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THE CHANGING IMAGE OF SPORTS: A HISTORY OF SPORTS TELEVISION IN POST-GLOBALIZATION INDIA

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Abstract: Shunning the welfare ideals of the Nehruvian state, India in the 1990s was framed through the notion of newness, constant change and dynamic movement: Urban vistas were architecturally reconstructed, economic policies were redrawn, middle-class ecologies were booming, and a culture of consumerism was reshaping everyday life and urban subjectivities. Amidst this shifting urban cartography of spaces and practices, the rapid rise of private television enabled the medium to embody the asymmetrical visions of transformation associated with ‘New India’. In the world of Indian sports too, this was a period marked by colossal change and movement. While cricket during this time came to acquire a bullying presence across the national sporting imaginary, other historically popular sports such as football fell from grace and persevered only within certain regional patches of the country. In this paper, I attempt a comparative history of cricket and football in post-globalization India as the games get consolidated through a constellation of neo-nationalist aspirations, private television networks, and sporting federation bodies. Unlike other sports-media arrangements in the West (Wenner 1998, Rowe 2003), I will argue that a consideration of sensorial and ‘aesthetic infrastructures’ (Larkin 2013) has been fundamental in deciding the contrasting fortunes of both cricket and football in India. In thinking through Marc Auge’s architectural landscape of supermodernity (1995), I propose the term ‘architectonics of aspiration’ to refer to an aesthetic form of image production that has guided the notions of quality and liveness for the Indian sports-broadcasting context. Moving beyond postmodern concerns of images as ‘representations,’ a consideration of aesthetic and affective dimensions allows us to pursue the materiality of images and how they feed into a larger spatial diagram of images in sports bars, bazaars, and emerging sports cafes. More significantly, in a world where virtually all elite sporting competitions are categorized as sports-media enterprises, aesthetic infrastructures enable us to think beyond a homogenous sports-media architectural experience.

Introduction

The 1990s were a crucial turning point for independent India on several accounts. Politically, the Nehruvian idea of welfare statehood came to a decisive end, and in its place, a neoliberal regime was formally inaugurated. With Special Economic Zones (SEZs) attracting global investment and multinational corporations being rapidly set up across the country, a new service industry promoted the steady manufacture of a thriving middle-class ecology. Urban vistas were being architecturally redrawn: Alongside draconian processes of gentrification and slum clearances, a panorama of gated colonies, shopping malls, pirate bazaars, flyovers and billboards were systematically inducing new commercial circuits to city life. The new rubric of consumerist impulses and desires were producing several seismic shifts in terms of reorienting workplace culture, as well as public and domestic spaces. That is, alongside urban surface, urban subjectivities were also being refashioned in the everyday acts of city life.

The dynamic movement of capital and bodies across national borders evoked a new global consciousness. This however did not mean an erasure of nationalist forces; rather, the globalist imaginary only helped redraw the lines on which the national community was to be now imagined. A rooted territorial nationalism gave way to a nationalism derived from cultural consumption of goods, or what Ashish Rajadhyaksha calls ‘cultural nationalism’ (2003). This was then a virulent neo-nationalism in line with the times – deeply rooted in commodity culture, western modernity, fears of cultural invasion, and drawing legitimacy by selectively distorting histories and inventing a glorious past. The anxieties and pathologies of the changing socio-political landscape can be traced through the political rise of right-wing Hindu organizations throughout the country – particularly the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad in the 80s and 90s. These Hindutva-preaching organizations mobilized rath yatras throughout the country and spearheaded the ‘Ram Janmabhoomi’ movement which ultimately led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid.¹ Cultivated through a globalist frame, the project of New India underscored a dramatically altered vision for the nation.

Amidst the many sites of popular culture, the rapidly changing landscape of television mediated many of the shifting desires and concerns shaping New India. As both mirror and vehicle, the platform became a crucial document to study the changing designs, framings and visage of

¹ The Wire Staff. “Babri Masjid: The Timeline of a Demolition,” <https://thewire.in/communalism/babri-masjid-the-timeline-of-a-demolition>. Accessed on 15 May 2022.

New India. While television began in India as a humble state-run division of All India Radio in 1959, it was only during the 80s and 90s that the platform truly became a mass medium. The launch of INSAT-1A and INSAT-1B in 1982 set up for the first time a satellite network in the country that could pick up television signals from low-power transmitters. Starting with just one such transmitter in 1971, and a slow rise to 18 by 1980, the number of transmitters shot up to 172 by 1985, and soon to 698 by 1995 (Mehta 2009: 586). This infrastructural setup was similarly accompanied by a substantial rise in the number of television sets. In the first two decades of television till 1982, the figures of television sets were cautious and pegged at two million. However, the accelerated push from 1982 to 1992 saw the total number of television sets exponentially rise to approximately 34 million TV sets (587). However, the most crucial infrastructural component of this televisual revolution was to come in the 90s, when the single state-run channel Doordarshan was to give way to a deregulated and privatized broadcasting landscape. By 1998, approximately 70 channels were operating in India, including those run by several prominent transnational networks (such as STAR, BBC, MTV, Sony, Disney etc.) as well as entrepreneurial Indian ventures like Zee TV and Sun TV (Thussu 1999: 127). Far from the state-controlled monopoly of Doordarshan, more than three decades later the total number of channels operating on Indian television screens has crossed the 1600 mark.

What we witnessed from the early 90s therefore was a new televisual system molded in and by the colors of globalization. To be sure, what was to manifest in full splendor in the 90s had already left quite a few traces since Doordarshan started commercial advertisements in 1976. Throughout the 80s, Doordarshan's increasing reliance on revenues from advertisements and private program production had already started denting the agendas of nation-building and developmentalism that were part of the Nehruvian television project (Kumar 2006: 33-35). Nevertheless, as Ravi Sundaram suggests, the 1980s were largely still a "dress rehearsal" for what was to arrive in the following decade (Sundaram 2005: 55). The very nature of television changed post the 1990s. The cable TV revolution fundamentally altered the direction of Indian television from an information-oriented public service broadcast to a profit-oriented, spectacle-driven, commercially vibrant setup. Such dynamic commercialism went well with the broader policies of economic liberalization and commodity culture that were being cultivated in new middle-class tastes and urban lifestyles. Televisual programming towards the late 90's shifted from directly sourced western programming to western formats with a distinctly local twist. New avenues like

‘indigenized’ game and chat shows, Hindi and regional news media, locally-dubbed and subtitled Hollywood films, TV shows and cartoons were continuously tried and tested with the expanding markets of television in India (Thussu 1999: 127). At stake in these everyday industrial negotiations was the reorientation of a national identity that was both born out of and heavily dependent on the forces of globalization.

Caught in the crossfire between a yearning for global citizenship and antagonistic sensibilities of cultural invasion, television relayed and reproduced a new vocabulary of nationalism. This of course had to do with the expanding market base of television viewership in India, but one must note how a delicate balance between the globalist vision and nationalism is woven through this format of satellite television programming. Certainly, without understanding this complex relationship between globalization, nationalism and satellite television, one cannot comprehend the ecology of Indian sports-media enterprises. It is only by examining the complicated terrain of India’s televisual complex that we can locate the contrasting fortunes of Indian cricket and Indian football. In mapping these alternate sports-media trajectories, my argument will also address the crucial role of aesthetic and affective infrastructures in televised sports broadcasts. Before we speak more on that however, it is first important to address the changing nature of relationship between cricket and the televisual landscape.

Changing Nation, Changing Sport: The Emergence of Cricketing Nationalism

By the mid-late 1990s, the influx of private broadcasting networks had fashioned an archive of neo-nationalism centered around a culture of consumption. Alongside the recalibration of Bombay cinema (into an industrial product known as Bollywood), the turn towards national cricket embodied the characteristic spirit of post-liberalization India. The sport, which was originally associated with British royalty and native princes in Colonial India, had by the late 80s and early 90s acquired a bullying presence over the Indian subcontinent. What is interesting to note here however is that of all the spectator sports that could stake a claim to the nationalist imagination, cricket, owing to its traditions of amateurism and heavy investment in sporting equipment, was the least accessible to the masses. On the other hand, football, and perhaps more crucially hockey, could legitimately stake its claim to the discourse of nationalism in sports. As Nalin Mehta remarks, “the astonishing early success rate of Indian Hockey when it won 6 successive gold medals at the Olympics between 1928 to 1956, turned the game into an icon for Indian

nationalism” (Mehta 2009: 582). It was no surprise then that after Independence, the Ministry of Sports declared Hockey as India’s national sport. Indian football too saw several early successes in postcolonial India, most notably winning the gold medal at the Asian Games in 1951 and 1962, finishing 4th in the summer Olympics of 1956, and finishing runners-up in the AFC Asian Cup in 1964. While cricket too had gained some momentum over the years, its popular perception was still that of a patrician sport. By his own admittance, Anthony De Mello, one of the founders of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), wrote in his book ‘Portrait of Indian Sport’:

Soccer in India, like hockey, is a poor man’s game. It is a game which most boys around the country play at one time or another – at school or in the maidan . . . Thus there is a nationwide understanding of, and liking for, soccer, stronger than that for cricket, which has till now tended to be more a game for the rich man.

[Mehta, 2009, 583]

It is not that cricket did not captivate a sizeable population of the country, but that historically it did not carry the preeminence that it does so today. How then, with the trajectory of developments that defined the early postcolonial landscape of India, did the country’s sporting ecology dramatically gravitate towards cricket?

In order to understand this contemporary nexus between cricket and nationalism in India, one has to pay close attention to the changing landscape of sports broadcasting. In this regard, one of the most visible alterations to the game was Kerry Packer’s World Series Cricket (1977). A shrewd businessman and a television mogul, Packer had a keen media-eye and “was much more interested in representation than the game itself” (Ghosh 2011: 79). With a heavily commercialized and television-friendly production, the cricket tournament introduced a variety of novelties that became steady features of the sport: the investment in colored and sponsored kits, the regular use of multiple camera angles, close-up shots, graphical effects, and slow-motion replays, and the adoption of the one-day format with day/night scheduling. Even though World Series Cricket as a sporting product barely lasted 3 years, the tournament’s impact on crafting a new look and format for the sport was permanent (see Ghosh 2011; Subramanian 2015). The fresh televisual packaging of the sport thus turned cricket on its head. In the words of Ashish Nandy, the “ritualized garden party” that defined colonial Test cricket paved the way for a modern celebration of the “slap-bang dramatics of the game’s one-day version” (Nandy 2003: 38-41).

The influence of cricket as a nationalist symbol grew out of the shifting nature of relations between sports and televisual media. Arjun Appadurai argues that televised sports and its will to spectacle – that is, the drive towards individual stardom, commodification of players, new intensive flows of corporate capital, the creation of ‘one-day’ matches, and a sharp aggressive anchoring around corporate-sponsored nationalism – was ultimately responsible for unyoking the Victorian amateur roots out of cricket and enabling its decolonization (2015). According to Nalin Mehta, the crucial link between Indian cricket and nationalism involved a host of factors since the late 1970s: “the creation of a large middle class, economic reforms, the politics of identity, the birth of the satellite television industry, and a whole gamut of forces under the broad rubric of globalization”; nevertheless, the lynchpin and connecting tissue throughout this period is the rapid rise of television as a ‘mass’ medium in the country (Mehta 2009: 581). He particularly emphasizes the associations between sports and television through the Asian Games of 1982 (hosted in Delhi), where color television and a nation-wide television network called ‘The National Programme’ were inaugurated.² The national television service enabled the rise of commercial advertisements, private programming, and thus television in the 1980s had started shifting from its developmentalist objective into “a new consumer spectacle... with an overt middle-class agenda” (588). Cricket too then got in the act of what Manas Ghosh calls ‘consumer nationalism’: where on the one hand individual cricketing stars (Kapil Dev, Ravi Shastri, Sunil Gavaskar) were born through corporate marketing and advertisements; and on the other hand, the nation itself became a commoditized ‘brand’, wherein nationalism was detached from territoriality and increasingly based on acts of consumption.

If televisual broadcasting has defined sporting fortunes, the reverse has been equally true. Scholars have noted how cricket in India has legally paved the way for the satellite revolution of the 90s (Hutton 2009; Mehta 2008; Smith 2016). Cricket in India was used (in Rupert Murdoch’s famous expression) as a ‘battering ram’ to open up the pay-TV markets in India. Before the economic reforms of 1991, only Doordarshan was allowed to broadcast sports matches, and the BCCI would have to bear the production costs for these matches. This situation however turned on its head in 1992-93, when for the first time BCCI sold cricket rights for India-England tour to

² At a time when television was becoming increasingly accessible to the nation and part of everyday culture, sporting results became ever-more visible and louder. In these years, the successive triumphs at the 1983 Cricket World Cup and the 1985 Benson and Hedges tournament turned the sport into a celebratory symbol, while the 7-1 loss to Pakistan at the Asiad Hockey Finals became a moment of national shame.

a multinational enterprise called Trans World International (TWI). In 1994, the BCCI signed a massive deal with American cable broadcasters ESPN (worth US \$30 million) for five years of cricketing rights of the Indian team. This was an important moment that we shall return to later in the context of Indian football. Doordarshan first took matters to court when the Cricket Association of Bengal (CAB) followed the BCCI's example in selling the broadcast rights for the Hero Cup to TWI. In 1995, the Supreme Court passed a major historical judgement declaring the airwaves public property and therefore no longer exclusively under the control of the government. Peter Hutton, a sports television producer at that time, gives an insightful personal account of how Bill Sinrich, Jagmohan Dalmiya and I.S. Bindra took personal charge and spearheaded the battle against MIB and Doordarshan. Commenting on the significance of the Supreme Court's verdict, Hutton remarks: "that judgement, arising out of a cricket dispute, gave legal basis to the satellite revolution that was engulfing India since the early 1990s and changed the face of Indian broadcasting itself" (Hutton 2009: 142). The very fact that the only other law passed in the last few years related to broadcasting i.e. the Sports Broadcasting Signal Act (mandatory sharing with Prasar Bharti) passed in 2007 also grew out of cricket is a testament to how tightly cricket and television have embraced each other through the anchor of nationalism.

Over the last two decades, the shared synergy between national cricket and private television have completely altered the financial fortunes of both the industries. Boria Majumdar notes how economic and political motives allowed BCCI to hold cricket tournaments like the 2006 DLF Cup held in Malaysia (Majumdar 2008). These matches were therefore staged as a 'satellite TV bonanza', a mega media event where the coverage of the match (on sports and new channels alike) generated massive TRP Ratings and advertisement money for television networks, and simultaneously allowed BCCI to benefit through selling broadcast rights. Similarly, Nalin Mehta's descriptive opening passage on Aaj Tak's perfunctory celebrations of India's T-20 World Cup final win against Pakistan (Mehta) and Boria Majumdar's analysis of how a news spectacle is created for covering the regional CAB elections in 2006 (Majumdar) are both prime examples to show how cricket invites symbolism that transcend sporting ambitions. In a seamless relay across the televisual spectrum – sports channels, news media, advertisements, soap operas, entertainment shows – Ghosh observes a virtual flow of iconicity, where cricket becomes a dominant iconic trope to shore up ratings through claims of Indian identity.

It is worthwhile to also mention here that the claims to national identity during these decades were grounded in a rather myopic vision of globalized Hindu modernity. While outside the scope of this current article, discourses around masculinity and body politics have become crucial features of underscoring the new national imaginary. Unlike the cinematic profile of Amitabh Bachchan or even the traditional brawny built of Hindu wrestlers (Alter 1992), a new kind of lean and vascular physicality began to find pervasive currency in the metropolitan centers of post-liberalization India, especially in the Hindi-speaking Hindu heartland. Groomed within a set of new professional spaces of leisure and consumption – middle-class gymnasiums, body-building competitions, modelling avenues, health cafes, and even hair salons, Michiel Baas notes that the physical transformation of the male body came to symbolize the active construction of New India (2020). He suggests that the lean and muscular frame no longer connoted laboring bodies (bodies of a specific caste and class) but rather projected an aspirational form of globalization: a muscular form tied to social mobility, discipline, control, and cosmopolitanism. Parallel to these advances in globalization, the film screens have simultaneously produced the visual blueprint of what Sudhanva Deshpande calls ‘the consumable hero’ (Sinha and Kaur 2005: 186-203). The heavy reliance on transnational capital for both film production and distribution enabled the films to draw upon body aesthetics that were familiar to global (western) audiences; similarly, the exposure to foreign films and images within domestic markets forced filmmakers to respond with similar hypermasculine archetypes (Balaji 2013; Balaji and Hughson 2014). Ajay Gehlawat refers to the increasing metrosexualization of the body, its smooth global consumability and reproducibility as the turn towards a neoliberal aestheticization of the Indian male body (2015).³ Outside of film personalities, a notable example of this chiseled masculinity that characterizes the spirit of the New India is best exemplified through the star physicality of the Indian cricket team’s former captain, Virat Kohli.

Nevertheless, if a global design to male bodies necessitated a new project in urban India grounded in muscular masculinity, then these bodies were always underpinned by the sentiment of a ‘transnational Hindu modernity’ (Bhattacharya 2013). Meraj Ahmed Mubarki suggests that the muscular physiognomy of male bodies was a response to a series of events in the 1980s and

³ Apart from film screens, a host of television commercials, music videos, posters, billboards, and magazine covers outlined the male body as a product of scopophilic consumption. Here, the broad-shouldered and bare-chested physiques emerged as new spectacular objects of immense sexual potential and libidinal investment.

90s – all of which heightened “a perceived sense of eternal victimhood for the Hindus” (2018: 15). Within the evolving canon of a Hindu-centric cultural nationalism (that would also include angry images of Ram and Hanuman), a muscular makeup of the male body aimed to command global respect while also consolidating a strong Hindu imagination internally. Therefore, Mubarki observes: “Liberalization aligned the male body with American aesthetics; Hindutva politicised it” (2018: 16).

In the myriad intersections between sports and television, the centrality of the star athletic body has become of late a prominent feature of the new national imaginary. During this period, the descriptions of Indian football’s lack of competitive edge internationally have focused on racially-charged notions of “genetic imperfections.”⁴ In cricket too, the politicization of the sporting body has informed several recent discussions and debates on the national team players. After losing to Pakistan in a World Cup T-20 match, many online trolls and television new channels singled out fast-bowler Mohammed Shami for the loss. The charges levied against Shami emphasized his Muslim identity, all the while accused him of betraying the nation and being a Pakistani secret agent.⁵ On the obverse side of this Hindu-centric nationalist prism, star players such as Ravindra Jadeja and Suresh Raina can be seen sporting upturned mustaches and flaunting their upper-caste identities on Twitter without any fear of critical feedback.⁶ In the field of hockey, a lower-caste player’s family received casteist slurs after the national team’s loss to Argentina in the 2021 Tokyo Olympics.⁷ This is by no means an exhaustive list of the expectations and anxieties that are organized through the confluence of sports, television and nationalism in post-liberalization India. Rather, my brief attempt here at signposting the logic of body politics and muscular masculinity in India’s project of nation-building is to open up this fertile domain for

⁴ In 1993, the Indian Football Association released a document that spoke about various reasons Indian football could not compete at the global level effectively. Interestingly, besides highlighting bureaucratic mismanagement and the lack of federal funding, the organization also cited the “genetic imperfection of Indian footballers concerning physical fitness” as a factor for the failures (Dimeo 2002).

⁵ The Times of India Staff. “T20 World Cup: Mohammed Shami faces vicious online abuse after India’s loss to Pakistan,” <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/sports/cricket/icc-mens-t20-world-cup/t20-world-cup-mohammed-shami-faces-vicious-online-abuse-after-indias-loss-to-pakistan/articleshow/87255167.cms>. Accessed on 15 May 2022.

⁶ <https://twitter.com/imjadeja/status/1301075666608304128>. Accessed on 15 May 2022. Express Web Desk. “Suresh Raina called out for his ‘Brahmin’ comment during TNPL 2021 commentary,” The Indian Express, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/suresh-raina-tnpl-commentary-brahmin-chennai-7413303/>. Accessed on 15 May 2022.

⁷ Scroll Staff. “Hockey player Vandana Katariya’s family faces casteist slurs after Olympic loss,” <https://scroll.in/latest/1002103/hockey-player-vandana-katariyas-family-faces-casteist-slurs-after-olympic-loss>. Accessed on 15 May 2022.

further academic research. Both literally and figuratively, the transformations of the male body have aggressively groomed an upper-caste, Hindu-centric nationalist framework for New India.

The consolidation of the practices through which private television in India organizes the logic of national cricket inevitably frames the enterprise as a ‘sports-media complex’ (Jhally 1984). Against a more traditional sociological approach to study sports industries, the novel sports-media framework realizes the increasing dependence of sports on televised spectatorship (Wenner 2003; Rowe 2004; Nicholson 2015). The heavy reliance on screens for sports consumption has perhaps been best summarized by Garry Whannel who remarks, “For most of us, for most of the time, sport is televised sport” (Whannel 2007). Lawrence Wenner’s edited volume titled ‘Mediasport’ (Wenner 2003) chronicles the myriad ways through which sports production and consumption practices are subsumed as televisual media forms. With the increasing number of globalized sports leagues emerging internationally, the sports-media framework as a conceptual axis has gained widespread academic acceptance. However, I argue that the notion of sports-media that emerges through this configuration is rather flattened, homogenous and monochromatic. This is primarily to do with the fact that most of these globalized enterprises are located within Western developed countries, and as a result, their engagement with the industrial confluence of sports and media formats has been limited. In this regard, the Indian context of sports-media offers two contrasting examples of sports-media assemblages – one belonging to Indian football and the other to national cricket. The two sports-media enterprises, we shall see in the following pages, present completely different assumptions about the confluence of sports and televisions.

At the same time, by counterposing these alternate mediatized infrastructures of sports in India, there is a larger argument to be made about the conceptualization of sports-media constellations. In the western approach to sports-media enterprises, there is an implicit assumption about the homogeneity of televised landscapes. All mediatized sports events are assumed to look a specific way, where spectacle, velocity and vibrant colors interact to produce a shiny surface aesthetic (Sandvoss 2003 and Whannel 2005, 2007). Since all sports-media enterprises are assumed to look the same way, the consideration of televisual aesthetics has not garnered much academic interest. Rather, the methodology and conceptual frameworks for examining the mediatization of sports have mainly tended to revolve around political-economy concerns. In this analytical model, aesthetic architectures of sport are assumed to be a by-product of its economic infrastructure. Any differences in the aesthetic makeup of televised sporting events are therefore

assumed to be a matter of budget, not culture. These frameworks of sports-media have filtered into the writings on Indian sports, which are mainly centered around national men's cricket (Rasul and Proffitt 2011; Gupta 2009; Smith 2016). Since the trajectory of developments in Indian cricket have produced a familiar iconography of globalized sports production that is expected of all contemporary sports enterprises, the writings on the sport have similarly ignored the sensory role of aesthetic infrastructures. Through this paper, I present two contrasting sports-media landscapes, wherein I argue aesthetic strategies of sports production have crucially defined the fortunes and misfortunes of cricket and football respectively.

A Failed Globalization: The 'National Football League' Experiment

Twelve years before the launch of the Indian Premier League, the idea of a national league built on professional corporate lines was first initiated in the world of Indian football. The move was born out of two primary considerations. On the one hand, it was based on the instructions of a 1995 FIFA Inspection Committee Report. As per the report, a unified league would allow the All India Football Federation (AIFF) an opportunity to consolidate domestic football in India, which was historically wedded to the ethos of provincialism and regionalism (Bandhyopadhyay and Majumdar 2006). On the other hand, the national league was meant to counter the declining base of Indian football audiences. The rapid expansion of Indian cricket and European football fans meant a new competitive broadcasting landscape of sports in India. Both European club football and Indian cricket had expertly revamped themselves to suit the needs of a newly globalizing country, where both sports and fandom were beginning to be understood in exclusively consumerist terms. My argument here will focus on how both Indian cricket and European football – via their broadcast partners ESPN and Star Sports –cultivated a loyal market of Indian sports fans by producing a surface aesthetic that conjured the fantastic dreamy visions of globalization. This novel visual imagery is what I shall refer to as the 'architectonics of aspiration'. In the next few pages, I shall argue that without such a foundational economy of affect in place, no amount of corporate funding could have sustained loyal support for either European football or Indian cricket. This point will be highlighted particularly through the contrasts with the AIFF's experiment with the national league.

One of the points of discussion that this article attempts to organize is around the role of sports television in India and how exactly does it intersect with the social infrastructures of post-

liberalization India? My contention here is that with the constant fluctuations, mutations and transformation in the urban geography of post-90s India, the social can only be conceived and mapped through an archive of the senses. In his work “Signal and Noise,” Brian Larkin (2008) usefully demonstrates how infrastructural development in colonial Nigeria served not only a technical purpose but also a deeply symbolic purpose. “Technology,” he suggests, “had a double function: its technical one of transmitting radio waves, or moving people faster from place to place, and its ideological mode of address, hailing people as new sorts of political subjects” (Larkin 2008: 43). By viewing technological infrastructures not only through a technical lens of scientific rationality but rather as architectural designs imbued with qualities of spectacle, sublimity and affectivity, Larkin allows us a significant point of entry into the aesthetic considerations of sports television in India. Particularly worth noting about such an infrastructure of affective networks is that it neither assumes some base-level economic or technical function nor assumes that poetic logic cannot overtake technical aspects in determining the political. It, therefore, shuns away from an orthodox Marxist framework, where cultural poetics is often left to the realm of ideology and superstructures. In a later work, by usefully drawing upon Aristotle’s notion of Aesthesis, Larkin (2013) is able to invert the Marxist order to reinvigorate the ‘value’ in the material and sensorial registers of objects. Aesthesis here – unlike ‘aesthetics’ – does not refer to a mental appreciation of art, but to a sensorial experience, which is primarily engaged through its materiality. This move towards refocusing our attention on the materiality of objects opens up a new malleable notion of infrastructural networks: it is treated not as the hard grounded substance on which deeper socio-political tensions are staged, but a dense intermedial matrix of light and sound, of graphic images, bodies and kinetics, of affective sensibilities, which themselves vibrate with thunderous politics.

Such a theoretical frame then allows us to crucially investigate television, which alongside other screened surfaces like cinema, becomes an archive of such pathologies, fetishes, and subjectivities. In the globalized remake of televisions during the 90s, we find a dense network of material and sensorial registers which allow us to measure emotive transactions, map cartographies of aspiration, and especially for our purpose here, enable us to understand how an economy of globalist desires was manifest in the spellbinding excitement of watching European club football and national cricket. Without understanding the deep intensity of sensory interactions between the European football broadcasts, Indian cricketing nationalism and the Indian sports audiences, one cannot fathom the tangible fan identities that these products were able to cultivate.

By the full force of the 90s then, India found itself plunged into serious sports-media terrain. Having to compete with the spectacular advances of Indian cricketing nationalism and the televisual export of European football, the AIFF moved towards crafting a domestic league of its own. Mario Rodrigues' (2001) well-researched essay delves into how corporatization was introduced at various levels of the NFL. Born out of AIFF's I-league experiment, two private ventures in the form of Kochin FC and Bengal Mumbai FC scripted history as the first professionally run clubs of Indian football. In addition to Kochin FC and BMFC, Vijay Mallya's United Breweries Group had made a massive investment by buying off the top three trio of Bengali clubs. Mohun Bagan became McDowell's Mohun Bagan and East Bengal became Kingfisher East Bengal. Mohammedan Sporting, even though it was legally tied to Herbertsons, chose not to attach the beer brand in the club's name in the face of a prospective backlash. Similarly, Zee had bought majority stakes in the family-owned Goan club, Churchill Brothers. Sponsorships elsewhere too, like kit sponsorships, and more importantly, the title sponsorship for the national league was also similarly up for sale. In the first two years, Philips sponsored the league. It was allegedly sponsored by Coca-Cola for the next two years after that, although the financial details of the contract remain murky.

Despite the initial burst of enthusiasm regarding corporate sponsorships, private ownerships and professional organizations in Indian football, the interest soon died out due to poor financial returns on the investments. By their fifth year, United Breweries downsized their investment in newly acquired entities Mohun Bagan and East Bengal from Rs. 27.5 million to Rs. 12.5 million each. Gulf Oil similarly cut down its budget for BMFC, and Kochin FC went through three different sponsors in the first three years of its operations. Within a few years, after both Philips and Coca-Cola had backed out as title sponsors, the NFL played without a title sponsor; other traditionally prestigious tournaments like the Durand Cup, Federation Cup, DCM Trophy, and Nehru Cup had either been locked out due to a lack of funds or were showcased with a bare minimum expenditure, without any publicity or fanfare around it.

Crucially, the fall in commercial investment was attributed to the AIFF's decision to partner with Doordarshan. After an initial year of broadcasting the NFL with ESPN-Star Sports, the (now former) AIFF president Priyaranjan Das Munshi decided to terminate the contract in favor of an agreement with Doordarshan. In my interview with Novy Kapadia, he confirms that with the benefit of hindsight one can see that this was indeed an important juncture for Indian

football. The decision to move away from ESPN-Star Sports held massive economic implications for the football federation. On the one hand, the AIFF lost out on the huge revenue sales generated through broadcasting rights; at the same time, the preference towards Doordarshan retracted many of the incoming corporate investors. Rodrigues suggests that Philips backed out of sponsorship deals with the NFL on account of “poor publicity returns” and “inadequate televisual coverage of the game.” Furthermore, he notes:

Most sponsors wanted programmes on the cable-distributed, satellite channel ESPN-STAR Sports rather than the ‘slipshod coverage’ provided by the terrestrial and government-owned Doordarshan channel. The latter is perceived to be a rather lumbering organization staffed by bureaucrats while ESPN-STAR uses the latest production techniques and is favoured by the wealthier classes... Vivek Singh of Procam Sports, a marketing agency... (Rhetorically asks) ‘Who is going to make stars of Indian footballers? Not Doordarshan, of course. Without stars there is no charm in the game, without charm no sponsors and without sponsors no progress.’

(2001: 117)

The chain of ‘star-charm-sponsors-progress’ already reflected a renewed wisdom of how to run the sporting industrial engine – a wisdom with television as its epicentre. The general brewing discontentment surrounding AIFF-Doordarshan’s partnership often erupted in small measures, in interview bytes, opinion pieces, and committee meetings.⁸ On one particular occasion, the persisting problems with Doordarshan even threatened to overthrow the AIFF as the governing body on Indian football. In November 2000, 9 out of the 12 clubs participating in the NFL publicly rebelled against the AIFF and formed a rival football organization known as the Indian Premier Football Association (IPFA). Although the conflict was brief and inevitably dissipated, at stake here again was the concern regarding televisual coverage. The chairman of the IPFA, Vijay Mallya, aired the discontentment with AIFF in simple terms: “The IPFA wants the League (NFL) to be spectator-friendly, television-friendly and sponsor-friendly” (Bandyopadhyay and Majumdar 2006: 151). Kausik Bandyopadhyay and Majumdar (2006) have also suggested that the AIFF’s

⁸ For instance, in an interview with India Today, the executive secretary of Kochin FC, P.V. Paul noted: “Sponsors are ready to pay well if NFL matches are telecast live. But here the AIFF has completely failed.” (India Today, 2000) <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/sport/story/20001204-leading-soccer-clubs-fight-for-professionalism-demand-change-in-indian-football-778535-2000-12-04>. Accessed on 20 April 2022.

general lack of televisual and marketing sensibility came through in a recommendation by then AFC General Secretary, Dato Peter Velappan, at the ‘Report on the Conference of Indian football’ (March 2003). His insistence for the AIFF to create a separate ‘Marketing Department’ was begrudgingly accepted in a Task Force Committee meeting held later in the same year (210).

The AIFF’s broadcasting deal with Doordarshan also enabled a different history of televised football in India. By terminating the contract with private broadcasters ESPN-Star Sports, the AIFF inadvertently freed up scheduling time for the transnational media network that was actively looking to expand its base of middle-class sports spectators in India. As a result, private broadcasting networks like ESPN-Star Sports increasingly turned toward telecasting European football leagues in India. Therefore, in the intimate ordering of the Indian televisual landscape of the late 90s and early 2000s, one could at the click of a remote shuffle between the broadcast of European football and their Indian counterpart. Television was then the shared space of comparison that allowed for notions of superiority and inferiority to emerge with respect to Indian football. Interestingly, this comparison between the NFL and European football was based on a notion of ‘football quality,’ which I shall argue did not just entertain differences in playing techniques and skill proficiency, but had more in fact to say about the different aesthetic infrastructures of European and Indian football. To be sure, this is not to deny the role of budgets and their influence on standards of sports production. European football broadcasts mobilized a huge amount of financial, technical and human capital that was simply unavailable to Doordarshan broadcasters. However, our purpose here is to push the boundaries of thought regarding what we consider ‘material’ investments in the field of televised sports-making. In this regard, I will suggest that Doordarshan still holds onto an infrastructural module that is an archaic remnant of an older, pre-globalization logic of television production – what Umberto Eco would call ‘Paleo-TV’ (Ghosh 2011). It is the asymmetrical encounter between India’s globalizing landscape and Doordarshan’s broadcast that is to date⁹ producing a sense of belatedness in their football broadcasts.

Our central proposition here then is that sports broadcasting is first and foremost a matter of design. In order to understand the visual imbalances produced in the cultural texts of DD Sports,

⁹ In a recent Scroll article, the author Jaideep Vaidya chronicles a list of persistent issues with the Doordarshan in recent times. <https://scroll.in/field/858473/dd-sports-the-sleeping-giant-of-indian-sports-broadcasting-is-showing-no-signs-of-waking-up>. Accessed on 21 April 2022.

one must therefore first take note of the graphical textures that define the globalized surfaces and exteriors of post-liberalization India. As urban planning and developmental projects get entangled within corporate logics of a new global order, the visual decor of Indian urban spaces – primarily, sites of movement, consumption and leisure – characteristically draws closer to what Marc Auge calls an ‘architecture of supermodernity’ (1995). Auge describes supermodernity as an abstractive force of globalism that converts places to ‘non-places’ – that is, a novel systemic design that composes spaces “which can not be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity.” (1995: 77-78) The term thus allows us to conceptually underline a placeless globalism that has come to dominate the architectural vistas of contemporary Indian urbanity, including airports and hotel lounges, supermarkets, metro stations, fashion outlets, mall-multiplexes, and sports bars and cafes. In the Indian context, however, the term ‘non-place’ requires a revisionist take. Rather than signify placeless-ness, these very sites have become vibrant symbols of the progressive West. Therefore, as an architectural form that offers the alluring promise of Western modernity and unhindered consumerist globalism, I instead refer to this aesthetic modality as ‘the architectonics of aspiration’. Nevertheless, in the televisual designs of ESPN-Star Sports, it is this plush surface aesthetic of supermodernity that finds an affective relay in the sports broadcasts.

By composing smooth and vibrant high-definition images, complemented by a heavy range of celebratory camera angles, sophisticated graphical effects and lively match presentations, the sports broadcasters construct a visual assemblage that taps into the registers of globalized spectacle. This graphical relay of silky images enables the screened geometry of ESPN and Star Sports to work well within the newly established sports bars and cafes. One cannot for instance miss the striking symmetry and rhythm of globalism that defines the urban décor of sports bars in India: a fan wearing a Messi jersey, standing against a wall laced with Barcelona paraphernalia, watching the El Clasico derby on the multiple LCD surfaces on display. If one were to speculatively replace the ESPN-Star Sports broadcasts with the Doordarshan version in these sports bars, the oddities and the rupture of programming become clearer. In that sense, a new aesthetic design undergirds the graphical intersections between the geometry of the sports screens of ESPN-Star Sports and the diagram of the sports bar.

Supermodern infrastructures are also defined in relation to a new kind of urban velocity and seamless interconnectivity. The rapid speed of bank transfers, human movement, digital image and data-sharing practices are all coated with a kinetic relay that also describes the smooth and

pace editing processes in the ESPN-Star Sports telecasts. In contrast to the dynamic mobility, flexibility, and rhythmic flow of images that characterizes the camerawork in the ESPN-Star Sports networks, the Doordarshan setup composed more static and stationary framing techniques. With longer gaps between editing, fewer camera angles and movement, lack of slow-motion replays, and a more sobering commentary style, the Doordarshan produced a more homogenous and monochromatic televisual landscape – defined primarily by its lack of globalizing speed. At the same time, several idiosyncrasies of the broadcast including low-resolution imagery, poor 2-D animation techniques and frequent technical faults and glitches prevented the domestic football league in India from generating any sense of media spectacle and consumerist hype. However, we must also note that this method of sports broadcasting brought forth a reality of the mundane. With most of the football matches holding a still, wide and distant camera frame, the long pauses of no ‘action’ produced a form of reality that was far from the ‘overbearing liveness’ of Indian cable and satellite television. It therefore crafted a sense of actuality and real-time display in the broadcasts that, following Ghosh’s insightful take, we shall see has disappeared in the context of Indian cricket.

The connotations of temporality should not be ignored, for the central governing theme of any supermodern infrastructure is to always draw attention to temporal scales. The plush aesthetics of supermodernity always tends to command the timeline by pushing itself through newness. Keep in mind, this is also around the time a new immersivity had started to serenade the field of cricket broadcasts. Stump cams and microphones, jimmy jib cranes, spider cams, and even military-grade equipment¹⁰ like thermal-image infrared cameras (also known as Hot Spot or Snickometer) and JAI monochrome cameras (called Hawk-Eye) were all brought in to aid the umpiring decisions. Similarly, in the world of European football, goal-line technology, cameras to spot off-side, and most recently the VAR have been brought in for similar assist. These new immersive patterns however cannot but be implicated in discourses of newness and modernity. They not only add value to the spectacle, but design a constant desire for scientific precision and anatomical accuracy required for the aesthetic architectures of supermodernity. In the aggressive mediascape of satellite television, where sporting products are constant competing with each other as well as other media

¹⁰ Vidya Subramanian has written about the relation between military technologies and their use in contemporary cricket broadcasts. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cricket/the-surprising-friendship-between-cricket-and-military-technology/story-imCL2DylQcRFiBBsmvuXLK.html>. Accessed on 10 May 2022.

genres for audiences, I-league broadcasts felt languid and pale in comparison to the immersive draw of the ESPN-Star Sports media spectacle. The images produced a sense of cultural belatedness, responding to an older constellation of televisual practices. In terms of imagining its subject, while contemporary globalized sporting leagues cultivate the fan through an intermedial economy of active consumerism, Doordarshan still positions its spectators as a docile passive recipient. In the globalized vistas of urban consumer culture in India, Doordarshan aesthetics produce an architectural form of temporal lagging.

Thus, the AIFF's decision to tender its broadcasting deal with Doordarshan misfired on several accounts: the inability to produce a spectacular mega event drew skepticism from corporates who chose to invest their money in other sports projects (Philips and Vijay Mallya both for instance went back to cricket); at the same time, by turning their back on ESPN-STAR, the AIFF dramatically lost out a young demography of globalized football fans, who were increasingly drawn towards STAR and SONY's broadcast of European football leagues. The AIFF-Doordarshan broadcast partnership also produced a general discursive hostility towards government institutions running Indian football, bolstering in the process the voices demanding a wholesale privatization of Indian football. The regulatory role of state bodies – AIFF and Doordarshan, it was claimed, were only hampering the chances of progression for Indian football. The declining fortunes of the AIFF, and the rising star power of Indian cricket and European football did inevitably spark some reconsideration amongst the AIFF authorities. In 2008, Zee Network, acquired the broadcast rights for the NFL and rebranded it as the 'I-league'. Despite the change to private ownership, this neither produced a surge in revenues nor did it create marketability of the league. Here again one sees the irreducibility of the aesthetic infrastructure, as a vector not necessarily governed by economic investments. The change in ownership did not produce a change in the aesthetic design of sports broadcasts. That is to say, with its assemblage of low-resolution images, stationary frames, and heightened sense of cultural belatedness, the Doordarshan modality of televisual design persisted.¹¹ The question of culling out a globalized media aesthetic was not only a question of privatization vs. the state. It was a more complex issue

¹¹ In addition, one also finds several common complaints that were once levied against the Doordarshan producers (in terms of match scheduling, equipment issues, faulty presentation) were not resurfacing in the context of Zee Sports' broadcasting setup. Some of the issues with Zee Networks are mentioned in this link: <https://www.thehindu.com/thread/sports/indian-football-in-crisis-averted/article28282489.ece>. Accessed on 10 May 2022.

of carefully manufacturing an affective surface of supermodernity, what we refer to as the architecture of aspiration for post-globalization India.

Spinning the Game Inside Out

Indian sport television has thus historically produced two alternate cartographies of the sports-media complex. If televised football moved away from the architectonics of aspiration, then cricket turned towards it. In this final section, I will now describe more fully what the aesthetic movement towards supermodernity has entailed for the broadcasting assemblage of Indian cricket.

If the fractured landscape of televised football was the haunting specter of consumer nationalism in India, then the country's emerging sports-media infrastructure of cricket evolved into a diagram of its dreams. In Manas Ghosh's insightful essay on the contemporary landscape of Indian cricket, he argues that based on sharp distinctions of self/other and an inconsolable desire to always win, cricket as 'manifest content' aspires to project the 'latent content' of contemporary nationalism. "Television in India in the global era," he further notes, "plays the role of a dream factory, which produces the manifest content, refining, channeling and displacing its desired messages in the pretext of live telecast of cricket" (2011: 82). What makes televised cricket in India unique then is that it represents an arena overcharged with nationalist symbolism, often at the cost of the pleasures and even credibility of the match itself. The minute pleasures of a brilliantly timed single or an in-swinging delivery that whisks past the wicket are lost out in the overdrive of a result-oriented nationalist spectacle based on wickets and boundaries. Ghosh refers to the game as 'pseudo-play', where the economy of representation caters to a constant overproduction of nationalist iconicity, which then becomes more integral to the sport than the impulse towards liveness and documentation. He remarks:

Global television transforms the sanctity of 'live' sports telecast to a pleasure of representation. The documentary effect of 'liveness' and fictionality of the play mode are so homogeneously mixed that the line of demarcation often vanishes.

(2011: 84)

Ghosh mentions two examples that help substantiate the 'fictionality' of the contemporary cricketing spectacle. The first instance comes from the betting scandal in 2001-02, where top

Indian cricket stars like Ajay Jadeja and Mohammad Azaruddin were implicated. However, the author remarks that this did not have any impact on viewership numbers since “televisuality and representation are much more important than the credibility of the game” (84). At the same time, he also picks the commercial advertisements sandwiched in-between the live cricket telecasts as a site that contests the ‘reality’ of the match. He suggests that “the fictionality of advertisements, which sometimes includes the same characters that are on the field, casts doubt on the non-fictionality of the representation of the game, thus inflicting the play mode onto a ‘live’ show” (84). The willing consumer subject, destabilizes the differences between entertainment and real cricket, and becomes an interface to mediate a smooth triad of corporation-televisuality-nationalism that drives contemporary sports.

By 2008, the increasingly blurred lines between fiction and reality at the level of national cricket induced a new theatrical imagination for its domestic counterpart. At the level of provincial tournaments, the decreasing footfalls in the Ranji Trophy enabled the BCCI to pitch a new domestic competition called the Indian Premier League (IPL). Borrowing its organizational and corporate structure from a host of other successful and familiar globalized sporting leagues – such as American National Football League, Major League Baseball (Majumdar 2013), and the English Premier League (Rowe and Gilmour 2009) – the new project drastically refashioned the culture of play by invoking a carnivalesque and muscular brand of cricket. The novelty of the format lay precisely in its ability to craft a new architecture of televisuality, wedded not only to the sport but a broader rubric of televisual media flows. Describing the IPL as a sporting-entertainment complex, Vidya Subramanian utilizes other frames than simply the analytics of sport to confront the broader corporate-industrial forces that go into making it a media spectacle. She suggests that the IPL is first and foremost a platform for other industries:

Software engineers who can design better analytical software, film stars who seek publicity, players looking for better pay packets, businesses looking for better advertising opportunities, and television channels trying to improve their ratings—are all stakeholders in the game. The sport itself is no longer the centre of the event of the match.

(Subramanian 2015)

The format of the IPL has also provoked other tangential considerations than simply the lens of cricket. Azmat Rasul and Jennifer Proffitt label the new format as ‘the Bollywoodization of Cricket’ (2011). Overtly, this of course is a reference to how Bollywood actors (such as Shah Rukh Khan, Ranbir Kapoor, Preity Zinta, Deepika Padukone etc.) are the brand ambassadors and/or part-owners of most IPL teams. But the phrase can however be made to symbolize deeper synergies of theatricality and consumer nationalism, wherein two of the most popular culture industries seamlessly blended together in projecting a new televisual ensemble.

There are several ways in which the IPL very deliberately went about creating a dense televisual architecture that would position itself in close proximity to Bollywood. In terms of the cricket played, the IPL followed the short T-20 variant which reduced the length of an entire innings to 120 balls each. This shorter duration of a three-hour match was complemented by primetime television slots, thus creating a television-friendly schedule for millennial and corporate classes to conveniently follow. Moreover, Sony Networks did not launch the new cricket spectacle on their sports channel, Ten Sports. Rather, the IPL began on Set Max, a channel dedicated to Hindi film programming. These myriad tangential relations to Bollywood were in fact even noted by the founder of the IPL, Lalit Modi. In a press launch, he is quoted to have said:

The IPL is an action-packed reality show. We are not pitching IPL against cricket; we are pitching it against the prime time (7 to 11 p.m.) of general entertainment channels...it’s an evening out. A Bollywood movie is three hours. This is a three-hour function.

(Subramanian 2015)

All these power words from the press launch – action-packed reality show, prime-time, entertainment, and Bollywood movie – give us a sense of the self-reflexive manufacturing of the IPL, which, at the very least, wanted to produce a new globalized sporting hybrid. Rather than work within the binary of fiction versus reality however, I argue that Indian cricket’s spinning infrastructure produces a postmodern sporting spectacle.

It is worthwhile here to first take a little detour through the writings of one of the prominent figureheads on postmodern culture (although he never quite took to the term) – Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard’s most provocative and insightful work comes from his focus on the dominance of televisual images in our contemporary lives, which produce for us a sedative hyperreality (a

telereality more ‘real’ than reality itself); a world much like *The Matrix* films, where the real is effaced in the face of simulation codes that engulf us entirely. These ideas also come through in some of his lesser-known writings on televised sports. In his essay, titled “The Mirror of Terrorism,” Baudrillard for instance compares the violence that is encoded within the sporting spectacle of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games to “a giant parade”, “a circus-like play, a play based on the pull of vertigo”; this violence, unlike the “Roman spectacles complete with wild beasts and gladiators cannot be mounted in the full light of the day”, but only timidly screened “in the wings” (Redhead 1997: 42-43). Later, in the same essay, Baudrillard also discusses a televised football match, where he notes:

In September 1987, in Madrid, a Real Madrid–Naples European Cup match took place at night in a completely empty stadium without a single spectator... The match was relayed in its entirety on television. A ban of this kind could never do away with the chauvinistic passions surrounding soccer, but it does perfectly exemplify the terroristic hyperrealism of our world, a world where a ‘real’ event occurs in a vacuum, stripped of its context and visible only from afar, televisually. Here we have a sort of surgically accurate prefiguration of the events of our future: events so minimal that they might well not need to take place at all – along with their maximal enlargement on screens. No one will have directly experienced the actual course of such happenings, but everyone will have received an image of them. A pure event, in other words, devoid of any reference to nature, and readily susceptible to replacement by synthetic images.

(43)

Baudrillard’s prophetic words on the ‘pure event’ and ‘synthetic imaging’ have perhaps acquired a new degree of relevance in the 21st century, where globalized sporting enterprises now crucially depend on television revenues and audiences.

Certainly, Baudrillard’s allusion to the dramatic Roman spectacles should invite our attention back to the graphic canvas of the IPL. Built into the surface aesthetic of the IPL is a festive format, carried forward through a cavalcade of spectacular images, gladiatorial bodies, energetic commentators, and a lively stadium spectatorship. In that sense, the sports cinematography working through these matches offers a kind of pre-determined conclusion. On multiple levels, the celebratory excess, iconicity and spectacle intersect with a narrative of hype:

in the advertisements, in the pre-match and post-match presentations, in the way sporting bodies are captured in motion. I include here the medley of zooms rapidly pulling in and out of player's faces, detailed shots of minute bodily gestures and micro-movements, capturing in dynamic ways the performative body in action. Perhaps most crucial here is the barrage of slow-motion replays that are replete in these match productions. On the incessant and repeated use of replays, Christopher Davis remarks:

For not only is the second-long footage of the shot shown again once in real time and perhaps half a dozen more times, slow motion, from various vantage points—including from cameras embedded within the stump and attached to the brim of the umpire's hat—but the footage is then shown close-up and in ultraslow motion, a theatrical soundtrack added, a loud bang effect timed for the moment the ball strikes the bat. My reservation is not necessarily with the footage itself, which affords the interested viewer an insight into its very anatomy. I am instead bothered by the outright fetishization of it and what the knock-on effect is on the esteem in which the whole thing is held. The shot is made purely theatrical, transformed from sport into spectacle... Are we not treading once more here on a Barthesian footing, in terms of his thoughts on the spectacle of wrestling?

(2015: 115)

Davies invites us to draw a Barthesian comparison here between boxing and wrestling. The essential difference being that while boxing was a game that was narratively built before one's very eyes, wrestling for Barthes "is not interested in the rise and fall of fortunes, but he (the spectator) expects the transient image of certain passions" (115). Wrestling then demands an ability to orchestrate spectacle, where certain images can be recreated time and again to pornographic delight. In cricket too, the shot of a bat bludgeoning the ball for 4 or 6 runs or the sight of a bowler striking the stumps are such lustful passions that the cultural designs of the IPL are built around. There is then a predictive element to the IPL match – that it will feature sixes, that it will feature fours, that it will feature astounding catches, or a fast pace bowler driving the ball right into the middle stump – not because it can, but because it must. The match is designed to deliver 'highlights'; it cannot but sustain without spectacle and iconicity.

In order to produce its sense of grandeur, the IPL casts the sport as a game for mythological men. In addition to the way slow-motion replays glorify and enhance the spectacle of sporting

bodies, a similar process is also crafted through the new data-driven techniques of body mapping and performance tracking. The statistical graphs and data visualizations that often accompany match presentations are in a sense then aimed at not only producing scientific verifiability on the pitch, but also produce, as Larkin would probably suggest, a technological sublime. This technological sublimity of data and information sciences produces a new kind of mythology around the cricketing star body, wherein the body spectacle is produced primarily through the “verifiability” of player performances (Stauff 2014). The auctioning of players before every IPL season is a perfect instance of how the sporting assemblage marries its data-centric practices with its drive towards stardom and spectacularity. In an essay titled “Cricket, Excess, and Market Mania,” Srinivasan Ramani delves into the valuation system of the players:

The establishment of this commodity market was kicked off by an auction system that instituted market value for the players through a valuation process. This valuation process considered not just the skill levels of the players but also their brand building capabilities. So it is that Ishant Sharma, a tyro who has promised a great future through some inspiring performances in Australia for the Indian team was valued at \$ 9,50,000 as compared to the established Umar Gul valued at just \$ 1,50,000 although he took the most wickets playing for Pakistan in the World Twenty20 tournament. Sharma’s value as a representative for brand building the franchise, owing to his Indian nationality, trumped over the real value of Umar Gul.

(2008: 14)

The auction process thus works on a speculative logic into what brand of player will generate higher returns and fetch profit. The pleasure is essentially one of creating market value. The cricketer’s personal stats work not as an archive of past records, but an incessant computational order of future gains and profit. Detailed graphs, statistics and data-based appraisals of each and every player is produced for the auction, and a logic of predictive play behavior models the future returns on investments. In that sense, the template used is akin to the pleasure of stock markets, financial depreciations, unexpected market turns, and unimpeded profit and growth. These intersections with broader infrastructural networks of consumption and capital accumulation suggest some primary ways in which the IPL organizes the architectural and aesthetic logic of supermodernity.

The changing ontology and texture of cricket has initiated a wholesale shift in the praxis of televised sports in India. The successful fusion between a new hyperreal format of sports and cricketing nationalism has generated a rippling effect across many emerging sports-media formats over the last decade, including Pro-Kabaddi League, Hockey India League, Premier Badminton League, International Premier Tennis League, and the Indian Super League. Although many of these organizations have already folded within a couple of years, the very sporting cosmology of these surfaces have radically altered the diagram of Indian sports television. Both the successes and failures of this novel sporting assemblage invites further studies on the topic. At the same time, our interest in pitching sports through questions of architecture and design was an attempt to open up the cultural imagination of these televisual cartographies. Globalized sports television is not a homogenizing force; rather it is always encountered locally. Its meaning is always produced in the material relations to its sociological context. Thus, the changing affective grammar of sports television also allows us to attend to the changing fabric of India's sensory infrastructures.

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