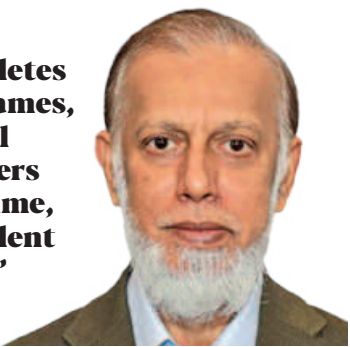


“The inaugural edition of the Youth Games produced a lot of talented athletes who later shone in the Bangladesh Games, thus making their way to the national squad. We have also provided 36 players with further training at BKSP. This time, we are determined to continue the talent hunt and provide advanced training.”

BOA vice-president
BASHIR AHMED



Little more than an empty gesture

“Although the federations have financial limitations, I think they should come forward and take the responsibility of grooming players and bringing talented players into training. We will definitely help them continue training.”

ANISUR RAHMAN

Despite the introduction of the Bangladesh Youth Games, the nation is still apparently dwelling in the “something is better than nothing” era when it comes to forging a proper pipeline for athletes.

While neighbouring India has been staging the ‘Khelo India Youth Games’ every year at the cost of hundreds of crores since 2018, Bangladesh, which staged its first Youth Games in the same year, remains light years behind.

On the surface, the two crore taka that has been allocated to the Bangladesh Olympic Association (BOA) for the ongoing 2nd Bangladesh Youth Games – against an estimated budget of 40 crore, later revised to 22.25 crore – simply pales in comparison to the 1,045 crore rupees allotted for the sixth edition of the Khelo India Youth Games 2023.

But whereas the BOA has to be satisfied by providing a one-off long-term training programme to the best players from each discipline, India has been providing the top two players from each discipline in the Khelo India Youth Games with an eight-year scholarship amounting to Rs 5 lakh annually.

Through such incentives, India has been encouraging world-class athletes and winning medals from the biggest multi-sports extravaganza such as the Olympics, Asian Games and Commonwealth Games. Bangladesh,



the federations have financial limitations, I think they should come forward and take the responsibility of grooming players and bringing talented players into training. We will definitely help them continue training.”

He added: “We also need infrastructure to facilitate training and build up coaches who can train the athletes at a higher level. We will try to bring high-performance coaches from abroad to train athletes or send athletes with the potential to China, Thailand, South Korea, Malaysia or India for training ahead of big international competitions.”

But it remains questionable whether the Youth Games has been serving its purpose.

The BOA introduced the Youth Games in 2018, five years after bringing back the Bangladesh Games which had been on hiatus for 12 years, in an attempt to increase the youth’s interest towards sports and provide a rare platform for young athletes since most national federations do not have age-group level competitions.

Although the move was hailed, the first edition drew plenty of criticism from the sports fraternity due to messy arrangements, especially at the district level, where oddities included athletes running barefoot with jerseys draped over their day-to-day outfits.

“Last time we did not know how to start and how to finish because there was no example to follow. So, there were many problems during the first edition. But this time around we took those aspects into consideration and rectified the mistakes before holding the 2nd edition of the Games,” Reza said.

Reza also pointed out some positives, such

as the increasing number of participants. The first edition featured over 27,000 athletes and officials, which has grown to 60,000 for the second edition.

“Representatives from districts, divisions and federations were very cordial this time. Besides, we also disbursed money before the start of the Games at the district level,” Reza said. “I don’t want to claim that everything is going perfectly, but I want to say that this time it is being held in a much more organised way compared to the first edition.”

Reza also claimed that the event was creating organisers, not just athletes.

“An organiser is recognised when he produces a good player and brings good results. This time there was a competition among organisers, which was absent in the previous edition, because organisers were very keen to deliver results from their own districts.”

Reza also opined that holding the Bangladesh Games and Youth Games simultaneously every two years would have a more significant impact in grooming players.

Yet, with 4,000 athletes coming into Dhaka for the final phase to contest 195 events across 24 disciplines, things have been no smoother. Federation officials remain unhappy after being asked to complete their respective events in Dhaka inside three days as they felt it compromised standards.

The BOA, however, maintained that constraints in the budget left no other option, leaving many to wonder how long the BOA can hope to take things forward in lieu of significant financial involvement from the government in sports development.

Urmi’s trajectory verifies Youth Games’ importance

After grabbing the spotlight in the 2018 Youth Games, shuttler Urmi Akter went on to become the country’s number one-ranked female badminton star. In an exclusive interview with Sabbir Hossain of The Daily Star, Urmi addressed the impact the Youth Games competition had to set her professional career in motion. She also revisited her successful journey so far, including the obstacles faced along the way and more. The excerpts are as follows:

The Daily Star (DS): Could you recall your feelings after bagging two gold medals in the inaugural Youth games in 2018?

Urmi Akter (UA): Participating in the very prestigious Youth Games alone was a big breakthrough for me, and earning two golds made it more pleasant as many of the participants didn’t quite achieve desired results. I expected a good result there but what I accomplished was beyond my expectation. Back then, I was happy to describe my feelings in words. But looking back now, when reminded of that event, it feels like a dream.

DS: What was the after-effect of that success?

UA: Having passed through the age-level badminton competitions successfully, I became a senior national player before the 2018 Youth Games, where the badminton competition was a U-17 one. There I told my coach that I wanted to achieve further glory at senior level, and afterwards I began playing with the determination to become a professional player while putting extra effort during practice.

DS: Tell us about your achievements at senior level.

UA: I won gold three times in a row in women’s singles and doubles categories in the Ranking Championship, and in the mixed doubles category of the tournament, I was champion once and runners-up twice. I was also crowned champion of the women’s singles badminton event in the [Bangabandhu 9th] Bangladesh Games in 2021. Before that, I secured bronze in the mixed doubles category in the 2019 South Asian Games.

DS: Did you face obstacles in your early days?

UA: For every successful sportsperson in Bangladesh, I think the backstory of struggle is quite mandatory. And if the player is a girl, it becomes even tougher. To reach a certain level, she must overcome a lot of obstacles. When I started playing alongside the boys, people used to say negative things, like calling me “shameless”, but the support of my parents was always there. However, my district association in Khulna did not provide much for me. So, I moved to Pabna in 2017 to get better facilities. I’m currently an employee of the Bangladesh Army.

DS: What is your future goal?

UA: I want to step up and win gold in the 2024 South Asian Games as I couldn’t do so in its previous editions. I hope the Bangladesh Badminton Federation will arrange more camps, provide us with more facilities and the necessary financial support, to raise our performance level.



Youth Games: Poor input leads to ‘almost zero output’

MOSTAFA SHABUJ from Bogura

The final round of the Sheikh Kamal 2nd Bangladesh Youth Games was inaugurated on 26th February by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, but those engaged with the event expressed concern about being able to unearth true talents from the grassroots level due to indiscipline and the poor quality of provided facilities.

In Bogura, the Youth Games featured a total of 600 participants from 12 upazila participating across six events, including football, kabaddi, swimming, wushu, taekwondo and athletics. Of those 600, 14 made it to the final stage in Dhaka on behalf of Rajshahi division, according to data provided by Bogura District Sports Association (DSA).

When asked about the selection of participants, a member of the Bogura DSA, wishing to remain anonymous, said: “There was pressure to organise the event. The participants were selected from different schools and colleges randomly, without being given minimum training or knowledge about national-level sports competitions. So, the positive output is almost zero per cent at the national level.”

Expanding on what he meant, he added: “Some participants who came to play football had never played 90-minute games before. Others, who came for swimming, athletics, ushu and taekwondo meets, did not know the rules of the games. A few of them were even selected for the final phase but they cannot compete with players from



urban institutions or institutions like BKSP. The youth games is an eyewash for the grassroots level games,” he lamented.

“Aside from that, there has been no follow-up for the kids who participated in the Youth Games. There are no facilities nor equipment, training or trainers for participants,” he added.

When asked about the selection process, Md. Masud Rana, district sports officer of Bogura, said: “We asked the UNO (Upazila Nirbahi Officer) and upazila sports associations to find participants. They selected participants from different educational institutions. Those institutions should also have provided training because they take a yearly charge for equipment. They have teacher too.”

When asked the budgetary

constraints at the district level, Masud Rana added that simply relying on the government to provide all the funds would be remiss, so they managed some local sponsors.

He added that he believed there should be residential accommodations and training during the events in order to get better results. When asked about the lack of facilities, Rana said: “If we want better outcomes, the allocation should be increased. School-college level sports should be monitored properly. We need to provide equipment at the grassroots level and arrange regular competitions or events at the upazila and district levels.”

If these areas are improved, then the aim of the Youth Games will be fulfilled, he opined.