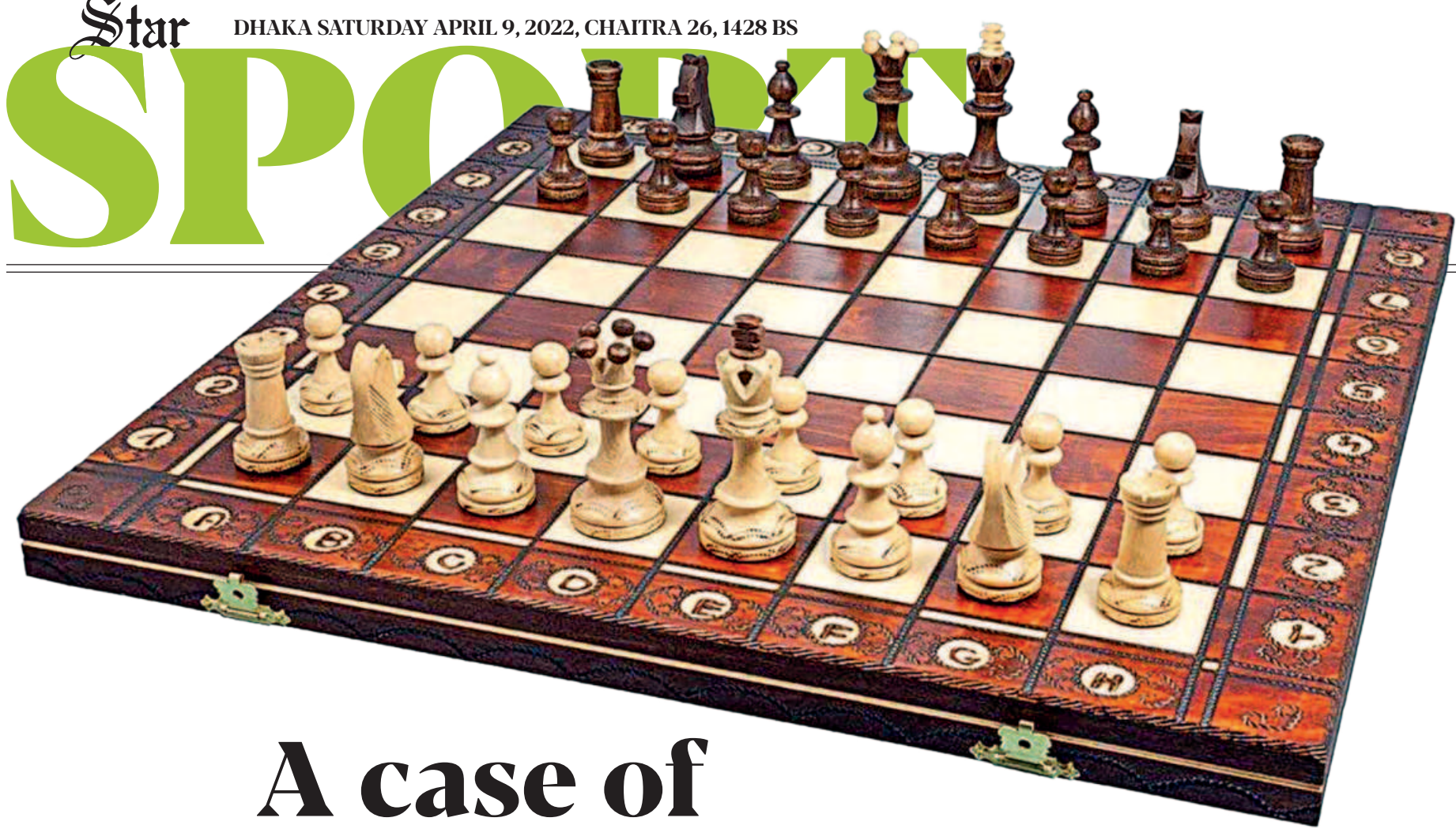




I don't look at computers as opponents. For me, it is much more interesting to beat humans. I spend hours playing chess because I find it so much fun. The day it stops being fun is the day I give up.

Norwegian World No 1
Magnus Carlsen.



A case of faulty pawn structure

A game that originated in northern India around 1500 years back and later had spread to the Arab world

KHALID HOSSAIN

Bangladesh, a country which produced the first grandmaster in the subcontinent through Niaz Murshed back in 1987, quite arguably, has miserably failed to live up to its expectation in the game of chess whereas neighbouring India, who had their first GM in Vishwanathan Anand in 1988, progressed in leaps in bounds over the years to become a global powerhouse at present.

A game that originated in northern India around 1500 years back and later had spread to the Arab world, established itself

as a popular medium of mental exercise for many, irrespective of age, sex and race, playing among and between themselves, with the eight by eight board becoming a household item.

However, on the professional circuit, chess demands a uniquely superior level of intelligence and dedication from the players to flourish, compared to other sports, and its growth in a particular country requires meticulous planning and the consequent execution, dedication aside, from the relevant authorities.

As Bangladesh still waits for their next

grandmaster to surface against the odds since 2008, India has produced around 50 GMs during this period and is basking on their 16-year-old grandmaster Rameshbabu Praggnanandhaa's triumph over world champion Magnus Carlsen of Norway earlier this year during a rapid online tournament.

Bangladesh could possibly be progressing somewhat with promising players popping up, coupled with the initiatives taken by its chess federation, of late. But if viewed from the frame of reference of India, for instance, it perhaps appears, as if, we are only moving backwards.

TOTAL MALE PLAYERS: 1586

Grandmasters: 5
International Masters: 4
FIDE Masters: 15

TOTAL FEMALE PLAYERS: 147

Woman International Masters: 3
Woman FIDE Masters: 6

HIGHEST RATED PLAYERS:

Men: Ziaur Rahman (2420), Niaz Murshed (2418), Enamul Hossain Rajib (2410), Abdullah Al-Rakib (2415), Reefat Bin-Sattar (2371)
Women: FIDE Master Noshin Anjum (2103), WIM Sharmin Sultana Shirin (1998)

PROMISING MALE PLAYERS:

Tahsin Tajwar Zia, Mannon Reza Neer, Subrata Biswas, Nayeem Haque, Ananta, Saqlaine, Sadnan Hossain.

PROMISING FEMALE PLAYERS:

Anjum Noshin, Jannatul Ferdous, Walijah Ahmed, Tasnim Jarin, Wadifa Ahmed, Israt Jahan Diba, and Tahsin Tasfia Prima.



More excuses than moves made as clock keeps ticking

Once a vibrant sport in the country, chess had apparently lost its charm since 2010 due to a dearth of organisers. It, however, returned to the fore in the last few years even though the country's wait for its sixth grandmaster seems to be never-ending. To know about the latest initiatives to be taken by the Bangladesh Chess Federation (BCF), their limitations and the latent life of chess in the country, The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman spoke with BCF general secretary Syed Shahab Uddin. The excerpts of the interview are as follows:

The Daily Star (DS): What changes have you made since becoming general secretary in 2016?
Syed Shahab Uddin (SSU): First of all, the federation hosted three big tournaments in 2019 for the first time. I also started working with all age-group teams and have sent them to play international tournaments, something which has not happened in the past. We are now regularly getting the opportunity to play the World Cup after producing good results in zonal meets.

DS: Would you mention the goals of the Bangladesh Chess Federation?
SSU: Our goal is simple. It is to make chess popular among the people by spreading the game across the country.

DS: The school chess tournament has not taken place for over a decade. Any plan to revive it?



SSU: The school chess tournament was, perhaps, last held in 2012. We could not arrange it due to financial constraints with no sponsors showing interest. We expect to resume the school tournament from the start of the next Bengali New Year.

DS: Since the last United Insurance and Leasing GM tournament in 2009, the federation took 12 years to organise another GM tournament. What were the obstacles?
SSU: Despite our interest, we could not organise the grandmaster tournaments due to financial constraints. However, we have organised a few big tournaments like Asian Zonal Chess Championships (Open and Women) and the 1st SAARC Chess Championships (Open & Women) in recent years.

DS: Bangladesh could not produce any grandmasters in the last 14 years whereas India produces GMs regularly. What's your take on that?
SSU: During our tenure, Fahad Rahman and Shirin Sultana became IM [International Master] and WIM [Woman International Master] which, I think, is an achievement. But they could not participate in any tournament in person due to the coronavirus pandemic. We have also not held any international tournaments or sent them aboard, so it was not possible for them to achieve GM or IM titles from the online chess tournaments.

'I see myself as Bangladesh's future Grandmaster'

Noshin Anjum, an 18-year-old chess player who dared to defy the odds by competing against 80 boys and two girls, finished second in the 2022 National Junior Chess Championship despite not losing to eventual winner Subrata Biswas, a fellow FIDE Master, in the final. With the support of her family and friends, the youngster aims to represent her country at higher levels. Anjum shared her goals and backstory with The Daily Star's Ashfaq Ul Mushfiq in an interview, the excerpts of which are below:

The Daily Star (DS): Tell us about your journey into chess.
Noshin Anjum (NA): The entire credit goes to my mother. Although my father had taught me how to play chess, it was my mother who pushed me to start playing properly ever since we moved to Dhaka. She always wanted me to do something alongside my studies and has been guiding me all along.

DS: It must have been some experience as you broke barriers while playing alongside boys in junior level chess, having finished second amongst 82 other participants.
NA: I got to play in the open division in the National Junior Chess and I felt really good. I always wanted to compete with boys and also, through this tournament, my rating went past 2100. So overall, it was a great experience.

DS: How did your family and friends react to your success? And did you receive any form of support from your school?
NA: My mother is very happy and my friends are very proud and supportive of me and they often come forward to help me with my studies when I have to miss classes due to tournaments.



Currently, I'm a higher secondary student at Viqarunnisa Noon College, where the academic session was yet to begin when I participated in the National Junior Chess. Back in school days, I was granted leave when engaged in international tournaments. This one time, I was even

sponsored by my school during an India tour.

DS: Any notable facility you are getting from the federation right now? And what are the challenges you face?
NA: The federation has organised a group training for us under the supervision of Grandmaster Ziaur Rahman. Also, before the pandemic, I was a student at the Elegant International Chess Academy. In future, I may partake in some international tours, which I see as my next challenge.

DS: What sort of assistance do you think you need in order to keep improving at the sport?
NA: I think, if I get the chance to privately train under a coach and get sponsors to play more overseas tournaments, I think the journey towards my goal will reap rewards.

DS: Speaking of personal goals and ambition, where do you see yourself as a chess player in the long run?
NA: My future goal is to become a good quality chess player and I want to see myself as Bangladesh's future Grandmaster.

'We are nowhere on chess' world map now'

Almost a decade-and-a-half flew by since Enamul Hossain Rajib became the last Bangladeshi to achieve the elusive chess grandmaster status. The current national champion reflects on the sorry state of the sport in the country, and the probable remedies in store, during an exclusive interview with The Daily Star's Sabbir Hossain, the excerpts of which are as follows:

The Daily Star (DS): You bagged the grandmaster appellation back in 2008. Tell us about that achievement.
Enamul Hossain Rajib (EHR): For a chess player, nothing is more longed than achieving the grandmaster title. I had two accomplishments a few months apart: I qualified for the Chess World Cup in 2007 and progressed to the second round [the only Bangladeshi to do so]. The following year, I became the fifth grandmaster from Bangladesh after getting the required rating points.

DS: Since then, no one has been able to emulate that feat. Isn't it frustrating?
EHR: Starting from Zia Bhui [Ziaur Rahman], Bangladesh got four grandmasters, including me, in six years. Bangladesh Chess Federation [BCF] provided us with the necessary support, but mostly it was about our



hard work, effort, and determination. I also can't say that the BCF had a systematic plan through which the grandmasters were produced. In the last ten years, only a few have become IM [International Master]. So, it is

hard to expect a new grandmaster in the country. I think the number hasn't grown because we lack participation in the international tournaments to fulfil the norms and acquire the rating points in the first

place. Plus the scarcity of sponsors is still a thing of worry.

DS: What is your take on the role the BCF is playing?
EHR: I feel the BCF has to lay out a systematic plan so that players can go to overseas tournaments while ensuring that local competitions are held regularly. And we can't ignore the necessity of training programs. We have to provide the players with the best resources possible and then see if positive results come out. Honestly speaking, we are nowhere on chess' world map now. We are neither participating in tournaments nor gaining anything. The present committee of BCF has inherited a lot of problems from the previous one, and they need a lot of time and effort to turn things around. But the young generation of talented and dedicated players, particularly girls, give me

hope.

DS: Any other measures that could be taken?
EHR: We need to take distinct steps to spread chess all over the country. I have been voicing, for the last five years, that the BCF should dedicate a specific fund to increase its popularity.

DS: You emerged champion in the National Chess Championship for the fifth time in January. How was the feeling?
EHR: The thrill of winning the National Championship is incomparable. I came out victorious in 2016 and 2017 but didn't participate in the 2018 edition. So, it felt fantastic to become an unbeaten champion again as all of the five grandmasters participated this time.