

"I don't agree with that [Bangladeshis are not athletic by nature]. If you look at Bangladeshi people in sports, like footballer Hamza Choudhury and cricketers Shakib Al Hasan and Tamim Iqbal, they are all top-level athletes. So, the talent is there, you just need to tap into the talent in a certain way to get the best out of everyone."

County's fastest man Imranur Rahman told The Daily Star during an interview last year.



Running towards extinction!

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ANISUR RAHMAN

Not that long ago, there used to be a dogfight among a number of teams for medals in the national and summer athletics championships.

Even in the 2018 Summer Athletics Championships -- Bangladesh Navy, Bangladesh Army, Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC), Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), Bangladesh Jail, Bangladesh Ansar & VDP and BKSP -- these seven teams shared 35 gold medals. But six years later, only Navy and Army grabbed all 39 gold medals in the National Athletics Championships, which was held this month.

Apart from the services teams and government organisations, there is

still participation of 64 districts teams, divisional teams, educational boards and universities but only a handful of those are able to vie for medals these days.

The scenario is getting bleaker every year and a major reason behind this, critics suggest, is the lack of training and initiative at the district-level, which has led to slow improvement in timing and performance of athletes. For example, Shirin Akter, the fastest female sprinter of the country for a long time, clocked 25.50 seconds (hand-timing) to win a 200m gold in 2014 while her timing in the same event in 2022 was 25.35 seconds, which earned her a silver medal behind Sumaiya Dewan, who clocked 25.30 seconds to win the gold medal.

In high jump, Mohammed Sohel cleared 1.95m to win gold in 2014 while Mahfuzur Rahman won gold by clearing 2.07m in 2022. Not only that the timings improved marginally, in some cases, performances have digressed too. In long jump, Mohammad Ismail grabbed gold medal clearing 7.50m in 2014 while Sanwar Hossain cleared only 7.22m to win gold in 2022.

"There used to be intense competition among participants in the 1980s and 1990s. That kind of competition is now absent, so the timing of athletes is not improving," said athlete-turned-coach Farid Khan.

"During our time, 30 to 40 athletes always used to be in the national training camps for five to six months ahead of the international meets, which helped improve their timing. Now no such camps are held under the supervision of the federation," Farid added.

Another major reason behind the lack of improvement and competition



these days is the withdrawal of government organisations from the sporting arena.

Once upon a time, government institutions such as Bangladesh Textile Mills Corporation (BTMC), Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC), Customs, Bangladesh Railway and T&T used to play a key role behind the emergence of top athletes. BJMC, in particular, used to hunt and groom talents from the grassroots, turning them into finished products. Those institutions have long pulled out of athletics, BJMC the last to do so in 2020. Although service teams such as Navy, Army, Air Force, Ansar & VDP, BGB, Bangladesh Jail are still involved with athletics, their focus is primarily on roping in finished products instead of raw talents.

The infrastructural issues, too, have stifled the growth of athletics in the country. There are only three athletics tracks in the country, with the one at

the Bangabandhu National Stadium -- which was out of bounds for more than two years due to renovation recently -- is usually used for all local events. The Bangladesh Athletics Federation (BAF) has been long demanding the government for athletics tracks at all divisional headquarters, but to no avail.

BAF, too, is directly culpable for athletics' sorry state of affairs. BAF general secretary Abdur Rakib Montu is serving his third term since 2017, but his promise of ensuring long-term training and foreign training for athletes is yet to see the light of day. Sheikh Kamal Athletics Academy has not materialised while the 7 crore-taka School and Madrasa Athletics Championship is yet to be followed up despite 35 participants being selected a year back.

The country that boasts a rich history in the sport and produced some of the fastest sprinters in the subcontinent like Shah Alam, Bimal

Chandra Tarafder, Mahbub Alam, it has been in a poor state for a long time with no significant improvement in the recent past.

Bangladesh could not win a single gold medal in the athletics events of the South Asian Games in the last 18 years since Mahfuzur Rahman Mithu finished first in the 110m hurdle in Sri Lanka in 2006.

Now, the focus seems to revolve around England-based Imranur Rahman -- an athlete who neither resides nor has been groomed in the country -- as BAF is seemingly doing everything to bring an end the gold-drought in the SA Games through the 30-year-old sprinter.

Such measures from BAF has drawn criticisms, suggesting that Bangladesh athletics has turned into a one-athlete show as athletes from other events hardly get the attention of the federation.

If compared with the neighbouring countries, Bangladesh athletics has only gone backwards over the last two decades or so. Our next-door neighbours India, who share fairly similar physicality and culture, have been reaping the rewards of long-term planning and investment in athletics, so much so that they have won 29 medals in the Hangzhou Asian Games last year after claiming a gold medal in Tokyo Olympics.

What is slowly turning India into one of Asia's superpowers in track and field is the financial security and benefits that their athletes are provided by the government enterprises, apart from the investment of corporates and long-term planning of the athletics federation, all of which are absent in Bangladesh, resulting in a near-death of the once-promising discipline.



'If nothing changes, athletics will fall apart

Milzar Hossain, one of the most prominent athletes of the country in the 80s, holds the record for the best ever timing by a Bangladeshi in the 800m event, 1:51.16, which he clocked in the 1986 Asian Games to finish fifth. The 58-year-old SA Games silver medalist spoke with The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman about the current state of athletics in Bangladesh and what needs to be done to improve it. The excerpts of the conversation are as follows:

The Daily Star (DS): How do you view the current state of the country's athletics as a former athlete?

Milzar Hossain (MH): The country's athletics is not in a good position. We keep hyping up Imranur [Rahman], but his performance is going downhill. There is another athlete named Zahir [Rayhan], who won a silver medal in the Asian Indoor Championship, but with his timing [48.10 seconds], he won't even win a medal in the South Asian Games or make it to the semifinal of the Asian Games. Some 37-38 years ago, I clocked 47.55 seconds in the Asian Games to qualify for the semifinal but could not qualify for the final. Apart from Imranur and Zahir, I only see two more promising athletes - Zakia Akhter in the shot put and Ritu Akhter in the high jump. Except for these four, I see no hope for anyone else.

DS: Why do you think athletics is in such a poor state?

MH: Those who are in power have a lot of work to do, I think. When we started out in athletics, the athletes, the coaches and the training were of a certain standard. We trained under coaches from England, Russia and China for brief periods, which helped us improve. There is no alternative to training. If you want to achieve something, you have to provide good training, accommodation, food and other facilities. In my view, we lack proper training and lack of responsible individuals in positions of power.



DS: Many government wings like BJMC, BTMC and Customs are no longer active in athletics. Do you think their absence is hurting athletics?

MH: Of course, the absence of those organisations is another big reason. Earlier, BJMC, BTMC, Customs, Bangladesh Railway, T&T and other government offices took part in sports. As a service-holder, I can tell you specifically about BJMC. It had four zones - Dhaka, Khulna, Chattogram and Adamjee. There were 15 to 16 jute mills in Khulna zone and sports organisers tried to find new talent from different villages, schools and colleges. They provided allocations for athletes if they finished among the top

six in the zonal competition of BJMC. I was also a product of such initiatives. Textiles also hunted talented athletes like BJMC but at present, there are no such initiatives from any government organisations across the country, so the talented athletes remain unearthed across the country.

DS: Defense organisations like the Army, Navy, Air Force and Ansar & VDP are currently dominating athletics. What is the difference between such organisations and teams like BJMC and BTMC?

HM: They can't unearth the really

talented athletes because of their limitations. They can look for athletes only among their recruited soldiers during the intra-sports programme. But when the talent is found, they are already of age and don't have time to improve themselves. They may succeed at the national level but they can't succeed at the international level. They also rope in a limited number of athletes from the national youth championships but those athletes lack the quality. However, BJMC and BTMC had no limitations in appointing apprentice athletes under minimum facilities.

DS: Khulna region, where you are from, doesn't produce as many athletes as it used to. Why?

MH: BJMC and BTMC produced a lot of athletes from Khulna, Jashore, Kushtia and Rajshahi. It stopped after BJMC and BTMC shut down their programmes.

DS: Why are the current generation of athletes failing to live up to the standards set by the likes of you, Shah Alam, Bimal Chandra and Mahbub Alam?

MH: Firstly, you have to search for talents across the country and provide them with proper training and facilities, that was the case for us. Then, you will find the successors of Shah Alam, Mahbub Alam and Bimal Chandra. In the process, another

important thing is to support the athletes financially, otherwise, they won't show interest. For example, most of us got government jobs in places like the BJMC, BTMC, Police and T&T after performing well, which doesn't happen now.

DS: Do you think a lack of proper leadership caused this vacuum in athletics?

MH: I think the organisers need to be competent. Before becoming an organiser, one must have a team and develop the capacity to organize. There is a shortage of such competent organisers. In the past, every District Sports Association (DSA) held its annual sports event regularly with the participation of affiliated clubs and participated in national championships. But there are no such annual sports in most of DSAs anymore. So, the local athletes are not getting a platform to climb up the ladder. Nowadays DSAs take part in the national championship just to save their councillorship.

DS: How do you think athletics can return to its glory days?

MH: Government organisations, corporate houses and clubs need to recruit athletes, offer them good contracts and then take part in the national championships. Only then the country's sports can be revived. If it continues to be run the way it is right now, the country's athletics will fall apart.

