

For the next three to four months, I want absolute determination from you. Your football career is small, so you have to be absolutely disciplined; no late night, no alcohol, and training is a must.

Bangladesh Football Federation president KAZI SALAHUDDIN



The inclusion of Lebanon and Kuwait had undoubtedly added a significant competitive edge to the recently concluded SAFF Championship in Bengaluru. And yet, India managed to continue their regional supremacy by lifting yet another trophy by edging past Kuwait in tiebreakers at the finale.

Can others dare play CATCH-UP WITH INDIA?

ANISUR RAHMAN

India re-evaluated themselves against skilled Asian teams, having repelled Lebanon in similar fashion in the semi-finals, but what will the rest of the South Asian participating nations take away from the tournament? From here on, how do they gauge their standards relative to India's ever-accelerating progress?

During the tournament, India captain Sunil Chhetri tried to paint an optimistic prospect for the likes of Bangladesh, Maldives and the rest.

"If we [India] improve, everyone will improve because we are the flag bearers of the tournament. Not all teams stay on top always.

"We played a lot of matches against Nepal, Bangladesh and Maldives in the last 10 years and I felt, wow! I am pretty sure they will do well," said the star striker.

Nevertheless, if the current state and prevalent reality of the South Asian teams are compared, it could be inferred that chasing India will be a daunting task for the rest.

With India's strong domestic, youth development set-up and an overall model in place, that seems to be fine-tuned to their evolving ambition, their neighbours have no choice but to buckle up for the long run.

INDIA

Two successive Asian Cup qualifications and a FIFA ranking under 100, from being 166th in 2015, show the magnitude of India's growth as a flourishing footballing entity – coupled with the fact that India only suffered as few as two defeats against their sub-continent rivals in the past decade.

India's influence to invite two nations beyond the region for the SAFF Championship was arguably clear evidence that the Blue Tigers fancied having added



incentives to perform at full potential on a level playing field. Eventually, a record-extending ninth SAFF Championship title proved a successful mission in front of a rapturous home crowd.

A stable domestic structure, with Indian Super League, and their 'Vision 2047' indicate India means business in accomplishing their ambitious mission of being one of top four teams in Asia.

They have already stepped into the cluster of top 20 Asian teams, as per latest FIFA ranking – leaving behind Maldives, India's nearest South Asian rivals, by 54 spots.

MALDIVES

Maldives have once been a force to be reckoned with, especially following the emergence of a golden generation - led by

the likes of SAFF Championship joint top-scorer Ali Ashfaq who had retired. The vacuum left by those brilliant bunch left a gaping hole and as Maldives find themselves in tatters at international level. Adding to misery, a weakened league structure has made their road to recovery tougher than ever.

A Maldivian Journalist named Mohamad Shamom, who covered the latest SAFF Championship, expressed his disappointment over the current state of Maldives football and predicted "Maldives will struggle for the next five to six years at international level".

He informed a top footballer in Maldives gets a maximum USD 50,000 per season and most footballers there, except the ones from Maziya SRC, are hardly paid by their respective clubs.

Shamom asked this reporter, "Did you know that the same eleven that had played for Maziya SRC in the domestic league - also played against Bangladesh [in 2023 SAFF Championship]?"

NEPAL

In Nepal's case, it reeks of gloom as talent drain undergoes in the Himalayan nation.

"There is hardly any competition and money, most of the players are leaving the country for Australia and other countries for a better future," said Nepalese journalist Himesh, adding that a top Nepalese footballer gets 2 lakh Nepalese rupee per month.

Another Nepalese journalist, Bikram Thapa, informed, "So far in the last two years, 50 footballers have already left the country for Australia, UK, Japan, UAE and Croatia to secure their future abroad."

Thapa believes a poor league structure with three-month duration of top-flight league, alongside poor payment scheme and poor governance have halted the progress of Nepal football.

BHUTAN

Bhutan, however, does not share the problems of Maldives and Nepal.

Following a 3-1 defeat to Bangladesh in Bengaluru, Bhutan coach Pema Dorji said, "Of course, Bhutan have been far better compared to previous editions. But there is a long way to go as the boys in this group are between 24 to 30 [years]."

Despite being on the receiving end of defeats in all three fixtures against Maldives, Kuwait, and Bangladesh, they showed commendable signs of improvement.

"After going back home, the players will be busy with their clubs and our league will also start soon," said a visibly content Bhutan coach.

BANGLADESH

Meanwhile, Bangladesh had a campaign to remember this time, following an underwhelming period of 13 years despite having had a professional set-up in place.

The emergence of some young players who operated in tandem with the experienced campaigners managed to turn the tide somewhat.

The bold show of the men in red and green in all four matches in Bengaluru has renewed hopes of reviving the long-lost spark that existed in the country's football circuit.

Chhetri categorised Bangladesh as an example of progress during the tournament, and now it remains to be seen whether the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) can cash in on the momentum and sensibly walk the arduous distance.

SRI LANKA AND PAKISTAN

Among the South Asian teams, Sri Lanka have the biggest gap with India in rankings: a 107-place gap. And like Pakistan, the two countries have a myriad of problems to solve if they wish to escape the tag of bottom dwellers in the region.

In conclusion, India's mission has long ventured beyond asserting SAFF supremacy and the possibility of more than two opponents outside the sub-continent featuring in the forthcoming SAFF Championship editions cannot be discarded. Thus, Bangladesh and the rest of the hopeful bunch are apparently in a race against time to speed up development and become worthy challengers before another SAFF Championship rolls out.

Whatever model has, more or less, worked until now may not work in time. It appears, the only way to catch up with India is to aim for the moon – that is, to aspire to fight neck and neck with elite Asian teams in the foreseeable future.

LEBANON, KUWAIT SHOW MAKES Jamal hopeful for future

Jamal Bhuiyan has been a part of the Bangladesh national team since 2012 and he has already participated in five editions of the SAFF Championship. The 33-year-old captain, who has worked under different foreign and local coaches and seen the ups and downs of the team, spoke elaborately regarding the difference from the previous campaigns to the recent one and what he feels should be the ideology for the team going forward. Excerpts of the interview, taken by The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman, are as follows.

The Daily Star (DS): It was the fifth SAFF Championship campaign for you and the team got out of the group stages to reach the semifinals for the first time in 14 years. How do assess the current squad as the team's captain?

Jamal Bhuiyan (JB): I think the squad was different from before and the preparation for the SAFF Championship this time was also good. We played two practice matches in Cambodia before starting our main campaign. Considering everything, it was a good team effort with players having a lot of meetings among themselves, which did not happen in other SAFF Championships where we hardly talked to each other. The most important thing in this campaign was the bonding among the players.

DS: Bangladesh were also close to qualifying from the group stage in the last two SAFF Championships, but eventually could not do that. That must be a great boost of confidence for the team.

JB: Lebanon and Kuwait were very strong teams compared to the nations of South Asia. If we keep this squad and tempo of the performance,

then I think we can go up in ranking.

DS: Bangladesh have played in different styles under different coaches. What should you think be Bangladesh's playing style?

JB: The formation changed this time around. We used to play with two wingers and a number nine, but this time we played with four midfielders in a diamond shape midfield. We played 4-1-2-1-2, which was effective for the team performance and we scored six goals in two matches which I can't recall the last time we did. I think the coach will stick to this formation and playing style because this is the best strength of our team because we don't have box-to-box players and genuine number nines.

DS: Do you feel there is a lack of quality players in the reserve bench compared to the starting eleven?

JB: Many people raised the same question to me that the players at the bench have are not as strong as the ones in starting eleven. However, those who are coming as substitutes are trying their level best.

DS: How much contribution do you think the



Bangladesh Premier League makes to advance the country's football at international level?

JB: Of course, it does. The clubs who are taking part in BPL also have responsibility. For the last 13 years, BPL has been going on well but of course we can do better. We can look at India, where they took their league to another level and we can do the same.

DS: Is it possible to carry the performance to the next assignment in coming days?

JB: We have to do the same that we did for the SAFF Championship. We have to take good preparation and training and ensure facilities like good ground and others.

DS: You have played under different coaches at national team. What do you think sets Javier Cabrera apart?

JB: Cabrera has been a bit different and his preparation is much different from others. The others had their own styles and Cabrera has his own style, but he is well prepared for every match. Three to four days before the matches, Cabrera talks about the team, talks about how they (opponents) will play; how we should play, how should we attack the

opponents and that is completely different from others. Cabrera is also keen to listen to the players. He calls me his right hand.

DS: After the SAFF Championship, another big task awaits Bangladesh in the World Cup Qualifiers. Can Bangladesh overcome the probable hurdles that may come in the form of Indonesia, Chinese Taipei, Singapore or any other big team?

JB: Of course we can but it's going to be difficult. I think we have a good chance, to be honest. If we can perform the way we did against strong teams like Lebanon and Kuwait, who are much higher than the teams we are supposed to face in the first round of qualifiers, I think we can do well.

DS: You are now 33. How long do you think you can serve Bangladesh team?

JB: I can play a lot more years. If you look at India, they have Sunil (Chhetri). If you look at Bangladesh, they have Jamal (Bhuiyan). So, yes, I can play for a lot of years.

DS: Where do you see Bangladesh in future?

JB: I just want Bangladesh to succeeded, nothing else.