

Off the ball

Preventing commentators from criticising referees is not cricket

The recent controversy between Michael Holding and World Cup broadcaster Sunset & Vine has highlighted an issue that the International Cricket Council (ICC) urgently needs to address. Earlier this week Mr Holding had sharply criticised the umpiring in a match between the West Indies and Australia, describing as “atrocious” decisions against two West Indian batsmen. His comments attracted a cautionary letter from the production head of Sunset & Vine to the effect that the broadcaster’s duty is “not to judge and highlight mistakes”. This is a strange objection: A commentator’s job

is to bring his or her expertise to an assessment of the game for the benefit of the viewers. Umpires are very much part of the game and their decisions influence it as much as any player on the field. To withhold comment on umpiring decisions, including rank bad ones, is likely to puzzle viewers or, at the very least, raise doubts about the commentator’s knowledge. To be fair, Mr Holding’s criticisms may have been open to censure on two counts. First, the fact that the decisions concerned West Indian batsmen may have raised questions about the unrealistic iron neutrality that former players are supposed to culti-

vate as commentators (and which viewers don’t expect, anyway). Second, perhaps “atrocious” was too strong an adjective. Mr Holding could as well have been asked to tone down his criticism. This, in fact, is the convention that tennis, football and rugby commentators follow. Over the past decade, in response to referee complaints about unfair criticism (because commentators see slo-mo replays to which refs don’t have immediate access), even the most salty of football commentators employ less incendiary adjectives about controversial decisions. The English Football Association also imposed the reasonable restrictions of requesting commentators to refrain from criticising referees ahead of games. But Mr Holding raised another pertinent point in his sharp reply to the broadcaster. He pointed out that had a football referee made such blunders in a World Cup

game, he would have been asked to pack his bags. Is it, as Mr Holding asked, “the objective to protect the umpires even when they do a bad job?” This same scrutiny is true of hockey and tennis. Last year, two umpires were made to stand down after controversial decisions during the US Open — including the highly experienced Carlos Ramos, whose uncharacteristically ham-fisted umpiring at the ladies’ final sparked Serena Williams’ high-voltage blowout. It is true that technology has raised the stakes for umpires and referees of all sports and made them more vulnerable to scrutiny. But the best of them have proven that the human eye is a match for the computer algorithm. The incidents that attracted Mr Holding’s withering comments suggest either a dereliction of umpiring duty or sheer ineptitude. At the very least, umpires are expected to spot no-balls or judge the

line of the ball accurately — they are closer to the action than any player, after all. It’s the run-outs that are not always easy to call, as even the great Dickie Bird acknowledged. Indeed, it is worth recalling that referrals initially were limited to run-out decisions and expanded to all decisions only later. Since teams have a limited number of referrals per innings, serial poor umpiring can impact results significantly. In that respect, cricket broadcasters have been kind to umpires, often refraining from replaying no-consequence No Balls, for instance. Mr Holding had threatened to quit if the gag were imposed but he and the broadcaster appear to have reached an understanding. That is good news. Mr Holding, one of the best fast bowlers of his time, is also one of the most acute and respected commentators. The World Cup will be richer for his criticisms.

Don't miss the Bimstec bus

More intensive economic integration with countries in the seven-member bloc will enable India to cash in on the abundantly available opportunities

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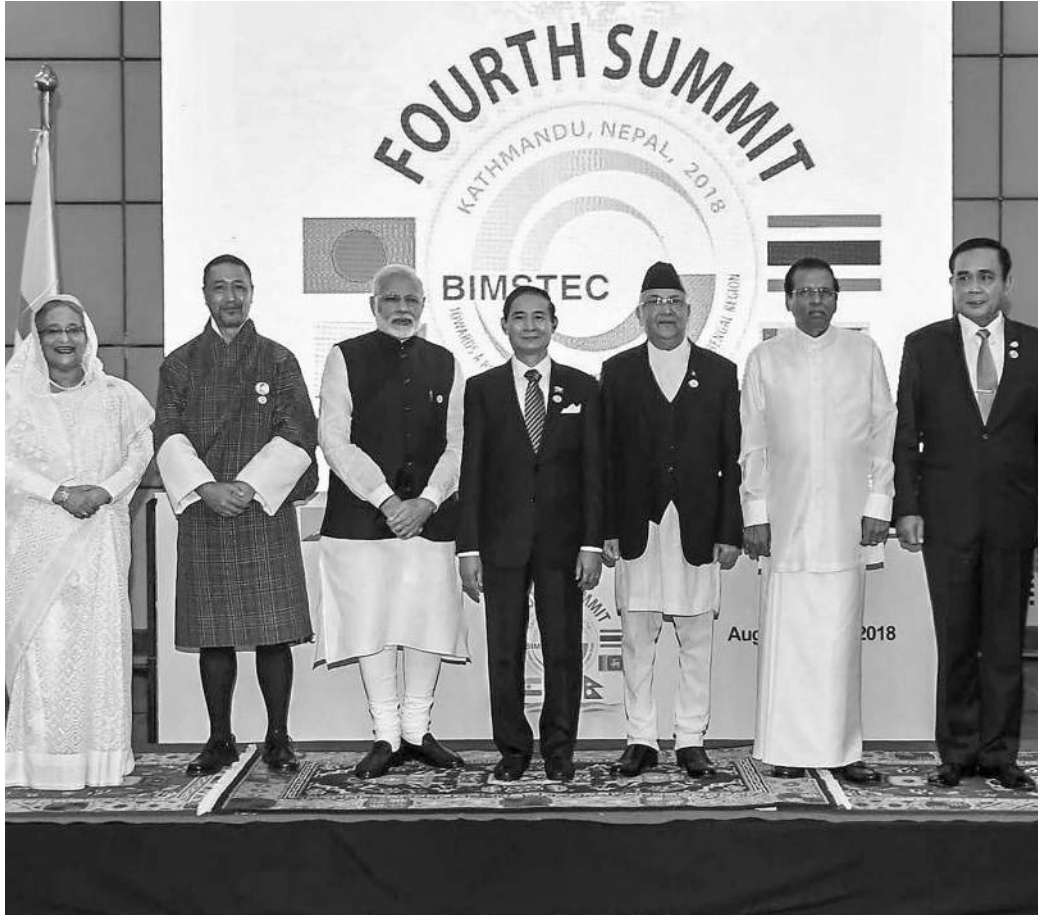
The swearing-in of the Narendra Modi government for its second term had a distinctive guest list comprising leaders from Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (Bimstec). Bimstec, which comprises Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, is a bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Looking beyond the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) and engaging with Bimstec has been a cornerstone of India’s policy shift. The two Southeast Asian countries in Bimstec, Myanmar and Thailand, have a crucial place in India’s ambitious connectivity plans for the north-eastern region. An India-Myanmar-Thailand highway — the Asian highway — is the hallmark of the government’s Act East (earlier Look East) policy. With the India-Pakistan bickering persisting and affecting Saarc, Bimstec is poised to overcome the failings of Saarc and advance India’s regional cooperation.

Mr Modi’s invitation to Bimstec leaders was a bid to reach out to neighbours. Beyond geopolitics, what does this outreach mean from an economic standpoint, specifically from the perspective of trade? Export promotion is a focal strategy for the Modi government, the downside in exports in recent quarters notwithstanding. The former commerce minister, Mr Suresh Prabhu, emphasised strategic regional partnerships where Bimstec also figured. In 2016, the bloc’s total trade stood at \$1.1 trillion; India’s share was a mere 2.4 per cent. With a GDP at least five times larger than that of Thailand (which has the second-largest GDP in the grouping), India has not capitalised on the Bimstec market.

Here, as a first cut, we look only at the agriculture sector, where new export markets are the need of the hour. Could Bimstec be the answer? In 2016, the agriculture trade comprised 15 per cent of the bloc’s total trade. Free trade in agricultural commodities ensures availability, accessibility and stability of food supplies, which can address chronic hunger and malnutrition in the Bimstec nations. Therefore, given geographical proximity and failure of domestic agricultural markets, enhancing agricultural trade should be a priority.

Apart from levels of trade, an important marker for the success of regional arrangements is the capacity to withstand shocks, i.e. resilience. Resilience can be measured by response to national, regional or global shocks. After the food price crisis of 2007-08, the intra-regional trade of all regional groupings (Asean, Bimstec and Saarc) decreased sharply. While intra-Bimstec trade shrank by 24 per cent, intra-Saarc trade declined by as much as 31 per cent. Interestingly, after the crisis (with the recovery period lasting from 2009 to 2011), Saarc’s agricultural trade increased by 83 per cent, while Bimstec’s increased by 108 per cent, although Saarc had already established a free trade area. This indicates the untapped potential in agricultural trade among Bimstec countries.

To highlight the trade performance among Bimstec countries, we present the results of an IFPRI study of the Asean-Saarc agricultural trade relationship, which derives the trade potential based on empirical models of trade. It assesses trade performance relative to estimated benchmarks to determine under-trading, over-trading or normal trad-



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Bimstec leaders at their summit in Kathmandu last year. Looking beyond Saarc and engaging with the group is a cornerstone of India’s Act East policy

ing. The analysis reveals that India over-exports around 56 and 14 per cent to Bhutan and Nepal, respectively. Myanmar, which mostly exports dried legumes and beans to India, over-exports around four per cent to India. Bangladesh and Thailand on the other hand under-export to India (around 0.4 per cent and one per cent, respectively). Bhutan over-exports to India by over 30 times, given that country’s economic fundamentals.

Since trade with important Bimstec partners is lower than it could potentially be, India may benefit through a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the grouping. In this regard, there are lessons to learn from China, in terms of its alacrity in forging trade alliances. Also, the experience of Saarc should be a reminder of the effects of doing too little, too late. China implemented the Asean-China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA) in 2005 after entering into the framework agreement in 2002, i.e., within three years. India also concluded the framework agreement in 2003, but the Asean-India FTA was realised only in 2010. Tardy progress towards closures creates trust deficits and sub-par returns from groupings, and Bimstec was meant to overcome these kinds of afflictions vis-à-vis Saarc in the first place.

In the case of Bimstec moving forward, there are lessons also from Asean. Agreements such as the Asean Comprehensive Investment Agreement

(ACIA), which came into force on March 29, 2012, aim to facilitate greater flow of financial capital and intra-regional long-term investment between Asean member countries. Inward intra-FDI flows among Asean countries amounted to about \$6.5 billion in 2006, increasing to \$24 billion in 2016. If Bimstec is to deliver for India, India needs to conclude agreements expeditiously. India has often missed the bus in trading and investment. She should avoid meeting the fate of Saarc, and/or being swamped by the Chinese juggernaut.

Sharing land and maritime borders with Bimstec countries, India should expedite growth in connectivity (through road, rail, maritime and air) within the grouping. For example, it should develop well-connected quality ports such as a deep-sea container terminal in Sri Lanka, and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway.

Simultaneously, focusing on trade facilitation measures such as simplification and harmonisation of trade procedures, setting regional single windows for custom clearance, recognition of custom transit documents, and proper coordination between border authorities will facilitate expansion of trade in Bimstec. With 22 per cent of world’s population and a combined GDP of \$2.7 trillion, Bimstec can become one of the strongest political and economic unions.

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India has the dubious distinction of being fourth from the bottom in a recent global ranking on environment performance. Waste management has been a key weakness. Around 80 per cent of municipal waste gets collected but only about 25 per cent of this gets treated. About 70 per cent of the sewage generated is not treated and flows through drains. The quantity of chemicals, plastics, metals and other alloys in consumption keep increasing. Industrial activity generates non-biodegradable waste. With rainfall, chemicals in untreated waste flow into drains contaminating soils, water bodies and ground water. Many also get into the air through evaporation and make air pollution more hazardous. Plastics are strewn all over the country. Not managing waste has an adverse effect on human health. The massive toilet construction programme to make India open-defecation-free has been a very good beginning. Now is the time for Swachh Bharat to display greater ambition. The goal should be that within five to seven years all sewage would be treated and all solid waste segregated, collected and treated according to prescribed standards.

Globally, waste management technologies have been getting better. Costs have been coming down. Decentralised microbial treatment of sewage and household food waste has made great strides. Long-distance sewage pipes and large sewage treatment plants requiring a lot of land are no longer the most cost-effective way of treating sewage. Industrial clusters need decentralised common waste water treatment plants. These industrial clusters also generate solid waste, which should be treated separately. Effective waste segregation in industrialised societies and technological developments have taken recycling to new levels.

Substantial progress in waste segregation at the household level will take some time in India. An innovative solution lies in using the informal sector *kabari* chain. All the waste which should not be part of household kitchen waste can be segregated and collected by providing an attractive-enough price for these through the *kabari* supply chain. These can then be treated or recycled. Treating segregated waste is environmentally better and also cheaper. For used gadgets such as mobile phones and TV sets, manufacturers could be mandated to run disposal facilities and to bear the full cost, including the price to be paid for getting all these items collected. Using the market mechanism with the right price signal would be key to success.

India, fortunately, has the late mover’s advantage in having the option of adopting the most cost-efficient technologies in the world. There is comfort as well as safety in traditional technologies and their specifi-

cations. The way to overcome this is to adopt a radically different approach and re-engineer the procurement process. Bids should be invited for outcomes and be agnostic regarding the choice of technology. The bid would have to be for a long-term agreement to build and operate a plant for treating waste and for the private investor to be paid per unit treated.

The cost of treatment per unit would be the bid parameter to be backed by performance guarantees on the one hand and a minimum supply of waste to be treated on the other. There would need to be separate bids for treatment of household waste, sewage, chemical effluents from industrial clusters, construction waste, industrial solid waste and the different categories of segregated waste collected from *raddiwallahs*. A series of such bids across India would bring in contemporary competing technologies, create a competitive industry structure and drive down costs.

The main reason behind the current state of waste management is that this is the responsibility of municipal bodies. They just do not have the funds for the gigantic task of treating all sewage and solid waste. Further, they do not have the technical domain knowledge and contract management abilities that are needed. The central government needs to recognise this reality. The implication is that it should assume responsibility, provide financing, leadership and technical guidance in a Mission mode. Only then would a breakthrough be possible.

Having practically completed electrification, provision of toilets and safe drinking water to all households, the central government could wind down the financing of these programmes. It could then use these budgetary resources for the waste management Mission. If necessary, the Swachh Bharat cess may be increased to provide additional resources. This is so critical that it has a legitimate claim on the funds from the coal cess as well as normal budgetary resources. This should be at the core of the Smart Cities programme.

Standard bid and contract documents would need to be prepared by the ministry of urban development and circulated to the state governments to be used by their municipal bodies. A Master Plan for 100 per cent waste management for all cities should be prepared at the outset.

Leadership, proper design and central funding have brought about remarkable breakthroughs recently in achieving full household electrification and in getting villages to be open-defecation-free. A similar resolve and approach could get India to get waste management right. It is doable and affordable. The avoidable health costs alone are high enough to amply justify making this a top priority.

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Bold steps are needed to win hearts and minds in Kashmir

The killing of CRPF jawans in the Valley indicates the challenges that await govt

The killing of five CRPF jawans in Kashmir by militants is a reminder of the challenge in the Valley that awaits the re-elected Modi government. The five men were on picket duty in Anantnag when two men on a motorcycle fired at them. The attack came four months after 40 CRPF jawans were killed in an attack claimed by Jaish e Mohammed, leading to an unprecedented Indian air attack inside Pakistan. The latest incident shows that militancy continues to take a heavy toll.

Governor Satya Pal Malik has appealed to militants to engage with him in dialogue. While such an appeal has its merits, it is without meaning unless the government acknowledges that there is a problem in Kashmir, and that this problem is a deep-rooted alienation. It cannot be resolved just by killing militants, slapping NIA cases against separatists and discrediting mainstream politicians, a vital link between the Centre and state, or even by cleaning up a corrupt system. The latest fear in Kashmir is over a purported plan for delimitation of Assembly constituencies. The NDA government would be well served by steering clear of divisive and polarising ideas that can only set the stage for more violence and alienation. The Centre has extended President’s Rule for another



er six months, but the priority should be to hold Assembly elections at the earliest. With his huge mandate, nothing stops Prime Minister Modi from taking bold steps to win the hearts and minds of Kashmir.

The Indian Express, June 14

Good news in a bad season

The fall in oil prices will benefit India

Amid a bevy of negative economic news, New Delhi can take comfort in the present slump in oil prices. In the first quarter of this year, oil prices rose over a third. There was talk of \$100-a-barrel and growth downgrades for importers like India. Instead, global oil prices have fallen to the low 60s and one crude variety, West Texas Intermediate, hit \$52 a barrel. With some analysts speaking of oil prices softening all the way into 2020, India could be a huge beneficiary given its problematic standing as the world’s fastest growing importer of oil.

The reason oil prices are in free fall is not supply, but demand. The assumption that the United States, China and India — the world’s three

biggest oil consumers — would keep burning ever increasing amounts has proven false. US oil consumption has been falling while China’s economy is slowing down rapidly. India’s growth in the coming year is likely to be less than robust. The US’s multiple trade wars are putting brakes on growth worldwide. India should be thankful for more than the obvious gains like a reduced trade deficit, a more stable exchange rate, more fiscal space, lower inflation and reduced interest rates. But a more useful fallout may be the end of the oil fix between Saudi Arabia and Russia which had artificially boosted prices over the past year.

Hindustan Times, June 14

Put NBFCs on a sound footing

It’s going to be a long haul

The crisis that engulfed non-banking finance companies in September last year is now rippling through other sectors of the economy, including banking, mutual funds and real estate, threatening to leave deep blotches of red across a range of corporate balance sheets. These entities have always borrowed from short-term lending windows and funnelled money to borrowers under long-term contracts. But when the liquidity sluice gates start to close and it becomes harder to raise money, the cracks in the system begin to show and the business cycle starts to break down. In April, several mutual funds had to reschedule repayments on their fixed maturity plans because of their exposures to companies

that had defaulted on their loan repayments that destroyed the value of their investment portfolios and severely undermined investor returns.

In late May, the RBI proposed to impose a liquidity coverage ratio for NBFCs with an asset size of more than ₹5,000 crore that would obligate them to hold a corpus of highly liquid assets to meet a short-term funds crunch. The new regime kicks in April 2020, and NBFCs will have to maintain a liquidity ratio of 60 per cent that will slowly rise to 100 per cent by April 2024. This is a start. But it is going to be a long way before the crumbling house can be put back in order.

The Telegraph, June 14