

Singapore Open: Does Kidambi Srikanth-Sai Praneeth final mean India is among elite nations in Men's game?

[Shirish Nadkarni](#) April 19, 2017



For the first time in history, two Indians contested the Men's Singles final of a Superseries Tournament, the Singapore Open, one of the elite competitions in the annual Badminton calendar. Last Sunday, which featured the summit clash between Kidambi Srikanth and B Sai Praneeth, could hence be considered as a red-letter day in the annals of Indian Badminton.

Only on 19 occasions in the past had a Superseries Men's Singles final been fought between two players from the same Country; and only three Nations had featured on that list. Chinese players had claimed that distinction on 17 occasions, while Indonesia and Denmark had achieved the mark once each.



One single quote from Gopichand is enough to serve as testimony to this. While he did heap considerable praise on both Sai Praneeth and Srikanth it was evident that he already had his eyes set on the future. Speaking to the PTI after Sai Praneeth's win over Srikanth yesterday, the 43-year-old said, ***"I am very proud of them (Praneeth, Srikanth), they reaching the finals. It is a big tournament to win. He (Praneeth) is still young. He has many years ahead of him. It will hopefully give him the confidence to play at another level."***

Not many are aware that Sai upset the former World and Olympic Champion Taufik Hidayat in the first round of the 2013 Indonesia Open 21-15, 12-21, 21-17 and the current World No.1 Lee Chong Wei in the first round of the 2016 All England championship 24-22, 22-20. Earlier this month, Sai came close to beating another former World and Olympic Champion Lin Dan, the eventual winner of the Malaysia Open.

Such a happenstance has never before taken place in the Indian Women's game. Saina Nehwal, over the past seven years, has won several Superseries tournaments, but has never been called upon to play against a fellow-countrywoman in a final. Not even at the India Open, which would have meant strong crowd support and familiarity with home conditions for Indian players.

In fact, Saina had been the sole trailblazer in Indian Badminton before Srikanth won the 2013 China Open, lowering the colours of five-time World Champion and two-time Olympic Gold Medallist, Lin Dan. Srikanth went on to win the 2015 India Open, and rise to as high as No 3 on the Badminton World Federation (BWF) rankings.

Saina's heir apparent, Pusarla Venkata Sindhu, had to wait five years before she bagged her first Superseries title – the China Open in November 2016. But, with Saina returning from a serious knee injury, sustained during the Rio Olympics three months earlier, the chances of an all-Indian Women's Singles final turned remote. Sindhu went on to win her second Superseries crown at the India Open last month.

All these above-mentioned facts beg the question: Has India, in the wake of the Praneeth-Srikanth Singapore Open final, barged into the ranks of the elite Badminton Nations — China, Denmark, Indonesia, Malaysia and South Korea — who routinely

contest for top honours in the Thomas Cup, symbol of International Men's Team supremacy?

Despite the euphoria that has suffused the nation, in the wake of the achievement of national coach Pullela Gopichand's fondest dream, there is need for a reality check. Several factors contributed to the placing of two Indians on the top two rungs of the victory rostrum at the Singapore Badminton Association Hall; and not all of them point towards an Indian surge to the pinnacle of the sport at international level.

First and foremost, the tournament was a Superseries event, featured prize money of \$350,000, compared to the \$600,000 on offer at the Malaysia Open, which had been held just a week earlier.

In addition, the Singapore Open was held at the fag end of an exhausting schedule that featured the All England Superseries Premier in the first week of March, followed closely by the India Open Superseries, the Malaysia Open Superseries Premier and the Singapore Open Superseries, the last three in successive weeks.

The top four men's singles players, Lee Chong Wei, Chen Long, Lin Dan and Jan O Jorgensen, either stayed away altogether, or cried off at the last moment, citing injury and fatigue.

Srikanth, meanwhile, had picked up steam from the bottom half, scoring impressive straight-games victories against fifth-seeded Shi Yuqi of China and Anthony Sinisuka Ginting of Indonesia. But he had had to extend every nerve and sinew to come through his second round encounter against another Indonesian, Ihsan Maulana Mustofa, saving three match-points in the decider before coming through. That fighting win had shown Srikanth's tremendous resolve and mental strength.

So, a reality check? While there is ample reason for euphoria at the moment, and sufficient evidence to show that Indian Men's Badminton is on the right path, and in a far, far better place than it was a few years back, the Indian Badminton-lover should show a modicum of sobriety in the short term, and await the posting of results similar to that of the Singapore Open.
