To Play, One Day, for Bangladesh

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The *Bachte Shekha* women's football team after a match in Magura.



The dream of one day playing for the national team is strong in Narail.

For a man to dream of playing football for his country is daring. But for a woman to pursue such a dream, when her country is Bangladesh, it is yet more remarkable. It's hardly controversial to note that there remain significant cultural and societal impediments to Bangladeshi women striving to excel in sport. This is true in the capital; even more so in a regional district like Narail.

But in the villages of Hatiara, Guakhola and Bakuli in Sheikhhati Union of Narail Sadar Upazila, the women's football scene is both competitive and lively. About twenty-five kilometres from district headquarters, such is the enthusiasm for the game that women from these three villages have been regularly travelling into town by local Nosimon – a noisy, small-engine transport vehicle. They don't wish to miss their training, which starts every day at 3 p.m. Ironically, the women's football participation rate in these villages far exceeds that of Narail town.

Yet as a result of their efforts, a number of town-dwelling women have also joined the team – including young women from the various ethnic minorities who were long ago brought to work in Narail's indigo plantations from distant regions of India and currently live beside the field where training takes place. To see the village women train has been their inspiration to pursue the game themselves.

The growth of village women's football in Narail began with the World Cup fever of 2010 when all over Bangladesh both men and women regularly found themselves glued to TV sets taking in the latest match in South Africa. At the time, Putul Mojumder, Bichitra Biswas and a few others from Hatiara village hatched a plan to arrange a women's football tournament at the Guakhola high school field.

With money collected locally they bought their first football and began to train for the upcoming tournament. Initially their efforts met with disapproval from some within the community – unsurprisingly since the sight of women playing football was certainly a novel one. Yet they persevered and the villagers at large gradually became accustomed to the women training.

Eventually there were no objections to the first tournament, which took place on 24 July 2010. It was a memorable day that drew in thousands of spectators from across the district. Village history had been made!

The two teams – the "married" team of mothers versus the "unmarried" team of daughters both played well, with the unmarried team gaining the upper hand to take the match four goals to one.