

Cricket 194

Chapter 194

The sun rose over Chepauk like a smoldering ember, glowing against the faint morning mist. The soil shimmered under the light, and the faint hum of the city mingled with the rhythmic thuds of cleats striking the turf. It was Day 3 of the Chennai Test — the kind of morning where history quietly waits in the wings.

The scoreboard read: India 49/0. Rohit Sharma, crisp in his stride, and Shubman Gill, calm and composed, took their marks. From the pavilion end, Moeen Ali twirled the ball between his fingers, eyes narrowing. The fielders crept in, shadows flickering across the dust.

Mark Butcher's voice crackled through the commentary box.

"Day three, bright and clear here at Chepauk! Moeen Ali to start from the Anna Pavilion End — the surface already dusting up, and you can see those footmarks building outside off. India lead by 308 — they'll want to stretch that as much as possible before the spinners start making it devilish again."

Rohit adjusted his gloves, eyes darting briefly toward midwicket. The first ball dipped, gripped, and spat back at him. A defensive prod. Next ball — tossed up slower. Another tight block. Moeen's over drifted into a maiden, all tension and patience.

Nick Knight: "A tidy start, that. Rohit's holding firm, but you can sense the pressure building. It's that sort of pitch where one ball can turn the day upside down."

From the other end, Jack Leach rubbed the ball, the faint powder of dust sticking to his fingers. He ran in, left arm over. Gill on strike. The first delivery — straight, low, defended. The second — drifted in toward middle. The third, quicker, flatter.

Thud!

An appeal erupted — loud, unified. Leach shouted, Foakes joined, and Menon's finger shot up almost instantly. Gill froze. He turned, walked toward Rohit. They spoke quietly, eyes meeting. Then came the T-signal.

"Oh, this could be close! Menon has given it out, but Gill looks confident. Let's check that replay. It looked very straight to the naked eye!"

The big screen flashed: Ball Tracking. Impact — in line. Pitching — in line. Wickets — crashing into leg stump.

Butcher: "It's hitting! Shubman Gill's gone, Leach strikes early! England needed that, and they've got the breakthrough! India 49 for 1!"

Gill sighed, disappointment flickering in his eyes. Rohit gave him a tap on the shoulder. And from the pavilion tunnel emerged a figure that sent murmurs even through the silent stadium — Aarav Pathak.

He jogged briskly, adjusting his gloves, shoulders squared, every step echoing composure. On the giant screen, his stats flashed: 12th innings, 921 runs, 4 centuries, 5 half-centuries.

Nick Knight: "Here comes the young prince of Indian cricket. Aarav Pathak — 20 years old, but already a phenomenon. Averaging over a hundred in Tests. And he's walking in like he owns the place."

Aarav took his guard. Leach turned again, eyes locked. The first ball, short and teasing outside off. Aarav's bat came down gently, tapping it away for a single toward point. Effortless. Controlled.

Harsha Bhogle: "And that's the hallmark of Aarav Pathak. No nerves. Just awareness. He's off the mark first ball."

The scoreboard ticked to 50. The dressing room applauded lightly.

But trouble loomed. Leach, in rhythm now, tossed one slower to Rohit. It dipped and drifted beautifully. Rohit stretched forward to defend — missed. Foakes collected sharply, whipping the bails off in a flash.

Butcher: "Has Foakes done it again? Oh, he's lightning fast! Let's go upstairs!"

The replay rolled. Rohit's toe, agonizingly close to the line. Nothing behind. The third umpire's voice crackled: OUT.

Bhogle: "Brilliant piece of wicketkeeping! Ben Foakes, that's world-class. And suddenly India are 50 for 2. What a turn of events!"

From the shadows of the pavilion, Virat Kohli strode out. The King. His bat tucked under his arm, chin lifted, that familiar aura of command around him. The silent stands amplified his presence. For a moment, the camera panned to Aarav — the Prince — and it felt symbolic. Two eras, walking together.

Kohli took strike against Leach. The next few overs simmered with quiet intensity — forward defenses, quick singles, the sound of the ball kissing the turf.

By the 20th over, the scoreboard read 82/2. Aarav had moved to 22, Kohli steady at 18. Moeen and Leach rotated, trying to pry through, but the pair stood firm.

Knight: "They're batting beautifully in tandem. You can see the communication — short nods, that mutual understanding. This is classic Test match rebuilding."

The partnership grew. Aarav's timing grew silkier with every over — glances past midwicket, drives through cover. Kohli began to find rhythm, wrist-flicks and quick singles turning the strike.

As the session neared lunch, Broad was brought in. The veteran, ball shining under his sweat-slicked palm, eyed Aarav from the end.

Butcher: "Here's Broad now — maybe the only one who can unsettle this calm."

Broad steamed in, angle across. Aarav watched it, waited, then — crack! — met it with the sweetest of cover drives. The ball raced, slicing the red dirt, past extra cover into the boundary cushion.

The sound was pure. A ripple of claps rose from the Indian balcony.

Bhogle: "Ah, that's majestic! Aarav Pathak at his fluent best. That'll bring up his fifty! Twelve innings, and another half-century to his name. This young man just doesn't stop!"

The camera caught Aarav removing his glove briefly, raising his bat toward the dressing room. A quiet nod to the sky.

From the commentary box, Knight added softly:

"He plays with such clarity — it's like he's seeing the ball in slow motion. That cover drive, Harsha, that was a painting."

Kohli walked up, patted his shoulder. "Stay. Don't think about it. We go big today."

Aarav nodded. "Together, bhaiya."

And so they did. Leach returned, tossed one on middle. Kohli leaned forward, tapping a single to midwicket. The scoreboard ticked to Virat Kohli – 50 (88 balls).

Butcher: "Now the captain joins the milestone! Kohli's fifty — his one of many, and what a moment to share it with the young man at the other end. The King and the Prince — holding India's innings together!"

By lunch, India sat strong at 166 for 2 — Aarav 60*, Kohli 50*. They walked off together, bats resting against their shoulders, sweat streaking through the sunlight. The red soil clung to their shoes; the air shimmered with quiet triumph.

Harsha Bhogle, closing the session: "There's a poetry in this partnership — calm and command, youth and experience. It's not just about runs; it's about belief. Chepauk is watching two stories run parallel, and both are heading toward something special."

As they disappeared into the pavilion tunnel, the scoreboard lingered — 166 for 2 — a picture of control, resilience, and promise. Day 3 had just begun to tell its tale.

The Chennai heat still shimmered off the Chepauk turf as lunch came to a close. The faint scent of grass and dust hung in the air, and the sound of leather against bat echoed softly from the nets as Aarav and Kohli prepared to resume their innings. India stood at 166 for 2, a lead that felt secure, but the battle was far from done.

Mark Butcher's voice crackled through the commentary box. "Welcome back to the afternoon session here in Chennai. Aarav and Kohli at the crease — two batters who've looked composed, calculating, and almost poetic in their rhythm before lunch."

Harsha Bhogle smiled, the warmth of his tone carrying over the mic. "Indeed, Mark. Aarav especially has that calm aggression today. He's reading the spin so early, almost as if he's in conversation with the pitch."

Nick Knight joined in, chuckling. "Yes, and with Moeen Ali and Leach back into the attack, this is going to be an absorbing test — literally spin versus patience."

The sun was now brighter, glistening off Aarav's helmet grille. He tapped his bat twice, glanced at Kohli, who nodded, and faced up to Moeen Ali. The ball spun sharply, fizzing past Aarav's pad, missing off stump by a whisker.

"Lovely drift that!" Butcher exclaimed. "You can sense the tension building again. It's like a coiled spring out there."

For the next few overs, both batters traded singles and twos, rotating the strike with masterful ease. Aarav's drives along the ground were smooth as silk; Kohli's flicks were pure elegance. They weren't just batting — they were orchestrating.

Then came the seventh over after lunch.

Moeen tossed it up invitingly. Kohli, on 62, went back, looking to guide it late. The ball spun more than expected, striking him above the knee roll.

"Big shout for lbw!" Bhogle called out sharply.

The umpire's finger went up. Kohli looked shocked. He turned to Aarav, eyebrows raised. "Review?" Aarav nodded. Kohli tapped his gloves, raised the 'T' sign.

The replays began. Knight leaned closer. "This is tight, really tight. No edge... ball-tracking coming up... oh, that's umpire's call on middle stump! He's gone!"

Moeen Ali punched the air, roaring. Kohli walked off slowly, shaking his head, his bat trailing behind. Aarav applauded his captain's effort from the other end.

"Virat Kohli departs for a fine 62," Harsha narrated softly. "And India now 184 for 3. A crucial stand broken."

Ajinkya Rahane walked in, eyes sharp under his helmet. He greeted Aarav with a firm nod.

"Settle in, Jinx," Aarav said quietly, gripping his bat tighter.

The next half-hour was patient work. Rahane played second fiddle, absorbing the spin pressure. Aarav, meanwhile, found his flow. He leaned forward into a Moeen delivery, caressing it past extra cover for two. The next over, he stepped down to Leach and lofted him elegantly over mid-off — four more.

The partnership began to rebuild the rhythm of the innings. Rahane's defensive elegance complemented Aarav's controlled aggression.

Then, Broad was brought back into the attack — a change of pace, a new challenge. Aarav on strike.

Broad ran in, smooth and rhythmic. Full delivery outside off. Aarav's eyes lit up. He stepped forward and drove through the line — the sweetest sound of bat meeting ball echoed around the stadium.

Harsha Bhogle's voice rose with emotion. "Cover drive! Pure class from Aarav!"

Aarav's heartbeat thundered. Every run felt heavier now. He knew he was close. He steadied himself, breathing deep under the helmet. Broad came again, slightly shorter, and Aarav tucked it behind square for a single. Ninety-five.

Then Leach back on. Aarav danced down the pitch to the very first ball. The team sensed it — they leaned forward in unison.

He connected.

The ball soared straight down the ground — high, handsome, and clean. Six runs!

Mark Butcher erupted. "That's it! Aarav brings up a magnificent hundred! What a way to do it — down the track, straight over the bowler's head, like a statement to the world!"

Harsha added, his tone gleaming with admiration. "The boy has done it again! His fifth Test century — and every one of them different, but all marked by this unshakable composure. Take a bow, Aarav."

Aarav raised his bat toward the dressing room, eyes glinting. Inside, teammates clapped and cheered. Kohli smiled from the balcony, mouthing, "Well played, champ."

For Aarav, the moment was both thunderous and silent. He could hear his own breath inside the helmet. He remembered every early morning net session, every blister from long hours under the sun. This century was carved from all of it.

He exhaled deeply. Focus.

Rahane's calm presence steadied the innings further, until Moeen struck again. Rahane misread the flight, popped one up for 15.

"Caught and bowled! Moeen Ali again!" Knight shouted.

In walked Rishabh Pant, lively as ever, thumping his gloves together. "Let's take it to them, bro!" he said to Aarav.

Aarav smiled faintly. "One ball at a time."

Pant played a couple of brisk shots, but soon, Moeen deceived him too — a loopy ball that dipped and turned sharply.

Bhogle sighed. "And gone! Pant departs for 8. Moeen Ali turning this afternoon into his own stage."

Then came the fateful over for Aarav.

Moeen around the wicket, Aarav on 106. He pushed forward, missed, and there was a loud appeal.

The umpire's finger rose immediately.

Aarav reviewed — his face expressionless. The big screen lit up: No bat, impact in line, umpire's call on middle.

Butcher's tone softened. "That's the end of a brilliant innings. Aarav departs for 106, a masterclass in patience and power."

As he walked off, the applause followed him — soft, yet endless. Kohli stood again from the balcony, hands clasped in respect.

India 248 for 6.

Ashwin came in, swinging freely, adding 21 vital runs. The tail wagged briefly, nudging India's total to 277.

Harsha Bhogle summed it up perfectly: "From the young prince's century to Moeen Ali's spellbinding bowling, this has been a session of fluctuating fortunes. India end at 277 — a lead that will make England sweat under the Chennai sun. England got the target of 536 runs in 2 days."

The camera lingered on Aarav, sitting quietly in the pavilion, pads still on, lost in the rhythm of the game. He wasn't celebrating; he was thinking. Of the innings. Of what lay ahead. Of balance — between steel and serenity.

The humid morning air shimmered above the red soil of Chepauk. A faint sea breeze carried the tang of salt across the empty terraces, and the sky was the color of molten brass — a sign that this day would burn with intensity. England needed an impossible 536 runs. India needed just ten wickets.

Aarav Pathak stood at the top of his run-up, eyes locked on the pitch, sweat already glistening on his neck. His heart thudded in rhythm with the crowd that wasn't there — the silence of pandemic cricket. Yet the energy was electric.

☞ □ Harsha Bhogle: "Here we go again, ladies and gentlemen, Day 4 at the Chepauk. India in complete command — a mountain of 536 runs for England to climb. The Prince of Indian cricket, Aarav Pathak, with the new ball in hand. What a day he had yesterday, and now he's steaming in."

.Mark Butcher: "Aarav's bowling has been fiery all through the series. Fast, disciplined, and sharp. Let's see if he can deliver the knockout punch this morning."

Aarav sprinted in, the ball fizzing through the humid air. The first over was all pace — 148, 149, 150 km/h — each delivery thudding into Pant's gloves like a cannon blast. Burns and Sibley struggled to see, let alone strike.

Second over, Siraj from the other end. Swing, bounce, chatter — India hunting in a pack. Kohli clapped at slip, urging intensity. Then came the breakthrough.

Aarav Pathak to Burns — Over 4.5

Short, climbing sharply. Burns hooks instinctively — top edge! The ball spirals high, glinting under the sun. Shubman Gill sprints backward from third man, eyes on the swirling red dot — and clings on!

.Nick Knight: "Gone! That's Burns out! What a take! The short ball plan from Aarav Pathak pays immediate dividends!"

.Harsha Bhogle: "Relentless pace, relentless pressure. You could almost feel that wicket coming. Aarav Pathak — the heartbeat of this Indian attack and leading the pace attack from the front for India that too in his second series."

England 12/1.

Root walked in, the captain under immense pressure. Aarav paused at his mark, studying him like a chess player about to make his defining move. His mind raced — seam upright, just outside off, tempt the drive.

Over 6.3 – Aarav to Root:

Perfect length, seaming away late. Root pushes — a feather touch, thin edge! Kohli dives right at slip — and takes it! Soft hands, world-class reflexes.

.Mark Butcher: "Oh that's beauty! Sheer class! Aarav Pathak gets Joe Root! That's as good as you'll see anywhere!"

.Bhogle: "He's bowled like a veteran — line, length, patience. The Prince is turning this match into his coronation!"

England 28/2.

Stokes walked out, jaw clenched.

Over 8.2 – Aarav to Stokes:

A yorker at 149 km/h, arrowing in on middle and leg. Stokes's bat comes down late — too late. Timber everywhere. The stumps light up like fireworks.

¶ □ Nick Knight: "Ohhh bowled him! That's thunderbolt stuff from Aarav Pathak! 149 clicks of pure fire!"

¶ □ Butcher: "That's unplayable! You can't stop that with a door, let alone a bat!"

Aarav roared, arms wide, his teammates rushing to engulf him. The empty stands echoed with their voices — a sound that would have shaken the Marina if fans were allowed in.

England 45/3.

Then came Moeen Ali. Aarav sensed one more. He adjusted the seam, switched to around the wicket, eyes blazing with hunger.

Over 14.5 – Aarav to Moeen:

Good length, angling across, then straightening off the seam. Moeen prods uncertainly, the edge flying low to Pant. He dives forward — caught clean!

▮ □ Bhogle: "Aarav again! That's his fourth! You can't keep him away from wickets today!"

▮ □ Butcher: "That's surgical precision. Aarav Pathak's bowling like a man possessed!"

England reeling at 62/4.

The spinners took over. Ashwin came into the attack, the red soil dusting his fingers. His first ball looped in flight and dipped, landing perfectly on middle. Dom Sibley tried to sweep — missed. Loud shout. Finger up.

▮ □ Knight: "Ashwin joins the party! The maestro at home in Chennai!"

Ashwin was unstoppable. The pitch cracked open like a desert floor. Every ball spat dust. England collapsed in confusion.

Ashwin's victims:

Dom Sibley (lbw), Ollie Pope (caught short leg), Dan Lawrence (bowled through the gate), Olly Stone (lofted straight to mid-off), and Jack Leach (caught and bowled). Five wickets of pure artistry.

▮ □ Bhogle: "Ashwin with another five-for at Chepauk! And what a sight — the master and the apprentice, Ashwin and Aarav, ripping England apart."

Siraj finished the innings — a searing outswinger to Stuart Broad, edged and caught behind. England, all out for 164.

Score Summary:

India: 393 & 277

England: 134 & 164

India win by 372 runs.

▢ Butcher: "That's it! India crush England by 372 runs, and what a performance from their young sensation, Aarav Pathak — four wickets today, six in the match, and that stunning hundred yesterday with total runs 198 runs. This man is special."

▢ Bhogle: "The Prince reigns supreme in Chennai. It's not just talent; it's temperament, focus, and heart. Aarav Pathak, remember the name."

▢ Knight: "You can see the pride on Kohli's face. India's next era has already arrived."

As the players walked off, Aarav glanced around the empty stands, the faint rustle of flags from the outer stands mixing with the echo of his footsteps. He had dreamed of these roars since childhood — today, silence itself applauded.

Ashwin walked up beside him, handing him the match ball.

"Keep it," Ashwin said with a smile. "You've earned it."

Aarav grinned, holding the ball like a relic. The sun dipped behind the eastern stands, bathing the ground in gold.

He was the future of Indian cricket.