have slowed down in recent years but has acquired a new stamina to score centuries in the last few years, as was seen in the recent series against South Africa.

The Also Rans

During his time, Brian Lara could be classed as a close rival to Tendulkar, since he too faced the same attack which tormented Sachin sans Ambrose and Walsh, who were playing on Lara's side. However, Lara had to deal with the quality spin bowling of Anil Kumble, who was on Sachin's side. However, it is arguable that Lara's record is less consistent and sustained, compared to Tedulkar's.

Similarly, during the same era Vivian Richards could run Gavaskar very close to being the best of his time. However, Richard's, fortunately for him, never faced the formidable West Indian pace bowlers. Indeed Viv's handling of Lillee and Thompson was not very impressive. To the best of my knowledge, Richards never fared well against Lillee and Thompson. He faced both of them in 1975-76 series, Thompson alone in 1977-78 and just Lillee in 1979-80 and 1981-82. In these 23 appearances against their pace Richard's scored only two centuries, and was dismissed on 14 occasions either by Lillee (8 times) or Thompson (6 times).

When Richard's faced both Lillee and Thompson together in Australia in 1975-76 he averaged only 32 and was dismissed 4 times by Lillee and 4 times by Thompson, having scored just one century and one fifty in 11 innings. In 1981-82, at the end of Lillee's career (Thompson had retired), in a series in Australia, Richards averaged only 26 in 6 innings, scored only one fifty and was twice dismissed by Lillee.

With such a record, Richards does not demonstrate a strong capacity for dealing with high quality pace bowling and was fortunate, unlike Gavaskar, in never having to face the formidable West Indian quartet who, served him faithfully as a foil to his otherwise formidable batting skills.

The other challenge in the post-war era to Gavaskar and Tendulkar comes from Sobers, who was ending his career when Gavaskar began his. Sobers, in the early part of his test career which began in 1954-56 during the Australian tour of West Indies, faced the pace bowling of the English attack, which included Freddie Truman and Brian Statham, who were both fast and skilled.

In his later years Sobers faced Snow, who was fast though hardly comparable to his West Indian contemporaries, Wesley Hall, Charlie Griffiths, and Roy Gilchrist. The Australian pace attack, after the retirement of Lindwall and Miller, was led by one of the best of the fast medium bowlers, Alan Davidson, though other members such as Garth Mackenzie and Neil Hawke were not in the same class.

In the realm of spin, Sobers faced the likes of Locke, Wardle and Illingworth in the English attack, who were good but hardly comparable to Warne or Murli. Sobers did face the skilled leg spin of Richie Benaud the Australian captain and also handled the formidable Indian spinners, Bedi, Prasanna, Chandrasekhar and Venkatraghavan with considerable finesse. But again it could be argued that the bowling faced by Sobers was not strictly of the overall calibre faced by either Gavaskar or Tendulkar.

Is Tendulkar the Greatest of Them All?

Can we, in the light of the available evidence, conclude that Gavaskar or Tendulkar, were superior batsmen to the great Don, on the grounds of the far superior bowling talent against which they attained their formidable scoring records? Bradman, of course, made his runs in an era of uncovered pitch but faced rather impoverished bowling, the best of whom, the medium fast English bowler, Maurice Tate, was past his prime when Bradman began his career, and Larwood, whose career ended after the bodyline series in 1932-33. For the rest of his career, up to his retirement in 1948, Bradman faced pace and spin bowlers who would not have found a place in the best Australian or West Indian teams of the post-war era.

In contrast, Gavaskar faced possibly the most formidable generation of pace bowlers ever, Roberts, Holding, Garner, Croft, Marshall, Thompson, Lillee, Imran, and Hadlee. So did Tendulkar who not only faced the pace of Ambrose, Walsh, Wasim, Waqar, Shoaib, Donald, McGrath, and Lee, but also faced the two greatest spinners of all time, Shane Warne and Murali.

On balance I would rate Tendulkar above Gavaskar, but it would be a toss up. Would I rate either above the great Don? The record suggests yes. But then perhaps a person with the extraordinary talents of the Don would have also managed to score his centuries against the extraordinary galaxy of bowlers who were dispatched to the boundary by Sunil Gavaskar and Sachin Tendulkar. I have fired my salvo in this unending disputation. Let the debate continue.

Rehman Sobhan is Chairman, Centre for Policy Dialogue, and the Chairman of Forum's Editorial Board.