**Ganga or Gayle**

**Who will lead the Windies?**

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IT IS a fitting irony that Daren Ganga should have, in the space of a couple of weeks, suddenly returned as a credible candidate as West Indies skipper through his leadership in the shortest form of the game, even more so since the principal claimant to reclaiming the post is Chris Gayle.

The two are closely linked in the ever changing story of the captaincy.

Ganga, based on his influence in bringing Trinidad and Tobago from near bottom to the top in regional cricket within a few years, was placed to lead West Indies 'A' teams on tour and in two Tests in England in 2007 when deputy to the injured Ramnaresh Sarwan before Gayle came into the picture.

Gayle was first elevated for the three ODIs on the same England tour only because of Sarwan's absence and Ganga's perceived inability as a limited-overs batsman.

Even then, Gayle's nomination by the selectors was initially rejected by a West Indies Cricket Board (WICB) executive committee dubious of his suitability. In the end, under pressure, it had to make an embarrassing U-turn.

Now, on the eve of a tour of Australia for three Tests, the two Gs, so different in every way, are again the names most prominent among the public's short-list of who should be at the helm.

Gayle was the incumbent before he and all those players originally chosen for the series against Bangladesh walked out two days before the first Test to press the West Indies Players Association (WIPA) case in its long-running disputes over contracts with the West Indies Cricket Board. Through a tenuous agreement that had to be brokered by Caricom politicians, the issues are now supposedly settled and the aggrieved players are all once more available for selection.

Gayle has asserted that he is ready to resume his role, stating that "it is always an honour to captain the West Indies".

Ganga has sensibly made no mention of such ambitions. He has simply once more come to the fore following his universally-praised leadership during Trinidad and Tobago's advance to Friday's final of the global Twenty20 Champions League final in India, paradoxically the kind of cricket that cost him the West Indies captaincy in the first place. He is now being promoted, inside and outside of Trinidad and Tobago, as the one needed to instill the same discipline, unity and pride shown by his team in India.

There can be no doubt that he has special qualities of leadership. As astute a judge as Ian Chappell alluded to it in the television commentary. Given the responsibility at whatever level, he will hardly shirk from it.

Yet, from his experiences with fractious 'A' teams, Ganga himself will know that leading the West Indies is an entirely different challenge. He has captained Trinidad and Tobago for eight years. He knows his men intimately, and vice-versa. They play together at club level and, as was evident in their remarkable performance in India and in the two regional Stanford 20/20 tournaments, have a passion for each other and for their flag.

In his two years in charge of the West Indies, Gayle has gained the publicly stated support from several of those under him, Dwayne Bravo of Trinidad and Tobago the latest, but his messages have been confusing.

He resigned as captain after the home series against Australia just over a year ago in circumstances never fully explained before WICB president Julian Hunte persuaded him to change his mind.

In an interview with a British newspaper during the tour of England last May he said he was tiring of Test cricket and that he would "soon" give up the captaincy.

His arrival from South Africa two days before the first Test at Lord's last season seemed to place his commitment to his contract with Indian Premier League (IPL) franchise, Kolkata Knight Riders, above that to his West Indies team. As forthright with his words as he is with his hard-hitting batting, he had several public run-ins with the WICB prior to the July strike, especially after he was controversially installed as captain, over Ganga, in 2007 in England.

He refused to apologise for his open criticism, as called on to do so by then WICB president Ken Gordon, noting that "there is no love lost between myself and the Board".

It was hardly the ideal relationship between the organisation charged with administering the game and the leader of the team. But Gayle's settled position as commanding opening batsman and useful off-spinner and his evident popularity within the team, if not his tactical acumen, were enough to retain the captaincy.

As far as Ganga's claims are concerned, there remains the perennial question of whether his batting merits selection. He averages 25.71 in 48 Tests in the ten years since his debut as a promising 19-year-old in South Africa. By comparison, Gayle's record is 39.58 in 82 Tests along with 41 wickets.

Even with a Board that has been embarrassed by his words and deeds, Gayle's numbers and the regard with which he is held by his players are likely to regain him the captaincy.

Whoever is chosen faces an intimidating task.

Australia have been the game's most consistently powerful team for more than a decade, time in which the West Indies have plummeted from their once similar position as champions to the bottom of the international ratings. They last won a Test there in 1997 and have been beaten in all of their last seven.

Coming, as it does, only weeks after the end of yet another divisive players' strike, Brian Lara is not the only one who fears that the West Indies "could be in for a bit of a hiding", as he told the media in Melbourne last week.

Leadership, and not from the captain alone, will be a critical element in ensuring that it is something less than a hiding.

The skipper, the management, the senior, most influential players and, above all, the WICB and the WIPA, must do everything to ensure unity.