on any type of wicket.'[18]

It took a triple century and two double centuries, thousands of runs,

averages of more than 50 in four consecutive seasons in domestic cricket for the selectors to be unable to ignore Pujara any longer. In December 2010 against Australia at Bangalore, on the fifth anniversary of his mother's death, Pujara finally made his Test debut. He was 22 years old.

With the score at 346 for 3 in India's first innings, Pujara came out to bat for India for the first time. He had been padded up and waiting for six hours. At the other end was Tendulkar, who would go on to make 214.

Pujara's innings was over in three balls. He was bowled by a fast, low ball from Mitchell Johnson that angled in to his stumps. Pujara was shattered. All those years on the domestic circuit and all that practice, his life devoted to getting better at his craft, finally a chance to play a Test, and it seemed as though everything had been snuffed out in a few minutes. He did not sleep much that night.

His chance to redeem himself arrived on the fifth day of the Test. India needed 207 to win the match and, after the fall of the first wicket, Pujara was promoted up the order. The team management was wary of having inexperienced players at the wicket should the chase become fraught in the later stages of the match. This time around, Pujara was not about to be profligate. He remembered what Tendulkar had told him before he had batted in the first innings. 'God has given you this chance to play; he will help you score runs. Don't worry.'[19]

He nearly ran himself out going for his first run. But his first four in Test cricket, his favourite drive through the covers, soothed his nerves. A few overs later, his footwork was in evidence as he danced down the track to hit the spinner, Nathan Hauritz, for two fours—one past mid off and the other through extra cover.

Pujara was now in his element. The signature composure had been regained. Again he shared a crucial stand with Tendulkar. He went on to make 72 from eighty-nine balls with seven fours, an innings that pretty much sealed the win for India.

The start of his international career, so long overdue, was auspicious. But a stutter and a huge setback soon followed. A couple of months after his Bangalore debut, Pujara was on the plane to South Africa. But his performance during that series was not distinguished. He played three innings in two of the three Tests, scoring 19, 10 and 2. The selectors may still have kept their faith in him, but an injury while playing the IPL necessitated surgery and forced him out for more than a year.

When New Zealand came to tour in August 2012, Pujara returned to the side in a Test he called his ‘second debut’. Dravid and Laxman had retired. Very urgently required was a refashioned batting corps.

At Hyderabad, Pujara staked his claim to be India’s new Number 3. It must be a crushing burden for a young player in only his fourth Test to have to walk out with millions of fans wondering: Can he be the new Rahul Dravid?

Ah, Rahul Dravid. Without the boy-legend status of Tendulkar, the buccaneering of Sehwag, the swashbuckling leadership of Ganguly, or the limpid elegance of Laxman, Dravid has been the most underrated of the great batsmen of recent times. Quiet, undemonstrative, effective and reliable, he has been the one who has delivered more consistently in gruelling tours overseas than any other Indian batsman.

He has scored more Test hundreds away than at home, a staggering achievement. His unbeaten hundred against the West Indies at Georgetown in 2002, double century against England at the Oval in the same year, double century against Australia at Adelaide in 2003, have helped save and win more matches for India abroad than any other batsman he played with.

Who can be the next Rahul Dravid? Well, possibly no one.

If that question weighed on his mind, Pujara did not let it show. He made 159, his first Test hundred, and was—along with Ashwin—one of the architects of India’s convincing victory. In the final session of the opening day, when Pujara and Kohli batted together, shredding the New Zealand attack with flair and abandon, matching each other stroke for stroke, it was tempting to feel that these two players would be at the heart of a new batting line-up in the post golden generation era.

Watching Pujara’s innings, who would have thought that he had last played for India twenty months ago?

His maiden hundred gave Pujara’s batting wings. His head, though, was not in the clouds; it remained firmly on his shoulders. He strung together a daisy chain of stirring performances, which prompted talk of how, if you compared him with Dravid at the corresponding stages of their careers, he was a more versatile batsman and had a more imposing record.

When England toured towards the end of 2012, Pujara stamped his authority on the first Test at Ahmedabad with an epic unbeaten 206. He had scored his first double century, a match winning innings of undisputable calibre, in merely his sixth Test. England were unable to dismiss him at all in

the match. Opening the batting in the second innings, he clattered a run-a-ball 41 not out as India won by nine wickets.

Led by a performance of breathtaking audacity from Kevin Pietersen and a heroic one from captain Alastair Cook, England won the second Test at Mumbai by ten wickets. Pujara distinguished himself with his third Test hundred, again using his fleet footwork to step out to deal with the canny England spinners. When he was out for 135, it was the first occasion that England had been able to dismiss him on the tour. By that time, he had made 386 runs.

Against Australia at Hyderabad in March 2013, Pujara made another double century. Coming in to bat with the score at 17 for 1, he put on with Vijay a 370-run stand, the highest second wicket partnership ever for India. He played through the pain of a leg injury, hobbling at times, but still attentive, amid his agony, to the need for running quick singles. Pujara and Vijay plundered 151 runs off the thirty overs of the final session, setting up what would in due course turn out to be a thumping victory by an innings and 135 runs. Pujara reached his 150 with a six; he brought up his double century with an on driven four. He had gone from 100 to 150 in forty-two balls—proof again, if any were needed, of how his scoring rate vrooms as his innings gains momentum.

When he walked out to bat at the fall of India's first wicket in Tendulkar's farewell Test on 14 November, Pujara had played fourteen Tests. He had scored four hundreds. Of those, two were double centuries. It was an understatement to call this a fine start. Those who had scoffed at Pujara's record in domestic cricket, claiming that it offered an inflated indication of his talent and ability, had already been silenced.

I had asked Arvind Pujara if he has any targets for his son in international cricket. A certain number of runs, perhaps, or a certain number of hundreds? Did they talk about those things? About how far Pujara could really go?

'Making presumptions in cricket is not a good thing,' Arvind told me, a touch of sternness creeping into his voice. 'The moment you have such targets, there is a lot of unnecessary tension. I motivate him in a different way. I tell him that if he plays one classic cover drive, all of India cheers. You must please people, return their affection by playing well, I tell him. God has given him this talent. I keep asking him to nurture his art. I have taught him that he must play the best he can. If he does that, runs and success will automatically follow.'[20]

It was a wonderful thing to say, especially because it was said in such a matter-of-fact manner. It put me in mind of what Philip Roth had said when he had announced in November 2012 that he would never write another book. ‘At the end of his life, the boxer Joe Louis said, “I did the best I could with what I had.” It’s exactly what I would say of my work: I did the best I could with what I had.’[21]

If Cheteshwar Pujara can say that at the end of his career, both he and his father will be happy men. And Indian cricket fans will have a great deal to be thankful for.

SEVEN

THE GROUND WAS SUBSTANTIALLY FULL WHEN PLAY BEGAN ON THE second morning, but thousands were still coming in. Tendulkar began by unveiling against Best another of those forward defensive strokes that send coaches into raptures. Played full stretch forward, head still over the ball, the perfect execution of this shot was another indicator that Tendulkar was in good nick. A delicate flick off the legs fetched a single off the following delivery.

Shillingford came on to bowl the next over. By the time the fourth ball was done, the masses converging on the Wankhede knew, purely from the racket inside the stadium, that they were missing some priceless action. The third ball of the over was short and wide, and Tendulkar offered to it a savage square cut that sent the ball screaming to the point fence. The next ball he took from outside the off stump and paddle swept, fine and precise, for another four. The day's play was only two overs old.

Tendulkar had dominated India's collective consciousness for nearly a quarter century in a way that no other person had. How could the effect of his final Test innings at his home ground be any different?

The moment at which Tendulkar arrived in international cricket was both a crucial part of and important reason why the narrative of his career unfolded the way it did. Were he to have—even with his talent and discipline and otherworldly gifts—played in a generation before or after, he would in all likelihood not been able to establish and entrench himself so deeply in our consciousness. The economy was being opened up, and India was just at the start of its journey towards becoming an economic force in the world. Tendulkar's career became a part of contemporary India's story of growth, hope and change.

When he appeared, India was beginning to give birth to a new, affluent, urban middle class. Tendulkar embodied all the qualities that this new class treasured. He was a world champion in his field. He was confident. He dressed well. He drove sexy cars. On the eve of his farewell Test, in an extremely rare signed piece on the front page of the *Hindustan Times*, he wrote about how dramatically the game and the country have changed in the

past two decades. ‘It is true in every industry and every sector—markets have evolved—lifestyles have changed and so there are a whole new range of products available in the market. I distinctly remember being proud of buying a second-hand international car in 1993 and today we are spoilt for choices with the best of brands available in the country.’[22]

Tendulkar delights in making good use of the choices we have at our disposal. I once asked him what he enjoyed spending money on.[23] ‘I love food, shoes, cars, perfumes,’ he said. Which one of his many cars was his favourite? ‘The BMW 5. It is a magnificent car. It is sporty and comfortable.’ The perfume he was wearing was Comme des Garçons. Thanks to Wikipedia, I found that it is a Japanese label that introduced in 1998 the ‘anti-perfume Odeur 53, a blend of non-traditional notes to create a modern and striking scent’. The shoes he had on were made by Berluti. Again, Wiki enlightened me that it is a French company ‘that manufactures and retails a very exclusive luxury brand of shoes and boots solely for men’. His watch was an Audemars Piguet, a luxury brand for which he was the global ambassador.

And yet he appeared to epitomize certain values a growing, changing India continued to cherish: courtesy, humility, deference to elders, a spotless public life, and a zealously guarded private one. With Tendulkar, we could have it both ways, and were delighted by that: he typified the best of both worlds that we think we strive to inhabit.

Once upon a time, he was the son every mother wanted. Now he has become the father every daughter would like to have. The iconography has accordingly changed. As a teenager, he did ads for an energy-boosting drink for children. Towards the end of his playing days, he endorsed life insurance.

He was Indian sport’s first global brand. Without him, there would have been no M.S. Dhoni, no Virat Kohli. The staggering amount of money that Dhoni and Kohli make today from endorsements has been possible because Tendulkar showed the way.

As cultural critic and author Mike Marqusee suggested in an essay in *Wisden Asia Cricket*: ‘The intensity of the Tendulkar cult is about much more than just cricket. Unwittingly and unwillingly, he has found himself at the epicentre of a rapidly evolving popular culture shaped by the intertwined growth of a consumerist middle class and an increasingly aggressive form of national identity. National aspirations and national frustrations are poured by millions into his every performance.’ [24]

Had Tendulkar not been such a colossal success, the allure of cricket as a

life-transforming career would not have been so well-defined; hundreds of thousands of boys and young men across India today would not have had the courage to dream of the alchemy cricketing success can provide.

As it turns out, they do dream. On the Maidan in Kolkata, in Shivaji Park in Mumbai, on barren fields in Bihar, in expensive cricket academies all over the country. The boy growing up in a wealthy family in a big city dreams that that life, that fame will be his with just as much intensity as the struggler in a village without even a railway station. Tendulkar's role in creating belief in this meritocracy, a meritocracy that has seen the underprivileged small-town boy compete with his empowered big city counterpart cannot be overemphasized. Dhoni and Pujara are examples of the success of small-town boys against big city counterparts such as Dhawan, Kohli and Rohit Sharma. Only a select few—whether from the hinterland or the big cities—break through to become successful at the international level. Even they are aware of how fleeting and rare the chances are. But that in no way dilutes the forcefulness of the desire. For that is the stuff dreams are made of.

Tino Best took it into his head to draw Tendulkar into the last duel of his career. In the third over of the morning, bowling at close to 145 kph with a slip, two gullies and a forward short leg, he banged in a short one. Tendulkar tried to slash, the ball landed in the wicketkeeper's gloves, and the West Indies went up in a huge appeal. Not out, said the umpire, eliciting from the spectators a collective sigh of relief that segued into raucous applause. It was the first false shot of Tendulkar's innings. The next ball, the final one of the over, was a bouncer. Tendulkar ducked. Best was not to be quieted.

After an uneventful over from Shillingford, in came Best again. He sustained his 143 kph speed, and stuck to a threatening line on or just outside the off stump. The hard disk inside Tendulkar's brain must be filled with memories of his duels with the very greatest fast bowlers of his era, how, on many occasions, he had not only vanquished them, but terrorized them into submission, but here, at the close of a career like no other, against a far less fearsome prospect, he looked uncertain. His defensive shot to the third ball of the over was tentative. To the fourth, he attempted an expansive upper cut, and missed.

Compared to the previous afternoon, he seemed a touch anxious, fretful, trying things that were not always coming off, minor cracks appearing in his concentration. The penultimate ball of Best's over, though, brought out the straight drive, that famous, economical push drive devoid of a showboating

follow through, one of the most glorious strokes in Tendulkar's repertoire. It fetched him a four, his ninth, and with it he reached his half-century—his first at his home ground after five outings. Best kept up the aggression, and retaliated with another bouncer that had Tendulkar ducking in the final ball of the over.

His next scoring shot, against Shillingford in the following over, was another four. Shillingford lapsed in both line and length, bowling short and wide outside the off stump. In a flash, Tendulkar, in a mood to punish the loose ball, was on his back foot, flaying it past point.

Forty of his 56 runs so far had come in boundaries. Appropriately, they constituted a sort of highlights package of the shots his fans treasure so much: the push drive, the on drive, the cover drive, the cut, the punch past point, the flick off his legs or hips, working the ball to midwicket or backward of square leg.

For me, Tendulkar's career is divided into three broad phases. The first one is defined by his arrival in world cricket, a boy of 16 in a game of men, and the heroic exploits that made incandescent his first decade. When, at the end of 1991, Tendulkar first toured Australia, a country that grew to adore and idolize him, an advertisement for a cigarette brand was gaining popularity among my circle of friends in Kolkata. Translated roughly from Bengali, the tag line for the ad said: 'For us, there is only one cigarette brand.' As Tendulkar scored his 148 not out at Sydney and followed it up with his 114 at Perth on a fiendishly fast wicket (one of his best hundreds), we borrowed and adapted the tag line of the ad. 'For us, there is only one cricketer,' we would say and thump each other on the back. Amid the bleakness of the 0-4 massacre of that series, amid the cravenness of senior, richly experienced players who capitulated time after time, an 18-year-old with a bat like a scimitar and an unparalleled reserve of gumption was our only source of succour. The matches in Australia began early enough for it to be dark in the Kolkata winter. Tendulkar lit up our days.

For us, there is only cricketer. In the first decade of his international career, that is what Tendulkar represented to India fans. It was a time when the India were bona fide flat track bullies: lions at home and lambs on tour outside Asia, slaughtered again and again, putting up scarcely any resistance. Under those circumstances, we watched in awe and wonder his unbeaten

debut Test hundred in 1990 at Manchester, a match-saving innings of rare panache (it had seemed rare at the time; increasingly, over the coming years, Tendulkar would make it routine); the remarkable 1991-92 tour of Australia that went a long way towards building his legend; his century at Johannesburg in 1992 against a fearsome South Africa pace attack; his first big hundred, 165 against England in Chennai; his demolition of England, 122 at Birmingham and 177 at Nottingham, in 1996; another trip to South Africa, another destructive performance exemplified by the 169 at Cape Town in 1997; the 1998 series at home against the world-conquering Australia (prior to which he had prepared for Shane Warne by having had a pitch dug up and facing a leg spinner bowling into the rough) a series in which he dismantled Warne, scoring a match-winning 155 not out in the first Test at Chennai, and a 177 in a losing cause in Bangalore, a series that so scarred Warne that the greatest spinner in the history of the game said he had nightmares about it after the encounter was over; the consecutive centuries, one of them defying a dust storm, in ODIs against Australia in Sharjah.

By the time he was 19 years old, Tendulkar had scored six hundreds in four countries. Never before had we seen an Indian batsman who could amass mountains of runs, and amass them while utterly pulverizing the opposition. In the first ten years of his career, Tendulkar appeared like some fantasy combination of Vivian Richards and Sunil Gavaskar.

What I like to think of as the second phase of his career began with Sourav Ganguly taking over as Test captain in November 2000 and continuing till Tendulkar's last great Test hundred (his *last* Test hundred) against South Africa at Cape Town in January 2011, followed, a few months later, by the triumph in the World Cup at home, a tournament in which he was an imposing presence.

'2000 to 2010 was a great decade for Indian cricket,' Tendulkar told me[25]. In this period, led first by the flinty, aggressive Sourav Ganguly, India began to shrug off the tag of lambs abroad. It was the most successful decade in India's history in terms of winning Tests as well as winning Tests away from home. The blossoming as well of Rahul Dravid, V.V.S Laxman, and Ganguly, the arrival of Virender Sehwag, and the sterling contributions from Anil Kumble, far and away India's most successful bowler, as well as the exploits of Zaheer Khan and Harbhajan Singh welded the team into a formidable unit. India's confrontation with Australia, then the world's best team, became, more than the Ashes or India versus Pakistan series, the

game's most anticipated encounter.

All this meant that Tendulkar was no longer the only pillar of India's success (or match-saving, face-saving bids). The fact that Dravid, Ganguly, Laxman, and Sehwag were in their pomp relieved some of the monstrous burden with which he had begun his career. Between 1 January 1990, and 31 December 1999, Tendulkar played sixty-nine Tests. In them, he scored twenty-two hundreds at an average of 58. India won eighteen of those matches. Between 1 January 2000, and 31 December 2009, he played eighty-nine Tests. He scored one fewer hundred (21), and his average was 53. In that period, India won thirty-five matches.

This was also the phase in which Tendulkar realized that in order to go on, he would need to adapt his game to adjust to the circumstances, his ageing body and the demands of the sheer quantity of cricket he had to play. It would have been stupid to expect his game to remain the same as he got older, as the opposition had more and more opportunities to study, analyze and dissect his game and make plans for him, as his body became weary and slowed down, as injuries kept gnawing away, including a tennis elbow that, it appeared to him at one point, might not allow him to hold a bat ever again. 'The darkest period in my life was when I was undergoing treatment for my tennis elbow in 2004 and the surgeries to do with it. It was unbelievably painful. It is the most that I have ever endured. I could not sleep at night. I thought that my career was over,' he told me.[26]

So Tendulkar adapted. And he often adapted when the going was not good. It took him eighteen months (from April 2004 to December 2005) to go from Century Number 33 to Century Number 35, but he got there, and in the end, well, well beyond. He floundered through 2003, his worst year in cricket, scoring 153 runs in five Tests at an average of 17. Coming off that year, in January 2004 against Australia at Sydney, he scored 241 not out: an innings of remarkable rigour and concentration, in which he shrunk his repertoire by refusing to play at all the cover drive which had repeatedly got him out on previous occasions. He showed us that, if he really put his mind to it, he simply would not be dismissed. 'At Sydney, I decided when I walked out to bat that I wasn't going to get out,'[27] he said to *wisden.com* afterwards. He didn't actually, remaining unbeaten on 60 in the second innings.

That obdurate desire to hang in there and accumulate runs appeared new to his fans. But the self confidence that allows a batsman to make a promise like that to himself—and keep it—did not. In this phase, Tendulkar took

fewer risks. At the same time, he was harder to get out once he got going. In 2004, for instance, his smallest hundred was 194 not out. The somewhat reductive way to summarize the change in Tendulkar is to say that in the middle phase of his career, he went from being hunter to gatherer.

And yet, even in this period, there were innings in which he unveiled the hunter of old, unleashing the attacking brio that had informed his batting in the early days. There was in November 2009 an innings of 175 in an ODI against Australia at Hyderabad, a majestic innings that was as much homage to as delighted remembrance of the player he once used to be.

It was an innings that set off an astonishing run of form in 2010. That was the year in which Tendulkar became the most capped player in history; he scored the first double century in ODIs; and he was the International Cricket Council's Test Player of the Year, and returned to the top of the ICC ratings. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Tendulkar called 2010 his 'sweetest year'.[28]

That was also the year in which Tendulkar cemented his claim for not greatness or all-time greatness (all that had been accomplished ages ago); this was actually the year in which the whisper about his being the greatest batsman of all time began to swirl and swirl, gaining substance and pitch, as he went from feat to staggering feat.

It really is a parlour game fans love to play, this business of the greatest ever. So much depends on the quality of the opposition, the nature of the pitch, and the evolution of technology and equipment, that it is misleading to compare a great of one era with another.

Across generations, however, Don Bradman—who saw himself in a young Tendulkar—continues to be the benchmark because his Test average of 99.9, and his twenty-nine hundreds in fifty-two Tests, are simply so far ahead of the pack as to eliminate other variables such as the quality of the opposition, the nature of the pitch and so on.

Among batsmen of the modern era, Tendulkar enjoys the gulf of difference with his peers that Bradman did with his. As Warne had once put it: 'Sachin is the best, daylight is second, and then there's the rest.' [29] He holds every record that is worth anything at all. He has scored the most number of Test runs; the most number of ODI runs; the most Test hundreds; the most ODI hundreds; played in the most Tests ever. Had there been a record for polishing the ball on one's trousers, he would have been the holder of that too.

In terms of posterity, just as Bradman's Test average will never be overtaken, it is safe to say that no one will overhaul many of the benchmarks Tendulkar has set—such as fifty-one Test hundreds.

In 2010 it seemed that Tendulkar, playing his twenty-second year of international cricket, was—improbably—actually getting *better*. It took him ninety-three Test innings to go from his thirtieth to his fortieth century; he went from his fortieth to his fiftieth in merely thirty-four. Put another way, in the autumn of his hyperreal career, Tendulkar was scoring a hundred every 3.4 Test innings.

In that 2010 interview to *The Guardian*, he said: 'I'm really focussing now on how I can get to the next level as a batsman. How can I get even more competitive? How can I get even more consistent? How can I get better?'[30]

It didn't happen. For once, this extraordinary cricketer was unable to find an answer to the questions he had posed. The third and final, somewhat shambolic, underwhelming phase of Tendulkar's career, was plagued with talk of whether he had outstayed his welcome as his fellow batting legends Dravid and Laxman retired; there was talk about how, by staying on, he was hindering the coalescing of a new young team and being detrimental to the future of Indian cricket; there was speculation about who ought to tell him that his time was up, and speculation about whether anyone could really do that.

In a perceptive piece[31], Mukul Kesavan compared Tendulkar's last twenty-five Test innings, prior to the start of his farewell series, with those of Sunil Gavaskar, Steve Waugh, Ricky Ponting, and Brian Lara. This is what Kesavan found. In those twenty-five innings, Tendulkar scored four fifties, no centuries, and averaged under 30. Gavaskar in his last twenty-five outings scored four centuries and six fifties at an average of over 58. Waugh's last twenty-five innings included five centuries, six fifties, and he averaged close to 65 per innings. Lara averaged just under 45 in his final twenty-five innings, but he made two game-changing centuries and two double centuries in this period. In comparison to those others, Ponting's performance is the weakest. He averaged 38. But that is still superior to Tendulkar's average of 28. Besides, Ponting scored a century and a double century in his last twenty-five Test innings.

Just as it is impossible to comprehend just how a champion batsman is able to attack a ball bowled at 150 kph, so it is difficult to precisely pinpoint

what exactly happens when a champion starts to unravel. What is he not doing that he was? What is not working? Can he not, after all these years, tell? If he can, why does he not do something about it?

Of course the reflexes slow down, the bat does not come down as swiftly or at precisely the right angle, there is a tendency to fall over the ball as the balance, having served him so well for so long, begins to falter. All of this is true, and yet none of this is adequate to explain a decline.

During that final phase of Tendulkar's career, there were moments when you thought that all this talk was nonsense, that there was nothing wrong with his batting, it was just luck, chance, a bad decision or two, things would sort themselves out soon enough. A 91 at the Oval on his last tour of England, and a couple of innings in Australia, made you think that. But then, when you watched him again, you saw that something had disappeared.

Chasing after that elusive hundredth international hundred, he played several ODIs, finally getting the century against Bangladesh in a match India lost. Thereafter, he retired from ODIs to allow himself to concentrate better on Tests. Something had vanished; it would never be captured again.

The momentousness of the occasion might colour our assessment, but Tendulkar's final innings at the Wankhede—even allowing for the benign nature of the opposition—was one of the finest he had played in the last leg of his career.

Best kept up the pressure. In Tendulkar's mind there was something going on in relation to the upper cut. Off the final ball of Best's next over, he tried it again. He missed again. The 2001 century in Bloemfontein, in which he had used it to lethal effect against South Africa fast bowlers immensely superior to Best, was a memory. It was in Tendulkar's past, a foreign country, as L.P. Hartley said, where 'things are done differently'.

Tendulkar remembered—as he had over and over during the course of this innings filled with his signature strokes—just how he used to do things in the past. He welcomed Best back with a cover drive off the back foot, a shot redolent of the kind of beauty that makes you gasp. It was as though he had suddenly thought, hang on, have I played this one yet, they won't see this again. The adrenaline levels inside the stadium were such that you felt they could not be sustained for much longer.

Tendulkar was on 63. Could it, could it really come to pass? A hundred in his final innings? That too at the Wankhede? Every spectator was thrilling to the thought. Having played so far a chanceless innings, Tendulkar offered a

difficult catch to short leg in the fifth ball of the same over in which he cover drove Best. His awkward deflection of a short ball hit the boot of the fielder and went to ground.

And then, when Shannon Gabriel pitched it up in the next over, we saw again that push drive, a boundary stamped all over it as soon as bat met ball, threaded between the bowler and the mid-on fielder who flailed at it in vain. Just this stroke would have been worth going some distance to watch. Generous to the last, Tendulkar was offering us a regal repast of strokemaking.

The next two overs saw Tendulkar, unharried, unhurried, on the defence. When drinks were called at the end of the first hour of play on the second morning, he was on 71 not out. Pujara, in sublime form at the other end, was on 58. India had reached 216 for 2, a lead already of 34. It was becoming clear that India would not need to bat again.

The valedictory tone inside the stadium had heightened as the overs ticked past. Every one of those present at the ground was even more keenly aware that they would never see any of this again. Amid the delirium, there was an acute enjoyment and appreciation of each ball that Tendulkar faced. The first over after drinks was the forty-seventh of the India innings. Narsingh Deonarine bowled it. The first ball, short, was flicked away by Pujara for a single. Tendulkar faced the second ball of the over. In a rerun of the shot he had played off Shillingford in the second over of the morning, Tendulkar fetched it from outside the off stump and paddle swept it to fine leg. Unlike in the previous instance, when he had got a boundary, he got 2 runs from this shot. The third ball Tendulkar played away for an easy single. Pujara drove the fourth ball, flighted up to him, to mid-off and took a run. Tendulkar was back on strike for the fifth ball of the over.

Outside the off stump again, this one did not have as much air. Tendulkar tried the upper cut. Or at least a cut that was intended to go fine. The bounce surprised him. Tendulkar got an edge. The ball flew to Sammy at first slip. He caught it.

Out. Over. Over and out.

Again the shocked dead hush. Again the sense of disbelief. The final affirmation of the realization that this innings being over meant that all Tendulkar innings had come to a close. And then the prolonged, ear-splitting, standing ovation, applause for all the innings over all those years, for the entertainment and joy and magic that he brought into our lives, the applause,

grateful, ecstatic, brimming over with adoration, for the delight and wonder of having had Sachin Tendulkar play for India for twenty-four years.

He walked back, a touch slowly, slower than on previous occasions (or did we merely imagine that?), surely savouring those moments. As he walked, he raised both arms in acknowledgement of the cheers, the adulation, not forgetting to salute every part of the stadium. Bat raised still, he headed off.

There is an iconic photograph of this moment, immortalized on the cover of the *Wisden Cricketers' Almanack* (as well as the *Wisden India Almanack*) 2014. In it we see Tendulkar stepping into the shadows as he walks beyond the latticed squares of sunlight and shade on the ground, the standing, cheering crowd a blur of colour in the background, Tendulkar with his right arm holding his upraised bat, helmet in his left, looking skywards, walking away, for ever.

The next man in, Kohli, waited for Tendulkar to disappear into the pavilion before emerging on to the field. The crowd, bathed in the afterglow of Tendulkar's innings and still coming to terms with the fact that it was emphatically goodbye to all that now, was still cheering.

Deonarine's last ball of the over was tossed up, and Kohli, unruffled by what was going on around him, immune to what had happened in the fifth ball of the over, smacked it through the covers for a four.

EIGHT

ON 13 JANUARY 2012, AT PERTH, WITH INDIA'S SCORE AT 66 FOR 4, Virat Kohli walked in to bat. Sehwag, Dravid, Tendulkar and Gambhir had been dismissed. On the first morning of the third Test, Australia's bowlers had India by the throat. Were Australia to win this match, it would give them a 3-0 lead in the four-Test series.

It had been a miserable tour for India. They had crumbled time after time, the diminishing powers of Tendulkar, Dravid and Laxman at the heart of India's worst batting performance against Australia in a decade. And here they were at Perth, crumbling again, their fate in this game too beginning to be sealed before lunch on the opening day.

It was particularly galling to see Laxman—in whose previous Number 6 position Kohli was now batting—struggle in Australia, a country in which he had offered us some of his most stirring performances. An Australian friend of mine had once asked me why Laxman only pulverized Australia. That is not strictly true, he pulverized plenty of other sides too, but somehow he was disproportionately successful against Australia. Six of Laxman's seventeen Test hundreds came against Australia, a team that was by some distance the best in the world during the height of his career. Who can forget his 167 at Sydney in 2000? Or his exquisite hundreds at Adelaide and Sydney in 2003-4? And the innings for which he is most famous: the 281 at the Eden Gardens in one of the most celebrated Test victories of all time, the innings that, in the Wisden Indian Cricketer of the Century awards in 2002, was voted the best Indian Test innings of all time.

Kohli had no time to ponder Laxman's woes. He had rather too many of his own. For someone so seemingly self-assured, self-assured to the point of appearing cocky to a lot of people, Kohli was nervous. His previous scores in the series had been 11 and 0 in Melbourne and 23 and 9 in Sydney. Were it not for the fact that the legends were floundering as well, Kohli may well have lost his place. Already there was a growing clamour for his exclusion.

Failure in Perth would portend worse for a young batsman like Kohli than for Dravid, Tendulkar or Laxman, whose bodies of work over so many years

deserved respect. What, so far, was Kohli's track record in Tests? He had made his debut against the West Indies in June 2011. Thirty had been his highest score in the three Tests that he had played in the series. Although he was selected for the ODIs, he had been left out of the Test team that toured England in the summer of 2011. Prior to Perth, Kohli had played in seven Tests. He was yet to score a hundred. He had made two fifties against a lowly West Indies team at home.

He had, however, emphatically established himself in India's ODI side. He had made a hundred in the World Cup in 2011. But he had not yet broken into Test cricket. For a player of his calibre and ambition, that was frustrating. He did not want to be branded as a one-day specialist. He had had his chances in the first two Tests in Australia. He had squandered them. He could not afford to throw away any more opportunities.

'The only time when I have seen Virat down, really down and depressed, was after his failure in the first four innings in that 2011-12 tour of Australia,'[32] Kohli's long-time coach and mentor Raj Kumar Sharma told me. 'We used to talk for hours every day in those weeks. I kept telling him to believe in himself. I knew the runs would come. I was about to go to Australia to comfort him and give him confidence. That is when the innings at Perth came along. That breakthrough was what he needed.'

Kohli's 44 was the highest by an Indian batsman in the first innings. He put on with Laxman 68 runs for the fifth wicket, the biggest partnership of the innings. Of those 68, 44 had been made by Kohli. All out for 161 before the end of the first day's play, India were already chasing the match. When Australia batted, the opener David Warner made 19 more runs than the entire India team. Australia's first innings total of 369 hardly constituted an avalanche of runs; but it was, it turned out, massive enough to bury India.

In their second innings, India made 171, losing by an innings and 37 runs. Kohli scored 75, his first fifty overseas. Four of his compatriots scored ducks. Other than him, only three batsmen got into double figures.

His confidence in himself restored, Kohli did not look back. In the following Test at Adelaide, his strokeplay was resplendent, his timing was impeccable, his technique good enough for it to appear as though he had grown up playing on these wickets. Kohli scored 116, the first century of his fledgling Test career. He cut off his back foot; he drove on the up; he flicked with assured touch, taking good length balls on the off stump or outside it and whipping them away to the boundary in front of square; and his only six was

a ferocious pull shot that sent the ball whistling over the deep midwicket fence.

Replying to Australia's first innings score of 604, India were—as had become their custom on this dismal tour—four wickets down before they had reached 100. Kohli came in with the score at 87 for 4. He was last out with the total at 272. After his 116, the next highest score was 35, coming from wicketkeeper Wriddhiman Saha, who had stood in for Dhoni.

India lost the Test by 298 runs—and with it the series 0-4—but Kohli had emerged as a humiliated team's only redemptive feature. He was India's only centurion in the series. He was the biggest run getter. And he topped the batting averages.

What happened at Perth and Adelaide unlocked something in Kohli. The three innings made abundantly clear to him that not only did he belong at this level, but that he had it in him to utterly dominate proceedings at this level. His self-belief grew in proportion to that realization. The 2011-12 Australia tour was where the talk about Virat Kohli being one of the best young batsmen in the world was born. His subsequent exploits made the talk grow louder and louder. By the time Tendulkar's last Test was being played in November 2013, it had become a commonplace to say that, if only players who were able to straddle all three formats of the game were to be in contention, Kohli was *the* best young batsman in the world.

In the narrative of Kohli's career, the heroics in Australia capped a chapter that could well be titled 'Rehabilitation and Redemption'. The chapter preceding that, the opening one in the Kohli story, would be called 'Young Star: Found and Lost'.

In December 2006, Kohli's father passed away. A few hours after the tragedy, Kohli was back in the field, resuming his Ranji Trophy innings for Delhi against Karnataka. His innings saved the match for Delhi that day. He thought he owed it to his team, to his father, to his chosen sport, to himself. He was 17 years old at the time. Two years later, Kohli, leading India's Under-19 team at the World Cup, became only the second India Under-19 captain to win that particular trophy.

Those who did not know of his Ranji Trophy innings on the day of his father's death knew of him now. They saw him on TV, a pudgy teenager with a foul mouth; a young player who in triumph swore, gestured and snarled like a maniac. 'Brash', 'brat' and 'arrogant' before long became easy shorthand to describe Kohli. In the public imagination his image was fixed: he was another

of those loutish big-city teenagers you saw at malls and restaurants and multiplexes. The talent, though, was undeniable. He was already being talked about as someone who would soon play for India. He did. Against Sri Lanka in an ODI series in August 2008. Before that, though, there was a season of the IPL, in which he had been picked for the Royal Challengers Bangalore team. Young women found Kohli attractive. Kohli found the parties, where there were a lot of young women, attractive. Blinded by the white heat of newfound celebrity, Kohli lost his way.

When England toured India in the winter of 2008, Kohli found that he was no longer in the ODI team. He now realizes that those were distracting months, a period that, seen from the vantage point of hindsight, threatened to finish him as a cricketer.

'Those were the darkest months. After all he was just a young man, barely out of his teens, and the culture at Royal Challengers Bangalore was like that,' Sharma told me. 'He got carried away with all the partying in the evening. I had to counsel him, scold him, use all the tricks in the book. I had to tell him that whatever he is, he is because of his cricket. I said, "There are lots of young men smarter than you, richer, more handsome. No one knows of them. You are here today because of your cricket. Lose that, and you will lose everything." Once he realized how true that was, he sorted himself out.'[33]

And how he sorted himself out. When he returned to the India team as a fixture in the Champions Trophy in South Africa in September 2009 (having played in the one game—and scored 2 not out—in a multi-nation tournament in Sri Lanka just before that), he was a different player.

The hours in the gym had paid off. So had the new diet. Once a fan of biryani, kababs and butter chicken, Kohli had eliminated oil, sugar and salt from his diet. He had shed his roly-poly look and appeared toned, honed, made for the splash of advertisers who would soon begin queuing up for his endorsement. His technique was much sounder; his play had a solidity to harness the swashbuckling shotmaking.

Speaking to *ESPNcricinfo*, Kohli described how he had wrenched himself out of the abyss into which he had found himself slipping so soon after beginning his international career. 'I spent twice as much time on the field. I didn't feel like hanging out with friends or going for a party for one and a half years. And never on an evening did I feel like I have had enough of hard work and I need to party, I deserve one night with my friends. For one-and-a-

half years straight, I was just spending time working in the gym or in the field, practising. I would come back and lie down, thinking that I should get ten hours of sleep, I should get proper sleep for my body. I taught myself to think that way—just love each and every minute on the field. And I started to enjoy my batting much more and felt very confident about myself. It was all about cutting out all the distractions I had and just focusing on cricket full time. My only aim was to get back into the team.'[34]

The runs began to flow. By the time he arrived in Australia in December 2011, he had already scored eight ODI hundreds. The next vital frontier he needed to breach was to be recognized as a Test cricketer of quality. Perth and Adelaide brought him that. A sensational run of performances lay in wait.

In every sense Kohli is the quintessential modern cricketer. He thrives in every format of the game. He is obsessed with training in the gym and muscle toning. He is supremely fit and athletic. For him, fielding well—lightning reflexes, acrobatic saves, swooping on and attacking the ball, throws that arrow in like guided missiles—is as important a part of the game as anything else. He puts a price on his wicket, willing to be patient, willing to hold back his effervescence till he is ready to uncork it.

Both his technique and temperament are sound. Against spinners, his footwork twinkles. 'Kohli's bat-swing, however, is not quite how the coaching manuals say it ought to be,' former India opener and author Aakash Chopra has written. 'He has a relatively short backlift, and an even shorter follow through. But he generates phenomenal bat speed by flicking his wrists at the point of contact, which in turn generates immense power.'[35]

Kohli has said that he learned from watching Rafael Nadal the need for and importance of meticulous, almost ritualistic preparation. On court, Nadal lines up his water bottles alongside his chair in a particular way. Before each serve, comes a sequence of tics: a swipe of his forehead; a flick at a lock of hair; the bounce of the ball a certain number of times; the pulling of his shorts at the bum. Repetition instils a sense of structure, a feeling of calm amid the storm of emotions and incidents that swirl around the player at the top level of international sport.

Before facing each ball, Kohli goes into a long, slow wind-up. He twirls his bat, held between both gloved hands and pointing upwards, five, six times. It is like the twirl of a racket that a tennis player habitually does; only, while the racket is kept horizontal, parallel to the ground, Kohli's bat is

perpendicular to the ground. He then screws up his nose, turning his face into a grimace. With his thumb, he prods the visor of his helmet. Only after that does he settle into his stance. His eyes blaze with a brooding intensity. The tics are ungainly, agitated, but the shotmaking that follows is sumptuous.

There is no proper cricket shot that Kohli cannot play. Given his wristy dazzle, he prefers to play his shots on the leg side. His 'bread and butter shot', Sharma feels, 'is the flick off his legs or hips'. But his cover drive is emphatic, imbued with poise, balance, superb transfer of weight, power and control. His pulls off the front foot—the bat coming down at just the right angle, slapping the ball down in front of square, or swivelling to tuck it away behind square—are joyously executed. On occasion, when he is really set and the shots are flowing, it seems as though the only way to get Kohli out is for Kohli to get himself out. 'The one area in which he needs to improve is playing the cut shot against fast bowlers,'[36] Sharma told me.

The other area is working on changing the perception of the bad boy image. The perception has changed over the years—in part because Kohli's play has been so scintillating, his batting has been so central to India's performance. Besides, Kohli has matured compared to the teenager he was when he won the Under-19 World Cup. He is still unafraid to show his emotions on the field, but that in itself is no bad thing. It adds an edge of intensity and resolve to his play, an aggressiveness and show of intent that tells the opposition—however famed—that he means business and is not to be trifled with. Not crossing the line into petulant, brattish behaviour is what Kohli must watch out for, especially given the fact that it seems a matter of when rather than if that he becomes captain of India.

'I keep telling him that he should follow the example set by Sachin,' Sharma said. 'He should learn from Sachin's attitude and humility, the way in which Sachin conducts himself in public. Virat is a huge fan of Sachin's. He now realizes the importance of how he behaves on the field or in the public eye. I am sure he will learn from Sachin.'[37]

His place in the Test team established in January 2011, Kohli embarked on a series of batting displays that allowed him to stake his claim as one of the most dependably destructive batsmen in contemporary cricket.

Right after the Perth Test, he blitzed an unbeaten 133 off eighty-six balls at Hobart to give India a sniff at reaching the final of the tri-nation Commonwealth Bank series, which also featured Sri Lanka and Australia. It was one of Kohli's most audacious exhibitions till then, precise, controlled

and full of conviction, anchoring what was at the time the quickest 300-plus chase in the history of ODI cricket.

His next innings, again against Sri Lanka at the Asia Cup in Sri Lanka, brought another hundred. In that 2012 tournament, as India failed to reach the final, Kohli scored two hundreds in three outings, the second being a barnstorming 183 against Pakistan, his highest in ODIs. He scored it off 148 balls, and was the dominant force in a run chase of 330, India's highest at the time. (That record would soon be broken, and Kohli would have a masterful hand in its breaking.) Starting with Hobart, he had cracked three centuries in four ODI innings.

In Tests, he made centuries in every series he played in: against New Zealand, England, and Australia. The hundreds against England and Australia came in back-to-back Tests. In not one of the last four Test series before the one against West Indies in November 2013 had he gone without a century.

There then came two innings that cemented Kohli's reputation as the master of the epic ODI chase, clinical, composed and ruthless. In October 2013, at Jaipur, Australia set India 360 to win. India chased the target down with thirty-nine balls remaining, and won by nine wickets. It was India's highest-ever successful chase, and the second highest-ever in the history of the game. Kohli scored 100 not out, an innings of blistering strokeplay in which the intensity never abated. His 52-ball 100 was the fastest ever by an Indian in ODIs. Thirteen days later at Nagpur, batting first, Australia scored 350. This time around India won with three balls to spare, Kohli's 66-ball 115 the piece de resistance of the sizzling effort.

Through that series and afterwards, Kohli's assaults on the bowling have come to assume a pattern. (The pattern existed even in his previous hundreds, but it had now become easier to discern.) He starts the innings in a circumspect manner, pushing out of his mind the idea of playing big shots no sooner than he is in. He never skimps on the singles and twos. Only when set, does he go for the fours and sixes.

Unlike, say, Shahid Afridi, he does not slog. All his shots are orthodox ones, gilded by the particular kind of flourish that he imparts to them. He relies on his technique, his timing, his placement. He takes few risks. He is nerveless. Watching him play is all the more thrilling because he accrues phenomenal results while keeping his approach and manner so orthodox and risk-averse.

Kohli put it down to sharpening his fundamental technique. 'If you have

worked on your technique properly, you can back yourself to hold your position and hit where you want to,' he said. 'That plays a major role. You need to have a strong technique to play the big shots. I keep working on that in practice sessions. I just hold my position, just middle the ball and time it properly in the practice sessions.'[38]

It sounds a simple enough theory, a coaching cliché, but to do it with such consistency requires you to be a player the likes of whom there are not too many of. If that were not to be the case, if it were a question of translating a simple theory into straightforward action, lots of batsmen would have been doing it. They aren't. And Kohli is. That says it all.

By the time Kohli had played 118 ODIs, he had notched up seventeen centuries. After the same number of games, Tendulkar had scored 8. Sunil Gavaskar predicted that Kohli was likely to overhaul Tendulkar's record of forty-nine ODI hundreds. 'The manner in which Virat is batting, the record for forty hundreds looks possible,' Gavaskar said. 'Now Virat needs thirty-two more hundreds to go and the number of ODIs India play, he can do it.'[39]

It did seem plausible. Fastest hundred by an Indian… Quickest to 6,000 runs… Quickest to fifteen centuries… The approbation began pouring in. In December 2012, after he had scored a gritty hundred against England in the Nagpur Test, Gavaskar—evidently an admirer—said that Kohli was ready to become India's Test captain. In April 2013, Vivian Richards described Kohli as a cricketer in his own mould. 'I love watching him. He looks to me like an individual after my own heart. I love his aggression and he has the serious passion that I used to have. He reminds me of myself,' Richards said. In September 2013, Gary Kirsten called him a rare talent who had always been destined for greatness. 'I always had a different kind of feeling when I started working with Virat Kohli,' the coach who led India to victory in the 2011 World Cup and Number 1 in the Test rankings said. 'From the beginning, I was sure that he was a rare talent and would become a great player. He has grown massively in these past few years and matured a lot.'[40]

It was entirely appropriate that on 15 November 2013, it was Kohli who walked in to bat at the fall of Tendulkar's wicket and spanked his first ball for four. Shortly before the series had commenced, Ian Chappell in his column for the *Hindustan Times* wrote of the ways in which he felt Kohli resembled Tendulkar. '… He's now set to take over not only Tendulkar's coveted Number 4 spot but his mantle as the Indian player opponents most want out… Long remember the king for he's (nearly) gone; hail the prince,

because he’s still around to torment bowlers.’[41]

At the age of 25, Kohli was being described as a sort of heir to one of the greatest cricketers the world had ever seen. All he needed was to keep his head.

NINE

PUJARA PLAYED ANOTHER CLASSY COVER DRIVE THAT FETCHED HIM a boundary. He had gone on to 64. By the time the Wankhede properly emerged from its Tendulkar-dismissal-induced stupor and focussed on the goings-on on the field, Pujara had reached his hundred. It was an innings full of poise and beauty, eleven fours studding it. In only his fifteenth Test, Pujara had scored his fifth hundred, consistency of an astonishing level that promised much for India in the era that was about to unfold.

Kohli, cover drives, flicks and pulls illuminating his innings, had been dismissed after scoring 57. So at ease was he while batting, he certainly would have felt that he had thrown away an opportunity to get a hundred.

Rohit Sharma joined Pujara at the fall of Kohli's wicket. Playing in only his second Test, in the midst of his most dazzling and successful year in international cricket, Rohit had scored a century at the Eden Gardens on debut. Here he came out with the score at 315 for 4, the lead having assumed impressive proportions. Rohit went on from there to make India's position in the Test of such commanding strength that an Indian victory was certain.

He batted through a collapse, and showed both heart and head in playing with Mohammed Shami, the Number 11 batsman. From 315 for 3, India went to 415 for 9, losing 6 wickets for 100 runs. When the ninth wicket fell, Rohit was on 45. With Shami, he put on 80 runs, the crucial difference that left only one outcome possible in the Test. The bowler contributed only 11 of those 80 runs. Rohit shielded Shami from the bowling, invariably running a single off the fourth or fifth balls of the over. At the same time, he refused to be bogged down, hitting three exquisite sixes. He remained not out on 111, having played an innings of guile and beauty.

TEN

IN MARCH 2008, ROHIT SHARMA'S LIFE WAS BEGINNING TO ASSUME THE contours that anyone who had seen him play as an adolescent had said it would. Six months previously, picked to play for India for the first time in the World Twenty20 in South Africa, his elegant, mature half-century had been instrumental in India winning a crucial game against the hosts. In Australia, over February and March 2008, he had shown great promise and brilliance. In the tri-nation Commonwealth Bank series of ODIs, featuring India, Sri Lanka and Australia, he had scored 39 not out at Melbourne; 70 not out in Canberra; and 66 at Sydney, where, batting with Tendulkar, who scored a match-winning unbeaten century, he had helped India defeat Australia.

He was still a month away from celebrating his twenty-first birthday. Those who had, when he was even younger, anointed him as the next big star in Indian cricket, the apt successor to Tendulkar, seemed to have been vindicated. In South Africa and Australia, Rohit had emphatically announced his arrival on the world stage. It seemed only a matter of time before he would become one of the batting mainstays of the India team.

But sport writes its own narrative. So many characters, whose glorious fates seem foretold and inevitable, are swallowed up, killed off, thrown by the wayside, reduced to bit players rather than becoming the heroes they were meant to be. For five years after he made his mark in Australia, it is the sort of narrative cricket wrote for Rohit Sharma.

Or perhaps, believing too much in the hype around him, thinking that fame and glory were his for the taking, and all he needed to do was turn up for matches, and not have to strive too much for any reward, perhaps believing all this, that was the narrative Rohit wrote for himself over the following five years.

Three years after his Australian sojourn, Rohit found himself dropped from India's 2011 World Cup squad. You could not blame the selectors. No contemporary India batsman (no, no contemporary young batsman anywhere in the world) had been given as many chances as Rohit; in no one else had the selectors invested so much hope and faith for three years with so little

return on their investment. If Rohit is now part of the hub of the India team in the era that succeeds the one of the golden generation, the India selectors—who get too many things wrong—must take enormous credit for it.

Following the ODI series in Australia, here is what Rohit scored in his next fifteen innings: 9, 26, 24, 11, 0 not out, 22, 58, 22 not out, 3, 19, 0, 32, 18, 3, 11 not out. A single fifty in fifteen innings. Still the selectors persisted with him. Rohit, the son of a storehouse caretaker for a transport firm, had dreamed of owning a BMW from the time he was a little boy. Despite his poor returns, he carried on as though a place in the national side—and all that came with it—was his entitlement. Rohit could be as stylish with his strokes as he could be infuriating with a suicidal waft outside the off stump. Too often, it was the waft that was the problem.

There were stories too of the whirl of parties in which young Rohit got caught up during the IPL season. One fellow player spoke about how he could outdrink two teammates, both known for their hard hitting and prodigious drinking. There was speculation about whether he had the commitment, the self-control and the self-denial that is essential to forge a top flight career. Or whether, like the vastly talented Mumbai player Vinod Kambli, he would flare only briefly, and then crash and burn his way to obscurity.

Talent will only take you so far at the highest level of international sport. When in 1996 Mark Philippoussis, then only 20 years old, defeated Pete Sampras at the Australian Open, he emerged as the most sparkling new talent in the men's game. Sampras had said at the time that there was no denying Philippoussis's talent; the question was what he did with it week in week out on the tour. The highest Philippoussis would ever rise in the world rankings was Number 8. He did not win a single Grand Slam title. Sampras, of course, won fourteen.

Finally, after he scored 11, 9, 23, 1, and 5 in an ODI series against South Africa in January 2011, the selectors lost patience and omitted Rohit from the World Cup squad. 'Being dropped was a huge setback for Rohit. But it actually helped him a lot,' said Pravin Amre, Mumbai coach and someone who has worked closely with Rohit. 'He became much more responsible. He realized that fitness and mental toughness were hugely important. He worked hard on those aspects of his game. He gave time to himself to learn to play a long innings. He worked on curbing an impulse to hit big shots right at the beginning of the innings,' Amre told me.

One of the reasons why Rohit kept getting so many opportunities was because there was no gainsaying his immense potential. Because he can pick up the length of the ball early, he has more time to play his shots. His elegance appears languid. Although he prefers the on side, there is really no shot that he is not adept at. His repertoire is brimming with strokes. The problem is which one he selects to play when. Poor shot selection has repeatedly led to his downfall. As has his inability to learn from mistakes.

'He is so incredibly talented that he never had to work as hard as others in the early part of his career. But that attitude will harm you in the international game,'[42] Amre told me.

When he returned to the India team for a tour of the West Indies in June 2011, Rohit appeared to have done whatever was necessary, both physically and mentally, to succeed as a cricketer. He looked fitter, seemed more focussed. India had not sent a first-choice side; it was led by Suresh Raina. Rohit made three fifties in five outings, his innings of 68 not out and 86 not out raising victories for India.

But he continued to not so much blow hot and cold as blow hot and glacial. He went through a horrifying 2012, averaging 12.94 in ODIs. The nadir was a series in Sri Lanka in which his scores were 5, 0, 0, 4 and 4. Picked in spite of that performance against Pakistan, he ended the year with an innings of 4 on 30 December. He had now failed to get into double figures in eight of his last nine innings.

He was left out of the team for the following two ODIs against Pakistan and the first three ODIs of a series against England. One opening slot was up for grabs. Ajinkya Rahane, selected to open alongside Gambhir, had failed in two innings. So, on 30 January at Mohali, the selectors turned again to Rohit. He was promoted up the order to open the batting. At the time the decision made little sense. It would be Rohit's lifeline.

Rohit made 83 from ninety-three balls, his first assured performance since his innings of 68 against Pakistan ten months ago. It was the beginning of an astonishing run of form in 2013, by the end of which he had scored two Test hundreds as well as emulated Tendulkar and Sehwag in scoring an ODI double century.

India stuck to him as an opener. In the Champions Trophy in England in June 2013, he began with a solid 65 against South Africa. He scored 52 in the next match. As his opening partner Shikhar Dhawan blazed through the tournament and made it his own, Rohit helped in providing the kind of starts

from which India could get themselves into winning positions.

Sure of his touch, confident of his ability to be consistent, Rohit contributed handsomely to India's win in a tri-nation tournament in the West Indies and a 5-0 pummelling of Zimbabwe. The transformation was dramatic. Still, by October 2013, six years after his international debut, he had scored only two centuries in a hundred-odd ODIs. His average was around 30. Those who had made their appearance in international cricket well after he had done so had surpassed him. Virat Kohli, who was playing Under-19 for India when Rohit made his mark in Australia in February 2008, had made sixteen centuries from about the same number of ODIs that Rohit had played. He was captain of the India team that beat Zimbabwe 5-0. And he was being talked of as a future captain in both Tests and ODIs. Cheteshwar Pujara, toiling away in the domestic circuit as Rohit was being heralded as the new phenomenon from India, had made two Test double centuries. There was some serious catching up to do.

And then came the ODI series at home against Australia in October 2013. India had bulldozed Australia 4-0 in the Tests. That ODI series was one in which, after six years of trailers, the real Rohit Sharma was revealed.

In the second ODI at Jaipur, India needed 360 to win. In an opening stand with Shikhar Dhawan, Rohit put on 176 in 26.1 overs. Then Rohit and Kohli piled up 186 in 17.2 overs. In neither partnership was Rohit the dominant player. But he was the one who held the innings together. Acknowledgement came in the form of the Man of the Match award. He caressed the ball through the covers. He hit, inside out, over the covers. He danced down the wicket with flamboyance to deal with the spin. Even a cramp in his leg could not cramp his style. When he reached his hundred, there came a howl of relief (as much a release of pressure and bottled emotion as a cry of triumphant self-vindication), some vigorous pointing of the bat and a torrent of swear words. He went on to remain unbeaten on 141. It was his first ODI hundred in three and a half years. 'He is the best among us in the nets,' Kohli —who had in the match made the fastest ODI century ever by an India batsman—said. 'He is the best of the young lot that we have.' [43]

A few days later at Nagpur, Rohit made 79. And on 2 November in Bangalore, he made history. After Tendulkar and Sehwag, Rohit became the third batsman in the history of the game to score a double century in ODIs. His innings of 209 came off 158 balls. He hit twelve fours and sixteen sixes. No one had ever hit as many sixes in an ODI innings. He consumed 114 balls

for his first hundred—sedate by the standards of how his innings cannoned along after that. His second hundred took him forty balls—ten fewer than Kohli had taken for his unbeaten century at Jaipur. Another contrast: he scored his first fifty off seventy-one balls; from his last eighteen balls he pillaged 59 runs.

Particularly scarring for the spinner Xavier Doherty was the forty-seventh over of the India innings. This is how Rohit dealt with the six balls he faced: 6; 4; no run; 6; 4; and 6—26 runs plundered in a sequence of pulls, drives, sweeps and cuts. It was not so much smash and grab as smash and smash. He reached his double century with a six in the final over of the India innings, a lofted drive over cover gracefully and easily clearing the boundary.

Throughout the innings, Rohit showed his preference for the on side, lifting the spinners high into the stands between long-on and square leg. You could not call it slogging. There was too much finesse and flair to his performance. His average in the twenty-two matches since he had begun to open the innings now stood at 59.50. His total of 491 runs in the series was the highest by any batsman in a bilateral ODI series. Afterwards he said, entirely needlessly, that this was the best he had ever played.

The selectors gleefully handed him his Test debut. He would play in the first Test at the Eden Gardens against the West Indies in November 2013, the first of the two-Test series that had been conjured up to say goodbye to Tendulkar. The prodigy who years ago had been tipped to be Tendulkar's successor would play his first Test in the series that would be Tendulkar's last. The narrative of cricket loves such patterns.

On 7 November, the second day of the first Test, Rohit walked out to bat in a Test for the first time with India tottering at 82 for 4. The crowd was still in a daze after Tendulkar's departure. The openers, Vijay and Dhawan, and Pujara were also out. Within minutes, the score was 83 for 5 as Kohli succumbed. The spinner, Shane Shillingford, getting turn and bounce, had picked up four wickets. None of the India batsmen seemed to be able to play with any measure of comfort against him.

Rohit did. Cautious at the beginning, aware of how big an occasion this was, how important a moment in his career, he took thirteen balls to get off the mark. His first scoring shot was a flick for four. Once he was confident that he would be able to negotiate Shillingford with fluency, once he felt that his touch—which had served him so well in the past eleven months—was not about to desert him now, he brought out his luminous strokeplay. Rohit drove

off the back foot past the bowler, he drove through the covers, he swept, flicked and pulled.

Along with Ravi Ashwin, he gave India the advantage by the end of play on the second day. He was 127 not out at stumps; India held a lead of 120 runs. The following morning he added another fifty to his tally. When he was out for 177, after a 280-run stand with Ashwin, India's score was 436. The team's position was unassailable.

India won the match by an innings and 151 runs on the third afternoon. Without Rohit, things could have gone quickly downhill from 83 for 5 in the first innings. In his debut Test, Rohit won the Man of the Match award.

When on 15 November he walked out to bat at the Wankhede in Tendulkar's final Test, Rohit Sharma's life was beginning to assume the contours that he himself would have foreseen after he had made his first splash in Australia in February 2008.

And, yes, he had bought a BMW a while back.

ELEVEN

INDIA FINISHED ON 495. THE WEST INDIES NEEDED TO SCORE 309 to avoid an innings defeat. Ashwin came on in the fourth over of the innings. By the sixth, he had claimed his first wicket. The slide had begun for the West Indies. It would not be arrested. The visitors would end the series just as they had started it: with dismaying ineptitude.

There was a good deal of turn and bounce in the wicket. Pragyan Ojha, best placed to use it, was introduced in the seventh over. In the ninth, he had his first scalp. Dwayne Bravo succumbed to Ashwin bowling from round the wicket. It was the final ball of the day. At stumps on the second day of the Test, the West Indies were 43 for 3 in their second innings.

The third over of the following morning was the most rewarding for the West Indies, with Chris Gayle—who had laboured through the series—and Marlon Samuels hitting Ashwin for four boundaries. But once Ojha had had Samuels stumped as he attempted a heave over long-on and Gayle caught behind, both accomplished before ten overs had been bowled in the day, the West Indies's resistance, however token, was effectively over.

Shivnarine Chanderpaul played a typical gritty innings; Ramdin got a fifty; but their moments of resistance were extinguished no sooner than they had flickered to life.

By the time the score was 168 for 8, competitive fervour—if there had been any in the first place—had drained from the Test. Dhoni yielded to the crowd's persistence, as he had not done in the first innings, by allowing Tendulkar to bowl. The spectators had what they were looking for. But already a sense of wistfulness, vast and deep, was shrouding the Wankhede. Tendulkar bowled two overs without incident.

When Shami knocked over Gabriel's middle stump in merely the forty-seventh over of the innings, the West Indies were put out of their misery. All out for 187 this time around, they had not lasted beyond two-and-a-half days in either Test. At an innings and 126 runs, this was, in terms of margin, one of India's biggest wins.

Ojha deservedly won the Man of the Match award for his haul of ten

wickets. Rohit was the Man of the Series. And Dhoni, with this victory, had now led India to triumph in six consecutive Tests, encompassing two whitewashes of 4-0 and 2-0.

The teams returned to their dressing rooms and emerged again for the presentation ceremony. The Wankhede, the entire roiling, seething mass of it, the noise levels still swelling in the steepling stands, was waiting to hear Tendulkar speak.

A piece of paper in his hand, he took the microphone. Rarely glancing at the sheet of paper (on which he had ostensibly written a list of people he intended to thank), Tendulkar proceeded to deliver the most eloquent and moving speech by any cricketer at his farewell Test. It was a courteous, attentive, scrupulous, sincere, deeply felt, and hugely emotional address.

'All my friends. Settle down, let me talk, I will get more and more emotional. My life, between 22 yards for twenty-four years, it is hard to believe that that wonderful journey has come to an end, but I would like to take this opportunity to thank people who have played an important role in my life. Also, for the first time in my life I am carrying this list, to remember all the names in case I forget someone. I hope you understand. It's getting a little bit difficult to talk but I will manage…

'The most important person in my life, and I have missed him a lot since 1999 when he passed away, my father. Without his guidance, I don't think I would have been standing here in front of you. He gave me freedom at the age of 11, and told me that [I should] chase my dreams, but make sure you do not find short cuts. The path might be difficult, but don't give up, and I have simply followed his instructions. Above all, he told me to be a nice human being, which I will continue to do and try my best. Every time I have done something special [and] showed my bat, it was [for] my father.'

He spoke about his mother, the uncle and aunt with whom he had lived for four years (when he was at school so that he could stay close to the practice grounds) and his brother Nitin. He recalled his first bat.

'The first cricket bat of my life was presented to me by my sister [Savita]. It was a Kashmir willow bat. But that is where the journey began. She is one of those many who still continue to fast when I bat, so thank you very much.

'Ajit, my brother, now what do I talk about him? I don't know. We have lived this dream together. He was the one who sacrificed his career for my cricket. He spotted the spark in me. And it all started from the age of eleven when he took me to Achrekar sir, my coach, and from there on my life

changed…

‘The most beautiful thing happened to me in 1990 when I met my wife, Anjali. Those were special years and it has continued and will always continue that way. I know Anjali, being a doctor, there was a wonderful career in front of her. When we decided to have a family, Anjali took the initiative to step back and say that “you continue with your cricket and I will take the responsibility of the family”.

‘Without that, I don’t think I would have been able to play cricket freely and without stress. Thanks for bearing with all my fuss and all my frustrations, and all sorts of rubbish that I have spoken. Thanks for bearing with me and always staying by my side through all the ups and downs. You are the best partnership I’ve had in my life.

‘Then, the two precious diamonds of my life, Sara and Arjun. They have already grown up. My daughter is 16, my son is 14. Time has flown by. I wanted to spend so much time with them on special occasions like their birthdays, their annual days, their sports day, going on holidays, whatever. I have missed out on all those things. Thanks for your understanding. [Both] of you have been so, so special to me you cannot imagine. I promise you [that] for fourteen and sixteen years I have not spent enough time with both of you, but the next sixteen years or even beyond that, everything is for you.’

Tendulkar mentioned his gratitude to his in-laws, the various kinds of ways in which his friends had gone out of their way to help him, calm him, gave him hope and belief. He described at length the great debt he owed to his first and most enduring coach, Ramakant Achrekar.

‘My cricket career started when I was eleven. The turning point of my career was when my brother [Ajit] took me to Achrekar sir… When I was 11 or 12, those were the days when I used to hop on (the) back of his scooter (to go) and play a couple of practice matches a day. The first half the innings I would be batting at Shivaji Park, the second half, at some other match in Azad Maidan. He would take me all over Mumbai to make sure I got match practice.’

He saluted his legendary comrades, fellow members of the golden generation, Dravid, Laxman, Ganguly and Kumble, each of whom he had captained and under each of whose captaincy he had played.

By the time he had said thank you to the media, Tendulkar realized that he had been speaking for more than ten minutes. Not one person at the ground wanted him to cut it short. There was silence for him to speak, and

then, in contrapuntal arrangement, applause for each utterance. Tendulkar delivered the coup de grace.

‘I know my speech is getting a bit too long, but this is the last thing I want to say. I want to thank all the people here who have flown in from various parts of the world, and have supported me endlessly, whether I scored a zero or a hundred-plus. Your support was so dear to me and meant a lot to me.

‘I know I have met so many guys who have fasted for me, prayed for me, done so much for me. Without that life wouldn’t have been like this for me. I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart, and also say that time has flown by rather quickly, but the memories you have left with me will always be with me forever and ever, especially “Sachin, Sachin” which will reverberate in my ears till I stop breathing. Thank you very much. If I have missed out on saying something, I hope you understand. Goodbye.’

In the stands people had tears in their eyes.

Dhoni and Kohli hoisted Tendulkar on their shoulders and began a farewell lap around the ground. In the cauldron of colour and sound that was the Wankhede, Tendulkar, unfettered, finally free from a quarter century of crushing expectation, waved the tricolour to his still screaming fans and smiled a smile that reflected a welter of emotions.

Then, in another unique moment in this unique Test made up of a succession of unique occurrences, Tendulkar broke away from the throng of family and teammates that surrounded him once the lap had been done. He walked, a solitary figure, from the boundary line towards the pitch. The continual chants from the crowd, a crescendo that maintained its volume and pitch, slipped as Tendulkar approached the wicket.

Till now, events had followed an expected pattern. Suddenly, few knew what was going on.

Tendulkar bent low, rubbed his palm against the red earth of the pitch, and touched his palm to his heart and head. No one had seen anything like this before. Once the crowd had realized the gesture for what it was—genuflection at the altar of the game, gratitude to it—the storm of cheering rose again.

In a packed press conference the next day, relaxed and jovial and comfortable in his skin as a ‘former India cricketer’, Tendulkar would think back on this moment: ‘I knew that never in my life would I get to do that in an international match. That is where it all started. Those 22 yards have given

me everything in my life. Whatever I have today is because I spent time within those 22 yards. It's like a temple for me. I just wanted to say a big thank you to cricket… When I went to the wicket, and I stood there, I realized this is the last time I am standing in front of a packed stadium as a part of the Indian team. This would never happen. That was very emotional. I couldn't control my tears.'

Neither could the spectators on that early November afternoon. Blinking back his own tears, his face hidden beneath the broad rim of his white hat, Tendulkar walked off the ground, up the steps of the pavilion and disappeared from view.

He was gone.

Sachin Tendulkar, the last titan of the golden generation of Indian cricketers, was done. Mahendra Singh Dhoni and his young team were on their own now. And, on current evidence, they were flying.

Part 2

Onwards

TWELVE

ON 2 DECEMBER 2013, INDIA ARRIVED IN SOUTH AFRICA FOR A short but seminal tour. The tour was short because of a squalid row between the two cricket boards. It was the sort of wrangling that embitters fans and leaves cricket poorer, the kind of base and naked show of power that the BCCI is known for.

Cricket South Africa chief executive Haroon Lorgat—a South African of Indian origin—had, when he was ICC chief, had several run-ins with the BCCI. To get its own back, the BCCI threatened to cancel the South Africa tour, a move that would put the squeeze on the hardly healthy coffers of CSA. A deal—as always—was finally brokered. Lorgat was kept out of the administration of the tour and of handling any matter to do with India. A series of three Tests, seven ODIs and two Twenty20 games was reduced to a tour of two Tests and three ODIs.

Yet, the tour was momentous for a number of reasons. This was the sternest test for the new team in the most challenging of conditions. As we have seen, the period between the conclusion of the World Cup in April 2011 to the end of 2012 had been one of the bleakest ever for Indian cricket. India had been humiliated in a Test series in England in the summer of 2011; they had been humiliated in the following Test series in Australia; they had been abject in the ODI tournament in Australia on the heels of the Test series, coming third among three teams; and possibly worst of all, they had been defeated by England in a home series. Clearly, rock bottom had been reached; the only way was up.

And so it proved to be in 2013. As we know, 2013 became—in terms of variety and consistency—one of India's best years ever. India began the New Year with a 3-2 win over England in an ODI series. In June, they won the ICC Champions Trophy. It was, if anything, more exciting than the World Cup because only the top teams play in it; further, the Champions Trophy triumph was significant as much for the fact that it came in England as for the reason that India remained undefeated through the competition. They then proceeded to win a tri-series in the Caribbean involving the West Indies and

Sri Lanka. A second string side walloped Zimbabwe 5-0 next. A 3-2 victory against Australia followed. India left for South Africa fresh from a 2-1 win over the West Indies in India. In all, India had won six ODI series in 2013, emerging victorious in twenty-one of the thirty games they had played and reclaiming the Number 1 ranking in the format. The team had chased down more than 350 twice. Kohli, Dhawan and Rohit were being seen as the most exciting trio of batsman in any ODI side.

The news in Tests, while not being quite as spectacular, was far from dismaying. India had beaten Australia 4-0, a neat inversion of the result they had been on the wrong end of Down Under in 2011-12. It was an underwhelming Australian team, no doubt, fractious and fragile, out of sorts on the subcontinent and with little of their characteristic grit and swagger. A travesty of a West Indian side then handed India a 2-0 victory, the series lasting less than five days over two Tests. In terms of statistics, India were setting off with a 6-0 record in recent Tests.

Irrespective of losing eight consecutive Tests when they last played overseas, India had (by dint of their home record and the fact that no team other than South Africa had been consistent through the year) climbed to Number 2 in the Test rankings. South Africa were of course Number 1, and the best Test team in the world in Test cricket.

This tour, then, would give everyone an indication of how good this team really was. They would be up against the best fast bowling attack in contemporary cricket. They would be playing in alien and hostile conditions, the kind of experience too few of them had too little of. But if they had not had the exposure, they neither had the baggage of sorry defeats.

And they were not as inexperienced—at least in the ODI format and in having played overseas—as such a young team might have been. Rohit had played more than a hundred ODIs. Kohli had played 122, averaged more than 50, and had scored seventeen centuries. He had just smashed Sir Vivian Richards’s record to become the fastest ever batsman to get to 5,000 ODI runs.

Several members of the team had travelled to South Africa in August to play first-class and List A matches. On that visit, Dhawan—the scorer already of five ODI hundreds and star of the Champions Trophy triumph in June—had distinguished himself by scoring 248 in a limited-overs match. Between them, these players had played in England, Australia, the West Indies and Zimbabwe.

Hardly a bunch of rookies in the conventional sense, then. But they had had little experience of Test cricket. Kohli, Pujara, Rohit and Dhawan had between them played in forty Tests at the start of the South Africa series. Tendulkar, Dravid, Laxman and Ganguly had played 610. Besides, being so long in the penumbra of the golden generation made these players appear to be more rookieish. While the men whose boots they were trying to fill were still around, when they were in their pomp, Indian cricket had seemed evergreen. It was up to the young charges to prove—to adapt an image from the Australian cricket writer and historian, Gideon Haigh—whether Indian cricket was also deciduous.

Ten Sports, the official broadcaster of the series, had got into the swing of things early. Soon after the Champions Trophy triumph, it created the hashtag #YoungRising to reflect the passing of the baton from the golden generation to this exciting new bunch of players and to create an enormous amount of buzz and chatter on social media. Interactive Avenues, the agency which managed the campaign for them, claimed that the sense of anticipation and discovery about the new team was such that the hashtag trended for eleven days on Twitter. It generated 1,25,302 tweets in that period.

So would Young India really rise to the occasion now?

The feeling, by and large, was that the ODI series could be a close run affair. South Africa's recent form in the format had been faltering. They had just lost to Pakistan in South Africa. The batting order was in a bit of a flux. There was uncertainty over Graeme Smith's and Jacques Kallis's places in the side. Not many were giving India much of a chance in the Tests against the Number 1 Test side. Especially given India's track record in this country, anything less than ruinous would be seen to be respectable.

In the event, things turned out rather differently.

Of course, one should never read too much into a series, a match, a tournament, a moment. Of course, there were mitigating factors when one tried to determine just how much of a litmus test this tour would be. India had arrived—thanks to their cricket board's scheduling—as they mostly tend to do these days: undercooked.

In a matter of weeks, they were going from playing benign West Indian bowling on flat pitches to the most explosive fast bowling attack in the game today on pitches that suited just that kind of bowling. The first ODI in Johannesburg was the first match they would play on the tour, ruling out any opportunity to adjust to pace, bounce or the lateral movement of the ball that

had troubled so many of their predecessors. For instance, V.V.S. Laxman, the silken destroyer of many an Australian attack on pitches Down Under with pace and true bounce, scored not a single century in South Africa. In ODIs, he averaged 2.5. Rahul Dravid, another colossus in the most trying of conditions away from home, had an average of 29.71 in South Africa, compared to a career average of 52.31.

Ever since India first toured the country after the lifting of apartheid in 1992, their record against South Africa had hardly been inspiring. Prior to this series they had won merely five of the twenty-eight ODIs they had played. In Tests, they had won two and lost seven of the fifteen they had played in South Africa.

But mitigating circumstances or not, this was what we had to go by. More than results, it was a test case of whether this team could compete at this level, make a good fist of one of the most arduous challenges in the contemporary game, whether these promising players had the resilience, the temperament, the technique, the adaptability that is required of cricketers at the highest level.

The South Africa tour was the first—and possibly biggest—moment of truth in the impending voyage of discovery on how the Indian team would acquit themselves in 2014, at the World Cup in 2015, and beyond. If this team acquitted itself honourably here, the future looked promising. If it was to be craven and cowed, all the steps forward that 2013 represented would be rolled back.

The future was here. There could be no better time to embrace it.

The future looked uncertain on 5 December at the Wanderers in Johannesburg. The defining moment of the first ODI came in the fifth ball of the eighth over of the India innings. South Africa had batted first and amassed 358. Morné Morkel was bowling to Kohli. India were 17 for 1. The third ball, a vicious snorter, had flicked Kohli’s glove on its way to the wicketkeeper Quinton de Kock who had dropped it. The fifth ball reared up from a length, Kohli tried to pull it and it cannoned into his ribcage. Morkel was bowling at more than 140 kph.

What happened next was fascinating—and rare in the context of Indian batsmen. Kohli neither flinched nor winced. He gave his body a sort of shake from the waist up, took a step to his right and smiled through his visor. He

flicked the following ball off his pads for a couple. In the next over, which was Dale Steyn's, he punched, with perfect timing, the second ball wide of cover for a four and the third past mid-on for another boundary. If India were looking for a statement of intent, there could have been few more assertive than this one.

Unfortunately, that was the only statement India made all day. South Africa shut them up, then shut them down. It was a no contest. India won the toss (the only thing they won that day) and chose to field. South Africa set the pace with a 152-run opening stand between Hashim Amla and de Kock. The innings was in its thirtieth over when they were separated. It provided the ideal platform for an assault, but the assault, when it did come, arrived with a savagery calculated to singe any visiting team in its opening match. When de Kock was out after an accomplished 135, the score was 247 for 3 after forty-one overs and five balls. That brought JP Duminy and AB de Villiers together. They were separated after less than eight overs together at the crease. In that period they had scored 105 runs. South Africa finished with 358.

It was carnage. The Indian bowlers, unused to the wicket and still fresh from the flat tracks of home, failed to find their length. Nor did they keep their line. Mohit Sharma's ten overs went for 82 runs; Bhuvaneshwar Kumar's nine cost 68. Only Mohammed Shami showed a bit of spunk and worked up some pace, but that was hardly enough.

But this was an India team that had chased down two scores in excess of 350 during the course of a single ODI series against Australia just months ago. Bat in hand, not much seemed beyond Dhoni, Rohit, Dhawan and Kohli. The bowlers had mucked up before but the batsmen had been cleaning up after them to devastating effect.

If there had been a keen sense of anticipation about the response, Dale Steyn snuffed it out when he came on to bowl. It was an unplayable opening spell, torrid in pace, unerring in line and length, probing, penetrative, sometimes quite frankly frightening and asking more questions of the batsmen than they had answers for. It was a classic, top-calibre fast bowling on a track with plenty of juice. More than merely his bowling figures (although at 3 for 35 in eight overs, the figures were mighty impressive), it was the manner in which Steyn put his imprimatur on the game—and indeed the series—that proved so decisive. For the neutral, it was a joy to watch.

Certainly that joy was not shared by Rohit. As only the third man to have

scored an ODI double century, a feat which he had followed up with back-to-back centuries in his first two Tests the month before, Rohit must have been wondering whether this was a different sport that he had been asked to play.

In a sense, it was.

Pinned to the crease, groping outside the off stump, beaten for pace, bewildered by the variation in length, discomfited by the short deliveries, the opener found it difficult to get bat on ball. It took him fifteen balls to get off the mark. His agony continued till the sixteenth over. He was run out by a suicidal call from Suresh Raina, who was motivated it seemed by no other reason than to want to get away from the striker's end. Rohit's dismissal made India 65 for 4. Dhawan discovered—as he would again in the series without learning his lesson—that Johannesburg was not quite Jaipur or Jamshedpur. The pace of the wicket made the hard, high slashes over point difficult to execute. And while having the hook and the pull in your arsenal is a handy thing, playing it well is far harder than on the subcontinent. Try it here and, unless the movement and timing are perfect, you could get it higher up on the bat than you would like. Dhawan hit three fours, all-glorious, off the slower pace of Lonwabo Tsotsobe. Then came Morkel. The first ball that Morkel bowled to Dhawan was a bouncer. Dhawan instinctively went to pull, got a top edge and was caught.

Suresh Raina reminded us again why he should not be picked for India on pitches such as these. He is simply not equipped with the technique. Running Rohit out was his most significant contribution to the match in which he was subsequently run out himself for 14 from thirty-nine balls.

Dhoni offered some plucky resistance, getting away with the edges that he never would at a Test at a venue such as this, and charging down the pitch, but it was more a token show of spirit than an innings that could have engineered a genuine fightback. His resolve did not waver and he milked the relatively less threatening Jacques Kallis and Tsotsobe. One of Dale Steyn's thunderbolts did for him. His innings of sixty-five ended in the forty-first over. Four balls later, India's innings was over for 217. It had lasted only forty-one overs and a little over three hours. The margin of the defeat—141 runs—was crushing. This was the sort of hammering that India had not been handed in a while.

Two days later, the mind games had begun. Asked if the South Africa

bowlers had frightened the visitors with their intensity and intent in Johannesburg, Steyn replied: ‘I would definitely say so. I didn’t see many of our guys walking off the field with bloody fingers or ice packs on ribs, so it definitely was a wake-up call for the Indians. It’s not Mumbai where the ball doesn’t get higher than the stumps. It’s going to be hard to play here.’[44]

Virat Kohli came out swinging in response. When told of Steyn’s remarks, he said: ‘I don’t think anyone in this Indian team is frightened of anything. Regardless of the loss the other day, you didn’t see anyone sort of closing their eyes to bouncers or getting out throwing their bats around. We were trying hard to counter the bowling they came up with, and they were bowling in great areas, but you didn’t see anyone sort of moving away from stumps and trying rash shots or anything like that. We were all trying to get into positions to play correct shots, but they pitched it in the right areas and were getting enough help to trouble us.’[45]

The batsman promised that the team had learned their lessons at the Wanderers and a turnaround could be expected in the second game in Durban. ‘We have understood, we have learned from the first game, and you will see a much better performance from the bowlers and the batsmen combined.’[46]

His hope was misguided. Like a loyal patron who returns to a favourite restaurant and asks for second helpings, India went to Durban and asked for more of the same. South Africa were happy to oblige.

The track was slower. Yuvraj was dropped in favour of the young Ajinkya Rahane. Ishant and Umesh Yadav, because of their greater pace, were chosen over Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Mohit Sharma. The plan was sensible, but things did not go according to plan.

Amla and de Kock staged *Bonnie and Clyde Redux*, putting on a devastating 194-run opening stand in thirty-five overs. Amla got 100, becoming the fastest to get to 4,000 ODI runs, bettering the record held by Vivian Richards. Afterwards, with typical grace, he said he was ‘embarrassed’ at having done so.

The Indians were embarrassed as well. De Kock made 106, becoming the third South African after Herschelle Gibbs and Amla to score two consecutive ODI centuries. India pulled it back a bit, snapping up 4 wickets for 22 runs between the forty-fourth and forty-eighth overs. But neither Umesh Yadav nor Ishant Sharma were able to exert a decisive influence. Shami threatened with his bouncers, yorkers and pace, but South Africa still

took 20 off the final over to finish with 280. India might have been buoyed by thinking that they had at least restricted the hosts to less than 300, but would at the same time have felt chastened to learn that the highest ever successful chase in Durban was 268.

Whatever hope India had had of mounting a spectacular chase evaporated before a fifth of the innings was over. It was as good as—or, if you prefer, as bad—as at the Wanderers. India's top four batsmen managed 37 runs between them. Before the end of the ninth over, the score was 34 for 4.

Dhawan slashed high and hard at the second ball he faced (a length ball from Steyn), got it high on the bat and straight to the fielder at point. A ball pitched a trifle back of a length kissed Kohli's bat as he tried to run it down to third man and ended up in the gloves of the keeper. Rohit pulled (off the front foot) straight to the midwicket fielder. And Rahane injudiciously chased a Morkel ball that was well outside off to be given caught behind although he had not really got an edge.

The torture did not last long. The innings lasted only thirty-five overs and one ball. India were all out for 146. The margin of defeat this time was 134 runs. At the press conference after the game, Dhoni blamed the top-order collapse for the debacle. Sixty-five for 4 in Johannesburg. Thirty-four for 4 in Durban. Could not bat the full quota of fifty overs in either. What else was there to say? The series was done and dusted. The third game in Centurion held only academic interest.

On the face of it, you could say that the wheels were coming off India's campaign without it even getting into first gear.

But there was another way of looking at it. India had played less than two full days of cricket on the tour. The team had arrived in South Africa merely six days ago. Only the previous month, these players had been up against a West Indian bowling line-up (that one would be loath to dignify by calling an 'attack') on pitches that were flat, dry and turning. And here they were now. Could one expect them to entertain us?

The cricket board's arrogance, avariciousness and folly in sending a young team out to its stiffest test of their first season together were self-evident. If India were to go down amid the rubble of its self-belief, the harm to a talented side would be irreparable. If the board was at all aware of any of this, it was doing a flawless job of pretending otherwise.

Other than allowing only one innings to be played in the third and final ODI at Centurion, the rain provided an important function: it offered us the

most interesting sidelight of the game, a sidelight that would later move from the periphery to the centre of the narrative of this tour.

During a rain break, SuperSport, the host broadcaster of the tour, replayed footage of the Morkel ball that had cracked into Kohli's ribs in the opening game in Johannesburg. The footage also showed Kohli holding an ice pack to his body and then working on his pull shot in the nets. The footage ran with the caption, *Kohli: Softened up*.

South African journalist Neil Manthorp, who before the series had begun, had written at least one jingoistic article, decided to indulge in some more sneering and triumphalism. 'It wasn't subtle and it wasn't flattering, but it was relevant and it was interesting,'[47] he wrote for the website *wisdenindia.com* and then proceeded to 'break' the story that the Indian management, led by coach Duncan Fletcher, had been offended by this clip. He wrote that the Indian management summoned the broadcaster to the dressing room to give him a dressing down, saying it was disrespectful to be showing it. '[Kohli] needs to score runs in the Test series, that's all that matters. There will be no point in defending his honour, pride and dignity unless he proves he's worth it,'[48] Manthorp concluded. You could almost hear his fist pounding the pulpit.

The Indian team management rubbished the accusation. *ESPNcricinfo* reported: 'Once rain stopped play, we did meet the producer of SuperSport, but it was for discussing something else and not about the clip shown of Virat,' an official statement said. A SuperSport spokesperson refused to confirm that Fletcher and Co had been enraged. 'SuperSport is aware that discussions took place between a member of its production staff and members of the Indian touring party at SuperSport Park on 11 December. SuperSport will continue to produce the matches during the current tour to world-class specifications and with regard to editorial context.'[49]

All this sniping revealed that, irrespective of the result of the ODI series, there was a fair bit of needle between the two teams. South Africa were not taking India lightly. This was the sort of edge that gave extra charge to a contest, the kind of thing we had seen over series between Sourav Ganguly's India and Steve Waugh's Australia.

And what of the actual cricket in Centurion?

For the first time since landing in South Africa, India had a sniff of a chance. The hosts were 28 for 3 before eight overs had been bowled. Ishant appeared transformed, picking up two vital wickets in his fourth over. But a

sniff was all that India had. After the initial stumble, the South Africa batsmen picked themselves up, steadied themselves, and proceeded on a fluent, resolute run. India had all the catching up to do.

De Kock, who scored nothing but hundreds in the series, duly made his third in three games. De Villiers returned to the mood in which he had commenced the series, making 109. After seeing a chink of opportunity open at 28 for 3, India saw the next South Africa wicket fall at 199. The hosts had not only slammed the door shut; they had bolted it for good measure. Fifty-one runs came off the final twenty-eight balls. When South Africa finished on 301, it became the tenth instance that India had conceded more than 300 runs in an ODI in a calendar year—no team in world cricket has that dubious distinction. Nevertheless, Shami took three wickets. Ishant showed us the bowler he could be with figures of 4 for 40 from his quota of ten overs.

In preparation for the most arduous assignment in the current game—Tests against South Africa in South Africa—India managed to play merely two-and-a-half days of dismal cricket.

THIRTEEN

DAYS BEFORE THE FIRST TEST GOT UNDER WAY, *FORBES INDIA* MAGAZINE announced its list of the country's top hundred celebrities. The magazine arrives at the rankings for this annual list by judging candidates on two parameters: earnings and fame. A combination of the scores on both counts determines the rank of the celebrity in question. The 2013 list saw Kohli burst into the top ten. He ranked at Number 7, sandwiched between the movie stars Akshay Kumar and Ranbir Kapoor. His earning in the period between 1 October 2012, and 30 September 2013, was estimated to be ₹57.31 crore. He had been absent from the 2012 list. At Number 8 on that list was a cricketer who no longer was part of the team: Virender Sehwag.

In an accurate reflection of the country's twin obsessions with cricket and Hindi cinema, actors and cricketers made up the top ten. In just as accurate a reflection of how famous these young players had become within a year, a host of them turned up—for the first time—on this list. Ravindra Jadeja was at Number 28; Dhawan at Number 39; and Pujara at Number 40. Rohit, who had appeared on the 2012 list at Number 24 (thanks to, one presumes, his exploits in the Indian Premier League), rose to Number 22.

Their captain, Dhoni, was at Number 2, with Shah Rukh Khan above him and Salman Khan below. He was estimated to have earned ₹155.32 crore between 1 October 2012, and 30 September 2013. The previous year, he had been at Number 3.

FOURTEEN

JOHANNESBURG FOR THE INDIANS MIGHT HAVE HELD THE STILL-FRESH memory of being scorched by Steyn and Co less than a fortnight before the first Test began on 18 December but it was also the site of a famous victory. That was in the 2006-7 series, a Test in which India, thanks to a fiery 5 for 40 from Sreesanth, had rolled over South Africa for 84 in the first innings. Propelled by an unbeaten 51 in their own first innings by Ganguly and an artistic 73 from Laxman in the second (the only two half centuries India scored in the Test), they had gone on to beat South Africa by 123 runs.

The series following that one in 2010-11 was drawn 1-1, the most creditable performance that India has shown in South Africa ever since cricketing ties were resumed between the two countries in the post-apartheid era. In the five series played here since November 1992, South Africa had won four.

None of those series was played without the participation of one or more of the Fab Five of Tendulkar, Dravid, Ganguly, Laxman and Kumble—who, with forty-five wickets in twelve matches, was the most prolific Indian bowler in South Africa. This was the first instance since April 1989, a Test against the West Indies at Kingston, in which India was without any member of the Fab Five.

In terms of batting alone, the Fab Four scored 45,179 Test runs; made 120 centuries; and 222 fifties. The magnitude of the task confronting this current team was to be measured as much by the difficulty of an assignment in which their predecessors, towering legends that they were, had a series record of 0-4 as by the enormous vacuum that they were now ordained to fill.

Given the mauling in the ODI series, there was, as the first Test approached, certainly not the kind of despair among fans that could ordinarily been expected. Around this team, bound by talent and promise and a billion dreams, sizzled a sense of optimism like static electricity. Come on, give them a chance. Don’t write them off. Even if they are ripped apart here in the southern hemisphere, believe in them. Without optimism—and there was genuine cause for it—what was left to the fan to clutch?

When I did a straw poll among fellow writers and fans on the morning of the Test, the consensus seemed to be this: India would bat better because they would be able to leave the ball much more; that the batsmen would be able to afford being circumspect without trying to score quickly as they had been forced to in the ODIs; and that they would hunker down and see off the torrid spells, before trying to push on with scoring runs once the pressure had been lifted.

The Indian batsmen had indeed been spotted practising leaving the ball alone outside the off stump at the nets. And the leave (cricket's contribution to the pervasive semantic trend of turning a verb into a noun) became as defining a feature of the India innings as the attacking strokes that the batsmen played. Unfortunately, merely being able to leave the ball effectively would not sort out India's problems.

Dhoni made a statement of intent by winning the toss and choosing to bat on a bouncy wicket that had brought so many woes to his team such a short while ago. We are ready, the gesture seemed to say. We are up for it. Bring on Steyn, Morkel and Philander. That statement needed eloquent backing up.

As is the nature of captaincy, a decision that appeared to be positive and imbued with the right intention before the start of play, was looking foolhardy after only fifteen overs and one ball had been bowled. At 24 for 2, India were squirming.

Dhawan got suckered into a classic fast bowler's trap. Steyn pitched short four times in a row. The opener kept trying to pull. Having embarrassed himself on three occasions, he put an end to the embarrassment by pulling the fourth one—ball caught again high up on the bat—down the throat of the fielder at backward square leg. Vijay left and left, scoring merely 6 runs from the forty-two balls that he faced, before perishing to a loose shot outside off to a ball he could again have let be.

And then in walked Kohli. Number 4 for India. The spot in which India had seen no one else but a certain batsman since before the Berlin Wall had fallen.

Kohli left sixteen of the first twenty-eight balls he faced. His first runs came when Kallis dug it in short ('Remember Morkel at this very ground in the first ODI?' the ball seemed to ask) and Kohli rocked back, ferociously pulling it for four. In the penultimate over before lunch, he flicked Steyn off his pads for another boundary.

The leg spinner Imran Tahir, like a blessing, loped in to bowl the last over

before lunch. Kohli was on strike. The first ball of the over, too short, was scorched through midwicket for a four; the final one, a certifiable long hop, was pulled away with the sort of timing and wrists that would have had Laxman smiling with pleasurable endorsement.

As India went to lunch at 70 for 2, the initial storm weathered, Kohli was on 32 not out from thirty-two balls. Just to put it in context—and to emphasisze why merely leaves can never be good enough, the shots you play are terribly important—he was scoring at a run a ball in spite of not having offered a shot to sixteen of the first twenty-eight balls that he had faced.

Pujara at the other end was unbeaten on 18 from sixty-one balls at lunch. This tour was Pujara's chance to show that he was as good as everyone thought he was. Unlike Kohli, he had not yet scored a century overseas. But he had phenomenally outscored his peers in Tests, two double hundreds standing out as the epitome of his achievements. Pujara was looking untroubled; he was looking to build.

Pujara and Kohli kept South Africa wicketless for two hours, easily the most pivotal period of play on the opening day and in India's first Test innings of the tour.

When play resumed after lunch, Kohli did not begin where had left off at lunch time. He began where he had begun when he had come in to bat with the score at 24 for 2. He left alone eleven of the first seventeen deliveries he got. The first really loose ball after lunch came in the seventh over. It was from Vernon Philander. It was short and wide. Kohli's vicious cut off the back foot screamed to the boundary.

From there on, in an innings that will rank among the very best by an India batsman in South Africa, Kohli did everything right. Well, almost everything. He ran out Pujara. And he was out in a manner that he himself was devastated by. Other than that, it was tactical, intelligent, exemplary batsmanship.

His admixture of judiciousness and adventure was extraordinary. He rarely missed the opportunity to put away a delivery that erred even slightly in line or length. His strokeplay was audacious. We saw the punch through point or the covers; the straight drive; the whips and flicks off his pads; and the pull shot, perfectly balanced, always safe. His defence—stretching forward to the fullest extent to offer a dead bat—was out of a coaching manual.

Kohli got to his fifty from seventy-seven balls with a rasping boundary

off Tahir. In the sixty-third over of the innings, he steered JP Duminy backward of point for a four to get to 98. The next ball he flicked through midwicket and reached his hundred. He became only the eighth Indian to score a century in South Africa. The last three India hundreds in Tests in South Africa had all come from the team's Number 4 batsman. Later Kohli would say that even when he was scoring centuries against Australia, his mind was on this series and how it might be if he could get a hundred over here.

Spurred by the imperative to get through the ninety overs of the day, Graeme Smith brought back Duminy and Tahir. Kohli, along, with Rahane, had themselves a merry feast. Then, off a benign delivery from Kallis, Kohli lobbed a drive to a bemused Duminy at cover. It was the most anti-climactic end possible to an achievement that was the apogee of the day's play. He hung his head when he realized what he had done. I have seldom seen a batsman look so shattered after so monumental an achievement. He had faced 181 balls. He had left sixty-one of them. But from the rest, he had garnered eighteen boundaries.

Perhaps the most appropriate—and flattering—remarks came from South Africa's bowling coach, legendary quick and once India's tormentor-in-chief, Allan Donald. Speaking of Kohli and his innings, Donald said: 'I think he showed great discipline and responsibility. It reminds me of Sachin Tendulkar when they came here in 1996. I was the first one to say back in 1996 that India didn't show much bottle, and that one person that jumps out and plays for the situation, plays for his team was Tendulkar. That's what came to my mind when I saw Kohli batting—the way he left the ball and when we were slightly off the line he punished the ball. He paced his innings very well. But for me, he was responsible today. He put up his hand today, and showed real fight. He was tight, and didn't give much away until the end.'[50]

The value of Kohli's effort—as well as the regret at his having thrown his wicket away and run out a well-set Pujara—became even more evident on the second morning of the Test. India lost their remaining five wickets in thirteen overs with the addition of merely 25 runs to the overnight score of 255. South Africa changed tactics, bowling straighter and closer to the stumps, not allowing the batsmen to leave as many as they had done on the first day.

Rahane caught the eye with his compact game, his strokeplay and his ability to stand up to Steyn, Morkel and Philander and give back just as good

as he got. Other than his 47 and Kohli's century, no Indian batsman crossed 25. Still, 280 was not a score to be scoffed at. It gave India a fair chance to not merely stay in the match, but even dictate terms.

If the team's batting was deemed to have enormous potential, the dicky bit was the bowling. Zaheer was returning to the team after being dropped. Ishant, who only occasionally shows the promise he had revealed in 2008 at Perth against the masterly Ricky Ponting, had been mauled in the ODIs. Shami had never bowled overseas.

But the bowling on the second day was a real surprise. Led by a fit and able Zaheer, India learned from South Africa and kept the line tight, probing the stumps, bowling with fire and intensity. Smith and Amla put on 93 for the second wicket to take South Africa to 130 for 1 at tea, but that was not an accurate reflection of how close the play had been.

The post-tea drama levelled things up. South Africa went from 130 for 1 to 146 for 6 in fewer than seven overs. Ishant got Amla and Kallis in consecutive deliveries. Zaheer had his man, Smith, for the seventh time in Tests. Shami steamed in and picked up the wickets of De Villiers and Duminy.

With the score at 145 for 4, Shami had returned for a new spell. The first ball of the over was tight and full and moved a hint to take Duminy's outside edge to first slip. The third ball skidded and jagged back to trap De Villiers right in front of the stumps. Shami had two wickets in three balls. This was only his third Test. He was confronting some of the finest batsmen in the world. And he was holding his own.

To get a sense of how far Shami has come, one needs an idea of where he has come from. He spent the first sixteen years of his life in a town called Sahaspur in Uttar Pradesh, a town with a population of 24,000. Forget cricket facilities, Sahaspur does not even have a railway station. Often it has electricity for a third of the day. Of all the small-town boys who have broken into this national team, Shami comes from the smallest town of them all.

His father, Tousif Ali, ran a store selling spare parts for tractors. Shami was immensely fortunate to have him for a father. Tousif believed that Shami could bowl fast. And he knew that for Shami to bowl fast on a cricket pitch (as opposed to the fields in Sahaspur on which he played as a child and teenager), he would have to leave home. Without putting any pressure on the

boy to earn a livelihood and help the family, Tousif packed off his 16-year-old son to Kolkata. To earn a living for himself in the city's many clubs that dot the Maidan. And to turn himself into the fast bowler he dreamed he could become.

Bit by bit, Shami did it. Rising through the ranks of the local clubs, from lowly Dalhousie to middling Town to top-flight Mohun Bagan, Shami bowled fast and accurate and blitzed out batsmen. Rare is the anecdote of a fast bowler being tempted with biryani to take wickets, but the lore on the Maidan in Kolkata is that Shami, promised a helping of biryani, would invariably ramp up his pace.

In his years in Kolkata, as he grew from an adolescent into a young man, Shami gained in physical strength and stamina. Kapil Dev had once spoken of how fast bowlers, rather than spending hours in the gym, were better off simply bowling and running hard. Shami, without perhaps ever having heard this, did precisely that. He bowled and bowled, for long hours, and he ran and ran.

At the age of 20, he made his first-class debut for Bengal. After only fifteen first-class games, on the heels of an impressive 2012-13 season in the Ranji Trophy, he was picked to play for India. By this time, Shami had in place the elements that comprise his strongest suit: pace, an upright seam, reverse swing and a handy yorker.

In January 2013 he made his ODI debut against Pakistan. It was a bright start to his international career. Shami bowled with pace and mean accuracy, snapping up four maidens and a wicket. Nine months later, he was selected for the Test side. It was the first Test of Tendulkar's farewell series. At the Eden Gardens, which was now his homeground, he took the new ball for India for the first time in a Test match.

He bowled a tight opening spell of four overs. In the second ball of his second spell, he had his first Test wicket. Shami bowled a bouncer outside the off stump to Kieran Powell who tried to pull, got an edge and skied the ball to mid-off. His next wicket, which was also the next to fall in the innings, was of the sort that releases adrenaline in a fast bowler, a pretty quick ball pitching on a good length and rocketing through between the bat and pad of Marlon Samuels, who was batting on 61, and uprooting his middle stump.

He knocked over Denesh Ramdin's middle stump as well as Sheldon Cottrell's, finishing with four wickets for 71 runs in his first Test innings.

Still better was to follow in the second. On the third afternoon, in a spectacular spell of befuddling reverse swing, Shami broke the back of the West Indies batting. From 97 for 1, the visitors, unable or unwilling to counter and nullify the reverse swing, were all out for 168. Shami had bowled thirteen overs and had taken 5 wickets for 47 runs. He had nine wickets in the match, a five-for on Test debut being as significant for a bowler as a hundred is for a batsman.

In the next Test, Tendulkar's final one, he again bowled with vim and venom although, with a wicket in each innings, was not as successful as he had been on his debut. It was good enough to put him on the plane to South Africa. This was a severe test of his skill, stamina and mental toughness. So far he was holding up rather well.

Shami remains, more than any of his teammates, still very much the small-town boy, loyal to his roots and his humble background. Not for him the shades and hirsute hipster moves of Jadeja, the ranch and horses and expansive ostentatiousness. No tattoo embellishes his body. His hair scruffy, his demeanour committed yet low-key, he does not have brand managers queueing up for his endorsement. In a team full of ad-shooting multimillionaires, Shami seems a throwback to a quieter age.

Eight years ago, having not been anywhere or seen any place outside his own town Sahaspur, he had made his first trip from home to the new world of Kolkata, whose Maidan seemed full of unbounded promise. Now, in a period of eleven months, Shami would be playing on three continents. This was his first stop.

The India bowlers reversed the old ball, something that South Africa had been unable to do, and this turned out to be a significant weapon. Even when Philander and Faf du Plessis put together a stand that brought the match right back in balance, shoulders did not drop, the intensity did not let up, and the field remained close instead of being—as has often been the case with Dhoni—spread out defensively on the boundary.

The opening session of the third morning saw South Africa doing what India had done in the first session the previous day: collapse in a heap. The hosts lost their last four wickets for 27 runs in nine overs and three balls. The period of play belonged to Zaheer who bowled with venom and accuracy and justified his return to the team with pickings of 4 for 88 from 26.3 overs.

India’s lead of 36 was slender, but was already being talked about as having the potential to be significant.

Cheteshwar Pujara knew that. And he was not about to let another silly run out—or, for that matter, anything at all—come in the way of showing the world just how good he could be. After Dhawan had outside edged Philander to second slip to be dismissed for 15 and Vijay had admirably blunted the new ball in a grimly determined, two-and-a-half-hour-long 39, Pujara and Kohli came together with the score at 93 for 2.

The architecture of a long Pujara innings is always masterful. Mukul Kesavan, who calls Pujara the ‘best young batsman in the Test-playing world’, has written about the symphonic nature of Pujara’s innings. ‘A long Pujara innings seems to follow a pattern. There’s an opening passage where he plays variations on defensive themes. Here he is very much like his great predecessor at Number 3, Rahul Dravid, in how late he meets the ball, in his self-denial outside the off stump, in the wristy turn to leg as a release shot that gets him a risk-free run.

‘After this alaap where time and run rates seem to be of no consequence, Pujara introduces a steady pulse of run-making into his performance. Once he passes a hundred, his innings becomes decidedly up-tempo, and by the time he is finished, he has mutated into an aggressive batsman, cutting and pulling and driving his way to the enormous scores that he routinely accumulates in both first-class and Test cricket.’[51]

Pujara scored 9 serene runs from his first sixty-four balls in this innings. His first boundary was a beautifully timed flick through midwicket off Philander. This was shortly followed by two more boundaries: a cut off Kallis past point; and a swivel pull off the back foot past midwicket. While Pujara may seem calm in the opening stages of his innings, he never appears to be staid. Almost always he spots and punishes the loose delivery. It justly appears as though he is setting the pace, that he, rather than the bowler, is drawing up the terms of the engagement.

After tea, he scored only 6 from seventeen balls. He reached his fifty—his first outside India—from 127 balls. His next fifty took merely forty-one. When Pujara was on 54, Kohli had 33. When Pujara, essaying a sublime, balanced cover drive off Steyn, reached his century, Kohli had been able to progress to 52. In his typical manner, Pujara had not only tired out the bowlers, figured out the field and pitch and dictated the tempo of play; he had outscored as aggressive a partner as Kohli by 46 runs to 19. He had scored 95

runs in the final session of play.

Pujara's accomplished back foot game allows him to not be messed around with by the short ball. It gives him the confidence to play his savage cut and pull shots off the back foot on pitches on which the ball is rising. He plays the ball late, he seems—even in innings in which he does not score high—composed and in with a chance for a big one. He appears imperturbable at the crease, his prudence laced with intent. If Kohli is a batsman against whom bowlers will always fancy their chances against the run of play, there is, to quote Kesavan, 'a permanence about Pujara'.

Numbers cannot be everything in cricket, but in Pujara's case, the numbers—because they are so remarkable—need to be stacked up. By the end of the South Africa series, Pujara had clocked up six hundreds from seventeen Tests. Of these, two were double centuries. Two others were in excess of 150. His average stood at 66.25. This doubtless reveals Pujara's indefatigable hunger for runs, his ability to conceptualize and execute daddy hundreds, the big ones that tend to be able to swing a match. No Indian fan was unfamiliar with the ferocity of Pujara's appetite. In Johannesburg, he revealed how single-minded he could be in satisfying it.

At the end of the fiftieth over, India were 151 for 2. By the end of the sixty-fifth, the score was 241 without further loss. South Africa had not managed a maiden. India had pummelled 90 runs from those fifteen overs. Pujara and Kohli, orchestrating the mayhem with gleeful abandon, were beginning to remind us of V.V.S. and Dravid improbably batting Australia out of the match at the Eden Gardens in 2001 and the Adelaide Oval in 2003. It was only fitting that these two new stars should bring back memories of two celebrated members of the golden generation. Johannesburg showed—beyond any doubt—that their time had truly arrived.

Pujara's innings had in fact eclipsed Kohli's. At stumps on the third day, India were 284 for 2. Kohli was not out on 77, aiming to become the first Indian to score centuries in both innings of a Test in South Africa as well as the first Indian Number 4 to achieve that feat anywhere in the world. The advantage lay squarely with the visitors.

The duo further consolidated India's position on the fourth morning, taking the score to 315 when Pujara was dismissed at the stroke of the first drinks break. Kohli fell a little later for 96. But by this time, it was a case of India having to decide how much time Zaheer and his comrades would be given to bowl South Africa out and how immense a lead would be considered

to be entirely out of South Africa's reach.

Zaheer flung his bat around to make a 31-ball 29 with a couple of towering sixes, and India were finally all out for 421. Other than the total, one statistic would have made the Indian batsmen smile. Steyn returned his worst Test figures: no wicket for 104 from thirty overs.

South Africa needed 458 to win. India needed ten wickets in a day and a half. By most accounts, it was an insurmountable target. But South Africa had lost only three Tests at home in nearly four years. And if the highest successful run chase in the history of Test cricket was West Indies's 418 for 7 against Australia at St John's in 2003, guess who had pulled off the second highest? It was South Africa who had scored 414 against Australia at Perth in 2008 to win. In the process, they had lost merely four wickets.

Alviro Petersen led the rescue mission. Kohli dropped Smith early on and even if South Africa were uncertain in occasional passages of play, runs came at a canter. Smith and Petersen put on 108 for the first wicket. India were finally rewarded for its unflagging efforts with two strokes of fortune: going for an unnecessary single, Smith was run out by a sharp throw from Rahane; and when Shami banged it in short, Amla ducked, and the ball which kept far lower than expected crashed into the off stump.

When play began on the final day of the Test South Africa needed to score 320 runs in a minimum of ninety overs for a historic win. India were eight wickets away from one of their most famous victories.

The first session of play on all but one day of this Test had richly rewarded bowlers. Four wickets had fallen in the morning session of the fourth day; four had gone down in less than ten overs on the third; and five in thirteen overs on the second day. If India could snap up as many in the first session, they would be sniffing a win to rival Kolkata in 2001, Adelaide in 2003 or Perth in 2008.

On the eve of the final day, Sanjay Manjrekar said that an India win was the most likely outcome of a Test that had turned into a high-octane confrontation. But the quick wickets that would have swung the game in India's favour eluded the bowlers on the fifth morning. The fiftieth and sixty-first overs yielded the wickets of Petersen and Kallis, making South Africa 197 for 4. The next wicket came with the score at 402.

Faf du Plessis and AB de Villiers, the two men who had secured a memorable draw against all odds in Adelaide in 2012, put on a heroic stand which this time put an improbable victory in South Africa's sight. It was

nerveless batting, soaking up like a sponge the pressure of a final day pitch, attacking fields, and by most accounts an insuperable task. India's bowlers toiled away. But despite cracks on the pitch which on occasion made the ball do unpredictable things, they lacked the bite and the incisiveness to winkle out the wickets they needed.

South Africa went to lunch at 236 for 4 with de Villiers on 24 and du Plessis on 42. At tea, the score had reached 331 for 4, with de Villiers on 72 and du Plessis merely twelve shy of a century. South Africa had batted out a session; it was beginning to seem as though de Villiers and du Plessis had taken the game away from India.

As the final hour of play got under way, the lights having come on at the Wanderers, both batsmen had completed their hundreds. More importantly, South Africa needed 66 runs from the last fifteen overs of the Test to win. They had six wickets in hand. In the manner of the greatest of Tests, all four results—an India win, a South Africa win, a draw and a tie—were possible. It was the sort of moment for which the phrase 'moment of reckoning' is inadequate.

Twelve overs later, South Africa were 442 for 7.

First, de Villiers inside edged Ishant on to his stumps. Next, Duminy, trying to cover drive, met the same fate off a Shami delivery. Then du Plessis, so admirable for so long, drove handsomely and set off for a run. Rahane fizzed in his return, direct from mid-off, and caught a diving du Plessis short of his ground.

With eighteen balls to play, all four results were still possible.

Philander and Steyn were out in the middle. Tahir, a certifiable Number 11 if ever there was one, was waiting to come in. Morkel, having twisted his ankle and not having bowled much in India's second innings, was padded up for an emergency. Now or never. Touch and go. Only, it was not all or nothing. This being Test cricket, the probability of a draw was alive. As was that of a tie.

Instead of attacking with a close in cordon of fielders, Dhoni spread his field. Should South Africa decide to go for the runs in the last three overs, the batsmen (who were principally bowlers) would have to risk the men in the deep.

Shami bowled a maiden to Steyn. It became clear that South Africa were not going to pick up the gauntlet. Zaheer bowled the penultimate over of the match. Another maiden. Steyn clobbered the last ball of the Test into the

stands. But the game had already been decided.

Both sides deserved to win. Neither deserved to lose. As combatants duelling on the edge of a precipice know, trying to tip the opponent over the edge entails the risk of oneself falling over. Call it quits. Walk away. And that is what India and South Africa did.

Instead of it being a memorable win, it was a memorable draw in the manner of Oval 1981. When Smith was asked after the match if South Africa had been too defensive by not going for a win, he said: 'India certainly didn't have four slips, short leg and a gully. I can throw the thing back at you if you want. I think certainly they didn't play like a team that had been wanting to win the game. In the end, probably a fair result for both the teams. I know there is a lot of emotion around, public sentiment, naturally so, but as a team I think we are in a strong position going into Durban.'[52]

Which was one (valid) way of looking at things.

When Kohli was asked the same question, he replied: 'Most part of that last session, we were looking to attack. Not so when Faf and AB were playing. The moment AB got out, all we looked to do was get wickets and get the result our way. We were never aiming for a draw. Or thinking that we needed to draw this game… If you ask me if we claim an emotional victory, we were on top on the first four days of the Test match. The fifth day they played brilliantly, but in the end when they had the chance to actually go for the total, they didn't. That was surprising for us. That revived or rejuvenated our confidence once again.'[53]

Which was another (just as valid) way of looking at things.

Nothing could have rivalled Johannesburg. The Durban Test, which started on Boxing Day, three days after the pulsating final session at the Wanderers had drawn to a close, was a far less charged affair. South Africa won by ten wickets, but the scoreline was not an accurate reflection of how the game had gone. Just as the series scoreline, 1-0 to South Africa, extending the hosts' record of never having lost a series to India at home, did not show how closely contested this series had been, how well India had played to take the fight to the world's top ranked Test team, and how the result could easily have been the other way around. India did not ruthlessly seize the moments they had to force a turnaround. South Africa, once they had their foot on the opposition's neck, refused to take it off till the kill had come about.

In a statement peppered with culinary allusions shortly after South Africa had gobbled up the second Test and series, Dhoni admitted as much. ‘This side, overall you talk about making some recipe, all the ingredients are there. This series we didn’t cook the food well. But apart from that we have got fantastic ingredients. Just have to make sure we are cooking the right way… If you have an upper hand, [you must] make sure you capitalize on that. On certain occasions, I felt that we were not able to capitalize on the upper hand.’[54]

One such occasion came when India went to stumps at 181 for 1 at the end of a rain-hit opening day at Durban. All the hard work that Vijay had done by hanging on and blunting the attack in the second innings at Johannesburg, all the patience he had shown at the expense of his natural attacking instincts paid dividends as he made his first fifty of the tour, ending the day only nine shy of his maiden century overseas. Pujara was unbeaten on 58. On a dry pitch, under warm and humid conditions, South Africa struggled. Steyn had gone wicketless for sixty overs.

India could have seized this moment to build an imposing total, a 500-plus score that would have brought the home team under pressure in the fourth innings. In the event, India lost their remaining 9 wickets for 153. Pujara added 12 to his overnight score; Vijay added 6. Kohli batted with panache for his 46, but could go no further. Rahane showed, in an unbeaten 51 that was plucked from the modern classic *How to Bat with Tailenders* written by V.V.S. Laxman, that he was a force to contend with in the lower middle order.

But more than any of this, the second day belonged to Steyn. He struck thrice in the first session and returned after tea to torpedo India’s lower order to end with 6 for 100 after not having picked up a wicket for nearly seventy overs.

South Africa, 82 for no loss at stumps, had the sort of chance that India did the previous evening. And unlike India, the Number 1 team grabbed it, going on to score 500 in their first innings. Kallis, playing his final Test, scored a valedictory century to lead the effort. The Indian bowlers’ tiredness notwithstanding, this was the second consecutive innings in which they had allowed the hosts to rack up 500 or more.

At the end of the fourth day, India found themselves in the sort of situation in which South Africa had been at a similar stage of the match at Johannesburg: if India could bat out the final day, the match would be drawn.

Kohli and Pujara were at the crease.

The opening session of the final day of the tour revealed why, even if you have the sort of batting strength that can outbat most teams, having a bowler who can in the space of a single spell blow the opposition out of the water can be the most crucial factor in winning Test matches.

India did not have one on the final day at Johannesburg. South Africa had Steyn at Durban.

Steyn's first ball of the day, shortish and just outside the off stump, caught Kohli pushing uncertainly at it. As de Villiers caught it, the South Africans went up in a loud appeal. Kohli was given out caught behind. Replays showed that the ball had glanced off his shoulder. In his next over, Steyn got Pujara with an unplayable delivery. Bowled at tremendous speed, it was pitched up and on the off, and then jagged back to shatter the stumps. Within three overs of play commencing, Steyn had punched not so much a hole as a crater through India's hopes of resistance. None of India's last five batsmen reached double figures. From 68 for 2, India were all out for 223—the second time in two innings in this Test that such a collapse had sabotaged their resolve.

Amid the ruins, came Rahane's runs. The Number 6 who had been waiting for his moment for so long showed the kind of grit and unfaltering application that is a trademark of the Mumbai-school of batting. Short balls from Steyn had cannoned into his body in the first innings, but the young man had not flinched. He had had scores of 47, 15 and 51 not out in the previous three innings of the tour, but it was on the final day at Durban that Rahane grew up, grew into his own, and staked his claim to be part of the core of the India team of the future.

Rahane is not a tall man. His game is suitably nimble and compact, his back foot play strong enough for him to be able to deal with the short and quick stuff, his thinking clear, his stroke selection and execution decisive. Nor is he overly defensive. As he found himself running out of partners, he stepped up the tempo, cutting and pulling the fast bowlers on a sort of wicket and in conditions that he had never encountered before. He ended with a strike rate of 61.14, the highest among the top six batsmen in the innings. Notably, he cut Philander for a six over point to go from 90 to 96.

In India's Test middle order, Rahane—a true blue opener in first-class

cricket and he would later open for India in ODIs—is a highly critical presence, and one that India will be thankful to have in the years to come.

He was one of the biggest revelations of this litmus test of a tour.

Pujara and Kohli were acts of affirmation. Full of as much substance as sparkle, the duo showed that they would be the bedrock on which this talented batting line up would be built.

At the same time, there were concerns.

Rohit's run of fantasy cricket scores at home against Australia and the West Indies did much to not let the questions regarding his performance in South Africa become too persistent. But there was no gainsaying the fact that, with scores of 18, 19, 14, 6, 0 and 25, the ghosts of his technique against the short ball and his temperament to last against quality bowlers on tracks that suited them have not yet been laid.

Dhawan's returns of 12, 0, 13, 15, 29 and 19 were equally troubling. Of just as much worry as the scores themselves was the manner in which he was repeatedly dismissed trying to pull without being able to get into a proper position. He was again and again beaten by the extra bounce; he mistimed the pull shot unlike, say, Kohli or Pujara, because he got the ball higher up on the bat than he should have.

It is unfair to conflate bowling in ODIs with that in Tests, but it surely says something that Ashwin took merely one wicket on the entire tour. Between the three ODIs and the first Test, his figures were 1 for 277 from seventy overs. On a final-day pitch in that second innings of the first Test when South Africa came so close to what had appeared to be an impossible target, Ashwin bowled thirty-six wicketless overs and gave away 83 runs.

After the South Africa series, Dhoni's recent record as a captain stood at 0-8 in nine Tests (he had not played the final Test of the series against Australia in 2011-12), a figure that ought to make a sizeable dent in the statistical fact that he is India's most successful skipper of all time. Just as crucially, his failure with the bat in Tests continued to bother those who took the trouble to parse the numbers.

Batting in the crucial Number 7 position, Dhoni, at the end of the tour, averaged 32.70 in thirty-nine Tests away from home. He had scored not a single century outside Asia. Compare this to what Adam Gilchrist, the Australian wicketkeeper, who also batted in that pivotal Number 7 position, achieved in his career. In thirty-eight Tests away from home, Gilchrist averaged 50.24. He scored ten centuries.

Look deep enough, and you will find flaws in every team. (Does South Africa, the currently Number 1 ranked Test team, have a spinner of any repute?) But what overrode everything else as 2013 drew to a close and a visit to New Zealand appeared as the first challenge of the New Year was the relief, no, the joy, at the manner in which India had on the whole played in the two Tests in South Africa. Faced with the toughest assignment in contemporary world cricket, a team stuffed with talented players who had not had the opportunity to gather top-level experience overseas came close to winning the Test series.

Three bad sessions was what it had taken the series away from them. Widely tipped to be blanked out, several Indian players had played with immense purpose and resolve, fearlessly backing their own games to forge the success they deserved every bit of. Some of their celebrated predecessors had done worse.

If this was what the future held, who could be cynical enough to not be excited by it?

FIFTEEN

SHORTLY AFTER THE SOUTH AFRICA TOUR ENDED, THE WORLD OF advertising threw light on how the stocks of these young players had risen during the course of the tour. The *Hindustan Times* reported that Kohli and Pujara—the two emphatic stars of the series—could expect to see their endorsement rates ratchet up by up to 15 per cent. The paper quoted brand experts as saying that Kohli, who had recently signed a ₹10 crore per year deal with the sports goods giant adidas and was already India's second-highest paid endorser after Shah Rukh Khan, could overtake the film star in coming months. He could look to be paid ₹11.5 to 12 crore for every brand that he endorsed. Pujara, who had till now earned ₹50 lakh for each brand that he endorsed, could expect to see that rise to ₹55-57.5 lakh. 'Kohli and Pujara are filling up the vacuum created in the brand world following the retirement of Sachin Tendulkar and Rahul Dravid,' the paper quoted adman Prahlad Kakkar as saying.[55]

On the evidence of the brief tour of South Africa, they may well be destined to do that on the pitch as well.

SIXTEEN

THE INDIAN CRICKETER'S LOT IS A STRANGE ONE. IN NOVEMBER, HE IS plying his trade in the oppressive humidity of Mumbai on a pitch the flatness of which a pancake would aspire to. In December, he is in South Africa, as near to straight off the plane as possible and released into the Wanderers at Johannesburg, on a pitch with bounce and pace and carry, in conditions that encourage lateral movement of the ball, against the best fast bowling attack in the business. The following month he is in New Zealand, in windy conditions, overnight rain often juicing up the pitch, a traditionally unsuccessful touring destination, against a smart young attack coming into its own and revelling in home advantage.

Adjust, adapt, accomplish. Or perish. The Indian cricketer's lot is a strange one.

India's tour to New Zealand—five ODIs and two Tests—in the first month of 2014 was not as heavy-duty and intimidating a challenge as the visit to South Africa in the previous month. After all, despite the mauling in the ODIs in South Africa, India remained the world's Number 1 side in that format as the series began. New Zealand? They were Number 8. In Tests, India were Number 2. New Zealand? Again Number 8.

But, as always in sport, the rankings were not everything. New Zealand—even sides without great players like Richard Hadlee or Martin Crowe—had always been more than a handful at home. When India beat New Zealand in New Zealand in 2009-10, it was the first time they had won a series there in thirty-three years. Only recently, New Zealand had bombed England, at the time one of the best sides in world cricket, in the first Test of a two-Test tour. Irrespective of what it appeared to be on paper, it would certainly not be a case of merely turning up and winning. Besides, very few members of this Indian team were acquainted with the conditions. The opportunity that this tour provided of gaining such familiarity was crucial, given that the forthcoming World Cup would be played here and in Australia.

The young team that had gone to South Africa had been given not a chance. The way it had played there had raised the stakes and expectations. It

was up to them now to prove in New Zealand that South Africa was not a fluke; rather, it was the precursor to other such performances.

As it turned out, the ODI series was nothing short of calamitous in terms of the result. India tied one game; they lost the other four. A team crackling with such batting talent, a team that had allowed a nation to hope only weeks ago in a tough series, a team that had performed so consistently all through 2013, it was not possible for a team like that to become wretched overnight. (It is not possible for any team or player to become wretched overnight.)

What was happening here?

First, there was the curious case of Cheteshwar Pujara. It was inexplicable to all but the selection committee why the country's most technically accomplished batsman should not be playing in the fifty-overs format. If anyone could hold an innings together, it was Pujara. If anyone could accelerate with impetuous alacrity, it was Pujara. Forget the fact that he averaged 58 in the format in domestic cricket. Just think about this: in Tests, Pujara scores at a faster rate than Kohli, the man rated to be our most explosive current batsman. If a worry seemed to be that he took his time to settle down and play a long innings, it ought not to have been one; it ought to have been seen as a blessing in circumstances such as those in South Africa where India failed to bat out fifty overs.

Days before the ODI series in New Zealand began, Sourav Ganguly made the case for Pujara to be in the side. 'Pujara is most needed in these conditions,' the *Hindustan Times* quoted him as saying. 'He has adjusted well in the Test mould and I am sure he will do well in the ODIs.'[56]

A few days later, Dravid joined the growing chorus of 'Let Pujara in'. In an interview with the *Hindustan Times*, the man who would know more than most about the travails of being typecast, said: 'I definitely believe he is someone who you can think of going into the World Cup, especially when it is happening in Australia. Sometimes, in Indian conditions, where scores are really high, you find there are other players who are big hitters preferred over him. But in these conditions abroad, there is no doubt in my mind that given the right role and responsibility, he can do a very important job for India. I definitely hope India start considering him for one-dayers.'[57]

No one had quite come out and asked just why Pujara was not being selected. The reasons, speculative all, circling around like lazy kites, was that

India were worried that, with surgeries to his knees, Pujara might become a liability on the field. The other concern seemed to be whether his body would hold up to the rigours of both ODIs and Tests. Should it not, India would risk losing an invaluable Test Number 3.

Pujara himself has spoken of how hard he is working to find a place in the ODI side. And commitment is not something you can doubt in the man.

India did not pick Pujara in the ODI series against New Zealand. It was one of the big mistakes of the tour.

The glaring nature of the error was even more starkly shown up because of the failure of the flailing, floundering Indian openers. In the four games in which they opened, Dhawan and Rohit put up stands of 15, 22, 64 and 8. The average for the opening partnership was merely 28. If you were to include the two ODI innings in South Africa, these batsmen had an aggregate of 133 runs in the past six innings at an average of 22. Hardly stuff to wrest the game away from the bowlers or to set up a comfortable platform from which the middle order could take over.

The two had problems of different kinds. It was evident that these are demons they must combat and conquer if India are going to be looking to make the best use of their batting talent in the foreseeable future.

Rohit's returns in the series—3, 20, 39, 79 and 4—were runs that were painfully accrued. Other than the chancy 79, his only 50 in ODIs since he had left India in December 2013, he had struggled against pace and bounce. He had tried time and again to play himself in, had eaten up too many balls, and was usually dismissed without enough return on the investment of time and deliveries he had made.

Dhawan refused to be subdued. He tried to wallop his way out of trouble, and failed on every occasion. The slap past point and the pull that got the ball too high on his bat remained his bugbears. Having sussed this out, bowlers seemed to have a plan for him. And Dhawan did nothing to counter that plan. With good reason, his cavalier batting puts one in mind of Virender Sehwag. But Sehwag's aggression, which often led to unwarranted dismissals, obscures the fact that he scored mountains of runs in Tests against quality opposition overseas, and with his never-be-cowed, brazen attitude, his astonishing reflexes, his hand-eye coordination, he scored them so quickly as to take the match away from the opposition in a single session. Dhawan has a long way to go till he gets there.

Dhawan was dropped in the fourth ODI. His scores of 32, 12, 28 and 9

were nowhere close to fulfilling the promise that his 2013 run had held out.

Whether he ought to back his instincts and play his natural game (and, were he to do so, did he have the reflexes and technique to be able to pull it off on the whole in conditions away from home and against attacking bowlers?) or whether he ought to be more circumspect, temper his aggression, look to settle and build and then dominate, is a puzzle he and his coach will have to solve. Kohli, so attacking in his intent, has neatly cracked that particular conundrum. The pacing of his innings, as well as his utter domination of the bowlers in the second half of a long knock, is nothing short of masterful.

The batsmen of this Indian side could learn another thing from Kohli: how to counter the short ball with an attacking stroke. In the first ODI, Dhawan, Rohit, Raina and Dhoni were all out trying to hook or pull. Kohli, while making another astonishingly paced century (the first of his centuries in a run chase that was not enough to win India the game), played the pull shot with imperiousness and precision. 'Even to leave a bouncer, it is very important to want to hit the ball,' he said afterwards. 'If you are looking to leave, your weight is already on the back foot and you are in no position to leave or hit. If you are looking to hit, you can take your body forward and then you can be balanced enough to duck under it… If I have a good base, then I have the confidence to actually pull, and look to hit it in front of square. I hardly look to hook the ball unless it is on my body, so it gives me more control. It gives you that extra half a second because you know you have to hit the ball in front of square, so you have to be quick enough to do that…'[58]

In that first ODI at Napier, Kohli made 123 from 111 balls. But more than the forceful pulls, the stroke that stood out in memory was a push-drive reminiscent of Tendulkar. It was the fastest ball of the game. Adam Milne had hurtled it in at 153 kph. Kohli simply punched it back down the ground. The ball streaked away to the straight boundary almost as fast as it had been bowled. No fielder risked getting any part of his body in the way of the ball.

He followed this up with a 65-ball 78 in the rain-interrupted second ODI, a game in which India scored more runs than New Zealand (277 for 9 against 271 for 7) in fewer overs (41.3 against 42) and still lost because of the target being revised upwards by the Duckworth-Lewis rule. In the final ODI, he scored 82, a desperate lone hand in a doomed run chase, as set to score 304 to win, India lost by 87 runs. Above the rubble of the 0-4 annihilation, Kohli

towered. His batting exuded at once a sense of ferocity and finesse, intensity and purpose, his play incandescent with spectacular strokes that unfurled, at leisure, as his innings lengthened.

Writing about Kohli after the conclusion of the ODI series, former New Zealand great Martin Crowe said he was the chosen one as Tendulkar had been before him and called him the leader of this young batting line up.

'He exudes the intensity of Rahul, the audacity of Virender, and the extraordinary range of Sachin. That doesn't make him better, simply *sui generis*, his own unique kind… Kohli's audacity is shameless. He is bold and beautiful in his shot selection and his style. When in the mood he can carve anyone apart, just as Sehwag did when awoken. Kohli will need to be reminded of Sehwag, that temporary loss of form that came in patches and grew to become one patch at the end. He needs to keep working the engine and stoking the fire. He will, without question.'[59]

But other than Kohli and Dhoni, the batsmen were unimpressive. Inexplicably, Raina played in the first three games, making a mockery of the Number 6 position. He was finally dropped. Rahane failed to leave his mark on the ODI series; and Ambati Rayudu, while suggesting that he could be a fine prospect with time, had a modest couple of games. Afterwards, Dhoni rued the inadequacy of the middle order, pointing to it as the difference between the two sides. And well he might. Despite the limpness of the opening partnership and the middle order, India's totals in the first four games were genuinely healthy: 268, 277, 314 and 280—an indication of how highly they could have scored had a few more of the batsmen punched their weight.

Yet, he was not quite right in saying that the middle order was the real difference between the two teams. That lay in the bowling. In the five games, India conceded 292, 271, 314, 280 and 303—leaving the batsmen with too high a mountain to climb in each of the games in conditions that were not subcontinental. The bowling was abject, and that is what dismantled India and took the series away from them. Ashwin, who declared himself content with his performance in having held one end up, took on the back of his woeful run in South Africa only one wicket in the whole series. He played in all the five games. Shami, like the sun on a cloudy winter's day, shone only in bursts. Bhuvneshwar Kumar did little in spite of the swing on offer. Stuart Binny, the all-rounder who was handed his debut, was allowed only the single over. Ishant gave away too many runs for too few wickets.

It was clear that if India were to make a good fist of defending the World Cup, the disarray in the bowling was the key thing that needed sorting out. Unlike in Asia, it would be impossible to outbat the opposition and win; if the bowling were to be as poor as we saw in New Zealand (and before that in the ODIs in South Africa), the batsmen would be left with so much of a task that even the most formidable of line-ups would find it daunting to accomplish.

The tied third game at Auckland showed that India could actually score 314 in a chase in these conditions. Even that was a run too few for a win. And that was not the kind of thing any team could be expected to pull off as a matter of course. An unlikely hero in the shape of Ravindra Jadeja emerged with the bat in that game. Jadeja, like Dhoni, Pujara, Shami, and Bhuvneshwar, exemplifies the emergence and success of the small-town boy in the highest echelons of Indian cricket.

The son of a nurse and a security guard, Jadeja was born in a one-room flat in the Navagam-Khed province of Saurashtra. (It is a reflection as much of how far he has come as of the modest nature of his birthplace that if you type Navagam-Khed on Google, nearly all the search results thrown up talk about it as being the place Jadeja hails from.) He was first noticed as a key member of the Under-19 team that Kohli captained to a World Cup win. Being spotted by Shane Warne for the Rajasthan Royals IPL team was his first lucky break. Warne, captain of the Royals in the inaugural season, nicknamed him ‘Rockstar’. His India call-up came on the back of a strong season in the Ranji Trophy, but it was hardly a spectacular debut. Two triple hundreds in the domestic season of 2012-13 led to his second coming in the side. He not only established himself but earned his place in the Test team when Australia toured in 2013. In favourable conditions, with the pitch aiding his style, he picked up twenty-four wickets in the four-Test series. He ended 2013 on a high, taking six wickets in the Test against South Africa at Durban, bowling 58.2 overs.

At Auckland, in the first month of 2014, Jadeja, the player of nearly a hundred ODIs, and a huge success in the IPL with Chennai Super Kings, feeling his way into the Test side, proved that he could make a substantial contribution with the bat. The gulf between India’s first-class cricket and the international level is epitomized by the fact that Jadeja, while having scored three triple centuries in the Ranji Trophy (more than anyone has ever scored),

has so far managed not to score a single international hundred. In the Champions Trophy triumph in 2013, he had scored a crucial 29-ball 47 in the defeat of South Africa as well as a 25-ball 33 in the rain-hit final in which India beat England. Too often he has failed to carry on. Too often he has failed to deliver on his promise.

His fielding has always been sensational. His fitness is never in doubt; his throwing arm is deadly; as a fielder, he creates doubt in the mind of the batsman by attacking the ball; and he is capable of pulling off stunning catches unless he is fielding in the slips.

During his debut Test series against Australia in 2013 and, more importantly, in the Durban Test against South Africa in 2014, Jadeja revealed how far his bowling has come. Jadeja is no Warne with the ball. He is not a great turner of the ball—and never will be. Not for him the deviousness of drift and dip, the fiendishness of prodigious turn, the flight that bemuses or the subtle variations of pace that confound.

Jadeja is a left-arm orthodox slow bowler who can nag and nag away with his accuracy. He sticks to his length, he rarely wavers from his line. On the slow turning wickets of the subcontinent, he will bowl his tight length and let the wicket do the rest. This does not happen overseas, but his accuracy is to be valued. By the end of the New Zealand ODI series, he had taken 113 wickets at an economy rate of 4.75. Equally he had taken five wickets in an innings only once. He is more grit than guile, more an executor of a plan than the conceiver of it, but he is the cricketer most captains would like to have in their ODI teams.

In Auckland, he came in to bat with the score 184 for 6 in the thirty-sixth over. Dhoni had just been dismissed; the target was 315; at the other end, Ashwin was not out on 18; time and wickets were running out. Were India to lose this game, the series would be over.

First with Ashwin and then on his own, Jadeja engineered an electric turnaround. In nine overs the duo put on 85, a counterpunching partnership of explosive strokeplay. Time and again Jadeja made room and struck crisp blows over long-on and midwicket.

The fifth ball of the forty-fifth over saw Ashwin being dismissed by an unparalleled bit of athleticism on the midwicket boundary. The score was 269. India needed 46 runs from thirty-one balls. Jadeja had with him the Indian tail that usually not so much refused to wag but was often disinclined to bestir itself.

Duly, the following three batsmen—Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Shami and Varun Aaron—made 4, 2 and 2. Still Jadeja went for it. He clubbed a massive six in the forty-ninth over, which yielded 11 runs. India entered the final over needing 18 runs from six balls. The final wicket was at the crease. Corey Anderson had the ball.

Jadeja scorched the first ball to the deep midwicket fence. The fourth ball he flicked for another boundary to fine leg. The fifth he pulled over midwicket for a six. India needed 2 runs off the final delivery.

The final ball was pushed towards mid-off. The fielder in front of mid-off pounced. But he was unable to prevent the single. Neither batsman risked running the second run. The game was tied.

SEVENTEEN

INDIA LOST THE TWO-TEST SERIES THAT FOLLOWED 0-1. IN BOTH TESTS, they were in positions from which they could have gone on to win the match. On both occasions, they squandered their chances. After having New Zealand at 30 for 3 in the first innings of the first Test at Auckland, they let the hosts escape to 503—the third time in four recent completed Test innings that the bowlers had conceded 500 or more. All out for 202, the Test seemed as good as lost. But an inspired bowling performance routed the Kiwis in the second innings; they were rolled over for 102, leaving India 406 to win. Unlikely as the target was, first Dhawan (of whom more in a minute) and Pujara, and then Dhawan and Kohli, got India to within more than a sniffing distance. But then, from 222 for 2, India were all out for 366, handing New Zealand a victory that had nearly been wrested away from the hosts after they had assumed it was theirs.

In the second Test at Wellington, a few days later, India bowled out New Zealand for 192 in the first innings. Propelled by a serene, richly deserved century from Rahane and a 98 from Dhawan, India reached 438, racking up a lead of 246. From here on, the Test was theirs to lose. The game seemed all but over with New Zealand writhing at 95 for 4 in the second innings. Would India need to bat again at all?

The next New Zealand wicket fell at 446.

Inept with the ball and in the field, India let New Zealand bat for more than two days; their captain Brendon McCullum was allowed a series of Bradmanesque proportions with a triple century in this innings following a double century in the first Test; and two young batsmen, BJ Watling and debutant James Neesham, both scored hundreds. New Zealand made 680. Kohli's magnificent century in the second innings saved for India a Test that they had thought they had won by the middle of the third day.

Reflective of the fact that the bowlers could be both effective and embarrassing (as well as staggeringly inconsistent) was this statistic: in the two innings in which they bowled well, they took 20 wickets for 294 runs; in the two in which they bowled poorly, they took 18 wickets for 1,183.

So at the end of the New Zealand tour—a tour that had been thought of as

difficult but nowhere near as daunting as the one to South Africa, against opposition that was clever and competent at home but nowhere near as terrifying as South Africa—India's record since the summer of 2011 in Tests away from home read like this: played twelve; lost ten; drawn two; won none.

But that was not the record of the team of which Pujara, Kohli, Dhawan, Rohit—and now Rahane—formed the core. Eight of those defeats—in as many Tests—had been suffered by a team that had Sehwag, Gambhir, Tendulkar, Dravid and Laxman. The new team, so to speak, had played four, lost two and drawn two (the only two draws, in fact, in the past twelve Tests). Very easily it might have been: played four; lost one; won two; drawn one. That is how close it was.

One thing bore added scrutiny. And that was the following fact: the only decision-making personnel common between the two teams were captain Dhoni and coach Duncan Fletcher. By the time the New Zealand tour ended, Dhoni had lost more Tests overseas than any India captain.

If this team had failed to seize the initiative at key moments and press home the advantage, it was in part because they had not yet acquired the habit of winning. It was because their sum was not yet greater than the parts—always a hallmark of a winning side.

But there was another crucial reason why the big moments were lost. And that lay in the two elements of continuity, in Dhoni and Fletcher. A captain is only as good as his side is the truism. But what if a captain is *not* as good as his side? What if he falls short in making the sum of his side greater than its parts of its whole?

After the Test series, Dravid spoke about how Dhoni was not trusting his bowlers as much as he should—was that why they were so perplexingly inconsistent? He said that to win Tests away from home, risks must be taken and followed through.

Sourav Ganguly, under whose leadership India had first begun to win regularly away from home, called Dhoni's captaincy 'obnoxious' on Headlines Today.

Ganguly's style of leadership could not have been more different from Dhoni's. Ganguly stared opposition captains in the eye and refused to blink. He as much led from the front as pushed from behind. Tough, provocative, bold in his decision-making, steadfast in backing his players, his sharp tactical brain constantly working at changing things around, adapting, trying

to seize the initiative, creating pressure. Vocal, demonstrative, Ganguly liked to be in the thick of things. He kept Steve Waugh, the master of mind games, waiting for the toss. He took off his shirt and twirled it from the Lord's balcony as a riposte to Andrew Flintoff's exaggerated celebrations after beating India on a previous occasion. Unlike Dhoni, Ganguly was not Captain Cool. He was Captain Courageous. Winning Tests away from home is one of the things that best epitomizes a leader's calibre. No wonder that Ganguly has won more Tests overseas than any other India captain.

Ian Chappell, one of the shrewdest and most forthright observers of the modern game, pointed out: '[Dhoni's] conservatism allows the better players among opposition batsmen too much freedom and easy runs. Consequently, big partnerships—like the Brendon McCullum and BJ Watling match-saving liaison—build too often… Good captains evaluate their assets, then go out and utilize them wisely. Michael Clarke is a perfect example. It is an over simplification to say that he is lucky to have Mitchell Johnson as a spearhead; the bowler is also fortunate to have a captain who enhances his chances of snaring victims.'[60] Chappell went on to write that had he had a conservative captain such as Dhoni, Johnson—who had annihilated England in the Ashes in 2013-14 and terrified South Africa into craven submission in the first Test of their series in 2014 February—would simply not be as lethal a bowler.

Certainly Dhoni's Test captaincy follows a pattern, especially in the period after the 2011 World Cup. The traits were exacerbated because India played in this period several tough Test series away from home. He sits back and waits for the opposition to make mistakes. Instead of being imaginative and adapting to the evolving contours of a Test, he stays stuck in his mould, trying to dry up the runs, hoping that frustration on the part of the batsmen will engender the error that will offer India the breakthrough.

On the first morning of the second Test between South Africa and Australia at Port Elizabeth in February 2014, Australia had opened the bowling with the in-form Mitchell Johnson and Ryan Harris. Within a few overs it became apparent that the pitch did not have as much pace and bounce and carry as expected. Michael Clarke immediately took out the gully fielder, put in a very short mid-on and very short midwicket in catching positions and exhorted his bowlers to seek wickets by getting the batsmen to drive on the up.

That is not Dhoni's way at all. On the subcontinent, on dusty pitches on which ordinary spinners are offered turn, uneven bounce and wickets, his

waiting ploy works more often than not. (Against the really strong teams who are ready to trust their defence, be patient and then take the fight to the opposition, even this is not a win-win strategy. India lost 1-2 to England at home in 2012.) But overseas, containment as the cornerstone of strategy is—as we have seen from the recent results—simply will not work.

As we know, it was only in the first Test against South Africa in Johannesburg that Dhoni kept attacking till the very end. That Test was an exception rather than the rule. We have seen what the rule was in Test after overseas Test since 2011.

Leading the series 1-0 against the West Indies in 2011, India entered the final fifteen overs of the Test in Dominica with 86 runs to get in fifteen overs with seven wickets in hand. It was as ripe a chance as any to comprehensively sweep the series 2-0. Despite there being almost zero risk of India losing, even if a few wickets went down quickly, Dhoni refused to go for the chase.

When offered a glimmer of an opportunity in the opening Test at Lord's in the 0-4 series against England in 2011, Dhoni looked away. England went to lunch on the fourth day at 72 for 5 in their second innings. Instead of going on the attack, Dhoni resumed the post-lunch session with Raina, a part-time bowler. England made the most of the gift. Later on in the series at Trent Bridge, in one of the few moments of ascendancy that they had had on the tour, India had England at 124 for 8 at tea on the opening day. When play resumed, Stuart Broad hit a few boundaries; England crossed 150; and Dhoni spread the field. England were allowed to get 221 in the first innings, enough to tilt the momentum back in their favour. India proceeded to lose the Test by 319 runs.

Dhoni has time after time pushed one fielder after another away from close in positions as the opposition goes on the attack. Coach Duncan Fletcher, whose tenure coincides with India's worst Test run in recent memory, is every bit as defensive: his detractors say—and only half in jest—that his abiding contribution has been to introduce the deep point fieldsman as a stock position in Tests.

Towards the end of 2011, against Australia in that 0-4 pulverizing, a window of opportunity opened for India early on in the series in Melbourne. Australia, leading by 51 in the first innings, were on their knees at 27 for 4 in their second. Nearly half the side out, and an effective lead of merely 78. Dhoni slammed that window shut. He tossed the ball to Ashwin and his

containing slow bowling. Sehwag came on soon after. Delighted, Australia swelled in runs and confidence. The moment was lost as later the Test and the series would be.

As recently as against South Africa at Durban in December 2013, with the hosts five down and trailing India, Dhoni tried to stop the leakage of runs rather than prise out wickets. He refused to take the new ball, assuming that it would come on quicker to the bat and be despatched for swift runs; he was in doubt that, even with the right fields and tactical thinking, the new ball might result in wickets. He continued with the run-restricting Jadeja and the old ball for 146 overs. South Africa scored fewer, but they ground it out, and in the end won the Test and the series.

Dhoni said after the Durban Test—as indeed he often has in the past—that he does not have the bowlers who can dominate and be deadly. That is more than true. But when, since India started consistently winning away from home in the 2000s, did they have a bowling attack like South Africa does now or Australia did at their peak or the West Indies possessed when they were masters of the universe? The kind of array of bowlers that strike terror in the hearts of batsmen, play games with their minds, allow them no respite?

For that, you would have to go back to the mesmerizing spin quartet of Bishan Bedi, Erapalli Prasanna, Bhagwat Chandrasekhar and Srinivas Venkataraghavan, a quartet that became a trio when team balance or conditions led to one of them being left out. Each of them different from the other, marshalled aggressively by Tiger Pataudi and Ajit Wadekar, this quartet/trio was as attacking a threat as any spin bowling combination in the game’s history.

Other than that? Well, other than that, India have had legendary individual bowlers who carried the attack on their shoulders with a little help from their teammates at the other end. Kapil Dev, loose-limbed and flowing, with the perfect action and endurance that made him not miss a Test in his career because of injury, a breathtaking sight, a magnificent threat as he opened the bowling. Anil Kumble, varying his pace as he matured, the unpredictable kick and bounce off the pitch snaring batsmen into errors, lethal enough to be one of the most prolific wicket takers of all time. There was Zaheer Khan, nearly a great and Harbhajan Singh. But there was no relentless bowling attack.

As we know, many of India’s most famous victories have been founded on batting triumphs. Think of Kolkata in 2001, Headingley in 2002, Adelaide

in 2003, Multan in 2004, Nottingham in 2007. And while no Test can be won without taking twenty wickets, India has often exerted a great deal of pressure on the opposition and made things easier for their own bowlers by simply burying the opposition under mountains of runs. As Sourav Ganguly told me during a panel discussion I chaired at the Hindustan Times Leadership Summit in November 2014: 'Anil always used to tell me, "Put enough runs on the board. And I will take the wicket."' And they did, the Fab Four. They invariably put enough runs on the board on the occasions of many of their memorable triumphs.

It is precisely because we don't have bowlers who can terrorize the opposition that the captain has a crucial role to play. He needs to spot and pick bowlers who can deliver wickets; he needs to nurture them; he needs to inspire them to winkle out wickets rather than choke the runs; he needs to back the bowlers by setting a certain kind of aggressive field and asking them to bowl to it in pursuit of wickets. None of this is Dhoni's style in Test matches. It used to be Ganguly's.

This team has the most exciting young batting line-up in contemporary cricket. In the four Tests they have played together till the end of the New Zealand series, Kohli has scored a century once every four innings. Besides, he has made a 96 and another fifty. Rahane has made a century and a near-century. Dhawan and Pujara have done the same. This team needs a spark in the bowling. And a captain who will be capable of igniting that spark.

No captain in the modern era would have survived the 0-8 pasting that Indian had suffered in Tests. Ricky Ponting had to make way no sooner than Australia's pre-eminence was over. Andrew Strauss stepped down after England surrendered the Number 1 Test ranking to South Africa in a home defeat. A day before South Africa lost 1-2 at home to Australia in February 2014, their first series defeat in *five years*, Graeme Smith announced his retirement.

After the battering in England and Australia in 2011-12, Sunil Gavaskar had called time on Dhoni. So had Mohinder Amarnath, then an India selector. In the wake of the New Zealand series, an online poll conducted by the *Hindustan Times* showed that 67 per cent of the respondents felt that Dhoni should no longer continue as India's Test captain.

But Dhoni has been untouchable as captain of the Test team. He has survived despite losing more Tests overseas than any other India captain; despite having lost nine and won none of the eleven overseas Tests he has led

the team in between July 2011 and February 2014; despite, as a Number 7 Test batsman, an average of 25 overseas in the same period.

Dhoni is one of the greatest ODI cricketers of all time. Even in unfriendly conditions—such as South Africa and New Zealand—he is solid, dependable and inevitably effective. He was top scorer and second top scorer in the series against South Africa and New Zealand. He is one of the most consummate finishers in the history of the ODI game. His ODI batting average, in excess of 52, after having played so many games, is staggering. In every respect his credentials are impeccable. But we should not judge his Test credentials by his ODI achievements.

No other country in the world has the same captain for all three formats. Certain teams, such as Australia and Sri Lanka, have two captains for the three formats; some, such as South Africa, have a different captain for each of the three formats. The New Zealand series underlined again that India need to see the good sense in doing so.

At one point in Hanif Kureishi's novel, *The Last Word*, the Indian-born, world famous writer Mamoon Azam tells his biographer: 'If one had played a shot like that at Lord's, one would die happy, don't you think? I am a poor entertainer compared to it.' Kureishi, slipping into free indirect narrative, glosses: 'Sport, which was unpredictable and existential, and where men were truly tested in the moment, was more important than art, which was 'soft'. Bowling at Lord's, taking a penalty at Wembley, playing at Wimbledon, that was 'the definitive', as Mamoon called it.'

Truly tested in the moment, Shikhar Dhawan passed that examination and showed that he was equal to 'the definitive'. The opener stared down crisis and confusion and overcame both to prove that he would not live on insubstantial dazzle. Not having crossed fifty after his outrageously entertaining Test debut, on the back of a 3-ball duck in the first innings, Dhawan cracked the puzzle the solution of which had been eluding him these past months: to trust his instincts and go for all-out attack or adapt his play to the conditions and bowling and unveil a combination of watchfulness and abandon.

At Auckland, Dhawan scored his 115 runs from 211 balls. And while his strike rate of 54 was well below that of Kohli, who went at the rate of 65 for his 67, he struck twelve fours and a six. He flicked the second ball he faced,

uppishly, for a boundary past square leg. The third, again uppish, went to the fielder at cover who failed to hang on to what would have been a spectacular catch.

He settled in after that, blending circumspection and aggression in an innings that, in the context of his career, might in the long run well prove to be even more crucial than his century on debut. Dhawan drew widely from his repertoire of strokes. He leaned into the ball to drive past cover. He cut and punched backward of point. He flicked through the leg side. He drove handsomely past both mid-off and mid-on. At the same time, he left ball after ball outside his off stump, refusing to be suckered into giving his wicket away. The self-denial turned out to be as potent a weapon as his resplendent strokeplay.

Dhawan reached his fifty from seventy-five balls. From the following twenty-three balls, he scored merely 7. Later he went from 93 to 107 within three balls. He danced down the track to clout the spinner for a six over long on to move from 93 to 99. The next ball elicited a ferocious cut to bring up his century with a boundary. And the ball after that was whipped through the leg side for another boundary.

His 60-run stand with Pujara and 126-run stand with Kohli (in which Dhawan was happy to be outscored by Kohli) put India in sight of an improbable victory. It was only after he was dismissed with the score at 248 that New Zealand came roaring right back into the Test.

If he had announced his arrival on the world stage in such spectacular fashion in Mohali against Australia, in Auckland Dhawan re-established his presence and resuscitated his reputation.

And just to prove that this was no aberration, he followed it up with a 98 that was as much scintillating as it was composed in the next Test at Wellington.

Afterwards he told *ESPNcricinfo* how what he described as the setback in South Africa led him to sort out his approach: ‘From South Africa, when I didn’t score that much, I analyzed my game that as a batsman, or as an opener, what shots I have to play at the start or what shots I shouldn’t play,’ he said. ‘Every pitch is different. We were playing in India a lot that time [just before going to South Africa]. Then when I went there, it was a setback. I wouldn’t say a failure, but the setback helped me a lot to become a more mature player.

‘Then I realized, “Okay, on these kinds of tracks I need to play these kind

of shots. And I have to leave bouncers [alone] at the start because the bounce is different, and it is hard to keep the ball down." That's what I did and brought those things into my practice. When I went to New Zealand that practice became my instinct, and that's how I scored big runs there.'[61]

Wellington provided redemption for another special young man. Rahane had been unfortunate to miss out on his maiden Test century in South Africa; here, he would not be denied. It is easy to lose sight of just how valuable Rahane can turn out to be for the future of this side. He has none of Dhawan's swagger and swashbuckle. Neither does he possess Kohli's aggressive intent and on-and off-field flamboyance. Not for him Rohit's elegance. Unlike Pujara, he does not elaborately construct an innings. A nudge here, a tap there, and before you notice it, it is simply there. In this respect, as in his ability to bat with the tail, Rahane is reminiscent of V.V.S. Laxman. He is a modern cricketer, a Twenty20 exponent, an athletic, sizzling fielder with an accurate arm; at the same time, he is a Test batsman of the old school.

By no means stodgy, he picks up his runs unobstrusively by capitalizing without flamboyance on all the opportunities that come his way. His first two scoring shots in this innings at Wellington were boundaries. Yet he left and left balls outside the off stump, and would have been happy to leave all day if required, frustrating the bowlers and forcing them finally to bowl where he would like them to.

A quiet unflappability is Rahane's calling card. In that, he reminds of Rahul Dravid. Although he makes no fuss as he scores, eschewing extravagance and playing the percentages early on in his innings, his drives, as he leans into the ball, are a delight to witness. He plays with soft hands, both a great skill and huge advantage. When he cuts and punches off the back foot, he rises on top of the bounce. Amid the storm of young stars in this side, Rahane is the perfect calm.

'He has a fine temperament. His technique is sound. His weight transfer is good. When he comes on to the front foot, he takes a big stride forward,' Rahane's coach in the Mumbai Ranji Trophy team, Pravin Amre, told me. 'He can score off the back foot because his cut and pull shots are effective. All he needs is a bit more consistency. His innings in the Tests in South Africa and New Zealand will help in that respect. Now he knows he belongs

at that level and it will give him a lot of confidence.' [62]

Rahane came into the team after amassing more than 5,000 first-class runs, but remained the eternal bridesmaid warming the benches on international tours as others were offered their opportunities. The travail might have broken a lesser man, made him lose focus and hope. It steeled Rahane. 'All credit to him. His maturity helped him handle it so well. If you are not in the playing eleven, often you don't even get that much of a bat at the nets. It can be very frustrating. But he never let it get to him. He knew how competitive it was. He never stopped improving. He worked on his fielding and got better at it. His mental toughness is remarkable,' Amre said.[63]

From Mumbai's middle class eastern suburb of Mulund, Rahane is unfailingly soft spoken and courteous. A keen student of the game, he is attentive to advice. If he knows how far he has already come, his resolve about where he wants to go is unwavering. 'His humble background keeps him grounded,' Ambre said. 'He is extremely focussed. He is respectful towards his seniors, his family. Certain players, once they come good at the international level, live in a world of their own. It goes to their heads. This is just the beginning for Rahane, but I know he will not change much.'[64]

India's first-innings lead of 246 was in large part because of Rahane's mature century. He came in to bat at 165 for 5, with India tailing New Zealand's modest first innings score and the intimations of another collapse, another opportunity squandered, hovering in the air. By the time he was ninth out with the score on 423, India had achieved a lead of 231, substantial enough to put them in sight of what was potentially a significant triumph.

He got to his hundred with a pull to the midwicket boundary, the fifteenth four of his innings.

His celebration of this huge moment in his career had, like his play, nothing profligate about it. Rahane says he grew up idolizing Dravid. Certainly his response on reaching his maiden hundred recalled that of India's greatest ever Number 3 batsman.

When Dravid first toured South Africa, Tendulkar had told him that if he scored 250 runs in the three Tests he played in, he would have done pretty well for himself. By that logic, had Dravid—like Rahane—had a maiden two-Test series in South Africa, he ought to have been happy had he made 160-odd runs. In the two Tests in which Rahane played in South Africa, he scored 209 runs. (Kohli scored 272 in those two Tests; Pujara made 280. All three,

therefore, comfortably exceeded the target Tendulkar had said Dravid should have been satisfied with.) The two Tests in New Zealand fetched Rahane 162 runs. In his four most recent Tests in tough conditions overseas, Rahane's average stood at 61.

Rahane's continuing form in Tests and Dhawan's rediscovery of his brilliance were two huge positives for India in a New Zealand tour in which they again came so close to wondrous results and failed again to achieve them.

EIGHTEEN

THE ASIA CUP IN BANGLADESH OFFERED INDIA A RETURN TO FAMILIAR conditions and rivals they were well acquainted with in the form of Sri Lanka, Pakistan and the hosts. In the last edition of this biennial tournament in 2012, they had come fresh from the disgraceful tours of England and Australia. On that occasion, they had failed to make the final.

This time around, they had a new captain. Dhoni was diagnosed with a side strain and was not fit to play. Kohli was leading the side. The curious case of Pujara turned into a full-blown mystery big enough to warrant bringing Ian Rankin's Inspector Rebus out of retirement. Pujara was picked for the squad. But he played in not a single game, not even in the final inconsequential one against Afghanistan which took place after India had been knocked out of the competition a few days earlier. The official version, articulated by Kohli, was that the team was trying to stick to playing as a single unit. It was not so much lame as beggaring belief. If you were trying to not alter a winning combination, there was some logic. If you had lost in two important games, were out of the tournament and had a chance to see what your most accomplished Test batsman could do in the shorter format, why would you not play him?

A former India batsman told me that Pujara's running between the wickets was suspect; that his fielding—unless at forward short leg, not a popular position in ODIs—was poor; and that it was hard to find a slot for him in the batting order. How had Dravid, a traditional and classical Test batsman, adapted to ODIs? He told me that that had happened because Dravid batted lower down the order, his running between the wickets was good and his job was to keep the scoreboard moving with quick singles and twos while big shots were played at the other end. Besides, by turning himself into an accomplished wicketkeeper in this format, Dravid allowed his team to play an extra batsman or bowler as the situation demanded.

Getting Pujara to play at, say, Number 5 in ODIs posed two problems. First, Pujara was not proficient with quick singles and twos. Secondly, even if he were, that would not be enough because this team was shorn of big hitters

like Dhoni and Yuvraj.

But why could he not open and Rohit, whose recent form had been patchy, play at Number 5? Why could Rahane, an opener by trade, not open (he did, actually, in the last game against Afghanistan, and played pretty well) and Pujara play at Number 4 (Rahane's current spot in the batting order)? I was offered no answer to either of these questions.

Not all former India players felt that way, though. Sunil Gavaskar launched a withering attack on the team management. Speaking on Star Sports, he said: 'Very hard to understand, to be honest with you, it's baffling. Some of the players have been playing non-stop, they need a bit of a break before the World Twenty20 starts, the second thing is if you are not going to give the reserve players a chance, then when are they going to play. Are you worried that Cheteshwar Pujara will score runs so that your favourites who are not consistent might have to make way?'

Gavaskar also questioned why Ishwar Pandey, the fast bowler who had been in the squad in both New Zealand and Bangladesh and had not got a single game despite the erratic performance of his peers, was not included. 'Are you worried that Ishwar Pandey will pick wickets, and again some of your favourite bowlers might not be certain of a place in the team, what are you worried about? The only thing that comes to my mind is that there is that worry and there's probably a fear that if these guys do well, what happens to our favourites in the team. This is what breeds complacency, guys know, kuch bhi karoon, team main hoon. (whatever I do, however poorly I play, I shall still find a place in the team).'

Afterwards Pujara said that he was trying his hand at bowling leg spin just so that he could enhance his value to the team in ODIs. He seemed desperate to play. Kohli's captaincy during this tournament was under keen scrutiny. His leadership had about it the air of being aware that he was merely filling in till Dhoni returned in the World Twenty20. He was on several occasions keen to point out both Dhoni's greatness as a leader as well as the fact that while he was honoured that he had been given the job, the temporary nature of it meant that the pressure on him was not remotely like what Dhoni has to handle.

Yet, Kohli led with flair and verve, the attacking intent of his batting stamped clearly on his captaincy. He bustled about and was communicative on the field, made intelligent changes in the field placing, purposefully shuffled his bowlers and constantly kept trying to make things happen.

Rather than letting the game come to him, he made an effort to take the game to the opposition.

Kohli's coach, Rajkumar Sharma, liked what he saw. He said that Kohli was in the Ganguly mould as a captain, ever ready to attack. Ganguly himself had kind words for Kohli's leadership. When I asked former India batsman Sanjay Manjrekar what he thought of Kohli as captain, he was unequivocal. 'I was very impressed. I liked the way he bowled the spinners in the death overs. He used the seamers intelligently, usually getting them to bowl their overs before the final batting power play.'

The selection of the leg spinner Amit Mishra, another player who had been travelling with the team without playing, was inspired. Mishra bowled with bite and accuracy against Pakistan, bringing India back into contention in a game that had been slipping away from them. Ashwin and Jadeja were encouraged to take wickets rather than merely staunch the flow of runs. Of course it helped a great deal that the conditions aided spin. There was about his captaincy a freshness and a resolve that boded well for the future.

For the present, though, the results simply refused to come. India began well by comprehensively beating Bangladesh. Kohli led the run chase with an inevitable century. He made 136 from 122 balls, an effort that was so routinely splendid that it seemed as if no ODI series or tournament could be said to have occurred without a Kohli century featuring in it.

This was his nineteenth ODI century, bringing him abreast of Brian Lara in terms of number of centuries. He scored it in his 131st ODI; Lara had scored his 19 in the 299 ODIs he had played in the course of his long and legendary career.

The game against Bangladesh was less the start of a purple patch than an evanescent purple speck where the India team was concerned. In their first big game of the competition, a combination of misfortune, sloppiness, poor shot selection and a perfectly paced attacking innings from Kumar Sangakkara saw Sri Lanka wrest the match away from India with four balls to spare.

Dhawan did nothing reckless, playing with the blend of patience and aggression that had been so rewarding in New Zealand. Although his strike rate in the end climbed to above 82, he waited for his scoring opportunities. His innings of ninety-four was the bedrock on which the India total of 264 was built. This was Dhawan's first fifty in eight ODI innings. After his revival in the two Tests in New Zealand, here now came proof that his rich

ODI form of 2013 had received a new lease of life.

Dhawan managed to undo some of that good work in the field. He collided with Rahane when both went for Kusal Perera's catch. The ball slipped through. Perera, at the time on 7, scored 64. Before being dismissed, he was allowed another life. Just as Jadeja had dragged India back into the match with two wickets in as many balls, Dinesh Karthik missed stumping Sangakkara. That was the moment on which the match turned. On 31 at the time, Sangakkara went on to almost single-handedly win the game for Sri Lanka.

Sangakkara made 103 from eighty-four balls in a display that was filled with authentic cricket shots that made purists purr. When he was let off by Karthik, he had been on 31 from thirty-nine balls. He scored 72 from the next forty-four. Not one of the Sri Lanka batsmen who came in to bat after him crossed 15.

India's experiment with Binny failed; he scored a duck and went wicketless in the four overs that he bowled.

The loss to Sri Lanka turned India's following match against Pakistan into a sort of semi-final. Whoever lost, would be out of the competition. It was a hard fought, gritty encounter, played in the spirit of a knock-out game in which a place in the final was at stake, and neither side was willing to yield, both clawing back lost ground, both trying to cling on to the slightest bits of advantage gained. It was relentless; it was dramatic. It was what India v Pakistan matches are billed to be.

Batting first on a slow wicket on which runs seemed not too easy to score, India lost Dhawan and Kohli early and the score was 56 for 2. Rohit, at the other end, languid and lovely, the pitch having no bounce to trouble him, was swatting the ball as though it were a fly, boundaries and sixes flowing from his flashing blade. In the fifth over, he cracked Junaid Khan behind point for a four. The seventh over saw him hoist Junaid for a six, followed by a flick to the fence for a four. His 56 came from fifty-eight balls with seven fours and two sixes.

Karthik and Rayudu got together with the score on 103 for four in the twenty-fourth over. They put on 52 runs at a touch more than four an over, raising the hope of erecting a stable platform that could set up a final assault. That is when Karthik made his first cardinal error of the match. To a good length ball just outside the off stump, Karthik played an unnecessary, premeditated sweep shot. It was an unwarranted wicket, and one which,

despite Jadeja's spanking unbeaten half century, took some momentum out of India's charge. India ended at 245, a total that did not threaten to cow Pakistan.

That seemed to be even more the case as the Pakistan openers gallivanted their way to 71 in under eleven overs. Then Amit Mishra, finally afforded a game after travelling with the team to the Champions Trophy in England, South Africa and New Zealand, grabbed his chance.

An old-fashioned leg spinner, he bowled with the intent of taking wickets rather than containing the scoring. That in itself was refreshing to see. He varied his pace, he was unafraid to flight the ball, he beat the batsmen in the air and he got the ball to rip off the pitch. He also showed that he has a googly that can be hard to pick. These were conditions that aided such sharp turn, and Mishra made excellent use of them. He winkled out two wickets in his ten overs; he gave away merely 28 runs.

Along with Ashwin, he bowled India back into the game. Pakistan, a mini collapse seeing them to 113 for 4, began to rebuild through Mohammad Hafeez and Sohaib Maqsood. With the score at 168 for 4 in the thirty-eighth over, Karthik made his second big blunder. With Maqsood stranded way down the pitch as he wasted an Ashwin delivery that was outside the leg stump, Karthik missed the stumping. It was a mistake that cost India the match—and a place in the finals.

Maqsood and Hafeez went on to add another 32 runs, each one of them crucial in a game of such tight margins. Ashwin finally got Hafeez to break the partnership; Maqsood was run out; but by that time Pakistan had reached 203 in the forty-fifth over. Their hopes were pinned on Shahid Afridi, genius and madman rolled into one, destroyer of oppositions as much as self-destroyer, volatile, vainglorious, in equal parts hero and villain.

Afridi ended the night as both hero and villain: hero to Pakistan, villain for India. Having scored just 3 runs in the penultimate over, Pakistan entered the final over needing 10 to win. Ashwin was bowling. The first ball of the over dipped and turned and bowled Saeed Ajmal round his legs. Pakistan still needed 10 runs to win. But they had only one wicket in hand now.

The new batsman, Junaid, scampered a single off the second ball. Nine runs to get off four balls. When the third ball of the over was bowled, Afridi made room outside the off stump and gave it an almighty wallop over extra cover. He did not get it in the middle of the bat. But he nevertheless got enough on it for the ball to clear the shortened boundary. Three runs to get

from three balls. The following ball Afridi tried to hoick as hard as he could. He miscued it and got a leading edge. The white ball soared, up and up against the dark night sky and in the glare of the floodlights, destined for—who else but?—the long-on fielder, who stationed himself, waiting for it to fall into his cupped palms.

The ball eluded him, thumping down on the other side of the ropes. Pakistan had won. With one wicket in hand. With a miscued six. The echoes of Sharjah 1986 and the six that Javed Miandad hit off Chetan Sharma to snatch a victory for Pakistan reverberated around the Mirpur stadium and in millions of drawing rooms in India.

Coaches and players often talk about the winning habit. It is one of those ineffable phrases in sport, like touch or form. Yet, like all those terms, the winning habit does mean something, and it counts for a lot. When a team believes in itself so much that it always seizes the big moments, when somehow it finds the resolve to dig deep amid adversity and come up trumps, when it manages to win even when playing beneath its best, that is when a winning habit is acquired. All of the above may be clichés, but they are demonstrable on the pitch. The winning habit may be hard to explain, but it is not hard to understand. Think of all the great teams in the history of sport. Or of the great players of all time in individual sport. And you know what the habit really is about.

Starting December 2013, though India have been thwarted on several occasions, they have performed nowhere near as poorly as the record for 2014 suggests.

The winning habit is hard to come by. Often, it takes a long while to acquire.

NINETEEN

THE WORLD TWENTY20 IS A STRANGE BEAST. PARTICULARLY SO IN India. In 2007 in South Africa, India, led by Dhoni for the first time in a global tournament, the team full of several young aspirants, won the inaugural edition in spectacular fashion, beating Pakistan in the final. Sreesanth ran from short fine leg, further and further back, till he caught Misbah-ul-Haq off the bowling of Joginder Sharma in the last over of that first final. India, world champions. Just as the triumph in the 1983 World Cup had changed Indian cricket for ever, this 2007 win brought about a never-imagined transformation in the landscape of the game in India.

Such a lot has changed since then. At the time Dhoni was captain in neither Tests nor ODIs; the IPL did not exist; and other than Dhoni, only two members of that side—Rohit (having in 2013 finally discovered himself after so long) and Yuvraj (in decline and able to find a place only in Twenty20s) were in the 2014 team. When Joginder Sharma was taking that final wicket in the final at the Wanderers in 2007, several of the key members of the current team were playing Under-19 cricket.

In 2007, the format was not taken too seriously in India. As Dhoni said at the beginning of the 2014 tournament: '[In 2007] Twenty20 was taken more in a joking way where they said "OK, have fun." They used to mic up guys, tell them "Have fun, guys, it's a different format." Now it is more intense. You don't see people enjoying it, the fun part is gone. They want to win, they want to try shots nobody has heard of. It has changed a lot.'

In thrall to ODIs, India were one of the last top nations to embrace the shortest format of the game. What the unexpected 2007 triumph did was to endear the format to fans. We love anything at which we can win something (that is how, after the success in the 1983 World Cup, India fell in love with ODI cricket). Within a year, the IPL was born. Ever since its birth, midwifed by glamour and money, more money than people had ever associated with playing less than two months of cricket, the tournament acquired its admiring millions of fans.

One of the casualties of the popularity of the IPL was the two-yearly

World Twenty20 tournament. The Indian fan, sated with the frenetic smorgasbord of the IPL, began to care little for this particular world cup, which had fewer games, appeared to be less exciting and did not have the money and glamour that gave the IPL its somewhat otherworldly thrill.

It was certainly not merely the IPL that contributed to Indian supporters being rather cold towards the world event. Had India continued to do well in the World Twenty20, interest in the tournament would have remained very much alive. After all, it was winning the World Twenty20 that made the Indian fan accept the format with fervour in the first instance. But India's performance was dismal. After that first win, they failed to qualify for even the knockout phase of any of the subsequent tournaments held in 2009, 2010 and 2012. Going in as the defending champions and undisputed favourites in 2009, India won only against Bangladesh in the group stage. They were eviscerated by South Africa, the West Indies and England. Things were no better in 2010 and 2012.

Perhaps because they were not too good at it, India have not played as many Twenty20 games as certain other countries. New Zealand, who played their first Twenty20 game in February 2005, had taken part in seventy-one games. India, who debuted in the format in December 2006 (shortly before they won the inaugural World Twenty20 title), had played forty-six. Since the last World Twenty20 two years ago, India had played only five Twenty20 games. They had played only one Twenty20 game—in October 2013—since December 2012.

As the 2014 edition came up, though, there was more buzz and anticipation about the tournament than in other years. Fans were keen to see how the current team, comprising modern cricketers, fit and agile, not merely at home in the frenzied pace of the Twenty20 game, but often reared on it and loving it, did in the shortest format in national colours.

India started their World Twenty20 campaign with the sort of flourish that one would not associate with a team that had won only an ODI each against Bangladesh and Afghanistan out of their last fourteen international outings.

The group that housed India contained Pakistan, previous champions and one of the most consistent sides in previous editions of this tournament; the West Indies, the defending champions and one of the world's most dangerous teams in this format with the bludgeoning brilliance of Chris Gayle and Marlon Samuels; Australia, cresting a wave of success and self-belief after

having triumphed over South Africa in South Africa in a just-concluded Test series and keen to win the one trophy that had eluded them this far. And Bangladesh, outsiders but capable of a big upset on their day in this unpredictable format.

Only two of these five teams would qualify for the knockout stage of the semi-finals. To be one of those two would be quite a feat for India.

Yet, India brushed aside Pakistan in the opening game. Two days later, they ambled to victory against the West Indies. Beat Bangladesh, and a semi-final spot was theirs.

The same player won the Man of the Match award in both games. It was Amit Mishra. Allowed an opportunity so soon after his heroics against Pakistan in the Asia Cup, the leg spinner was loath to squander it. Against Pakistan, Mishra got 2 wickets for 22 runs in his quota of four overs; against the West Indies, his figures were 2 for 18 from four overs. The ball with which he got his first wicket of the tournament, the one of Ahmed Shehzad, would have delighted any leg spinner—as well as any connoisseur of the art of leg spin bowling. Mishra gave it a big rip. Deceived in the air, the batsman came charging down the track. The ball spun viciously past the outside edge for the wicketkeeper to pull off a simple stumping.

A bowler, a leg spinner at that, being picked out as the standout performer in two consecutive Twenty20 matches? If it had happened before, no one was telling. It was just the latest twist in the long running story that is the career of Amit Mishra. Such is the story of so many bit players in the narrative of Indian cricket.

For someone who made his ODI debut in 2003, it seems curious that Mishra played only twenty-one ODIs till his appearance in the game against Pakistan in the Asia Cup in 2014. Before the World Twenty20, he had played in only one previous Twenty20 game for India. Having made his debut against Australia in Mohali in 2008, Mishra has got a look-in in merely thirteen Tests.

The first chunk of his career was in the shadow of the great Kumble, a period when Harbhajan Singh was also in his prime, and it was next to impossible for a third spinner to figure in the team. Once Kumble had retired and Harbhajan faded away, Mishra’s progress was impeded by Dhoni, a captain who was happiest with Ashwin and Jadeja, both useful with the bat.

Mishra was deemed to be not particularly athletic; and his batting average in ODIs was 5.

After Kohli had backed him in the Asia Cup, and after he had delivered in that tournament, Dhoni reckoned that on the turning wickets of Bangladesh, in a format in which slow bowlers have much influence, playing Mishra would be a clever ploy. Two games into the campaign, Mishra had vindicated the faith.

Afterwards he spoke about how he had honed his bowling while being on the bench, of not losing his belief as he was excluded from the team again and again and of how he stuck to his own attacking style and aimed to take wickets rather than bottle up one end even in a format that is cruel to bowlers.

Watching him in Bangladesh, it was clear that Mishra had enough variations of flight and pace to trouble batsmen, that he could extract sharp turn when the conditions were friendly. He has been a hugely successful bowler in the IPL, having taken three hat-tricks. Thirty-two now, he is mature in his approach and his thinking. Whether he can extend his guile and attacking threat to wickets that are not half as helpful as these will determine the next turn in the narrative of his career. If he were to be selected to play at all.

On 25 March 2014, days before India's game against Bangladesh, a win in which would assure India of a place in the semi-final, the Supreme Court of India dropped a bomb. It asked the BCCI president N. Srinivasan to step down from his post so that a fair probe could be conducted into the spot fixing scandal that had rocked the sixth edition of the IPL. The Supreme Court said: 'Unless the BCCI president stands down, there can be no fair investigation… It is nauseating… Why is Srinivasan sticking to his chair? If you don't step down, then we will pass an order.'[65]

The sorry saga, redolent of the way in which Srinivasan has ruled Indian cricket administration, goes back a long way but many of its squalid details became drawing room conversation when the betting scandal in the IPL broke in 2013.

In June 2013, the BCCI had appointed a panel to probe the charges of betting and fixing in the IPL. Aditya Verma, secretary of the Cricket Association of Bihar, a body not affiliated to the BCCI, filed a petition in the Bombay High Court, raised charges of conflict of interest in the formation of

the panel. A month later, the panel released its findings, discovering no wrongdoing on the part of the team owners.

Days later, though, the Bombay High Court ruled that the probe panel was illegal. The BCCI and Verma filed petitions in the Supreme Court against this order, with Verma's counsel contending that the Bombay High Court could have instead suggested a fresh inquiry panel.

The Supreme Court suggested the setting up of a new panel headed by Mukul Mudgal, a former chief justice of the Punjab and the Haryana high court. In February 2014, the Mudgal committee submitted its 179-page-long report. It found to be true the charges of betting and spot fixing against Gurunath Meiyappan, son-in-law of Srinivasan and team principal of the franchise Chennai Super Kings. It also said that Shilpa Shetty and Raj Kundra, the owners of the franchise Rajasthan Royals, certain players of which team had been implicated in the controversy, were under the scanner.

On 25 March while calling Srinivasan's power-grab 'nauseating', the Supreme Court gave the BCCI two days to respond. On 27 March the court recommended that Srinivasan step down for the duration of the investigation and former India Test captain Sunil Gavaskar assume the post in the interregnum. It also suggested that the two teams under a cloud—Chennai Super Kings and Rajasthan Royals—be barred from the forthcoming edition of the IPL.

In an incendiary statement, Verma's counsel, Harish Salve, said: 'The captain of the Indian team is guilty of corrupt practices.' Salve contended. '[He] gave a false statement to get him [Meiyappan] off the hook. He indulged in a cover-up, which is a corrupt act.'

BCCI flatly denied that such a statement had been given before the Mudgal panel.

The shameful nature of the fixing scandal that undermined the credibility of the IPL and cast doubts over the integrity of certain players is not the subject of this book. Were one to go into the murky details of that and explore the web of deceit, greed and ruthless furthering of vested interests that lie at the dark heart of that outrage, one would have to write a different book. I am here concerned with the above matter insofar as it affected the Indian team and its fortunes.

And affect them it did. Seven players of the side that was in Bangladesh for the World Twenty20 were part of CSK and RR, the two franchises that the Supreme Court had recommended throwing out of IPL7, due to start in

Dubai on 16 April 2014. Speculation swirled that Dhoni had offered to quit after the ongoing tournament. The rumour was that he had spoken to Srinivasan—and the most powerful man in Indian cricket had asked him to hold on.

Overnight, however, the Supreme Court softened its stand. On the morning of 28 March, following the submission of the BCCI counsel, the court allowed CSK and RR to participate in IPL7. Srinivasan stepped aside till an independent probe came out with its findings. Gavaskar was made responsible for all matters related to 2014's IPL tournament. Shivlal Yadav, a Srinivasan loyalist, was asked to be in charge of all non-IPL affairs of the board. The BCCI pronounced itself pleased with what the court had said in its interim order. It was against this backdrop that India got ready to play Bangladesh that evening.

In Mirpur against the hosts, the Indian players played with ruthlessness and focus to saunter to a convincing victory. If the court's order released in them a special sense of relief and abandon—and some remarked it did—there was nothing on the record to document it.

Mishra again returned with impressive figures of 3 for 26 from his four overs. The judges of the Man of the Match award, having already given the prize to him for the first two games, settled on Ashwin for this one. Ashwin, helped by the conditions, had been disciplined and effective. He had 2 for 15 from four overs; he opened the bowling with Bhuvneshwar Kumar (who had, in this tournament, found his swing again); and provided the crucial initial breakthroughs by taking two wickets in two balls in his second over.

The target of 139 was modest, but India needed to keep their wits around them. Rohit glided to a second consecutive fifty, unable this time to stay till the end. Kohli did that, 57 from fifty balls, his strokeplay as bright as the floodlights in the stadium. At the fall of the second wicket, Dhoni, yet to get a bat in the tournament, promoted himself ahead of Yuvraj Singh. Single-minded and aggressive, as though keen to make a statement in the face of all the muck that was being raked back at home, he finished off the game with 22 from sixteen balls, including two, trademark sixes.

India were in the semi-final of the World Twenty20. On the only other occasion that they had come this far, they had gone on to win the tournament. After the Champions Trophy in which they surprised every observer, here a

new moment of truth had come calling.

The final group game against Australia on 30 March was a dead rubber. Pakistan's defeat of Bangladesh meant that Australia, who had fancied their chances before the start of the competition, were now out. India would be joined by the winner of the match between Pakistan and the West Indies.

Australia were playing for pride; India for the preening rights of becoming the only team to go through undefeated to the knockout stage. Unlike in the inconsequential match against Afghanistan in the Asia Cup, India realized that it was a good opportunity to experiment. Rahane, such an effective opener in the IPL, was given a chance instead of Dhawan. Mohit Sharma came in as the second seamer along with Bhuvneshwar.

With neither Rohit nor Kohli getting runs, India found themselves at 66 for 4. But Yuvraj, whose place in the Twenty20 team was on the line, played with gumption and verve, his counter attacking 61 and a crucial partnership with Dhoni taking India to a respectable total of 159. A combination of misguided slogging and tight bowling saw a spectacular Australia collapse. The Aussies were all out in sixteen overs and two balls. Neither Mishra nor Ashwin needed to bowl their full quota of overs. Mishra snapped up 2 for 13 from his three. Ashwin got 4 for 11 from three overs and two balls. It was good enough to earn the off spinner his second successive Man of the Match award.

India had comprehensively topped their group, the only team to have won each one of their matches. The spinners had won the Man of the Match award in all four games.

While all the talk in the group stage had been about the spinners, one man was consistently going about his business. In the three victories that had secured India a place in the semi-final and rendered the fourth group-stage game against Australia inconsequential, Kohli's scores had been 36 not out, 54 and 57 not out. Two out of three times he had seen through the chase. His average in the tournament on the eve of the semi-final was, for this particular format (no, for any format, really), a scarcely credible 85. As though to make even more conspicuous his influence in the World Twenty20 and put his stamp on the tournament once and for all, Kohli decided to make the semi-final his very own.

South Africa countered well the threat of the Indian spinners. Other than Ashwin—who took 3 wickets for 22 runs in his four overs and whose prodigiously turning carrom ball to bowl Amla would soon be described by

Gilchrist as the Twenty20 ball of the century—none of the other three slow bowlers got a wicket. Mishra, a little awed by the occasion, could not settle down to a rhythm. He bowled too fast, offered none of the variation of pace that we had hitherto seen, and gave away 36 runs in his three overs—he was the most expensive of the India bowlers and his returns were the worst he had had in the tournament.

Faf du Plessis, India's scourge at the Wanderers Test four months ago, top scored with 58. Duminy lent substance with a 40-ball 45. And the late charge was provided by David Miller, who made 23 from twelve balls. South Africa ratcheted up the tempo in the final quarter of the innings. They made 38 runs in the last three overs. Shane Warne, who at the start of the match had said that 160-odd would be a 'par score', proclaimed the total of 172 formidable. South Africa had never scored in excess of 170 in a Twenty20 game and lost.

Kohli had other ideas. Du Plessis's baffling defensive decision to open the bowling with Duminy and Albie Morkel was welcomed by India as Rohit and Rahane clattered five boundaries in the first two overs. Steyn came on in the third over of the innings. By then, the duo had settled—or settled as much as it is possible for a pair of opening batsmen to settle in a Twenty20 game. Still smarting from the memories of South Africa, Rohit upper cut Steyn's fifth ball for a six over third man. Rohit departed in the next over, his 24 from fourteen balls having kept India in the hunt.

With the score on 39 in the fourth over, out walked Kohli. He would have been aware of the statistic that India won in 86 per cent of the occasions that he scored more than 40 in a Twenty20 game. He would also have known that in India victories in Twenty20s since 2012, he had scored the most runs. In other words, for India to pull off this chase, Kohli needed to play yet another coruscating innings.

While his brutal strike over long-on for six, the wristy pulls that found the fence by threading gaps in the field and racing away, and the six over midwicket that brought up his 50 were among the many shots that lit up his innings, his cricketing nous and one of the reasons why he has become so effective in every format of the game was showcased in the thirteenth over. In this over, in which he hit a boundary off the second ball, Kohli kept up the pressure on South Africa by placing the ball flawlessly, and running furiously hard and cleverly to turn a couple of consecutive singles into twos.

Dhoni's decision to send in Raina ahead of himself (in contrast to the

manner in which he had decisively promoted himself in the World Cup final in 2011) paid off. In the format for which he is best suited provided the wickets are slow and devoid of bounce, Raina produced—with generous strokes of fortune—what the TV ads through the tournament kept calling the ‘one big over’. The seventeenth over saw a six and two fours, none suicidal, but all off edges.

Dhoni, rhythmically thumping his right thigh with his tightly clenched right fist, rocked slightly back and forth in his seat in the dugout and looked on with his brows a little knitted, but his face otherwise without expression.

The big over left India with 23 to get from the last three overs.

Raina was out in the penultimate over, having made 21 from ten balls. Dhoni faced the final ball of the nineteenth over. The scores were level. He blocked it, so that Kohli could have the pleasure of hitting the winning runs. The ruthlessness with which India had executed this chase was best exemplified in the luxury of deliberately blocking a ball in the nineteenth over to allow the star of the day the honour of playing the winning stroke.

Which Kohli promptly did by hitting the first ball of the final over from Steyn for a four. He had made 72 not out from forty-four balls. He had seen through another winning chase, the third time he had done so in five matches. As significant as the four fours and two sixes he had cracked was the fact that there had been only three balls from which he had not scored.

The victory accomplished, Kohli raised his arms, serene, the bat held aloft in his right. That expression segued into one in which he shook his arms and let out a primeval roar, scrunching up his face into a grimace, teeth bared, rocking his head from side to side as though in the grip of a frenzy.

Afterwards he called it the best innings of his Twenty20 career and offered an insight into how he approached these difficult chases. ‘In Twenty20, I look at the target in terms of the number of runs and overs to go, not number of runs and balls to go,’ he said at the post-match presentation ceremony. ‘Overs make it look easier. A hundred from ten overs seems more gettable than a hundred from sixty balls. When you count the number of balls left, it seems to have got away from you.

‘I told Raina, let’s try to finish in the nineteenth over. We don’t want to give Dale Steyn 8 runs to defend in the final over. He can bowl six good yorkers. I wasn’t feeling too good before this game, had some body weakness, so it was good to go out and let it all out with my celebration.’[66]

Kohli had throttled South Africa. The perennial chokers—having failed to

win a single semi-final at an ICC event since 2000—had obligingly choked again.

India went in to the 6 April final in Mirpur aiming to become the first team to simultaneously hold the World Cup, the Champions Trophy and the World Twenty20. Sri Lanka, who had lost to India in the World Cup final in 2011 as well as been beaten in three previous finals of the World Twenty20 (most recently on home soil in 2012 against the West Indies) were looking as much for redemption as for a fitting farewell for two of their greatest ever batsmen, Mahela Jayawardene and Sangakkara, friends, former captains, legends, both of whom would retire from international Twenty20 cricket after this game.

It is always tempting to find a fall guy after a sporting defeat. And India fans and media needed to look no further than Yuvraj Singh after losing the final. Yuvraj, one of the greats of the limited-overs game, the player of the tournament in the 2011 World Cup, the man so pivotal in India's unlikely triumph in the World Twenty20 in 2007, the sweetest of timers, the cleanest of hitters, he of the twinkling footwork and effortless lofted sixes, Yuvraj floundered so embarrassingly in the final that he almost single-handedly halted India's final surge and was responsible for his team finishing with a good 20 runs fewer than should have been the case. The following day India fans pelted his house with stones; his international career seemed as good as over; and the IPL franchise that had paid ₹14 crore for his services in 2014 was secretly wondering if it had done the smart thing with its money.

How ephemeral and fragile is the thing we call sporting glory.

Yuvraj walked in to bat in the eleventh over with the score 64 for 2, Kohli at the other end on a run-a-ball 31. A shower before the game had made the wicket slower. The ball was not coming on to the bat and the conditions were difficult for the humongous hits.

Kohli had been scratchy at the start, not timing the ball as well as he had in the past few matches, on occasion not piercing the gaps with as much ease as he does, but he was hanging in, playing himself in, like all fine players who know how to score even when beneath their best, and was, as Yuvraj came in, beginning to find his rhythm and momentum.

A flurry of fours, a flick through midwicket, a drive through the covers, an immensely powerful one creamed wide of long-on, followed from Kohli. In the sixteenth over, Kohli hit Nuwan Kulasekara for a six and two fours. India were 111 for 2 with four overs to play, and all prepared for the crucial

four-over dash. Kohli had galloped to 70 from fifty balls. In the course of his partnership with Yuvraj, he had made 39 runs from nineteen balls. In the same period, Yuvraj had scored 7 from twelve.

It is in the last four overs that India's challenge unravelled. Yuvraj crawled to 11, eating up twenty-one balls in the process. He not only consumed the balls in those overs. He failed to rotate the strike, leaving Kohli stranded. Kohli, facing only nine of the final twenty-four balls, whacking his pad with his bat, shaking his head, impotent and frustrated, snarling at the non-striker's end as the overs slipped away as did India's chance of a total that could mount a title challenge.

It wasn't of course merely Yuvraj's fault. Sri Lanka's bowling in the closing overs was outstanding. Lasith Malinga bowled two of the final four and not even Dhoni—who tried everything, including his helicopter shot—could get him away. The bowlers perfectly executed a clever plan of bowling yorkers well outside the off stump, a line and length that is one of the hardest to clobber in the final stages of a limited-overs game. By the time the India innings had ended at 130 for 4, the chance of winning the final had as good as evaporated in the warm Mirpur night.

No one, though, could have blamed India for not having tried. They stuck gamely to their task, Ashwin, Raina, Mishra and Mohit Sharma taking a wicket each, Dhoni being aggressive in his field placements and bowling changes, tying Sri Lanka down to 78 for 4 at the end of the thirteenth over. But the total was too paltry. Sangakkara weighed in with an unfazed-by-pressure, unbeaten 52 and, along with Thisara Perera, guided Sri Lanka to their first win of a world cup since that delirious triumph in 1996.

Dhoni said he was well pleased with the way the team had played through the fortnight. 'Overall if you see the whole tournament we played really well,' the captain said. 'Right from the practice matches, and it was [also] evident from the fact that we didn't have too many changes in our side as the tournament progressed. Spinners contributed when there was a bit of turn for them. Throughout the tournament, more often than not, they bowled well. And Virat has been brilliant for us for last one, one and a half years, even more. He is someone who has been very consistent. Yes, overall very happy with how everybody performed.'[67]

And why not? Ashwin had been the best bowler of the World Twenty20. Other than in the semi-final, Mishra had been a revelation. Kohli had proven to be the most imposing and consistent batsman. He had scored 319 runs—

the most any batsman has made in a single tournament in the history of the Twenty20 World Cup. In a format in which an individual score of 45 is seen to be as important a personal landmark as a century in ODIs, he had made four fifties in six outings. His average was 79.

India had won five of six matches, and while they floundered at the final frontier, their victories in all their other games had been emphatic enough to rekindle memories of the 2013 Champions Trophy. Without having played much together as a team in Twenty20, they were unfancied when they started the competition. Towards its end, they had turned into tournament favourites.

Who could complain about a run like that? What could be better? Well, being champions would have been, but then there is no satisfying some people.

TWENTY

STAR SPORTS, THE OFFICIAL BROADCASTER OF THE INDIA V ENGLAND series over July, August and September 2014, had billed the encounter as a shoot-out between two embattled captains, M.S. Dhoni and Alastair Cook. Depending on the outcome of the series, which crammed five Tests in a period of forty-two days, only one would remain.

Certainly both Dhoni and Cook were in the midst of grim spells in Test cricket. Cook, who only a year ago, in the summer of 2013, had led England to a 3-0 Ashes win at home had since presided over the loss of six of seven Tests. England had been routed 0-5 in the Ashes in Australia in 2013-14. In the first series of the summer of 2014 England had hosted Sri Lanka in a two-Test series. Both Tests were agonizingly close, being decided in the dying moments of the match. One had been drawn; Sri Lanka had scraped through in the other. This was England's first home defeat ever to Sri Lanka. In conjunction with his team's plummeting fortunes, Cook's own form had been appalling. As the series started, he had not scored a century for twenty-four Test innings; his average in 2014 stood at 13.

Dhoni was actually worse off. India had not won a Test overseas in more than three years, their last victory coming against the West Indies in Kingston in June 2011. His captaincy record was 0-9 in the last eleven Tests outside Asia. As pitiful as the statistic was the manner in which he had captained recently, dour, defensive and inflexible, eliciting calls for removal. Despite this, he had been handed the captaincy for the England tour.

With Kevin Pietersen sacked, Graeme Swann retired, Jonathan Trott recovering from a long illness, and neither of the two main strike bowlers, James Anderson and Stuart Broad, quite at their peak, England were far more vulnerable than when India had visited last in the summer of 2011. Sam Robson, one of their openers, as well as their Number 3 batsman, Gary Ballance, were just starting out. The team had no frontline spinner. If ever there was a chance to get the better of England in England, this was it.

India had arrived with six specialist batsmen: Dhawan, Rohit, Pujara, Kohli, Rahane and Gautam Gambhir (recalled without having had a prolific

season in domestic cricket). That implied that even if a couple of batsmen were to endure a poor series, they would be allowed to play on. In the squad were six seamers, presumably to allow for rotation and recuperation in a five-Test series. Not one player in the team had ever played a five-Test series before. Not one of them was acquainted with how a five-Test series was enormously different from a three-Test one, how it called for extra rigour, fitness and mental strength. The last five-Test series between England and India in England had been in 1959. Only Dhoni, Gambhir and Ishant had even played in a Test in England before.

The narrative of the first Test at Trent Bridge, Nottingham, was shaped by the lifeless nature of the pitch. It was flat and slow, no bounce, no carry, and had on it straw-coloured grass. It was the kind of pitch that breaks a fast bowler's heart, wrings frustration out of him with every toiling, unrewarding over. If England wanted to be hospitable (and there was talk that the authorities would much rather have the Test go the full distance than be wrapped up within three days amid a couple of spectacular batting collapses), they had been over-generous. Anderson complained—with justification—about the pitch. The groundsman apologized, saying it was an error of judgement rather than the execution of intent. And amends would be made in this regard, it was agreed, in subsequent Tests. Why, even Dhoni said at the end of the match that he was looking forward to a livelier wicket for the second Test at Lord's.

In the fourteenth over of the final morning, India found themselves wobbling at 184 for 6 in their second innings. This meant that, having conceded a lead of 39 runs in their first innings, they were merely 145 to the good. All the recognized batsmen were out. At the crease, Ravindra Jadeja was looking frustrated and out of sorts. He had played thirty-six balls without being able to score a run. Out to join him was the debutant Stuart Binny, who had frittered away his wicket in the first innings. There were seventy-six overs to play. Anderson and Broad were bowling full and tight. If they could knock over the remaining wickets without much fuss, England had a genuine chance of winning a Test in which, at the end of play on the fourth day, a draw seemed a foregone conclusion.

How had a match on a wicket more at home on the subcontinent than an English summer, a wicket that had neutered bowlers and seen the highest

tenth wicket partnership for India and the highest ever tenth wicket partnership in the history of Tests, come to this?

India had played three specialist bowlers and two all-rounders, Binny and Jadeja. This was the first time since Adelaide in 2008 that India had fielded five bowlers. The idea was that Binny and Jadeja would do a holding job, allowing the seamers—Ishant, Shami and Bhuvneshwar—to bowl in short, quick bursts. Dhoni pushed himself up to Number 6—something that, with his poor batting record outside Asia, he had rarely, if ever, done before. Rohit was the batsman sacrificed for the extra bowler.

Having won the toss, India batted with authority and calm. Murali Vijay, who had worked so hard in South Africa and New Zealand, had mounted long vigils to blunt the new ball without getting proportionately tall scores, was rewarded with a hundred—his first away from home and the fourth of his career.

A dramatic afternoon collapse on the second day saw India going from 344 for 5 to 346 for 9—4 wickets gone for 2 runs; and the distinct possibility of a total in excess of 500 was extinguished in twenty-one balls.

Bhuvneshwar, who made 58, his highest Test score, and Shami, who made 51 not out, his highest, set about frustrating England with an obdurate 111-run last wicket stand that took India to respectability. A total of 457 seemed from the outset to be the kind of score which, if you got in the first innings on a flat wicket, ruled out losing the Test.

Before long, it appeared to be more than that. With England, at 298 for 9, proving their predilection for implosion on the back of a fine spell of bowling from Ishant, India were wondering whether they could force a victory. A lead of 150-odd, and a chance to get the hosts—edgy after the defeat against Sri Lanka, shorn of a wealth of experience, troubled by a besieged captain—to bat in the fourth innings, and who could tell, however placid the pitch, whether the pressure would be enough to make them crumble.

But this was a Test that redefined the phrase ‘last stand’. India had put on 111. England proceeded to put together a pugnacious world-record 198. Anderson got a career-best 81. And Joe Root, quickly turning out to be a bright, long-term prospect, his boyish features belying his tenacity and toughness, remained unbeaten on 154. This was his fourth century in only his eighteenth Test. He had remained not out on a previous occasion as well; in that innings he had made 200. From a position of precariousness, England leveraged a lead of 39, too insubstantial, one would imagine, to make any

difference in this dying Test.

But then came the fifth morning to breathe unexpected life into the match. India began the day at 167 for 3, with Kohli on 8 and Rahane on 18. Kohli, around whom there was more hype in England than around any India batsman, had in the first innings played for reverse swing that was not there and ended up poking the ball to be dismissed for 1. He was keen to do better. Rahane, who had made a compact 32 in the first innings and was looking as much at ease in the second as he did in the first, seemed unruffled.

In the second over of the morning, Broad bowled one to Kohli that was full and coming in. Kohli tried to tuck it away past midwicket, and was caught on the pad right in front of the wicket. 168 for 4. Two overs later, Broad, with a delivery that had a touch of reverse swing, caught the outside edge of Rahane's bat. Matt Prior took the catch behind the wicket. 173 for 5. In the fourteenth over of the day, Dhoni, who had shortly before been dropped by Cook, heaved across the line against Liam Plunkett and had his stumps rattled. 184 for 6.

India's lead: 145. All the specialist batsmen out. To play: seventy-six overs. If there was to be a decision in this match, only one team could win it. And that team was not India.

So that is how a Test on a wicket that had neutered the bowlers had come to this.

At the international level, Binny counts as a bits-and-pieces player. Some not-particularly-potent seam, an ability to bat a bit. Picked so that he could while bowling do one half of a holding operation with Jadeja, he had bowled merely ten overs. His selection had been debated a great deal. Many, including myself, had felt that if indeed India wanted an extra bowler, that bowler should have been Ashwin.

By the time the Test drew to a close, we had had reason to be thankful to Binny. A gorgeous cover drive at the beginning of his innings gave the debutant confidence. He then put on two match-saving partnerships: 68 runs with Jadeja and 91 with Bhuvneshwar, who scored his second fifty of the match. Binny kept his head, and stroked the ball freely. He glided through third man, punched past point and drove with assurance. By the time he was finally out for 78, India had reached 340, and both teams were looking ahead to the second Test at Lord's.

The draw, however, was not the only outcome of the match. The Trent Bridge Test ended on Sunday. On Tuesday Anderson was charged under Level 3 of the ICC Code of Conduct after the India team management alleged that he had abused and pushed Jadeja. The incident was said to have taken place as the teams were leaving the fields for the lunch break. At many other refurbished modern grounds, the two teams leave and emerge through two paths from their respective dressing rooms on to the field. At Trent Bridge, an old and pretty ground, there is only one route for both teams to take while walking off or on to the field. The incident was seen to have come on the back of some protracted sledging in the final over of the pre-lunch session.

Anderson was charged with conduct that either is contrary to the spirit of the game; or brings the game into disrepute. A player found guilty of a Level 3 charge faces a ban of up to four Tests, or up to eight ODIs, depending on the forthcoming fixtures.

The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) reacted with sharpness and surprise. In a statement released with alacrity it said: ‘The ECB has today reacted with surprise that the India team has made allegations against James Anderson under Level 3 of the ICC Code of Conduct for a minor incident involving Ravindra Jadeja during the first Investec Test match at Trent Bridge.

‘In the light of this the ECB has notified the ICC of its intention to lodge code of conduct breaches against Jadeja. Anderson categorically denies the accusations made against him and the ECB has pledged their total support for the player should he be charged by ICC.’

The ECB retaliated by bringing Level 2 charges against Jadeja. ‘It is alleged that after the players left the public area and entered the pavilion [for lunch], Jadeja turned suddenly and took steps towards Anderson in an aggressive and threatening manner,’ the ICC said on receiving the ECB’s complaint.

If found guilty of a Level 2 offence, breaches carry a fine of between 50-100 per cent of the match fee and/or up to ban in one Test, or two ODIs.

Cook said India were making ‘a big mountain out of a molehill’, going so far as to view this as a tactic to unsettle and get rid of England’s most potent bowler. Dhoni, unflappable as ever, reiterated that there had been physical contact, something that crossed the boundary of gamesmanship or sledging, and spoke highly of the manner in which Jadeja had kept his head during the incident.

The inquiry would begin on 22 July the day after the second Test at Lord's was slated to end. An ICC-appointed judicial commissioner would have to preside over the hearing.

On a glorious London summer's afternoon on 10 July, Ajinkya Rahane walked out to bat at Lord's in the second Test with India at 86 for 3. The talk from the morning, especially in the context of the complaints of the lifeless pitch at Trent Bridge, had been all about the pitch.

At Lord's the wicket was of the kind that England fast bowlers would love as a Christmas present. It was green enough to be indistinguishable from the outfield. Former England captain and commentator Nasser Hussain said he had never ever seen a pitch as green as this at Lord's. Former England spinner Graeme Swann tweeted: 'The wicket is like a bowl of mushy peas.' Alastair Cook, relieved to have won the toss on such a pitch and made the inevitable decision of bowling first, allowed that this was the greenest wicket he had ever seen at Lord's.

In the event, India held up well, losing only two wickets before lunch. Perhaps overexcited, perhaps not focussed enough, England bowlers fluffed a chance unlike any they had had in the series so far. Instead of pitching it up on or around the off stump and creating doubt in the mind of the batsman about whether to play or leave the ball, instead of trying to induce the edges, instead of letting the pitch do the work it had manifestly been laid for, Anderson and Co bowled the wrong length, short and wide, allowing the batsman to sway out of the line of the ball or leave it.

After lunch, though, they had begun to get the line and length right. Kohli had been snapped up after beginning with great flourish. 86 for 3 was the sort of juncture from which, with disciplined bowling and a stroke or two of luck for England, things could quickly become pretty dreadful indeed.

From 113 for 3, India were rocked back to 126 for 6, Pujara, Dhoni and Jadeja gone for the addition of 13 runs. And then it became, with the dismissal of Binny, 145 for 7. The odds were on India being all out for within 170, and England batting well before stumps on the opening day. The hosts had firmly seized the gift horse of the pitch.

Rahane did not believe in that prospect. He believed in himself. He played with confidence and calm, his small, compact frame refusing to be bullied by the bounce and swing. Unlike many other India batsmen, he did

not look to steer and glide towards third man, minimizing the risk of getting edges. He played very straight, accumulating most of his early runs between mid-off and mid-on, driving straight as well as on either side of the wicket with precision and grace.

Climbing on to the top of the steepling bounce, he strung together a sequence of three fours—over point, extra cover and cover point—to go from 42 to 54. Past his fifty, and with Bhuvneshwar looking full of beans at the other end, Rahane ramped up the pace. His first fifty had come off 103 balls; his second took him merely fifty. Every time Liam Plunkett tried to bounce him, Rahane pulled him to the boundary, on one occasion finding the fence even with three men out at the back. Rahane flicked Anderson for a four and hit him straight back over his head for a six off consecutive balls. From 90 to 102 he went with successive boundaries. When he got to his hundred by pushing Anderson through the covers, the crowd accorded him a standing ovation.

This was one of the best hundreds by an India batsman at Lord's—and between Dilip Vengsarkar, Sourav Ganguly and Rahul Dravid's gems at the ground, we had a generous selection to choose from. This was Rahane's second hundred in only his seventh Test. He had scored one in New Zealand and, out for 96, was denied a deserved one in Johannesburg.

In his unobtrusive manner, devoid of any of the hype that has been attendant on several of his teammates, Rahane has indisputably laid his claim to being a part of the nucleus of this young side. He has never been called a prodigy, the next big thing. He had to prove his mettle by making eighteen first-class hundreds before he was handed a Test debut. He has not been given a fraction of the chances that Rohit was allowed. Selected over Rohit to anchor the middle order at Lord's, Rahane responded with an innings of such poise and class that it will be difficult for the selectors to ignore him in future.

His 90-run partnership with Bhuvneshwar, second top scorer with 36, was the highest of the India innings. Rahane took India to 275 before being the ninth man out. That was on a wicket on which 250-275 was being seen as a pretty competitive first innings total.

Afterwards he said: 'Initially I wanted to play close to my body. Then I backed my instinct.' Modest and grounded, he said he had come out when the wicket had eased a little; he thanked Vijay, Pujara and Kohli for batting in the tricky period and making the job easy for him.

When England batted early on the second morning, India revealed

another young hero. Bhuvneshwar Kumar, 24 years old and playing in only his eighth Test, produced a bowling performance that crowned his already significant contribution in the series: two fifties and 5 for 82 at Trent Bridge (something that should have won him the Man of the Match award, but did not); and 36 in the first innings at Lord's.

On Christmas day in 2012, Bhuvneshwar had first played for India in a Twenty20 game against Pakistan at Bangalore. India bowled second. Bhuvneshwar opened the bowling. Facing him was Nasir Jamshed. Outswinger followed outswinger, the batsman reaching for the ball, beaten by the movement away from his body. The final ball of the over swung in; Jamshed, expecting to play the away swinger, was confounded, and the ball shot through the probing bat and stranded pad to crash into the stumps. A wicket in his first over in international cricket for the soft-spoken 22-year-old from Meerut in Uttar Pradesh.

Five days later, on 30 December against Pakistan at Chennai, Bhuvneshwar played his first ODI. Again India bowled second. Again Bhuvneshwar opened the bowling. Facing him was Mohammad Hafeez. The first ball was a big, bemusing inswinger that knocked over Hafeez's off stump. Again Bhuvneshwar had a wicket in his first over on an international debut.

Well before he made his debut in that Twenty20 game in Bangalore, Bhuvneshwar had earned a singular distinction in the Ranji Trophy final at Hyderabad in January 2009: he was responsible for Sachin Tendulkar's first duck in domestic cricket.

Merely 18 years old at the time, he bowled a probing spell to the country's greatest sporting hero. Thirteen balls the young Bhuvneshwar bowled to Tendulkar. For thirteen balls Tendulkar groped and prodded, was beaten, hung on. He failed to score a single run. Having bowled several outswingers, Bhuvneshwar swung the fourteenth ball back. It took the edge of Tendulkar's bat, hit his pad and ballooned for a bat-pad catch. It was the greatest feat of a career that was still in its infancy.

Bhuvneshwar does not come from a small town like so many of his compatriots. He comes from a village that makes the small town of Meerut in Uttar Pradesh—where he grew up and made his cricketing fortune—seem like a big city with bright lights. His father was a sub-inspector. His elder

sister persuaded his parents to allow him to join a cricket club, to have a stab at making a living from the game. Subsequently, both parents as well as his sister comprised the bedrock of his support as he made his way through the world of club cricket.

Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state, which elects eighty members of India's Parliament every general election, is an often-menacing cauldron of crime and complex caste equations. It has, however, turned out to be a breeding ground of the country's swing bowlers. Praveen Kumar and R.P. Singh—both of whom had taken five-fors and made it to the honours board at Lord's before Bhuvneshwar—are also from Uttar Pradesh.

Praveen in particular became both mate and mentor for Bhuvneshwar as he sealed his place in the Uttar Pradesh Ranji Trophy side. Praveen's international career had begun well but had not really flourished. However, he was almost peerless when it came to players who competed only on the domestic level. Not particularly pacy, but with an ability to swing the ball both ways and bowl long spells on flat wickets, Praveen was the bulwark of Uttar Pradesh's bowling.

Bowling with Praveen, talking to him, seeking out his advice, Bhuvneshwar grew into a classic swing bowler. He is neither very tall nor very well built nor very fast, bowling in the 130 kph range, lacking the pace and bounce to unsettle batsmen with the ball coming down from high. But what he has—and what makes him so tricky to play especially in conditions that favour swing—is his ability to move the ball. He can swing it away; he can bend it in; he can make it hold the line and wobble, drawing batsmen into doubt and indecision, prompting errors.

On pitches such as the one at Lord's, he can extract an enormous amount of help from the conditions, not becoming too revved up, not trying extra hard, bowling the right length, letting the pitch and conditions do the rest. His wrist position is perfect and he is a canny enough cricketer to know that patience is as important in this business as guile.

It is when something goes wrong with that wrist position that his game is vastly impoverished. His control over the swing diminishes, and without the swing, Bhuvneshwar is a medium pace bowler who in international cricket does not pose much of a threat. He had lost his swing, had been left out of the tours of South Africa and New Zealand and then found it again, the vital elements of what defines his bowling clacking into place on this tour of England.

Like Shami, Bhuvneshwar reminds us of an age when players were not brands. He is shy and courteous, a quiet intelligence underpinning his demeanour and his play. His stubble, when he has it, is not designer. Bhuvneshwar is no brand. He is a bowler. And when he gets into the swing of things, he can make batsmen dance to his rhythm.

Before the series against England in the summer of 2014 he had taken nine wickets in six Tests. Now, after bowling in merely two innings of the series, he had eleven.

His performance at Trent Bridge showed that he could be potent in these conditions. At Lord's he was outstanding, doing all the things that he was good at, taking the ball away, bringing it back, making it hold its line, forcing batsmen into folly and repeated error. He bowled thirty-one overs, the most by any bowler in the match so far, threatened in each spell he delivered, and his figures of 6 for 82 were responsible for pushing England back every time they looked to get ahead in the match.

Despite the ups and downs of the match this far, England earned a lead of 24 runs. It should not have been. The moment in which England's innings turned was the dropping of a regulation catch by Dhoni early on in Ballance's innings, an edge that Dhoni did not even go for, leaving the first slip fielder Dhawan arcing up his hands in bewilderment. Gary Ballance went on to top score with 110.

(A note on India's close catching. Dhoni, in England's second innings, fluffed another chance that could have cost India the match. In the closing moments of the fourth day's play, a ball lobbed off the back of Moeen Ali's bat, and was put down. Moeen, along with Root, batted on till a ball before lunch on the final day. Had England not been subsequently so intemperate, they could have been looking at a win. But it is not merely Dhoni. Kohli has dropped too many chances. He has while standing in the slips taken a little more than half the chances that have come his way. Rahane and Dhawan have put down catches. So has Ravinder Jadeja. In Test cricket, slip fielding is a specialized art, crucial to the well-being of the team. India has an unsettled, uncertain look about their close-in fielding. We talk a lot about how difficult it is to replace the legends of the golden generation in terms of their batting. We perhaps pay not enough attention to how big a hole has been left in the side with the departure of two members of that generation—Dravid

and Laxman—from the slip cordon.)

Vijay showed once more when India batted in the second innings how far he had come from the time when he had been dropped from the team after a series against the West Indies in July 2011. At the end of this innings, his scores in the series were 146, 52, 24 and 95 No player, from either India or England, had a higher batting average than his 79.25. He had already made 317 runs in the series. His career average still did not touch 40—a reflection of his poor first stint for India. But since returning to the Test side against Australia at Chennai in February 2013, he had made three hundreds, and come mighty close on one occasion in South Africa and once in this innings at Lord's.

He was seventh out in this innings with the score at 235, holding his nerve and the innings together as India went into a tailspin, losing Pujara, Kohli and Rahane within the space of 5 runs. His discipline was immense, his technique tighter; he played closer to his body, and he had become adept at leaving alone the ball outside the off stump. He faced 247 balls for his 95. Yet it was by no means a dull effort. Every time he leaned into a cover drive, it would take your breath away.

Dropped from the ODI team, Vijay perhaps realized that his only chance of redemption in international cricket lay in Tests. He cut out the flashy, uninhibited strokeplay that earned him admirers in the IPL, replacing it with a technique that had a blend of vigilance and occasional flair as its bedrock.

'A lot of work has gone into it. We worked on the basics and the effects are showing,' Vijay's coach Jayakumar told the *Times of India*. 'It's not that he has not done that before. He left a lot of balls at Durban also when he came close to a century. But the challenge was to ensure that he does that more regularly. Obviously, it was not easy to prepare for England in Chennai. But we used some damp pitches, left some more grass so that there was that extra lateral movement. And then of course it was Vijay's determination to do well.'[68]

Bhuvneshwar Kumar scored yet another fifty, becoming the only India player other than Vijay to already have had three scores in excess of fifty in the series. But it was Jadeja's somewhat crazed counterattacking charge that buoyed India's second-innings total.

Cricket is nothing if not a game of many subplots. In the Anderson-Jadeja narrative within the larger story of the Test, Jadeja, after this innings, led 2-0. He had got Anderson out in England's first innings. Now in India's second,

he had attacked and hit fours off Anderson as though it had given him particular relish.

Not yet done for the day, nor yet having exhausted his quota of good fortune, Jadeja got opener Sam Robson's wicket, declared lbw off an inside edge, no sooner than England had come out to bat. Cook, striving for one respectable innings, flailing for purchase on the brink of the worst precipice he had stood on in his career, clung on. Along with first-innings centurion Ballance, England crept up to 70 for 1.

Twenty balls later, they were 72 for 4.

Shami induced an edge from Ballance; Ishant bowled Ian Bell; and then he had Cook caught behind the wicket. The fourth day's play ended with England on 105 for 4. Certainly they were not out of the game, but India were ahead. Hovering over the tourists in concentric circles were two sets of ghosts: in the inner circle were the ones of Johannesburg and Wellington, two recent Tests in which this new team had failed to seize the substantial advantage they had wrested; in the outer circle was the combined statistics of the Tests played overseas since they last visited England in 2011, twelve Tests of which India had lost ten.

India were aware they could win here. They needed to get six wickets in a full day's play. But England could just as well squeeze out a victory. They had 214 runs to get in ninety overs. A draw was not out of the realms of probability. Neither was a tie. A gripping final day awaited.

With one ball to go for lunch on the fifth morning, while all four results remained still probable, England had clawed their way back in and were looking to get their noses in front. They had gone on to 173, quite at ease, Root looking particularly menacing as he reached his fifty with three fours in an Ishant over. Moeen Ali was on 39. Six wickets intact, a lower order that had scored fluently in the series, and 146 to get to pull off a thrilling victory. The ghosts in concentric circles were hovering ever closer over India.

The last ball before lunch. Ishant bowled it short. Moeen ducked, tried to fend off the rising ball. Got a glove and it ballooned to Pujara at short leg. At 173 for 5, the match was back on an even keel.

In a period of an hour's play after lunch, England lost 5 wickets for 25 runs. First Root and Prior added some aggressive runs, attacking Ishant's short-pitched bowling with gusto. What happened thereafter was inexplicable.

With a forward short leg, a backward short leg, and three fieldsmen out

on the leg boundary, Ishant kept bowling short, rising deliveries. One after the other, four England batsmen pulled, miscued, and were dismissed. Prior, Stokes, Root, and Broad were all out in identical fashion. Could one imagine a Test team being so utterly complicit in their own downfall? It was not so much bowling and strategy of genius as batting of ruinous ineptitude.

Ishant, nonetheless, often a figure of much ridicule, the bowler who had the worst figures in history among all bowlers who had played more than fifty Tests, now had 7 for 74. It was his third five-for in 2014, a year in which he had taken twenty-five Test wickets. If he had ever looked like turning the corner, this was the moment.

But the match was not yet over. One final moment of drama, a denouement of the Anderson-Jadeja subplot remained. With England at 223 for 9, Jadeja ran Anderson out with a direct hit from one of his trademark rocket throws. (A few days later, Jadeja would be docked 50 per cent of his match fees, found guilty, not of the Level 2 offence with which he had been charged, but a Level 1 offence. Anderson's hearing was scheduled to begin the day after the conclusion of the third Test.)

India had won by 95 runs. At Lord's in 2011, they had begun their miserable sequence of losing ten of twelve Tests overseas. At Lord's in 2014, they ended it. The new team had its first Test victory. Irrespective of the outcome of the series, they had already done better than the team that had visited in 2011.

Former England bowler and BBC columnist Jonathan Agnew called this triumph 'one of India's greatest victories'. Ravi Shastri, never one to shy away from hyperbole, called it 'India's greatest ever Test triumph'.

Certainly, it was not that. Lord's 2014 was not in the league of Port of Spain 1976 or Lord's 1986 or the Eden Gardens 2001 or Headingley 2002 or Adelaide 2003 or Multan 2004 or Perth 2008. This was an England side that was at a low ebb, hamstrung by underperforming stars, bereft of some of their best players. But it was a win that had been a long time coming.

As the Test series went beyond its half-way mark with the conclusion of the third Test at the Ageas Bowl in Southampton, India found that the two men who were expected to be the mainstay of their batting had not made sizable contributions. Although neither had looked out of place or ill at ease at the crease.

Pujara had made one fifty. His three-hour vigil in the second innings at Lord's had been crucial. But uncharacteristically he had not gone on to turn his solid starts into the kind of huge scores we have come to associate with him.

Kohli's highest score in the series at the end of the third Test was 39. It was an innings full of promise, compiled in the second innings of the third Test, and a cover drive and a straight drive he had played in the innings showed that he was in his element. But, as with a stroke-filled 25 at Lord's, the dazzle had not turned into durability.

There was no obvious weakness in either man's technique. Both had scored heavily in testing conditions, against more imposing bowling, away from home. Yet neither could seem to get going in England. Not one expert could explain why this was so. The duo had been on a tremendous run in several series preceding this one. Perhaps it was the impossibility of playing well in series after series, of it being inevitable that a dip in scoring, a blip in performance would come. It happens, said Rahul Dravid on commentary, there is no reason for it. Form, touch, whatever you call it, is an inexplicable, ineffable thing. Had Pujara and Kohli played as well as they can in the final innings of the third Test, India may have been able to avoid defeat. Needing to bat out 130 overs to save the Test, India caved in for 178 in sixty-six overs. With four balls, Moeen Ali, whom his captain had hitherto considered to be a part-time bowler, wrecked the innings of some of the best players of spin in the world.

The batting of Kohli and Pujara was not the only things that Indian fans were thinking about after the 266-run defeat. Had Ishant been fit to play, things could have been different. But he was not, and the plan of repeating the barrage of short-pitched balls to England remained in the realm of dressing room strategy, not allowed the chance of being executed on the field. Had Jadeja taken the catch offered by Cook when he was on 15 in the first innings there might have been a different outcome. Cook scored 95, snapping the worst-ever run of form in his career. Had India embraced the decision review system, Bell would been given out leg before wicket without scoring in the first innings. He made 160. Ballance would have been out for 10. He made 156.

Such moments had arrived at Lord's as well. But Dhoni's dropping of Ballance and Moeen were redeemed by chances that arrived again and were grasped. At Southampton, England were in no mood to be generous. They

made use of the fortune they had; India squandered the opportunities they had been afforded.

Capped by the worst batting performance of the series so far in their second innings, India were poor on all counts. Irrespective of the what-ifs, the result was fair. India deserved to lose, and lose as heavily as they did. The loss was ascribed to, among other things, incorrect team selection. Several former cricketers were of the opinion that Ashwin, rather than Jadeja, should have played.

This Test did not heave and tilt one way and then another as the one at Lord's had done. England dominated every session of every day of play. This match never appeared to be an encounter between two evenly-matched sides. From the moment England ended the first day with the loss of only two wickets, it never seemed as though they would allow India back into the game. It was a convincing, assured performance.

How, within a week, had England gone from their lowest ebb to a position of ascendance? How does a collective performance turn around so rapidly and dramatically? That in itself is one of the most mysterious and magical things about sport at this level.

The day after the match ended, the ICC-appointed judicial commissioner Gordon Lewis heard the Anderson-Jadeja case via a video link from Melbourne. The BCCI had appealed the punishment that Jadeja had already been handed—the docking of half of his match fees. Lewis overturned that penalty, thus proclaiming Jadeja not guilty of the Level 1 charge that had been levelled against him. He exonerated Anderson as well.

During the hearing, Anderson admitted to calling Jadeja a 'fucking prick' and a 'fucking cunt'. When asked if this was in the spirit of the game, Anderson had said that it was not. But no evidence of physical contact could be found. There was no video footage of the incident. It was all one set of witnesses' word against another.

England were relieved that Anderson remained in the fray for the forthcoming Test at Old Trafford, Manchester. For India, the overturning of Jadeja's previous punishment was scant consolation; they made their disaffection with the verdict plain.

But India would not be allowed a further appeal. So the BCCI did what it could. It wrote to the ICC chief executive Dave Richardson, expressing its

discontent with the decision. Richardson, as the head of the ICC, was the only one who could act in the matter. On 6 August, the day before the fourth Test got under way at Old Trafford, Richardson announced that he would not act against the verdict. ‘This outcome is the result of two exhaustive and thorough disciplinary processes and, after considering the written decision, the ICC is satisfied with the manner in which the decisions have been reached,’ Richardson said. ‘There is no merit in [India’s] appeal and it would not be in the best interest of the sport to take such action.’

Anderson was known to be a sledger, a provocateur on the field. If he had indeed made body contact with Jadeja, he had certainly crossed a line that he ought not to have. But India, in the guise of refusing to be, well, pushed around and standing up for themselves had behaved in a righteous and prissy manner. In the past India had been able to bully the opposition and the ICC based on the magnitude of their financial clout. On this occasion India’s behaviour gave off the odour of a sense of entitlement.

India had not much time to pull themselves together. England felt they had the advantage at Old Trafford, which happened to be Anderson’s home ground.

Within nineteen balls on the first morning, India lost the fourth Test. From 8 for no loss, India went to 8 for 4 wickets by the end of the fifth over. It was the second time ever that three of India’s top four batsmen had scored ducks. The previous instance was at Headingley in 1952. The pitch, quick and with ample bounce, helped Anderson and Broad. But it was not so brutish as to justify that score after less than half an hour of the start of the Test.

History told us that there was still a chance. On the last three occasions that England had taken four opposition wickets with the score less than 25, they had gone on to lose the Test. India, however, would give them no chance to do so. After allowing England to score 367 in the first innings, India offered a similarly spectacular collapse in their second outing. From 53 for 1, India were all out for 161. They lost nine wickets after tea, surrendering the Test in less than three days. Rain had already wiped out most of the second day’s play. The forecast was for more rain on the fourth day. Had India clung on, there was a fair chance that the weather would have dictated a draw, and the final Test at the Oval would still have started on even terms at 1-1.

There were of course plenty of reasons why India played so poorly. Not

one solid opening partnership in the series, not one opening fifty partnership in three years as a matter of fact, had exposed the middle order too soon. Pujara and Kohli failed again. Pujara's vulnerability to the incoming ball was much remarked upon. We noted that Kohli was not enough side on with his stance, that he was playing with an angled bat that was resulting in edges and that he was not coming forward enough on the front foot to nullify the swing. Against Moeen Ali, someone who was seen as a part-time bowler at the start of the series, the batsmen had been confused in their strategy, becoming either too aggressive or too defensive, giving the spinner nineteen wickets by the end of the fourth Test. The slip catching and wicketkeeping continued to be appalling, and Jadeja's dropping of Cook on the first morning in Southampton began to be seen as the defining moment of the series.

Then there was the captaincy. 'There were,' Shane Warne said, 'some bizarre and weird bowling changes. It was not just me. Everyone at the ground felt it.' On *wisdenindia.com*, Michael Holding wrote: 'A lot of M.S. Dhoni's captaincy throughout this series has been questionable. It seems to me that he is trying to do things that people say he shouldn't do just to prove them wrong.'

No surprises there. Dhoni's familiar negative tactics, his trying to sit back and preserve a 1-0 lead over two Tests, his bowling with a seven-two leg side field that allowed England easy runs, his placing of a long-on as soon as a hard-hitting batsman came in to bat, his starting the third morning at Old Trafford with Jadeja, his not bowling Ashwin enough (despite the success of England's off break bowler, Moeen Ali, despite Ashwin being a specialist off spinner and England having five left-handed batsmen), his attempt to persist with Jadeja as a Test player, his move to drop Dhawan and play Gambhir although Gambhir had done nothing to justify selection, all this went some way towards costing India the Test. India had not shown the stomach for a fight. These were all boxes that we could tick and say, ah, that is why India were now in a position in which they had to win the final Test to avoid another series defeat overseas.

But a good deal was left unexplained. How had Anderson, after a woeful series against Australia and well below par against Sri Lanka and in the first two Tests against India, almost overnight returned to his best? If we all knew that Kohli was not coming decisively forward to negate the swing was leading to his downfall, surely he did too, as did the team's coach? In which case, how was it that a world-class batsman who had scored hundreds in

Australia, South Africa and New Zealand was unable to correct a flaw that seemed so easy to put right on TV slow motion replays? How did England, so listless, so beleaguered at the end of the Lord's Test, turn things around so dramatically in less than a week and play with such vigour and discipline in Southampton and Manchester? Why, for that matter, did India cave in so utterly within a week of the resounding triumph at Lord's?

Over March and April 1983, Mohinder Amarnath, one of India's grittiest and bravest batsmen, had an unforgettable series against the West Indies in the West Indies. This was Clive Lloyd's invincible team at its peak. Against the frightening quartet of Andy Roberts, Michael Holding, Joel Garner and Malcolm Marshall, Amarnath, over the course of a five-Test series, made scores of 58, 117, 91, 80, 54 and 116. It was one of the most stirring displays by an Indian batsman against a side that was indisputably one of the greatest in the history of the game.

India's next two series were at home. They hosted Pakistan and a return visit from the West Indies over September and October. Amarnath followed his justly lauded sequence of scores in the West Indies with 4, 7, 0, 0, 1, 0, 0, 0. What exactly had changed between April and September? How had the same player fallen so low from such vertiginous heights?

Confidence, touch, form, momentum… These are words we reach for. The objective reasons we can see. What we can't see is *why* the reasons should exist in the first place. The mind of an elite sportsman is what we cannot really read. If we could do that, we would know with more certainty why sporting success is so precarious, why sporting glory has frailty at its heart.

If England had been complicit in their own defeat at Lord's, India returned the favour, twice over, in the final Test at the Oval. India were bowled out for 161 in the first innings in sixty-one overs and one ball. In the second, they were all out for 94 in twenty-nine overs and two balls. In both innings combined, they batted less than a regular day's play.

For the record, this defeat—by an innings and 244 runs—was the worst in terms of the margin since 1974. It was India's third-heaviest defeat ever. Kohli was outscored by Extras in the series. From a promising start, Pujara dwindled. Bhuvneshwar, burdened by more overs than he was strong enough to bowl at his full pace, dropped in speed so that his swing became easy to

play. Ishant, back after a two-Test break, was ineffectual. Dhoni's captaincy looked more and more wretched. The coach and support staff had gone missing in action, unable to make a difference to the batsmen's method of playing or to their eroded self-belief.

India looked like a broken team, shoulders drooping, lacking in intent and intensity, appearing as though the high point of the series would be its imminent conclusion. Kevin Pietersen had spoken of the same kind of feeling in the England dressing room, the same sagging confidence, the gloominess, the wish to be put out of their misery, as England were in the midst of their 0-5 against Australia in 2013-14.

Perhaps it had to do with lack of experience. The inexperience of playing a five-Test series, being used to its particular ebb and flow, the way its narrative unfolds and shapes a team, the manner in which fitness and intensity need to be at a far higher pitch than for a three- or two-Test encounter, the ability to find something from within oneself and turn things around when the odds are stacked against your team, the ability to take your chances when they come, to keep your spirit unflagging, your belief intact. Sourav Ganguly certainly thought these were the reasons for India's downfall. (Had this been a two- or three-Test series, the likes of which India are familiar with playing, they would either have won 1-0 or drawn 1-1. Both would have been praiseworthy, and none of the hand wringing and post mortem would have ensued.) But then, England and Australia play more five-Test series in the form of the Ashes than any other team in contemporary cricket. That still did nothing to dilute the despair in the English dressing room as they were being routed by Australia. When India toured England in 2011, they had a vast wealth of experience at their disposal. The result was still 0-4.

Another example. When India visited England in 1974, they played twelve tour matches in the run-up to the first Test. The tour started on 22 April; the first Test began on 6 June. So the team had more than enough time to acclimatize themselves to the conditions before playing a Test. That acclimatization period was longer than the one (forty-one days) in which the entire five-Test series had taken place in 2014. Moreover, on that occasion, there were tour matches between Tests to allow players to work on their technique and confidence in match situations, to find that incommunicable thing called form. This time around, there was no provision for such an eventuality.

What happened then in the Tests in 1974? In the first Test at Manchester, India lost by 113 runs. It was a three-Test series. India lost the series 0-3. In the second innings of the second Test at Lord's, India had been bowled out for 42. They had lost that Test by an innings and 285 runs. Yet it was by no means an inexperienced side; nor was it a team one could scoff at. India were led by Ajit Wadekar; they had in the team Sunil Gavaskar, Gundappa Viswanath, Bishan Bedi, Bhagwath Chandrasekhar and Erapalli Prasanna. Pretty much the same players had beaten England 1-0 in a three-Test series in England in 1971.

Sport, like life, is full of irreconcilable contradictions.

Perhaps it was all in the head, in the mind. The *Times of India* quoted Pravin Amre as saying that the players would have benefited from consulting a sports psychologist, pointing out how Sandy Gordon had helped with Ganguly's team before the 2003 World Cup and how Paddy Upton and Mike Horn had stiffened the resolve of the 2011 World Cup winning squad.

'If there was a problem with our players' technique alone then we wouldn't have won the Lord's Test. This tour is a good example of why we need to avail the services of a sports psychologist,' Amre told the *Times of India*. 'On a long tour like this it is not just one thing that leads you to success. It is a combination of many factors, like fitness, form, skills, team bonding and mental approach. When you talk to psychologists, they will tell you that thousands of thoughts can pass through a person's mind in one minute and 80 per cent of those could be negative ones. With such a mindset, it becomes very difficult to go out and perform. That is why it becomes all the more important to train your mind. That is where a psychologist can help.'

What was irrefutable was that this was the new team's first humiliation. On 21 July India were the lords of Lord's, beaming and buoyant. On 17 August in the city of their triumph, some Tube stops further south at the Oval, dispirited and deflated, they had surrendered the series 1-3.

The airwaves and ether were alive with anger and frustration. A lot of the ill feeling was directed towards the captain, the coach Duncan Fletcher, and the support staff comprising bowling coach Joe Dawes and fielding coach Trevor Penney. How was it that Fletcher, so instrumental in England's epochal Ashes win in 2005, had been able to do so little since he had taken charge of the India team after the World Cup win in 2011? The whisper went that Fletcher was simply too lazy, too reactive, not up to the job of working

with and building a young side. The counter whisper went that Dhoni's writ ran so large that Fletcher had little say, that he was merely a figurehead.

The Indian fan has often been fickle, oscillating between delusional hope and unjustified despair. In February 2003, as Sourav Ganguly led his formidable side to the World Cup in South Africa, fans all over the country were fizzing with optimism. Surely, this was our year. (This is a once-every-four-years refrain, ever since Kapil's Devils changed the mindset of the Indian fan by winning the World Cup in 1983. Only in 2011, to wildly exultant celebrations, was it really India's year in the way fans meant it. On balance, 2003—in alien conditions—was a brave campaign fronted by a fearless, flamboyant leader. But India lost in the final against the brilliant defending champions, Australia.)

I used to live in Kolkata at the time. In our neighbourhood was something called the Red Rose Club, not so much a proper club as a room in which unemployed or barely employed young men from the area played carrom in the evenings, watched TV, drank dark rum and occasionally got rowdy afterwards. As a eulogy to the India team the wall outside the club had been covered with a colourful collage of players' photographs. A gallery of Tendulkar images was the centrepiece of the collage. It also had a photoshopped image of Ganguly holding aloft the trophy. Surely, this was our year.

A week into the tournament, India had played two disastrous matches. They had failed to bat out fifty overs against the Netherlands, winning merely because of the less than fearsome nature of the opponents. Against Australia in their first serious encounter of the World Cup, India had again failed to last fifty overs, making 125, the lowest they had ever scored in the history of the championship. Australia had knocked off the target in a little over twenty-two overs.

After the capitulation against Australia, the wall of the Red Rose Club was denuded of its photographs. The operation had been carried out with some viciousness. Jagged strips indicated the spots from which the pictures had been ripped. At the foot of the wall lay a mound of paper—what remained of the photographs—turned squelchy by the evening showers and hurrying, muddy feet.

On another wall in the city, I spotted a spray painted sign: *Death penalty*

to those who have raped Indian cricket. Anticipating trouble, a large police contingent had been posted outside Ganguly's home in the south of the city. Someone had painted black the wall of Mohammad Kaif's Allahabad home. Rahul Dravid's house in Bangalore had been pelted with stones. Fans were taking out mock funeral processions at the end of which they were setting fire to players' photographs.

Two days after the defeat to Australia, India played Zimbabwe. Word of how the fans were reacting had reached the India team. On the eve of the game against Zimbabwe, Tendulkar made an extraordinary plea to the country's cricket supporters. 'I am here on behalf of the Indian cricket team,' he said. 'We ourselves are very disappointed with the kind of performances we have put up and I also understand the disappointments you have gone through. I am just here to assure all of you that we will fight until the last ball is bowled… so please continue to support us, as you have done in the past. This support will definitely help us.'

Against Zimbabwe, India won by 80 runs. A week later, India beat Namibia by 181 runs. A new collage went back up on the wall outside the Red Rose Club. By the time India beat England by 82 runs in the next match, the talk was about how this was the best India ODI team ever, how this team had triumphed against England in that famous run chase at Lord's in 2002, how this really ought to be our year. The Indian fan is capricious. It takes little to transform his mood.

TWENTY-ONE

ON 2 SEPTEMBER, FIFTEEN DAYS AFTER THE DESOLATION OVER THE 1-3 Test series defeat, the panegyrics were pouring in. Geoff Boycott said that India had taken ODI cricket to a different level. Tendulkar spoke of how this team, so well-balanced, was a strong contender for the forthcoming World Cup. Convincing, comprehensive, conclusive and masterly were at the heart of the repertoire of adjectives being used to describe the side and its performance.

India had just won the five-match ODI series 3-0. One game had been abandoned; one was left to play. The victory margins were crushing: 133 runs; six wickets (with seven overs to spare); and nine wickets (with twenty overs to spare). This was the first time in twenty-four years that India had won a bilateral series in England. In the last similar bilateral series in England in 2011, India had lost 0-4. After the Champions Trophy triumph in 2013, this was the second successive year that this team had won a trophy in England.

If anyone recalled that this very team had not won a single ODI against South Africa and New Zealand some months ago, they were not letting on. England were roundly condemned for being stodgy in their play, out of date in their tactics, and poor all around. If anyone recalled that this very England team had been Number 1 in the ICC rankings in ODIs a little over a year ago, they were not letting on either. Such is our absorption in the narrative of the moment, such our airbrushing of the context and history in which the moment is played out.

Suresh Raina, recalled to the team, unscarred by the Tests, emerged an unlikely star, given that this series was being played away from home. His 75-ball century at Cardiff propelled India into the lead and set the tone for the series. Raina spoke of how he had worked on his technique and concentration, how he had sought out Pravin Amre and Tendulkar and benefitted from their advice, how the hurt at being dropped from the team had fuelled this comeback, how the time with family and friends had helped in the time that he was out of competitive international cricket, and how he felt he was now a different player.

Raina looked fit and effervescent, energetic in the thick of the action, and brought a freshness to a side that appeared jaded after the gruelling schedule of the five-Test series. He batted at Number 5, following up his hundred with a score of 42. The work he had done on his glaring weakness against the short ball showed when he pulled and hooked with a measure of confidence. He fielded with agility when in the slips and athleticism when in the outfield. And his spin invariably brought breakthroughs at critical junctures. He was appropriately awarded the Man of the Series.

Never having been a fan of his when he plays away from home, I have been critical of Raina earlier in the book. The performance in England did not make me entirely change my mind. The hundred that thrust India into a 1-0 lead in the series was Raina's first in four years. Surely it tells you something about a player if his first ODI hundred away from home comes after nearly 200 games? How many batsmen would have been given such an opportunity? This was the last ODI series away from home before the announcement of the World Cup squad. Raina had indisputably staked a strong claim to be the Number 5 batsman in that team.

Rohit, after having scored a typically elegant 52 in the second game (the first had been washed out), broke his finger and was ruled out for the rest of the series. His exclusion paved the way for two other players to show that India had more options in terms of batting selection than had been apparent at the beginning of the series.

Asked to open the innings in place of Rohit, Rahane proved that India had in him another bona fide opener at their disposal. Having shone in Tests in South Africa, New Zealand and England, Rahane had so far not made much of a mark in ODIs, usually batting in the middle of the order and averaging barely 25. When he was out, after having played with assurance, in his forties on two consecutive occasions, the pundits—who would once go into raptures over Rohit's pretty forties and fifties—blamed him for giving his wicket away, of soft dismissals, of the urgency of building on the forties and going on to play a match-defining innings.

Which is what Rahane proceeded to do in the match that sealed the series 3-0 for India. A run-a-ball 100 that tore England apart. Rahane used his Test match technique and temperament as the bedrock of his innings, grafting on to it the inside out shots and clean lofted hits that serve him well in the Twenty20 game. He spanked Anderson for 4 fours in an over. He reached his fifty with a six, the first of four he hit in the innings. Rahane's scintillating

innings allowed Dhawan the time to settle down without being under the pressure to slash and heave from the start. Once he had, Dhawan reminded us for the first time in the summer of the moustache-twirling marauder whose bravura performances had terrorized bowling attacks a little over a year ago in the Champions Trophy on these shores. His unbeaten 97 showcased the exuberance and abandon of Dhawan at his best and sent out a signal that, persisting with him even when he was not fully on song could be worth India's while because, on his day, especially in this format, he could win a game on his own.

With Rohit injured and Rahane opening, a slot was freed up in the middle order. Ambati Rayudu, his stop-start, ban-halted career having slowed the progress of a batsman seen nearly a decade ago to be a huge and exciting prospect, made two fifties, both in winning causes, and sent a message to the selectors that he was up for that spot.

Afforded a degree of turn and bounce, the spinners were tight and often incisive. Besides, both Jadeja and Ashwin contributed with the bat coming in in the crucial Numbers 7 and 8 positions. It was instructive that the only game that England won in the series, the final one, was one in which Root and Buttler were able to have the measure of the two spinners.

In that last game too, the bowling at the death, one of India's vulnerabilities, was tested for the first time in the series. Although Shami acquitted himself well by bowling yorker after yorker and snapping up wickets, the other seamers failed the test. In the World Cup and beyond it, this was something the team would certainly need to address.

At the time the ODI series in England was being played, the World Cup was five months away. Certain commentators said that India had played the ODI series like the defending champions they were. It was an exaggeration. But hyperbole and Indian cricket are easy bedfellows. It never fails to remind me of what Martin Amis wrote about the critical revisionism that attended on Philip Larkin after his death. 'The reaction, like most reactions, is just an overreaction. To get an overreaction, you need plenty of overreactors. Somebody has to do it. And here they all are, overreacting.'

Everywhere the talk by this time was of preparations for the World Cup. South Africa and Australia were going toe to toe in a tri-series along with Zimbabwe. England, whose love for Tests is second to none, were about to take a break from Tests and focus solely on ODIs. Cook's future as the ODI captain was on the line. Pakistan had scheduled outings against both

Australia and New Zealand. Sri Lanka were preparing to host England and travel to New Zealand.

And what of India? Well, India had appointed Ravi Shastri as director of cricket for the ODI series and for the World Cup, effectively—some said—putting the coach Duncan Fletcher on notice. Fletcher's assistants, the bowling and fielding coaches, were asked to go on leave. Dhoni starred in an enigmatic press conference, in which he said Fletcher was the real boss. Shastri, while saying that everyone, including the players, reported to him (this bit of corporate-speak, smelling of organograms and hierarchies, effectively showing up Indian cricket to be the corporation it is) said Dhoni was the real boss. It was all typically baffling, but with the ODI series won 3-1, the fans were willing to not pay too much attention to these shenanigans.

India players and fans alike have a unique relationship with the World Cup. Tendulkar had told me that his greatest cricketing memory was winning the World Cup in 2011. Not the hundred at Perth in 1991 or the debut century at Old Trafford or one of many, many stellar adventures in a career without parallel. Winning the World Cup was it. Dhoni had said that the abysmal showing in the 2007 World Cup in the Caribbean, when India failed to make it out of the group stages, was the lowest ebb of his career. Not being spanked 0-4 and 0-4 by England and Australia in Tests in 2011-12. Not losing 1-2 in the Test series to England at home in 2012. Not getting out of the group stages in a World Cup was what hurt him the most.

The fan, too, always excitable, ever demanding, reserves the greatest heights of frenzy and adulation and overreaction for this tournament. This was a quadrennial boiling over of hysteria and mass participation, an unrestrained show of fervour and jingoism. The last World Cup India had played without the participation of a member of the golden generation was in 1987. A defining moment beckoned this new team. Were they all ready for it?

TWENTY-TWO

WHAT, THEN, DID WE LEARN OF THE NEW TEAM FROM THE FIRST five key assignments in their first full season together?

Rohit and Dhawan remained inconsistent, with Dhawan having had the greater impact of the two overseas, and also seen to be the more dangerous with his ability to decisively and swiftly influence the outcome of a match. After a Superman-like run of form stretching back to the beginning of 2012, Kohli revealed to us in England his Clark Kent side. But Superman will return, if acutely aware of the Clark Kent side. Along with him, Pujara will continue to be the mainstay of the Test batting. Vijay has made a commanding return to the Test team, and may, with luck, offer an option at the top of the order in the ODI team. Rahane will be at the heart of the team in all the formats. Jadeja has become a valuable player in the ODI team, but the mission to turn him into a Test player is fundamentally flawed. Ashwin, spurned in England, having eliminated some of the distracting variations that were taking away from the core of his art, still needs to prove that he can be a potent attacking threat in Tests overseas. The seam bowling attack showed us no settled order. Ishant's 2014 was as good a year as he has had in a while, but he has to do more, he has to be able to lead the attack more frequently. Varun Aaron and Umesh Yadav have been injured too often and played too little. Shami and Bhuvneshwar seem to be the two who will form the nucleus of the attack. But Shami needs to be consistent. Bhuvneshwar was destructive when he found his swing, but the threat was neutralized when, tiring, his pace dropped below 130 kph—as it did towards the latter stages of the England tour.

And Dhoni? Well, he has long relinquished the right to captain the Test side. It is arguable, with his keeping usually below par and on occasion woeful, whether he deserves a place in the Test side. In the ODI team, as a batsman and as a captain, he remains a colossus.

So what kind of team are India now? What sort of transition are they in the process of making? Their transition will not be like Australia's: taken from a low ebb by Allan Border and ushered through to world domination

under Taylor, Waugh and, for a while, Ponting. They will not wither away as the West Indies did once the players from their most golden years left the scene. Unlike Arsenal, they will not have to wait a decade for a major triumph. They almost broke through in South Africa and New Zealand, they won a Test in England and produced their most convincing ODI triumph in a bilateral series in England in twenty-four years.

This India team will forge its own template.

My guess is that they will be formidable at home. They will be unpredictable travellers, as likely to put in an impeccable performance as to crumble. If the middle order fulfils its potential (as it did in the Tests in South Africa) and, ideally, if the openers set up some sort of platform (there has not been an opening partnership of fifty in Tests since June 2011), they will genuinely fancy their chances. But they will not be, as many of their predecessors have been, routinely terrorized overseas, pantomime cricketers ready to impersonate ducks in a shooting gallery no sooner have they stepped off the plane on a tough tour outside Asia.

What cannot be gainsaid is that, as Sanjay Manjrekar pointed out, at the hub of this team is the best set of young players we have. It is hard to look beyond them. This is what we have. It is either this or nothing. And nothing is so much worse.

AFTERWORD

I HAVE BEEN HERE BEFORE. I HAVE BEEN HERE WITH DIEGO MARADONA, with John McEnroe, with Gundappa Viswanath. Every time a player I admire walks away from the game, he takes with him something of what the game means to me. A sense of loss, of what Ian McEwan calls ‘instant nostalgia’, of feeling bereft, a dwindling of the attachment I have for the game.

But on every occasion, I have found someone has stepped in to fill the void. Not quite in the same way. In this most unreciprocated admiration between fan and player, each case of unreciprocated admiration is different from the other. But the chief thing is that, more often than not, along comes a player who rekindles that sense of excitement, that intense attachment we feel for the game.

Lionel Messi arrived for me years after Maradona last played for Argentina. Roger Federer won the first of his many Wimbledon titles, and I was in thrall once again. Tendulkar burst on to my TV screen and into my life after I had despaired in the wake of Viswanath’s departure. And then came the other Fab Three. Along with Anil Kumble.

As one by one, Sourav Ganguly, Anil Kumble, Rahul Dravid and V.V.S. Laxman said goodbye to cricket, and as Tendulkar neared his imminent retirement, a spark seemed to have been extinguished from my passion for following the game. The batting of Virat Kohli and Cheteshwar Pujara against New Zealand in 2013 reignited that spark. The edge of keenness returned. Dhawan’s effervescence lit something in fans on his Test debut. Rohit’s annus mirabilis came as a realization, much delayed, of enormous potential. Rahane delighted by marrying his unflappable nature with the abandon of his strokeplay. As the new team set off on one sojourn after another in its first full year together, talk of regeneration whirled and eddied around them.

Watching this process of renewal is one of the most fascinating things in sport. How do these players, so inexperienced, most of them barely in their mid-twenties, seek to fill the abyss left behind by a group of men whose reputations had assumed mythic proportions by the time they left the world

stage? It is an exhibition of, to borrow from Philip Larkin, ‘the strength and pain of being young’. Renewal, rebirth, restitution, regeneration. Begin afresh. The spirit of it is infectious.

In *The Meaning of Sport*, Simon Barnes quotes an American gambler as saying: ‘The most exciting thing in life is winning. The second most exciting thing is losing.’ But the gambling, the clatter of the dice, the unknowability of the outcome, the shredding of the nerves, is all. It is a bit like that while watching a new team take its first strides into the world. The hope that it will succeed. The fear that it won’t. The fear of them losing. The unhappiness of having to watch them lose. The dread, too, of being on the cusp of a victory because that situation is always accompanied by the dread of having to bear watching that triumph being snatched away.

The thrill of following a new young team entails all of that. It is unforgettable. Just as unforgettable is the feeling of proximity to a historical, unfolding sporting narrative. The feeling that, yes, I was witness to it, yes, I was there, when these boys became men.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should first like to thank David Davidar for suggesting, in December 2013, that I write a book on India's new cricket order in the post-golden-generation era. Aienla Ozukum marshalled the production of this book with immense forbearance and enthusiasm. I attended Tendulkar's last two Tests at the behest of the *Hindustan Times*, the paper for which I have worked since 2000, and in the pages of which I have written many thousands of words about the game I so adore. For continuing belief in my work, I am grateful to David Godwin, my agent. To everyone who agreed to be interviewed for this book, thank you for your time and patience. Thanks to my colleague, Sanjjeev Samyal, whose help made many of those interviews possible. My father, Dilip Bhattacharjee, showed me the value of determination. This book is in memory of my mother, Purabi Bhattacharjee (7 August 1947-23 July 2013). It is the first of my books that she has not seen being published. I am grateful to her for making me fall in love with cricket when I was a little boy. To my wife, Chandrani, I am indebted in all sorts of ways; without her, nothing seems possible.

NOTES

1 *Wisden*.

2 ‘Kirmani stumped by Dhoni’s wicketkeeping technique.’; PTI; 24 November 2006.

3 Interview by Siddhartha Vaidyanathan and Nagraj Gollapudi; *ESPNcricinfo*; 24 March 2008.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Greg Chappell in *Wisden India Almanack 2014*.

7 *Indian Express*; June 2005.

8 ‘Federer as Religious Experience’; David Foster Wallace; The *New York Times*; 20 August 2006.

9 *Sachin: The Man Cricket Loved Back*; *ESPNcricinfo*; Penguin Books; New Delhi; February 2014.

10 Arvind Pujara to author.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 ‘Philip Roth Says Enough’; David Remnick; *The New Yorker*; 9 November 2012.

22 ‘Playing cricket for India has given me lifetime memories’; Sachin Tendulkar; *Hindustan Times*; 14 November 2013.

23 Sachin Tendulkar to author.

24 ‘A Singular Icon’; Mike Marqusee; *Wisden Asia Cricket*; 1 September 2002.

25 Sachin Tendulkar to author.

26 Sachin Tendulkar to author.

27 Sachin Tendulkar to *wisden.com*

28 Sachin Tendulkar interview with Donald McRae; *The Guardian*; 29 October 2010.

29 ‘Sachin’s the best: Warne’; Rohit Brijnath; *Sportstar*; 4 May 2002.

30 Sachin Tendulkar interview with Donald McRae; *The Guardian*; 29 October 2010.

31 ‘A Farewell too late’; Mukul Kesavan; *ESPNcricinfo;* 14 October 2013.

32 Raj Kumar Sharma to author.

33 Ibid.

34 Virat Kohli interview with Sriram Veera; *ESPNcricinfo*; 16 July 2011.

35 'The Kohli Method'; Aakash Chopra; *ESPNcricinfo;* 13 September 2014.

36 Raj Kumar Sharma to author.

37 Ibid.

38 'Kohli says proper technique behind his quickfire tons'; *ESPNcricinfo*; 1 November 2013.

39 Sunil Gavaskar to *NDTVSports*; 31 October 2013.

40 'Kohli a rare Talent—Kirsten'; *ESPNcricinfo*; 3 September 2013.

41 'As Sachin Tendulkar bows out, all hail the prince of tormentors'; Ian Chappell; *Hindustan Times*; 2 November 2013.

42 Pravin Amre to author.

43 'Rohit produces long-overdue winner'; Abhishek Purohit; *ESPNcricinfo*; 18 October 2013.

44 'South Africa might have scared India batsmen, says Steyn.'; Sidharth Monga; *ESPNcricinfo*; 7 December 2013.

45 'No one in Indian team is frightened of anything—Kohli.'; Sidharth Monga; *ESPNcricinfo*; 7 December 2013.

46 Ibid.

47 'Kohli, and the test of fire.'; Neil Manthorp; *Wisden India*; 12 December 2013.

48 Ibid.

49 'India deny pulling up SuperSport'; Sidharth Monga; *ESPNcricinfo*; 12 December 2013.

50 'I think he showed great discipline and responsibility'; Sidharth Monga; *ESPNcricinfo*; 18 December 2013.

51 'Shades of Gavaskar'; Mukul Kesavan; *ESPNcricinfo;* 4 January 2014.

52 'Whose win should it have been anyway?'; Sidharth Monga; *ESPNcricinfo;* 22 December 2013.

53 Ibid.

54 'Mixed feelings for Dhoni after South Africa Tests'; Sidharth Monga; 30 December 2013.

55 'Kohli, Pujara, Zaheer see their ad rates soar'; Himani Chandna Gurtoo, The *Hindustan Times*; New Delhi; 26 December 2013.

56 The *Hindustan Times*; 20 January 2014.

57 'Bounce isn't the biggest problem, bowlers have to perform: Dravid'; Sai Mohapatra; *Hindustan Times*; 30 January 2014.

58 'Important to want to hit the short ball—Kohli'; Abhishek Purohit; *ESPNcricinfo*; 21 January 2014.

59 'A force called Kohli'; Martin Crowe; *ESPNcricinfo*; 4 February 2014.

60 'Time for Dhoni to go'; Ian Chappell; *ESPNcricinfo*; 23 February 2014.

61 *ESPNcricinfo*; 11 March 2014.

62 Pravin Amre to author.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Justice A.K. Patnaik.

66 Associated Press; 4 April 2014.

67 ‘India turn over a new leaf’; Abhishek Purohit; *ESPNcricinfo*; 7 April 2014.

68 The *Times of India*; 21 July 2014.

We have great books for anyone who enjoys first-rate literary fiction and non-fiction. In addition, as we believe exceptional books need to look and feel good, we make every effort to invest each one of our books with world-class design and production quality. Please visit us at www.alephbookcompany.com to learn more about our books and authors, special offers and a lot more besides. You can also find us on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Tumblr, Google and Goodreads.