

When Shakib All Hassan gets a cold, it's heard all around the country. On Tamim Iqbal's wedding day, thousands log on to Facebook to get a glimpse of the lucky bride. People queue outside Mushfiqur Rahim's house for a single autograph. But if we were to ask the same people about Salma Khatun, we'd get a blank look. And when we inform them that she is the captain of the Bangladesh National Women's Cricket Team, most reply with an apathetic oh.

Despite the lack of public and media attention, the Bangladesh National Women's Cricket Team continue to make us proud in the international arena. The team had a victorious international debut when they won two matches against Thailand in a series played in July 2007. They then went on to compete against China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Nepal, Singapore, Thailand and the UAE to win the ACC Women's Cricket Tournament in the same year of their international debut. Within a span of four years, the team was granted the one day status in 2011, after beating the United States and finishing fifth in the 2011 Women's Cricket World Cup Qualifier. Salma Khatun has been at the helm of these successes as the captain of the team since 2008.

Salma's love affair with cricket started from a very young age. As a child living in Khulna, she would attend cricket matches with her uncles, who encouraged their niece's interest in the game, getting her a bat and a set of cricket balls to practice in her village field. "I never dreamt of playing for the national team. I just loved watching and playing this sport," she says.

Her passion for the game was supported by her uncles and the rest of her family. However, neighbours would sometime tease her for playing a 'boy's game.' "But they didn't have the nerve to say that to my face or even go to my family and taunt them. My family was quite influential in that area, thankfully, and people knew that I had their complete support," she says. Her mother, however, would sometimes scold her for missing her school to practice cricket. "She would be furious when I missed school. That for her was sacrilege," says Salma with a laugh.

Salma used to play in cricket events organised between different villages. But her venture to district and national level cricket was quite serendipitous. She and her younger brother were visiting their grandmother in Faridpur when Moin, a cousin's friend, who also played cricket, learnt from the newspaper that there were

talks of forming a women's cricket team. Players from all over the country were invited to attend the tryout calls.

"When Moin called my home number in Khulna, my mother informed him that I was not in town. He urged that they should make sure that I return at the earliest so as to not miss out this opportunity," she says. When Salma heard this news, she couldn't contain her excitement. "I was basically on pins and

The Bengal Tigress

UPASHANA SALAM



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

balls. I wanted to return home that very night but her brother told her to wait until the next morning. They got on a ferry early next morning but reached home later in the evening. Salma rose at the crack of dawn the next day and swiftly made her way to the field where the tryouts were being held.

Salma went to play attired in a salwar-kameez suit, as she didn't know that she had to dress any differently. The tryout panel asked her what position she played in and whether she was a batsperson or a bowler. She replied that she was equally adept at batting and bowling. When it was her turn to show her skills, a lady instructor helped her pin her *orna* to her kameez so that her game wouldn't be hampered. As

Salma said she could bowl both spin and pace balls, she was asked to give a demo by bowling three spin balls and three pace balls. "The esteemed panel was delighted at my performance. They told me that even though I

was not bad with pace balls, I should focus on being a spin bowler."

Salma was obviously selected and asked to attend practice sessions from the following day. However, she was worried that she didn't have the proper outfits or sporting equipment but her worries were put to rest when cricketer Sheikh Salahuddin Ahmed, who was a member of the selection committee and who owned a sportswear shop, bought her the outfit and other required items.

This was in 2006. Salma played district level



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

cricket for a year before attending a national camp for women cricketers who would be chosen to play the first international match against Malaysia in a series match in 2007. However, a disaster awaited her a week before the completion of the selection process. "During one of the practice sessions, one of the balls hit by a bowler hit me square on the lips. I was severely injured and we were all concerned whether I could take part in the practice sessions anymore. The tour at that time seemed like a distant dream. Salma needed two stitches on her lips and was strictly told that she could not practice for around four days. That was a blow for the passionate cricketer. "I couldn't wait to go back to the field. And before I was completely healed, a couple of days before the selection day, I went back to practice." Salma was obviously selected for the tour which turned out to be the first international match and first international victory for the national team.

Salma's nomination for captaincy was a surprise for the cricketer. During a tournament against the visiting team Hong Kong in 2008, a press conference was organised and then coach of the team Zafrul Ehsan told her that she would have to accompany him. When she asked where, he told her that she

would see when the time came. When their autorickshaw stopped in front of the Bangladesh Cricket Board building, Zafrul Ehsan, who always addressed her with the endearment *beta*, said, "Beta, the board has taken a consensual decision to nominate you as the captain of the team. We will announce this captaincy at the press conference and you may have to answer questions posed by the media."

She was shell-shocked. She kept repeating to Ehsan that she had never spoken to the media before and didn't know what she would say. On his part, Ehsan kept reassuring her that he would be right beside her at all times so that she could turn to him whenever there was a need. "It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be," she says with a laugh. "That was the beginning of my captaincy and fortunately I've been blessed with a wonderful team. It's amazing but we have been able to come far within a short span of time."

Salma says that even though the country is finally recognising the Women's Cricket Team for their contributions, there are still obstacles that need to be overcome. While the men's cricket team is probably getting 100 percent in terms of support or resources, the women's team is receiving around 60 to 70 percent of the same, she says. The men's team is given preference in terms of practice sessions and timings, she adds. Even when a specific time and space is allocated for the women's team, if the men's team needs the space for an emergency practice session, it will be allocated to them.

Salma, however, says that such compromises are not that big a deal. "We really don't have too many complaints. Even the Prime Minister pledged to improve our facilities and resources, and that's hopeful."

Earlier this year, the International Cricket Council announced that Salma topped the ICC T20 all-rounder rankings with 291 rating points, clearly four points ahead of Sri Lanka's Shashikala Siriwardene. She is also ranked as the number one T20 bowler in the ICC Player Rankings.

Salma says that her family has always been her biggest support, her biggest anchor. "My biggest achievement will be when more and more girls decide to play cricket for the nation. We will not always be there and we need new blood to replace us. I believe that the only way girls can get the courage to face their fears is when their family supports them," concludes the master cricketer. ■