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A PHILOSOPHICAL READING  
OF CRICKET

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## A PHILOSOPHICAL READING OF CRICKET

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It is possible to view cricket in a way different from that adopted by the usual playgoer. I have never been a player of any sort. Life had from infancy appeared to me too harsh for laughter or play. Cricket had for long impressed me as a tedious and boresome game, but when I saw the Test Match between India and England in 1934, I developed a sudden liking for the game. Ever after that, I have made it a point to witness high-class matches.

The cricket match has been to me in spirit and form something like a tragedy of Shakespeare. At any rate, I find a tragic appeal in the game. I have gone to see cricket with a view to seeing a tragedy enacted; I have sat watching it in solitude amidst a rapturous crowd, watched it in suspense and gloom, and I have invariably returned after the match depressed by the thought :

“We are of such stuff as cricket is made on.”

For, beneath all the varied froth and flash of this complex Anglo-Saxon game, I have been able to see and feel a grim portrayal of the tragic game of human life.

The complex nature of this game deserves emphasis. It calls for a variety of talent, seldom all met with in the same individual; only a team of eleven can adequately cope with its demands; even then each member is heavily taxed. Its complexity is comparable to that of a novel; by its side tennis or football would appear like a short story. Cricket is the play of the herd; the individual makes at best only a limb of the organism. It is this restriction of the individual player's contribution towards the whole, as well as the

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dependence of the whole on his role that are responsible for the tragic spirit that permeates the play. Cricket portrays the mutual interactions between the individual and the herd in the inexorable transactions of human life. The individual is represented as batsman, bowler, fieldsman, or wicket-keeper. But his most representative form is revealed by the batsman. We shall, therefore, first consider him in that form.

The batsman corresponds to the mortal struggling in the world to keep body and soul together. He is surrounded by a band of eleven players who are bent on killing him; in mockery he is given a friend — of the same type as we invariably get in life. This friend is an inevitable companion and member of your side, but cannot and will not come to your rescue. He is there to grind his own axe, and coolly witnesses companion after companion collapsing. He changes his friend without a groan. Yet he has got the power to ruin you; your career is made to depend on him. In effect you are frightfully alone; you are surrounded by a vast field wherein lie spread many traps for you. Your freedom of movement is restricted; the heavy pads on your legs make you walk like a goose. You look more like an amputated man than a player. In the vast field the area you are entitled to make your own is severely limited. A crease line separates a few square feet from the rest, and you are condemned to struggle within that area. You bat and take runs. There are only two ways of taking them, either by running for each or by despatching the ball to the boundary along the field or across the air. When you do the latter your life is independent of your friend; but when you do the former it hangs on his mercy. Although there are only two ways of scoring runs, there are about six ways of meeting with your death.

The first and the one *par excellence* is getting bowled. This is the natural death, yet it is humiliating and most so when the middle stump is knocked out. Secondly, you may be killed by being caught. This is not humiliating, for you had your hit at any rate. But it adds insult to injury when you are caught and bowled by the same devil.

The third way by which you can meet with your doom is through the hands of that silent and heavily-gloved fellow, who, wearing an apparel similar to yours, looks different from all your other enemies, and stands close behind you, always watching you with anxiety when a ball is hurled at you. He

stands as though he is hungry to hug you from behind and lock you up in an embrace. And if you happen to get injured you are sure to find yourself first in his arms. His movements are parallel to yours and none of us could consider him your wiliest foe until he caught the ball after you had touched it and raised it in ecstasy or knocked your bails off when, after dashing forward from your little territory and hurling the bat in vain at the ball, you did not retreat in a flash. At such fateful moments the alertness of this Caliban surpasses that of Ariel. He is the fellow who stabs you in the back. He is called the wicket-keeper, but that is a misnomer. He is the fell wicket destroyer. The wicket-keeper symbolises all the cunning, treachery and foulness that prey upon the individual in life under the mask of friendship.

The fourth way of seeing the end of your career is that disgraceful process of being runout. Here the mistake may be either your miscalculation or the betrayal by your friend, standing at the opposite wicket. At any rate, the austerity of the end which is the one redeeming aspect of all tragedy is denied in this process, and the more proud and self-respecting you are, the greater your pang resulting from this mishap.

The fifth way of meeting your doom is by your own hands, which is called in cricket by the term self-wicket. How often are we not our own doom-makers in life? After a life of intense self-discipline, patience and carefulness, we commit unknowingly some little mistake which tilts the scale against us and drives us straight to our doom. An unwitting movement of the leg during the search of an innocent ball throws the delicately-poised bails from the stumps and you are given out. You cannot believe your own eyes; yet your fall has been real, as real as when you were clean bowled. The wicket is as fragile and unstable as life itself, and self-wicket is as common in cricket as self-ruination is in life.

The sixth possibility by which your fate is sealed is controlled by the umpire who may give you out l.b.w. This end is the one that is subjected to a lot of dispute and heart-ache. The decision rests solely in the hands of a single individual whose eyes and judgement are assumed to be infallible. This end is not disgraceful, since the audience are never sure about the justice of the decree. Nevertheless, at times it breaks your heart. You may feel convinced that

you were incorrectly judged by the pious-looking umpire (for is he not dressed like a Catholic father?), and then you bemoan your enforced inability to correct him. How often do the audience find an l.b.w.-condemned batsman, who had been given out just when he had struck his form and was commencing to score runs in his natural grace, sending an imploring look behind at the unkind umpire as he returns to the pavilion with a faint hope of being recalled after second thought. But no, the umpire is inexorable. Even if his second thought disturbs his mind, he sticks to his guns and condemns you to the gallows. How often we meet with a similar fate in life! Such victimisation in life, such dependence of life on the arbitrary judgement of the power-wielding men of the world is beautifully symbolised in cricket by this l.b.w. Abuse of authority, abuse of conscience, excessive reliance on the infallibility of the senses and other similar factors that constitute the cause of considerable tragedy in human life, are symbolised in the umpire's role in cricket. To feel that one man has dictatorially to decide whether another is to live or die—in other words, to compound the prosecutor, judge and executioner into one—is repugnant to our moral sense. But it does not affect our moral sense in the same spirit when we confer a similar power on the umpire, regarding the fate of the batsman. We do not want to make cricket any more easy or any less imperfect than life, and we do not want to introduce into it a higher morality than obtains in life.

Till now we have considered only the dangers that beset the batsman from the human factor on the field. This is undoubtedly the chief source of all his calamity, but at times a new factor suddenly swells into importance which, when it does so, even eclipses the human factor. This, again, holds the mirror so true to life that from the tragic standpoint considered in this essay it is most important. In no game is the state of the ground and of the weather so vitally important as in this game of the Anglo-Saxon race. The condition of the pitch is a matter for the anxious attention of the captains of the teams in every match of importance. The same accounts for their anxiety to win the toss, for very often the side that has the choice between batting and fielding secures by virtue of that very fact the power to win. References to the wearing wicket are made in tragic tone in the description of many test matches. But the situation

becomes alarming, nay maddening, when nature deliberately sides with one of the combatants and works havoc to the other. "England's twelfth man," one English newspaper once aptly styled it. A little rain is enough to produce a sticky wicket, the paradise for Verity, but a regular slaughter ground for the team whose lot it is to bat. On such a ground not even Don Bradman can ever be true to his merit; in Hamletian manner he would curse himself and think :

" The time is out of joint ; O cursed spite  
That ever I was born to set it right."

The whole side collapses as though stricken with epidemic, and most undeserved success crowns the opposing team. Undeserved, we all agree, but cricket is so faithfully patterned after life that we accord that victory the same value as to any other sort of victory in the game. Herein is no shirking of the grim realities of life, herein is no endeavour to "circumvent God" or alter the ordained scheme of things. Man may be wiser than God, but so long as he cannot escape His inexorable laws, he will introduce all the imperfection of His scheme into his own creations and willingly suffer them. Therein lies man's heroism, his real majesty. Our resolution to deny ourselves the joy of perfection in our creations until our Creator's works cease to suffer from imperfection is the supreme example of our tragic greatness. This we have seen best exemplified in Shakespeare, the severity of whose poetic justice denied life to Cordelia and broke the heart of Lear. How many of our poets, philosophers, scientists and saints were forced to live their lives in circumstances hostile to the flowering of their genius and destructive of the purpose of their lives? The rain-spoiled or sticky wicket has often prevailed in history and deprived many great men in the past of the capacity to exhibit or utilise their merits. Thus the genius of Archimedes was snuffed out early in life; Copernicus and Galileo were persecuted by the stupid religious machinery of their times; Lavoisier was beheaded by the mob; Priestly migrated to the New World; the Maid of France was burned to death. Scattered along the entire length of history we had perilous times—pudding wickets—and it was impossible for all great batsmen then to pull the game of life through to success. Centuries could not be thought of then; to remain simply at the wicket without any daring was itself a feat.

I have so far dealt only with the calamities that beset the individual batsman who belongs to the true category of batsmen. Many of my ideas do not apply to those who form the lower order in the batting list. These are people who have found their place in the team on account of capacities other than batting ; they too have to bat, although they have little desire to do so. The soldier who is concerned with the demolition of the fortress seldom takes interest in the artisan's job. Human society is a heterogeneous complex of creators, destroyers and preservers. All people need not join the work of slaughter in times of war ; but all people have to lay down the rifle in times of peace. In like manner, although all batsmen need not be bowlers, all bowlers have to bat when the team goes to bat. Creation calls for the labour of all, destruction needs the help of only the few.

It is among these bowlers that we have to search for the representatives of those huge destroyers of human peace and happiness, who at the time of their attack carry the rapturous populace on their side, but leave to history to evaluate the sin and ruin they effect. A gentlemanly bowler of Amar Singh's type, so scientific, so artistic, so cunning in the delivery of his balls, who has won his place in the test team on account of those merits, knows no law or restraint when sent out to bat. He is the hurricane hitter and nothing can govern his career. He cares not a rap for the plight of the wicket ; soft, hard, or sticky, it is all the same to him. For his technique is shaped independent of such factors. His extraordinary virility, his action in scorn of consequence, his callous indifference to the scientific and artistic methods, his sole determination to eject as much of his bouncing energy as possible, and hit the ball in murderous fury, coupled with his uncanny genius for timing, create a technique which outcompasses the game as much as it baffles and disarms his opponents. By outsoaring the limits, he disorganises all fielding and by creating confusion steadily destroys its morale. Of course, seldom can his game develop into the forbidding character it portends ; invariably it ends in fireworks ; but at times when helped by sheer chance, he dictates the destiny of the match. A beautiful carpet drive, effortlessly made by a batsman of sparkling talent and reaching the boundary eluding a network of fieldsmen, may attract the connoisseur of the game and thrill the artistic

spectator ; but to the bulk of the audience, possessing more gross appetite than refined taste, the sixer soaring the sky is more energising and hence more satisfying. Encouraged by the deafening cheers and closely nurtured by chance, the hitter accelerates his game and wrenches victory for his team and immortality for himself. His victory and immortality, like those of every dictator in history, are the outcome of reckless immorality and inartistry, sponsored by chance ; but that victory and immortality are not less valued in cricket than in life. Further, no distinction is made between the runs earned by Mushtaq Ali and those plundered by Amar Singh ; both are mixed and piled together on the score-board, just as the money earned by honest labour assumes no distinction from that derived by plunder or prostitution. The sixer is most often the offspring of brute force ; but the artists who created cricket—tragic artists they were—gave it the value of six runs, whereas the carpet-drive boundary was awarded only four, solely in recognition of the fact that the sixer is more applauded by the mob than the four. This judgement is only kindred to the poetic justice of Shakespeare who condemned Desdemona to die strangled and Iago to escape with life. A Napoleon broke skulls, froze tears, and spilt blood over a whole continent and kept a whole generation in trembling ; still he carried the enthusiasm of a whole nation with him, for his hurricane hitting was for a long time continually blessed by chance. A Mussolini sent his sixers flying over a continent and rained bombs over Abyssinia ; a whole nation was delirious with joy and extolled the hitter, while all who lived life artistically and scientifically in a civilised epoch gazed in impotence at the barbarous spectacle. Lo, just then a Hitler begins hitting from the other wicket ! Such is life, and cricket enacts that hard fact.

What has hitherto been said must convince the reader of the complex face and character of cricket. It is much larger than any other game. It is played not in hours, but in days ; as a result it is less thrilling than every other game. It has got as much dross as there is in life. But it is wide, deep and austere. It represents an earthly social life beset with evil and chance, where the factors conspiring against the exercise of individual merit are manifold, where the sole interest is tragic and lies in the inadequacy of the whole scheme to justify the individual worth or mete out punishment for

individual atrocities. The beauty of the game consists, as of life, in the realisation of beauty breaking in flashes through ugliness, and the fascination for the game is identical with our fascination for the enchanting beauties and unsolved riddles of life. It is fitting that the nation that produced Shakespeare also produced cricket.

I have yet to point out another tragic aspect of life that cricket symbolises. The cramped and limited scope of action of the batsman has been dealt with in detail. His comrades and sympathisers watch him from comfortable seats around the ground, but none can extend to him a helping hand in the bitter struggle he is condemned to endure alone. Cricket is team work only where it destroys, it is individual work where it creates. It teaches us the moral that in the making of our souls each of us is left severely alone, but that when we want to pull another down we can count upon support from others. The batsman has invariably a precarious life. He gives chances, but receives none. He faces the fast and slow bowlers alternately ; he has to escape the fury of the former and see through the wiles of the latter. Othello was a dashing bat, but he ought to have played cautiously against the "googlies" of Iago. Temptation for the batsman is as strong on the field as it is for us in life. And if he succumbs to the temptation, he has at once to quit the garden of Eden. He has to fight patiently and passionlessly, yet every offensive stroke has to issue hot from the bat. He is the cynosure of all, for he is the lamb for the sacrifice. He is the centre of the crowd, yet he is without company. No person goes to lead him out of the field when his wicket falls ; alone with bent head and bat under the arm he has to walk off, and when he confronts his successor on the way he is too broken to take notice of him. His exit has often melted my heart. Only when he reaches the pavilion and begins watching the game does he discover the comedy of it all. What was the object of all his bitter struggle and anxiety ? What was he supposed to defend ? His task had been to guard three wooden stumps on the top of which rested two bails. It was for this ridiculous lumber that he had struggled in such seriousness, for which he had risked his life. Even if he had scored a century, it would not be an article worth taking with him. Perhaps this is meant to symbolise the concrete substance we realise in life after its "fitful fever." We fight in life for unsubstantial phantoms, questionable ideals, and uncertain values. The

fight is real, nay dreadful. We fight immediately regardless of the purpose or object. It is only after the fitful fever has ended, that we look back and try to understand what we have fought for and why we have fought. And overcome by despair and remorse, we exclaim :

“ Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing. ”

I have found in this wicket the symbol of a great eternal fact. The three stumps stand for the Past, the Present and the Future. These three being continuous, the stumps are connected by means of bails. The past and the present cannot be disjointed, neither the present and the future. That is why when the bails are knocked off, the wicket is said to fall. The deepest reality known to us is our *being*, and we know that this being is extended through the past, the present and the future. Without the past there is no wisdom, and without the future there is no hope. Without the past there is no substance in our lives, and without the future there is no incentive to live. Thus the wicket symbolises the cardinal fact of our existence.

Something more. Life is not for each of us a purely batting career. We take runs for ourselves as well as we deny runs to others. Some of us live only to deny runs to others. In making ourselves we generally mar others. One man's meat is another man's poison. That is why the cricket match is not complete until you have done to your opponents what they did to you. Tit for tat, here again as in life. The reappearance of the batsman in the field as a bowler, a wicket-keeper or a fieldsman obliterates the tragic effect he had created. I have often wished that the batsman's exit from the field was final ; his immediate return in light dress and hale spirit renders comic what had been felt to be tragic. Just imagine King Lear returning to the stage with the crown on his head and Cordelia on his bosom soon after Shakespeare's tragedy had been enacted to the end. But although cricket symbolises the tragic aspects of life, it is not in itself a tragedy. It is a play and must be so. Otherwise it will not serve its great purpose. It is meant to be enjoyed by all. If the spirit of cricket ceases to be that of play, its beauty would paralyse the nerves of the playgoer,

and there will be only as many to see cricket as there are to read *Lear*. In order that we may live in water, we must only float on its surface. Likewise, in order that we may live life, we must keep floating on its surface, and all our endeavours to plumb its depths or experience the state of the deep waters should necessarily be efforts detached from the living self. To leave the surface and plunge into the depths and have first-hand experience may be heroic, but in that case, like Hamlet, you will have to perish. But cricket is meant to equip you for living life ; it is not tragedy enacted, it is tragedy circumvented. It is not art, it is play.

The relation between Good and Evil and the differences between them are also gracefully illustrated in this game. We can readily take the creative process of batting as the principle of Good and the destructive process of bowling as the principle of Evil. It is then remarkable how the cricket world has always been allotting greater importance and attaching greater respect to batting. The batsman is looked upon with greater favour than the bowler. Bradman is worshipped as a hero and a superman by many cricket fans, while Grimmett is simply praised. Such beautiful epithets as "brilliant", "sound", "graceful", "masterly", "stolid" are applied to the batsman, whereas the bowler is complimented only with such words as "deadly", "accurate" and "wily".

There are sound reasons for this invidious distinction. In fact, bowling is never absolutely destructive. It succeeds only because batting fails, whereas when batting goes on strong bowling is thoroughly subdued. Theoretically, there is no ball bowled by a bowler that is not defensible by a batsman ; in other words, theoretically, bowling is not a fatal operation preying upon the batting. Perhaps this reveals to us the truth in the relationship between Good and Evil. *Evil succeeds only because the Good we know is finite and therefore breaks down ; theoretically even infinite Evil cannot destroy infinite Good.* Every onslaught of Evil can theoretically be resisted and defeated by the power of Good. Further Good can exist independent of Evil, whereas Evil vanishes when Good is no more. This is also illustrated in cricket. A combination of batsmen like Bradman and Ponsford was capable of standing undivided for a whole day and still gave a treat to the onlookers. It is not essential for cricket that bowling must succeed ; bowling may prove impotent and

yet the batsmen may provide a sight for the gods. On the other hand, imagine a situation where a bowler has been deadly enough to take all the ten wickets without yielding a single run. Then I wonder if the performance would deserve the name cricket.

Such arguments must convince the reader that bowling is not the mathematical opposite of batting. Of course, it is a counter operation, but it only helps to heighten the beauty of batting. Strictly speaking, all the higher talents of the batsman can be called into play only by the aid of superb bowling, the batting being liable to turn out to be inartistic flogging when the bowler is mediocre. In that case the play loses all its charm. Exactly for similar reasons, Evil cannot be regarded as the opposite of Good although it works in the counter direction. For without Evil much of the highest Good is bound to go unknown and unblossomed. What we have to accept in the problem of Good and Evil by force of religious faith or intellectual ratiocination, we accept with natural ease in the case of cricket. For everybody would admit that the prime note of cricket is batting and that the batsman is the real hero of the play. But it requires a powerful sermon to convince a man that Good is the stronger force in the universe, that good actions constitute the prime note of human life, and that the good man is the hero of the struggle. Herein lies the difference between cricket and life, but the reason for the difference is plain enough. We view cricket as play, whereas we consider life as business.

There is a tendency among philosophers to consider the world as a playground of God and life as a game played by Him. This is particularly a Hindu belief. It is not, however, an attitude that can be stomached by any man of feeling, but if the statement is anywhere near the truth, I believe it will be fair to regard cricket as the prototype of the game played by God. God's enjoyment of human life must then be identical with our enjoyment of cricket. And since our enjoyment of cricket is innocent and refined, are we bound to conclude that God's enjoyment of human life is innocent and refined in like manner? Very few people I am sure, will be prepared to endorse an answer in the affirmative. Life is a serious thing, they would argue; its struggles and pains, breakings and bleedings, pangs and tears cannot constitute play. True, but is any player anything but serious when he

plays? Are the struggles of the batsman when he bats on a sticky wicket against spin bowlers a mere eye-wash, a hypocritical or half-hearted display? *The truth is that the play mentality prevails only without the play, not within it.* A gas is gaseous only because there is a large void without its molecules; within the molecules there is solidity as rigid as in the cricket ball. Horace Walpole has said, "Life is a tragedy to those who feel and a comedy to those who think". So long as we are within the play, in other words so long as we are players ourselves, we *feel* it and the whole struggle is serious and tragic. But once we get back into the pavilion or watch the game from the gallery, it turns out to be all comic, all play, because we then begin to *think*.

This has not, however, solved the puzzle. In the first place, all people cannot remain in the pavilion; a few must play in order that others may see the play. This means that the comic view cannot replace the tragic, it only means that it can co-exist with the tragic. Both are real, and together they make the truth. In the second place, there are people who would prefer being players to being spectators. That creates the puzzle whether the one position is really inferior to or less enjoyable than the other. Perhaps we are all angels, who before we were born were sitting in the company of God, witnessing the cricket of human life on earth, and who, unable to contain our raptures, threw off our comfortable dress, clad ourselves in pads, and rushed down to the earth to bat, to bowl, to field or to stump as we liked. And then, after having come below and plunged ourselves headlong into the intoxicating game and gone tipsy, we cry and rail against the God above and make mouths at Him for our own virtue of playing the game in the thrilling way. In the meantime, as the immortal Shakespeare put it, "Upon such sacrifice, Cordelia, the gods themselves throw incense"—a spectacle similar to the mob roaring with rapture over a batting Bradman. But unaware of this great truth, we ask in mocking agony, "Is this the promised end?"; whereas in reality He had made no promise and this is no end at all. What fools we mortals are! A little while after, after death, we are bound to laugh at ourselves. And who knows we will not then pray to God to send us down to earth again?