

Since a lot has changed, we, too, want to change women's cricket by taking it a step forward. And that can be achieved though doing something positive on a stage like the World Cup.

Bangladesh captain NIGAR SULTANA JOTY



WOMEN'S CRICKET poised to match the hype



Twenty20 Internationals (T20Is) have been around for about two decades, and it's fair to say they've become the fan favourite among the three formats, drawing larger crowds worldwide compared to One-Day Internationals and Tests.

ASHEFAQ UL-ALAM

Now, when talking about T20Is, the natural inclination of cricket fans would be to think about the men's game, which dwarfs the women's game in terms of popularity and media visibility.

It thus may come as a surprise that the highest-ever attendance for a T20I came in a women's match: the final of the ICC Women's T20 World Cup 2020 between Australia and India at the iconic Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG).

A record 86,174 people turned up at the MCG for that final, where they saw the hosts thump India by 85 runs to bring home their fifth trophy.

Granted, several factors contributed to that massive turnout. The home team, Australia, were in the final, facing India, who had reached that stage for the first time. The match took place in a colosseum like the MCG, turning that final into a perfect storm and setting the stage for a grand spectacle.

Still, so many people turning up to watch two women's cricket teams fight it out for the title must have felt like vindication for the International Cricket Council (ICC), who had raised the winners' and runners-up's purse that year to \$1 million and \$500,000 respectively, five times the amount offered in the previous edition.

The bigger investment from the ICC seemingly increased people's interest. In the following edition in 2023, held in South Africa, the audience once again tuned in in large numbers, with the number of global

viewing hours reaching 192 million – 44 per cent higher than the previous tournament.

The ninth edition of the 10-team event is set to raise its curtains on October 3 in Sharjah, and this time the ICC has opened up its coffers even more and taken a bold step in their endeavour to ensure pay parity in men's and women's cricket.

The ICC has more than doubled the total prize pool for the 2024 edition, increasing it to \$7,958,080. The champions will bag a staggering \$2.34 million, while the runners-up will get \$1.17 million, marking a 134 per cent increase in each. For comparison, India bagged \$2.45 million for winning this year's men's T20 World Cup, and runners-up South Africa won \$1.28 million.

The two teams that get knocked out in the semi-finals of the 10-team event will receive \$675,000 each, more than three times their 2023 payout. Even the ones who get knocked out in the group stage will not return empty-handed, as a base prize of \$112,500 will be awarded to all 10 participating teams.

This huge mark-up in cash rewards has already turned the ninth edition of the tournament into a landmark event in

women's sports in general, as for the first time in any major team sport, a women's tournament is virtually handing out the same prize money as the men's.

Bangladesh were set to be the country where this historic event took place, but due to unforeseen circumstances, the tournament had to be shifted to the UAE.

When it comes to the cricketing standpoint, the women's game has been on an incline for years.

In the inaugural edition in 2009, when England emerged victorious, runners-up New Zealand's coach Gary Stead admitted that his team looked amateurish compared to the English side. Fast forward to now, several teams are playing exciting T20 cricket, piquing the interest of fans worldwide.

Defending champions and record six-time winners Australia, led by the explosive wicketkeeper-batter Alyssa Healy, will begin the tournament as the favourites. But inaugural champions England, former champions West Indies, a strong India, and last year's runners-up South Africa will pose a strong challenge.

South Asian teams like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan spring a surprise or two, aided by the typically spin-friendly pitches in the UAE, while newcomers Scotland will be eager to make a mark.

But more than anything, this tournament needs to continue showcasing top-quality cricket and attracting more viewers. If it does, it will not only justify the pay and prize hike but also set an example for other major sports to follow in the ICC's footsteps.



KEY PLAYERS TO WATCH

Sophie Ecclestone: England's top-ranked T20I bowler is a seasoned campaigner, ranking fourth in all-time T20I wicket-takers with 126 dismissals.

Beth Mooney: Australia's opening batter currently leads the T20I batter rankings. Mooney's career total of 2,858 runs places her 10th on the all-time list.

Hayley Matthews: West Indies'



inspirational captain and last year's Women's T20I Player of the Year has made significant contributions with both bat and ball. Matthews is currently ranked third among batters, sixth among bowlers, and is the number one all-rounder in T20Is. Her ability to play spin sets her apart.

Nahida Akter: Bangladesh's leading T20I wicket-taker with 99 scalps, left-arm off-spinner Nahida will play a crucial role in the spin-friendly conditions

of the UAE. She is also the only Bangladeshi woman to have won the ICC Women's Player of the Month award, which she received in November last year.

Smriti Mandhana: Known for her elegant stroke play and rapid scoring, India's reliable opener consistently performs under pressure. The form of Mandhana, ranked fourth among T20I batters, could be decisive in determining whether India posts or chases large totals.

Marizanne Kapp: The pace-bowling all-rounder is a key player in global franchise leagues and her performance will be vital for South Africa as they look to surpass their runner-up finish in 2023.

Chamari Athapaththu: One of Sri Lanka's brightest stars, the aggressive opener is always one to watch and is currently ranked fifth in the T20I all-rounder standings.

Tigresses face acid test in bid to change their fortune

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

Bangladesh team have taken arguably their best-ever preparation ahead of the ICC Women's T20 World Cup in the UAE, starting on October 3, with a good number of international fixtures, a domestic T20 tournament and long training camps, highlighting the ambition of achieving success in the global meet.

It will, however, be interesting to see whether they can actually reap the benefits of the build-up and showcase their 'A' game in the 10-team event, the ninth edition of which will get underway with the Bangladesh-Scotland encounter in Sharjah.

Except for the Asia Cup triumph in 2018, the Tigresses have yet to achieve any significant success in either white-ball formats of cricket, even though they have beaten a few big teams here and there in bilateral series.

On the global stage, though, the Tigresses have failed miserably, having the lowest win percentage (9.52) in T20 World Cups among



teams that have played at least 20 matches.

Another unwanted record is looming for the Tigresses, that of the longest losing streak in T20 World Cups, currently held by Ireland (17), with Bangladesh only one defeat behind – a losing streak dating back to 2016 T20 World Cup. Hence the fear of another World Cup debacle this year isn't completely baseless.

The Tigresses, ranked ninth in WT20I rankings, are still far behind in showcasing fight against most of the teams due to their lack of batting

technique, insufficient power-hitting ability and over-reliance on skipper Nigar Sultana Joty.

Another big issue is that Bangladesh haven't played enough against big teams, especially against two of their group mates, England and the West Indies. Bangladesh have met these two teams on only three occasions each – all of those in the 2014, 2016 and 2018 T20 World Cups, losing on all six occasions.

There are a few silver linings for the Tigresses though.

Bowling department, especially

the spin department, looks solid with a number of quality spinners like Nahida Akter, Fahima Khatun and Rabeya Khan regularly performing.

Last year, Bangladesh tasted a maiden T20I victory against South Africa – their other group opposition – that too at their own backyard and eventually drew the three-match series 1-1.

There is a good blend of youth and experience in the side and if they can make good use of that combination in the field, Joty's semifinal blueprint can become a reality.

"To play in the semifinals, we will have to win against three teams. We have different plans for each team. If we can execute our gameplan, then it will be better for us. We have defeated South Africa in T20Is. We rarely meet England, only in World Cups, so it might be difficult for them too," Joty had said in a press meet in Mirpur on September 24.

But to achieve that lofty target, Joty and Co must end their losing streak first by beating Scotland, otherwise things might only go downhill.

The ninth edition of the ICC Women's T20 World Cup will take place in the United Arab Emirates from October 3 to 20. The 23-match event will feature the top 10 teams, split into two groups of five, competing across two venues: the Dubai International Stadium and the iconic Sharjah Cricket Stadium.

GROUPS

Group A: Australia, India, New Zealand, Pakistan, Sri Lanka
Group B: Bangladesh, England, Scotland, South Africa, West Indies

FORMAT

After the teams play in a single round-robin format in the group stage, the top two teams from each group will advance to the semi-finals, where the group winners will face the second-placed teams from the opposite groups, before the title decider in Dubai.

HOW TEAMS QUALIFIED

The top six teams from the 2023 edition (Australia, England, India, South Africa, New Zealand, and West Indies) automatically qualified for the 2024 tournament. Pakistan earned their spot as the next highest-ranked team at the February 2023 cut-off date.

Despite the tournament being relocated from Bangladesh, Nigar Sultana Joty's side retains their place as hosts. Sri Lanka and Scotland secured the final two spots through the ICC Women's T20 World Cup Qualifier, held earlier this year in the UAE.

PRIZE MONEY

The ICC has doubled the prize pool for the 2024 edition, raising it to USD 7.96 million. The winners will receive USD 2.34 million—134% more than Australia earned for their 2023 victory. Prizes for the finalists, semi-finalists, and group stage finishers have also been increased.

BANGLADESH FIXTURES

October 3: Bangladesh vs Scotland, Sharjah
October 5: Bangladesh vs England, Sharjah
October 10: Bangladesh vs West Indies, Sharjah
October 12: Bangladesh vs South Africa, Dubai

Year	Hosts	Winners	Runners-up
2009	England	England	New Zealand
2010	West Indies	Australia	New Zealand
2012	Sri Lanka	Australia	England
2014	Bangladesh	Australia	England
2016	India	West Indies	Australia
2018	West Indies	Australia	England
2020	Australia	Australia	India
2023	South Africa	Australia	South Africa

ROLL OF HONOUR

