

A victory that should unite A DIVIDED NATION

ATIQUE ANAM

The SAFF Women's Championship success could not have come at a better time for Bangladesh, a nation divided along many lines and one that is trying to recalibrate its identity following a major shake-up in its socio-political landscape.

The win may not have generated as much euphoria as two years ago when Sabina Khatun and Co first proved their supremacy at the South Asian level. That is probably because Bangladesh were one of the favourites this time around and the outcome was not too much of a surprise. Or perhaps it could be because of the current state of our collective being: our hearts full of desire for a brighter future, yet our minds numbed by the fear of uncertainty. But that is exactly why this victory should be more significant than the previous one.



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

This victory could at least teach us, as a nation, a lesson or two about sticking together through tough times and achieving glory through unity. That's because this group of girls have not only conquered South Asian football, twice in a row now, they have been conquering extreme social, cultural, and economic hardship, injustice even, all through their lives.

If you ever happened to have stepped inside the Bangladesh Football Federation premises in the bustling city centre of Motijheel, you may have wondered how this group of girls, living in such a shabby dormitory, go on to conquer a much more privileged opponent like India.

The answer, perhaps, lies with the fact that these Bangladeshi girls have taken on adversaries from a very young age -- adversaries in the form of social stigma related to women in sports and in the form of their families' desire to marry them off at a very young age.

Our women's football team is an extremely diverse sporting unit as they come from all corners of the country -- from the remotest village on the coastal belt to the foothills of Garo mountains, from the dreary flatlands on the north to the mountainous terrains on the southeast. They come from diverse ethnicities, religions, caste and creed -- all living under the same roof, sharing their lives through football all the while trying to forget the ills of the past.

Many of them come from communities which face racial abuse till this day because they don't share the same culture with the majority. Many of them have seen their kinsmen live in constant fear of those who oppress them and try to usurp their land and properties. But these girls have taken all those episodes in their stride and made the country proud, leaving the countrymen sing their praise in unison.

Now it is the state's responsibility to ensure these girls get a better life and start across all sectors of the society the practice of equality and inclusivity, which have been catchwords of Bangladesh's 'second independence'.



PHOTO: BFF

Our success is a result of prayers and support of everyone. This is our second success but it feels like the first time. The congregation of so many people proves how much people love football.

Bangladesh captain Sabina Khatun

A triumphant return

ANISUR RAHMAN

Bangladesh, winners of the SAFF Women's Championship, returned home from Nepal with their second consecutive regional title amid huge enthusiasm from fans and media personnel at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport yesterday.

Although the women in red and green did not demand any open-top bus parade this time, unlike the last time around, an open-top double-decker bus of BRTC, decked with pictures of the triumphant team, was ready to welcome the team.

After being received with bouquets inside the airport, the team started their long journey towards the BFF House in Motijheel, with the parade followed by hundreds of jubilant fans lining up the streets on both sides. The players responded spontaneously to the crowd, waving hands, some even throwing flower petals at the fans.

It was an overwhelming experience at the VIP gate of the airport as hundreds of media personnel flocked to grab footage and soundbites of the SAFF champions, with the security personnel sweating to control the crowd.

Head coach Peter Butler, captain Sabina Khatun, the tournament's best player Ritu Porna Chakma and best goalkeeper Rupna Chakma came out through the VIP lounge with the prestigious trophy to meet the press.

"I've always said there's great potential within the women's game. I'm really delighted with the girls, and especially for the people of Bangladesh. It makes me very very proud to represent Bangladesh,"

Butler said at the crowded press briefing.

"It's not the fact that we won it, it's the fact how we won it. We won it playing really good football, beginning from Day 1. Whatever team we've put out were competitive, everybody played their part, from the 23 squad," the coach

football."

"We are very happy to deliver this trophy for the countrymen. Please keep us in your prayers so that we can deliver more trophies in coming days," said Ritu Porna.

The fans at the BFF premises created a festive atmosphere, chanting slogans for the team and

"The youth and sports ministry has declared Tk one crore for the team for delivering a beautiful gift to the nation as it is an international success," added Asif.

"There are some allegations regarding facilities in women's football team and women's cricket team. To address those problems,

BFF keen to retain Butler

SPORTS REPORTER

Mahfuza Akhter Kiron, chairman of Bangladesh Football Federation's (BFF) women's wing, voiced strong support for head coach Peter Butler despite recent tensions between him and senior players surfacing over team selection during the

winning campaign in Nepal.

Under Butler, Bangladesh defended their SAFF Women's Championship title, showcasing impressive performances since the former West Ham player took charge in March.

"I requested Butler to wait until November 2, when I come back

from the AFC Congress in Korea. I will sit with him then.

"We don't want to lose him, even after his contract comes to an end in December, because he is the best coach we've ever hired," Kiron told The Daily Star on Thursday.

Read full story on The Daily Star's website

For the people of Bangladesh, for what they have gone through recently, I think it will give everybody a little bit of something to cheer about, to smile about and be happy.

Bangladesh coach PETER BUTLER



added.

Thanking the people behind this success, captain Sabina said that she feels similar happiness to the time when Bangladesh had lifted the trophy for the first time two years ago.

"Winning the trophy for the second time feels like the first one and the gathering of such huge number of people prove how much the people of Bangladesh love

for Bangladesh.

Following their arrival at the BFF House, the winning members met Sports Adviser Asif Mahmud, who declared Tk one crore reward for the team.

"The honourable chief adviser expressed his interest to meet the members of the national women's football team, who have been invited at his residence on Saturday," Asif said in a short briefing.

we have already spoken to the BFF and will discuss the issues with the BCB. We are hopeful about solving these issues. The way the women athletes are bringing international success, we believe they can bring big trophies in coming days and the government is willing to help them," the sports adviser added.

Tigers turn fear into reality

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN from Chattogram

When Bangladesh finished Day 2 of their second and series-deciding Test against South Africa in Chattogram at 38 for four in their first innings on Wednesday, doubts seeped in whether the Tigers would be able to survive the entire third day with their remaining 16 wickets in both innings.

That fear turned into reality yesterday as Bangladesh were bundled out for 159 in their first innings, and for 143 in the second after being asked to follow-on, eventually ending up being hammered by an innings and 273 runs in response to South Africa's mammoth 575 for six (declared).

In both innings, Bangladesh witnessed extraordinary batting collapses only to see their tailenders helping them out to take their scores past the 100-run mark.

Bangladesh skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto, who has been under the scanner for his form with the willow and for uncertainty regarding his captaincy, was one of the six Bangladeshi batters who got dismissed twice in a day.

The southpaw, who scored only one fifty and a total of 317 runs in his last 15 Test innings this year at an average of 21.14, couldn't deny the fact that his own poor performance had an impact on the team's disastrous

performance not only in this game but also in the last two series as well.

"The most disappointing thing is that in my last few innings, I've been getting out between 20 to 40 runs after getting set. This is damaging to the team. I need to focus more on my batting in this regard," Shanto admitted that he needed to step up.

The burden of scoring runs at the top does not only fall on the skipper and Shanto pointed that out as well.

"We have been batting like this for a long time. If you don't get top-order partnerships, the rest of the batters will find it difficult in red-ball cricket. I don't know how our top-order batters prepare or think, but if it goes on like this, this will be the result.

"This was a good wicket. Even in Mirpur [in the first Test that the Tigers lost by seven wickets], the type of wicket it was, we shouldn't have gotten out so quickly. Overall, we didn't bat well in these two Tests," Shanto added.

Before the start of the series, Shanto had expressed his wish to step down from his role as the Tigers' all-format captain. Shanto, however, said that his hesitance regarding captaincy 'might have' been on the back of his mind but also mentioned that it still could not justify such a shambolic batting performance by his side.



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Shakib to sit out Afghanistan series: Faruque

SPORTS REPORTER from Chattogram

Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) president Faruque Ahmed said yesterday that ace all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan is set to miss the upcoming three-match ODI series against Afghanistan, starting on November 6 in the UAE, owing to a lack of practice.

"Shakib is likely to miss the next series [against Afghanistan] as he has been out of practice for some time and probably needs some time to regroup," Faruque told reporters in Chattogram.

Faruque claimed that it was Shakib's call not to play in the Afghanistan series. He also said that the all-rounder can feature in the all-format West Indies tour, starting on November 22, if he is fit enough.

On Wednesday, Faruque had said that Shakib was available for the Afghanistan ODIs. Asked whether the BCB had come to a decision on Shakib, Faruque said: "Regarding Shakib Al Hasan, since the team has not been given yet, it means he is available."

The series is set to get underway in Sharjah on November 6 with the remaining matches scheduled for November 9 and 11.

Bangladesh are expected to depart for the UAE on November 3 in two separate groups. The squad for the series is yet to be announced.

Much like India, their star batter Virat Kohli has had an underwhelming Test series so far against New Zealand. While Kohli will look to recover his form, India will be hoping to avoid a rare series whitewash at home when they take on the Black Caps in the third and final Test of the series in Mumbai from Friday. A win for New Zealand, who stamped their authority with convincing wins in the first two Tests, will see India clean swept at a home Test series for the first time in 24 years.



PHOTO: AFP