

A dilapidated league and the widening cracks in Bangladesh cricket

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For any structure – a physical one like a skyscraper or an abstract one like Bangladesh cricket – the most important part is its foundation as once the foundation crumbles the structure is bound to come crashing down.

In most Test playing nations in the world, four-day cricket is considered the foundation, but Bangladesh's case is different as the cricketing culture here has historically revolved around the 50-over format.

And as the only recognised List-A competition of the country, the Dhaka Premier League (DPL) is the most important pillar in the foundation of Bangladesh cricket.

But over the years, the grandeur of the league has diminished in spades for a multitude of reasons. The enthusiasm that surrounded DPL in the 80s and 90s has degraded to such an extent that less than a day before the newest edition of this top-tier competition begins, the main topic of discussion is whether the players will even receive their wages which has already been slashed down significantly.

A dilapidated palace

The current state of the DPL can be compared to an abandoned palace, which has a glorious past and once possessed great splendour but now only the hollow structure remains.

Competition from international cricket and the emergence of T20s have certainly played a role in DPL's decline in popularity, but the club-runners' focusing more on the inner workings of the cricket board and how to best leverage their councillorship has arguably played an even bigger role in this deterioration.

Due to the complexities of club politics, the balance among teams is disrupted, and the competition is usually limited to a few sides. The lack of competition has gradually increased to such an extent that even the cricketers themselves have lost interest in the outcome of the matches.

Aminul Islam Bulbul, Bangladesh's first Test centurion, played in the DPL during its heydays in the 90s, when the galleries used to be packed for Abahani,

Mohammedan, or Biman matches and the fans' enthusiasm was immense.

According to Aminul, Bangladesh cricket has come this far by capitalising the fanfare of DPL in those days and the competitive nature of the league helped them develop into a competitive ODI team in quick time.

And now, as the DPL is arguably nearing an all-time low, the national team is also struggling to perform in what used to be its most preferred format.

The Bangladesh team returned to Dhaka after a winless ICC Champions Trophy campaign on Friday. They had also underperformed in the ICC ODI

“The more competitive a country's domestic cricket is, the more competitive they become in international cricket. If there's no competitive edge in domestic cricket, how can you expect it in the national team?”

A league in shambles

The livelihoods of most of the country's professional cricketers depend on DPL and this fundamental aspect has also suffered a major blow ahead of the upcoming season.

Salaries across all clubs have been nearly halved and some cricketers are being forced to play in the league for as little as Tk 50,000.

According to Ashraf, the league right now is being held just for the sake of it.

“You play one day, rest one day, and then play again the next day. This way, there will be no improvement. We just do everything for the sake of doing it.

“To develop, we need to plan better. Besides, the players have to travel to very distant venues. They leave BKSP after praying Fajr [Morning prayer]. Now, it's Ramadan, so they'll have to leave almost right after Sehri. They'll play without sleep. After the game, they'll travel for another five hours. Everyone will just play for the sake of playing.”

The way out?

Aminul, who works as an ICC game development officer, fears that Bangladesh cricket will regress if the Bangladesh Cricket Board doesn't pay attention to these issues now.

“I don't think it should be left to the clubs alone. Everyone needs to focus on fixing this together. Those who are running Bangladesh cricket now should focus on this. Otherwise, we will go backwards.

“In the Champions Trophy, we saw how many dot balls we played. We don't have genuine spinners in the team. These things will improve if we play many 50-over matches. There should be intense competition among four or five teams.”

Aminul used Afghanistan as an example, a country that joined the big leagues decades after Bangladesh but are already performing more consistently in ICC events, having recently defeated England in the Champions Trophy.

“In Afghanistan, there are many 50-over tournaments in domestic cricket. They have taken initiatives to reduce their dot ball problem by bringing forward those whose strike rate is above 80. In 50-over matches, they give incentives to those whose strike rate is above 100.” Accepting that Afghanistan may already have a better domestic structure than Bangladesh, may be a hard pill to swallow for this country's cricket administration. But facts don't care about anyone's feelings and from the looks of it, Bangladesh cricket is in a race against time to salvage its decaying foundation.



World Cup in 2023 and have lost series against New Zealand, Afghanistan and West Indies in between.

Whether this correlation between the decline in DPL and Bangladesh's ODI returns signify a direct causation is difficult to ascertain. But to Aminul, that seems to be the case exactly.

“The face of a country's domestic cricket is essentially the face of its international cricket. If you look at our three events, first-class, BPL, and DPL, first-class cricket is not very competitive. The BPL is our T20 preparation. And the 50-over Dhaka Premier League is our only List-A cricket. We have three national teams from these three tournaments. If there is no competition in these, if we can't create a buzz, then we can't create players.

Former national team captain Mohammad Ashraf, head coach of Dhanmondi Sports Club (formerly Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club), explained the reality to The Daily Star. “Players who used to get Tk 30,00,000 are now playing for Tk 5,00,000 7,00,000. Teams that spent Tk 5,00,00,000 to build their squads last year are now doing it with Tk 2,00,00,000. If they spend Tk 3,00,00,000 less, salaries will naturally decrease.”

This List-A tournament is held every year during the summer, hence, there's a rush to finish it before the monsoon season starts, leading to a packed schedule. Additionally, players face travel hassles due to matches being played at venues outside Dhaka.

Latif links ‘instability’ in Pakistan and Bangladesh cricket

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN from Lahore

Former Pakistan captain Rashid Latif, regarded as one of the finest wicketkeepers of his time, sees a familiar problem plaguing both Pakistan and Bangladesh cricket – instability.

Both teams were eliminated early from the ongoing Champions Trophy in Pakistan and the UAE after losing to India and New Zealand, with their head-to-head fixture abandoned due to rain in Rawalpindi on February 27.

“Very disappointed. We are hosting a big event after 29 years,” Latif told Bangladeshi journalists over phone.

He believes a lack of professionalism, frequent changes in selection committees, and political interference have hindered consistent success for both Pakistan and Bangladesh.

“We have issues with selection, and the higher authorities make too many changes in five years. There have been 26 selectors in four years, and frequent changes in the chairman's position as well. That's why we can't find stability.

“I think it's the same issue for Bangladesh as for Pakistan. The thought process behind cricket is very important. I don't know who is running the board, but politicians are also involved in Bangladesh, just like in Pakistan,” said Latif, who currently works as an analyst for Geo News.

The 56-year-old, who played 37 Tests and 166 ODIs, added that unless both nations adopt a more professional approach, they will continue to fall behind. “Bangladesh and Pakistan need professionals. Even the cricketers themselves aren't professionals.”

Despite his concerns, Latif acknowledges a promising shift in Bangladesh's cricketing identity – their newfound

While Latif speaks about the future, he also carries a lingering regret from the past – one that changed the course of his career.

During the famous Multan Test in 2003, he took a controversial catch of Bangladesh batter Alok Kapali, despite the ball appearing to have touched the ground. The decision stood, and Kapali was given out, but the moment would come back to haunt him.

Now, more than two decades later, Latif reveals that he wanted to overturn the decision and allow Kapali to continue his innings, but Inzamam-ul-Haq, then his deputy, refused.

“Yes, after I took the catch, I asked Inzamam-ul-Haq, ‘Inzi bhai, can we bring him back?’ But he said, ‘No, no, no.’”

Inzamam would go on to play a match-winning innings – an unbeaten 138 off 232 balls – guiding Pakistan to a dramatic one-wicket victory and denying Bangladesh their maiden Test win, which they eventually secured against Zimbabwe in 2005.

Looking back, Latif regrets how it all unfolded. “Definitely, I regret what I did. But I also blame him [Inzamam].”

Latif had subsequently received a five-match ODI ban for violating the code of conduct. Though he returned briefly, his international career never recovered.

“After that, I had a five-match ban, and then I played five matches. But by that time, Inzamam had become captain, and my career was over,” he said with a chuckle.



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emphasis on fast bowling after having been traditionally reliant on spin.

“Bangladesh have made a gear shift towards fast bowlers. It's a positive change, just as Pakistan and West Indies did previously. Their pacers – Nahid [Rana], Taskin [Ahmed], and [Tanzim] Sakib – are very good, and I think they can play much better cricket in the future.”

He is particularly impressed with young leg spinner Rishad Hossain, believing he could be “the best bowler in the world in a year.

“Rishad is very sharp... He should play in Test matches as well.”

Cabrera pledges better results than last year

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Bangladesh national football team's head coach Javier Cabrera said the team should take responsibility and start delivering better results than last year, especially since they will be facing comparatively easier opponents this time around and due to the addition of England-based Hamza Choudhury.

Speaking to reporters before the team's first training session of the year at the Bashundhara Sports Complex yesterday, the Spaniard said he's starting the year – having received a contract extension one year and four months recently – with a lot of hope.

“We start the year with a lot of hope because we knew the last year was going to be tough. The World Cup Qualifiers Rd 2 was tough really but I'm really



positive about their performances even though we are very aware that we should have probably achieved better results, especially the game we lost in Bhutan and the first one here against Maldives,” the Spaniard said, referencing to four defeats in four World Cup Qualifiers matches as well as a defeat each against Bhutan and Maldives in the four FIFA friendly matches during the year.

Although Cabrera felt the results did not always match the performances on the pitch, he believes there should be no excuse for poor results in the six Asian Cup Qualifiers matches against play India, Singapore and Hong Kong – starting with an away game against India on March 25.

“Now is the moment that we need to make that step forward. We are going to have a better team because we are bringing in a top player (Hamza Choudhury), so now we have to take the responsibility and achieve better results than last year,” the 40-year-old said.

The Spaniard was looking forward to the addition of England-based defensive midfielder Hamza and Italy-based forward Fahamdul Islam with excitement.

“They will join as soon as they can,” Cabrera said. “Hamza has a match on the 16th, so he will join in that week which is good enough... The same with Fahamdul; his last game is on the 8th, so he will be joining on the 10th in Jeddah. So it's good that he will be able to get eight days of training and hopefully will get to play one or two practice matches.”

The Spaniard also felt the match against India in Shillong, for which the team will have four days of training in Dhaka before a two-week camp in Saudi Arabia, will be the most special one of his Bangladesh tenure.

“A very special match, probably the most exciting one since I've been here for three years already. The players are really motivated about the challenge, and I think we are going to have the right preparations with enough time to get the best of the camp and have a big chance to achieve something important in India.”



Butler's charges vow to learn from mistakes

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The Bangladesh women's football team was looking forward to rectifying the mistakes from the first match when they square off against UAE in the second match of their tour on Sunday.

The match would kick off at 10:00pm Bangladesh time at the UAE Football Association Pitch 1.

Having gone down 3-1 in the first match on February 26, the young charges of Peter Butler were intent on returning home with pride against a team that is 16 steps higher in FIFA ranking.

Midfielder Sapna Rani Mandal feels that they have learnt from their mistakes following the coach's instructions.

“Now we know what mistakes we made and learnt from those. The coach will guide us and we will try not to repeat the same mistakes. Obviously we will try to return home with a victory,” Sapna said.

Echoing a similar sentiment, striker Sauravi Akanda Prity said:

“We have learnt a lot from the last game. The coach has pointed out the mistakes we made in the last match. We will try to play according to the coach's instructions,” Prity said, adding that this young team, in absence of first-string seniors, will continue to grow the more they play against better oppositions.

Group A top spot up for grabs as India take on NZ

India take on New Zealand at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium today in the final Group A fixture of the ICC Champions Trophy. Both sides have already guaranteed their semifinal spots, courtesy of wins against Pakistan and Bangladesh but stakes are still there as the result will determine who will go through as group-winners, hence settling the final four lineup.

● India hold the upper hand in head-to-head records against New Zealand, courtesy of 60 wins in contrast to the Black Caps' 50 in 118 meetings overall. One encounter between the sides ended in a tie and seven matches produced no result.

● The two sides have met only once in the Champions Trophy – in the 2000 final. New Zealand won the grand finale by four wickets in Nairobi.

● Virat Kohli and Kane Williamson have scored the most runs amongst active players in India-New Zealand contests. Kohli has amassed 1645 runs in 31 matches at an average of 58.75, while Williamson, who has played two matches less, has tallied 1147 at an average of 44.11.

