

Notes from the dressing room

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Coaching Beyond

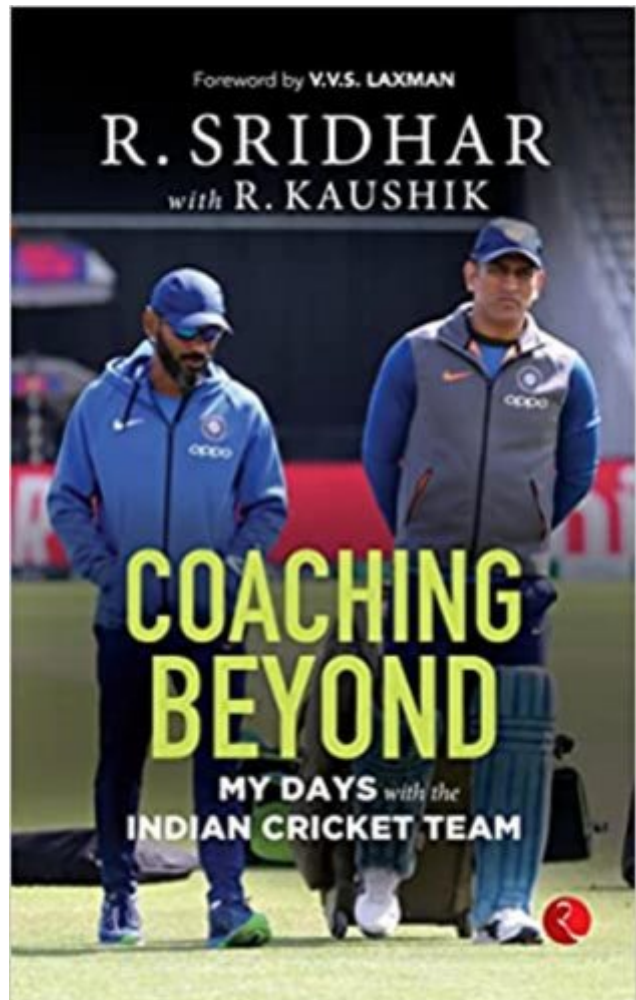
Sometimes a book delights as much as it surprises. When a copy of R Sridhar's 'Coaching Beyond: My days with the Indian Cricket Team' arrived home as a gift, I was already behind on my reading, I do not know what made me start reading this book by India's former fielding coach. But such was its ingenuous charm and flow that I never put it down.

Years ago, one had read John Wright's 'Indian Summers', on his tenure as the Indian cricket coach. Wright's period was the start of an upward curve for professionalism and work ethics in Indian cricket. Sridhar's book will sit beside that lovely tome with a self-assurance that tells us how much India's approach to coaching has changed. Since 2014, we have only had Indian coaches. Ravi Shastri, Anil Kumble, and Rahul Dravid, 'star head coaches', and their assistants — batting, bowling, and fielding coaches — also Indian, have proved to be the backbone of the team.

Sridhar may have been a journeyman cricketer but he found his calling as a coach, bringing a rare passion and commitment to developing and honing players' skills, be they schoolboys, the under-19 team, or superstar cricketers. It is illuminating to hear the story of Indian cricket from a coach who knows the players intimately.

Peppered with excellent stories and anecdotes to make insightful observations about the technical and psychological aspects, Sridhar asserts that coaching goes beyond just the sport. 'Nothing pleases me more than seeing young men I have worked with turn out to be fine human beings. If they do well on the ground, I consider that an added bonus'.

How does one coach Rishabh Pant? Or, more importantly how not to coach Rishabh Pant? Knowing that the buccaneering style of batting is what Rishabh thrives in, if you curb him, you kill his spirit. And so, when he gets out to outrageous strokes, the thing to



do is not tell him to stop playing those shots but to suggest other outrageous shots! The one place in the book where the unassuming Sridhar takes pride is in the transformation of Pant, the wicketkeeper. A technical adjustment made all the difference — but it was provided to the stubborn man only when he conceded to the coach and requested his advice! Not a minute earlier! Sridhar believes that it was his work with Pant that got him a renewal of his contract in 2019, despite the legendary Jonty Rhodes being in contention.

How differently does a coach motivate Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammad Shami? Shastri and the team were aware that the former is a very sensitive person who must be gently offered suggestions.

The latter, a simple soul, must be properly wound up so that he could then unleash his fury on the ground.

Sridhar's adoration for Shastri will be eye-opening for readers who are far removed from the dressing room. 'With Ravi, only one thing matters — the Indian cricket team.' When Kohli itched to take over the leadership of the ODI team from MS Dhoni, Shastri told him, 'Unless you respect him now, you won't get the respect from your team... it will come to you; you don't have to chase it.' To beat Australia in Australia, the team needed Shastri of the booming baritone and in-your-face aggro.

In a fine analysis of captains, Sridhar dissects the strengths and styles of Dhoni, Kohli and Rohit Sharma, with a clarity that will help Indian fans understand their cricketing heroes better. Sridhar is candid and introspective while discussing the mistakes the team management made during those seven years. Take just two: (a) the failure to identify a batsman for the crucial Number Four position, which cost the team dearly in the 2019 World Cup and (b) the less-than-ideal handling and recognition of a match-winner like Ravichandran Ashwin.

The elephant in the room that Sridhar has avoided, is the fraught tenure of Kumble as a coach and his collision with Kohli. In a treatise on coaching, the absence of even a sentence on this — purely as a learning experience and not for anything salacious — makes the work incomplete.

R Kaushik, who has co-authored the book, is becoming a master at this. First VVS Laxman, then GR Vishwanath and now Sridhar. His is a rare humility that ensures that it is only Sridhar's voice we hear in the book.