

Footsteps to the future

Winning the second SAFF Championship should open more doors for Bangladeshi women footballers



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Till the 80th minute, the scores were tied at a goal each. Both Bangladesh and Nepal fought brilliantly till that point; however, after Nepal equalised, they began to pose more of a threat in the attacking third. Two attacks from Sabitra Bhandari exposed Bangladesh's deteriorating physicality, but somehow they held on. Then, a quick throw-in changed everything.

Ritu Porna Chakma received the ball well on the far left, quickly manoeuvring past the Nepali defender before lopping it over three players and the keeper. When the shot left her foot, it felt like time had stopped. It sailed past Anjila Subba and beyond her reach, hitting the back of the net. The entire stadium fell silent, except for the dugout of the visiting team. There it was, the winning goal, and it was a spectacular one.

Bangladesh came into the SAFF Women's Championship as the defending champions. After drawing with Pakistan, they convincingly defeated India, SAFF's powerhouse, with a scoreline of 3-1. In the semifinals, Tohura Khatun's hatrick and Sabina Khatun's brace secured a resounding 7-1 win, setting up a rematch of the previous edition's final against host Nepal.

Aside from India, no other team has won the competition, let alone twice. This victory comes at a critical time as Bangladesh undergoes a political and systemic reform. With a young leader, Asif Mahmud, at the forefront as the youth and sports adviser on the interim government, every major win strengthens the case for giving female athletes the respect and budget they deserve in order to progress their development.

Either way, our women's team really don't need more proof of their worth. Year after year, they have shown resilience and talent. But this is no perfectly oiled machine. There are many discrepancies, shortfalls, and missed opportunities to capitalise on growth. These stem from the Bangladesh Football Federation's failure to function effectively due to systemic corruption.

In 2022, when the women's team became champions for the first time, they were promised improvements and fair resource allocation. But those promises were broken, and the resources never arrived. When the team had a chance to play in the Olympic

qualifiers, Abu Nayeem Shohag, the former general secretary of BFF, claimed there was not enough budget for their travels to Myanmar. It was disheartening that in a country with so few sporting achievements, we were willing to forgo the of these due to women

mismanaged funds. Worse still, in 2023, FIFA banned Abu Nayeem Shohag and others for illegal conduct, failing to fulfil their duties, and falsifying accounts. The question remains: did these officials feel no shame when they denied the women's team the opportunity due to the federation's own dishonesty? Is our women's team really so low in priority that they received no respect or empathy for their hard work?

There is no denying that our current crop of players is generational in South Asia, and with a little support, they have limitless potential. The general mindset on women's football has evolved in the region as well. In contrast to 20 years ago, when some people, on the grounds of religion, protested against the women's team playing against a team from West Bengal, there is now a genuine appreciation and pride.

Another reason this final was important

is because it demonstrated the collective power of a united country. Several players come from Indigenous backgrounds, and it is vital to remember that the minority communities contribute immensely to the country. That's perhaps why Ritu's celebration felt appropriate. Her "shush" to the crowd could easily be interpreted as a response to those who fail to see their value. Without them, this final might have easily gone Nepal's way.

This championship gives us a chance to start anew and improve all aspects of women's sports, ensuring that no community gets left behind.

But how do we progress? What is the next step to ensure that we don't fall into the same broken path again? First, we need to pay these players the unpaid

salary they are owed. Yes, Bangladesh can boast of being a pioneer in women's sports with the highest player wages in South Asia, but if they are not paid, what is that really worth? Fortunately, the government has said steps are being taken to clear the dues. Second, we need to rethink the system of awarding large lump sums only when players win major tournaments. Bonuses are fine and justified, but a steady, systematic funding process is essential. This would allow growth in the game, better infrastructure, and improved academies to create a sustainable path to professional development. Most importantly, we need experienced coaches in the subdivisions of the sport, who can develop the different areas of a team. Organising more international friendlies is equally essential. We have barely played any international matches since 2022, and this lack of exposure shows when we face teams beyond South Asia.

There is much to be done if we want to elevate our women's team to the next stage. Systemic changes in BFF's fund management, resource allocation, and transparency are essential for developing our sporting department. Far too many talented youth have abandoned their dreams, and too many players are tired of being failed by the system. Unless we follow through on our promises, progress will remain elusive. Our women's team has never deserved to be a footnote; it's time we gave them a permanent place in the headlines.

And to the Bangladesh women's team and staff members: thank you for making us dream again.



After winning the SAFF Women's Championship for the second consecutive time, Bangladesh women's football team don't really need more proof of their worth.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Jack and the Beanstalk revisited



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

There was this picture of a majestic swan held by a young boy who raided Gono Bhaban on the day of the fall of the Awami League regime. The boy was among the many enthusiasts who stormed the former prime minister's residence—maybe out of curiosity or out of the passion to collect a memento of the day in which our political history changed forever. I write "forever" with a pinch of caution, as one lesson we have learnt recently is that nothing lasts forever. Then again, there are situations in life that recur in history and form a pattern in our collective consciousness.

The reference to the boy with the swan came up in my folklore class recently. Didn't the picture remind us of Jack and the Beanstalk? It is the story in which a naive English boy sells his cow to a trickster for some magical beans. The beans sprout to reach the sky, and the boy climbs up the beanstalk through the clouds to enter the land of the giants. He kills a giant and steals his goose that lays golden eggs. The story disguises colonialism. It glorifies the adventurism of White men and normalises their pillage and pillering. Shakespeare used the famous rhyme, "Fee-fi-fo-fum/I smell the bones of an Englishman," in his play *King Lear*, highlighting the story's Englishness. Norse mythology is the source of one version of the story, which involves giant plants and giant-slaying, while various English colonies in Australia and the Caribbean contain other versions, making the story universal.

In contrast, the boy with the former prime minister's swan has a rather local and factual heritage, unless we think of him as one of the actors who slay the metaphorical giants of fascism. He was one of those who stole frozen fish from the freezer, chased deer in the garden, snatched rabbits from the cage. The list goes on. On that day, a defiant reclaiming of ownership marked the seizure of the

then PM's personal property. Narratives clashed to establish who the bigger thief was. Even when ordinary citizens intervened to stop some of the looters, the perpetrators responded by asking, "Where were you in the last 15 years when the country was being plundered?" A valid question. We were part of a system where the only means of punishing a politician's wrongdoings was through the national election. We lost that opportunity as there was no democratic method to intervene and penalise the wrongdoers. The mass uprising



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

was, therefore, inevitable. Change was achieved through numerous sacrifices. However, we are finding changemakers in different roles, prompting us to re-examine some of the fundamental cultural and moral questions.

These issues pertain to the significant social fragmentation and self-serving ambitions prevalent in our contemporary society. Parallels between our present climate and the enduring themes of our folk culture are unmistakable. The folk tales, riddles and rhymes that are passed down generations depict a world where the clever triumph over the righteous

and deception, rather than honour, often leads to success. Is it possible that, layered in our collective psyche, we nurture secret admiration for these cultural heroes who don't necessarily conform to social norms? Is it possible to consider our present political climate as an extension of our ancient legacy?

The way the former prime minister left the scene serves as a reminder of *Tonatuni* (tailorbird), who gathered all the ingredients to make a cake and consumed it all by themselves. The jungle animals were invited to celebrate; they assumed they would receive their fair share of the cake. When they arrived at the empty house, all they found were a few relics. I always questioned the rationale behind teaching our young learners the *Tonatuni* story, which extols the cunning of tricksters who prioritise wit and cunning over fairness or justice. After August 5, I knew this story had prepared us for history.

We grew up with many such stories,

folklore reveals certain shared symbols and archetypes that connect to our collective unconscious. These animals or similar figures rely on their cunningness to outwit stronger opponents.

The Native American prairie dog Coyote, for instance, uses trickery to teach moral lessons to his clan. His misadventures often cause chaos, but they chart human values. These characters, spanning continents and centuries, all share a single trait: they break the rules and upend established norms with impunity. The boy with the swan offered an epiphanic moment: a part of us, inherited through such tales and lore, harbours an instinctive desire for rule-breaking, and a willingness to overlook moral ambiguity if it means personal gain. Tales of *sheyal mama* (Uncle Fox) or *boka kumir* (the Foolish Crocodile) tap into a side of our psyche that perhaps senses the power dynamics in society—the need to outwit others to survive, a sentiment that is echoed in our modern culture's often uncritical acceptance of self-promotion and individualism at any cost. Let's not forget that, as a race, we inherit the notorious legacy of thuggery. English reformer Lord Bentick strongly stalled the rampant thugs of Bengal, who used scarves to strangle their victims. The gangs of Mohammadpur live up to the old reputation of thugs. We need the intervention of reformers to put a stop to this.

Political and criminal agents often act as "disrupters," implying that disruption, even in a ruthless or unethical way, is a virtue. It's not surprising that there is a growing culture of disrupters in our educational institutions. Students, frustrated with a lack of faith in the system, are taking matters into their own hands, seeking immediate satisfaction rather than long-term ethical grounding. Nobody wants failure. Everyone seeks "auto pass" without any opposition. It is as if their survival depends on the annihilation of the other. Rather than liberating the swan from the giant's grasp, they aim to take advantage of it, much like Jack in the fairytale. Rather than ignoring this tendency in our collective psyche, perhaps it's time we confronted it, questioned its role in our society, and, most importantly, sought ways to transform these energies into forces that serve the common good.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Falafel holder
- 5 Go by
- 9 Plains grazers
- 10 Hand costs
- 12 Bay
- 13 Kick off
- 14 Aiming to lose
- 16 2016 Olympics host
- 17 Top rating
- 18 Running wild
- 20 Rehab target
- 22 Not active
- 23 Tear into tatters
- 25 Crimson Tide, for short
- 28 Regardless
- 32 Just for kicks
- 34 Be in the red
- 35 Harry's friend
- 36 Succeeding
- 38 Some exams
- 40 Was frugal
- 41 Bother
- 42 Undoes a dele
- 43 Piano parts

DOWN

- 1 Beaten on the mat
- 2 Vacation spot
- 3 — the line (obeyed)
- 4 Ohio college
- 5 Elbows on the table
- 6 Hill builder
- 7 Was rude, in a way
- 8 Continuing story
- 9 Flora and fauna
- 11 Put away
- 15 Go aboard
- 19 Orderly
- 21 Part of a Caesar quote
- 24 As a group
- 25 Fifth element
- 26 Hooded jacket
- 27 Get by
- 29 Coolidge's successor
- 30 Young hooters
- 31 Fuses
- 33 Party VIPs
- 37 Pro —
- 39 Place down



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