

Mirpur: A poisoned chalice

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Veteran coach and cricket analyst Nazmul Abedeen Fahim



ATIQUE ANAM

After the Sri Lanka cricket team returned to the country following a disastrous World Cup campaign where they only won two matches and finished ninth, consequently missing out on a spot for the 2025 Champions Trophy, the team was greeted with heavy criticism from all quarters.

One man from the team management, though, fronted the media with his reasoning of what had led to the debacle and the continuous downfall of the once world champions over the last few years.

Mahela Jayawardene, the Sri Lanka team's consultant coach, expertly explained to the media, in the presence of the players and head coach, that the downfall was more owing to the pitches that Sri Lanka Cricket prepares at home than any lack of talent or skill of the current generation.

It was an interesting evaluation from one of world cricket's brightest minds, and it brought into focus an issue which is as relevant for Sri Lankan cricket as it is for Bangladesh cricket.

under the carpet whenever there is an uproar following debacles in global events on the back of some home series wins.

What makes Mirpur so critical in this discussion is the fact that this venue is historically renowned for offering slow and low bounce, which often troubles touring teams, who more often than not, are used to playing on sporting wickets and find it hard to cope with the nature of the wickets in Mirpur.

Remember what happened to Bangladesh in the 2021 Twenty20 World Cup after the team went into the tournament with a world of confidence following historic series victories in Mirpur over Australia and New Zealand?

There was criticism over the kind of pitches that had been dished out for those two important series and the looming disaster those had set the team up for. Even Shakib Al Hasan had said in an interview that playing on such pitches would effectively destroy career of batters.

But that was that. No lessons seemed to have been learnt from that episode, otherwise, Bangladesh wouldn't have played their preparatory series against New Zealand at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium (SBNCS) in Mirpur ahead of this World Cup.

And it is not as if all the international venues in Bangladesh produce wickets similar to Mirpur.

The two other venues currently in use are the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium (ZACS) in Chattogram and the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium (SICS).

Since the last World Cup in 2019, ZACS (252) and SICS (280) have posted much higher first-innings scores on average in ODIs compared to SBNCS (225).

ZACS has in fact produced three 300+ scores in ODIs in the last two years, including a 400+ score earlier this year, which is a record total in an ODI on Bangladesh soil.

Yet, we see the lion's share of matches – international and domestic – hosted by Mirpur while the two other active venues lag behind and the five other international venues are either overlooked or are completely lost to circumstances.

In its 17 years of being, SBNCS has hosted 207 international matches – sixth highest among all international cricket venues in the world – while the seven other international venues in the country have hosted 220 international matches.

Veteran coach and cricket analyst Nazmul Abedeen Fahim believes SBNCS, as the premier cricket venue of the country, should be hosting important matches, but not in the manner or with the intention it is currently hosting.

"I believe it's a matter of intent more than the nature of the pitches. It's a matter of lack of intent from the decision-makers, board directors, coaches," Fahim opined during a conversation with The Daily Star.

"The coaches come here with short-term ideas. They can say they want to play more matches in other venues, but I don't see that. Maybe they are more concerned with immediate results rather than long-term benefit of the players and cricket."

While the cricket authorities goad as Bangladesh continue to rack up victories at the SBNCS, or on some other doctored pitches at other venues in the country for that matter, the long-term impact is a devastating one, as it stunts the growth of the country's cricketers, stymieing their skill set to a great extent, Fahim reckons.

"When you keep playing on slow and low pitches, batsmen will want to play every ball on the front foot. That's why they will be hesitant to go on the front foot and free their arms and will not be able to play shots when batting on sporting pitches.

"Likewise, when the spinners bowl, they know they can bowl on a specific line and length and the rest will take care of itself. They won't need to do anything different in order to get wickets, but they will suffer when playing on wickets that are different," the veteran coach explained.

When cricket moved from the Bangabandhu National Stadium to its permanent home in Mirpur in 2006 following years of bitter wrangling with football, there was optimism all around that cricket would finally find a centre of excellence, which will in turn produce cricketing talents and lend a solid base under the cricket board's feet.

While the SBNCS has indeed become a part of Bangladesh's cricketing folklore, hosting many historic events and witnessing many remarkable victories of Bangladesh, thereby elevating the cricket board's prestige and boosting its coffers, it seems to have driven the cricket administrators to use it for short-term gains and further their financial and political ambitions while rooting out the seeds of promise from the sport.



A reluctant captain at the centre of mess

NABID YEASIN

From aspirations of making it to their maiden semifinal to barely qualifying for the 2025 Champions Trophy with an eighth-placed finish, Bangladesh's World Cup dream has fluctuated as wildly as its tumultuous state of affairs.

If looked closely, at the core of the fiasco, two entities could be found – skipper Shakib Al Hasan and his enabler, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB).

At 36, Shakib just wanted to play in what he said was going to be his World Cup swansong. He had clearly mentioned in a much-talked about interview that he had no intention of leading the Tigers in the mega event and was only made to do so at the behest of the BCB.

So, questions could be raised as to why BCB – a board that always claims to prioritise long-term planning over anything else – would send a team to the World Cup under someone who was reluctant to lead in the first place?

Is it because there were no other suitable candidates to take the helm? If so, then that contradicts the long-stated claims of a rich pipeline and the depth of the national team's pool of players.

While that is a part played by the country's cricketing governing body in the Tigers' recent slump, Shakib and the team management including head coach Chandika Hathurusingha only furthered the downward spiral.

Hathurusingha could be inquired about how the bunch of players that had seen Bangladesh do decently in ODIs just months ago had lost their mojo and balance in the most crucial time while Shakib would have to justify his off-field antics more than his underwhelming on-field performances.

Despite being forcibly burdened with the captaincy, expectations on Shakib were still very high, especially after his superhuman effort in the same tournament four years ago.

Dealing with such pressure and cancelling out the outside noise has never been an issue for a champion cricketer like Shakib. In fact, followers of Bangladesh cricket know how he had made a pattern of covering up his off-field misdoings with immediate brilliance with the willow and the ball.

But this time, things proved to be different. After being part of the chaotic process of team selection for the World Cup that saw Tamim Iqbal being left out at the last minute, Shakib only managed to drum up more controversy and almost no superhuman act on the field to cover it up.

Shakib's trip to Dhaka for a few solo practice sessions with his mentor midway through the World Cup was followed by the Tigers hitting the nadir of their already abysmal campaign – an 87-run thumping at the hands of associate member, the Netherlands, in a game where Shakib made five with the bat and scalped just a solitary wicket.

Also, for the first time in a long while, Shakib even looked to have let the pressure get to him when he struggled for eight deliveries before finally opening his account in the game against Pakistan.

Shakib's World Cup campaign ended with a player-of-the-match performance against Sri Lanka, but his overall 2023 World Cup figures of 186 runs at 26.57 average and nine wickets may be an outcome befitting the visible shift of focus Shakib's career has seen in the last few years.

Since coming out of his ICC-sanctioned ban for failing to report corrupt approaches in 2020, Shakib has anything but stayed away from controversies. From having affiliations with betting sites, kicking stumps, arguing with on-field umpires, returning to the country for personal reasons in the middle of the Asia Cup 2023 in Sri Lanka to inaugurating jewellery shops of a fugitive criminal – Shakib could not have made it more apparent about his priorities and reluctance to fall into line.

Maybe Shakib had things clear in his mind long before his reflection on the matter came to the fore when he said in that interview, "Would that [captaining Bangladesh in this World Cup] add any value to my career at this stage?"

Perhaps Shakib knew all along what he was taking the team into and only tried to deflect the blame in case things went south when he admitted to not being willing to be in the leadership role ahead of the World Cup.

Shakib is used to evading the true repercussions of his antics, mostly by riding on the BCB's reluctance to do anything about those. It might not be any different for Shakib this time too but the same can not be said of Bangladesh cricket which will have to suffer the real consequences of always accommodating a reluctant performer.

The rot in domestic cricket and its consequences

MAZHAR UDDIN

While sifting through the wreckage of Bangladesh's disastrous World Cup campaign in India to find out what caused the team to crash and burn out in the competition, there are many apparent reasons that come in sight.

The sudden captaincy change that unsettled the team, the mudslinging between two of the most prominent figures of the side, the constant shuffling of the batting order, key bowlers and batters losing form in the tournament and poor planning from the think tank – just to name a few.

But buried under the pile of rubble is hidden the root cause of the disaster, the cancer cell that has infected the country's entire cricketing body, the symptoms of which are now unmissable in the national team – the appalling state of the country's domestic cricket.

From the days cricket first spread its wings in Bangladesh post-independence, the 50-over format has always been the preferred format in the country.

Since the mid-1980s, long before gaining List-A status, the Dhaka Premier League (DPL) has been the most prestigious domestic competition in Bangladesh cricket.

This 50-over competition played a huge role in increasing the game's popularity before the turn of the century and deserves credit for producing cricketers for the national team in its nascent years.

The competition in the league was intense, so much so that title-contender clubs wouldn't shy away from splurging and bringing in international cricket stars like Arjuna Ranatunga, Wasim Akram and Neil Fairbrother years before Bangladesh became a Test nation.

The highly competitive nature of DPL was one of the reasons why all of Bangladesh's early successes in cricket came in 50-overs cricket and that trend remains the same even after completing over 23 years as a Test nation.

But since the 2010s, when the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) hedged its bets on the Twenty20 franchise league Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) which still hasn't truly taken off as a competition, the standard of the league has been on a downward spiral.

"DPL used to be the main source of producing cricketers in the country until the introduction of BPL. After that it started to lose its charm and importance in the domestic cricket of the country," Tarikul Islam Tito, the chief coordinator of the Mohammedan cricket team told The Daily Star.

While DPL still remains the country's premier 50-over competition, as aspiring young cricketers try to make their mark in the league to forge a path to the national team and many domestic-level cricketers depend on the earnings from the competition to make their living, the level of competition has taken a plunge.

This decline, however, is not incidental.

In the 90s, even though Bangladesh was at the periphery of international cricket, it had a bustling domestic cricket scene. There were a number of smaller leagues, who would unearth talented cricketers who would then be scouted by the DPL clubs.

But now, those smaller leagues have disappeared. The second and third divisions of the domestic circuit



have now become the darkest annals of the country's cricket where greed for power has seemingly placed a bottleneck on the influx of young cricketers.

"Previously we used to have at least two to three 50-over domestic competitions such as the Damal Samal tournament and others... There haven't been any qualifying matches in the lowest division in the last few years. Earlier, around 60-70 teams would take part in this league where thousands of new cricketers would get an opportunity," said Tito.

Due to the high entry fee for third-division clubs (Tk five lakhs), teams without significant financial backing can't even register.

The teams who finish higher in the second division get councillorship, giving them the right to cast the ballot in the board elections.

As per multiple reports done by various media organisation over the past few years, the umpires play a role in making sure that only certain teams finish above the cutoff for councillorship.

There are accusations of biased umpiring in the DPL as well, however, the corruption that is reportedly taking place in the lower division is causing much more significant damage.

Over the years, there have been some instances where clubs in protest of alleged biased umpiring have refused to play.

There have been other protests as well. Like in 2017, when Sujon Mahmud of the Lalmatia Club intentionally conceded 92 runs off four balls against Axiom cricketers in the second division to draw attention to biased umpiring.

How did the board respond to this protest?

They banned Sujon for 10 years and also handed a six-month ban on the umpires who officiated the match.

But why did the umpires give biased decisions, that question was conveniently swept under the rug.

"I don't want to talk about the corruption. But things have improved when it comes to biased umpiring in

the DPL," said Tito.

Apart from the reported corrupt practices, there is also the issue of failure to adapt to the changes in the game.

Teams around the world are scoring in excess of 300 more frequently in ODI cricket. Currently, batters are scoring more freely as the pitches are getting better and better for batting.

However, in most pitches in the country, especially the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur – Bangladesh's home of cricket – scoring in excess of 300 remains a substantial challenge.

The low and slow natures of the pitches do not prepare the batters or bowlers for the flat pitches that are prepared by the ICC for mega events.

There are problems with the cricket calendar as well, where DPL gets pushed back to make space for BPL.

"We don't have a proper cricket calendar. So, how can the clubs prepare for the upcoming season? Over the past few years, the DPL has been taking place around May-June during the monsoon and under scorching heat. Previously, it used to take place around November-December," the Mohammedan official said.

Even amidst all this doom and despair, chief selector Habibul Bashar chooses to see hope.

"Our domestic cricket has improved a lot. We used to talk a lot about the pitches and I think the wickets have been sporting in the past couple of years in both the first-class competitions and the DPL. I think the change has started even if we don't see the results right now," said Bashar.

The World Cup in India has highlighted the gulf between the top teams in world cricket and Bangladesh and it has also made it apparent that if the Tigers really want to achieve something big on the world stage, they first need to develop a thriving domestic scene.

Otherwise, Bangladesh cricket will get stuck in a loop of disastrous outcomes followed by false promises of better outcomes in the future.