



This trust between fans and cricket players in Bangladesh has not deteriorated in one innings against Afghanistan; it has taken years of disappointment. PHOTO: AFP

## Our men's cricket team is suffering from a crisis of trust



Azmin Azran is digital features coordinator at The Daily Star.

AZMIN AZRAN

Before this year's T20 World Cup, if the Bangladesh men's cricket team and its fans were offered a situation where they found themselves in the last game of the Super Eight with the opportunity to go to the semifinals, having full control of their own destiny, they would bite the hands off the person offering it. The truth is, the Tigers have exceeded pre-tournament expectations. Yet, at the same time, they have left fans bitterly disappointed.

Normally, it would be difficult for a team to do these two things at once, but this strange mess of feelings fans have been left with is possibly indicative of what the men's cricket team really is right now: a big mess.

They got the obvious things right. The squad picked was close to the best we had to offer. The captain was given a series or two before the world cup to get his team combinations right. The team even featured a couple of young, exciting talents like Towhid Hridoy, Tanzim Hasan Sakib, and Rishad Hossain.

A lacklustre series win against Zimbabwe and a shock series defeat against the USA tempered expectations too. Everyone knew that nothing should be expected of this team, and anything positive that comes out of this world cup would be a bonus. By the time the team was lining up to play Sri Lanka in Dallas, everyone was prepared for the worst.

But the thing with the Bangladesh men's cricket team these days is that it's very difficult to understand what's actually going on with them. The brilliance of young Rishad and the new-found grit of an out-of-sorts Litton Das won the game against Sri Lanka, and when Bangladesh pushed South Africa to the last ball for a narrow defeat, suddenly, they were playing well.

The Netherlands and Nepal were promptly defeated in efficient displays, and fans who expected nothing were rewarded with a surprise Super Eight appearance. The coach even came out in the press and said that the goal for this team was to get to the second round, whatever came after would be a bonus.

Fans understood that the team had exceeded expectations. The good feelings from the three victories in the group stage duped everyone into thinking that this team could be expected to do the bare minimum that one might expect from a national sports team. Yes, they were not in form before the tournament. It's true that the senior players in the team were becoming burdens. The cricket board, at this point an entity that is as dysfunctional as it's immovable, couldn't provide the team with the perfect platform. Despite all this, the national cricket team at the world stage was expected to do only one thing—try. And they failed us at that too.

There have always been fans and haters of the men's cricket team in

Bangladesh. Fans keep hoping that they will come up with the goods, while haters remain sceptical about whether they have the ability to do so. Some of us believe that one day, they will do something truly remarkable, while others believe that such a day will never come. The one thing, however, that everyone for the longest time assumed to be true is that these professional athletes will keep trying until loss is inevitable, and do their best to postpone that inevitability. If they're not good enough (or strong enough, as we keep hearing), it's natural that they will lose. But the mentality to give something an honest go is not dependent on muscles or talent.

Against India and Australia, who are clearly superior opponents, the losses felt digestible. The lack of an impetus to post a big score against Australia, or to chase one down against India was a sore sight. But most fans were still thinking that this is all extra, this team was never supposed to be here. When

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the difficult equations for semifinal qualification in the game against Afghanistan were revealed, then too fans might not have felt malice towards the team. The Afghans make an excellent T20 team; beating them by such margins was not likely.

But once again, this mess of a Bangladesh team surprised with a good bowling display, giving the batters a chance to chase 115 runs in 12 overs, a perfectly doable task in today's cricket. How the team reacted to this golden opportunity, however, has opened, deepened, and festered the wounds of trust between the cricket team and its fans.

Everyone knows what followed. According to the captain in a press conference following the match, the team apparently tried for six overs out of the 12. Once they lost three wickets and figured that the task at hand was too difficult, they decided that giving up semifinal aspirations and going for a comfortable consolation win was the better course of action, something they failed to do anyway by losing the game.

Herein lies the problem. The team admittedly stopped trying at a point where it was realistically possible to reach the semifinals. Whether

they did it out of fear of failure or embarrassment or lack of belief can be discussed later, but what's certain is, once again, this team breached whatever trust it had left with its fans—the people of Bangladesh.

Supporting a sports team is a fundamentally illogical act. These gifted athletes who live in a bubble of mainstream popularity don't care about you or me. Their lives and realities are disconnected and different from everyone else. Yet, what makes the illogical act of supporting a sports team worth it is the fact that we assume these people who represent our colours want the same things we do—to win, and if they lose, to do so with heads held high. This is the trust between fans and players that is the basis of the sports industry worldwide.

This trust between fans and cricket players in Bangladesh has not deteriorated in one innings against Afghanistan. While the batters' inexplicable surrender in the face of possible victory was a truly humbling blow to loyal followers, the team has chipped away at the fans' perseverance constantly since the 2019 ICC World Cup. When our best player, Shakib Al Hasan, was banned for failing to disclose an approach from a betting syndicate, this trust took a blow. When the much loved captain of the team, Mashrafe Mortaza, chose not to see his own failings and retire with grace,

the trust was pegged down a notch. When Tamim Iqbal chose himself over the team by creating pathetic off-field drama, and Shakib Al Hasan participated in it and took it further, the trust was shattered. The 2023 ICC World Cup performance was so bad that as fans, supporting this team felt criminal. This year's T20 World Cup has obliterated any goodwill left among fans.

Still, cricket in Bangladesh won't die. People may not love the team as much, but the love of the sport prevails. Whether it is this team under this inept board, or some future team under the stewardship of a more capable administration, fan trust will need to be earned back. This is not unprecedented in cricket. India went through this after Mohammad Azharuddin's match-fixing scandal in the early 2000s. Australia did it recently following a ball-tampering incident. Their players did it by playing good cricket, and by presenting a version of themselves to the public that resembled genuine human beings who understood what their efforts meant to the people of their countries. The future of cricket in Bangladesh possibly hinges on the ability of our players to do the same.

## Breaking chains through whistleblowing



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

"Julian is free." The headline of Democracy Now! sent shivers up my spine. The news broke, unleashing a wave of chemical messengers in my brain. The system kept the WikiLeaks founder incarcerated for more than a decade. A woman in Sweden accused him in a sexual assault case in 2010, soon after his whistleblowing platform published a report on US military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Julian Assange jumped bail and took refuge in London's Ecuador embassy in 2012, seeking political asylum. He lived in a tiny cell in that embassy compound for seven years, during which period the rape charges were found meritless. However, the British government arrested Assange and placed him in the high-security Belmarsh Prison, forcing Ecuador to revoke its asylum decision. The US wanted him extradited on charges of espionage and leaking sensitive documents. The Australian government finally intervened, saying the case had dragged on for too long. Julian Assange is finally free after pleading guilty to one count of espionage. The court determined that he had already served his five-year sentence, given his prolonged imprisonment. Justice is restored.

Ayub Khan regime, he realised that the whole of East Pakistan was in prison. His obstinacy gave us hope and prepared us for the freedom fight. When millions of refugees displaced by our Liberation War took shelter in India, our country began with the realisation that we could be a poor country, but we needed to be rich in soul. Years later, we witnessed our prime minister providing shelter to hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees, reflecting on our common experience of displacement during wartime. The same is true for Mandela, who believed that his struggle for freedom would be incomplete without the freedom of Palestine. Years later, South Africa, inspired by the words of their visionary champion against apartheid, has taken Israel to the International Court of Justice.

Analogously, Assange's freedom can have far-reaching impacts. That makes me hopeful. I listen to Yanis Varoufakis' passionate speech, detailing the background of resistance that conditioned his freedom. The former Greek minister recounts how their allies began abandoning them under the guise of opposing an alleged rapist, despite the later exoneration of the charges. Now that Assange



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Why does it matter for us when a foreign individual is free after such a long time? The short answer is: Julian Assange is a symbol of hope, just like Nelson Mandela and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman were during their imprisonments. What good is symbolism when realpolitik demands much more direct action or intervention when millions are dying? When is "one" more than one? When does a man become many?

It takes real courageous individuals to blow the whistle and alert the community. WikiLeaks, responsible for what has come to be known as Cablegate, released confidential files on human rights abuse, political machinations, and corruption, leading to a diplomatic fallout and a stringent reassessment of the information gateway. The repercussions faced by Assange are not unique. Character assassination, social ostracisation, and legal battles are some of the known weapons used to castigate whistleblowers. They provoke the system's anger by raising concerns about institutional corruption or moral injustices. Still, they dare to share information to ensure transparency and accountability and become the catalysts for change.

WikiLeaks has brought to light numerous cases of bribery, extortion, corruption, murder, and other crimes committed by Bangladeshis, enabling them to amass a staggering amount of money, which they then syphoned out of the country. And to think that some of our culprits have more money abroad than our foreign exchange reserves speaks volumes about our institutional weaknesses. The whistleblowers' bravado often forces the system to address its leaks. Their bullheadedness gives us hope—a hope that is contagious.

When Bangabandhu was in prison during the

is free, the system will need to undergo numerous adjustments and deal with the consequences. Similar systemic readjustments were required in the political arena after Edward Snowden exposed the National Security Agency's (NSA) mass surveillance programmes. Or when Frances Haugen, a former Facebook employee, exposed her company's harmful practices by leaking internal documents. There are many other instances.

Let me end on a lighter note, though. A hill of corruption collapsed when a goat turned out to be a whistleblower. An animal trader was running a notorious racket, adding pedigree to his stocks to inflate their prices. Like a true trickster, he would boost his clients' egos by creating a false consciousness about his cattle. He would charge a crore for a cow and about Tk 15 lakh for a goat. Somehow, the price of the goat was too much to stomach for the audience. People were curious about the individual who was willing to spend such a significant amount of money on a goat. The goat became the unlikely whistleblower to expose the buyer and his family, who were relishing a mountain of ill-gotten wealth. The drama did not end with an incomplete purchase. The trader who boasted about his animals' pedigree is now on the run, as the whole system has come after him, possibly for exposing one of their own kin. The ordinary public, which lacks decent earnings and livelihoods, enjoys the show as the goat becomes the unsung hero.

I hope there is no connection between the recent announcement of lower loan rate incentives given to goat farming and the practice of goatheadedness as a form of resistance to corruption. It will take more than a goat to break the chains through whistleblowing.

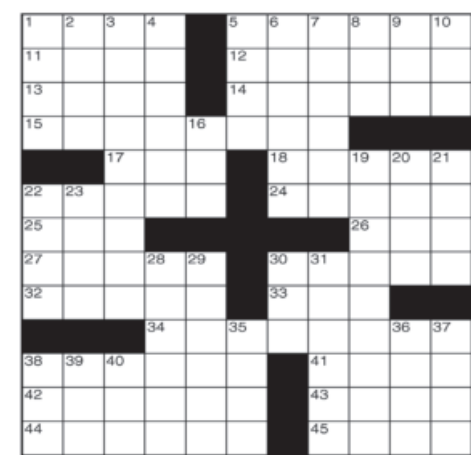
### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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