

Box-office Kohli leaves longest format of the game with massive void

Reuters

New Delhi

India stalwart Virat Kohli's Test retirement has robbed the format of its biggest global star and its most influential advocate, leaving a vacuum that will be hard to fill.

Kohli has ended his 123-Test career having amassed 9,230 runs at an average of 46.85, securing his position as a modern great of the game.

Between 2014-2022, Kohli captained India to 40 wins in 68 Tests to become the country's most successful skipper in the format.

But the 36-year-old's lasting legacy in Test cricket lies beyond his truckload of runs and checked cover-drive, which is among the game's most beautiful shots.

Having succeeded Mahendra Singh Dhoni as India's Test captain, "King Kohli" overhauled In-

dia's approach to turn the team into a ruthless juggernaut that did not rely anymore on designer dustbowls to win Test matches.

Kohli demanded, and helped create, a formidable pace pool in his single-minded pursuit to turn India into a team capable of winning Tests anywhere in the world.

Mostly they did.

He revolutionised the fitness culture in the India dressing room, turning a somewhat lax fielding side into a crack squad of electric-heel fielders. Kohli led by example.

Nicknamed "Chiku" after a chubby-cheek popular comic book character in India in his early years, Kohli sacrificed his favourite butter chicken and grew into a lean, mean run-machine with an extraordinary ability to run between the wickets.

On the field, he is among the safest catchers and the fastest retrievers of the ball.

When doing none of this, Kohli,



like a conductor at an orchestra, whips up boisterous support from the stands with just one gesture.

When needed, he can also silence the stands with a glare or gesture, like he did at the Oval after India fans started booing Australia batter Steve Smith during a 2019 World Cup match.

THE DRAMA

The silky-smooth batting, the wild celebrations and a penchant to get under an opponent's skin - Kohli has often been at the centre of an unfolding drama, which injects fresh life into a fan's often-dreary experience of watching Test cricket.

Kohli's name fills the stands and guarantees theatre, and his availability is often a major factor in broadcast rights negotiations.

Married to a Bollywood star, Kohli has 271 million followers on Instagram and 67.8 million on X - making him a social media phenomenon.

His popularity has been a key factor behind cricket's return to the Olympics at the 2028 Games in Los Angeles, the organisers acknowledged last year.

Kohli called on all of it to back Test cricket's primacy - demanding a results-oriented approach and advocating India hold their home matches in select venues with guaranteed full-houses.

"There's something deeply personal about playing in whites," Kohli wrote about his love for the format in his retirement statement.

"The quiet grind, the long days, the small moments that no one

sees but that stay with you forever?"

As a batter, he fell well short of Sachin Tendulkar's 15,921 runs from 200 Tests, but Kohli may have carved out a stronger legacy, according to former Australia captain Greg Chappell.

"... perhaps Kohli even eclipses him (Tendulkar) in terms of cultural influence and psychological impact on India's cricketing identity," he wrote on *ESPNcricinfo*.

"Kohli, the incandescent heart of Indian cricket for over a decade, did not just score runs. He redefined expectations, challenged conventions, and symbolised the self-assured, unapologetic India of the 21st century.

"He was the most Australian non-Australian cricketer we've ever seen - a snarling warrior in whites, never giving an inch, always demanding more. Not just of his bowlers, his fielders or his opposition, but first and foremost, of himself."