

India, the new superpower of cricket

When Kerry Packer launched his 'circus' in 1977, Indian cricketers were so much in the doghouse that not one of them was chosen to play. The omission was all the more galling for Indians because several Pakistanis, led by the dashing Imran Khan, were included.

Now, the old order has been turned upside down with the Indian players, matinee idols, business magnates and the cricketing establishment dominating the scene. After India demonstrated its clout through the unprecedented step of getting an umpire changed after he had given adverse verdicts against the Indian team in the recent India-Australia Test series, a wit remarked that India's behaviour was not unlike America's in the World Trade Organization (WTO).

And as if to confirm its current larger-than-life role, India is sponsoring a Twenty20 cricketing extravaganza in which players from all over the world are being paid huge amounts to participate. One of them, Australian all-rounder Andrew Symonds, has described the \$1.35 million (Rs.5.4 crore) that he is receiving as 'staggering'.

While the captain of the Indian limited-overs team, Mahinder Singh Dhoni, is getting even more - \$1.5 million (Rs.6 crore) - there are others, especially youngsters like Ishant Sharma (\$950,000 or Rs.3.7 crore) and Rohit Sharma (\$750,000 or Rs.3 crore), who began playing international cricket less than a year ago, receiving sums which would have been undreamt of in Packer's time.

Not surprisingly, former Australian captain Allan Border has warned players against falling prey to the lure of money at the expense of playing for their countries. It is for this reason that players like Michael Clarke, who is expected to become Australia's captain after Ricky Ponting, hasn't signed up.

However, the same arguments were heard in Packer's time also till the Australian board bowed to the power of money and accepted the ostracised players. There is no such problem with the latest tourney - Indian Premium League (IPL) - since it has the blessings of the Board of Control for Cricket in India. In fact, the IPL was sponsored to upstage the rival Indian Cricket League, set up by former Indian fast bowler Kapil Dev.

The games, which will feature stars like Sanath Jayasuriya and Muttiah Muralitharan of Sri Lanka, Graeme Smith, Jacques Kallis and Shaun Pollock of South Africa, Shane Warne, Ricky Ponting, Adam Gilchrist and Mathew Hayden of Australia, Chris Gayle of the West Indies, Daniel Vettori and Scott Styris of New Zealand, Shoaib Akhtar and Mohammed Asif of Pakistan and others, cannot be any less glittering than the recent Twenty-20 World Cup in South Africa. It is this tournament that gave respectability to this 'madcap version of the game', as veteran cricket writer Peter Roebuck has called it.

Although purists still scoff at it, with social and cricket historian Ramachandra Guha comparing Twenty20 to country liquor while Test cricket is Scotch whiskey and the 50-over game Indian Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL), the series of matches from April 18 to June 1 cannot but be a TV and media spectacle, which will keep India and the cricketing world enthralled.

Apart from the 'damage' which the kind of hectic batting unavoidable in these games may cause to refined techniques, carping voices are also bound to be raised about the supposedly baneful effects of the corporatisation of this 'gentlemen's game'. Those who had expressed dismay at the huge

salaries earned by young people in the information technology and allied sectors are also expected to bemoan the corroding impact of filthy lucre on a man's inner being.

But, notwithstanding the negative features which cannot be summarily brushed aside, the razzmatazz complete with live bands and cheer girls, which the World Cup made almost an integral feature of Twenty-20, is symptomatic of the hedonistic culture which India has embraced in the age of liberalization and globalization.

Ironically, no slogan suits this brave new world better than Deng Xiaoping's unabashed aphorism, 'to be rich is glorious'.

What is more, the wealth will not be earned by the wealthy, but by many players from ordinary homes, such as Irfan Pathan (\$925,000), his brother Yusuf Khan (\$25,000) and Joginder Sharma (Rs 90 lakh). And the other feature of this new scenario is that talent is the only determining factor.

Both these distinguishing characteristics militate against the old order under which the Maharajkumar of Vizianagram or Vizzy, as he was known to listeners of his radio commentaries in the 1950s, became the captain of the Indian team in 1936 because of his princely lineage and not because he played well. His other dubious claim to fame was that he 'bagged' 300 tigers.

England also had its traditional Gentlemen vs Players matches, in which the former were amateurs whereas the latter were professionals in the sense that they earned their livelihood from cricket. And because of their commercial interest, no 'player' could become the captain of England till Len Hutton did in 1952 against stiff opposition.

So, it isn't only that India has changed but also the world. Hence, the beeline made to India by nearly 40 foreign players, including such big names as Brett Lee of Australia, Stephen Fleming of New Zealand, Makhaya Ntini and Mark Boucher of South Africa and Younus Khan and Kamran Akmal of Pakistan.

If the tournament proves to be a success, as it may given the phenomenal popularity of the game in India and its extensive coverage over television, the practice of 'buying' players in an auction under the auspices of tycoons and film stars will probably become a regular event in the country's sporting calendar, much to the dismay of the traditionalists.

(Amulya Ganguli is a writer on current affairs. He can be reached at aganguli@mail.com)

Amulya Ganguli (© IANS / India eNews)