



# 2023 SAFF CHAMPIONSHIP

## Unmatched thrill awaits

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**ATIQUE ANAM**

The passion and excitement that the South Asian Football Championship and its precursor, the South Asian Games football event, used to evoke has somewhat faded over the last two decades.

While the rising popularity of cricket in South Asian countries has played its part in the receding appeal of football's biggest event, the dominance of India has turned the outcome into somewhat of a foregone conclusion.

India, the biggest country of the region in terms of both area and population, has dominated the event so much over the course of time that it has, at times, had the luxury to field a youth team and still managed to win the trophy. India cannot be blamed if it did take the competition a bit lightly at times, given that it had not much to gain from here, while its ambition lay in being competitive against the top teams of the continent.

The men in blue have won the regional event eight out of 13 times, with Maldives the only other team to have won it multiple times. Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, the latter no longer part of the regional football bloc, have won it once while three of the permanent members of the South Asian Football Federation (SAFF) -- Pakistan, Nepal and Bhutan -- are still searching for that elusive silverware.

Afghanistan's inclusion in the federation in 2003 added some lustre to the event as the central Asian nation went on to become powerhouse, but their switch to the Central Asian Football Federation after 2015 robbed the championship, once again, of the much-needed competition. Afghanistan's departure also posed a serious challenge to the organisers, who had to draw two groups of unequal number of members, in case all seven members decided to participate, for the apex biennial football competition of the region.

And if any of those seven members decided



to opt out or were barred due to a FIFA suspension, for instance Pakistan's absence from 2014 to 2021 and Sri Lanka's in 2023, the organisers had to make do with two groups of three teams each. Needless to say, six teams in two groups made for a poorer competition from both sponsors and spectators' points of view, which is what prompted the sponsors to look for two outsiders this time around.

Inviting teams from outside regional blocs is nothing new in the footballing world. CONMEBOL, being the forerunner in this case, had set the trend of inviting two teams from other confederations since 1993. SAFF, or more precisely the sponsors Sports Partners International, just took a leaf out of CONMEBOL's book and opened its borders by inviting teams from behind the region, with Lebanon and Kuwait -- two members from

the West Asian Football Federation -- happily accepting the proposal.

India, the host nation of the upcoming edition and biggest draw for the sponsors, played the facilitator's role in this expansionary policy, something which the SAFF and its sponsors hope to continue with and profit from in future as well.

With Lebanon the top-ranked team (99) ahead of India (101) and Kuwait in third (143), the 14th edition of the SAFF Championship promises to be the most competitive and entertaining one in the history of the competition. And as each of the South Asian teams get at least three games in the group stage with one against a presumably superior team from West Asia, this should be a great learning experience for all six of them regardless of the results.

# ‘Challenging but semi berth would be fantastic’

**Rajani Kanta Barman is a bright star in the country's footballing sky, having captained Bangladesh in their maiden SAFF Championship title in 2003 -- the only one till date. Rajani was also part of the Bangladesh team that bagged gold in 1999 South Asian Games. The ever-reliable defender called time as a professional footballer in 2016 and was involved in a brief coaching stint afterwards. In an exclusive interview with Sabbir Hossain of The Daily Star, Rajani looked back on the successful 2003 campaign, gave his views on the current state of the national team, and what the upcoming SAFF Championship might have in store for Bangladesh. The excerpts are as follows:**

**The Daily Star (DS):** Looking back now, how do you recall the memory of the 2003 SAFF triumph?

**Rajani Kanta Barman (RKB):** Memories of 2003, I believe, float in the eyes of every Bangladeshi -- not just me. The football enthusiasts who had travelled to the stadium to witness that final were thrilled by the result.

**DS:** Being the hosts, were Bangladesh the favourites in that event?

**RKB:** Not favourites, we began the tournament as underdogs but we were under immense pressure as we were the hosts. However, as our team had all senior players at the time, we could withstand the pressure and our performance corresponded to the number of spectators. The fans, who were also seen to gather in tens of thousands outside the stadium, played an important role.

**DS:** How pivotal was coach George Kottan's impact at the time?

**RKB:** A coach is a team's guardian and we used to think of him as one. He used to look after us like how parents look after their children, and we thoroughly followed his instructions. In our group, he allowed a loving bond to flourish.



**DS:** What distinguished that winning squad from others?

**RKB:** Coach Kottan made entertainment arrangements for us to prevent pressure from rising. We had this routine where we would visit Ramna Park early on matchdays. In addition, we were closely bonded, there was mutual respect and admiration between players, and all that reflected onto the field. Everyone was mentally prepared to step up and act when required. You don't become champions

merely by training.

**DS:** Since 2003, eight more SAFF editions were held but we could not taste ultimate glory. How do you view the fact that we have failed to go past the group stage in last five outings?

**RKB:** There was a time when we didn't even consider Bhutan, whereas we were only thinking about how many goals we were going to score against them. But we now lose to Bhutan as well -- what could be more heartbreaking than this?

In India, there are high-quality football leagues. So, I will not discuss them. The unfortunate reality is that all countries

are progressing. However, we are moving backwards. There is no point in blaming the players now.

Those in positions of authority, however ... you (media) are watching everything and these are being written about, anyway.

**DS:** Why are we repeatedly failing? Do we lack quality?

**RKB:** We don't lack anything. We possess the skills and qualities but the players need to be properly nurtured. In our era, there was no regular league. The league from one year was carried over to the next. However, we players made the most of it. Now since leagues are held annually, our football players also receive large sums of money. However, where other countries are systematically advancing, we are lagging behind.

**DS:** From June 21, another SAFF Championship will take place. What chance do you think Bangladesh have in the competition?

**RKB:** Bhutan, Lebanon, and Maldives are part of Bangladesh's group. We have a 50-50 chance of beating Bhutan since they are a fighting team now. Lebanon is well ahead, so discussing them is pointless. Maldives have also made great strides. So, it would be a fantastic result for us if we could reach the semifinals, but it will be really challenging. Having said that, my heart wants Bangladesh to compete in the final.

FIXTURES		
<div><div><div>Group: A</div><div>India, Kuwait, Nepal, Pakistan</div></div><div><div>Group: B</div><div>Lebanon, Maldives, Bhutan, Bangladesh</div></div></div>		
DATE	MATCH	TIME (BST)
21 June	Kuwait vs Nepal	4:00 pm
	India vs Pakistan	8:00 pm
22 June	Lebanon vs Bangladesh	4:00 pm
	Maldives vs Bhutan	8:00 pm
24 June	Pakistan vs Kuwait	4:00 pm
	Nepal vs India	8:00 pm
25 June	Bangladesh vs Maldives	4:00 pm
	Bhutan vs Lebanon	8:00 pm
27 June	Nepal vs Pakistan	4:00 pm
	India vs Kuwait	8:00 pm
28 June	Lebanon vs Maldives	4:00 pm
	Bangladesh vs Bhutan	8:00 pm
1 June	Semifinal-1	4:00 pm
	Semifinal-2	8:00 pm
4 June	Final	8:00 pm

ROLL OF HONOUR		
YEAR	CHAMPIONS	RUNNERS-UP
1993	India	Sri Lanka
1995	Sri Lanka	India
1997	India	Maldives
1999	India	Bangladesh
2003	Bangladesh	Maldives
2005	India	Bangladesh
2008	Maldives	India
2009	India	Maldives
2011	India	Afghanistan
2013	Afghanistan	India
2015	India	Afghanistan
2018	Maldives	India
2021	India	Nepal
2023	?	?

OVERALL TOP SCORERS		
NAME	COUNTRY	GOALS
Sunil Chhetri	India	18
Ali Ashfaq	Maldives	13
Bhaichung Bhutia	India	12
Ibrahim Fazeel	Maldives	10
Ahmed Thariq	Maldives	10

BANGLADESH'S TOP SCORERS IN SAFF CHAMPIONSHIPS		
PLAYER	GOALS	
Rokonuzzaman Kanchan	5	
Zahid Hasan Emily	5	
Ariful Kabir Farhad	4	
Enamul Haque	4	
Tapu Barman	4	
Alfaz Ahmed	3	

EDITION-WISE BANGLADESH'S STANDINGS		
YEAR	POSITION	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
1993	Did not play	4
1995	3rd	5
1997	5th	6
1999	2nd	6
2003	1st	8
2005	2nd	8
2008	6th	8
2009	3rd	8
2011	7th	8
2013	7th	8
2015	5th	7
2018	5th	7
2021	4th	5