

Cricket 197

Chapter 197

The sun beat down gently over the Narendra Modi Stadium, the morning air crisp with the scent of dew and freshly cut grass. The echoes of laughter and the thuds of leather on willow blended into the symphony of a training day. India was preparing for the second T20I against England—and Aarav Pathak had returned.

After days away, resting and spending time with family, the air of competition felt familiar yet exhilarating. As Aarav walked into the practice nets, the stadium empty but humming with energy, he could already spot familiar faces. Kohli bhaiya was practicing his drives, each stroke clean and effortless, the sound of the ball meeting the bat ringing sharp. Pant and Rahul bhai were nearby, exchanging teasing words over missed shots and perfect deliveries.

Aarav smiled, tightening his grip on his duffel bag. The aroma of red soil and sweat, the distant cheer of ground staff, the muted commentary from support staff—all of it felt like home again.

As he approached, Pant was the first to notice him. "Oye, Pathak! Look who's finally back from his mini vacation!" he yelled, tossing the ball into the air.

Kohli turned, that trademark grin lighting up his face. "Welcome back, champ. Took a long enough break, huh?"

Aarav laughed, extending his hand for a handshake which Kohli turned into a friendly shoulder bump. "Had to, bhaiya. Needed to recharge a bit. But looks like you all didn't miss me much."

"Missed your bouncers for sure," Rahul teased, adjusting his gloves.

They laughed together, the easy camaraderie flowing naturally. Aarav loosened up, pulling out his spikes and tying them on. He could feel the buzz of anticipation building within him. It wasn't just practice—it was a signal that he was back, ready to contribute.

Kohli tossed him a ball. "Come on then, let's see if you've still got that swing."

Aarav nodded, rolling his shoulders and taking his run-up mark. He closed his eyes briefly, inhaling. Then he ran in.

The seam kissed the air. The ball pitched just outside off, swinging late, and Kohli adjusted in a heartbeat—a neat punch past cover for a couple. Kohli smiled, tapping the pitch with his bat.

"Not bad," he said, that glint of challenge in his eyes.

The next ball, Aarav pitched fuller. Kohli leaned forward again, but this time the ball jagged in sharply, clipping his pad. A mock appeal went up from Aarav, earning laughs from the team around.

For the next fifteen minutes, it was a duel of precision and power—Kohli meeting Aarav's accuracy with timing and grace. Pant occasionally chipped in from behind the nets with his cheeky commentary.

"Bhaiya, don't let him get you! This man bowled Root and Stokes like nothing!" Pant shouted, laughing.

When the session wrapped up, Aarav grabbed a water bottle and sat beside Hardik, who was stretching. The atmosphere buzzed with focus, but also warmth.

"So," Hardik said, glancing at him, "back in rhythm?"

Aarav nodded. "Feels good to be back. My arms are itching to bowl, man."

Hardik grinned. "Good. Because England aren't going easy. Let's make sure they remember who they're dealing with."

They exchanged a light fist bump.

Soon, it was Aarav's turn to bat. Bhuvneshwar bhaiya, Hardik, and Yuzi lined up to bowl at him, testing his timing after the short break.

Bhuvneshwar began with a trademark outswinger, smooth as silk. Aarav set himself early, watching the seam, and with a fluid motion of his wrists—crack! The ball soared over long-off for a six.

A collective whistle rose from the sidelines. Pant clapped his hands dramatically. "Bhaiyaaa, he didn't even warm up properly!"

Hardik took the ball next, flashing that competitive smile. "Let's see you try this one, Pathak."

He bowled quick, angling it into the body. Aarav anticipated, shuffled, and with a cheeky grin, scooped it over fine leg for four. The boys erupted in laughter.

"What did you eat in the break, bro?" shouted Iyer from the corner.

"Mom's food and peace of mind," Aarav shot back, chuckling.

Then came Yuzi Chahal, spinning the ball in his fingers like a magician preparing his trick. "No pace now, my friend. Let's see if you can handle this."

The leggie floated in, dipping right under Aarav's eyes. He stepped out and sent it soaring down the ground—a no-look six that landed halfway up the stands. The crowd of players cheered, whistles and laughter filling the air.

Shardul, laughing uncontrollably, yelled, "Kya shot tha yaar! Are you possessed or what?"

Aarav laughed, raising his bat in mock acknowledgment. The light mood spread across the team—everyone was smiling, enjoying the rhythm of the game again. Even the coaches watching from the sidelines couldn't hide their grins.

As the sun started to dip, the team huddled for a short strategy talk. The day felt complete—training sharp, spirits high, and a sense of confidence rippling through the squad.

Aarav stood at the boundary line for a moment, gazing out at the empty stands that would soon be roaring with fans again. The quiet hum of floodlights filled the air. He felt that familiar rush—the calm before the storm.

In his mind, he whispered to himself, I'm back.

Tomorrow, England would face not just a team hungry to level the series—but an India led by rhythm, camaraderie, and fire. And Aarav Pathak was ready to make his mark again.

The night sky above the Narendra Modi Stadium glimmered like a thousand diamonds, and beneath it, the echoes of over fifty thousand fans rose like waves in the Arabian Sea. Despite only half capacity being allowed due to COVID restrictions, the atmosphere was electric — chants, and Indian flags fluttering under the floodlights. It wasn't just another match — this was India vs England under lights, and Aarav Pathak was back.

Kohli won the toss, flashing his signature grin, and announced, "We'll bowl first." The crowd erupted. The plan was clear — early wickets, keep England under control.

Bhuvneshwar Kumar marked his run-up. The air was thick with anticipation. Buttler took guard, tapping the pitch twice, adjusting his gloves.

0.3: Bhuvu angled one in, the ball skidding low. Buttler shuffled across — thud! — right on the knee-roll! Huge appeal! The umpire's finger went up like a flash.

Harsha Bhogle: "There it is! Bhuvneshwar strikes! Buttler trapped in front — no doubts about that one!"

Sunil Gavaskar: "A beautiful seam position, that ball nipped just enough. What a start for India — Buttler gone for a duck!"

The stadium exploded. Buttler walked back, head bowed, while Kohli and Pant sprinted toward Bhuvu, slapping his back in celebration. The scoreboard read England 1/1.

Aarav Pathak was handed the ball for the second over. He stood at the top of his mark, rolling his shoulder, eyes fixed on Dawid Malan. The crowd began to chant his name, "Pathak! Pathak! Pathak!" The roar sent chills down the spine.

His first ball — a fiery 148 kmph outswinger. Malan let it go. The next — a sharp cutter at 150, beating the inside edge.

Then, the third delivery. A full-length beauty that straightened after pitching. Malan looked to drive — edge — gone! Pant leapt to his right and pouched it clean.

Murali Kartik: "And there's the magic of Aarav Pathak! Just the hint of movement away — Malan nicks it, and England are 7 for 2!"

Gavaskar: "This young man's control is phenomenal. High pace, late swing — deadly combination."

Aarav's celebration was measured — a fist pump, a smile toward the stands where the tricolor flags waved madly.

England fought back briefly with Roy and Morgan rebuilding, but Aarav returned for his second spell with the same fire.

At 17.1, Morgan decided to charge. Aarav bowled a slower off-cutter, rolling his fingers across the seam — Morgan mistimed it straight up, and Pant settled under it.

Bhogle: "Clever! That's cricketing intelligence! Aarav changes the pace, and Morgan walks right into the trap."

Score: England 142/5.

Stokes was still in, looking dangerous. Aarav had the ball again — last over. The floodlights reflected off his eyes as he ran in.

19.4: Shorter ball, slower again. Stokes pulled — mistimed — straight into the safe hands of Hardik Pandya at long-on.

Murali Kartik: "Variation, variation, variation — Aarav's mastery at the death! Stokes departs for 28, England in real trouble!"

England ended at 164/6 — a competitive but chaseable total.

The crowd roared as KL Rahul and Ishan Kishan walked out to open. England's pace duo, Archer and Wood, glistened under the lights.

0.2: Archer steamed in — 150 kmph rocket on off stump. Rahul went for the drive — edge, caught at slips! Golden duck!

Gavaskar: "Oh dear! Rahul gone without scoring! England strike early, and the Ahmedabad crowd goes silent!" (??🙄🙄)

India 0/1.

Kohli walked in, calm and composed. His presence alone reignited hope. Ishan Kishan counterattacked with audacious strokes, but his aggression ended in the 3rd over, when he mistimed one at 14 runs.

India: 18/2.

As Kishan walked back, the chants started again — this time louder.

"Pathak! Pathak! Pathak!"

Aarav Pathak strode to the crease. Bat tucked under his arm, helmet gleaming under the lights. Kohli smiled at him, whispering, "Let's do this Champ."

First ball — Archer ran in at 151 kmph, short and wide. Aarav leaned back, opened the face of the bat, and guided it over the keeper for four — an uppercut as smooth as silk.

Bhogle: "Ohhh that's audacious! First ball and Pathak uppercuts it like he's been here all night!"

Manjrekar: "Confidence dripping off that shot. He's not easing in — he's making a statement."

Kohli and Aarav started rotating strike — classic vs fearless. Kohli caressed through covers, Aarav flicked off his pads, timing everything. The partnership blossomed. Every run was greeted with rhythmic chants and camera flashes.

5th over: Aarav danced down the track to Adil Rashid and lofted it effortlessly over long-off — six! The ball soared into the night.

Gavaskar: "He's playing fearless cricket, this boy! Reminds me of the early days of Sehwag — but with a touch of elegance."

At the end of the powerplay, India were 59/2 — well on track.

Kohli took charge in the middle overs, driving and glancing in typical fashion, while Aarav rotated brilliantly. Every now and then, he'd unleash — a scoop here, a reverse sweep there — electrifying the crowd.

At 10 overs, India were 94/2. England's spinners tried variations, but Aarav neutralized them. Archer returned, peppering him with bouncers, but Aarav pulled one disdainfully into the stands.

Harsha: "That's raw pace against raw confidence — and Aarav wins the duel!"

Kohli brought up his fifty with a firm flick, and Aarav soon followed with a quickfire 34-ball 51. Their partnership of 103 runs broke England's resistance.

As the finish line neared, Kohli, with his classic cover drive, sealed it — India chased down 165 with 11 balls to spare.

Fireworks painted the sky above the world's biggest stadium. Kohli hugged Aarav as both of them shake England's players hands and returns to the pavillion. The scoreboard flashed: India win by 8 wickets.

Harsha Bhogle: "India levels the series 1-1! What a comeback, powered by the young genius, Aarav Pathak, who shone with both ball and bat! the prince and the king Virat Kohli, the chase-master taking team to the win to level the series."

Aarav was named Player of the Match — 4 overs, 3/27, and an unbeaten 54. The cameras followed him as he smiled at the roaring stands.

Aarav (in presentation): "It's always special to contribute for India. The atmosphere was amazing, and it's good to be back in the blue jersey."

The bright floodlights of the Narendra Modi Stadium lit up the night sky as the third T20I between India and England began. The atmosphere was electric — even at half capacity due to COVID restrictions, the roars of the Ahmedabad crowd echoed like thunder, banners waving, drums beating in sync with chants of "India! India!" and "Rohit! Kohli! Aarav!"

England had won the toss and elected to field. The pitch looked hard, glistening under the artificial light, with a thin grass layer that promised early movement. Rohit Sharma and KL Rahul walked to the crease, their bats tapping rhythmically against the turf. Both looked focused, exchanging a quick nod before settling in.

Jofra Archer sprinted in for the first over — rhythmic, menacing, every stride a statement. His first delivery was sharp, nipping off the seam, testing Rohit. But the veteran calmly pushed it for a single off the last ball of the over. A safe start, but the tension was already simmering.

At the other end, Mark Wood marked his run-up. His first ball — 146 km/h — whistled past KL Rahul's bat. A hint of swing. Rahul adjusted his gloves, tightened his grip. The next ball, a probing length, another dot. The pressure mounted.

Then it happened.

Wood's third ball — full, nipping in. Rahul tried to flick it across the line, his bat coming down late. The stumps shattered. Timber flying. The stadium fell into stunned silence for a split second. Rahul was bowled for a duck again. His string of low scores continued — 1, 0, 0. He looked up to the heavens in disbelief before walking back, the giant screen replaying his dismissal over and over.

India — 7/1.

The crowd, waiting for Virat Kohli's entrance, buzzed in anticipation. But to their surprise, it wasn't Kohli. It was Aarav Pathak.

The young all-rounder strode out confidently, the energy around him shifting. His helmet tucked under his arm, he jogged onto the field with the calm assurance of someone who belonged here. Rohit looked at him, fist bumped him and said with a smirk, "Let's steady this, champ."

Mark Wood ran in again, the ball gleaming under the floodlights. His first delivery to Aarav was short — Aarav picked it early. He leaned back and pulled ferociously, the ball soaring over square leg and into the stands. The crowd erupted. Fireworks cracked. The commentator's voice rang out: "Welcome to the game, Aarav Pathak! What a statement!"

The next ball was a dot — Wood tried to adjust his length. But the third ball, overpitched — Aarav drove it elegantly through the covers for four. Pure timing. The bat sounded like music against leather.

In the later over, Archer returned. A short one to Rohit, who mistimed his pull. The ball flew straight to midwicket. Rohit was gone for 15 off 17. A sigh went through the stands as Kohli, the Indian captain, finally walked out to bat.

The crowd went wild. Chants of "Kohli! Kohli!" mixed with "Pathak! Pathak!" echoed across the stadium. The two shared a brief nod — mutual respect, mutual purpose.

The next few overs were poetry and chaos intermingled. Kohli played his classic flicks and drives, while Aarav unleashed fearless strokes. His bat seemed an extension of his instincts — picking the line early, countering pace with timing. Archer's 150 km/h rockets were met with lightning wrists. Wood's variations, his slower ones, were lofted over mid-on with disdain.

Every shot Aarav played had purpose — not just aggression, but art. A late cut here, a straight drive there, a ramp over fine leg that left commentators gaping. "This man," Sunil Gavaskar said, "is redefining composure."

Between overs, Kohli walked over and said, "Don't change a thing. Keep your flow."

Aarav nodded, "Just enjoying the rhythm, skipper."

By the 8th over, India was 86/2. The partnership had stabilized the innings, and the momentum was clearly shifting. Kohli looked sharp on 25, Aarav already past 40. But in the 10th over, Kohli attempted a big loft over long-off against Adil Rashid and mistimed it. Caught. The crowd groaned.

Kohli looked disappointed but patted Aarav's shoulder on his way out, "Take it deep."

Aarav did more than that.

He accelerated.

In the next over, he danced down the track and launched Rashid over long-on for six. The sound echoed — crisp, clean, fearless. Pant joined but couldn't last long, trying to slog Moeen Ali and edging behind for 4. Shreyas Iyer came, hit a few elegant shots but fell for 9.

Hardik Pandya joined him next. Together, they ran sharp singles, rotated the strike, and occasionally punished loose deliveries. Aarav, now on 60 off 31, was batting like he had read every bowler's mind. Every flick, pull, and punch came with precision.

Then came Archer again, steaming in for his final over. The first ball was 149 km/h, aimed at Aarav's ribs. Aarav swiveled, pulling it fine for four. The next, full and wide, he opened the face of his bat, guiding it between point and third man — another boundary.

"Seventy-one!" shouted Hardik, clapping from the non-striker's end.

Aarav smiled, sweat glistening under the lights. The crowd roared his name now — "AARAV! AARAV!"

The last ball of the over, Archer went for the yorker. Aarav shuffled slightly and ramped it over the keeper's head for four. Unbelievable improvisation.

When the innings ended, Aarav stood unbeaten on 77 off 39 balls. A masterclass — bold yet composed. India posted 156/6. Not a massive total, but defendable.

England came out to bat, chasing 157. Jos Buttler and Jason Roy opened, confident and calm. India needed early wickets. Bhuvneshwar bowled tight lines, but the English openers were patient.

Buttler, in particular, looked in sublime touch. Every ball he faced seemed to slow down for him. Pulls, cuts, drives — it was his night. Aarav bowled in the middle overs, trying variations, cutters, but Buttler read him well.

Jonny Bairstow joined him after Roy's dismissal and counter-attacked fiercely. England's chase looked smooth — Buttler's 83 off 52 balls and Bairstow's 40 off 28 anchored the innings. They chased down the total with 8 wickets in hand.

That night, back in the hotel, as he sat by his window overlooking the city lights, Aarav's phone buzzed. It was a video call.

Shradha.

Her face lit up the screen, her eyes sparkling. "Seventy-seven not out, huh? You're getting too good, Mr. Pathak."

He chuckled softly. "Trying to make you proud, Dr. Shradha."

She smiled. "Already am."

The fourth T20I was not just another game. It was a reckoning. England led 2–1. India needed a victory to stay alive in the series. Every run tonight mattered, every over could bend the story toward triumph or heartbreak.

Rohit Sharma and KL Rahul walked in to open. The wicket looked true but deceptive — a touch of dew, a bit of grip, and the scent of unpredictability hung over it. From the dugout, Aarav watched the first few overs unfold, helmet in hand, the leather thuds echoing through him.

Rohit flicked Archer for four; Rahul drove one past point. But soon, England struck — Rahul mistimed a pull, and a silence trembled through the stands. Then, Kohli walked in, calm as ever, his bat an extension of his will.

By the ninth over, India were 72 for 2. Then came the moment everyone had been waiting for. The giant screen flashed — "Next batsman: Aarav Pathak."

The roar that followed wasn't sound — it was emotion made audible. Kohli turned back, smiled, and said with that teasing glint, "Let's set it on fire, champ."

Aarav nodded. "Let's burn it bright."

The first ball he faced — Wood steamed in at 149 kph. Aarav moved across, knees bending, eyes narrowing — crack! The ball soared high over deep square leg. Six. Effortless, beautiful, audacious.

Bhogle's voice boomed over the speakers:

"Oh, that's outrageous! First ball — over the ropes! Aarav Pathak announcing himself in style!"

Kohli grinned, tapping his gloves with Aarav's. "You're not even warming up, huh?"

The next delivery — short again, and Aarav pulled it flat, scorching the turf to the boundary. Then came a slower one — he waited, leaned in, and lifted it over extra cover. The ball kissed the night sky, arcing into the stands.

Within minutes, Aarav had 20 off 8. The rhythm was poetry — wrist flicks, glide cuts, a straight drive that made even the English bowler nod in disbelief.

Every time his bat connected, it wasn't just a shot — it was a statement. Four through midwicket. Six down the ground. Two sharp singles to rotate strike. A deft late cut that sliced through point.

The crowd roared his name like a prayer: "Aarav! Aarav! Aarav!"

Kohli, at the other end, was feeding off the fire — driving, pulling, running twos with fierce energy. But the evening belonged to one man — the young all-rounder who played as if time itself bowed before his timing.

By the 17th over, Aarav had raced to 44 off just 20 balls — six fours, two sixes, and the rest crisp singles that carved rhythm into India's innings. Then came a slower delivery from Stokes, dipping low. Aarav shaped for the scoop but mistimed — the ball brushed his gloves and fell just short of the keeper. He smiled, adjusted his gloves, eyes calm. The next one he played safe — pushing for one, keeping strike.

When the innings ended at 184/6, the crowd's applause rolled like thunder. India's dressing room erupted — Kohli hugging Aarav tight, Rohit laughing, "Kid's on fire again."

England's chase began under the haze of dew. Buttler threatened early, cracking two boundaries off Bhuvneshwar. But Aarav's over turned it. Bowling the fifth, he swung one in — pace, fire, precision — and Malan's stumps cartwheeled in sparks.

The rest of the innings unfolded like a slow squeeze. Ashwin's guile, Bhuvneshwar's discipline, and Aarav's searing short balls broke England's backbone. In the 18th over, Aarav yorked Stokes — leg stump gone, crowd in delirium.

England folded for 153. India won by 31 runs. Series level at 2–2.

Final T20I — The Decider

The next evening had a different tension — sharp, electric, almost cinematic. The whole world was watching. The scoreboard read: Series tied 2–2.

India batted first. Rohit and Kohli at the crease — both seasoned, both determined. Aarav padded up, ready, watching with that still fire in his eyes.

Rohit started slow, then exploded — flicking Archer over midwicket, dancing down to Rashid. Kohli was a vision of calm brilliance, nudging, piercing gaps, never missing rhythm.

By the time Rohit reached his fifty, the dugout was on its feet. Kohli raised his bat too — 80 not out, a masterclass of precision and passion. Aarav came in near the end, facing the 16th over.

He started with a gentle push for one, then glanced one behind square for four. The next — a backfoot punch that raced like lightning. Two overs later, he lofted Wood over long-off — pure, clean, and elegant.

But on 32 off 17, he miscued a slower ball. The ball went high — sky-high — and came down into Buttler's gloves. Silence for a second, then applause — not disappointment, but admiration.

As he walked back, Kohli lifted his glove in salute. Aarav nodded.

India ended at 210/5.

When England began their chase, it was all heart but no hope. Aarav bowled the powerplay with sting, Bhuvu nailed his lengths, and Sundar mopped up the middle order. England were bundled out for 165.

India won the match — and the series 3–2.

The stadium exploded. Fireworks streaked into the night, golden arcs blooming against the sky. Kohli walked to the podium, holding the shining silver trophy. Cameras flashed, microphones swayed, and the anthem of victory filled every corner.