

“Definitely we [Bangladesh’s ‘big five’] didn’t win a major trophy, but I don’t agree that we don’t have any achievements.”

Bangladesh batter
MAHMUDULLAH RIYAD



ASHEFAQ UL-ALAM

September 9, 2007 is not

a red-letter day in Bangladesh cricket, but it ought to be.

On that day, as Bangladesh took on Sri Lanka in a group-stage match of the inaugural ICC World T20 in Johannesburg, which they lost by 64 runs, Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, Mahmudullah Riyad, Mushfiqur Rahim, Shakib Al Hasan and Tamim Iqbal appeared together for the Tigers for the very first time, marking the beginning of the era of the Five Pillars.

THE GENESIS OF FIVE PILLARS

At that time, Mashrafe was the only settled member of the Bangladesh team, with the other four still young upstarts, trying to make a name for themselves in the game. But in the following few years, Mashrafe’s injury troubles made him almost a sporadic figure in the national team, while the other four gradually rose in prominence in the side, especially Shakib.

Till 2014, the term Five Pillars did not really exist in Bangladesh cricket’s zeitgeist, but its prominence really came to the fore in the 2015 ODI World Cup in Australia. Mashrafe and his men surpassed everyone’s expectations in that tournament, knocking out England from the group stage and reaching the quarter-finals for the very first time, thus kickstarting the legend of the Five Pillars.

And this legend kept growing in the next few years, thanks to the consecutive series wins over Pakistan, India and South Africa in 2015,

and heartbroken when he got banned by the ICC in 2020 for not disclosing contacts with bookmakers. Three years later, he followed the footsteps of Mashrafe and joined the Awami League, a decision that further damaged his image. Now, the all-rounder, much like Mashrafe, is trying to appease the enraged fans for his silence during the July Uprising that led to the ouster of the Awami League government.

Meanwhile, Tamim’s actions gradually started getting more erratic. He did not play T20s for almost two years before finally quitting the format in 2022 and started missing more and more matches due to injuries. His retirement and prompt un-retirement just months before last year’s ODI World Cup — where he was supposed to lead the team — and then the public mud-slinging with Shakib after getting left out of the World Cup squad left a bad taste in everyone’s mouths.

Mahmudullah and Mushfiqur remained more of silent figures during this period but have hinted that they harbour grudges about how they were treated. Mahmudullah, who retired from Tests in 2021 after hitting a century on his comeback and returned to the ODI World Cup squad last year after getting dropped from the squad months prior, quit T20s after the recent India tour. Mushfiqur also retired from T20s right before the 2022 T20 World Cup.

Now, the remaining four stalwarts are only active in ODIs. Shakib has already announced his intention to retire from international cricket from the tournament, and the other three also have a chance to join him and move on from the game hand in hand. But the grand adulation for

in a staunch defence of their legacy, Mahmudullah, in his last press conference in India said that the achievements of the big five can’t only be gauged by trophies.

“I think if a trophy is the only benchmark, then many legends wouldn’t be called legends. The situation is very different from the time I made my debut in 2007 to now. It is not just due to the Poncho Pandob [Five Pillars]. Every player, coach and team management involved have all contributed to this change in Bangladesh cricket,” he added.

Granted, winning a trophy is not everything, but having one certainly helps cement the legacy of a generation. By winning the ICC Trophy in 1997, Akram Khan and Co ushered in a new age in Bangladesh cricket. For all they have done, Mashrafe and Co don’t have any silverware to show for it. In this same period, the men’s Under-19 team won the World Cup in 2020 and the women’s national team won the Asia Cup in 2018, while the men’s senior team

coach in all formats, later clarified multiple times that his frustration was never directed at Dhoni, but at the narrative set by the media. In a cricketing culture where hero-worshipping is the norm, Gambhir’s take may have seemed out of place, but it was relevant nonetheless. So, the question that should be asked next is why does the media create this narrative, and what do they get out of it?

Well, this is where things get a bit murky. For a media outlet to be successful, it needs to attract eyeballs, and a tried and tested method of ensuring that is to make people emotionally invested in the team. Using patriotism, national pride and, in some cases, geopolitical tensions between countries as fuel to attract viewers is an effective method, no doubt, but an even better play would be to get people emotionally attached to certain individuals.

Media can help create a cult surrounding a cricketer and then use it to attract viewership. Actually, this does not just apply to fans; even if a player has a lot of haters, the media can just as well exploit that hatred to attract viewership. But then again, there is another side to it. No matter how hard the media or a player’s personal PR agency tries, at the end of the day, it’s the fans who decide who they want to follow. And for the media, it just makes business sense to give the fans what they want.

So, the hero-worshipping of cricketers is a two-way process, done hand in hand by the media and the fans. Ironically, the cricketers themselves can do very little to dictate how they will be treated. Their PR agencies can try, but the media and fans, especially in the age of social media, decide who will be the cricketing icons among the rest.

THE PRICE OF UNCHECKED POPULARITY
Coming back to Bangladesh, one could argue that even if the fans and the media went overboard in their adulation of the Five Pillars, it did not harm the team, as these five were the best players Bangladesh possessed throughout this period.

But looking at the entire era of the Five Pillars and the years they were down to four, it becomes evident that other than a few exceptions, almost every other player was viewed as expendable.

This tendency did not harm the team when the five stalwarts were at the height of their powers, but even when they were in the midst of an elongated slump or when age was catching up to them, their status still earned them a longer leash than others.

Moreover, the younger four of the veterans — Shakib, Tamim, Mahmudullah and Mushfiqur — have enjoyed this special treatment almost from the start of their careers. At a very young age, they were all elevated to the national team and accorded a long learning period, which came at the expense of many others not getting a proper go at the highest level.

And on the rare occasions when any of them were dropped, it became breaking news. The resulting pressure on their replacements was immense, as they knew that a few bad outings would lead to them being axed from the side, making way for the stalwart’s triumphant return.

WHOSE FAULT IS IT ANYWAY?

Over 17 years have passed since that day in Johannesburg. With the end drawing near, the question that naturally comes up is what would be their legacy as a group.

Will they be remembered for the many historic wins they achieved for Bangladesh, for making the countrymen believe they can not only compete but even win against top sides in cricket? Or will they be remembered as a group of cricketers who were more hype than substance, who delved into petty ego fights rather than joining hands for the greater good?

But before passing judgement on their legacy, it is important to acknowledge one thing. These players never demanded special treatment. Just because the five in question failed to live up to the expectations imposed on them, do they really deserve to be ostracised?

THE ‘BIG FIVE’ IN NUMBERS

All of the ‘big five’ of Bangladesh’s cricket have played together in 111 matches across formats, helping the Tigers win on 54 occasions. Bangladesh lost in 53 of these matches with four producing no results.

In the 29 T20s that they featured together, the Tigers lost 16 and won 13.

Unsurprisingly, the five stalwarts played together most in ODIs — 81 matches, in which the Tigers lost 37 times, won 36 times, and saw eight games either produce no results or get abandoned.

The only time they all played together in a Test was during a 95-run win over hosts West Indies in Kingstown in 2009.

The Kingstown Test was the last for Mashrafe, who had limped off the field due to an injury very early in that game.

The first time that all five of them played together was back in September 2007 in a T20 World Cup game against Sri Lanka.

Their final time together was also in a World Cup (ODI) — against Pakistan at Lord’s in July 2019.

During the nearly 12-year period between their first and last appearance together, the Tigers have not played a single game across formats without at least one of the five stalwarts.

Since the end of that 12-year period, Bangladesh have played 14 matches across formats without any of them, losing 7 and winning 6.

Bangladesh’s win/loss ratio in matches where all five of them have featured in is 1.018, which is more than 21 times better than the pre-‘big five’ era.



playing the final of the 2016 and 2018 Asia Cup, reaching the semi-final of the ICC Champions Trophy for the first time, and winning maiden Tests against England and Australia.

HONEYMOON LASTS FOR FIVE YEARS

The fascination over the quintet started to wane in 2019. Mashrafe, who was lauded for his inspirational leadership just four years ago, was now seen more as a burden for the team. While Shakib pulled off what could be termed as the greatest all-round performance in an ODI World Cup, with 606 runs and 11 wickets in eight outings, Bangladesh finished eighth out of the 10 teams. The brunt of the blame went to Mashrafe, who claimed just one wicket in the entire tournament, and the fact he had joined politics before the World Cup and became a parliament member from Awami League hampered his image, drawing questions over his cricketing commitment.

After Mashrafe left the picture quite unceremoniously, quitting the ODI captaincy early next year following a home series against Zimbabwe — having retired from T20s in 2017 and not being fit enough to play Tests since 2009 — the Tigers were down to four pillars.

By that time, the foundation had been rocked. Shakib left his legions of fans shocked

the Five Pillars has been damaged beyond repair at this point, and a collective send-off might make fans nostalgic, but it is unlikely to evoke the same emotion.

REALITY OF THEIR LEGACY

The masses had turned these five cricketers into icons, placed them above every other Bangladesh cricketer and showered them with all the love they could muster. But why? The Five Pillars were definitely a cut above the rest from the contemporary in Bangladesh, but other than Shakib, none of them were truly world class players for a sustained period. The other four had their moments, sure, but Shakib was the only one who could be considered among the best in the business.

Mashrafe was a shadow of his old self after the injuries, Tamim was never consistent for a great length of time, and Mahmudullah has a knack for turning up on the big stage, with three centuries in ODI World Cups and one in the Champions Trophy, but consistency was never his forte. Mushfiqur, even though the most consistent of the lot, would often be playing second fiddle to whoever was the star player of the day. And for all that these five have achieved as individuals, they never won a trophy for Bangladesh in an ICC or ACC event.