



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

‘Time to bring the trophy’

Nigar Sultana Joty, the Bangladesh women's ODI and T20I skipper, was part of the pack when the Tigresses won a momentous Asia Cup, beating India in the final in 2018. Here, she talks about Bangladesh men's team's possibilities in the upcoming Asia Cup, her favourite players, her assessment of the recently-appointed skipper Shakib Al Hasan and much more during an interview with The Daily Star's Abdullah Al Mehdi.

The Daily Star (DS): You have won the Asia Cup. How did it feel?

Nigar Sultana Joty (NSJ): Since it's the biggest achievement in Bangladesh's women's cricket, that was the most special moment for us. I would say that that tournament changed the whole image of women's cricket in Bangladesh.

DS: India would be a big opponent for the men's team. The women's team defeated India in that final. What was the intensity like in that game?

NSJ: When we played the Asia Cup final, it did not evoke a different kind of feeling regarding playing India. It didn't come to our minds that they are a very good team and that they are the defending champions.

Our main focus was to play good cricket. As we already had made the final, for us, there was nothing to lose. But we thought if we won, we would have much to gain. Our captain Salma [Khatun] apu told us one thing before we took the field which I still remember vividly. She said, "We don't have anything to lose but a lot to achieve."

DS: How do you evaluate the men's team not winning a tournament of this stature yet?

NSJ: First, of course, it hurts. The guys and girls all play for Bangladesh. And not only as players but as fans, we expect a lot from the men's team. That's why we want them to win. When both men's and women's teams progress similarly step by step, then we can say our cricket is developing. We have a lot of potential and I won't want to linger on the past. In this format, we have been playing really good cricket recently. The team is in a good flow, so, obviously, Bangladesh will have a lot of chances to do well.

DS: What do you think are the reasons for having a great chance?

NSJ: If you look at the players' recent form and the way the batters are doing at the moment, well-supported by the bowlers, there is a great chance. Previously, we were very much spin dependent.

You would see that the opposite is happening now and pacers are dominating a lot more in terms of performance. Both batting and bowling departments are balanced, and there is energy on the field. I would say things are looking really good.

DS: What would you say about the fielding department of the Tigers, an area where they were below par previously?

NSJ: I think there is a lot more energy now and everyone has improved immensely. Previously, there used to be some negativity but the percentage has decreased a lot. It's not like mistakes don't happen anymore, but far fewer now. My personal opinion is that when a team's fielding unit is very good, the potential for winning matches is high.

DS: How would you evaluate the new stars alongside the seniors in the squad, and who do you feel will shine?

NSJ: Everyone has potential. [Najmul Hossain] Shanto bhaiya has been there for a while and he's doing really well. Tawhid Hridoy is very consistent and the one thing I like the most about his batting is that it is eye-catching. Obviously, Shakib bhai is just Shakib bhai and he contributes a lot to the team. Mushfiqur [Rahim] bhai is Mr. Dependable and a lot of things will depend on him. If we get a strong start from Liton [Das] bhai, which I dearly want as I am a big fan of his batting, it will be great. Actually, I liked his playing style from a long time back. He plays flawlessly and can play all around and has all the shots. That's why his cricket feels really attractive.

If he plays well, then the ones coming after him like Hridoy, Shanto, or Shakib bhai and Mushfiqur bhaiya would make our batting lineup really strong. As finishers, Shamim Patwari has been doing immensely and Afif [Hossain] is also there. Our batting unit will have to play a big role. When you have to put on a big score or when you are chasing one, it will depend on them.

DS: Since we know now that you are a Liton fan, which of his shots are your favourite?

NSJ: It's the pull shot. I would say he also plays the square drive well but the pull shot is too good. When he pulled Jofra Archer in the England series, a bowler that is impressively fast and bowling at 145-146 km/h, how he was playing the pull flawlessly without effort was just incredible.

DS: You are a skipper yourself. How do you see Shakib as a captain?

NSJ: He's one of the best and that's how it always is. I think that he makes decisions about the team's requirements according to the scenario in a very short time. His captaincy is extraordinary. A naturally talented captain, he binds the team together which is the most important thing. He always focuses on the game and thinks hard about how the whole team can perform.

DS: How do you see the other sides in the Asia Cup?

NSJ: The Asia Cup did not appear to be as important to India four-five years ago as it seems right now. They used to send their second-tier teams. But now they are going full-strength. Sri

Lanka are in very good shape and as they are the defending champions, they would look to keep the title. Since the conditions [at the World Cup] would more or less be the same, every team would field their best eleven as it's a huge opportunity.

DS: How do you evaluate the India-Pakistan rivalry?

NSJ: It's a high-voltage fixture enjoyed by everyone. However, when I used to ask players about how the fixture felt in women's cricket, they would say that they didn't feel much but believed that people created the vibe to be entertained. From a different angle, though, when India-Pakistan men's game happens, the fans feel that rivalry and the quality the teams possess make for a really competitive fixture. It's quite enjoyable.

DS: Who would you be looking forward to in the Asia Cup apart from the Bangladesh players?

NSJ: I enjoy Babar Azam's batting and follow his matches. So I'll be watching what he does.

DS: How do you see the demands put on Bangladesh in terms of frequent travelling during the Asia Cup?

NSJ: Not everyone would face the same but as professional cricketers, you have to follow the tournament rules. So our players have to stay fit as it's our job.

DS: What would be the effect of not having a leg-spinner in the side?

NSJ: See, thinking about what's not there will only bring negativity. So it's better to think of what's there. Even without a wrist-spinner, our spin attack is not bad. Teams from other countries play leg-spin well too since they play leg-spinners as part of preparation. I don't know if it would affect the side. Our women's side have a lot of leg-spinners, which makes us feel lucky.

DS: What would be your message for the Bangladesh team in the Asia Cup?

Joty: It's time to bring the trophy. That's my message to them.



PLAYERS TO WATCH

Towhid Hridoy (Bangladesh)

While many have come with a lot of promise and yet withered away too quickly, Towhid Hridoy has already garnered praise from all and sundry, who believe that the 2020 U-19 World Cup-winning star is here to stay. Still, very early in his international career, the 22-year-old has forged the reputation of being a cool head with a fearless heart. Just when Bangladesh's vaunted middle-order was struggling for runs, Hridoy eased into the side and assuaged the team management's headache with his consistent performances at No. 5, scoring 338 runs in nine ODIs at a staggering average of 48.28 and a healthy strike rate of 97.68 – including a 92 on debut against Ireland in Sylhet. Hridoy's reputation only increased when he played a starring role in Jaffna Kings' Lanka Premier League campaign in the T20 format, earning plaudits from the franchise owners as well as fans – something rare for a young Bangladeshi cricketer. The Bangladesh team management will be banking on Hridoy to continue to lend solidity to the middle order in the Asia Cup.



Rahmanullah Gurbaz (Afghanistan)

Afghanistan opener Rahmanullah Gurbaz has played so many franchise tournaments around the world and has become such a mainstay for his nation's batting that it is hard to believe the right-handed batter is only 21 years old. One of the few consistent performers in the Afghan batting line-up, Gurbaz lends an assurance to his team with his dominating batting display up front. Having scored 127 on his ODI debut against Ireland a little over two years ago, the attacking batter has already had five ODI centuries to his name, including 151 against Pakistan in the second match of their recent bilateral series in Sri Lanka. Boasting a high average of 41.43 and a healthy strike rate of 85.93, Gurbaz is the perfect foil for the likes of Ibrahim Zadram and Rahmat Shah, who like to start a little slow in an effort to anchor the innings. Gurbaz's familiarity with Sri Lankan and Pakistani conditions means he will hardly need time to acclimatise with the nature of the wickets.



Naseem Shah (Pakistan)

Often going under the radar because of the all-encompassing presence of Shaheen Shah Afridi, Naseem Shah has quietly carved out a reputation as Pakistan's gamechanger in his fledgling shorter format career. The 20-year-old mixes express pace with swing to cause havoc to opposition batters, his prowess in the 50-over game quite evident from his highly impressive statistics. In 10 matches so far, the pacer from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province has bagged 25 wickets, including two five-wicket hauls against the Netherlands and New Zealand. He is yet to go wicketless in his ODI career, boasting an astounding average of 16.12 and a meagre strike rate of 4.63. What makes Naseem a coach's dream, though, is his ability to handle pressure and contribute important runs with the bat at the death – his latest cameo against Afghanistan saw him hit Fazalhaq Farooqi for a boundary for the winning runs in the penultimate ball in Hambantota in the second ODI on Thursday, harkening back memories of his two sixes against the same bowler in an Asia Cup T20 fixture in Sharjah last year.



Shubman Gill (India)

After spending a couple of years trying to find his feet in international cricket, Shubman Gill finally emerged as India's latest all-format batter with his elegant and aggressive batting at the top of the order last year. The 23-year-old has been so prolific over the last 18 months that he has made the selectors' job easier by becoming one of the first players to be on the list of players whenever the squad is announced in any format. Elegant and technically sound, Gill can shift gears almost at will depending on the match situation. This calendar year, the Punjab-born batter has scored 750 runs in 12 innings, including two centuries and a double century. The youngster has an incredible ODI career average of 62.47 in 27 matches with a strike rate of 104.06, something which has helped India get a kickstart to their innings even as Rohit Sharma or KL Rahul continue to struggle for consistency. This will be the first major tournament for Gill and an ideal platform to prove his worth.



Maheesh Theekshana (Sri Lanka)

The latest in line of Sri Lanka's long list of mystery spinners, Maheesh Theekshana seems to have finally found his groove and is emerging from the shadows of his more illustrious spin partner, Wanindu Hasaranga. After having burst into the scene with a four-wicket haul on his debut against South Africa in 2021, Theekshana found it hard to assert himself as the go-to man for the Lankans in international cricket for a year-and-a-half. But the Colombo native seems to have turned a corner this year, playing a key role as the island nation navigated a tricky qualifying phase for the upcoming World Cup. Theekshana took 21 wickets in eight matches in that event, with the last five outings fetching him 18 wickets while staying miserly. He took three consecutive four-fors in the last three matches, against Zimbabwe, West Indies and the Netherlands. With a crucial Asia Cup coming up, Theekshana, together with Hasaranga, could likely form the best spin duo of the tournament.

