



Although India are favourites in today's final, Bangladesh can draw on the inspiration provided by the lion-hearted Mashrafe Bin Mortaza and their (Inset) raucous support in Dubai to perhaps seal what would be their most famous success.



PHOTO: AFP FILE

Mashrafe, you deserve it

BISHWAJIT ROY

It would not be an injustice in any way if the Cricket Gods allow Mashrafe Bin Mortaza to lift the Asia Cup trophy with his firm hands at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium today to bring smiles on the faces of the millions of cricket-crazy people in our country.

However, the question is how realistic that dream is. India will go into the final today tagged as 'overwhelming favourites' after enjoying an unbeaten run in the tournament while the Tigers endured a bumpy ride.

While it is true that Bangladesh have overcome many odds to reach the final, many will say: "It's India man! And don't forget there is no Shakib Al Hasan or Tamim Iqbal."

However, a Midas touch from one man can change all the equations and realistic views.

He has given proof of that many times in his fairytale career and he did it again in this tournament too with a traditionally charismatic approach.

When Bangladesh left the country, they had high hopes of achieving glory. Things took a turn and there was plenty of drama in the opener against Sri Lanka, all of which was eventually overshadowed by Tamim Iqbal's unbelievable courage. However, the

man who motivated the left-hander was none other than his inspirational skipper.

Tamim's loss had a huge impact as the two new openers failed to find their feet and two defeats to Afghanistan and India made things difficult for the captain, who was tasked with putting the pieces back together and reigniting their hopes. Then the controversial decision to include openers Imrul Kayes and Soumya Sarkar apparently unsettled the team but hope never faded as that colossal man was at the helm.

He stuck to two young openers despite their failures and the hard-fought victory against Afghanistan in the Super Four promised something good was coming to the team.

Alas! The Cricket Gods threw another monumental challenge at the man as Shakib Al Hasan was ruled out ahead of the do-or-die match against Pakistan.

The rest is history.

Mashrafe's stunning catch to dismiss dangerman Shoaib Malik might be publicised most but the way he charged up his men and marshalled the fielding, apart from a good bowling effort, only provided more proof why this man is special.

So, do not only consider logistics when this inspirational man is around. If anyone deserves this prestigious trophy, it is Mashrafe, even more so at the fag end of his career.

Mashrafe bhai told us one thing and we talked about one thing: when at war, don't look back. So if you think that I am going to war and I will try to play it safe, that won't work. Either kill or be killed -- one or the other.

MUSHFIQUR RAHIM

AFTER THE WIN OVER PAKISTAN IN THE ASIA CUP

INFO-ZONE

BANGLADESH V INDIA

HEAD TO HEAD IN ASIA CUP

M	W	L	NR	M	W	L	NR
13	1	12	0	13	12	1	0

IN ALL ODIs

M	W	L	NR	M	W	L	NR
34	5	28	1	34	28	5	1

Last meeting in ODIs: Dubai, Sept 21, 2018. India won by 7 wickets in Asia Cup.

KEY PLAYERS



Mushfiqur Rahim
34.16
177
5125
144
77.68
30
6
Average
Innings
Runs
HS
SR
50s
100s



Rohit Sharma
46.16
181
7017
264
87.45
36
19



2016: INDIA BEAT BANGLADESH BY EIGHT WICKETS

The second time Bangladesh made the final of the tournament, again at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium on home soil, the result was far more straightforward. The tournament had been changed to a 20-over format due to the impending World T20 and that was already a huge setback for Bangladesh, who had taken impressive steps in ODIs but still lacked substance in T20s -- arguably still the case two years later.

As such, the Tigers could put up only 120 runs on the board. The unbeaten Sabbir Rahman scored 32 off 29 to hold things down before Mahmudullah Riyad blazed his way to an unbeaten 33 off just 13, smiting two fours and as many sixes.

After the exchange, India, a dominant force in the format, cantered home in 13.5 overs. Dhawan departed after scoring 60 off 44 with nine boundaries and a six while Kohli remained not out after a 28-ball 41. Captain and one of the finest T20 players, Mahendra Singh Dhoni, was only required to play a supporting role and he did so in his own inimitable fashion with a seven-ball 20.

If the previous final against Pakistan was the most-closely fought, then this was perhaps the exact opposite and there were no tears this time around. Bangladesh captain Mashrafe simply walked to his counterpart and with a tip of the cap and shake of the hands, he walked back to claim second place for the second time.

Tigers revel in pains of evolution

SAKEB SUBHAN from Dubai



It is a twist of fate that two different Asia Cups have been witness to two stages in Bangladesh's evolution. Along with evolution, of course, comes growth amid turmoil and Bangladesh have had much of both in the 2012 tournament and the ongoing one in the UAE where they will contest for the trophy against overwhelming favourites India.

In 2012, Bangladesh were rank outsiders but they surprised all pre-tournament forecasts by outclassing both Sri Lanka and India before enduring the heartbreak of losing the final by a mere two runs against Pakistan. 'So near, yet so



far' was the soundtrack of heartbreak then, but years later cricketers and fans alike look back at that tournament wistfully as the point where Bangladesh cricket matured into a force to be reckoned with.

Six years later, however, it is a different evolution but it has come with the same growing pains. For long, even after their previous step up, the Tigers had been a team that could come up with stellar performances but tended to lose the plot when there were setbacks. And it was a certain kind of setback that hurt them the most: a loss of form or absence of one or more of the five cricketers who have thus far lifted Bangladesh to its greatest heights: skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, Shakib Al Hasan, Tamim Iqbal, Mushfiqur Rahim and Mahmudullah Riyad. Incidentally, all of these cricketers were part of their first real ascension to cricketing prominence in 2012.

Now, however, the two cricketers from that bunch who have done more than any other to change perceptions and expectations of Bangladesh cricket -- Tamim and Shakib -- are out of the Asia Cup with injuries. In 2012, Shakib was the player of the series and Tamim had hit four consecutive half-centuries.

With Tamim already having flown home on September 18 with a fracture to his left hand, Shakib's absence was a shock to the team on the morning of their virtual semifinal against Pakistan in Abu Dhabi on Wednesday. Yet, just as the team had somehow found a way to win Sunday's match against Afghanistan without Tamim to stay in contention for the final, they roared into the final with a bowling and fielding performance worthy of Tigers against Pakistan to win by 37 runs around the time that Shakib was unpacking his bags in Dhaka.

"Both tournaments have their separate respect and value. In 2012 we could not win anything, we won rarely," said Mashrafe in the pre-final press conference at the hotel yesterday, a rest day after the exertions of the Pakistan match in the searing heat. "We won against big teams on the odd day. Now we are at a stage that whenever we won big matches, our best performers were Shakib, Tamim and Mushfiqur on most occasions. Mustafizur [Rahman] too. But to come to this stage without our two best players is a big achievement. The boys can feel proud of it, but there is still one match, if they can give their best shot I hope it will be a good match."

It was not too long ago that this was not the case. In South Africa last October Bangladesh surrendered without a whimper without Shakib in the Tests, and in the ODIs without Tamim in the last two matches. In the home tri-series final against Sri Lanka in January, they lost the plot after Shakib left the field with injury -- the same one to the left little finger that requires surgery now -- and succumbed to defeat not just in that match but in the following Test and T20I series.

Evolution, of course, retains the toughest and best bits from the past and Bangladesh have retained the toughest component in the skipper, who has inspired the team with bold decisions throughout the tournament, and the masterful Mushfiqur -- whose batting throughout has compensated for top-order failures. Regardless of who wins today, Bangladesh will be richer for having evolved into a team that can overcome the harshest setbacks and come out on top.

Hats off to Bangladesh: Dhawan

SPORTS REPORTER from Dubai



India have been far and away the best team in the ongoing Asia Cup. There may have been a lot of disgruntled noises from other teams -- including Bangladesh skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza -- hinting at the preferential schedule the world's number one ODI side have been handed, but there is an argument to be made that even the worst of schedules would not have altered the results much.

And the results speak for themselves. They beat Pakistan by eight and nine wickets respectively in two matches, and Bangladesh -- their opponents in today's Asia Cup final -- by seven wickets. They rested their best players in the opening match against Hong Kong and the minnows put up a spirited show to lose by just 26 runs. In their last match too, having already confirmed a place in the final, they fielded a weaker side against the tournament's revelations Afghanistan and got away with a tie.

A major architect of their dominance has been vice-captain Shikhar Dhawan, who has been the tournament's highest scorer with 327 runs

with an average of 82, including two centuries. However, more than talk about his or his team's achievements, he was generous in his praise for his opponents, who moved into the final by beating Pakistan despite missing two stalwarts in Shakib Al Hasan and Tamim Iqbal.

"I guess they're balanced, know what their strengths are and they've improved a lot," he said of Bangladesh during the pre-final press conference in Dubai yesterday. "They're a competitive side. Hats off to them, the way

they play all-round cricket, the results will follow. We'll stick to our previous plan.

INDIA'S SHIKHAR DHAWAN



they played and won against Pakistan. When you play all-round cricket, the results will follow. The plan we made against them in the previous game, we will try and stick to that. Conditions

will remain the same [at the Dubai International Stadium], we'll plan for individuals by looking at videos of their batsmen, revise and prepare accordingly."

The top billing for the Asia Cup was of course the India-Pakistan rivalry, and press conferences surrounding the two teams often focused on questions about the archrival, despite who they were playing the following day or had just played.

"Of course we'll carry momentum and give it our best shot; all teams are competitive," Dhawan said. "Everyone thought it was going to be an India-Pakistan final, but Bangladesh won a great match last night [Wednesday]

day], we can't take them lightly just because Pakistan is a bigger team. Bangladesh are playing better cricket, there's a difference between a team on paper and who is doing well on the field, that's how I see it."

When reminded that Bangladesh have not won a final against India -- in the last Asia Cup in Dhaka, in the Nidahas Trophy in March -- Dhawan again batted for his opponents.

"How many years have they been playing cricket now? If we see any other team, what will be the difference? Sometimes reaching finals is a big thing. I look at it differently. Hopefully we win tomorrow, [but] we will see them crossing that barrier also, things can change anytime."

THIRD TIME LUCKY FOR BANGLADESH?

Bangladesh will go into today's Asia Cup final against India with some jarring memories from their previous appearances. The Tigers have come leaps and bounds from that gut-wrenching loss to Pakistan in 2012 and were never really expected to win in 2016, a T20 affair. This time around the main problem will be the missing stars in the form of Shakib Al Hasan and Tamim Iqbal. However, the Tigers hope that they can cope with those losses as they did against Pakistan, especially in the absence of India's marquee player Virat Kohli. Here we look back at the previous two finals and also look ahead.

2018: A RECORD SIXTH OR HISTORIC FIRST?

While India will be hoping to complete their dominance in Asia by winning a record sixth Asia Cup -- they are currently tied with Sri Lanka on five wins each -- Bangladesh will be hoping to finally add some silverware after years of near-misses.

The Tigers, even without their two stars, are certainly up to the task. Left-arm pacer Mustafizur Rahman was firing on all cylinders against Pakistan and he was aptly rewarded with four wickets while Mehedi Hasan Miraz's stranglehold over batsmen added immense pressure. Even the part-timers showed up big time and if they can continue to do so and get India's dynamic opening duo of Rohit Sharma and Shikhar Dhawan early, then it should set up a gripping game.

The batting department has been more lacklustre and much will likely depend on Mushfiqur again, but if he can find a partner in Mohammad Mithun or elsewhere, then the pocket-sized dynamo will certainly be a threat to India's bowling attack.

2012: PAKISTAN BEAT BANGLADESH BY TWO RUNS

The image of Mushfiqur Rahim crying into the arms of a teary-eyed Shakib is deeply embedded into the mind of every cricket-loving Bangladeshi. That was the aftermath of Bangladesh's harshest defeat to date, a two-run loss to Pakistan at the home of Bangladeshi cricket.

Pakistan batted first and put up 236 for nine in their allotted overs. Opener Mohammad Hafeez chipped in with an 87-ball 40 and four others scored over 30 runs, including now captain Sarfraz Ahmed's 52-ball 46. Mashrafe, who was then being captained by Mushfiqur, Shakib and Abdur Razzak picked up two wickets each.

In a curious twist of fate, it was Shakib and Tamim that were key for Bangladesh, both hitting half centuries at key points of Bangladesh's innings. Bangladesh were eventually left needing 19 runs off the final two overs with Mahmudullah Riyad and Razzak at the crease and brought that down to nine off the final six balls before falling agonisingly shy in the most intensely-fought Asia Cup final to date. Man of the match Shahid Afridi was chiefly responsible for the heartbreak, scoring a quickfire 32 before suffocating the Tigers with the ball as he gave away just 28 runs in 10 overs.

