

Reflections

by BOB RUPANI



The government says F1 is not a sport but entertainment and so it gets no support from our sports ministry

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SO VETTEL WAS CROWNED F1 WORLD

Champion once more at the Indian F1 Grand Prix, which he won for the third time. Again the organisers of the race, the FMSCI and the Jaypee Group, owners of the Buddh International Circuit

in Greater Noida, all did a splendid job and ran a flawless race. This has been done three years in a row now and it's an achievement our country needs to be proud of. What's more, they have done this without any support from the government. In fact they have faced hurdles at every step with the sports ministry even refusing to recognise Formula One as a sport! They say it's not a sport but entertainment and so it gets no support from our sports ministry. And as its entertainment, the organisers are required to pay entertainment tax. This matter is now in court and the Jaypee Group has already had to deposit a substantial amount.

All this leads me to ask, "Is watching Sachin Tendulkar bat not entertainment?" If it's entertaining, it cannot be a sport, right? After all that's what our government says. So is it contradicting itself? Of course it is. But there is nothing new in that. Our governments have almost always failed us and their performances or manner of functioning leaves a lot to be desired - putting it mildly.

The other important thing is that the Indian F1 GP is not part of the calendar for 2014. Bernie the boss says it will come back on the calendar in 2015 and he will even extend its contract. But the Jaypee Group has started complaining of lack of government support, huge financial investment and low returns, pending entertainment tax issues, etc. So what is one to make of this? Bernie the boss has also brought up the tax and lack of government support issues. Does this mean the 2013 F1 GP was India's last one? If this happens it will be a huge tragedy. All the drivers, the teams, sponsors spectators, etc, all love the Indian GP. In fact the drivers and teams love Indian food, World Champion

Sebastian Vettel having taken a big liking to 'kebabs' and Schumacher to 'kali daal'! Before the inaugural race, Vettel also travelled to the Taj and loved it. In fact Nico Rosberg also told me that he is keen to go see tigers in Corbett Tiger Reserve and if I would go with him. All very good for India and its image.

Another thing which most people, especially our government, do not realise is that apart from the Olympics and football World Cup (which take place every four years), F1 is the most viewed sport on television globally. Some 570 million viewers worldwide saw the recent Indian race and they also got to know a bit about

our country and many may decide to visit it in the future. In fact the Indian GP plays the role of an effective ambassador for India. It showcases the skills of our people and portrays India positively, something the events (remember CWG) organised by our governmental authorities have been unable to do. Just imagine, if the Indian government had to buy two hours of airtime in over 175 countries, what it would cost. Airtime in most countries is charged for by the second and our government gets it free thanks to the Indian F1 GP. The race helps build 'Brand India', and another benefit to the country is tourism and generation of foreign exchange. All the participating teams come and stay here with their drivers, technicians, engineers, managers, strategists, publicity personnel, etc. FIA has its own team and about 300 international media personnel also attend the race.

Enthusiasts from other countries also come to view the race and many not only go sightseeing and shopping in Delhi, but also travel to other tourist destinations within India. The Golden

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Triangle of Delhi-Agra-Jaipur is an obvious choice, and there is no shortage of attractive destinations in India.

But what our authorities and government lack is imagination and vision. Instead of supporting the Indian F1 GP they have thrown obstacles in its path. And now after three years and the non-inclusion in the 2014 calendar, there is a real fear that India will not host another F1 GP, at least in the near future. The FMSCI should move the highest court against the government and sports ministry and appeal to the judiciary to order the government to support the Indian F1 GP because it's in the interest of our nation. As for the Jaypee Group, we should thank them for all they have done for the sport. But it's also a fact that land around the race circuit has appreciated so much, that not running a race and using it for other development projects, will give them huge financial benefits. I can't help but ask, "Was this the plan in the first place?" ❌

Bob Rupani is a pioneering Indian automobile journalist and is presently the executive editor of Auto India