

Gill to lead India through 'massive' Test transition; unfit Shami out of England tour

At 25, Shubman will be India's fifth youngest Test captain after Pataudi (21), Tendulkar (23), Kapil Dev (24) and Shastri (25); will have swashbuckling but erratic Pant as his deputy for the five-match series that will begin on June 20 in Leeds

PTI, MUMBAI: Batting star Shubman Gill was on Saturday handed India's Test leadership to steer through a "massive transition" phase starting with next month's tour of England that will be nothing short of a trial by fire for the relatively inexperienced 18-member squad announced here.

At 25 years of age, Gill will be India's fifth youngest Test captain after Mansoor Ali Khan Pataudi (21), Sachin Tendulkar (23), Kapil Dev (24) and Ravi Shastri (25).

He will have the swashbuckling but erratic Rishabh Pant as his deputy for the five-match series that will begin on June 20 in Leeds. "Last year or so we have looked at Shubman (for leadership). We are hopeful he is the guy who is going (to take the team forward). It is a high pressure job but he is a terrific player," said chairman of selectors Ajit Agarkar after announcing the squad, which offered no major surprises.

Gill has appeared in 32 Tests so far and averages a rather modest 35 for his 1893 runs with five hundreds and seven fifties at the top of the order since making his debut in 2020.

The 27-year-old Pant, on the other hand, is a bit more experienced with 43 Tests under his belt and a better average of 42.11 for his 2948 runs lower down the line-up. He has smashed six hundreds and 15 half centuries since coming into the side in 2018.

"Pant is one of our best batters in Test cricket over the last four-five years. A wicketkeeper can see the game well and that's why he is Shubman's deputy," Agarkar added while explaining the big-hitter's role.

The selectors' decision on the team's leadership was on expected lines following the retirement of senior stars Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli, both of whom called it quits within a week of each other earlier this month.

A notable exclusion was pacer Mohammed Shami, who was deemed not fit enough for the long series that will end only in the first week of August.

"He has been trying to get fit for the series but he has had a little bit of a setback last week... and he has got some MRIs done. I would like to mention, I don't think he was going to be available for all five Tests. I don't think his workload is where it needs to be," Agarkar said.

"It's just the medical guys who told us that he's been ruled out of the series. Unfortunately, we were hoping that he's available for some part of the series at least. But if he's not fit at the moment, it's very difficult to be waiting. At the moment he is not fully fit," he added in the press conference.

MAIDEN CALL-UPS FOR SAI, ARSHDEEP

Among the notable inclusions were young left-hander B Sai Sudharsan and left-arm pacer Arshdeep Singh, who earned their maiden Test call-up. "Sai has not been picked based on IPL, he

has shown the right temperament and has the game to succeed at the top level...we have been looking at him for a while," Agarkar said, referring to the IPL's top scorer this season with 638 runs at an average of 53 so far for Gujarat Titans.

Like Sudharsan, Arshdeep too has experience of playing in county cricket.

The left-arm pacer, who has been picked ahead of Khaleel Ahmed, is India's leading wicket-taker in T20 cricket but proving himself in the traditional format will be a much tougher challenge.



PERSISTENT NAIR IN, UNFIT SHAMI OUT

The squad also features Karun Nair, who returns to the national set-up after eight years. Having last played in 2017, Nair was dropped from the team soon after becoming the second triple centurion in Tests from India.

From the tour of Australia, Harshit Rana and Sarfaraz Khan have been dropped even though the latter had claimed to have addressed some of his fitness concerns by shedding considerable weight.

BUMRAH NOT AVAILABLE FOR ALL FIVE TESTS

Besides Gill, Bumrah was another strong con-

TEST SQUAD

Shubman Gill (captain), Rishabh Pant (vice-captain), Yashasvi Jaiswal, K L Rahul, Sai Sudharsan, Abhimanyu Easwaran, Karun nair, Nitish Reddy, Ravindra Jadeja, Dhruv Jurel, Washington Sundar, Shardul Thakur, Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammed Siraj, Prasidh Krishna, Akash Deep, Arshdeep Singh and Kuldeep Yadav

tender for captaincy but the selectors decided to hand over the leadership responsibility to the batter from Punjab. There were also questions over Bumrah's fitness and Agarkar acknowledged that the star pacer's availability for the full series is a concern.

"I don't think he's available for all five Tests as far as, again, (from what) the physios and the doctors have told us," Agarkar said on Bumrah.

"Whether it's four or three (Tests), we'll see how the series goes and how his body can take the workload. Needless to say, how important he is. So, even if he's fit for whether it's three or four Tests, he's going to win us a few Test matches," he added.

The chosen one, Gill, has a massive challenge at hand, both as a leader and batter. His rare batting talent is undisputed but he is yet to prove himself in Test cricket, especially in SENA (South Africa, England, New Zealand and Australia) countries. He averages 14.66 in three Tests in England.

As a captain, he has not got a lot of

experience in domestic cricket but has been leading IPL franchise Gujarat Titans for the past couple of seasons.

"It is a massive transition. Both Rohit and Virat were around for a long time," added Agarkar, who said deciding Kohli's replacement at number four would be a call taken by the team management comprising Gill and head coach Gautam Gambhir.

EASWARAN AND THAKUR TOO MAKE THE CUT

A heavy scorer in domestic cricket, Abhimanyu Easwaran has found a place in the extended squad as a reserve opener. He has been picked in the past as well but could never feature in the playing eleven.

With doubts over Nitish Reddy the bowler, the selectors have picked another fast bowling all-rounder in Shardul Thakur, who last played for India in December 2023.

Thakur was part of India's previous trip to England where he smashed back to fifties in the Oval Test that India won by 157 runs.

"Whether it's a tough experience, or, we have a really good series, whichever way you look at it, it is going to be tough and experience can only help going forward. At the moment, from what we're looking...be it franchise cricket, you can see that he's relishing the role. This is obviously going to be a lot harder. But those are the challenges you face playing international cricket. The 25-year-old Gill is the one to take Indian Test side forward. It's a big job; it's a big transition. Two of your big players are retiring. But we're all confident that he's the guy to take us forward and hopefully, in time, that proves it. He's a terrific player and we're all very hopeful

— Ajit Agarkar, chairman of selectors



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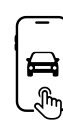
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