

Cricket 183

Chapter 183

The Brisbane sky woke in golden glory, casting long shadows across the Gabba outfield. It was Day 3 of this titanic clash between India and Australia. The pitch, now slightly cracked under the sun's relentless gaze, whispered stories of wear but still held enough for batters to build upon. The Indian team emerged from the dressing room with steely determination. The scoreboard read 69/2, with Aarav Pathak and Ajinkya Rahane at the crease. The partnership held the promise of resistance, of control, and of hope.

The first session began with quiet tension. Starc and Cummins pounded the pitch with pace and bounce. The ball zipped, seamed, and tempted. Rahane was compact in his defense, and Aarav, eyes focused and shoulders relaxed, met every delivery with grace and grit. Their chemistry was visible—quick nods, urgent calls, and the thud of leather on willow echoing through the morning air.

The Gabba crowd, a swirling blend of anticipation and unease, sat expectantly. Each run was cheered, each near-miss gasped at. The partnership began to gather momentum, as Aarav slowly found his rhythm, threading the gaps with calculated elegance. He punished the bad balls with finesse and soaked up the pressure like a seasoned pro.

Then, in the 38th over, the moment came.

Nathan Lyon floated one on middle and leg. Aarav stepped forward, got under it, and lofted it elegantly over mid-on. The ball soared—a delicate arc that kissed the blue sky—and landed just short of the boundary, bouncing into the ropes.

The scoreboard flickered: Aarav Pathak - 50* (112 balls)

Commentator Harsha Bhogle lit up:

"There it is! A well-earned half-century for the young man. He's soaked up pressure, weathered fire, and now reaps his reward. What maturity from Aarav!"

Ricky Ponting added:

"You've got to admire this lad. The composure, the timing—he's playing like a seasoned Test veteran in just his debut series."

Aarav raised his bat to the dressing room. His teammates erupted in applause. A small smile crept onto his face as Rahane walked over and gave a light punch on his gloves.

"Well played, champ," Rahane whispered.

They continued to frustrate the Aussie bowlers. But cricket, like life, is never predictable. In the 56th over, Starc returned with vengeance. A fuller ball on middle, skidding low—Rahane misjudged, and it clattered into his pads. The umpire's finger shot up.

Rahane gone for 42.

India: 152/3.

Aarav took a deep breath as Mayank Agarwal walked in. The next phase was about consolidation. Agarwal looked confident. He rotated strike well, and together with Aarav, they stitched another crucial stand. The fielders were chirping, the slips buzzing, but the two Indian batters remained resolute.

Lunch came and went, and India's innings swelled with intent. But the Australian bowlers kept pressing. Cummins, Lyon, and Starc rotated tirelessly, varying lengths, angles, and tactics. The crowd was relentless, urging their bowlers for a breakthrough.

Aarav's vigil ended on 72. Lyon lured him with a flighted delivery outside off. Aarav reached for the drive but mistimed it. The edge flew—straight into Smith's hands at slip.

The crowd rose in applause as Aarav walked back, bat under arm. His innings was one of defiance, precision, and class. He had laid the foundation.

India: 211/4.

The mood in the dressing room was a mixture of pride and tension. Aarav's knock had anchored the innings, but the job was far from done.

Then came the unexpected heroes—Washington Sundar and Shardul Thakur.

The pair began cautiously, adjusting to the movement and bounce. They took their time, blocking and defending with discipline. But once settled, they unleashed strokes of bravery and elegance. Thakur's off-drives and Sundar's flicks drew roars of admiration. The partnership revived India's innings from shaky to sturdy. Their running between the wickets was energetic, their communication crisp.

Boundaries came, singles rotated smartly, and Australia began to look ragged. What was once a quick collapse turned into a revival, with both players exhibiting maturity beyond expectations.

Commentator Harsha Bhogle:

"What a partnership! This is grit. This is what Test cricket is about—rising from the ashes. Two young guns playing with the composure of veterans."

Together, Sundar and Thakur notched their fifties, lifting the team total and the morale of the entire nation watching. They brought out the paddle sweeps, lofted straight drives, and even cheeky reverse sweeps—showing a wide range of skills and supreme confidence.

By the time Sundar departed for 62 and Shardul for 57, India had crossed 340. The dressing room stood to applaud—this was more than a resistance, it was a statement.

The tailenders added some handy runs, chipping in with edges, nudges, and the occasional boundary. Every run counted. The Australians looked more and more frustrated.

By the time the final wicket fell, the scoreboard read:

India: 356 all out in 119 overs.

A trail of only 13 runs for India.

Australia's response came with six overs left in the day for them to bat. India, sensing a chance, unleashed its pacers with aggression.

Aarav opened. Siraj followed. Aarav bowled the final over of the day—hostile and full of swing. Each delivery thudded into the gloves, zipped past the bat, and raised hopes.

The Indian fielders prowled like wolves. Every ball was an event. The slip cordon was alive, crouched and ready.

But the Aussie openers held firm. They played out the six overs with caution.

At stumps:

Australia: 3/0 in 6 overs.

The umpires walked to the wickets, gently removing the bails. The players walked off slowly, sweat-soaked and mentally drained. The day belonged to both sides.

Coach Shastri gathered us in a huddle in the dressing room. "We're still in this. Tomorrow is the moving day. Let's move it in our direction."

Aarav sat by his locker, a towel draped over his shoulders, sipping an electrolyte and listening to the talks of coach and captain Rahane.

The pre-match buzz rippled across TV screens and stadium lounges as the sun rose over Brisbane, spilling golden light onto the Gabba. The fortress stood proud, drenched in legacy, whispering stories of undefeated years. Inside studio lights of Cricket Extra, the tone was analytical, charged, and crackling with tension.

"Hello everyone and welcome to Cricket Extra — the thrill before the drill!" Harsha Bhogle's voice chirped with familiar warmth. "Today could be historic. I'm joined by Sunil Gavaskar, Sanjay Manjrekar, Glenn McGrath, and Allan Border. Let's talk pitch and pace. Glenn, thoughts?"

McGrath leaned forward, tapping the desk lightly. "It's a firm deck, slight cracks developing. Ideal for pacers and batsmen who apply themselves. But here's the thing — India's bowling attack today, with no Ashwin, no Jadeja, no Bumrah — looks like a rookie lineup. Aarav Pathak, the most experienced pacer, is playing just his first series. That says a lot."

Gavaskar nodded, adding his timeless gravitas. "True, Glenn. But never underestimate hot blood. The young rise when the old rest. And Aarav — well, he's something else. That title of 'The Prince' isn't just symbolic. He's walking a path paved by giants — Sachin to Virat — and maybe Aarav is next."

Allan Border, the rugged Aussie legend, gave a wry smile. "I usually don't get swayed. But that kid? Aarav? He's a freak. He's got Rahul Dravid's patience, Sehwag's aggression, and bowls like Dale Steyn. He is like Kapil Dev or Jack Kallis. He isn't a part-time all-rounder. He's a full-fledged dual weapon. A complete player."

The camera panned back to Harsha, who closed the segment with a simile.

Australian Dugout – Pre-Match Huddle

Justin Langer, stoic and composed, gathered his team. The room buzzed with restrained energy.

"Alright boys," he said, his voice cutting through murmurs. "We're batting to save history. We need 300 on the board. That's our first target. Draw this game, protect Gabba. Then we go for the win."

He paused and stared into the eyes of Warner and Harris. "Treat it like an ODI. Positive cricket. But be bloody careful of Aarav. He can swing a new ball out of nowhere. Don't fall for it. Remember — this Indian team is raw, hungry, and unpredictable. That makes them dangerous."

The Aussies nodded. Plans were made. Pads were strapped. Emotions tucked behind focused eyes.

Day 4 Begins – Gabba Ground

The stands slowly filled, the crowd animated in tricolor jerseys and green-gold flags. Siraj had the ball. Harris and Warner took guard.

First ball — clipped for four. Second — nudged for a single. Then came a wide. Eleven runs from the opening over. A clear statement from Australia: we're not backing down.

14/0 after 7 overs.

Commentator Sanjay Manjrekar spoke from the box, "Looks like Australia wants to dominate from ball one. They're going to accelerate."

"But here comes Aarav," Harsha's voice added, the tone sharpening. "One over of fire incoming."

Aarav jogged in from the Stanley Street End. The buzz from the crowd changed pitch. Chants rose — "AARAV! AARAV!"

Three slips in. A short leg. Field tight, alert.

Ball One – a searing in-swinger. Warner barely meets it with his bat.

Ball Two – a bouncer that screams past Warner's helmet.

Ball Three – pitched up, swinging late. Warner edges — just past second slip.

The tension built with each delivery. Aarav was breathing fire.

In his second over, it happened.

8.5 – GONE!

Aarav bowled one outside off, the length drawing Warner forward. Seam straightened at the last moment. Warner nicked it. Straight into Rahane's hands at first slip.

Harsha Bhogle almost screamed, "It's Aarav ! Warner walks! What a breakthrough! What a ball!"

The Indian players swarmed Aarav. Hugs, fist bumps, backslaps. The Gabba echoed with chants.

Warner stomped back to the pavilion, head bowed. The Indian fans roared louder.

"He's not just the Prince," said Glenn McGrath from commentary. "He's turning into the Emperor of this series."

The rest of the morning saw relentless Indian bowling. Siraj was hostile, Saini was sharp, and Aarav kept bending the ball to his will. Though Harris and Marnus Labuschagne steadied the innings with grit, the cracks began to show.

By lunch, Australia stood at 89/2. The battle was on.

Aarav sat alone on the grass near the boundary, eyes scanning the pitch, bottle in hand. Rahane approached him.

"One more spell, champ?"

Aarav nodded. "Let's bring it home."

The next session began. And it was chaos.

Harris fell to Sundar, trying to sweep a ball that wasn't there. Labuschagne, on 42, tried to cut a rising delivery from Saini — edged to second slip.

Aarav returned in the 47th over.

And once again — fireworks.

47.3 – BOWLED!

Cameron Green, who looked solid, was undone by an in-cutter from Aarav. The ball snuck between bat and pad, knocking the off stump.

Aarav roared. Fists clenched, veins bulging, chest heaving. It was more than just a wicket. It was a message.

By Tea, Australia were rattled. 192/7.

Justin Langer sat, lips pressed into a hard line.

India smelt blood.

By the end of Day 4, Australia were bundled out for 281.

Aarav – 3 wickets.

India's target: 295 to win the match and the series with white wash.

The lights dimmed. The crowd buzzed with anticipation.

Tomorrow would be Judgment Day.

Day 4 ended.

The fortress had cracked.

But tomorrow, India would decide whether it would fall.