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Ratul Das

Heritage Law College (India)

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Heritage Law College (India)

Abstract

The article is in the nature of a personal interpretation of the illustrious career of former Indian batsman Virender Sehwag. Known for his swashbuckling stroke play, he found his niche at the top of the famed Test batting line up that once boasted of the likes of Rahul Dravid, Sachin Tendulkar, V.V.S. Laxman and Saurav Ganguly, despite unanimous opinion of critics about the glaring deficiencies in his batting technique. His rather inconsistent returns in limited overs cricket run counter to the conventional wisdom that associates the 'copybook style' of batting with greater successes in the longest format of the sport. The article is less of an attempt to a statistical analysis of the batsman for reaching a quantitative explanation for the said 'anomaly' in his performances, and more of an enquiry into his 'inner world' as a batsman, offering a metaphorical insight into the existential dichotomy of the longer and shorter formats of cricket. The author draws from the perspective of Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard on anxiety and that of American anthropologist Ernest Becker on neurosis, reflecting on the various manifestations of despair that haunt batsmen across formats, as a window to Sehwag's unique defences in dealing with the anxieties at the batting crease. In this quest, the author expresses concerns about the future of the game in the backdrop of the slippery slope of the age-old existential dilemma facing the governing body of the sport in its bid to go truly global.

Key Words: Cricket, batsman, batting, freedom, anxiety, despair, neurosis

Resumen

El artículo es una interpretación personal de la ilustre carrera del ex bateador indio Virender Sehwag. Conocido por su juego de golpe de espadachín, encontró su nicho en la cima de la famosa alineación de bateadores Rahul Dravid, Sachin Tendulkar, V.V.S. Laxman y Saurav Ganguly, a pesar de la opinión unánime de los críticos acerca de las flagrantes deficiencias de su técnica de bateo. Sus retornos bastante inconsistentes al cricket en contra de la sabiduría convencional que asocia el "estilo copybook" de batear con mayores éxitos en el formato más largo del deporte. El artículo no es tanto un intento de análisis estadístico del bateador para llegar a una explicación cuantitativa de dicha "anomalía" en sus actuaciones, sino más bien una investigación de su "mundo interior" como bateador, ofreciendo una visión metafórica de la dicotomía existencial de los formatos más largos y más cortos del críquet. El autor se inspira en la perspectiva del teólogo danés Soren Kierkegaard sobre la ansiedad y la del antropólogo estadounidense Ernest Becker sobre la neurosis, y reflexiona sobre las diversas manifestaciones de desesperación que persiguen a los bateadores en todos los formatos, como una ventana a las defensas únicas de Sehwag para hacer frente a las ansiedades en el pliegue del bateo. En esta búsqueda, el autor expresa su preocupación por el futuro del juego en el contexto de la pendiente resbaladiza del antiguo dilema existencial al que se enfrenta el órgano rector del deporte en su intento por globalizar el cricket.

Palabras Clave: Cricket, bateador, bateo, libertad, ansiedad, desesperación, neurosis

Cricket, like boxing, as Clint Eastwood put it in *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), is in many ways a counter-intuitive game. For an Indian cricket follower, Virender Sehwag may well be the living illustration of it. Almost two years after a nondescript ODI (abbreviated for “One Day International”) debut, when Sehwag had finally broken onto the international scene, with a carefree counter-attack on a spring afternoon of 2001 (“1st ODI, Australia tour of India at Bengaluru, Mar 25 2001”), comparisons with Sachin Tendulkar, arguably the best batsman of his time and one of the most prolific opening batsmen in ODIs of all time, were quick to catch up. When he was promoted to the top of the order in ODIs later that year, where he stayed for the rest of his career, however, there was nothing in his domestic exploits that attested his abilities against the new ball. Nor did his inconsistent record in the middle order after that one innings against Australia - in 11 innings, he returned 162 runs, featuring a solitary half-century¹.

Even if initial returns were encouraging, the decision to try him at the helm of the Test line-up during the English summer of ‘02 seems inspired by sheer insight. After all, by the time he had made his debut in the middle order, Test cricket was literally a different ball game – the red ball has been estranged from the longest version of the sport since 2001. It belied the profile of his abilities when he started making inroads into the imagination of experts, who were enamoured with his extraordinary eye-hand coordination and knack for timing the ball so sweetly, and equally reprehensive of his lack of foot movement or a convincing defensive technique. His international career statistics went on to defy conventional schemas about the art of batting, encasing his name in the top bracket of prolific Test batsmen to play for the Indian men's cricket team and among the contemporary great Test openers. Ian Chappell (2010) hailed him as "The new Bradman". The fact that he scored Test centuries in all countries he toured over the course of his career, save for in New Zealand, and finished with an average of 45.25 opening the batting outside India (it stood at a more impressive 50.48 when Chappell was writing) – coupled with the tempo at which he made them – always

¹ All statistical data have been retrieved from ESPNCricinfo (www.espncricinfo.com).

retained a high impact factor against his name in the opposition's blueprints. According to him, Sehwag was in a class of his own:

"He exceeds such renowned new-ball clatterers as Matthew Hayden and Chris Gayle by more than 20 runs per 100 balls. Incredibly, he is 16 runs per 100 balls ahead of the eternally belligerent (Sanath) Jayasuriya." (Chappell) (parentheses supplied)

However, his shorter version stats, especially those in Twenty20 Internationals (hereafter T20s) ("See ball, hit ball"), reads rather modest compared to his red-ball exploits. How did a batsman of such mercurial acumen outshine his technically sounder peers and his own record in formats conventionally understood to be more accommodative of his clean hitting charms, in terms of both consistency and efficiency? Was he a madman who thrived purely on luck defying statistical odds, or was there a method to his madness?

A clichéd argument goes, strengthened by the recent successes of Rohit Sharma as an ODI opener, after spending about half a decade searching for runs like a deserted traveller for an oasis, that some batsmen thrive in the freedom at the top of the order (Priyanjan, 2016). Avinash Subramaniam (2012) perhaps paraphrased for many critics here:

"In the longer form of limited overs cricket², in which batsmen call the shots (even more so than in Tests), defensive bowling and fields are the predominant form of attack. This stymies, frustrates, and bores Sehwag, who, unlike Sachin Tendulkar, finds it banal, and impossible, to play the role of an accumulator. Sehwag's bread and butter shots are 4's, which explains why he is even less prolific in T20s.

"The sooner the field restrictions come off, the harder it gets for Sehwag to score runs in 4's ... In Tests, captains retain the close catching cordon for at least the first hour. In ODIs, the inner ring is packed with catchers and single-savers for the first five minutes or thereabouts. In T20s, the fielders in the inner circle are dispatched to boundary-saving positions even sooner. The effect of these field placing and run-saving tactics is revealed in Sehwag's batting numbers. Simple as Sehwag!"

The numbers do not quite back up this 'simple' diagnosis. Sehwag opened in 212 ODI innings, among which he was dismissed by a bowler (that is, excluding instances where he was run out) within the period of initial fielding restrictions (first 15 overs before July 2005 and first 10 overs since) on 123 counts. His average strike-rate in such matches stand at 97.95,

² The expression "limited overs" has been used in collective reference to all forms of cricket played with maximum quota for the number of overs to be bowled in an innings.

which is lower than his average strike-rate in those innings where he stayed at the crease beyond the said restrictions, at 106.64. The figures may seem to accommodate an explanation that Sehwag went on to bat longer in matches where he found the going easier, but a closer look reveals that in every one out of three instances where he was dismissed within the period of fielding restrictions, he was striking at 100 runs per 100 balls or more at the time of dismissal. A study on ODIs between July 2005 and December 2013 suggests that while Sehwag worked up a better strike-rate in the Powerplay overs, the difference with that in the remainder of the play is pretty minimal (Silva, Manage, & Swartz, 2015).

What sets cricket apart from other ball games is the variety environmental challenges offer – the state of weather, the texture of the soil, the health of the grass, the leather of the ball, the spikes on the player's shoes, and so on. It is anybody's guess that the idea of limited overs cricket, at least as far as international cricket is concerned, was introduced to add context to a rather sedentary game spanning several days. The defined limitations on the number of deliveries in an innings were intended, among other things, to encourage the element of freedom with the willow. With less mental resources focused on survival, batsmen were left with greater incentive to score runs, and the scoreboard assumed a far greater context, adding to the potentiality of all possible results on each delivery.

To put it in simpler words, the limited overs adaptation added to the tangibility of the game of cricket. With the advent and constant evolution of the limited overs form, it is the scoreboard that has increasingly emerged as the determinant of the course of a match. What the scoreboard gives the batsman is immediate purpose – to beat the bowler or perish trying, drastically reducing the influence of other factors on his mind.

There is a compelling metaphor for this dichotomy in Soren Kierkegaard's anxiety and Ernest Becker's neurosis. The infinite of our imagination is so painfully challenged by the limits of our cognition that the expanse tends to wear us down with its terrors and reminders of the inadequacy of mortal life. Just as the existentially aware human being is overwhelmed by the insignificance of his routines in the face of the perceptually infinite uncertainties of the universe, the cricketer is so often left to the fickleness of the environmental factors. In the first-class form, there is no standard blueprint to approach the play - one has to waft through the nothingness of the infinitesimal contexts that each passing moment of the game provides

to the end goal. On the other hand, between the 50-over and 20-over formats, it is the overwhelming context of the scoreboard, more specifically the 'runs' column, that dwarfs the concerns of all other possible factors that can influence the outcome of the unit delivery bowled in a match. Bereft of the shackles of a well-defined objective, like Achilles, the cricketer may look to soar above the contentment of victory and to pursue excellence and glory³.

Becker might have appreciated this as a manifestation of the immortality project (1973) in the cricketing world. His views on neurosis as a normal attribute of the human experience provides some analogous insight into the existence and evolution of limited overs cricket:

"When we say neurosis represents the truth of life we again mean that life is an overwhelming problem for an animal free of instinct. The individual has to protect himself against the world, and he can do this only as any other animal would: by narrowing down the world, shutting off experience, developing an obliviousness both to the terrors of the world and to his own anxieties. Otherwise, he would be crippled for action... [T]he 'normal' man bites off what he can chew and digest of life, and no more. In other words, men aren't built to be gods, to take in the whole world; they are built like other creatures, to take in the piece of ground in front of their noses... Most men spare themselves this trouble by keeping their minds on the small problems of their lives just as their society maps these problems out for them... They 'tranquelize themselves with the trivial' (borrowing from Kierkegaard here) – so they can lead normal lives." (p. 177) (parentheses and emphasis supplied)

With his limited human cognitive abilities and even weaker control on most environmental variables, if not all, a batsman would be paralyzed by anxiety if appropriate psychological defences are not adapted. While the shorter formats have increasingly devised the scoreboard pressure as a culturally mapped form of Rank's partialization or Becker's fetishization to the extent of gradually reducing the game to a neurotic binary of runs-or-dots, it is largely unavailable for a Test batsman as a filtering method for default prioritization of variables to target. Without the culturally moderated localization of anxiety, the batsman's mind devises heuristics to deal with the problems the opposition present him with.. Beaten outside the off stump in seam-friendly conditions, he may react with a conscious lookout for the 'one that leaves him', to the extent of fetishizing it, wherein he limits the equation of his survival and triumph over the threats on his life at the 22-yard strip to leaving everything outside off to

³ A nice case in point would be when Sri Lanka batted for over three days as records tumbled, going on to post the hitherto undefeated world record for the highest team total in a Test innings ("1st Test, India tour of Sri Lanka at Colombo, Aug 2-6 1997").

avoid that outside edge. He may be so wary of the short rising ball that he forgets to look for the ones pitched up to him. Elsewhere, the fourth innings 'rough' right outside the spot where he has taken guard may hog his imagination with its occasional antics.

In contrast, the trivials of the run-or-dot binary in the shorter formats may come as a relief, where the aesthetics are increasingly becoming more and more immaterial; it does not matter if it is an 'ugly' shot from a batsman, as long as it is a 'boundary' - "doesn't matter how they come", they say - or, if a bowler keeps on targeting the wide line outside off (stump) to secure dots. The scoreboard lays down the dominant marker for the players to adapt by. However, it is the ever-changing equation of the shorter formats that represents the neurotic price of the tranquilization, where the player keeps on looking back over his shoulder, wary of failing to score or prevent enough runs in enough time, thereby localizing the essential anxiety of the cricketer onto the scoreboard. This may be seen as a reflection of how in the larger context of culturally mapped goals in the life cycle of the social human being, temporality, essentially coloured by the ever-present bogeyman of mortality, plays a quintessential factor.

What does a batsman do in the face of stupefying despair when he is unsure if his primary object is to score runs or occupy the crease? Why do the best of batsmen so often find themselves so listless in executing a 'blockathon' when hopes of a win are at best a mirage? The 2005 Test series between India and Pakistan may provide some perspective. Perhaps one of the more painful knocks an Indian cricket fan might have come across in the last decade was a 98-ball-vigil by Tendulkar in Bengaluru for a mere total of 16 runs, dropping anchor on a day-five wicket, before a fast straight delivery from Shahid Afridi snuck through his defence ("3rd Test, Pakistan tour of India at Bengaluru, Mar 24-28 2005"). India's 168-run surrender amplifies the contrast of the Kamran Akmal-Abdul Razzaq match-saving 7th-wicket partnership in the third innings in Mohali, where Akmal's counter-attacking bravado would appear somewhat radical when survival made more conventional sense than runs ("1st Test, Pakistan tour of India at Chandigarh, Mar 8-12 2005").

Freedom, as Erich Fromm wrote, can be "a burden, too heavy for man to bear, something he tries to escape from" (Fromm, 1955, p. 4). The different versions of cricket promise their relative freedoms – a freedom from context and a freedom of context – and come with their own price. Sehwag, just like any other batsman, had to battle anxiety at the batting crease in

its different apparitions. The key to understand Sehwag's elan in red-ball cricket and comparatively inconsistent returns in the limited overs game may lie in the peephole to his inner world as he walked out to bat. How did he adapt to the anxieties of the game?

India's tour of Sri Lanka in 2008 provides for a telling case study for comprehending the value Sehwag brought in his prime to the Indian Test side. It was closely following on the rude discovery of a mystery spinner in Ajantha Mendis during the final of the just concluded Asia Cup (“Final, Asia Cup at Karachi, Jul 6 2008”). Mendis made sure that it was not a singular aberration, claiming 26 scalps in the three-Test series, at a lethal average of 18.38 and strike-rate of 37.6 (“India in Sri Lanka Test Series, 2008 | Most Wickets”). The Indian team was welcomed with a drubbing of an innings and 239 runs in the first Test (“1st Test, India tour of Sri Lanka at Colombo, Jul 23-26 2008”), with Mendis claiming 4 wickets in each innings. It was Muttiah Muralitharan who claimed 5-wicket hauls in both innings, but it would not be far from truth to say that he benefited from the menaces of Mendis against a famed batting line-up, the core of which were battle-tempered against Muralitharan's guile. Come Galle for the second Test (“2nd Test, India tour of Sri Lanka at Galle, Jul 31 – Aug 3 2008”), Mendis clinched a 5-wicket haul in the first innings, returning a 10-wicket haul in aggregate match figures. Yet, it was India who won by a comprehensive margin of 170 runs. Harbhajan Singh deserves much credit, picking up 6 and 4 wickets in the first and second innings, respectively. But if India had adequate runs to attack with, it was because Sehwag almost single-handedly made up for another indifferent show by the batsmen, by carrying the bat with a double-century in the first innings, and following it up with a half-century in the second. (Gautam Gambhir, his partner at the top of the order, held his own too, with fighting knocks of 56 and 74, respectively).

A post-mortem of the series (“India in Sri Lanka Test Series, 2008 – India | Batting and bowling averages”) would reveal that Gambhir, finishing with three half-centuries in six innings at an average of 51.66, with was the most consistent in a batting order that was all out of sorts. But Sehwag returned the highest average, at 68.80, thanks largely to the effort in Galle, with V.V.S. Laxman a distant third with two fifties at a middling average of 43. As far as it came to making an impact on the opposition bowlers, no one else came close to Sehwag. In terms of number of deliveries faced by Indian batsmen in that series, he was third, after

Laxman and Gambhir, respectively, having played more than even the 'dependable' Rahul Dravid. What really set him apart from the rest though was not his numbers, it was his nonchalance.

In Galle, Sehwag scored 61.09% of the team total at a strike-rate of 87.01, where his mates in the top six positions of the batting order returned scores of 56, 2, 5, 0 and 39. This is not an one-off, either. 15 out of 22 Test tons by Sehwag as opener came in instances where the side were bowled out by the opposition. In 14 of those, he ended up being the top-scorer for his team; in 12 innings, he contributed with more than 30% of the team totals, 6 of which accounted for more than 40%, including 3 monumental efforts where he scored more than half the team aggregate. Also deserving of mention is the match-saving 151 in the fourth innings at Adelaide in 2008, in which the second highest score was 20 ("4th Test, India tour of Australia at Adelaide, Jan 24-28 2008"). Further, he hit half-centuries on 19 occasions where India were all out in an innings, in 9 of which, he finished with the highest score, and in 7 of those, he was the only batsman to have reached or crossed the 50-run mark.

Sehwag, at the height of his red-ball game, exuded something of what could be equated with Kierkegaard's earnestness (Beaubout, 1996, p. 56) – a quest through the pits of anxiety, guiding one away from despair and towards salvation. Sehwag might well have been reading from the journals of the Danish theologian:

"Can there be something in life that has power over us which little by little causes us to forget all that is good?..."

"If this can ever be, then one must look for a cure against it. Praise be to God that such a cure exists - to quietly make a decision..."

"...It is just a matter of moments, make a decision and all is well. Dare like a bold swimmer to plunge into the sea, and dare to believe that the weight of the swimmer will go to the goal against all opposing currents." (Kierkegaard & Moore, 2007a, p. 3)

In times of collective crises of the team, the batsman, like the existentialist, must act, and internalizing Krishna's dictum of compulsory action in the Mahabharata (Vyasa)⁴; he must leave doubt and hesitation outside the (battle-)field. One often hears the learned commentators emphasizing on the need for batsmen to guard against tentativeness and to be

⁴ The celebrated dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra can be found in Chapters XXV through XLII of the 'Bhishma Parva', which has also been classically compiled into a separate volume revered as a Hindu religious text known as the *Bhagavad Gita*. Gurcharan Das (2009) carries out a thoughtful deliberation on this dialogue in his treatise on the *Mahabharata*.

decisive and committed in their footwork and stroke play, especially when the going gets tough in the face of unpredictable surface conditions. If a coach had a bunch of advice to a batsman limited on defensive skills like Sehwag, this would be right up there at the top. But were it not easier said than done, batting in Test cricket would be far lesser a challenge than it is.

When Kierkegaard wrote about decisiveness as a "matter of moments", he was perhaps leaving a tip for batsmen to attend to the present. Writing elsewhere, he realized that the secret to deal with anxiety is to immerse oneself in the present:

"When by the help of eternity one lives absorbed in today, he turns his back to the next day. The more he is absorbed in today, the more decisively he turns his back upon the next day, so that he does not see it at all." (Kierkegaard & Moore, 2007b, p. 212)

Now, the present of man is a unique concoction, as Becker might have acknowledged, for man is alone in the organismic realm to conceive of infinitude as the antithesis of the finitude to which the flesh is bound. Thus, he lives on the fuel of past experiences and in imagination, rather than mere anticipation, of the future. This eternal problem makes itself known quite forcefully should the batsman be beaten by the ball on a certain instance. By the time he takes guard for the next delivery, he might be better readying himself to tackle the bygone than to face the actual imminent delivery. This cognitive susceptibility increases, where based on his assessment of the environment, the batsman perceives the probability of the recurrence of the delivery that got the better of him to be more than that of mere chance.

This is where pundits thought (Engineer, 2015) that Sehwag excelled, at least in Test cricket: the uncanny routine of switching off and on between deliveries. If he was bothered by the ball beating his bat, it was less likely to influence his preparation for the next delivery compared to his legendary peers. Chappell (2010) attributed him with the "incredible strength of an uncluttered mind" which spilled over to his frame of mind between innings - he would remain unfazed even in the face of the coach's criticism following an underperformance, a shrug of shoulders, perhaps, as former Indian coach John Wright recounted, "as if to say, 'Watch my next innings'". From Sehwag's own accounts of his game, one understands a preference for playing a ball on its 'merit' over modifying his approach to a particular game situation (Interview by Nagraj Gollapudi, 2009). To excel with such philosophy would require a religious adherence to a couple of ground rules: one, what has already happened cannot be

changed; two, what is going to happen cannot be pre-empted. The only option the batsman would thus have is to narrow his focus off variables he cannot control, on to the present task of watching the ball leave the hand of the bowler and track its path onto him. That is all the information he needs to process and nothing else. Then, as Sehwag put it himself, "if there is a ball to be hit I will hit it... if it is a good ball I have to respect it" (Interview by Nagraj Gollapudi, 2009).

If Sehwag's fundamental game was predicated on the art of keeping it simple, why did it not serve him in the limited overs formats? He might well have succumbed to a different sort of earnestness evoked by what Kierkegaard would call finitude's despair (Kierkegaard & Moore, 2007c, p. 136), a necessary result of the fetishization of the run-or-dot binary. The immanent context of the scoreboard of which Sehwag found himself free in Test cricket was the defining component of ODIs and T20Is. So, even an outcome less defeating than the ball beating the bat, like an instance of a perfect connection between the bat and ball that does not add to the team score, may serve to worsen the ever-present anxiety of not scoring enough runs in the designated number of overs. By definition then, the batsman is not supposed to play the ball only, but the scoreboard as well. Hence, despite the best of efforts by Sehwag to switch off after facing a delivery, he would be severely limited in his capacity to do so because of the very nature of the shorter formats.

Ruminating on Krishna's pep talk to Arjuna, the reader of the Mahabharata (Vyasa) might enquire: even if abstinence from action was never an option, did Arjuna have a choice in determining the course of his action? Then again, Arjuna in the context of Kurukshetra was a warrior: on the battlefield, it preordained him with a duty to fight, to the prejudice of alternative courses of action he might have assumed in other walks of life. In the same breath, it is possible that the seeds of Sehwag's underperformance lay in the internalization of the stereotype accorded to him by the cricketing culture: that of a naked sword, with which to vanquish the enemy, or to perish falling on it.

Virender Sehwag was, first and foremost, a swashbuckling stroke player who had been promoted to the top of the ODI batting line-up to provide a quick, but not necessarily safe, start for the batsmen to follow. It was an identity that largely influenced his style of play in limited overs cricket. The mindfulness routine of his Test strategy would be necessarily

confounded by the overbearing burden of scoring runs at breakneck strike-rates, and he probably felt obligated to not only maintain the momentum but improve on it even when he would be scoring at a reasonably brisk pace. Like Arjuna whose refusal to slay his kin would contradict his Kshatriya dharma, Sehwag's abdication of the role as the battering ram of the limited overs batting line-up would be antithetic to his very identity as a limited overs cricketer.

It follows that earnestness in itself may not be the panacea to cure a batsman of his anxiety and keep despair at bay. Deciding to act in a course that lacks "infinite" and is treaded by "the multitude of people and things around it", according to Kierkegaard, has the pitfalls of losing the self "by being altogether reduced to the finite", and "consists in ascribing infinite value to the trivial and temporal" (Kierkegaard & Moore, 2007c, p. 136). Sehwag might have fallen prey to the despair of the finite, something that "goes virtually unnoticed in the world", as he is perceived by "the multitude of others" as "just what a human being ought to be" (Kierkegaard & Moore, p. 137). He was tied to his destiny, as prescribed by the temporal norms of limited overs cricket, of being the embodiment of an Achillean infantry sent out to shock and neutralize the enemy, inflicting the maximum possible blows in the least measure of time.

Thus, time, the reductive element of life and its decay that gave birth to Sehwag's phenomenal impact, especially on what it means to be an opening batsman in Test cricket (a la Adam Gilchrist dawning a new age for the batsman-wicketkeeper at the expense of the wicketkeeper-batsman), ended up consuming it in white-ball cricket. This is less of an indictment on Sehwag and more on the ever-evolving nature of cricket itself. When the International Cricket Council (hereafter ICC) fretted over "time to complete a game" as a shortcoming in its 'Strategies, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats' analysis (Bull, 2018), it appeared to be a foreboding that the fate of cricket may be giving in to an "instinctive wish for submission" (Fromm, 1955, p. 4) to the security of the finite. The variety in the environmental conditions for the limited overs matches across the world, which endows the sport with its unique character, appears to be in a free fall. The ICC seems to be chasing a formula to reduce the mortal terrors of the game into a neurotic race against temporality, presenting the sport as relatively more failure proof, and as requiring a more manageable set

of skills (and defences) required to master the game, in a bid to attract investment in and from newer territories. Even as 20-over cricket may hold the promise for expansion (Berry, 2018) and the talk of it becoming global enough to grow into an Olympic sport (“Champions Trophy axed as ICC eyes Olympics”), the struggles are real in the other formats. The fact that ICC has been struggling with the 'middle overs' in ODIs despite frequent experiments with rule changes suggests volumes about how 50-over cricket is regressing into an increasingly irrelevant extension of the shortest format. The key might well lie in encouraging more sporting wickets as a matter of policy. Without the aesthetics of the tussle between the ball and the bat, mediated by uncontrolled environmental variables, when T20s too become old enough for the spectators to struggle with the 'middle overs' stagnation, even as ICC looks at ‘T10’⁵ as both a ‘threat’ and an ‘opportunity’ (Bull, 2018), Hong Kong Sixes might hold the not-too distant future!

"Cowards die many times before their deaths" (Shakespeare). So *dies*⁶ a batsman over the course of his career, and apparently, so does cricket. Andy Bull (2018), writing for The Guardian in the month of May, observed that cricket’s “morbid obsession” with its extinction is almost as old as the history of the sport itself, which he thought is not necessarily a bad thing; the “existential crisis” that has perennially shadowed the game has inspired the course of its survival, adaptation and evolution. Indeed, this gentle recreation of the early colonial era has come a long way, rigging its normative framework time and again to frightening complexity even as it chases greater significance in the world of sports through banal simplification of context. But, the ever anxious spectator, struggling to adjust with all the rapid changes in the recent times, cannot help but wonder: how long does cricket have before the essence, which binds the plurality of its personae, is lost, and like the ship of Theseus, it becomes something else?

⁵ Acronym for a ten-over professional format. The Emirates Cricket Board introduced the first ever internationally approved league featuring this format in 2017.

⁶ The anecdote of death used as a euphemism for dismissal of the batsman in play.

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