

## Cricket 193

### Chapter 193

The second morning at Chepauk rose beneath a pale orange sun. The air was thick with salt and dust, that unmistakable Chennai scent that clung to every breath — sea breeze meeting red soil. Inside the vast, echoing bowl of the MA Chidambaram Stadium, the Indian tricolour fluttered lazily over the empty stands. COVID restrictions had silenced the usual roar of the crowd, but the energy was still there — humming in the soil, pulsing through the dressing rooms.

Aarav Pathak stood on the boundary rope, stretching his shoulders as Rishabh Pant flicked one behind square for a single. The sound of leather on willow cracked through the quiet like a whip.

From the commentary box high above, Harsha Bhogle's warm voice filled the morning. "And that's fifty for Rishabh Pant — yet another half-century for the man who refuses to bat by the textbook! India now 385 for nine, partnership of ten runs with Md Siraj. What a fine hand this has been."

Nick Knight chuckled. "He's played it the only way he knows, Harsha — fearless. Look at him grinning under that helmet, even as he's just missed one by an inch."

Mark Butcher added, his tone smooth and precise. "Yes, but credit to Siraj too. Holding one end up, rotating strike, keeping India inching toward that 400 mark. Every run here will count — this pitch, you can already see those cracks beginning to open."

Down on the field, Aarav exhaled, watching the scuffed patches on the good-length area shimmer under the sun. Spin will rule here, he thought. By the time we bowl, this will be a dust bowl.

A few overs later, Siraj edged one to slip off Moeen Ali. India — all out for 393. A solid total, built on Rohit's earlier century and now sealed by Pant's audacity. As the team gathered their gear and walked off, the players exchanged quick smiles. But Aarav stayed a few seconds longer on the turf, eyes on the pitch — mapping angles in his mind, lengths he wanted to hit.

By noon, England's openers — Rory Burns and Dom Sibley — walked out into the light. Their whites glowed against the red dust, the sight of new challenges waiting in every mote of air. Aarav felt the ball in his palm, brand new, glistening faintly with lacquer. Siraj stood beside him, rubbing another ball on his thigh. (ball checking moment) Six men circled close on the field — Kohli at slip, Rahane at slips too with Rohit near short leg.

Harsha Bhogle again: "Right then, England's reply begins. It's Aarav Pathak with the new ball — the young prince of Indian cricket, who's already made his mark Down Under. Can he do it here, on this slow, turning Chepauk track?"

Mark Butcher: "Interesting choice, Harsha. You'd think spin first, but Kohli's giving the new cherry to his left-arm seamer. Maybe trying to exploit that early hardness, a hint of swing."

Aarav marked his run-up. Eighteen steps. Breeze from the Marina end. He took a deep breath, heart steady — the familiar stillness before rhythm took over.

The first delivery — a gentle loosener, outside off. Left alone. Second ball — fuller, angling in. Defended. Third — he quickened his stride, wrist rolling at release, seam upright, pitching on middle.

It darted back, trapping Burns on the crease.

A huge appeal erupted. "Howzzzaat!"

Umpire Virender Sharma froze, hand hovering — then slowly raised his finger. Burns stared, stunned. Consultation. The DRS sign went up. Players gathered mid-pitch, heartbeat thudding under helmets.

Harsha's voice carried the tension: "He's gone upstairs! That looked close. Burns was caught deep in the crease there."

Nick Knight leaned in. "Yeah, hit him around middle and leg... oh look at that replay — just brushing leg stump!"

A moment's pause. Umpire's call. The decision stood.

Aarav clenched his fist, roaring softly, his teammates converging. "What a start!" Bhogle exclaimed. "The young man strikes in his very first over! Burns gone for a duck — England 0 for one!"

Dan Lawrence walked in, shoulders tense, tapping his bat nervously. England's scorecard: 0.3 overs, 0 run, 1 wicket. The air felt heavier already.

Aarav's next few overs were about discipline. The red ball bit into the rough patches, kicking awkwardly at times. Siraj, from the other end, kept a tight line — both bowlers moving in unison like mirrored rhythms. Five overs each, one wicket, 25 runs on the board. The partnership of patience.

Kohli clapped from mid-off, his voice cutting through the silence. "Keep it there, Aarav! Make him drive!"

Lawrence and Sibley defended stubbornly, their bats meeting the ball with thick, dull thuds. The sweat gathered quickly under the Chennai sun. Aarav felt the heat rise from the pitch like a living thing — every step back to his mark felt heavier.

When the ball finally lost its lacquer, Kohli nodded to Ashwin. "Time to spin them."

Aarav handed the ball over, the faint scent of leather and salt lingering in his palm. He jogged to midwicket, breath slowing, eyes narrowing as Ashwin took his place.

Mark Butcher: "And there we go. Spin from both ends, as expected. Ashwin and Kuldeep to take charge now. But that early strike from Aarav Pathak — that's set the tone beautifully."

Harsha Bhogle added with a chuckle, "He just has that knack, doesn't he? The ability to break through early. You can see why India rates him so highly, he is even playing as the main pacer in his second series and don't forget even though we are hyping Aarav for his amazing performance, Siraj is also playing his second test series and first at home and both of them had the control, the temperament."

By mid-afternoon, the Chepauk surface had changed colour — the sheen gone, replaced by a dull, dusty brown. Every Ashwin delivery left a small plume behind. England's batsmen, uncertain, danced down the track and retreated just as quickly, their footwork faltering.

Ashwin's rhythm was pure art — wide of the crease, arm looping, ball dipping. "And he's got him! Sibley gone!" shouted Bhogle, as Rohit took a sharp catch at short leg.

Aarav cheered, the team huddled. One wicket became two, then three. Kuldeep's wrist-spin teased the edges, Axar's arm balls skidded, and England were tangled in a web they couldn't escape.

At 80 for 5, Root stood tall — England's anchor, calm amid chaos. Aarav watched him from the boundary, hands on hips. He's the one. The English captain was playing soft hands, rotating strike, reading length early. Kohli's glance met Aarav's across the field — a silent signal.

"You're up next," Kohli murmured.

When Aarav returned to bowl, Root was on 40. The pitch had roughened more now — variable bounce, unpredictable turn from the footholes. Aarav switched angles, bowling over the wicket to the right-hander.

First ball: back of a length, Root left it alone. Second: slightly fuller, Root drove past point — two runs. Third: Aarav took a longer pause, rubbing the ball, then sprinted in harder. The ball climbed awkwardly, short of a length, rising sharply at the ribs.

Root tried to pull — too early.

The edge ballooned high toward midwicket.

Ashwin settled beneath it.

"Gone! Joe Root, caught at midwicket!" roared Butcher. "Aarav Pathak again! Short ball, quick and clever — England's last hope gone for 40!"

Aarav pumped his fist, the sound of his teammates' cheers echoing through the empty stands. For a brief second, he let himself smile — not the proud smile of ego, but of relief. Patience rewarded.

From the commentary box, Bhogle's tone softened into admiration. "He's just twenty, but the maturity he shows — it's remarkable. First the early strike, now the captain himself. You can see why they call him 'Prince.' It's the poise, the hunger."

By tea, England's innings lay in ruins. Ashwin bowled like a magician — looping, drifting, spinning. His fingers conjured movement that defied physics. He took Sibley, Stokes, Stone, Leach, and Broad in quick succession. Kuldeep added two more — Pope and Lawrence. Siraj chipped in with Foakes.

The final total: 134 all out.

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The evening sun blazed over Chepauk, throwing sharp, golden light across the field. India stood 259 runs ahead, a commanding lead, and now Rohit Sharma and Shubman Gill walked down the stairs of the dressing room, helmets under arms, gloves already fastened.

The commentators' voices filled the airwaves, stitching the narrative together.

Mark Butcher: "Fifteen overs left in the day, gentlemen. India will look to bat England out of this contest completely. The lead already at 259, and Rohit Sharma, in this mood, could well turn that into a nightmare for Root's men."

Harsha Bhogle: "Yes, Mark, and this pitch is beginning to wear. You can see the rough patches forming just outside the right-hander's off stump. England have to be perfect with their lengths tonight."

Nick Knight: "Perfect and patient, Harsha. But against Rohit and Gill, that's easier said than done. They've both looked comfortable throughout the series against pace and spin alike."

The umpires took their places. Stuart Broad stood at the top of his mark, the ball shining on one side, dark red against the fading light. Gill took guard. The faint hum of the crowd, the occasional call of a vendor, and the soft shuffle of the fielders set the soundscape of the evening.

Broad ran in, rhythmic and smooth.

First ball—pitched on a length, shaping away. Gill let it go, the ball thudding safely into the keeper's gloves.

Harsha Bhogle: "Gill looks so calm at the crease. The kind of calm that unnerves bowlers."

Over after over, the pair played with precision. Rohit, timing drives through the covers with ease, his bat whispering through the air. Gill, fluid and compact, picked singles, turned strikes over. Each shot sent soft echoes into the stands. There was no need to rush—every run was a knife turning slightly deeper into England's hopes.

By the tenth over, Rohit was in his groove. He pulled Archer effortlessly through midwicket for four, and Butcher couldn't hold back a low whistle.

Mark Butcher: "Ah, that's trademark Rohit Sharma. The pickup, the balance, the effortless power. It's like watching poetry in motion."

Nick Knight: "And it's killing England softly, isn't it? Every time you think there's a chance, he puts one away and resets the tone."

Leach came on, round the wicket to Gill. The field closed in. Two slips, a short leg, and a silly point hovered like hawks. The first ball spun sharply, beating Gill's edge. The second was driven past mid-off, silken and precise. A murmur from the dressing room balcony—Aarav, helmet in hand, watching the young opener's balance with a smile.

As the shadows lengthened, Rohit tapped his bat once, twice, before dispatching a short ball over midwicket for four. The sound echoed—pure, sweet, unhurried.

Knight: "And that boundary will close the day nicely for India. 49 without loss, the lead swelling to 308 runs. England have a mountain to climb."

The umpires removed the bails. Stumps.

Harsha Bhogle: "And that, ladies and gentlemen, is a masterclass in control. India stretch their lead beyond 300, and England now look at the long road ahead. It's been a day owned by Indian spinners, and now their batsmen have made sure the advantage grows."

Mark Butcher: "If England are to save this Test, they'll need the performance of their lives tomorrow. But for now, it's Rohit and Gill smiling under the floodlights, and a content Indian dressing room waiting for them inside."

The day was done. The work was steady, unflashy, but it had done what was needed—India were in total command.

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Gift and chats below is completely Generated so don't blame me if this is not good as I don't have any experience in this, so using AI completely for this so yeah!....

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In Mumbai, Shradha woke to the sound of her phone vibrating against the wooden nightstand. A delivery notification flashed: "Package arriving today, 9:00 AM."

She frowned, half-asleep. "What... package?" she muttered, rubbing her eyes.

Downstairs, the bell rang. The maid's voice floated up, "Madam, courier!"

She hurried down, her hair tied loosely, dressed in a soft blue T-shirt. The delivery boy handed her a box wrapped in silver paper and sealed with a small red sticker. No sender name.

Inside, she found a bouquet of red tulips and a card: "For the morning that deserves a smile."

Her lips curved—Aarav. Of course.

Before she could hide it, her mother, Anjali, appeared behind her. "Oh, what's this? "

"Uh, just something from a brand shoot, Maa!" she called back, sliding the note quickly into her book. "PR package."

Her mother appeared at the doorway, wiping her hands on a towel. "Oh? So early in the morning?"

"Time zones," Shradha improvised, cheeks warm. "You know, these London-based collabs..."

Mrs. Tendulkar frowned, then smiled. "Fine, fine. Keep your secrets. Breakfast is ready."

Shradha nodded, relief bubbling in her chest. As her mother walked away, she picked up one of the orchids and whispered, "You're mad, Aarav."

By noon, a second package arrived: a small wooden music box that played Pehla Nasha. Inside the lid, neatly engraved: "To the one who turns silence into song."

Her heart fluttered. She placed it on her dresser, wound the key, and listened as the soft notes filled the room.

Sara knocked and peeked in. "Hey, you got another parcel. Who's the secret admirer?" she teased.

Shradha rolled her eyes. "Just some PR thing. I think they mixed up names."

Sara raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, right. PR teams now send personalized music boxes?"

Shradha tossed a pillow at her. "Shut up and go!"

When the door closed, she pressed a hand to her chest, smiling helplessly. Her phone buzzed—Aarav's message: "Two down. Four to go. Happy Valentine's Day." ❤️

She texted back quickly, fingers trembling with delight: "You're insane. Stop sending stuff. I'll get caught!"

He replied: "Worth the risk."

At around 6 PM, a large white box arrived, tied with a velvet ribbon. This time, her father, Sachin, was sitting on the living room couch, flipping channels. The delivery boy read aloud, "Miss Shradha Tendulkar?"

Sachin glanced up. "What's all this? You've been getting parcels all day!"

Shradha's mind raced. "Oh, it's from the charity foundation, Baba. Valentine's fundraiser—they send sample hampers."

Sachin nodded, distracted by the cricket highlights. "Right, right. Just don't clutter the hall."

She exhaled in relief, hurried to her room, and opened it. Inside lay a designer perfume, her favorite brand, with a note: "For the evening breeze that smells of you."

The note wasn't signed, but it didn't need to be.

She laughed quietly, shaking her head. "This man..."

Her heart swelled as she arranged all the gifts on her table—the tulips, the music box, the perfume. Each one was a whisper, a secret heartbeat across the miles between Chennai and Mumbai.

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Her phone buzzed again: "Last one arrives soon. Be ready."

Shradha was brushing her hair when the doorbell rang again. Her heart skipped — sixth time that day. Outside, another courier placed a heavy white box on the doormat and stepped away.

Her father's voice came from the living room. "Shradha! Another delivery? What's going on today?"

"Just... campaign stuff, Papa!" she called, heart thudding.

Sachin Tendulkar appeared around the corner, raising an eyebrow. "Six campaigns in one day? I should've gone into marketing."

She chuckled nervously, pushing the box behind her leg. "It's Valentine's week, Papa, everything's about gifting these days."

He smiled. "Hmm. Just make sure there's no chocolate brand trying to make you eat sugar again."

"Promise," she said, half laughing.

When he turned away, she darted into her room, shut the door, and tore open the box. Inside lay a delicate glass dome. Beneath it, a single preserved blue rose stood upright on a silver stem, glowing softly under a ring of tiny LED lights. Beneath it, a small note read:

"Even when I'm miles away, this will shine when you switch it on. For every night we can't share."

— A."

Her breath caught. For a moment she said nothing, just touched the dome lightly, watching the light refract over her fingers. It wasn't just a gift. It was a promise — one that whispered through silence and distance alike.

Her phone rang.

"Aarav."

She picked up. His face appeared, tired but smiling, eyes still bright from the match.

"Do you like it?" he asked softly.

"I love it," she said, voice low. "But you're insane. What if someone had seen—"

He shrugged. "They didn't. And even if they did, who's to say it wasn't from a fan?"

"'A fan' who knows my favorite color?"

He smiled. "A well-researched fan."

For a while, neither spoke. The silence between them was full — the kind that holds warmth instead of emptiness. Behind Aarav, the lights of Chennai flickered against the window. Behind her, the soft blue glow of the rose painted her face in light.

"I watched you today," she whispered. "You looked calm. Different."

"I felt calm," he said. "Maybe because I knew you'd be watching."

Her lips curved. "Corny."

"True," he said simply. "But true."

They talked for a while longer — about cricket, about Sara's questions, about the moon over the Bay of Bengal. When the call finally ended, she didn't switch off the light of the rose. She let it glow beside her as she fell asleep, its soft hum filling the room.

Back in Chennai, Aarav leaned against the window, looking out at the dark ocean. The night breeze slipped through the crack in the curtains, carrying the faint scent of the sea. He thought of her laughter, of her quick excuses, of the way her voice had softened when she said "I love it."

He whispered into the quiet, "Happy Valentine's, Shradha."

And somewhere in Mumbai, under the soft light of a glowing rose, she smiled in her sleep, as if she had heard him.