

NEIGHBOURS AND RIVALS: ON THE ASIA CUP

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The Asia Cup, a tournament originally launched to promote Asian solidarity in cricket, is often caught between the fissures that define Indian subcontinental history. Started in 1984 with bonhomie between the big three — India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka — the championship soon became captive to the political issues that cropped up between these nations with the India-Pakistan narrative being the primary basis for grudges. Still the continental skirmish has developed deep roots, lasted the distance, embraced new teams such as Bangladesh, Afghanistan and even had Hong Kong and the United Arab Emirates. And when the 16th edition commenced at Multan in Pakistan on Wednesday, even Nepal was in the fray. The latest edition also had its share of heartburn. Originally scheduled to be entirely held beyond the Wagah border, India's refusal to tour Pakistan forced a compromise with Sri Lanka stepping in as a co-host. Pakistan bristled and then got practical and it is a sad reality that India's last tour of its neighbouring country happened during the 2008 Asia Cup in Karachi. Much water has flowed down the Indus but old wounds continue to fester. The current version has six teams split into two groups leading towards the super-four stage before concluding with the final at Colombo on September 17.

It is a travesty that matches involving India and Pakistan are reduced to guest appearances within ICC events and Asia Cup jousts. Away from the diplomatic crossfire, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka will look at the Asia Cup as a preparatory stage for the World Cup commencing in India during October. The Indian squad will try to fix the missing links in the coming weeks but with K.L. Rahul, Shreyas Iyer and even Jasprit Bumrah winging back from injuries, there is anxiety. The last named did well as a leader during the recent T20Is in Ireland and yet the Indian line-up looks unsettled. Much will hinge on the batting thrust that skipper Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli can lend while Suryakumar Yadav needs to find his feet in ODIs. Incidentally this Asia Cup will consist of ODIs while in some of its previous avatars it had dallied with T20Is. Sri Lanka too is in a transitory phase but the most heartening story would be Afghanistan's resilience even if back home the Taliban's restrictions tend to suffocate life and sport. Meanwhile Bangladesh, yet to win the Asian title, gets another tilt but all eyes will be glued to Saturday's India-Pakistan tussle at Pallekele. This contest may offer clues to the Asian angle in the upcoming World Cup.

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