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What the IPL Spectacle Really Feeds

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There is something in the human being that cannot sit quietly with itself. Not restlessness in the ordinary sense, not boredom that a good night's sleep would fix, but a structural dissatisfaction, a felt sense of incompleteness that persists regardless of what is acquired or achieved. The person who appears to have everything still reaches for something more. At rest, there is still a low hum of insufficiency beneath the rest, one that cannot quite be named or located.

This dissatisfaction is not a mystery. It is the ego's own structure: a false centre claiming to be the whole, unable to sit with itself because sitting with itself would expose the claim. What the ego will not face, it must run from. And running requires a destination.

To keep that condition below the threshold of conscious discomfort, one reaches for objects: achievement, approval, belief, tribe. And of all the objects available, a borrowed collective identity is among the most efficient: it delivers belonging, definition, and a ready-made opposition in a single transaction, with no inner work required. You simply absorb the group, and the group begins doing what you needed done.

This is what makes IPL cricket, now in its nineteenth season and carrying a total business value that has crossed eighteen billion dollars, something more interesting than just a cricket tournament. The economics have been analysed, the spectacle often criticised, and the cricket endlessly debated. But the real question worth asking is a different one, and it concerns the man watching rather than the men playing. Why does he need it so badly that none of the rest of it seems to matter? What is the franchise actually doing for him? What would he have to sit with if it were not there?

The Franchise You Never Joined

Every season, millions of people across the country develop a fierce, protective attachment to a franchise they do not own, whose players they have never met, and whose victories produce in them a warmth they would struggle to explain. The first thing to notice about this attachment is that it is borrowed, and borrowed from nothing the spectator chose with any real attention. Nobody examined the economics of a franchise before deciding to feel wounded when it loses. Nobody studied its ownership before making its victory feel personal. The team was absorbed, usually through geography, peer pressure, or proximity to a single player whose face appeared on enough billboards. And yet the resulting loyalty behaves in every way like something earned: fierce, tribal, capable of genuine aggression toward those who hold the rival affiliation.

Outside a home stadium after a closely contested match, one often sees the winning side's supporters turning on those who came for the other team. People with no personal history with each other, no competing interests, no actual grievance, treating each other as opponents because of the colours on someone else's shirt. This is not fan enthusiasm exceeding itself but a precise illustration of what borrowed identity does to a person when it operates without examination.

The ego, by its nature, requires objects to feel real. It cannot sustain itself on nothing; it must attach, claim, identify. And the franchise is a remarkably convenient object for this purpose. It is stable, highly visible, emotionally intense, and, crucially, it requires no inner work whatsoever. You do not need to understand anything, question anything, or risk anything to absorb a franchise as your own. You simply take on the identity, and it begins immediately doing what all borrowed identities do: sorting the world into those who share it and those who threaten it. The fan who cannot explain why he loves his team, but who would feel genuine contempt toward you for loving the other one, is not behaving irrationally. He is behaving as the ego always behaves when it has been handed a costume and told: this is who you are.

This is the same mechanism by which the ego adopts religion, region, caste, or political affiliation. The psychological movement is identical in every case. The ego encounters something that can give it belonging, definition, and a ready-made opposition, and it accepts instantly, because the alternative is to remain without scaffolding. An ego without borrowed identity has to face itself, and that facing is what the ego spends most of its energy avoiding. The franchise is simply a more colourful and seasonally reliable version of the same relief.

What should disturb a thoughtful person is not that this mechanism exists, but that it is so transparent in this context and yet so invisible to those inside it. A man who would bristle at being called communally tribal will spend two months a year in an emotional state psychologically closer to tribalism than he would like to admit, organised around the batting average of a paid athlete who lives in a different country and would not even recognise him on the street.

The Formula of Inner Poverty

There is a principle worth stating as plainly as possible, because it is the key to everything else. The poorer the inner life, the cheaper the entertainment will need to be. When the actual life fails to provide genuine engagement, genuine love, work of any real depth, the evening's match ceases to be a pleasure and becomes an anaesthetic, something the person takes not to feel good but to feel less. The kind of entertainment one repeatedly reaches for can reveal more about inner condition than income, education, or stated aspiration ever will.

At this point, one thing has to be clear: there is nothing inherently wrong about watching a cricket match, or for that matter any sport. A person whose life contains real work, real attention, real relationships conducted with some honesty, can still enjoy a cricket match. The grief of one result will have to be replaced by the next, which demands his attention. The odds scrolling at the screen's bottom, which change with every ball, arrive with every boundary, the

cheerleaders whose presence has somehow become structurally necessary to the proceedings: none of these feel like requirements, because the watching comes from abundance rather than from demand. Two months of the sporting calendar do not constitute the emotional high season of his year, with everything else as merely what happens in between.

Cricket, as it was played before it became primarily a vehicle for advertising, repaid close attention. There was a time when a bowler who conceded nothing across six deliveries earned applause, when a spinner who tossed the ball up and beat the batsman in the air was considered to have done something skilful, when a batsman who occupied the crease for an entire session without incident was understood to have served his team well. Test cricket in particular checked something in a player that other formats could not: the capacity to remain still, patient, and focused across days rather than deliveries. That quality of the game has not been replaced by something better. It has been replaced by something louder.

There is a quality of watching that does not leave the person where it found him. Not excitement, for excitement passes without depositing anything. Something that went deeper than excitement, an inner movement that left a residue, so that the person who attended carefully to a passage of real beauty walked out of the ground carrying something he did not have when he walked in. This kind of engagement demanded something of the watcher: patience, freedom from the demand for the next stimulus, and the willingness to let the experience develop at its own pace rather than his. A well-constructed innings unfolding over hours, the slow accumulation of tension between a precise bowler and a patient batsman, the geometry of a cover drive that the entire ground understood in the same moment: these required genuine attention, and what they asked of a person, they gave back changed.

What has replaced that is stimulation without depth: immediate, surface-level excitement that activates without deepening, passes without leaving anything behind, and is completed the moment it lands. It asks nothing of the watcher because it cannot afford to; the moment it asks for attention rather than simply capturing it, the watcher moves on. One kind of engagement left the person altered; the other leaves only the demand for another unit of the same, because nothing has been satisfied, only temporarily suppressed. The difference runs not between old cricket and new cricket, or between sport and other forms of entertainment, but between a quality of inner engagement that produced a genuine, somewhat higher pleasure and a structural restlessness that produces only the simulation of it. The comparison that states it most simply: a b leaves the reader better than it found him; a match watched w where he started, except more

demanding. From one engagement, something was gained. From the other, only the evening was spent.

This is why, in the case of superficial stimulation, the dose the ego reaches for must keep rising. A six was once sufficient. Then the six needed the fireworks burst to register as real. Then it needed the cheerleaders. Then came the fantasy sports apps that allowed the viewer to carry a financial stake in every delivery. By the time Parliament passed the Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming Act in August 2025, banning fantasy sports, rummy and poker outright as "online money games," Dream11 alone had registered over 220 million users, and the legal real-money gaming industry had grown to roughly ₹30,000 crore a year. The Parliamentary debate cited documented financial ruin, gaming addiction, and household distress as the justification for the ban. The illegal cricket betting economy, which has always dwarfed the legal one, was left completely untouched. The entertainment apparatus is working progressively harder to produce diminishing returns on pleasure, not becoming more generous with it. The ego's tolerance rises steadily; what produced the first effect becomes incapable of producing any effect at all. The spectator who once needed only the result now needs the result plus the spectacle plus the skin plus the betting slip, and next season there will be something more, because the logic of the mechanism demands it. The deeper enjoyment has left; agitation has filled its place; and these are not equivalent conditions, whatever the roar of the crowd might suggest.

And what is true of the individual spectator is true of the culture that produced him, too. Two populations occupy the same country simultaneously: hundreds of millions of viewers for a franchise tournament and, at the other end of the scale, a library system that receives among the lowest per-capita public investment of any country measured. The most careful empirical estimate puts India's per-capita public library spending at around ₹11.62 a year, and in states like Bihar and Jharkhand the figure drops below half a rupee per person. The United States, for comparison, spends the equivalent of nearly ₹3,500 per person. These are not two unrelated facts; they are the same fact seen from different angles. A person who cannot sit with a paragraph, who cannot tolerate the slow accumulation of understanding that a serious book requires, will require something that delivers sensation in immediate, undemanding bursts. The match is what he will find. And the match will keep requiring more of itself to keep producing less.

There is a student in every city who can cite IPL brand valuations accurately, name the captains of all ten teams, and recite the names of the players who have been bought and sold with the fluency of genuine knowledge. Ask him how many books he has read, who someone like

G.D. Agarwal was, what the Thomas Cup is, or who leads the Indian men's singles tennis ranking. The silence that will likely follow speaks not of ignorance alone but of attention that has been actively redistributed toward what costs nothing, asks nothing, and leaves the one attending it unchanged.

The Economy of Distraction

That redistribution did not happen passively. The ego chose it, every evening, every weekend, over several seasons compounding into years. Something had a legitimate prior claim on that time, something that would have demanded effort, produced discomfort, and eventually altered the person who gave it sustained attention. The franchise received that time instead. And here the irony deserves to be looked at plainly: the theft is the spectator's own, committed against his own life, and the proceeds are collected by someone else entirely. The ego steals from what is real in itself, and the stolen hours become the foundation of someone else's private jet and seven-generation wealth.

The mechanics of this transfer are precise. Broadcasting rights for the current IPL cycle were sold for ₹48,390 crore, a per-match value exceeding the English Premier League. In a single season, advertisers pay over ₹4,500 crore to access the spectator's screen, with a 10-second television slot during the tournament priced at around ₹18 lakh in recent seasons. By GroupM ESP Properties' annual accounting, 87% of all sports endorsements in India, and 95% of all sports media investment, flow into cricket. In the economy that the IPL has built, the match is the pretext and the spectator is the product.

The fusion of match and gambling was not incidental; it was structural. Dream11 served as the IPL's title sponsor from 2020 to 2022. My11Circle replaced it in 2024 as the League's official fantasy sports partner. The cricketers whose jerseys the fans wear, Rohit Sharma, Jasprit Bumrah, Hardik Pandya, Shikhar Dhawan, Rishabh Pant, Shreyas Iyer, and others, all served as brand ambassadors for these same platforms, selling to the spectator the very product that Parliament would eventually judge harmful enough to ban outright. The player was paid to legitimise the apparatus that drained the fan. When the ban came, the players moved on to their next endorsement; the households that had accumulated debts were left where they stood.

The player whose jersey the spectator wears does not know his name. Does not know whether his child is unwell, whether his savings are stretched, whether the month has been hard or easy. The spectator's personal energy, his willingness to defend a stranger online against

of comparable weight returns. A leading cricketer now earns approximately ₹200 crore annually from brand endorsements alone, with a single sponsored social media post valued between ₹11 and ₹14 crore; his IPL playing contract, by comparison, pays him ₹21 crore for an entire season, roughly a tenth of what his face earns from brands. He simultaneously endorses more than thirty products spanning tyres, paint, insurance, grooming, real estate, energy drinks, and, until August 2025, fantasy gaming itself. Structurally, this makes him less of a sportsman who endorses things and more of an endorser who plays sport to maintain the value of his face. Yet when someone criticises the player, it is the spectator who reaches for his phone, as though an insult to the franchise were an insult to his own family. The person being defended would not recognise the defender on the street. This is the furthest reach of borrowed identity: a person spending his real life protecting the reputation of someone who does not know he exists.

The cities where the largest crowds gather are themselves instructive. Bengaluru has been in acute water crisis for years; by the 2024 summer, nearly half of the city's roughly 14,000 government borewells had ceased to yield water, and the daily water deficit ran to 500 million litres. Chennai faces the same issue. The home grounds in both cities fill reliably; local victories are celebrated as the city's own achievement. Ask how many of those filling the stands know the precise state of the groundwater table under the city they claim to love through franchise loyalty, and how many of the players representing those cities have said a public word about the water crisis, stayed in the city after the season, or given any indication that the city means to them what they mean to the city. The asymmetry is so complete it would be comic if its implications did not reach so far.

There is a reason the entertainment apparatus grows more elaborate, more expensive, and more omnipresent in precisely the historical moment when the ground-level facts of existence are becoming harder to look at. Political theatre, religious spectacle, franchise cricket: the products differ but the mechanism is identical in every case, each offering the ego a ready-made emotional world to inhabit so that it need not examine the actual world it lives in. Each is loud, tribal, structured around heroes and enemies, generating the sensation of meaningful participation while demanding nothing of the participant's inner life. Two large wars proceed in real time; the sixth mass extinction has moved from projection to event, with species leaving the world at a rate that recorded human history offers no precedent for; the rivers that built civilisations are in documented decline. These facts are available to anyone who looks. But looking requires that the ego not be running from itself, and an ego running from itself is precisely what the entertainm The spectacle has not grown because the human capacity for because the ego's willingness to

bear reality has declined, and the ego must administer a progressively larger dose to itself to maintain the numbness.

And here is the point the entertainment industry will never state but which its economics make plain. The apparatus lives on inner poverty; it has no market among people who are not running from themselves. If people were to live with genuine engagement, genuine work, genuine inquiry, the market for cheap distraction would simply have no buyers. Nobody would need it. The franchise survives not because it is wonderful but because the inner poverty it temporarily replaces is so painful to inhabit. And that inner poverty, which the ego itself authors and refuses to examine, is exactly what the entire economy around the spectator has assembled itself to meet.

The match ends every night. The emptiness that sent the spectator to the screen is exactly where he left it when he sat down. Sometimes the result has gone badly and there is the additional weight of frustration; sometimes it has gone well and there is a warmth that persists for an hour. But the franchise cannot replace a self, and a borrowed loyalty cannot substitute for the loyalty a person owes to his own life, his own questions, the things in himself that have been accumulating, season after season, while the matches played on. These do not disappear because the IPL is live, they compound.

What the crowd is running from was there before the first ball of this season was bowled, and it will be there after the last wicket falls. That, not the scoreboard, is the fact that has been waiting, patiently, without fanfare, for someone to sit with it.

Acharya Prashant is a philosopher and author whose work centres on self-inquiry and its application to contemporary life.

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