

MY TALES OF 22 YARDS

Roquibul Hassan

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THE ALL-ROUNDER IN MAKING

I started playing cricket at school level in St. Gregory High school. My father and his friends used to love cricket. They would often go to stadium together. Whenever there were matches, there would be grand lunch or dinner arrangements in our house. As a kid, at times these seemed like Eid to me! This is how the interest grew inside me. I was good at many other sports alongside cricket. I was a table tennis champion; I represented my school football team as well. And I also played basketball and volleyball. But a time came when I realized that I was best at cricket, and if I wanted to do better in this, I would have to compromise with other sports. In 1968, I got my first chance in *Quayed-e-Azam* trophy. I was in class 10 at that time. Success in the first division cricket ultimately meant that Pakistan national cricket team would be waving at me. I played really well in Karachi, and eventually got into the under 19 team. But even after doing excellent with the junior teams, I was not given a shot at the ODI team first squad. It was only because I belonged to East Pakistan. I was only enlisted as the 12th man. Sheer oppression was mounting every day, which ultimately ended in us putting precious lives on the line for our great liberation war.

FROM SPARK TO WILDFIRE

In 1969 I played a test match for the Pakistan national team against New Zealand, where Glenn Turner had made his debut. It took place in Dhaka. I was hoping to be chosen as the opening batsman, since there was a crisis of opening batsmen in Pakistan team at that time. Later in the morning I found out that, despite my excellent form, I was kept as the 12th man, yet again! Then came the All Pakistan Under-19 tournament, where I was the captain of East Pakistan team. We had players like Jewel (who died as a martyr), Syed Ashraf Haque (who later became the CEO of ACC), Tanvir Mazhar Tanna (who later become the President Dhaka Club Ltd), late Tanvir Haider and many more in that team. After that, another team came to Dhaka called 'International 11' to play an unofficial test match in Dhaka. It was scheduled to take place from February 26 to March 1, 1971. We were staying at the Purbani hotel. Our opposing team consisted of some highly skilled players. By then the political pandemonium had instigated much confusion nationwide. In the middle of the entire debacle, I had done something very special that I am proud of till this day. I had put a sticker on my bat that said 'Joy Bangla'! At that time, Sheikh Kamal was one of my very close friends. He was actively involved in political affairs. I requested him to bring me one of those stickers, saying this is my prime opportunity to prove my stance. All of us were provided with equipment for the match, and I saw the Pakistani players' bats had a

sticker of a sword, the emblem of Bhutto. So I also wanted to give them a strong reply. Within a short time, Kamal managed to get me the sticker. On the morning of 27th February, 1971, the whole nation saw the young East Pakistani marching proudly towards the 22 yards with a bat that was sharper and shinier than any Pakistani sword could ever be. The whole stadium was on their feet, shouting 'Joy Bangla!', as I walked down to the pitch. The next day, every newspaper published my photo with the stickered bat. However, the test match was cancelled on the fourth day, after Yahya Khan crudely halted all parliamentary process. For my act of demurral, I was termed as a traitor. I could realize that the protests had finally taken a turn irreversible. Now there was no going back.

A GEM TOO PRECIOUS TO LOSE

After the crackdown on the 25th March, the whole nation came to a standstill, unsure of our next move. The news of the death of my cricketing godfather Shaheed



Mustaq (after whom we have a stand named in Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium) came to me. With a heavy heart, I was wandering on the roads of Dhaka, and I saw piles of human bodies, lying lifeless on top of each other. Blood streaming though the drains clogged the narrow pipes. My whole body was shaking with all the nauseating gore around. It was a morning I will never be able to forget. As I was walking, I met Dipu bhai, an elder brother very dear to me. He said, "What on earth are you doing in Dhaka right now? Don't you know that you are also on the wanted list of the butchers?!" Clueless, I said, "Why? What have I done?" And he replied, "Your sticker did not go unnoticed by the army intelligence! My boy, if you want to survive, leave Dhaka immediately!" Shortly after, I left for the countryside, and decided to join one of the *Muktibahini* training camps in my hometown near Kashiani, Gopalganj. There I

met Sheikh Shahidul Islam, the nephew of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He called me up and said, "Roquibul, do you listen to Shadhin Bangla Betar? Do you think our country is going to be free?" I said, "Yes, it will be free. I don't know when, but I am sure it will." Then he said, "Aren't we going to have a cricket team in the liberated country? Who will play for the Shadhin Bangla cricket team; if boys like you die fighting in the front-lines?" I had no reply for him. He then embraced me and told me, "We are going to have a sun of our own, just as we are going to have a cricket team of our own. And we will need players like you to lead us to victories. Whatever you do, do it wisely!"

STARTING FROM SCRAP

After the liberation war, everything needed to be reformed and reorganized. A country emerging from the ruins could hardly allow much luxury. Some people had spread the false idea that cricket was a very expensive game, and the infant country did not need one such luxury at that time. Cricket had

started to gain much negative response from the countrymen. I, along with many others, had to run from this office to that ministry to break this stereotype. One day I, along with Sheikh Kamal and many others, was marching forward with a procession towards Ganabhaban in Minto road to reach Bangabandhu and submit our proposals for saving our cricket. Midway, we were stopped by some law enforcement personnel. They called upon Kamal, who was right in front of me, for discussion. Then we came to realize that Bangabandhu was already aware of our demands, and had firmly assured that our cricket will never stop. As an aftermath, the Bangladesh Cricket Control Board (later Bangladesh Cricket Board) was formed in 1972. We had very little to begin with. But we had hearts full of courage and passion, and that was just enough!

CRICKET FOR LIFE

As I belonged to a middle-class family, I

had to work hard and earn for myself. I had joined the People newspaper as a sports column writer. A fond memory of this time was that, at times, I even had to write reports of my own matches! Such happened that I had scored a century the previous day, and I had to write a report on cricketer Roquibul's beautiful century the next day! I retired from international cricket in 1986. I could still play for some more years, but I felt that it was better to leave early rather than becoming a burden for the team. After that, I took part in various the managerial works of cricket board. I have been a member of Bangladesh sports writers association, served as their president for twice. Eventually I came to commentary as well. I was the commentator in the first test match between Zimbabwe and Bangladesh. I have not done international commentary that much. But I am still involved with sports analysis, post-match discussions and similar activities. And I believe every sportsman, after retirement form their regular career, should take part in such works. Because nowadays we see people from other professions who have very little idea about the game become analyzers. These people make comments that hardly make any sense. This is ruining our taste and ability of properly analyzing the games. Match refereeing is another job that needs skilled personnel. I am currently the chief match referee of BCB. I have also done match refereeing for numerous international matches.

DEAR TO MY HEART

My son Sazid Hasan also played for the Bangladesh team. I am fortunate to have a son like him; together we even created a history by playing against each other in a league match! My idol in cricket was Hanif Mohammad. I used to collect his photos. Sunil Gavaskar, Richie Benaud were also my favorite players. I had the opportunity to meet boxer Mohammad Ali once. He had a great influence over my career as a sportsman as well. Other than that, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has been a lifetime idol for me. He is one monumental figure in our history that nobody can ever dare to erase.

FOR THE LOVE OF THE GAME

There remain many stakeholders behind the development of a sport's infrastructure. Commentators and commentating facilities in our country need to be developed thoroughly, solely for the benefit of Bangladeshi cricket. Maybe we can arrange workshops to find new, skilled and informed commentators for the years to come. Now we only see Shamim Chowdhury and Athar Ali Khan. But their career will eventually be over, and we are not preparing anybody who can take charge after that.

By Tasbir Iftekhar