

The year did end on a sour note for the Bangladesh national cricket team. While the South African series was bound to be difficult, the Tigers were expected to put up a much better show than the 7-0 drubbing.

However, as far as Test cricket is concerned, there's no doubt that 2017 has been their best year for the longest format so far. Their away win versus Sri Lanka and the victory at home against the mighty Australians have been the highlights.

It was on November 10, 2000 that the Tigers embarked on the highest level of the game with a one-off Test against India. The start, of course, was magical. Aminul Islam's century, Bangladesh surpassing the 400-run barrier—these were milestones that kept fans from the newest Test nation back then, at the edge of their seats. Not many expected the Tigers to achieve what they did in their very first innings.

However, their meek surrender in the second half of the match, when they collapsed for just 91, is a characteristic that haunted them for the next decade.

The last two years though have seen them make significant strides, the crucial aspect being that they have finally found out a way to win Tests at home.

They challenged their experienced batsmen to get accustomed to slow, turning tracks and then used these conditions to attack the English and Aussies, who rarely play on such wickets.

While it wasn't a flawless performance, they did lose one Test each against England and Australia; the wins helped them nurture the belief that they have the ability to beat big teams in the longest format.

This is something that was absent even two years ago. In fact, prior to the Chandika Hathurusingha-era, it wasn't uncommon to see eight batsmen in the playing 11 or placid tracks that would help draw games. When Sri Lanka had arrived here in 2014, skipper Angelo Mathews was so frustrated with the flat deck in Chittagong for the second Test that he actually claimed that one could

A CHANGE IN TREND

17 years of Test cricket

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2017 was arguably Bangladesh's best year for test cricket.

PHOTO: STAR FILE

have played on the wicket for 10 days and it still wouldn't break, at the end of the match.

Prior to 2016, questions such as does Bangladesh have the bowling lineup to take 20 Test wickets would dominate pre-match press conferences.

And then came the England Test in October. It was a series filled with surprises. The pitch in Chittagong had enough in it for the batsmen, but then again, it turned from day one. The traditional rules of Test cricket were changed. The new ball was given to the spinners, whereas the old cherry was used by the pacers to generate some reverse swing.

Eventually, Bangladesh lost the seesaw encounter on the final day. There were many who compared this defeat to the one in Multan in Pakistan, which the Tigers had lost despite being inches away from a historic win. Many were afraid that a similar, win-less streak would follow.

The same formula—curbing the visitors with the slowness of the pitch and turn—was used on a more lethal track in Mirpur in the second Test and this time the visitors caved in. In a way, the win helped the Tigers surpass an imaginary boundary.

Today, the hype prior to the start of a Test series is almost similar to that of a

limited overs series. And that's because they have found a formula to win.

Having said that, what's important now is to develop more winning strategies. One can be sure that the next time England, Australia or any other team weak against spin bowling come to Bangladesh, they will be prepared.

The other question is: what kind of strategy will Bangladesh use when the sub-continental teams come home? One definitely won't expect the matches to be held on slow, turning tracks against the likes of India or Pakistan.

While the Tigers did lack the fighting spirit in South Africa, it would be unfair to be overtly critical about their performance. They first need to start winning on a regular basis at home, just like the one-day internationals.

By no means have they become unbeatable at home as far as the longest version of the game is concerned. The one step that they probably need to take in a bid to build a fortress at home is to create a specialised pool of players for Test cricket.

Be it T20s or ODIs or Tests, the core of the team is always essentially the same. And for that to happen, the domestic four-day competitions will need to be a lot more competitive and lot more respected as well.

Truth be told, Bangladesh's 17th year in Test cricket has brought a sense of relief. They have beaten the oldest Test teams, which helped them earn a lot more respect. They were also invited to play in India for a bilateral series for the first time ever.

However, ask the players and they will be the first ones to tell you that the Test team still has a long way to go.

There will be plenty more accolades that the Tigers will achieve in the coming years, but the one thing is that certain is that they can always look back to this little period between late 2016 and 2017 as the year that changed the belief of the Bangladesh Test team.

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