

“Our goal this time was to have the best possible cricket. I think we can complete this BPL without any major problems. I hope we can maintain this system in the next BPL.”

BCB president Nazmul Hassan said in 2015 after the BPL was rebooted following two murky editions.



Often mired in controversy, BPL still suffering an IDENTITY CRISIS

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Dhaka Gladiators, Dhaka Dynamites or Minister Group Dhaka? Which team should fans pledge allegiance to?

The ever-changing shuffle of franchises, and with it their names, is enough to drive home the point that the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), the nation's premier franchise-based T20 tournament, has failed to establish its own identity nearly 10 years after its inception.

When the BPL launched in 2012, it certainly lured in viewers and gained massive public acceptance for a promise to follow in the footsteps of the Indian Premier League (IPL) and a pledge to perfect the 'brand of cricket' the country wants to display in the format.

The fact that it was at a time when T20 cricket was at the peak of its popularity also helped the cause.

But despite all the razzmatazz, the BPL has been mired in controversy since the beginning. From players and staff payment issues, a lack of planning, a failure to form a specific set of rules for smooth operation to even the unfortunate event of spot-fixing, the BPL seemed well behind forging the

promised brand of cricket in its first two editions.

However, after skipping a year to combat these issues, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) was able to revive the league in 2015 with renewed promise and vision. The promise was kept, but only for that season.

In fact, the timing of that edition and performances yielded in that season helped national cricketers prepare better and flourish in the Asia Cup and provide glimpses in the T20 World Cup the following year. "I hope we can hold on to this system in the next BPL," were the words from BCB president Nazmul Hassan back then but while it raised hopes, results never materialised.

After three editions and four years of planning and scrapping, it was time for the BPL to actually prove its standing behind the IPL, a statement that has often been uttered by the tournament's governing body.

For that, the BPL needed to tick the other boxes besides just timely payments and creating a platform for local players to share a dressing room with stars. It needed to ensure more profitability for franchisees and, most significantly, groom up and-coming national stars capable of going on to rule the

T20 format at the international level – something the IPL has certainly done for India over the years.

When franchises get ownership of a team, they obviously look for more than just exposure. Financial gain remains a major expectation.

However, over the years, franchises have often failed to recover investment due to the BPL governing body's frail financial structure.

When it comes to producing players, the BPL did give Bangladesh players like Afif Hossain, Yasir Ali and Hasan Mahmud, all of whom have since been in and around the national set-up. But their impact on the national side has not even been close to that of IPL finds Ravichandran Ashwin, Rishabh Pant and Ishan Kishan to the Indian side.

Even this year, the BPL started with glitches and the upsurge in Covid-19-related issues pose further challenges. Come January 21, the next 29 days will surely be a testing period for the BPL governing body. Will this edition be riddled with controversy or will the BPL finally take a step in the right direction in terms of establishing its identity?

THE BPL'S DUBIOUS DISTINCTIONS

- In the inaugural edition, it was announced that Chittagong Kings would play in the semifinals before BPL governing body, following late-night meetings, stated that Barisal Burners, not Chittagong, were through.
- Mashrafe Bin Mortaza reported a potential spot-fixing approach from a fellow cricketer to his franchise, Dhaka Gladiators, in the first edition of BPL.
- The first two editions of the BPL saw repeated complaints from players and coaching staff regarding delays of payment.
- Mohammad Ashraful was handed an eight-year ban – later reduced to five years – and franchise Dhaka Gladiators were handed a lifetime ban for match-fixing in the 2013 edition of the tournament.
- Despite setbacks, the BPL attracted star foreigners over the years, with the likes of Steve Smith and David Warner playing in the 2019 edition.
- In 2015, a match between Sylhet Superstars and Chittagong Vikings was delayed after Sylhet named a different eleven at the toss to the one they eventually fielded as Ravi Bopara and Josh Cobb's NOCs arrived after the toss.



- In 2017, the BPL governing body forgot to impose a pre-tournament regulation that a match would be decided by a Super Over in the playoffs in case the allotted overs were not played due to rain.
- Ahead of the 2020 edition, the Bangladesh Cricket Board announced that each BPL team would be required to have a pacer bowling over 140kmph and a leg-spinner present in the eleven.

● The BCB rejected franchise revenue sharing, scrapping all franchises and arranging special editions of BPL, from 2020.



‘We consider BPL a developmental tournament’

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Since its introduction in 2012, the cash-rich Bangladesh Premier League has made headlines due to glitz, glamour and myriad controversies. Influential Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) director Ismail Haider Mallick, also a member secretary of the BPL governing council, spoke to *The Daily Star's* Mazhar Uddin about the reasons behind the stunted growth of the franchise-based T20 tournament, the obstacles in the way and how to improve in the future. The excerpts are below:

The Daily Star (DS): Tell us about the journey of BPL since its introduction in 2012.
Ismail Haider Mallick (IM): We came to the board after the first edition of the BPL and what we faced most were non-payment issues. Franchisees were not paying the players and the board was supposed to get Tk 30 crore from those who organised the event. Then the board formed a commission and found out that they were still owed Tk 52 crore. The model back then was different. The board used to take money from the franchisees and then they were supposed to pay the franchisees. But no party got the money. Then we went for a settlement of Tk 25 crore but we were unable to recover that as well.

Then we decided to dissolve the financial structure and opt for a different structure for the second edition. We formed new franchisees but none of the old franchisees were able to



continue beyond the third edition. That financial model did not match the context of Bangladesh's economical structure and was never viable. We call the BPL a headache because every edition you will hear about non-payment issues. But at one point between 2015 to 2017, we truly created hype. But since the pandemic, there has been a break but we still arranged a special edition.

DS: The franchisees asked for a revenue-sharing

model just before the special edition in 2019...

IM: If we want to share revenue, we have to return to the model from the inaugural edition. We have to increase franchise fees. The board's initial aim was to make this BPL a revenue-generating tournament, but we are not on that trajectory. Yes, the BPL generates money for us each year. But because this is the only T20 tournament in our calendar, we want to make it the platform for new players to get

international exposure as well as a way to give other local resources such as coaches, umpires, groundsmen and even the security team that exposure. If we talk about Mustafizur [Rahman] or Soumya [Sarkar], they came after getting exposure in the BPL like many others. We consider BPL a developmental tournament.

DS: Why are there always complaints about poor pitches in the BPL?

IM: We are suffering in terms of pitches. If you ask me as a member of the BPL governing council, we are not happy with the type of T20 pitches in Bangladesh. The grounds department is trying its best but to maintain a good pitch we can't have more than 40 days of cricket on the same ground each year. But we have over 200 days of cricket because we have to play a majority of matches in Mirpur, Chattogram or Sylhet.

DS: Do you think BPL has hit the heights it was destined to?

IM: No, we couldn't. Frankly, the hype we had during the third, fourth and fifth editions is not the same as now. As I said, we had a gap in the middle and non-payment issues have surely tarnished its image. But I think we can eventually get there if we develop infrastructure and go for a long-term agreement with franchisees once we get a proper timeslot. This is only the BCB's part, the franchisees should also prepare long-term plans.