BREAD, BUTTER & CIRCUS

AMOGH SHASHINBHAI RAVAL

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A Note Before We Begin

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I am eighteen years old. I live in Ahmedabad, study BCom at Gujarat Arts and Commerce College, and have never published anything before this point. I am not an economist, a sociologist, a psychologist, or a historian. I have no formal expertise in media studies, digital behavior, or the political economy of sports. What I have is a notebook, an internet connection, a curious mind about why life is the way it is, and a few years of attending cricket coaching sessions from 3:30 pm to 7:00 pm every afternoon – as a below-average, regular player who was largely invisible to the coaches, ignored in favour of the genuinely talented kids – that eventually gave me a very different picture of what it means to be inside an activity and then by accident rather than decision, outside it.

That experience gave me something I did not expect: a vantage point. Not from inside the game — I was never good enough for that — but from just beside it, close enough to understand what real athletic effort looks like, far enough outside to see the machinery built around it. You learn different things at the back of a drill than you learn at the front. At the front, you learn the craft. At the back, you learn the whole room. This book came from the back of the drill.

I started writing because I could not find a book that addressed the experience of being a young Indian in 2025 the way I wanted it addressed, not as a productivity

problem, not as a screen addiction to be managed with apps and alarms, and not as a moral failing to be corrected with discipline. I wanted someone to explain the system to me honestly—not condemn it, not celebrate it, just explain it, the way you would explain something to a friend you respected. So I wrote the explanation I wanted to read.

This book is not an argument against sports. Cricket gave me something real — five years of showing up, of understanding what effort and discipline look like from the inside, of knowing what it means to be in a room full of people who are better than you and choosing to stay anyway. Sports are part of life. Precisely that: part of it. This book is about what happens when the circus built around sports—the algorithms, the franchise models, the content machines, and the twenty-four-hour attention capture apparatus—slowly and silently begins to replace the rest of life.

I still scroll. I still watch the IPL. I still make almost all of the choices this book examines critically. The difference is that now, at least, I am making them with my eyes open. That is the only thing I am asking of you in return for the pages that follow. Not perfection. Not discipline. Just attention.

— Amogh Raval,
Ahmedabad, 2026

How to Read This Book

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The fourteen chapters that follow are designed to be read in sequence—each one builds on what came before—but they can also stand alone if you return to particular chapters later. The first seven chapters deal with diagnosis: understanding what the system is, where it came from, and how it works. The final seven chapters deal with implications and agency: what it costs to stay in the audience, who profits from your staying there, and what it looks like to choose differently.

There are no solutions at the end of this book. There is no morning routine, no productivity hack, no seven-step framework for beating the algorithm. What there is, I hope, is enough clarity about the system that you can find your own way through it, which is the only way the finding really works.

The central question of this book is not whether you should stop watching sport. You should not. The question is whether watching has quietly become the whole of life and whether that happened because you chose it or because it was chosen for you by a system that benefits from your continued spectatorship. Let us begin.

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Chapter 1

What Bread, Butter & Circus Means

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It was a Tuesday. I know it was a Tuesday because my B. Com timetable has Accounts and Statistics back-to-back on Tuesday mornings, and the particular dread of that combination has a texture I can identify without looking at a clock. It is a specific, slightly nauseating quality of the morning — the knowledge that six hours of your day are already spoken for before you have done anything to deserve having them spoken for. Tuesday mornings have a flavor. This one was typical.

I woke up at around seven-fifteen, which meant I had time. Not abundant time, but enough time—the kind that should have been used for something. Breakfast. The chapter I had not read the night before. A few minutes of sitting quietly, which I have found, on the rare occasions I manage it, actually improves the quality of whatever comes after it. There was time for any of these things.

Instead, before my feet had even found the floor, before my eyes had fully adjusted to the thin light coming

through the curtains, my hand had already located my phone on the nightstand with the practiced certainty of a reflex. Not a decision. A reflex. The distinction matters, and I will come back to it repeatedly.

I scrolled for forty minutes. I know it was forty minutes because the screen time notification I habitually dismiss told me so later that day. In those forty minutes, I watched seventeen Reels—comedy sketches, a gym transformation video, someone making pasta in a way I will never attempt, a dog doing something endearing, and three or four videos I cannot account for at all. I watched three cricket highlight compilations, all of them from matches I had already seen or read about. I watched two meme compilations. I watched one motivational speech delivered by a man in a fitted suit in front of a whiteboard, and he said something about discipline and wolves, and I thought, Yes, that is true, and then I put the phone down and picked it up again thirty seconds later.

By the end, I had consumed the equivalent of a short film's worth of content and retained approximately nothing. My tea went cold on the desk. I had made it before the phone—a small, unremarked victory of intention over habit that the phone promptly negated. I drank the tea cold and grimaced and told myself I would be more disciplined tomorrow. My textbooks were where I had left them. Untouched. Closed. Waiting with the patient indifference of objects that have nowhere to be and nothing to prove. The day had technically started. Nothing real had begun.

I want to be precise about this, because it is the beginning of everything I am going to say in this book. The forty minutes of scrolling were not relaxing. I was not rested afterward. They were not educational, creative, or social

in any meaningful sense. They were not even particularly enjoyable—there was no single moment in those forty minutes where I sat back and thought, "Yes, this is exactly what I needed." What they were, if I am being honest, was a filling of space. A preventive measure against the discomfort of the morning, against the faint but persistent anxiety that the day ahead generates in someone who has several things he should be doing and is doing none of them.

I reached for the phone because it was there. After all, it was warm and bright and immediately rewarding in the specific sense that it asked absolutely nothing of me. It made no demands. It produced stimulation without requiring effort. In the arithmetic of morning willpower, when the alternative is sitting quietly and thinking or getting up and beginning, the phone wins every time — not because it is better, but because it requires less. And less so when you are seventeen. Reels deep before your feet have touched the floor, feels like more than enough.

This book is about that. It is about forty minutes. But it is also about something larger than forty minutes, something the forty minutes points toward: a structure of modern life that has been quietly, efficiently, and without any malice whatsoever organized around the principle of keeping people watching. The forty minutes are a symptom. The structure is the disease—though 'disease' is too dramatic a word for something so pleasant, so universally participated in, and so genuinely difficult to stop.

The Three Pillars

I have come to think of modern life in Ahmedabad—and I suspect in most Indian cities, and I suspect in most cities

anywhere—as resting on three pillars. I call them bread, butter, and circus. These words come from a Roman poet I will introduce in the next chapter, and they carry more history than I initially knew when I borrowed them. But the words, even stripped of their historical weight, describe something I recognize from the inside of my daily life with uncomfortable precision.

Bread is the first pillar. Bread is survival. It is income and shelter and the basic material conditions of existence — the things that must be in place before anything else can be built or even contemplated. For my parents, bread is the tension that lives quietly behind every conversation about my studies, every time my father asks whether I have looked into CA enrollment or whether I have spoken to the professor who knows someone at a firm. Bread is the reason we study what we study and live where we live and have the conversations we have at the dinner table when the conversation turns, as it does with regularity, to what I am going to do with myself. Bread is not glamorous, but it is honest. When you are worried about bread, you know exactly what you are worried about. The anxiety is specific and legible, and it points directly at what needs to be done.

Butter is the second pillar and the one that I think about most often, and believe causes the most invisible damage in the lives of people my age. Butter is comfort, not necessity, not luxury in the old sense, but that soft zone between survival and aspiration where most of modern urban life actually takes place. Butter is the Swiggy order at 11:00 PM that you did not need but wanted because deciding what to eat from the kitchen required a kind of low-level effort that your depleted attention could not quite manage. Butter is the Netflix subscription that

renews automatically every month, even though you have been watching the same three shows for two years. Butter is the AC at twenty-two degrees in October because the fan would be entirely adequate, but the AC is nicer. Butter is not wicked. Butter is pleasant. That is the entire problem with it.

The circus is the third pillar. The circus is the spectacle—sports, social media, Reels, IPL, viral controversies, celebrity gossip, and the endless algorithmic provision of things designed to be watched. The circus is not something you go to anymore; it has not required physical travel since approximately 2007. The circus comes to you. It lives in your pocket, and it knows your preferences better than most of your friends, and it is available twenty-four hours a day, and it is free, or nearly free, or cheap enough that the cost is never the reason you stop. It never asks you to perform in it — only to watch. That is the arrangement: you watch, and it continues. You watch more, and it continues more.

These three pillars hold up a structure that, taken together, constitutes what most of us mean when we say 'daily life. Bread gets you up in the morning. Butter makes the mornings comfortable. And the circus fills everything in between—the commute, the gap between lectures, the hour before dinner, the two hours after dinner, and the last forty minutes before sleep that slide easily into an hour because the autoplay never asks whether you want it to stop.

Why Butter Is the Most Dangerous Pillar

If I had to identify the most underrated danger in modern life — not the most dramatic, not the most visible, but the most consistently destructive — it would not be poverty,

which is terrible but generates its own urgent response. It would not be the circus, which at least declares itself openly as entertainment and can be managed once you see it for what it is. It would be butter. Butter is the most dangerous pillar because it is not enough to make you happy, and not bad enough to make you change.

Consider what butter does to ambition. Genuine ambition — the kind that produces something, builds something, changes something — requires a degree of discomfort as its fuel. It requires the lived sensation that what you have is not enough, that the gap between where you are and where you want to be is real and worth doing something about. Bread creates this sensation in its most acute form: people who are genuinely struggling do not need to be told they should work harder, because the pressure is immediate and impossible to rationalize away. Butter removes this pressure without replacing it with anything. Butter says, "You are comfortable." Not thriving, but not suffering. What exactly is the problem? There is no visible problem. And that — the invisibility of the problem — is the problem.

The zone of comfort is where ambition most often dies, not in dramatic failure but in the slow anesthesia of sufficiency. In the comfort of enough. The young man in Ahmedabad who orders biryani at midnight and watches a web series until 2:00 AM and wakes up groggy and scrolls for forty minutes is not suffering. He would describe himself as fine. He is butter-level fine—sedated by comfort, too comfortable to revolt, and not comfortable enough to truly rest. I know this because I am, most of the time, this person. The book is being written by this person, from inside this condition.

Butter is dangerous in a second way, too: it creates the conditions in which the circus is most effective. A person who is genuinely struggling for bread does not have the luxury of spending three hours watching IPL on a weeknight. The pressure of necessity compresses the time available for passive consumption. Butter removes that compression. When you are comfortable enough not to be desperate but not fulfilled enough to be building something, you are exactly the audience the circus is designed for. You have time, you have a phone, you have a Wi-Fi connection, and you do not have an urgent reason to do anything else. The circus was built for you. This is not an accusation. It is a structural observation.

The Cricket Years — What the Game Gave Me

I want to tell you about the experience that made this book possible, because it is the foundation of everything that follows. From roughly the age of ten until I was about fifteen or sixteen, I attended cricket coaching sessions at a ground not far from where I live. The sessions ran from 3:30 PM to 7:00 PM in the evening—those late-afternoon hours when the Ahmedabad heat has technically broken but not really, when the dust is up, and the sky is going orange, and the sound of leather on willow carries a specific resonance. I cannot hear now, even on television, without something shifting somewhere in my chest.

I need to be clear about something: I was not good. Below average, in the actual technical sense. Not in the false-modest way that talented people sometimes describe themselves—I mean it in the legible, observable way that my position in every drill demonstrated without ambiguity. The talented boys had natural timing, footwork, and the specific quality of spatial intelligence that makes good batsmen look like they are playing a

slower game. I did not have those things in the quantities required. I was at the back of every drill. Not as punishment. Simply because that is how things worked, and because the allocation of coaching attention to the boys most likely to benefit from it is reasonable, even when it is painful to experience from the wrong end of it.

I showed up consistently for years. And many of those days, nobody noticed that I had. The coaches gave their full attention to the players who deserved it. What the boys at the front of the drill received was instruction. What I received, without quite realizing it at the time, was observation. I watched the good players the way the good players watched the coaches — with attention and without ego, because I had nothing to protect. You see differently when you have nothing at stake.

Here is the truth about how I stopped going: there was no decision. I stopped for one week for a reason I cannot clearly recall, and the following week I did not go back— not because I had decided not to, but because I had not decided to. One absent week became two. Two became a month. A month became a summer. At some point during that summer, I became someone who used to play cricket. It was not a brave exit. It was a drift. But from the position the drift accidentally created, I have been able to see things about the game and about the circus around it that I could not have seen from inside.

Cricket gave me something real during those years. Discipline that did not feel like discipline — just the habit of showing up at three-thirty on a Tuesday, even when the motivation was absent. Physical self-knowledge: the specific, irreplaceable understanding of what it feels like to be accountable to your own body in real time, with no algorithm to soften the feedback. The experience of being

inside something demanding and choosing, imperfectly, to remain. These are not small things. The game gave them to me even at the back of the drill. I love cricket. I want to say that plainly. What I see now, from the outside, is what cricket is also becoming: something else, something larger and more commercial and more optimized for viewership than for the game. Both things are true. Holding both at once is what this book asks you to do.

What This Book Will Not Do

This is not a self-help book. I am eighteen years old, and I have not figured out my own life, let alone yours. I will not tell you to delete Instagram, because I have not deleted Instagram. I will not give you morning routines or cold shower prescriptions. All of that is its own form of circus—productivity content as spectacle, the consumption of self-improvement advice as a comfortable substitute for the actual uncomfortable work of improvement. If you finish this book and feel judged, I have failed. If you finish it and feel seen—recognized in something you had not quite named—I have done what I set out to do.

What this book will do is attempt to understand the circus from within it. I am a product of the exact system I am describing. I scroll. I watch the IPL. I follow cricketers I will never meet probably. I am writing about spectatorship as an active spectator, and I think that is the only honest position from which it can be written. To name the structure. To see what I am participating in clearly enough to make some choices about it—not perfect choices, not permanent choices, but conscious ones. That is the whole project.

The circus does not announce itself. It simply arranges the world so that watching is always easier than doing, until the difference between the two becomes invisible.

Chapter 2

Rome, Juvenal, and the First Big Spectacle

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Before there was an algorithm, there was a grain dole. Before there was an infinite scroll, there was the Circus Maximus. Before the IPL was a franchise model generating billions and turning cricketers into celebrities whose faces appear on billboards between advertisements for mobile phones and mutual funds, there were chariot drivers whose names were scratched into the walls of Roman apartment blocks by fans who would never meet them but loved them with a devotion that required no personal contact at all. The architecture of spectacle is old. What is new is only the scale, the speed, and the fact that you carry it in your pocket.

I want to go back to Rome—not as an academic exercise, because I am a BCom student and not a historian, and I should be honest about the limits of what I know—but because the Roman case is the clearest and most documented example I have found of what happens to a society when it decides, consciously or not, that spectacle is an adequate substitute for civic life. The Romans did

not arrive at bread and circuses through a single policy decision made in a committee room. It accumulated, over generations, as a series of individually reasonable decisions that added up to something nobody had quite planned. That slow accumulation is what I want to trace, because I believe we are in the middle of our own version of it, and the Roman version tells us something about how the middle feels from the inside.

A City of One Million

At the height of the Roman Empire — roughly the first and second centuries AD — the city of Rome contained approximately one million people. Pause on that number. One million people in an ancient city, before electricity, before running water in any modern sense, before sanitation infrastructure that we take entirely for granted. The city was dense in a way that contemporary Ahmedabad, for all its crowding, is not. People lived in insulae—multi-story apartment blocks that rose as high as six or seven floors, narrow and dark, prone to fire, with the wealthy on the lower floors and the poor crammed into the upper levels, hauling their water upstairs and disposing of their waste into the streets below. The smell and noise and proximity of one million people in an ancient city are not something any modern I believe we undervalue what each person has gone through.

The inequality in Rome was of a kind that would be recognizable to anyone who has driven from one part of a modern Indian city to another. The senatorial class lived in enormous private houses—the domus—with courtyards and fountains and staff measured in dozens. The plebeians, the common citizens of Rome, lived in those insulae, worked trade or craft or service jobs, and were, in most practical senses, excluded from the political

machinery that governed their lives. Rome had, technically, a republic and then an empire, and in both cases, the meaningful decisions were made by people who were not the millions.

This created a management problem. A million people concentrated in a single city, many of them underemployed, most living in conditions that would generate resentment in anyone paying attention—this is a population that requires, from the perspective of whoever is governing it, some kind of management. The management solution that Rome developed was not primarily violent repression, though repression was certainly available and used when necessary. It was something more subtle and in the long run more effective: the provision of material sufficiency and spectacular entertainment, in quantities large enough to keep the population occupied, satisfied enough not to revolt, and distracted enough not to organize.

Juvenal and the Tenth Satire

Decimus Junius Juvenal—known simply as Juvenal—was a Roman poet who lived from approximately 55 AD to 130 AD, during the reigns of several emperors, including the despotic Domitian. He wrote sixteen satires that constitute some of the sharpest social criticism in any literature I have encountered. He was not a gentle writer. He was not a diplomatic writer. He was a man who looked at Roman society with what I can only describe as forensic contempt and wrote down what he saw with precision and fury.

The Tenth Satire is his most famous work. Juvenal is describing what has happened to the Roman people—the people who once, in the days of the Republic, elected

magistrates, served in legions, and debated policy in the Forum. He writes that these are the same people who once commanded generals, kings, and provinces, who now hold themselves back, and who desire only two things with anxiety: panem et circenses. Circuses and bread.

This phrase is quoted so often that it has lost some of its force. It is used as a knowing cultural reference, a clever observation about the relationship between entertainment and political passivity. But Juvenal was not being clever. He was horrified. He was writing about a free people—a people with a genuine tradition of civic participation, of popular sovereignty, of political engagement—who had traded their political voice for grain and entertainment. Not through a single catastrophic decision. Through a drift of thousands of small, individually comfortable choices, facilitated by rulers who found an entertained and fed population easier to govern than an engaged and demanding one. The bread and circuses were not a gift from generous rulers. They were a management tool. And the people, Juvenal observed, had accepted the exchange so completely that they no longer recognized what they had given up.

I find this devastating. I also find it entirely familiar. The Tuesday morning with the cold tea and the seventeen Reels is not the Circus Maximus. But the structure—the provision of comfortable entertainment as a substitute for the harder, more demanding, more meaningful engagement with one's own life—is recognizably the same. Two thousand years have passed. The grain dole has become Zomato. Chariot racing has become the IPL. Juvenal's words have not aged.

The Grain Dole and Its Political Function

The frumentatio—the grain dole—was Rome's version of a social safety net, though that description significantly flattens its actual function. From the time of the Gracchi brothers in the late Republic (around 123 BC) through the height of the Empire, Rome distributed subsidized or free grain to a large portion of its citizen population. By the first century AD, somewhere between 150,000 and 300,000 Romans were receiving the grain dole monthly—a substantial fraction of the city's total population.

The official justification was compassionate: Rome was a city of significant poverty, and ensuring that citizens had access to basic food was a matter of civic obligation. But the political function was at least as important as the humanitarian one. A population that is not desperate about food is a population that is not rioting about food. The grain dole was, in the most direct and practical sense, the management of political energy through material provision. Keep people fed enough not to revolt. Keep them not quite fed enough to aspire. The space between starvation and aspiration is where docility lives, and the Roman state had identified and was deliberately inhabiting that space.

I think about this when I think about cheap Jio data — genuinely one of the cheapest mobile internet services in the world, which made India into one of the most connected countries in the world in the space of a few years. I am not claiming this was a political conspiracy equivalent to the Roman grain dole. Jio's entry into the market was driven primarily by business considerations, and the democratization of mobile internet has produced genuine goods alongside its complications. But the effect of making the circus available to everyone, cheaply, in

their pocket, continuously, is structurally similar to the grain dole. When the circus is free, or nearly free, something has been managed, even if nobody consciously managed it.

The Colosseum and the Making of a Shared Experience

When most people think of Roman entertainment, they think of the Colosseum—the Flavian Amphitheatre, completed in 80 AD, a structure that held between fifty thousand and eighty thousand spectators and hosted gladiatorial combat, animal hunts, public executions, and theatrical spectacles. Emperors sponsored events lasting days—Trajan, celebrating his Dacian victories, presided over games running for 123 days, involving more than ten thousand gladiators.

What the Colosseum created was not just entertainment but a shared experience that functioned as social glue. Fifty thousand people in a single space, watching the same event, reacting together—cheering the crowd favorite, watching the defeated gladiator await the emperor's decision. The shared experience created the feeling of community without the substance of community. People who had nothing else in common—different neighborhoods, different trades, and different economic positions—shared the gladiator they supported and the outcome they had witnessed. This, I think, is what large-scale sports events do. When the Mumbai Indians win the IPL final, millions of people share a moment of collective emotion. For those few hours, they are part of something larger than themselves. The emotion is real. The community it generates is thin in a specific way: it does not survive the end of the match, requires no mutual

obligation, and asks nothing of the participants except their attention.

The Circus Maximus — Ancient IPL

The Circus Maximus was larger than the Colosseum. It could accommodate somewhere between 150,000 and 250,000 spectators—a quarter of Rome's entire population in a single venue. Chariot racing was Rome's equivalent of cricket: the sport that organized social life around its schedule and produced celebrities whose popularity crossed every class line. The racing factions—Blues, Greens, Reds, and Whites—were not merely sporting teams. They were identity groups, political affiliations, and tribal loyalties. A Roman did not simply prefer the Greens. He was a Green.

The drivers—aurigae—were mostly slaves or freedmen, socially marginal and technically despised, yet enormously famous. A successful charioteer named Gaius Appuleius Diocles raced for twenty-four years, won 1,462 races out of 4,257 starts, and earned what historians have calculated to be the equivalent of several billion dollars in today's terms. His name was known across the empire. His career statistics were inscribed on stone. He was, in every meaningful sense, the Sachin Tendulkar of ancient Rome—a man whose personal excellence had been transmuted into a commercial and cultural phenomenon that generated wealth and attention on a scale that dwarfed the individual.

I think of the IPL franchise model when I read about the faction system. Teams with colors and brand identities, players valued not for their cricket but their marketability as well, and the whole apparatus structured around viewership and sponsorship rather than the game itself.

The Circus Maximus was ancient IPL: the sport was real, the athletes were genuinely extraordinary, and the surrounding ecosystem was sophisticated. machine for managing and monetizing public attention. Two thousand years separate the two institutions. The architecture is the same.

The Nika Riots — When the Circus Got Political

In 532 AD, something remarkable happened in Constantinople. The fans of the chariot racing factions — primarily the Blues and the Greens, who were usually bitter rivals — stopped fighting each other and started fighting the emperor instead. What began as a racing dispute escalated, over the course of a week, into one of the most destructive urban riots in history. The rioters burned much of Constantinople to the ground, killed tens of thousands of people, and came within hours of overthrowing the Emperor Justinian.

The word 'Nika' means 'victory' in Greek—it was the chant of the unified factions as they tore the city apart. Justinian was reportedly ready to flee. It was his wife, the Empress Theodora, who held firm—famously telling the court that she preferred death to exile, that the imperial purple was a fine burial shroud. Justinian's general Belisarius trapped the rioters in the Hippodrome and killed somewhere between thirty thousand and forty thousand people in a single afternoon.

The Nika Riots demonstrate something important: spectator populations are not inherently passive. They can, under specific conditions, convert collective energy into political force. The circus exists, among other reasons, to give public energy somewhere to go that is not toward the exercise of actual political power. When the

circus fails to contain that energy—when the spectacle is not distraction enough, when real political grievances break through the entertainment, the consequences can be catastrophic. The management of spectacle is always, at some level, the management of latent political energy.

What the Circus Could Not Prevent

Rome fell. The Western Roman Empire, battered by a combination of military pressure, economic decline, political instability, and demographic shift, ceased to function as a coherent political entity over the course of the fifth century AD. The city of Rome was sacked by the Visigoths in 410 AD, and again by the Vandals in 455 AD. The last Western emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed in 476 AD without anyone considering it important enough to record in detail at the time.

Edward Gibbon, in his eighteenth-century history of Rome's decline, argued that the entertainment culture contributed to a softening of civic virtue—a gradual withdrawal of the citizen from active engagement with public life and a corresponding dependence on the state for provision and entertainment. This argument has been contested and qualified by historians since, and the causes of Rome's fall are genuinely complex and multi-factorial. But the structural observation remains: a population that has been habituated to watching rather than participating, to receiving rather than producing, and to consuming bread and circuses rather than governing itself—that population is less equipped to meet a genuine crisis when one arrives.

The lesson is not that entertainment destroys civilizations. The lesson is subtler: that the consistent substitution of spectatorship for participation, over enough time,

produces a different kind of person. One who is comfortable, entertained, and progressively less practiced at the skills that civic life and genuine agency require. This is not a Roman problem. It is a structural problem. It is our problem.

> *A free people trading its political voice for grain and spectacle does not make a single catastrophic decision. It makes a thousand comfortable ones, each of which seems entirely reasonable at the time, until the total becomes irreversible.*

Chapter 3

How Entertainment Took Over Daily Life

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My grandfather spent his evenings in the courtyard of the family home somewhere in Gujarat in the mid-1970s. Evening. The temperature had dropped to something bearable. Two or three neighbors had gathered—not by arrangement, just by the organic logic of proximity and the fact that the courtyard is where people go when the heat breaks. Someone had brought tea. There was probably a transistor radio somewhere, playing something nobody was specifically listening to. The conversation ranged across local news and family matters and probably at least one story that everyone present had heard before, but that still got told, because the telling was the point more than the content.

I spent a recent evening in my room in Ahmedabad. On my phone: Reels. On my laptop: a half-watched episode of something I had started three days ago and kept meaning to finish. On the television in the next room: the sound of a news channel playing for nobody in particular. I had four potential screens of content and could not settle

on any of them, so I cycled between them—pieces of several things, fully invested in none of them. After two hours of this,s I was more bored and more tired than if I had done nothing at all. I had been stimulated continuously without being engaged at any depth. I had consumed more in two hours than my grandfather consumed in a week, and I felt less.

What changed between those two images is not merely technology. The technology is the symptom. What changed is the relationship between a human being and the act of doing nothing — the tolerance for silence, the capacity to be unoccupied without experiencing unoccupation as a kind of failure, the ability to be present in an evening without demanding that the evening perform for you. My grandfather's courtyard evenings did not perform well. They simply existed, and the people in them existed alongside them. I have almost no capacity for this. Most people my age have almost no capacity for this. Understanding how that happened is the work of this chapter.

When Entertainment Had Edges

To understand what has happened to entertainment, you need to understand what it used to require: friction. In India in the 1980s and 1990s, a cricket match was an event. I mean that word precisely—it had the temporal structure of an event. It was scheduled. It began at a specific time and ended at a specific time. Neighbours came to houses with better televisions. Someone made tea. The cricket was woven into the fabric of an actual social occasion, which meant that the match existed inside a web of human presence and conversation and shared time that gave it weight.

If you missed a wicket, it was gone. There was no replay on your phone, no official clip package on Instagram, no way to catch up. If you stepped out during a dramatic moment, someone would tell you what happened, and you would have to construct the picture from their telling—and the construction, the small act of imagination required to fill in what you had missed, produced a quality of engagement that passive spectatorship does not. Scarcity created investment. The thing you had seen and could not see again was worth having seen. The thing available on endless replay and highlight compilation becomes, over time, something you approach differently.

Cinema was an occasion. You did not choose from a library of ten thousand films available immediately. You chose from what was playing at what theater on what day. The decision was made in advance. The tickets were bought. Plans were arranged around the showing time. The friction of getting there—the autorickshaw or the bus, the queue, and the buying of samosas outside before going in—was part of the experience, not a tax on it. It built anticipation. Anticipation is what gives an experience weight. When the gap between wanting and having is compressed to zero, the experience arrives without the anticipation that would have made it matter.

Music in the cassette era required effort. You owned the cassettes you could afford, which were not all of them. If you wanted to hear something specific, you found the cassette, rewound it, and listened. If the cassette were not available, you would wait for it on the radio — the radio that played what it decided to play, on its own schedule, independent of your preferences. This friction was not hardship. It was simply how music worked. But the friction meant that when you finally heard the song you

wanted, you were already prepared for it, already invested in it, already bringing something to the encounter.

The Systematic Elimination of Friction

What the past fifty years of media technology have systematically done is eliminate friction. This is usually presented as an achievement—and in many ways it genuinely is. The remote control was convenient. The VCR was liberating. Streaming is extraordinary in its abundance. Autoplay eliminates the small effort of pressing play. Infinite scroll eliminates the effort of deciding when to stop. Each friction eliminated felt like a pure gain at the moment of its elimination. And in aggregate, they have produced an environment in which the gap between desire and satisfaction has collapsed to near-zero: if you want to be entertained, you are entertained, immediately, without any preparation or waiting or coordination that once stood between the wanting and the getting.

The problem is that friction was not merely an inconvenience. Friction was the mechanism by which the brain registered investment. When you have worked even a little to access something, the something has value that it does not have when it arrives without effort. Friction is how the mind learns to associate effort with reward in a way that makes the reward meaningful. When you eliminate the friction between desire and gratification—when every entertainment experience is instantly available, infinitely scrollable, and perfectly personalized—you do not actually make people happier. You make them harder to satisfy, because the threshold for satisfaction has been raised by the abundance that was supposed to lower it.

Reels represent the current endpoint of this process. They have removed the requirement for sustained attention. A Reel runs for fifteen to sixty seconds. If it does not capture you in the first three seconds, you swipe up and another begins immediately, with no gap and no friction. The format has calibrated itself to the most reduced attention span. that human beings are capable of, and then it has trained that attention to be shorter still. Every user is simultaneously the audience and the subject of an ongoing optimization experiment designed to find the content that will hold them longest. The experiment never ends. The content never runs out. The friction has been eliminated.

Csikszentmihalyi and the Neuroscience of Genuine Pleasure

The Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi spent decades studying what makes human beings genuinely happy — not in the self-report sense, where people describe how they feel when asked, but in the moment-to-moment experiential sense, using experience sampling methods that caught people mid-activity and asked how they felt right then. His findings were counterintuitive and, for a generation raised on passive entertainment, uncomfortable. People were happiest when engaged in activities challenging enough to require concentration but not so difficult as to produce anxiety. Not during passive leisure. Not during television watching. Not during scrolling.

He called this state Flow: a condition of deep engagement in which the self disappears into the activity, time passes unusually, and the person is using all of their capacity in service of something that is stretching that capacity. Athletes call it being in the zone. Musicians have a version of it. Surgeons have a version. I had a version of it at the

cricket academy, in the exact moments when I was facing a bowler who was slightly better than I was comfortable with and had to concentrate with my whole body just to survive the over. Not often. But occasionally, in those moments when the Challenge and my ability were in the right relationship to each other, something clicked into place, and the whole world was the ball and the bat and the ground.

Csikszentmihalyi's finding—which has held up across decades of replication in multiple countries and cultural contexts—is that people are happiest during flow, and flow requires challenge. The endless scroll cannot produce flow. It produces something that researchers have called 'simultaneously stimulated and empty': your attention is engaged at the surface level, but never in a way that requires or produces anything. You are busy but not absorbed. Stimulated but not satisfied. This is why you can spend two hours scrolling and feel worse at the end than you did at the beginning. You were engaged without being invested. The nervous system was occupied. But the person was absent.

The IPL Content Machine — A Case Study

The Indian Premier League is, in a sense, the most sophisticated content machine India has ever produced. A single IPL match runs for three to four hours. But the content that surrounds that match extends indefinitely in every direction.

Before the match, previews show on broadcast channels, featuring ex-players generating opinions. Fantasy cricket platforms — Dream11, MPL, and others — where players assemble their fantasy teams, which requires consuming information about player form, pitch conditions, head-to-

head records, and injury updates. Instagram and Twitter accounts for every franchise are generating content in the hours before the match. Player videos, training footage, and behind-the-scenes glimpses are carefully curated by franchise social media teams. Speculation and rumors, and projected playing-eleven debates.

During the match, second-screen commentary on social media, where millions of people simultaneously watch and comment, is crucial. Leave fantasy updates because your fantasy points change delivery by delivery. Sponsored graphics and statistics appearing on screen—strike rates, wagon wheels, probability models—feed the appetite for data that has developed alongside the appetite for spectacle.

After the match comes an entirely new spectacle; in depth the post-match analysis, player interviews and press conferences and expert breakdowns. Meme compilations are assembled within minutes of a memorable moment. Highlight packages. Best moments compilations begin to flooding on social media, followed by Highlight reels and the “Best moments packages".

Meanwhile social media erupts with hot takes, arguments, defenses, and counter-arguments. If something dramatic happened—a last-ball finish, a controversial decision—that incident will be a content topic for days, generating its own sub-ecosystem of opinion, replays, analysis, and argument.

The match is not the product. The match is one node in a continuous content network that runs twelve months a year, two of which happen to have matches in them. The other ten months are offseason trades, auction analysis, franchise news, player fitness updates, injury speculation,

and upcoming season predictions—all generating continuous engagement, a continuous reason to check in. IPL cricket is genuinely brilliant. The quality of play is high, and the matches are often exciting in ways that make them worth watching for their own sake. I am not arguing against cricket. I am noting what has been built around cricket and asking whether you see the building or only the game inside it.

The Necessary Boredom

Boredom is not a malfunction. It is a function. When the brain is not actively engaged in external tasks, it shifts into what neuroscientists call the default mode network — a set of brain regions that activate during rest, rumination, and internally directed thought. This is where you replay recent experiences and extract meaning from them. Where you simulate future scenarios and plan how to respond. Where you integrate information from different areas of experience into the kind of coherent narrative that makes you feel like a person who persists through time and not just a sequence of reactions to whatever the screen is showing.

Creative insight—the kind where a connection suddenly becomes clear that was not clear before—this very often happens during idle time. The long shower where something finally makes sense. The walk where the argument arranges itself. Lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, where the problem resolves itself. These are not mythological phenomena. They represent the real process by which the brain, freed from the demands of external attention, does the work of making sense of things. When you eliminate boredom — when you fill every gap in your attention with content, every commute with a podcast, every meal with a video — you are not avoiding

unpleasantness. You are depriving your brain of the processing time it needs.

I see this in myself and in my friends. We consume enormous amounts of content and have, increasingly, very little to say about any of it. Not because we are incapable of thought, but because thought requires time to develop, and we have stopped giving it that time. A Reel watched is not a Reel processed. Thirty-seven Reels watched is not thirty-seven thoughts had. It is one undifferentiated blur of stimulation from which the brain has extracted almost nothing.

The Normalisation of Watching

There is a belief that has settled quietly into my generation's relationship with the world, and it rarely gets spoken aloud because it does not need to be—it is in the architecture, in the default behaviors, and in the design of every platform we use. The belief is that watching is a valid way to spend a life. Not occasionally watching — we all watch things occasionally, and that is healthy and normal. But watching is the primary mode. Watching as the first response. Watching is what you do when you have time, and also what you do when you do not have time but you do it anyway.

Watching IPL instead of playing cricket. Watching cooking shows instead of cooking. Watching travel vlogs instead of going anywhere. Watching other people build things on YouTube instead of building anything yourself. And—crucially—reacting to the watching as a form of participation. Commenting on the match as though your comment could change the match. Sharing a post as though the share is itself an action. None of these things is inherently wrong. But they are the simulation of

participation, the feeling of being involved without the substance of involvement. Sport is part of life. But watching sport has become, for many people, the whole of what sports mean to them. That is the shift this chapter has been trying to trace.

> *We eliminated friction from entertainment without realizing it was serving a purpose. We made watching easier and doing harder, and then we were surprised to find ourselves watching.*

Chapter 4

Why You Are Becoming a Spectator

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There is a specific quality to the moment when the bowler's arm comes over, and you have not yet moved your feet. It lasts approximately half a second. In that half second, You know that the ball is going to arrive somewhere you are not ready for, that the feet should already be moving but are not, that the gap between where your body is and where it needs to be is too large to close in the time available. The ball arrives. Your feet are still wrong. The result is whatever the ball and the pitch decide, because your body has forfeited its vote.

I spent several years at the back of a drill experiencing that sensation. The coaches did not always comment. The ball provided its own commentary, consistently and without malice. Over time, something changed — not in the result, which often remained bad, but in the body's response. The feet began, slowly, to be in slightly better positions. Not because I had consciously decided to move them differently, but because the body had been learning something below the level of conscious instruction.

Repetition builds structure in the nervous system. That structure is real. It persists. And the process of building it—of showing up repeatedly to do something difficult and badly and gradually less badly—is an experience that spectatorship cannot provide.

The Self-Efficacy That Watching Cannot Build

The psychologist Albert Bandura developed the concept of self-efficacy in the 1970s, and it has become one of the most replicated and practically significant findings in all of psychology. Self-efficacy is not self-esteem—it is not a general feeling of being good or worthy. It is specific: the belief, grounded in experience, that you can perform a particular task or navigate a particular type of challenge. Self-efficacy is built through mastery experiences — through the actual attempt and partial success of doing something, not through watching someone else do it and feeling the vicarious pleasure of their success.

The mirror neuron system — the neural circuitry that activates during observation of an action as well as during performance of the action — gives the brain something that resembles performance. When you watch a perfectly timed cover drive, the motor circuits involved in playing a cover drive are partially activated. This is why watching sport feels physically compelling in a way that watching abstract patterns does not. Your body is doing something. But the something it is doing is not the same as actually playing the shot, and the self-efficacy that would come from actually playing the shot is not built through watching it. You can watch ten thousand cover drives without your batting improving. You cannot hit ten thousand balls in the nets without something changing, even if the something is small and imprecise and not always visible.

This distinction matters beyond cricket. The principle applies to every domain in which modern life offers the choice between watching and doing. You can watch cooking videos indefinitely without becoming a better cook. You can consume business content without building a business. You can follow fitness influencers without becoming fit. In each case, the watching produces a feeling adjacent to doing — stimulation, inspiration, the sense of being in contact with the subject — without producing the actual capability that doing would produce. The gap between watching and doing is the gap between entertainment and education, and modern content has become very good at closing that gap in the felt experience while leaving it wide open in fact.

The Path of the Least Resistance

Evolution did not build us to be productive in the modern sense. Evolution built us to survive, which required the conservation of energy—doing only what was necessary, resting when possible, and taking the easier option when the easier option was available. The impulse to take the path of least resistance was not laziness. It was adaptive intelligence. In an environment where When food was scarce and threats were physical, the brain that conserved energy was the brain that survived long enough to pass on its genes.

The modern entertainment ecosystem has identified this evolutionary wiring and built its entire business model around it. Every friction has been removed from the consumption pathway—immediate availability, infinite content, personalized recommendations, autoplay, and infinite scroll. Meanwhile, the production pathway—actually making, building, practicing, and creating things—remains as demanding as it has always been. The

asymmetry is deliberate and enormous. Watching a cricket match requires you to do almost nothing. Playing cricket requires you to travel somewhere, change your clothes, warm up, concentrate through physical discomfort, and accept public feedback on your performance in real time. The watching is available immediately, frictionless, and comfortable. The playing requires planning, effort, and the willingness to be bad at something in front of other people. When these two options exist simultaneously, the evolutionary brain systematically chooses the first.

This is not a moral failure. I want to be very clear about this, because the easy misreading of what I am arguing is that people who watch rather than participate are lazy or weak-willed. They are not. They are making the choice that the environment has been designed to make them make. The environment is not neutral. It has been built by some of the most intelligent and well-resourced people in the world, specifically to make passive consumption the default. Recognising this does not excuse the choice. It explains the mechanism. And understanding the mechanism is the beginning of the possibility of making a different choice.

The Drift — How It Actually Happens

I did not decide to become a spectator. I drifted into it. The drift happened so gradually and so quietly that by the time I recognized it as a drift, it was already complete. This is how spectatorship most often happens: not through a dramatic decision to stop participating, but through the accumulation of small, individually unremarkable choices to watch rather than do. One week, you skip the nets because you're tired. The month you miss because of exams. The summer that passed, and then the year that

passed, and then the realization, encountered sideways, that you have not picked up a bat in two years.

Drift is different from decision in a psychologically important way. A decision creates accountability. When you decide to stop doing something, you have a reason, you can examine that reason, and you can change your mind. A drift creates no such accountability. There was no moment. There is no reason to examine. The drift happened in the gaps between decisions, in the spaces of not choosing that accumulated into a complete change of direction without ever requiring you to choose anything. The most consequential changes in a person's relationship with their own life often happen this way—not through the wide choices we make consciously, but through the small non-choices that add up in the dark.

The Friends Who Stayed

Some of the boys from those three-thirty hours' sessions are now playing district-level cricket. A few are in Ranji Trophy trials. I follow their progress on Instagram. The posts from practice camps, the kit laid out before matches, the scorecard screenshots with their names in the averages. What I feel when I see these posts is not jealousy—jealousy requires believing that what they have should have been yours, and I do not believe that. What I have access to is awe: the quiet, enormous recognition of what consistent effort applied across years actually accumulates into.

They had talent and they worked. The combination is what produces outcomes at that level. The coaching sessions that felt to me like routine were for them a genuine building. Each session added something to a structure that is now visible. For me, those sessions were

building something different and less legible. I did not see what it was building while it was building it. I see it now, from outside, in the form of this book and this argument and this particular way of looking at the system that the back of the drill accidentally gave me.

I do not romanticize what I lost. I was never going to play Ranji cricket. The drift away from the nets was the drift away from something I was going to lose eventually anyway. But there is a difference between stopping because you have exhausted what a thing can give you and stopping because you drifted out of the habit without noticing. The first is a completed arc. The second is an incomplete one. What I am trying to describe in this book is the arc I would have preferred and the system that made the drift easier than the continuation.

A Generation of Spectators

My generation streams music but rarely plays instruments. We post political opinions but do not organize. We watch cooking shows but rarely cook. We follow creators who make things and genuinely intend to create something of our own—starting next week, when things settle down a bit. We watch fitness content and feel motivated, and then sit back down. We watch travel vlogs and feel the desire to go somewhere, and then check the cost of flights and close the tab and watch another vlog instead. We are spectators in almost every domain, not because we have no ambitions but because the friction of doing has been made so much higher, relative to the frictionlessness of watching, that the doing perpetually gets deferred.

Sport is one domain among many where this is visible, but it is the most visible one because sport has a before—a

time within living memory when most people who cared about cricket had some active relationship with a bat and a ball. The shift from that relationship to pure spectatorship is documented in the tape-ball cricket academies; they have more students than ever, but casual street cricket—tape-ball games and gully cricket, the informal version that was the introduction for Gen—tape-ball cricket lovers—has declined significantly in urban areas as the phones have arrived and the screens have multiplied. The watching has expanded. The playing has contracted. And the watching has also changed: it has become less about the game and more about the content ecosystem built around the game.

> *The question is not whether you are becoming a spectator. The question is whether you will choose your spectatorship consciously or the system will choose it for you.*

Chapter 5

Sports, Leagues, and the Business of Hype

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When was the last time you cared about the cricket itself — the actual game, the skill, the tactics — and not the drama built around it? The controversy. The social media wars. The narrative the broadcast constructed before a ball was bowled. Sit with that question honestly. Because I think most of us, if we are honest, will find that we struggle to separate the game from its packaging. And that difficulty—the inability to peel the sport away from the entertainment infrastructure encasing it—is not a natural consequence of caring deeply about something. It is the result of a design.

The Two Layers of Modern Sport

There are two distinct layers to what we call modern sport, and the confusion between them is the engine of everything in this chapter. The first layer is the game itself. This layer is real and genuine and earns your attention fully. When a top batsman plays controlled aggression against a hostile bowling attack on a pitch offering variable bounce, what you are watching is the product of fifteen or

more years of disciplined, uncomfortable, relentless practice. The technical adjustments his eyes and hands make in the fraction of a second before bat meets ball are real. They were built through repetition so extensive that it restructured his neurology. The game deserves respect. It deserves your attention. It is worth watching.

The second layer is the entertainment apparatus constructed around the game. The broadcasting infrastructure, the commentary narratives, the manufactured controversies, the sponsorship ecosystems, the fantasy league platforms, the social media content machines. This layer is also real—but real as a business, not as a sport. Every element of it was built not to serve cricket but to serve commercial interests that have attached themselves to cricket because cricket produces something commercially valuable: the consistent, passionate, emotionally engaged attention of hundreds of millions of people. Both layers coexist. The problem is that they have been blended so thoroughly that most spectators genuinely cannot tell them apart.

The Architecture of IPL Ownership

The Indian Premier League was founded in 2008 under the aegis of the BCCI. The Mumbai Indians were purchased by Reliance Industries for approximately ₹450 crore. By 2023, independent franchise valuations placed the Mumbai Indians at approximately ₹8,000 crore — roughly eighteen times the purchase price in under two decades. If you had placed ₹450 crore in a fixed deposit at seven percent in 2008, you would have approximately ₹1,600 crore by 2023. The franchise is worth five times that. The people who got in early did not do so because they loved cricket the way a fan loves cricket. They did so

because they understood what cricket could become as a delivery mechanism for monetized human attention.

The Lucknow Super Giants, added in the 2022 expansion, were purchased for ₹7,090 crore before they had played a single match. Gujarat Titans went for ₹5,625 crore. These were not sentimental purchases. They were investment decisions made by sophisticated financial actors buying access to a distribution network for human attention at the scale of hundreds of millions of people. In 2022, the BCCI auctioned the IPL media rights for the 2023–2027 cycle. The winning bids totalled ₹48,390 crore — the most lucrative sports media deal in Asian history. Across five years, that translates to roughly ₹118 crore per match. This is not the price of cricket. This is the price of access to the people who watch cricket.

Star Sports retained the television broadcast rights. JioCinema acquired the digital streaming rights. The split was architecturally precise: television reaches households that have not fully migrated to digital; JioCinema reaches the mobile-first urban and semi-urban audience that Jio itself helped create by making mobile data effectively free after its 2016 market entry. Together, the two platforms created a broadcast architecture with no meaningful gap. There is, for the practical purposes of IPL distribution, nowhere a potential viewer can be where the signal does not reach them.

Format Compression and What It Reveals

The trend toward shorter formats is consistent across every major cricket-playing nation. England's The Hundred arrived in 2021 — a format of exactly 100 balls per side, with scoring simplified to five balls per over to reduce cognitive demand for casual audiences. Team

names were designed for mass commercial appeal rather than geographic or historical identity. The Hundred is not an improvement on cricket as cricket. It is an optimization of cricket for an audience with a shorter attention window, less cricket knowledge, and greater familiarity with entertainment formats than with the game.

Australia's Big Bash League operates on the same logic: evening scheduling to compete with family entertainment time and stadium experiences designed to compete with theme parks. The cricket is present. It is not the primary product. The primary product is an evening out, a family entertainment experience, a spectacle that happens to involve cricket. Both competitions express the same underlying truth: sport does not determine the terms of its own commercial existence. The entertainment industry determines those terms, and sports must adapt or be commercially marginalized. Test cricket's slow erosion is proof.

Manufactured Stakes

Modern sports broadcasting frames every match as part of an ongoing story. The struggling team is on a journey of redemption. The veteran is playing in what might be his final season. The underdog is about to silence its doubters. These frames are applied whether or not the underlying reality supports them—because they generate engagement, and because the commercial logic of broadcast sport requires engagement to be sustained between every delivery, not just between matches. Every match becomes the most important match. Every inning is potentially career-defining. Every dropped catch is a crisis. Every hundred is a redemption.

When the narrative frame becomes more powerful than the event itself, the audience loses the capacity to assess what it is actually watching. Responses to performance become responses to the story about the performance. We become fans of a narrative rather than fans of a sport. And a fan of a narrative is much more commercially valuable than a fan of a sport, because a narrative never stops generating content, while a sport generates content only when it is actually being played.

I love cricket. I want to say that clearly before we go further. The game is real. The drama that arises naturally from the game — without amplification, without a script — is sufficient. But the circus built around cricket is something else, and learning to tell the difference is not cynicism. It is clarity. You cannot genuinely love something you are unable to see plainly.

> *The circus is most powerful not when it is entertaining you, but when it has made you forget that you are in the audience.*

Chapter 6

The Algorithmic Arena

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My phone knows more about me than most of my friends do. Not the things they know — my opinions, my history, the things I find funny or intolerable. A different kind of knowing, colder and more precise. My phone knows that I spend more time on cricket content in the evenings. It knows when I am bored. It knows what holds me and what I scroll past without registering. It knows the difference between my morning attention and my late-night attention, because those produce different scrolling patterns. I have never told any of this. It learned everything by watching. And now it uses what it learned every time I unlock the screen. This is not a metaphor for something sinister. It is engineering — very sophisticated, very expensive, very deliberately executed engineering.

The Attention Economy

The concept of the attention economy rests on a structural recognition: human attention is finite, scarce, and therefore commercially valuable—understood by

advertisers for over a century. What changed when the internet became the primary communications environment was the precision with which attention could be captured, measured, and monetized at scale. Google's advertising revenue in 2022 was approximately $224 billion. Meta — which owns Instagram and Facebook — generated approximately $117 billion in advertising revenue in the same year. These numbers are not incidental facts about technology companies. They represent the scale at which human attention has been commodified. Every ten minutes you spend on Instagram is ten minutes of attention being measured, packaged, and sold at a price determined by your demographic profile and demonstrated interests.

The platform's goal is to maximize time-on-platform because time-on-platform equals advertising inventory, which equals revenue. Your goal — the goal you would articulate if someone asked you to step back and think — is to find what you are looking for, connect with things that matter to you, be entertained or informed in a way that feels worthwhile, and then stop. These goals are structurally opposed. Every design decision in the platform's architecture is made in service of the platform's goal. None of them is made in service of yours. Understanding this does not mean you should delete the apps. It means you should know what you are participating in when you use them.

How the Recommendation Algorithm Works

The recommendation algorithm is not trying to show you what you want. It is trying to show you what will keep you engaged the longest. These are related but not identical. What keeps you engaged the longest is often what makes you feel the most strongly—outrage, desire, anxiety,

competitive satisfaction, or fear of missing out. The algorithm has no interest in whether those feelings are good for you. It has interest only in whether they keep you on the platform, because your continued presence is the thing that has been sold to the advertiser.

The sports content ecosystem is particularly well-suited to algorithmic capture because sports produce genuine emotion consistently—triumph, heartbreak, controversy, beauty—and emotion is what the algorithm has learned to trade in. A compilation of last-ball finishes generates a genuine feeling. A controversial dismissal generates genuine outrage. The algorithm knows this because it has observed the patterns across billions of interactions. It serves you more of whatever produced the strongest response, regardless of whether that response was good for your sleep, your attention, or your actual relationship with the game.

A young person whose cricket education comes primarily from algorithmic recommendation will develop a taste calibrated to spectacle, to the most dramatic moments of the most dramatic matches. Test cricket, which requires sustained attention and produces most of its drama slowly, is poorly suited to this environment. T20 highlights, controversies, and dramatic moments are perfectly suited. The algorithm is not neutral between cricket formats. It selects for spectacle, and in doing so, it shapes what the next generation thinks cricket is and what they will pay for and, therefore, what broadcasters will fund and, therefore, what cricket will become.

Variable Reward and the Slot Machine in Your Pocket

The psychologist B.F. Skinner established that intermittent reinforcement — rewards that arrive

unpredictably — is the most powerful conditioning mechanism available. A pigeon on a variable reward schedule becomes almost impossible to discourage: it will peck the lever almost indefinitely because the reward might be the next one. The slot machine is designed on this principle, and it works on human beings for the same reason it works on pigeons. Our brains are not categorically different from pigeon brains in their vulnerability to variable reward. They are just larger and more capable of constructing narratives to justify the pecking order.

Reels work this way precisely. Each reel is a pull of the lever. Most are unremarkable. But the next one might be genuinely funny, genuinely moving, genuinely interesting. It never quite is—which is why there is always an eighteenth. Watching cricket works this way, too. You watch because this match might be the great one, the one that produces the moment you will remember. Most matches are not great in that specific sense. But the reward might be the next one. So you watch another. The difference between the slot machine and the pursuit of actual competence—actual cricket, actual practice, actual skill—is that the slot machine's rewards are external and random, while the rewards of competence are internal and cumulative. Competence is real: you can do something you could not do before.

Your Data as the Product

Every interaction you have with cricket content online — every like, every comment, every minute of watch time, every search — contributes to a profile that is sold to advertisers who want access to young people who are emotionally engaged with sport. The profile has commercial value. You generated it for free. The

platforms made money from it. You received entertainment in return, which is a real exchange but an asymmetric one.

Sport gave you something when you played it: discipline, self-knowledge, the physical memory of effort. The platform gives you something when you watch it: stimulation, entertainment, the feeling of being connected. The first giving was unconditional. The second is a transaction in which what you give is more durable and more fundamental than what you receive, nd in which the party on the other side of the transaction employs entire departments of behavioral economists and data scientists to ensure that the asymmetry is maintained. Knowing the terms of a transaction does not require you to refuse it. It requires you to make it consciously.

> *The algorithm is not your friend. It is not your enemy. It is a machine that has learned what holds your attention, and it will use that knowledge in its own interest, every time, without exception.*

Chapter 7

The Psychology of the Fan

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There is a specific quality to being a cricket fan in India that I want to try to describe before I subject it to analysis, because the analysis is less useful if you do not first acknowledge what is being analyzed. Being a cricket fan in India is not like being a fan of any other sport in any other country in quite the same way. Cricket in India carries the emotional weight of national identity, generational memory, collective triumph, and collective heartbreak in a genuinely unusual concentration. The 1983 World Cup final happened before I was born, and I have watched the highlights dozens of times. The 2011 World Cup final happened when I was four, and I remember nothing of it, but I know where my father was and what he felt and how the tea tasted that evening because he has told me.

This is real. The cultural weight of cricket in India is not manufactured by the algorithm, not produced by the franchise model, not a commercial construct. It predates all of those things. It is a genuine inheritance —

something passed from generation to generation through shared experience, through the specific drama of a game that India first genuinely fell in love with when it was still a postcolonial act of assertion, when beating England at cricket meant something that went beyond cricket. Understanding what fandom is, psychologically, is understanding something truly valuable before it became commercially exploitable.

The Real Psychology of Fandom

Fandom provides things that ordinary daily life in a modern city often does not: a clear narrative with winners and losers, a community of shared investment, moments of genuine collective emotion, and a sense of belonging to something larger than yourself. These are real psychological goods. Psychologists who study group identity have documented consistently that belonging to a group—any group, including a sports fan community—provides measurable benefits: higher self-esteem, lower anxiety, and a greater sense of meaning and purpose. The fan who feels that the team's victory is in some meaningful sense their victory is not deluded. The emotional experience is real. The community is real. The shared language is real.

The problem is not that fandom exists. The problem is what happens when fandom becomes identity—when your emotional state on a Monday morning is determined by what happened in Sunday's match, when the team's defeat feels like a personal blow that affects your capacity to function, and when your sense of self is so thoroughly invested in the team's performance that you experience their failures as your own. This is a fandom that has expanded beyond its appropriate place in life and begun to crowd out things that require more from you. NoMore

worthy things am not making a hierarchy of value—but things that require actual contribution, actual effort, and actual risk.

Vicarious Achievement and Its Specific Limit

Fandom offers, among other things, vicarious achievement—the pleasure of participating emotionally in someone else's accomplishment. When your team wins, you feel something real. Neurologically, the feeling is not entirely unlike what you would feel if you had won something yourself. The studies on this are consistent: fans' testosterone levels rise after their team wins and fall after their team loses, mirroring the pattern seen in athletes. The body does not fully distinguish between vicarious victory and actual victory. This is powerful. It is also, in a specific way, empty.

The limit of vicarious achievement is that it does not build anything in you. The team's championship does not improve your batting. The hero's century does not add to your skill set. The victory you share emotionally leaves no deposit of capability. It produces a feeling, and then the feeling passes, and you are in the same position you were in before the match began—except that now there is another match next week, with another opportunity for the same feeling. The cycle is pleasurable. It is also, over time, a cycle rather than a progression. You are not building anything. You are feeling things about someone else who is building something.

Genuine achievement — the kind you produce yourself through effort over time — works differently. It leaves a deposit. The student who passes a difficult examination, the cricketer who improves their footwork through months of nets, and the writer who finishes a chapter—

these accomplishments do something to the self that vicariously sharing someone else's accomplishment does not. They create the specific confidence of someone who knows, from experience, that they can do hard things. Self-efficacy, not self-esteem. The knowledge is internal and yours. It does not depend on next week's match result.

The Social Function Worth Defending

Sport serves a social function that is worth defending explicitly, because the rest of this chapter and the next could easily be read as an argument against watching sport entirely, and it is not. The shared experience of a great match — of a nation watching the same drama unfold simultaneously — is one of the most genuine collective experiences modern life produces. It provides a shared language across class, geography, and age. It creates occasions for the kind of ordinary, unforced human gathering that urbanization and digitalization have otherwise made rarer.

The IPL final is a moment when an enormous number of people are emotionally in the same place simultaneously. This shared experience creates social bonds. It gives people things to talk about, reasons to gather, and occasions for the kind of easy, low-stakes conversation that maintains the surface texture of social life. A world without shared sporting occasions would be a world missing something real. Sport is part of life. The question is only whether it has been allowed to grow into the whole of life, crowding out the other things that a full life requires — including, most importantly, the things that you do rather than watch.

Fandom at its best is shared joy. Fandom at its worst is a replacement for the harder work of building a life worth cheering for.

Chapter 8

What Real Participation Looks Like

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The ball does not negotiate. This is one of the things the nets taught me that I did not expect and could not have been told. It does not negotiate, it does not consider your mood, it does not care that you stayed up too late the previous night or that you are distracted or that your grip is slightly wrong in a way you have been meaning to fix for three months. It arrives. Your body responds, or it does not. The result is immediate and unambiguous and yours alone. There is no algorithm to soften the feedback. There is no like button on a good shot and no dislike button on the ones that miss entirely. The ball gives you the information directly, without mediation, in the most efficient delivery system the universe has for honest feedback: reality.

I miss this. I did not know, while I was in it, that I would miss it. I thought the nets were just the nets—the thing I did on Tuesdays and Thursdays because I had said I would and because I loved the game and because the three-thirty hours' sessions had become part of the texture of my week

in a way that made their absence, when it eventually came, feel like a small but noticeable change in the weather. What I did not know was that the honest feedback—the ball telling me the truth about my footwork—was one of the more valuable things I was receiving. Because most of what the modern world offers you is not honest. Most of what the modern world offers you is mediated, filtered, and optimized for your continued engagement, telling you what you want to hear or what will make you feel most strongly about something.

What the Nets Actually Gave Me

When I was at the nets for three-thirty hours', below average, at the back of the drill, with nobody watching and nobody correcting—I was doing something that no amount of cricket content consumption can replicate. I was learning to be accountable to my own body. That accountability is a specific and underrated form of education. You cannot outsource it. You cannot learn it by watching someone else submit to it. You have to be there, in the actual physical situation, receiving the actual physical feedback, and doing something with it.

The body that shows up to something physically demanding repeatedly over the ears develops a specific kind of knowledge. Ryle called it 'knowing-how' as opposed to 'knowing-that'—procedural knowledge as opposed to declarative knowledge. Knowing that is what you can articulate: I know that to play a cover drive, you need your front foot to move to the pitch of the ball, your weight to transfer forward, and your head to stay still. Knowing-how is what your body can do: actually playing the cover drive with your feet and your weight and your head doing the right things without conscious instruction. Knowledge can be acquired by watching. Knowing-how

can only be acquired by doing. And it is knowing-how that produces the specific confidence — the self-efficacy, the settled sense of capability — that genuine participation builds.

I had years of know-how being built in me during those sessions, even at the back of the drill, even without the coaching attention that the talented boys received. Every ball faced added something to a structure in my nervous system. The structure was not cricket excellence—it was not going to make me a district player. But it was something: a physical familiarity with effort, with concentration under pressure, with the specific texture of doing something difficult in real time with real consequences. This is not available through the screen.

The Gift of Being Ordinary at Something

There is a specific and underrated value to being ordinary at something you love. Not talented — ordinary. The person who is ordinary at a thing and continues to show up to it, unrewarded and largely unnoticed, acquires something that the talented person and the spectator both lack. The talented person acquires excellence. The spectator acquires familiarity. The ordinary participant acquires patience with difficulty—the specific form of resilience that comes from choosing, repeatedly, to be bad at something in the hope of being slightly less bad at it.

I was below average at cricket for five years, and I showed up anyway, not out of discipline—I was not especially disciplined—but out of love for the game and a kind of obstinate unwillingness to stop doing something I had started. In retrospect, that obstinate unwillingness was more valuable than I knew. It was the early practice of a capacity that every worthwhile pursuit requires: the

capacity to continue through the stage where you are genuinely not good enough, before the stage where you begin to be good enough arrives.

Most people who become good at things have stories of this phase — of the years before it worked, when they were doing it badly and continuing anyway. What I am arguing is that even if the 'becoming good' never arrives—even if you remain ordinary throughout—the phase of continuing through difficulty has its own value, independent of the outcome. You are building something in yourself that is not legible as a scoreboard achievement but is real and transferable and yours. It cannot be watched into existence. It can only be practised into existence.

The Argument for Playing, Not Stopping Watching

I want to make the central practical argument of this chapter as clearly as I can, because the rest of this book could easily be read as making the opposite argument. I am not arguing that you should stop watching sports. I am arguing that you should also play something—play it, or build something, or practice something, or in some domain of your life have an active relationship with an activity rather than only a passive one. Watching is not the problem. The absence of doing is the problem. The healthy relationship with sport is not one where you stop following the IPL — it is one where following the IPL coexists with some form of active engagement with the game or with something else you are genuinely building.

A young person who plays cricket on weekends and watches the IPL on weekday evenings has a balanced relationship with sport. The watching is enriched by the doing. The doing is motivated by the watching. The two exist together in a proportion that keeps both meaningful.

The problem arises when the weekend cricket stops—when the doing is replaced entirely by watching, and the watching begins to expand to fill all the time that doing once occupied. At that point, the watching has changed character. It is no longer recreation alongside participation. It is a substitute for it.

This is the distinction I want to leave you with: recreation versus substitution. Recreation is the genuine rest and pleasure that restores capacity for effort—the match watched on a Friday evening after a productive week, enjoyed fully, and then set aside. Substitution is the entertainment that fills the space where effort would otherwise go—the match watched instead of studying, instead of practicing, instead of building anything. The content is identical. The function is completely different. And the difference is not in the content but in you—in what you are using the content for and what it is preventing you from doing.

> *You cannot watch your way back into having been somewhere. You can only have been there.*

Chapter 9

The Cost of Staying in the Audience

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There are costs to sustained spectatorship that are seldom calculated, because they are not experienced as costs at the time. They are experienced as relaxation, as entertainment, and as a reasonable recovery after a day of effort. The tea going cold is not a tragedy. The forty minutes of Reels is a catastrophe. The evening spent watching instead of building something is not, in isolation, a problem. The problems in the accumulation—in what those forty minutes every morning become over the course of a year, and what they become over five years, and in what the person spending them becomes alongside them.

Let me do the arithmetic. Forty minutes of Reels every morning, seven days a week: 280 minutes per week. Across a year: approximately 14,560 minutes, or 243 hours. That is ten full days. In five years: fifty days. In ten years: one hundred days. These are the numbers for just one daily habit — the morning scroll before getting out of bed. They do not include the evening browsing, the

content consumption during meals, or the two-screen watching of cricket and social media simultaneously. The total, for most people my age, is substantially larger.

Time: The Invisible Cost

The first cost is time, and it is the cost most easily minimized in the accounting we do of our own lives. We rarely count entertainment time the way we count work time. We experience work time as time spent; we experience entertainment time as time recovered. This accounting is inaccurate. Both are timely. Both are drawn from the same finite supply that each of us receives at the rate of twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week, no exceptions, no renewals.

The boys from my coaching ground who are now in Ranji Trophy trials did not get there by watching cricket. They got there by being at the three-thirty hours' sessions every day for years, by choosing to be inside the game when the algorithm was offering something easier. Their time allocation was different from mine. Not because they had more time — we all had the same Tuesday afternoons — but because they chose differently about what to do with it. Time is the only resource that is truly equal in its distribution and utterly unequal in its use. Understanding how you are using it is the first step toward using it differently.

Attention: The Deeper Cost

The second cost is attention capacity—the ability to focus, to sustain engagement with difficult material, and to resist the pull of distraction long enough to understand something complex. This capacity has to be maintained through use, exactly like a physical skill. An attention span

that has been calibrated to the fifteen-second Reel is genuinely, neurologically, less equipped to sustain the focused engagement that difficult things require. The habit of rapid switching—app to app, screen to screen, content to content—trains the brain for speed in a way that is incompatible with depth.

A study at the University of California found that once an attention stream is interrupted—by a notification, a message, or a pull toward a different screen—it takes an average of twenty-three minutes to fully return to the original task. Twenty-three minutes. And the modern phone delivers dozens of potential interruptions per hour, from notifications to the simple availability of the device. The person who is trying to read a difficult chapter or understand a complex argument while their phone is within reach is not merely distracted. They are operating in an attentional environment that has been structurally degraded, and they have probably been operating in it for long enough that they have adapted their expectations of what concentration feels like downward accordingly.

Identity: The Subtlest Cost

The subtlest cost of sustained spectatorship is to the sense of self—the particular quality of identity that comes from having done things rather than watched them. This is difficult to articulate precisely, but I believe it is real. The person who has attempted difficult things, who has failed publicly and improved incrementally, who has the specific confidence of someone who knows from experience that they can endure the beginning stages of incompetence — that person is different from the person who has only watched others attempt difficult things. The first person knows, from their own body and their own history, that the beginning is hard and the middle is workable and the

end is possible. The second person knows it only theoretically.

Sport is one arena where this distinction is particularly visible because sport has a measurable before and after. You cannot fake having played cricket. The body either has the footwork or it does not. The confidence that comes from having been in the nets — from knowing, in your body, that you can face a fast delivery and survive it — is not available through watching someone else do it. It is only available through having done it. Not done it well. Done it, imperfectly, with effort, in the actual physical world. And the absence of that kind of earned confidence — the confidence of someone who has been somewhere and come back — is minuscule. It is a meaningful one.

The Compound Effect

Each of these costs—time, attention, and identity—compounds over the years. The person who spends their twenties primarily as a spectator is not in the same position at thirty as the person who spent their twenties building something, practicing something, doing something. Both people have had experiences. Both have had enjoyment. But one has a body of work, a set of capabilities, and a history of having attempted and partially succeeded and improved, which the other does not. One has the specific confidence of someone who knows from personal evidence what they are capable of. The other has the specific uncertainty of someone who does not.

This is not an argument that entertainment is worthless or that spectatorship is without value. It is an argument that the proportion matters. A life that contains sport, entertainment, and leisure alongside building, practicing, and creating is full. A life that contains primarily watching,

with the building and practicing perpetually deferred, is a life that will look different at thirty from the inside than it looks at eighteen from the outside. I am writing this at eighteen. I am trying to see what it will look like from thirty and to make some choices before the arithmetic becomes irreversible.

The circus will never make you tired in the right way. Only the game will do that.

Chapter 10

Awareness vs. Distraction



There is a practice that appears, in various forms, across every philosophical and spiritual tradition that has seriously engaged with the problem of scattered attention. Buddhism calls it mindfulness. The Stoics called it "prosoche"—attention to the present moment. Athletes call it being in the zone. Psychologists call it flow. The specific formulations differ across traditions and disciplines, but the underlying observation is consistent: human beings have a capacity for qualitatively different types of attention—a shallow, reactive mode that is susceptible to every passing stimulus and a deep, deliberate mode that is capable of full engagement with whatever is actually in front of you. The first mode is the default. The second mode requires cultivation.

I am not a meditator, not a Stoic, not an elite athlete. I am a BCom student in Ahmedabad who spends too much time on his phone and is trying to think clearly about that fact and its implications. But I have read enough about these traditions to recognize that what they are all pointing

at—the practice of actually being present to what you are doing when you are doing it—is both rarer and more valuable than our culture currently suggests. And in the specific context of sports, entertainment, and the circus of modern life, the capacity for genuine attention is exactly what the system is designed to circumvent.

Awareness Is Not Abstinence

Let me be clear about what I am and am not arguing. Awareness is not the same as not watching. It is not the same as not using your phone, not following the IPL, not enjoying entertainment. Awareness is the capacity to know what you are doing while you are doing it — to be conscious, in real time, of the choice you are making and what you are exchanging it for. A person watching the IPL final with awareness is a person who has chosen to watch the IPL final, knows that they have chosen it, is genuinely present for it, and will put the phone down when it is over. That is completely different from a person who has drifted into watching the IPL final because the algorithm served it,t and they were present enough to start it but not deliberate enough to stop it.

The difference is not in what you watch. It is whether you are there or not. And 'being there'—being genuinely present to the experience you are having rather than simultaneously half-present to three other screens—is the thing that determines whether entertainment is genuinely restoring or merely consuming time while leaving you feeling empty. Two hours of cricket watched with full attention will leave you feeling differently than two hours of cricket watched while also scrolling Twitter and checking fantasy cricket points. The game is the same in both cases. The experience is completely different.

The Quality of Presence

You can watch a five-day Test match with total attention and genuine pleasure and feel, at the end of it, that you spent five days doing something worth doing. You can follow the match closely enough to understand the field placements, the bowling changes, the partnership building, and the subtle psychological shifts that a good Test match reveals over time. You can appreciate the craft of what you are watching with the specific appreciation of someone who has been in the trenches—who understands, even inadequately, what it takes to produce the thing you are watching. That is a rich and valuable experience. It is sports at its best.

Contrast this with watching twelve highlight compilations on autoplay while also checking messages and feeling, at the end of it, vaguely dissatisfied and unable to explain why. The content is not the variable. The quality of your presence is in the content. The numbing effect that comes from too much passive consumption is not the effect of entertainment itself—it is the effect of entertainment consumed without presence. Genuinely engaging film, watched with full attention, does not produce the hollow overstimulated feeling that three hours of scrolling produces. The difference is not the content. The difference is you.

The Practice of Catching Yourself

Here is the practice I am trying to build, imperfectly and with frequent failure: catching myself in the moment before I default. The moment when the phone is in my hand, before I have decided to pick it up. The moment when the algorithm has suggested the next reel, and my thumb is already moving toward it before I have

consciously registered the movement. The moment when the silence of the room and the availability of the competition, and the screen is winning by default, because it always wins by default unless I intervene.

The intervention is small. It does not require enlightenment or heroic discipline. It requires only a pause—a brief moment of conscious registration: "This is what I am about to do. Is this what I have chosen to do?" Often, the answer is yes, and then I watch the Reel with something closer to a choice. Sometimes the answer is no, and then I put the phone down. The ratio between yes and no is not the point. The point is that there is a ratio—that the question is being asked at all and that the choice is becoming slightly more conscious over time, even if very imperfectly.

Awareness does not make the circus disappear. The circus is very large and very loud and very good at what it does, and it will be there tomorrow exactly as it was today. Awareness does not silence it. It just means you know you are in it. And knowing you are in it—really knowing it, in the practical daily sense, not just as an abstract acknowledgment but as a lived recognition you return to—is where every real choice begins.

> *Awareness is not a destination. It is a practice—the daily, unglamorous, frequently failed practice of catching yourself in the drift and choosing again.*

Chapter 11

Who Really Runs the System?

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There is a question I never thought to ask for the first sixteen years of my life. Not who is batting. Not who dropped the catch. The question is simpler and more fundamental, and it sits so far outside the emotional frame of being a fan that it almost sounds rude to raise it at a sports event or in a discussion of cricket: who owns this? Not who plays. Not who coaches. Who owns the match, the broadcast rights, the franchise, the stadium, the advertising inventory, and — quietly, efficiently, without asking your permission — who owns your attention for the three hours you sit in front of the screen?

I want to trace the ownership structure of the IPL in enough detail to make the answer clear, because I think most fans have only a vague sense of it, and the vagueness is not an accident. The vagueness serves the owners. An audience that thinks of itself as a community of fans is more loyal and less demanding than an audience that understands itself as an attention pool being monetized by

a set of extremely wealthy people whose interests may not align with those of the game.

The BCCI and Its Extraordinary Power

The Board of Control for Cricket in India is a private organization registered under the Tamil Nadu Societies Registration Act. It is not a government body. It is not subject to the transparency requirements that apply to public institutions. And yet it exercises authority over Indian cricket that is close to absolute—selecting national players, licensing domestic tournaments, negotiating international broadcast deals, and setting the framework within which every professional cricketer in India operates. The BCCI is one of the richest cricket boards in the world, and its wealth comes primarily from the IPL — from the broadcast rights that it auctions and from the franchise fees that fund its annual budget.

The people who run the BCCI are not primarily cricket administrators in the traditional sense. They are businessmen and politicians — people from state cricket boards who have built power bases through the complex patronage network of Indian cricket governance. The connection between cricket governance and commercial interest is not theoretical. It is structural. The decisions made by the BCCI about the format of cricket, the schedule of tours, the allocation of matches to venues, and the treatment of cricketers—all of these decisions are made by people whose primary interests are commercial and political, in an organization with limited transparency and limited accountability to the fans and players whose lives it shapes.

Who Owns the Franchises

Look at who owns the IPL franchises. The Mumbai Indians are owned by Reliance Industries, one of the largest private corporations in India by market capitalization. Chennai Super Kings is majority-owned by the Chennai Super Kings Cricket Limited, with significant interests associated with N. Srinivasan, a former BCCI president who was suspended by the Supreme Court for conflict of interest before returning through associated entities. The Kolkata Knight Riders are associated with Shah Rukh Khan's red. Chilli's Entertainment. Royal Challengers Bangalore is owned by Diageo, the multinational drinks company that purchased United Spirits from Vijay Mallya. The pattern is consistent: franchise ownership is concentrated among the very wealthy and the very connected.

These are not passionate sports enthusiasts who bought a team because they loved cricket. They are business entities making calculated financial investments in a platform that has bprogressively valuedvely higher with each successive IPL cycle. The Lucknow Super Giants were purchased by the RPSG Group for ₹7,090 crore. Gujarat Titans went to CVC Capital Partners for ₹5,625 crore. CVC is a European private equity fund—its interest in Indian cricket is entirely financial, involving investors in multiple countries who have no personal or cultural connection to the game. When a European private equity fund owns an IPL franchise, it is a reliable signal that this is primarily a financial product.

Sportswashing and Sovereign Wealth

The phenomenon of sportswashing — using sports investment to launder a public reputation — is well-

documented at the global level. Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund purchased Newcastle United in 2021 for approximately £300 million. The PIF subsequently invested in LIV Golf, creating a rival to the established PGA Tour and generating enormous controversy and enormous column inches. Saudi Arabia has hosted Formula 1 races, boxing world championships, and golf tournaments. These investments are not driven by Saudi enthusiasm for British football or American golf. They are a deliberate strategy of reputational management, using the global glamour of sport to soften the international perception of a state that has faced sustained criticism for its human rights record.

The United Arab Emirates has pursued the same strategy through Abu Dhabi's ownership of Manchester City via the Abu Dhabi United Group, which is majority-owned by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the deputy prime minister of the UAE and member of the royal family. Manchester City's transformation from a mid-table English club to a dominant European force has been achieved through investment on a scale that was not possible under normal commercial conditions. The investment is real. The football has been genuinely brilliant. And the geopolitical function of the investment — the association of the UAE state with the most successful club football in the world—is also real, and it runs alongside the football without being identical to it.

The Pattern Across Every Layer

Consider how the interests interlock. A wealthy industrialist who owns an IPL franchise is a franchise owner and therefore benefits from broadcasting revenues, match-day revenues, and franchise value appreciation. His group company sponsors the IPL, so he is also an

advertiser whose brand benefits from the viewership. His telecom or digital business provides the infrastructure through which millions of people stream the matches. His political relationships influence the governance of the BCCI. His media relationships shape the coverage. At every layer of the ecosystem, the same set of interests is present—collecting revenues, shaping narratives, and influencing decisions.

The viewer sitting in front of the match is not interacting with one commercial entity. They are interacting with a fully integrated system in which every layer profits from their continued attention. The system has been built to be self-reinforcing: the better the cricket, the larger the audience; the larger the audience, the higher the broadcast rights; the higher the broadcast rights, the larger the franchise values; the larger the franchise values, the more professional the cricket operation; the more professional the operation, the better the cricket. It is a functional and mutually beneficial system—for everyone inside it. The question is whether the viewer is inside it or outside it. The viewer is, functionally, outside it. Their role is to generate attention. Their reward is entertainment. The value they generate is captured by those inside the system.

> *You are not just a cricket fan. You are a unit of attention in a system worth hundreds of thousands of crores. The people at the top of that system know your precise commercial value. The question is whether you do.*

Chapter 12

Should We Stop Watching?

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No. Not because stopping is wrong, and not because I am afraid to commit to a position. The honest answer is no because eliminating entertainment is not possible, not necessary, and not actually what this book is about. The problem was never entertainment itself. The problem is something more specific and more interior: when entertainment stops being a choice and becomes a default—when you do not select it but simply land in it, because landing requires less activation energy than doing anything else. The answer to that problem is not abstinence. It is consciousness.

I want to address this directly and with some care, because the easiest misreading of this book—the reading that would make it useless—is the misreading that treats it as a condemnation of entertainment, an argument for productivity over pleasure, and a case for the kind of joyless self-discipline that produces anxious overachievers rather than people who are actually living their lives. That is not the argument. If you come away from this book

feeling guilty about watching cricket, I have communicated the wrong thing. If you come away feeling a little clearer about what you are watching and why, I have communicated the right one.

Entertainment Has Always Belonged to Human Life

Human cognition is not designed for uninterrupted effort. The prefrontal cortex depletes across sustained cognitive work the way a muscle depletes across sustained physical work. It needs recovery periods of low cognitive demand, distraction, and narrative engagement to restore its capacity for effortful attention. Entertainment is not an indulgence that competes with productive cognition. It is, when used well, what makes productive cognition possible over the long run. The person who never rests never recovers. The person who never rests properly — who fills every gap with content rather than with genuine rest — also never recovers, even though from the outside it looks as though they are relaxing continuously.

The Ramayana has been performed, recited, sung, and watched for thousands of years across the Indian subcontinent. The bardic oral traditions that existed in pre-colonial India were not corruptions of human potential. They were expressions of it—the human need for narrative, for vicarious experience, for shared emotional engagement, and for the particular pleasure of watching skilled people do difficult things well. These needs are not pathological. They are ancient and legitimate. The IPL is not a debasement of this ancient tradition. It is a modern expression of it, wrapped in commercial infrastructure that was not present for the Rama, yana, but which is simply the form that large-scale storytelling takes in a commercial economy. Both are real. Both have value.

Recreation vs. Substitution — The Central Distinction

The distinction I keep returning to is between recreation and substitution, and I want to articulate it as clearly as possible because it is the practical heart of the argument. Recreation is genuine rest and pleasure that restores capacity for effort. The match was watched on a Friday evening after a productive week, enjoyed fully, and then set aside. The game followed with genuine attention and genuine feeling. The cricket that gives you something real—shared experience, genuine emotion, the specific pleasure of watching excellence—and then finishes, returning you to your own life with something added rather than something taken.

Substitution is entertainment that fills the space where effort would otherwise go. The match was watched instead of being studied. The third episode was watched because starting the reading requires more activation energy than pressing play. The scroll that replaces the quiet from which ideas would emerge if you gave them time. The content consumption that expands to fill every gap, not because those gaps needed filling, but because the discomfort of the unfilled gap was less comfortable than the content. In substitution, entertainment is not a supplement to life. It is a replacement for it.

The content in both cases is identical. The function is completely different. And the distinction is not in the content but in, you—in what position you are using the content from and what the content is preventing. One form of watching enriches a life that contains other things. The other crowds out the other things until the watching is all that remains. Both look the same from the outside. Only the person watching knows which one it is.

What Conscious Watching Looks Like

Before I sit down to watch something, I try to ask one question: Am I choosing this, or am I defaulting to it? If I am choosing it — if there is something specific I want to see, if there is a reason beyond 'there is nothing else to do and this is the easiest available thing' — I watch it. I watch it with the phone down and my attention on the match. If I am defaulting to it — if I am reaching for the remote because the silence makes me uncomfortable and this is the nearest available means of filling it — I try to sit with the silence instead. Not always successfully. But the attempt is different from not attempting, and the question, asked regularly, begins to change the ratio.

Sport deserves this level of respect, independent of what you deserve. The athletes who are producing what you are about to watch have given enormous amounts of their lives to be able to do it. A fast bowler who makes it to the national team has, in almost every case, played cricket since childhood, organised his entire adolescence around training, survived the specific psychological brutality of selection and deselection, and the perpetual possibility of injury ending everything without notice. The minimum the audience owes them is to actually watch. Not to watch while also scrolling, not to watch while also generating opinions for social media. To watch. To be present for the thing they have worked their entire lives to produce.

> *Sports are part of life. The question is whether the rest of your life is still yours.*

Chapter 13

The Reality Check: Both Things Are True

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I want to name the failure mode of books like this one, because naming it is the best protection against falling into it. The failure mode is contempt—the slide from critical analysis into the flat, undifferentiated position that everything about modern entertainment is corrupt, that the cricket is merely commercial, that the fans are merely manipulated, and that the only honest response is a kind of superior disengagement from the whole apparatus. This is easy. It is also dishonest. And a book that arrives at it has, in its own way, become a circus—the circus of the knowing, cynical observer, performing their clear-sightedness for an audience who wants to feel elevated above the people still watching it.

A book that has no room for the beauty of the game is not honest about the game. A book that cannot acknowledge that the last-ball finish is genuinely thrilling, that the 2011 World Cup final produced something real in the people who watched it, or that Sachin Tendulkar's batting was an aesthetic experience worthy of the word 'beautiful'—that

book is telling you something less than the full truth. And partial truth is just a polished form of dishonesty. The full truth is more complicated and more interesting: the game is real ,,and the apparatus is also real, and they coexist in the same broadcast, in the same stadium, in the same three hours of a Tuesday evening IPL match. Holding both at once is what this chapter is about.

What the Players Have Actually Done

A cricketer who makes it to the Indian national team has, in almost every case, been playing since he was seven or eight years old. By the time he wears the blue jersey in an international match, he will have played somewhere between fifteen and twenty years of cricket, in a country where the competition for selection is unlike any other cricket-playing nation on earth. India has more cricket academies, more coaches, more players, and more intensity of competition for a smaller number of selection spots than any comparable country. The supply of cricket talent in India is enormous. The demand — the number of places available in the national team and its surrounds — is tiny.

The person who makes it through this filter has done something extraordinary. Their childhood was organized entirely around the sport. The social life was deferred, the academic paths were not pursued, and the mornings at the academy were before school,hool, and the afternoons at the academy were after school. The physical cost is documented: fast bowlers carry back injuries that would be career-ending in most other occupations. Stress fractures among young pacers are routine enough that sports medicine has developed specific protocols for managing them in teenagers; the repetitive strain injuries of batting and throwing accumulate across decades of

practice. The psychological cost is less documented but real: public failure at a scale that almost no other profession exposes you to, the perpetual possibility of being dropped, and the social media commentary of millions of people who believe their opinion of your performance is useful information for you to receive.

The career is brief. Even a successful international cricket career rarely extends beyond a decade of consistent selection. The sacrifice is front-loaded and enormous. When you watch a match, there is a real person on that field who has given more than you can easily imagine to be there. Not a fictional character in a franchise narrative. A real person who chose, at seven or eight or nine years old, to give their life to this specific activity and has been making that choice every day since. Watching them with genuine attention — understanding something of what it cost to produce the thing you are watching — is the least the game deserves from you.

The Commercial Apparatus — Also Real

The commercial apparatus built around these real athletes is also real and deserves honest acknowledgment. The franchise model does not exist to honor the athletes. It exists to create a product that can be broadcast and sold. The broadcast rights auction exists to generate revenue for the BCCI and the franchises. The advertising ecosystem exists to extract commercial value from the fan's emotional engagement. The fantasy cricket platform exists to monetize fans' desire for participation. The social media algorithm exists to capture and commodify the fan's attention. All of these things are true simultaneously.

The athlete's genuine excellence and the commercial exploitation of that excellence are not in contradiction.

They coexist in the same match, the same broadcast, the same commercial ecosystem. The honest fan knows both. The fan who sees only the beauty—who cannot acknowledge the commercial machinery—is being naive in a way that makes them easy to exploit. The fan who sees only the machinery—who cannot acknowledge the genuine beauty—is being cynical in a way that impoverishes their experience of something worth appreciating.

The Position That Serves You Best

The position that serves you best — as a fan, as a person, as someone trying to live a full life in an environment designed to reduce you to a unit of attention — is the one that holds both truths simultaneously. Genuine love of the game and clear-eyed awareness of the apparatus built around it. Love with open eyes. Appreciation without delusion. Critical awareness without contempt. This is harder than either naive fandom or cynical disengagement, because it requires you to hold two things at once that the culture around you is constantly trying to collapse into one.

The culture of fandom collapses the two by making the apparatus invisible—by presenting the commercial product as though it were simply the game, by making the franchise brand feel like a genuine community, and by turning the act of consuming content into the feeling of participating in something real. The culture of critique collapses the two in the other direction by making the game invisible—by treating everything about sport as contaminated by its commercialization, as though the beauty of the thing and the ugliness of the business around it cannot simultaneously be acknowledged. Neither collapse is honest. Both serve specific interests—the first

serves the owners, and the second serves no one except the critic's sense of elevation.

Sport is part of life. Precisely that—a meaningful, beautiful, culturally significant part. A part that can teach things about effort and collective emotion that are not easily available elsewhere. But part of it. Not the whole. Not the primary. Learning to love the part without letting it become the whole is the practical project that everything in this book has been working toward.

> *Love the game with your eyes open. Know the apparatus for what it is. Let both be true at the same time.*

Chapter 14

Final Question: Who Controls the Circus?

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In the first century AD, Juvenal looked at the citizens of Rome and described what, after thirteen chapters of this book, should feel uncomfortably familiar. He watched a city whose people had once participated in civic life with the seriousness of people who understood that they held power and that the power required tending. They had voted, debated, deliberated, and served. And he watched those same people, in his own time, surrender all of it without a fight, in exchange for two things: bread and circuses. Panem et circenses.

Two thousand years have passed. The bread is now Zomato delivering biryani at midnight. The circus is the Indian Premier League, broadcast to tens of millions of concurrent viewers, franchised and branded with a fervor the Roman emperors would have recognized immediately. The formula is unchanged. The delivery mechanism is faster, more precise, more personalized, and orders of magnitude harder to see clearly because it is woven into the fabric of everything w,e do rather than

confined to a specific place you must physically travel to. The Circus Maximus required you to go there. The algorithm comes to you. It lives in your pocket. It knows your preferences. It has been working on keeping your attention since the moment you first logged in.

Three Archetypes, Finally Resolved

Across the chapters of this book, three types of people have moved through the argument. Understanding each clearly is useful for understanding where you are in the system.

The players are the people who do the thing itself — the athletes who generate the primary product through their bodies, their trained skills, their years of discipline. They are the reason anyone watches. Without the players, there is no franchise, no broadcast, no advertising inventory, and no algorithm to optimize. The players are the essential foundation of the entire commercial structure. And even they are not fully in control: the format they play was not chosen by them, the schedule was not negotiated by them, and decisions about where they play and when they play are made by people whose primary interest is commercial. The players are simultaneously the most important people in the system and the people with the least structural power within it.

The owners and platforms are the people who capture and monetize the attention that the players generate. The franchise owners, the broadcasters, the algorithm designers, and the advertising networks. They did not create the sport. They created the apparatus around it. The apparatus is enormously profitable. The sport subsidizes the apparatus by producing what the apparatus sells: your

attention, measured, packaged, and delivered at the price determined by your demographic profile.

The viewer—you—is the third figure and the most complex. You are the raw material from which value is extracted. You are also the person whose genuine love of the game makes the whole system possible. Without your real, honestly earned love of cricket—the love built through watching, through playing, through Sunday mornings in the gully with a tape ball, through sharing a match with your father or your friends—there would be nothing for the apparatus to monetize. The apparatus did not create your love. Your love created the apparatus. The original thing was yours. Understanding that changes your relationship to everything that has been built around it.

The Juvenile Parallel, Final Form

Juvenal was not optimistic. He named the phenomenon with the bitterness of someone who had watched it happen and could not prevent it. He left the naming behind in a form that has survived two thousand years. The name has survived. The structure it describes has survived somewhat longer than that. The question Juvenal did not answer is the only question worth ending a book on: what do you do once you know?

He knew. He named it. And Rome continued. The circuses continued. The citizens continued to accept the bread and the entertainment and to surrender whatever political voice might otherwise have demanded something more. Juvenal was not optimistic because he understood that naming a thing and changing a thing are not the same operation. What comes after the naming belongs to the person who has done the naming. Not to the audience.

I am not Juvenal. I am an eighteen-year-old BCom student in Ahmedabad who has been thinking carefully about the structure of modern life for long enough to want to write this down. The naming I have attempted in this book is less eloquent than Juvenal's and covers a narrower slice of the phenomenon, but it is aimed at the same target: the possibility that a young person who reads it will see the structure a little more clearly and make, occasionally, a slightly more deliberate choice about how to live inside it.

Personal Manifesto

I will still watch cricket. I am not leaving the circus. I will watch it with a time allocation I have chosen — not one the algorithm has chosen for me, not one that expands by default every time I pick up my phone between lectures. I will decide in advance how much time cricket gets, and I will watch within that allocation. I will live by it imperfectly and with revisions. But the allocation will precede the watching, rather than following it as a retroactive justification for how the evening went.

I will try to play something. Not necessarily cricket—the three-thirty chapter of my life closed without a decision, and I do not expect to reopen it. But something physical, something that requires my body and not just my eyes, something where the feedback arrives directly and cannot be curated before it reaches me. Something where the ball, or the equivalent, tells me the truth about myself in real time. Because the game, however badly I play it, is more honest than the screen. And I find I need that honesty, increasingly, as the world around me becomes more curated and more optimized and more carefully shaped to tell me things that will hold my attention rather than things that will be true.

I will make things. This book is one thing. There will be others—a business idea tried and perhaps failed, a skill practiced past the phase where I am genuinely bad at it. The making is its own justification. Every time I produce something — even something small, even something bad — I am on the other side of the transaction. Not a unit of attention being monetized. A maker, however imperfect, putting something into the world rather than only taking from it. The making is what the algorithm is designed to substitute. The substitution only works if you let it.

I will remember that sport is part of life. A real part. A valuable part. The IPL final is worth watching. The World Cup is worth clearing your calendar for. A Test match that goes to the last session of the fifth day is one of the great experiences cricket offers, and I am not telling you to miss it. Watch it. Watch it with full attention, phone down, and genuine appreciation. Then, when the match ends, put the phone down and do something with your own hands. Build something. Write something. Practice something. Cook the dinner instead of ordering it. Read the chapter you have been putting off. Try the thing you have been watching other people do and wondering whether you could do it.

Sports are part of life. Make sure the rest of life is still yours.

Closing

The circus only continues as long as we keep looking at the stage.

Juvenal named it. Rome continued. The question is whether you will.

Today, look at your own hands. What will you build?

Acknowledgments

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About the Author

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Amogh Raval is a 19 year old B.Com student in Ahmedabad. He writes LinkedIn posts about ideas he is thinking through, and he is working on several other writing projects alongside this book.

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A Final Note of Gratitude

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In a world that often feels rushed, superficial, and heavily scripted, exploring Liberty City, San Andreas, and the dusty, unforgiving frontiers of the West taught me how to look beneath the surface. You showed me flawed,

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See you on 19/11/2026…