

**We had a lot of issues in the camp but we ignored all the issues and thought if we could succeed, we will be able to attract interest from different quarters.**

MEHRAB HASAN SAMIN  
captain of Bangladesh youth hockey team



## Youth keep hockey's FLICKER ALIVE



for their maiden Women's Junior Asia Cup appearance. Ambitions were high, goals were moderate, but the outcome was quite frustrating. The team eventually returned empty-handed, losing all their group games, including against Thailand whom they had beaten in the qualifying campaign of this tournament.

The ad-hoc committee's general secretary Lt Col (ret'd) Riazul Hasan admitted that there is a lot to be done on the women's hockey front.

"There are various issues involved with women's hockey, especially keeping in mind the social context," Riazul told The Daily Star. "The team that we have right now is very young, 16 years old on average. So our job will be to keep these players and groom them for the future. Furthermore, we will ask the district and divisional organisers to see how they can help us in women's hockey."

The most pressing issue, though, is preparing a solid pipeline for the senior team by ensuring that top-tier competitions like the premier league, the club cup and the first division hockey league are kept on the pitch every year.

Ending a long hiatus, the premier league



was held earlier this year, but the standard of competition and the ability of the clubs to form teams were called into question various times during the event.

The reason? Most clubs could not get enough financial support to form teams or give the players proper accommodation and other facilities. This is the same reason why the sport has become confined inside the boundaries of the BKSP, all but extinguished from the rich breeding grounds of Old Dhaka, Faridpur, Naogaon, Dinajpur and other district towns.

Whether the officials of the new committee at the hockey federation have the means and the time in hand to address and solve these issues remains to be seen, but the youth team have at least provided them with a window of opportunity to pounce upon.

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### ATIQUANAM

Bangladesh hockey hardly ever makes headlines for the right reasons. A sport in perennial turmoil, the once-promising discipline has been weighed down heavily over decades by powerplay of clubs, financial constraints and a lack of discipline. International success in hockey, hence, is a rare currency.

So when the under-21 team qualified for next year's FIH Hockey Junior World Cup, thereby becoming the first Bangladeshi hockey team to earn the eligibility to compete in any level of World Cup, it came as a pleasing surprise to most. And the achievement now presents a huge opportunity before the hockey federation to cash in on and build a platform for future success.

But there are myriad challenges ahead for the ad-hoc committee of the federation, which has been installed following the change of government in the country in the wake of the July Uprising, to pave the path for success. First and foremost is the financial challenge.

Despite being an Olympic discipline, hockey is not quite a money-generating sport. Unlike football and cricket, the member associations in hockey do not receive any funding from its global body, the FIH, or the regional ones like the Asian Hockey Federation. So the Bangladesh Hockey Federation (BHF) relies mostly on local sponsorship apart from the small amount of annual grant it receives from the government to run its regular activities and continue development projects.

When the 80-day training camp was

held at the BKSP ahead of the Under-21 Asia Cup in November-December, the federation was only able to provide the bare necessities to the players in terms of daily allowance and logistical support. Against this backdrop, the fifth-place finish for the young team which featured a draw against Malaysia and a win against China – both much higher-ranked teams – deserves a lot of credit.

The team's captain Mehrab Hasan Samin, speaking to media following the team's return from Oman, hoped their hard work would lure more interest from sponsors and that they could emulate their success in the 24-team Junior World Cup in India later this year.

"We faced a lot of hardship in the camp. The facilities and allowances were minimal. But we did hard work and ignored all of that thinking that if we can do well here and qualify we will be recognised and rewarded," Samin had said.

Preparing this team for the World Cup is just a short-term programme that the federation needs to undertake now. But there are various other avenues that need to be focused upon if a broader range of success is demanded from the sport.

For example, women's hockey, which is still at a nascent stage in the country, needs a bit of attention. There was a rude awakening for the country's hockey officials recently regarding Bangladesh's standing in global women's hockey.

The day the men's junior team returned from Oman, triumphant and full of hope, the women's team set off for the same destination

## 'It is time to brand this group of boys'

Former national forward-turned-coach **Moududur Rahman Shuvo** played a pivotal role in the Bangladesh U-21 hockey team's historic qualification for the Junior World Cup in his first assignment with the team. The BKSP coach, who holds FIH Level-2 credentials, had represented Bangladesh from 1998 to 2006 and retired from domestic hockey in 2010. In an interview with **The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman**, Shuvo discussed the team's dedication in securing their World Cup spot and the preparations required for next December's Men's Hockey Junior World Cup. Excerpts from the interview are as follows:

**The Daily Star (DS):** First of all, congratulations on the maiden achievement of the U-21 hockey team. How difficult was it to achieve this feat, and did the allocation of six Asian quotas to the Junior World Cup help you?

**Moududur Rahman Shuvo (MRS):** When we learned that six teams from Asia would qualify for the Junior World Cup, we set our sights on securing a place because Bangladesh have been in sixth to seventh positions in Asia. The boys were also determined to secure a World Cup at any cost, and they really toiled hard since the qualification round of the AHF Asia Cup, from where they entered the final round after emerging champions. The boys were disciplined, dedicated and motivated to achieve the target, and they finally delivered by securing the place.

**DS:** How much could the Bangladesh Hockey Federation meet your requirements during the training camp at a time when the country was going through a transition period?

**MRS:** You know that there were hardly any high officials in most national federations at that time [post-August 05], but BHF president Air Chief Marshal Hasan Mahmood Khan did everything single-handedly because he realised that the Bangladesh U-21 team had the potential to do something, especially after the boys became champions in the qualification round. BKSP and its hockey department also extended their full support to the

national hockey camp. Of course, the federation could not meet all the requirements I placed, but the boys and I did not have any problems because the boys were fully focused on qualifying for the World Cup instead of worrying about getting something or not from the federation. They wanted to deliver a breakthrough for the country's hockey.

**DS:** You were given the responsibility of head coach to guide the national team at any level. How challenging was it, and how did you prepare for this?

**MRS:** I also delivered the league title to Mohammedan Sporting Club in my first assignment. I was also assistant coach of the senior national team, and I know A to Z about this group of boys, whom I have been working with since they joined grade seven at BKSP. So, there was no challenge for me, but I believed that if I could do my work perfectly and the boys could hold on to the target, we would achieve it. In 2021, I completed a diploma in India where I worked with different Indian coaches, and I think I gained confidence from completing that course.

**DS:** You will agree that there is a big difference between the Asia Cup and the World Cup. How much do the Bangladeshi boys need to improve to

reduce the gap?

**MRS:** I think the level of the Asia Cup is much higher than the AHF Cup, so it is similar for the Asia Cup and World Cup. As we have quite good time on our hands, we can take proper steps to reduce the gap by engaging them in activities such as holding the domestic league and the franchise league, where they can grow, mature, and gain match temperament by playing against senior players as well as foreign players. The federation can also cooperate in organising leagues, from which the boys can earn some bucks instead of worrying about their future.

**DS:** What should the World Cup squad be based on?

**MRS:** Of course, we should pick the squad on the basis of performance. I have already told the boys that they might lose their place in the future if they can't maintain themselves. Besides, the players who were outside will also try to come into the squad, and it will definitely increase competition among the players. However, only goalkeeper Mohammad Noyon will miss the World Cup due to his age.

**DS:** Did you see any impact after securing the Junior World Cup seat?

**MRS:** I don't see any impact anywhere



## 'Hope the youth team's success will attract sponsors'

**Lt Col (ret'd) Riazul Hasan** has recently been made general secretary of the ad-hoc committee of Bangladesh Hockey Federation. The former hockey player and former director of Army Sports Control Board spoke to **The Daily Star's Atique Anam** regarding the under-21 team's historic qualification for the Junior World Cup, the challenges ahead for the new committee and the state of hockey in the country in general. Following are the excerpts of the interview:

**The Daily Star (DS):** Bangladesh under-21 team's qualification for the Junior World Cup is the first ever for Bangladesh hockey in any type of world cup. What is the plan of the federation to capitalise on this success?

**Riazul Hasan (RH):** Our president has already addressed this issue. We feel we should give this team a good platform to prepare for the main event. We will try to give them five to six months of training. We are planning to increase the base of the coaching staff by including a head coach, two assistant coaches, a physio and, if possible, a trainer. We will try to arrange a few practice matches abroad after consulting with the coaches and the team management.

**DS:** The president has already said that they want to hire a coach or a consultant ahead of the tournament.

**RH:** Exactly. We have discussed about it. We will soon contact with the AHF or different countries to select a coach or a consultant, who will have the experience to guide the team in the world cup.

**DS:** Has there been any decision regarding the start of the training camp?

**RH:** We are thinking about having five-to-six months' camp. The coaches and team management will decide after which stage of the camp we can go for a tour abroad for practice matches.



**DS:** What about the long-term plan regarding this team and that of the senior team?

**RH:** When you speak about long-term plans, you understand there are a lot of issues involved, especially in terms of finance. The federation is not solvent enough and we struggle to get sponsors. But we hope that after the youth team's success, we will get a few sponsors. We will not only need this team but we need to get more young players out of the system so that we get a stronger national team in future. We will start a programme, hopefully, by January or February next year, to make sure we get more young players and players from the school level in the pipeline.

**DS:** There have been a few ambitious programmes taken in the past few years including franchise league, school hockey and women's hockey. What is the plan of the ad-hoc committee about those programmes?

**RH:** We have studied those programmes. I have already said we will focus on school hockey and youth hockey. For women's hockey, there are a few limitations in the country. We will sit with hockey organisers at district and divisional level to see how they can help us in regards to women's hockey. The women's team players that we have are 16 years old on average. Our target is to keep these players.

**DS:** The government has set an agenda to federations regarding reforms in their respective disciplines. What will be the reforms in hockey?

**RH:** We will focus on development of the sport, and we will do that with optimum transparency. We will do everything with consensus from the committee.

**DS:** What about the premier league and the other leagues, which are the source of income for the players?

**RH:** We have already had a few discussions over this. We will ask the clubs to send their representatives for a meeting this month to hear about their issues and set a timeframe regarding the start of the leagues. We are working on cleaning the stadium, which will take a little more than two weeks. Then we will open the field for teams to train in different shifts. We will start the Victory Day tournament from December 23, where services teams and BKSP will participate. Premier league teams have not responded to our invitation, but we will allow players to form a team to participate so that they get to play.