



CENTRE STAGE

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IPL... Let's talk money

A mind-boggling sum of 1.72 billion dollars is at stake for Indian Premier League (based on the lines of EPL and NBA) and the game has not even started yet. Indian Cricket Board, already the richest cricket board, raised this huge amount by sale of TV rights and auction of cricket teams recently. And the party is not yet over. The board is more to gain from the sale of title rights and other sources. IPL caught the attention of the biggest corporate houses and the richest ones in Bollywood. So, what is this hoopla all about? Does it intend to make the sport better or just another attempt to capitalise on a cricket-crazy nation? Let's analyse.

Over the years, Cricket has become the cash cow giving one of the best returns that one can expect. But the number of teams was very limited and the players had to be within geographical boundaries of that country. The new structure introduced by the Indian Cricket board i.e. IPL breaks these boundaries and thus creating avenues for higher revenues. Teams would bid for the players of their choice. Clearly, money would be the biggest criteria to attract the best players. So the richest team bidders would have the power to attract the best players from the world. And since money is the main criteria for a player to join the team, loyalty to a particular league team can be expected only as long as the team management pays him in abundance. This would serve to widen the gap between the teams (the well-off teams against the rest) as has been the case in English premier league. The "Big Four" dominance over EPL is a testimony to this fact.

We have already heard many cricketers complaining about the excessive pressure due to increase in number of matches. I wonder how they would cope up with this new version of cricket. Clearly, one of the two formats i.e. the existing one or the IPL, would suffer. And with the kind of monetary benefits involved with IPL, it may not be difficult to say that the existing cricket format would suffer as some of the top players would prefer to play for IPL. Moreover, with the increasing stress of the IPL matches, these players are bound to cut down on regular cricket tournaments.

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There have been continuous allegations of “Match Fixing” in the previous years. At least some of these allegations appear to be true. The logic is simple. With the kind of money at stake for each match, it becomes very lucrative to offer a part of this amount to turn the match in one’s favour. The recent format proposed for IPL gives a bigger dimension to this phenomenon. With huge prize money being the prime motive of every league team, such cases are bound to increase in number.

The IPL structure also changes the way the people are attached to this game. For a cricket crazy nation, it is not just a game. It is much more than that. Whenever Indian team wins against Pakistan or for that matter any opposition, it is still seen as a victory of the Indian Nation and not just as a team win. The cricket lovers had developed deep emotions with the game and they often border upon a nationalistic fervour. With the advent of the league structure, I doubt whether the people would feel the same way as they feel for the national team. As there is no common factor uniting a league team, except for the expert’s opinion and financial conditions, these league teams can probably never gather that mass loyalty. So a constant change in the audiences’ preferences would bring a radical change in the way the game has been perceived till now.

IPL is believed to adopt the recent “20-20” version of the game. However, there has been a constant tussle over the issue whether the new version is of any good for the game. Still, the best players of the world feel that (including the likes of Sachin Tendulkar and Ricky Ponting) the new version of the game is just a new way to make the game more popular and they still believe the “test cricket” to be the real test of character for a good player. The “20-20” game is unfairly biased towards the batsman. And more so, batting techniques and the art of masterstrokes go for a complete six. Yes, they are not relevant in the new context. The new format needs players who can punch the ball really hard and with very little batting elegance. This is good for making the game commercial but is harsh on ones who view the sport with more of the beauty attached with elegant strokes.

Also with the kind of people backing the teams, one thing is clear. These teams would be run in a professional manner. It would not be wrong to say that they would work as a corporation with profit being its main motto. This is like a double edged sword. While on one hand, it would help to improve the state of facilities given to players and may provide huge incentives to perform, it also leaves some painful facts. There is no social obligation for such teams to give equal opportunities to all sections of the society. They would want players who fit their requirements and can earn them profits instantly. They would have lower appetite for risk and to give chance to new players. As corporations usually don’t feel liable to provide benefits for the underprivileged, it may in fact provide them with no chance whatsoever.

IPL is purely driven by commercial motives and it remains to be seen to what extent it can fulfil that purpose. But, we need to ponder on our objectives. Is this for the love of cricket? If the answer is no, I believe it would hurt the game in the long run. We would never see players with the same elegance and perfection as we had in the past. We would never see the usual unswerving emotional attachment of cricket lovers with their teams. Perhaps the game would not be the way it used to be. Change is inconsequential but if this change is for the betterment of the game, it is heartily welcome. But, if the change is only for monetary gains, perhaps we should reconsider our objectives.

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