

Tilak seals a thriller as India beat Pak to lift Asia Cup for 9th time

AGENCIES

DUBAI

A defining half-century by Tilak Varma and his useful partnerships with Sanju Samson and Shivam Dube saw India secure their second T20I Asia Cup title and overall ninth title, including the ODI editions, beating Pakistan by five wickets in a nail-biting final at the Dubai International Stadium on Sunday.

Kuldeep Yadav (4/30) sent Pakistan into a shocking collapse, from 113/1 to 146 all out, despite a fine 84-run opening stand between Sahibzada Farhan (57 in 38 balls, with five fours and three sixes) and Fakhar Zaman (46 in 35 balls, with two fours and two sixes). In the chase, India collapsed to 20/3 with an initial burst from Faheem Ashraf (3/29), but Tilak (69* in 53 balls, with three fours and four sixes) strung partnerships with Samson (24 in 21 balls, with two fours and a six) and Shivam (33 in 22 balls, with two fours and two sixes).

But India blinked in their chase of 147 for victory being reduced to 20 for 3 at one stage. Their world-beating batting line-up appeared to be panicking as Pakistan came at them - this time for every reason because there was a title on the line, adds *espncriinfo*.

A collapse of 9 for 33 had left Salman Agha's men with no room for error and for the most part they coped with it. They got rid of Abhishek Sharma early. That sent jitters through a middle-order that was upended to accommodate Shubman Gill.

A straightforward chase was going pear-shaped. And Tilak Varma felt all of this out in the middle. The quiet of the stands. The belief among the Pakistan players. The doubts of a billion people back home. Somehow he absorbed it all and produced a really special half-century.

Concentrating as hard as he had to, there wasn't a single



India captain Suryakumar Yadav takes a bow to Tilak Varma after the latter steered India to victory against Pakistan in the Asia Cup final in Dubai on Sunday. Chasing 147, India won by five wickets.

moment through the innings where Tilak showed emotion. But once it was done, he yelled, he punched, he made little heart signs with his hands and basked in the glory of winning India their ninth Asia Cup title.

Farhan's opening salvo

This entire Asia Cup has been a referendum on Pakistan's decision to move on from Babar Azam and Mohammad Rizwan. There is credence to the theory that they do not push hard enough when they bat up the order, and the powerplay is not a time to be shy.

Sahibzada Farhan took that to heart and although he didn't always come up with the goods, he never stopped swinging. A series of slogs took him to 26 off 21. And those same series of slogs - when they started connecting - brought him 50 off 35.

The Pakistan collapse

Farhan and Fakhar Zaman were able to put one of India's bankers - Kuldeep Yadav - under pressure. The left-arm

wrist spinner's first two overs went for 23. That prompted Suryakumar Yadav to turn to Varun Chakravarthy, whose mystery Pakistan have just not been able to solve. As if on cue, he took down both of Pakistan's top scorers. Farhan and Fakhar were the only two to cross 15.

On the back of Varun's incisions, his team-mates came into their own. Axar Patel took two wickets in back-to-back overs. Kuldeep took three in one single over. Pakistan were 107 for 1 with 44 balls to play. They were bowled out with five balls remaining. A large part of their innings involved the batters going for slogs. In the front 10, they either made good contact or just plain missed. So just one wicket fell. In the back 10, the big hits were all mis-hits. So nine wickets fell.

Tilak's method

Where all his team-mates tried to force the issue, Tilak found ways to trust himself. He was 24 off 26. But he didn't seem to care. Early in his innings, he

hit a back foot punch though extra cover for four off Ashraf. There was no pace on that ball. The only way he could find the boundary was if he timed the ball perfectly. And for that to happen, he had to have the measure of this pitch down pat. He did.

India had to settle for either singles or dots through the eighth and ninth overs of the chase as Abrar Ahmed and Saim Ayub stuck to the basics - keeping the stumps in play and asking India to take risks if they wanted to score quickly. Tilak rose to that challenge but even then, he was careful to go after the full one, the one that he could get to the pitch of and negate the turn. All that good work meant even with long-on in play, the ball went for six.

In the 15th over, Tilak took down Haris Rauf, pace on the ball allowing him to play more expansive shots. Seventeen runs came from those six balls and changed the complexion of the game. From needing 64 off 36, India needed 47 off 30.

Dube cameo

India were without their first-choice seam-bowling allrounder. Hardik Pandya was nursing a quad niggle and couldn't make the XI. Shivam Dube did, after resting the last game. He was responsible for two absolutely vital sixes. The first of those showcased his spin-hitting ability as he tonked Abrar down the ground. The second exemplified how well he reads the game. He had faced, and watched from the other end, as Ashraf in the 19th over, tried to hide the ball outside off stump. So when he got back on strike, he indulged in an exaggerated trigger movement across his stumps to get closer to the ball and launch it over wide long-on. Dube contributed 33 off 22 to a momentum-shifting, match-winning, fifth-wicket partnership that yielded 60 runs off 40 balls.

The finish

These three India-Pakistan games have taken place under the shadow of far greater events. The two countries were in military conflict earlier this year. The two teams have not shaken hands. The two captains have even been avoiding eye contact. Rauf was fined for making gestures that seemed to point to those cross-border tensions. Jasprit Bumrah used the same gesture - hand pointed down, arcing to the floor - to give it back to Rauf after bringing down his stumps with a yorker.

With eight to get off five, Tilak launched a six over square leg - once more showcasing just how well he had grown accustomed to tough batting conditions and Rauf once again falling short by putting pace on the ball. Rinku Singh haring off into the distance. It was an India-Pakistan classic worth the 41-year wait.

Scores: India 150 for 5 (Tilak 69*, Dube 33, Faheem 3-29) **beat Pakistan 146** (Farhan 57, Fakhar 46, Kuldeep 4-30) by five wickets.