

"I love playing ODI cricket. I think for me, ODI cricket is probably the one format that tests your game completely - your technique, composure, patience, playing the situation, and playing differently in different phases of the game. So, I think it tests you as a batsman completely, and I feel the ODI cricket has always brought the best out of me because I like to embrace that challenge and play according to the situation to help my team win."

Indian batter Virat Kohli



Babar plays down India hype ahead of Nepal fixture

AFP, Multan

Pakistan captain Babar Azam stressed his team was focused on Wednesday's Asia Cup opening game against Nepal rather than against arch-rivals India, saying no team can be taken lightly.

The six-nation Asia Cup - which Pakistan and Sri Lanka are co-hosting after India refused to tour Pakistan over political tension - opens in Multan with three other matches in Lahore.

India will play all their matches in Sri Lanka, where nine matches - including the September 17 final - will be staged.

Azam regretted the snub over Pakistan's hosting.

"In my opinion, it would have been great if the whole Asia Cup was held in Pakistan," he said on Tuesday. "But unfortunately, it has not happened, so we have to be ready for whatever schedule is decided."

Pakistan will fly to Sri Lanka to play India in Pallekele on September 2 before playing a Super Four match in Lahore and then returning to Sri Lanka for the remaining matches.



Pakistan skipper Babar Azam and his Nepal counterparts Rohit Kumar Paudel on Tuesday speak during a press conference on the eve of the today's opening match of the Asia Cup at the Multan Cricket Stadium in Multan.

PHOTO:AFP

Barring any upsets, Pakistan will also play India in Colombo on September 10.

"As professionals, we have to be ready. There is some travelling and back-to-back matches, but we are excited," said Azam, who also played down the hype over the India clashes.

"Pakistan and India matches are always of high intensity and we will try to play

the best cricket on that day, but at the moment we are focused on Nepal and will not take them lightly.

"It's the first match and is important," he added.

India, Pakistan and Nepal are in Group A while defending champions Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Afghanistan form Group B. The top two teams from each group

will qualify for the Super Four stages.

Pakistan are on a high, having whitewashed Afghanistan 3-0 in Sri Lanka last week to rise to the top of the ODI rankings.

Nepal qualified for the Asia Cup after winning the Asian Cricket Council Premier Cup in April at home, beating Oman and the United Arab Emirates.

"We are playing in the Asia Cup for the first time and it's a big occasion," said captain Rohit Paudel. "We want to give a competitive game to Pakistan and India as well."

"We deserved to be here. We have been playing for more than two decades and this is the highest opportunity for Nepal and a great learning experience against a world-class team."

Nepal will hope their high-quality spinner Sandeep Lamichhane cause some problems for Pakistan batting which includes world's top-ranked batter Azam, number three Imam-ul-Haq and number five Fakhar Zaman.

Their inexperienced batting will be tested by world's top pace trio of Shaheen Shah Afridi, Haris Rauf and Naseem Shah.

Injury worries grow in Tigers' camp

SPORTS REPORTER

Injury is still Bangladesh's top concern prior to their opening Asia Cup match against Sri Lanka tomorrow.

Left-arm seamer Mustafizur Rahman is suffering from pain in his knee and is under observation as the team started their training session yesterday.

However, the Bangladesh team management is hopeful that 'the Fizz' will be able to feature against the Lankans. It was learned that the Tigers will feature the best possible side to keep their hopes of second-round qualification alive.

Meanwhile, vice-captain Liton Das has started to recover from his fever but was unable to take yesterday's flight to Sri Lanka to reunite with the team.

"We are waiting for his update so that he can travel quickly once he recovers from the fever. But it is confirmed that he won't be available for the first game," selector Habibur Bashar told The Daily Star.

Earlier, pacer Ebadot Hossain was ruled out from the Asia Cup due to injury and replaced by young pacer Tanzim Hasan Sakib at the last moment.



A fist full of fire and faith

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

It was a momentous occasion for Bangladesh when a bunch of young guns clinched the U-19 World Cup in 2020, beating a strong opponent such as India who are known for

can make their presence felt in international cricket. Some of the questions have already been answered.

As Shoriful had reminded in an interview with The Daily Star just a day after that victory, the team "stayed together as a family" and that is perhaps the biggest indicator of why they had done so well. A similar mentality was flowing through them, a similar aggression based on cricketing senses.

The likes of Shoriful already staked his claim as one of the front-line pacers, having debuted in 2021, and Tawhid Hridoy, having debuted

A look at other national teams suggest that they have not had players from the 2020 U-19 World Cup appear for the national team to the extent it is applicable for Bangladesh. Yashasvi Jaiswal, the highest run-getter in that tournament, made his debut for India Test side this year while Ravi Bishnoi, the top wicket-taker of that same tournament, debuted for the senior side in 2022 but has not played since.

The importance of not one or two individuals coming through but a bunch coming together cannot be overemphasised. Shoriful reminds of the faith the bunch had while playing that final.



producing young talents in bulk.

The joy of winning that U-19 World Cup was immense and the whole country rejoiced with droves of people celebrating their homecoming following the landmark achievement. But concerns have always been there on whether they

only this year, looks well-honed to serve the Tigers with a number four berth in the batting lineup.

Shamim Hossain had been in and out of the squad and yet to get a strong footing but, following debut in 2021, he finally was able to do enough domestically to make the Asia Cup side.

In fact, six players that also includes opener Parvez Hossain Emon, pacer Mritunjay Chowdhury and batter Mahmudul Hasan Joy have made the Tigers' lineup in one format or the other so far. Wicket-keeper batter Akbar Ali, who led the side with great determination, along with spinner Rakibul Hasan and top-order batter Shahadat Hossain Dipu are waiting in the wings with the latter having recently made the Test squad against Afghanistan.

The two newcomers Tanzid Hasan Tamim and Tanzim Hasan Sakib, yet to make their debuts, only got into the Asia Cup following injuries to opener Tamim Iqbal and pacer Ebadot Hossain. But it is the assuredness portrayed by players from that bunch that have led the national team to pick them up during such a vital period with the World Cup just around the corner.

"When we won that World Cup, from the beginning of the tournament, our plan was to go match by match. Up to the semis that remained but when we made the final, there was some kind of determination that since we didn't know if we would play for the U-19s again and since we made the final, we had to snatch the win."

"Each and every of our players had that fire within them till the end that we will do it. That faith was a big thing," Shoriful told this reporter in an interview after the Ireland series.

With the likes of Hridoy and Shamim, Shoriful now finds familiar comrades, who achieved the incredible feat in 2020, beside him in the senior side.

"Obviously, everyone is doing well. We have that faith that we will do something good at the World Cup," he had added regarding the players from that batch who came to the national team.

With Tanzid and Sakib now also in, the number from that stands at five. Five make a fist and they know they will always have that World Cup victory from 2020. The aggression, the mentality and faith can now go a long way to ushering them towards the next big prize.

SL take brunt of injury blow

AGENCIES

Sri Lanka have been hit by injuries to key bowlers as they named their 15-member squad for Asia Cup 2023 yesterday.

Leg-spinning all-rounder Wanindu Hasaranga is among four key Sri Lankan players who will miss the Asia Cup due to injury.

Pacers Dushmantha Chameera, Lahiru Madushanka and Lahiru Kumara are also missing from the squad due to injuries. Binura Fernando and Pramod Madushan were late inclusions in the squad to replace the injured players.

Kusal Perera, returning after a hiatus of two years to the ODI squad, is still recovering from flu according to a statement from Sri Lankan Cricket and will join with the rest of the squad once he recovers.

Meanwhile, India suffered an injury setback as 31-year-old stumper-batter KL Rahul was ruled out of India's first two Asia Cup games, including the showdown with archrivals Pakistan on September 2.

Rahul will be assessed again on 4 September, before the start of the Asia Cup Super Four stage, according to India coach Rahul Dravid.

Sri Lanka squad: Dasun Shanaka (c), Pathum Nissanaka, Dimuth Karunaratne, Kusal Janith Perera, Kusal Mendis (vc), Charith Asalanka, Dhananjaya de Silva, Sadeera Samarawickrama, Maheesh Theekshana, Dumith Wellalage, Matheesha Pathirana, Kasun Rajitha, Dushan Hemantha, Binura Fernando, Pramod Madushan.

'A special place' as nostalgia and aspiration juxtapose for '86ers

BISHWAJIT ROY

The Asia Cup remains unparalleled for a certain generation of former Bangladesh cricketers, when it comes to evoking an intense sense of nostalgia.

Gazi Ashraf Hossain Lipu, Bangladesh's first ODI captain, had often stated that his team would remember the 1986 Asia Cup in Sri Lanka for the rest of their lives. The former captain is fond of recalling what transpired with Pakistan great Imran Khan during the toss.

Chief selector Minhajul Abedin Nannu said on the eve of the tournament's 16th installation, "Whenever Asia Cup comes, it makes us nostalgic. Just think, I was part of the team which played its first Asia Cup match and now I'm part of the current team as a selector."

"It's really interesting that at that time we were excited as we got the opportunity to play in an event

where our idols were playing. Now my thoughts are turning to how our squad will hoist the trophy. Therefore, it's a unique experience and excitement for me."

"Asia Cup tournament has a special place in our heart," former Bangladesh pace bowler Golam Nawsher Prince, who is currently affiliated with USA cricket, told The Daily Star over phone while reminiscing about his first ODI match experience in Bangladesh's debut Asia Cup expedition in Sri Lanka.

Back in 1986, Prince and company "were living in a dream" when they played the first international match. But now the dream has morphed to an extent that it all boils down to whether the Shakib Al Hasan-led side can bring the first major title for the country following three last-hurdle heartbreaks in the past 11 years.

"I still can remember those



days. It was so exciting as we were going to play matches against the international teams. I cannot explain everything in words. It looked like we were living in a dream. I started in 1976 and always wondered whether the day would come for me to play international cricket. We had a doubt about whether we could see the country get ODI status in our lifetime," an emotional Prince shared

the experience of the days when the Tigers had taken baby steps onto the international circuit.

"You cannot now imagine how we were driven by emotions. We were going to play a Pakistan team, possessing names such as Imran Khan, Javed Miandad, Mohsin Khan, Mudassar Nazar, Abdul

Qadir; you cannot simply imagine," he continued.

"Now I feel proud that we have such a good team who can win the tournament. We have our own stars now. As a former cricketer nothing could have given you much satisfaction than that."

I follow Bangladesh cricket as much as possible. I firmly believe that

these bunch of cricketers have the belief that they can win the tournament. A team can fail but still we have a very good ODI unit," Prince said with utmost

confidence.

Nannu, on the other hand, believes that the current generation is receiving financial and infrastructure support that they

could not have imagined in their day.

"There was no infrastructure at all but still we had to face some world class bowlers and batters in that tournament."

"Javed Miandad was my idol. It was a great experience to meet him there and Arjuna Ranatunga as well. In terms of infrastructure, we improved a lot and accordingly the players are also improving. Now time has come to deliver," said Nannu.

Bangladesh's 50-over team have evolved significantly since the inaugural ODI, leaving both Prince and Nannu yearning for trophies. "We'd like to say we started a journey from which our next generation will accomplish the feat," Prince concluded.

The 1986 group will therefore be keenly watching the Tigers' performance as they kick off their campaign against Sri Lanka tomorrow in Kandy, just like millions of Bangladesh fans will.