

# A World Cup semi-final: A dream too far for the Tigers?

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There is a sense of hope and, at times, sheer determination amongst Bangladeshi cricket fans that the 15-man squad donning the famous green-and-red and travelling all around the United Kingdom battling it out against nine other nations can *surely*—if not easily—make it to the semi-finals of this year's edition of the ICC Cricket World Cup. That's all well and good, but the question still remains: is this Bangladesh squad really good enough to secure a top-4 finish in this year's tournament and in this format, or is it all just a pipe-dream we are all trying to glorify because of our culturally romantic relationship with *hujuk*?

One of the biggest talking points prior

squad to compete against the top teams. But strong enough to withstand the unassailable challenge of the format itself? Let's dig deep!

The biggest strength of Bangladesh in the World Cup, undoubtedly, is the cumulative experience of the team, especially the 'Big Five'. The Big Five—Tamim Iqbal, Mushfiqur Rahim, Shakib Al Hasan, Mahmudullah Ryad and Mashrafe Bin Mortaza—have a wealth of experience, drawing inspiration and knowledge from their 995 ODIs. Tamim, Shakib, Mushfiq and Mash are playing their fourth World Cup, while this is Mahmudullah's third. This gives Bangladesh an obvious edge over some of the other teams in the competition, but in

The Tigers have a very good batting line-up now; the likes of Tamim, Shakib, Mushfiq and Mahmudullah give it depth and experience, whereas young and exuberant talents such as Soumya Sarkar, Liton Kumar Das, Mosaddek Hossain and Sabbir Rahman give the team the flamboyance it needs to fight against the top bowling attacks. Bangladesh's lower-middle order has been spearheaded by Mahmudullah Ryad for the better part of a decade now, and any ardent follower of this team would know how impressive he has been at this role over the years. There were times in the past when Bangladesh's designated finisher fell short of the mark due to poor form, but also due

look to out for and has been touted to be Bangladesh' version of Hardik Pandya. Although Saifuddin still has a long way to go to fall under the same bracket as the Indian all-rounder, especially in terms of his batting, the Bangladeshi youngster has become the country's premium death bowling option in a very short time over Rubel Hossain, the hero of Adelaide 2015. His panache and variations have paid dividends so far, but Bangladesh will be worried with the form of Mustafizur Rahman and Mashrafe Bin Mortaza. Both are Bangladesh's principal wicket-taking bowlers, specifically in English conditions, but their lack of sharpness and/or fitness is stifling the Tigers bowling attack. Coupled with the fact that Bangladesh is one of only two teams who don't have a frontline wrist-spinner in their squad—an invaluable asset in today's cricket due to their skill, control and unpredictability—this makes things even more difficult for captain Mashrafe. Because, now-a-days, with shorter fields, bigger bats and the overall game being skewed in favour of the batsmen, the most effective way to put a brake on the opposition's scoreboard is by getting wickets—something Bangladesh is and possibly will be struggling with through-out the World Cup.

So, all things considered—the format of the tournament, Bangladesh's robust batting line-up and a rather passive bowling attack—a World Cup semi-final berth this time around is probably a step too far for Bangladesh. But the odds were stacked against Bangladesh in 2015 when the team famously knocked 'the England Lions out of the World Cup' to play a World Cup quarter-final for the first time in history. And just a couple of years back in 2017, at Cardiff, Bangladesh were 33-4 against New Zealand, chasing 268 in a must-win game in the ICC Champions Trophy to book a semi-final spot in any ICC event for the first time as well. The Tigers achieved that too. This means, if there's anything team Bangladesh is good at, it's making the improbable, possible; it's creating miracles; it's providing moments of absolute euphoria. And since this might be the last time the fans get to see Tamim Iqbal, Mushfiqur Rahim, Shakib Al Hasan, Mahmudullah Ryad and Mashrafe Bin Mortaza play together in a World Cup, who knows, maybe Mash and co. do have one miracle left in them: making the World Cup semi-final dream a reality!

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to the start of the tournament was—to be fair, it still is—the format of the 12th edition of ICC Men's Cricket World Cup, in which all ten teams are placed in a single group to face each other once, to try and win as many games and collect as many points as possible to finish in the top-4, and qualify for the semi-finals and, subsequently, the final. This format has been lauded in some quarters and criticised by some, mostly because it comprises a total of 48 games over the course of nearly one and a half months. As such, the tournament is going to be long, tough and obviously very demanding for all the participating teams. This is also true for team Bangladesh, who do have a solid

this day and age, a team needs more than just *big-match experience*.

In order to not only vigorously compete but also defeat the bigger cricket nations, any international team needs:

- Firepower, stability and composure at the top and middle of the batting order which can lay the foundation for a big score in the first innings or a measured chase in the second innings;
- A lower-middle order with the ability to score 80-100 runs in the last 8-10 overs of an innings;
- Fast bowlers with raw pace, discipline, intelligence and variation, accompanied by spinners who have guile, courage and an attacking mindset to take wickets.

to the fact that being a finisher was never Mahmudullah's natural game. By his own admission, he has had to work really hard to become the team's go-to person at the end of an innings because the team just didn't have one. He has had to adapt and change to meet the requirements of the team, and that is why the recent resurgence of Mosaddek Hossain is giving the Tigers' fans hope. In the last month or so, Mosaddek has provided Mahmudullah the support lower down the order with some big hitting, which Mahmudullah often didn't get previously.

However, it's the bowling which is more of a concern for Bangladesh. Mohammad Saifuddin is, arguably, one to