

“Sir [BFF President Tabith Awal] has already said that there will be no shortage of support. But what we need are better facilities: proper ground, nutritious food, and a well-equipped gym. We also want more friendly matches against strong teams if we are to achieve good results in the Asian Cup final round.”

Bangladesh captain **Afeida Khandokar**



Glory echoes across eras, cries constant

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RAMIN TALUKDER

Bangladesh's latest women's football triumph has rekindled a 46-year-old legacy. Year 1979: just around eight years into its independence, Bangladesh was still rising from the ruins of war. Amid all the struggles, and despite lacking structure or international experience, football emerged as a rare and unifying joy in the red-and-green hearts of a young nation. At the time, Bangladesh hosted its first major international tournament in the form of the Asian Cup Qualifiers. All eyes were on Dhaka Stadium as Qatar and Afghanistan arrived. While preparation was thin and infrastructure limited, footballing dreams burned bright here. With fierce determination, the nation earned a place in the Asian Cup finals. It's a milestone still treasured with pride. Back then, a 14-inch black-and-white TV was a luxury, drawing the entire neighbourhood around it; and where TVs were absent, the radio saved the day.

then – it just happened. We played against Qatar and Afghanistan. We drew with Qatar and beat Afghanistan. We were thrilled. In those days of black-and-white TV, we were promised a 14-inch set if we qualified for the Asian Cup. And later, they kept that promise.” Bangladesh began with a 2-2 draw against Afghanistan, followed by a 1-1 draw with Qatar. In a do-or-die return match, they edged Afghanistan 3-2 to seal a historic place in the finals, despite a 3-1 loss to Qatar in their last group game. In the main round, Bangladesh couldn't notch a win – falling to North Korea and Syria in hard-fought battles, and suffering heavy defeats to Iran and China. Yet, that journey stands as a golden chapter in Bangladesh's football legacy. Reflecting on their struggles at the main stage, Yusuf explained: “Look who we played: teams like Iran, regulars at the World Cup. We also used to play South Korea, Japan, Iraq; and they invited us regularly. “Because of those strong opponents, our ranking suffered. Nowadays, Bangladesh plays against much weaker teams we never even faced before. Now we have to play a qualifier for the qualifiers.” Though the team struggled in the main round, the nation's love for football only deepened. The players became household names – idolised like heroes. “Our popularity was sky-high back then,” recalled Chunnun. “Every player was a star. But over time, that faded. Back then, it didn't matter if you played for Abahani or Mohammedan, as everyone gave everything for the country. Football was something unparalleled – almost unreal – and words can't truly capture it.” As the years rolled on, that fervent popularity gradually waned. Now, after 46 long years, a Bangladeshi team has once again broken through to the Asian Cup finals. This time, though, it's the women who have made history. For the first time ever, Bangladesh will feature in the final round of the Women's Asian Cup – set for March 2026 in Australia. The nation is awash with pride and celebration, as this landmark achievement becomes a unifying symbol of national triumph. The heroes of 1979 are proud too. Former midfielder Bablu reflected: “There was no real culture of women's football here. “Only the federation has nurtured them over the past 15 years. Back then, the same girl would play football, cricket, athletics, handball – everything. But now, after 15-20 years, these girls have come a long way. “People said they couldn't even kick a ball, but they've become SAFF champions and now, Asian Cup qualifiers. It's a point of pride for me as a Bangladeshi footballer. These girls, coming from the poorest of homes, have earned this with their sweat and talent. History is made – and they've made it.” Still, a tinge of regret lingers among the

heroes of the past: football should have advanced much further by now. Instead, it almost disappeared. And Bablu pointed fingers at the administrators. “We played when football was incredibly popular. But the downfall began slowly – for many reasons. Mainly politics. “Every new government used football to push their own agenda. They tried to claim even the smallest successes as their own, losing sight of the real goal. Win one game out of ten, and they'd say Bangladesh football has turned around; we're ready for the World Cup! This hunger for political mileage has destroyed our game. That political hijacking of our rare successes – that still hurts,” he explained. Chunnun added that the officials of the time failed to capitalise on football's popularity. “They had no long-term vision. They thought football would automatically progress as the country progressed. But football needs a plan – a target. And they never thought that far. That's why the game lost its grip.” Yet all three former stars hope that this recent women's success can help football reclaim its former glory. But for that, the government must take the lead, Yusuf stressed: “Football still has fans. But we don't have heroes like we used to. “Who will the supporters lift onto their shoulders now? We must first know why we play. “These days, people don't even go to play – no physical activity, no fields. Even the annual school sports are gone – and when they happen, it's only on paper. We must get boys and girls back to the fields. The authorities must act first.” Chunnun called for a proper plan from BFF's new leadership. “We need proper direction, and we need to move forward wisely. We must not be content with small gains. This is just the beginning. “It needs proper management and a long-term plan: one that spreads football beyond Dhaka, across the whole country. With the right plan, anything is possible.” Bablu sees this as a major challenge for the new leadership. “This journey, started by the women's team, must continue. Maintaining this momentum is the federation's greatest challenge. If the men's team can perform well too – if we can get a few good results – then our efforts to revive football will finally succeed.” In the long gap between two triumphs, one thing echoes consistently: the cry for long-term planning, and the lingering question of whether we can truly capitalise on success and momentum.

‘This success should motivate us all’

After Bangladesh women's football team's historic qualification for the AFC Women's Asian Cup in Australia, questions are being asked about whether the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) can turn this moment into long-term progress. In this exclusive interview with *The Daily Star's* Anisur Rahman, the BFF president **Tabith Awal** addresses the challenges, plans, and prospects for the women's game. **The Daily Star [DS]:** How does BFF view this qualification? **Tabith Awal [TA]:** This is not beyond expectations – it's the result of analytical preparation. We now study both opponents and our own players in depth. The team's performance reflects what Bangladesh is capable of. All credit goes to the girls for their physical and mental strength. It's not a miracle – it's the fruit of proper planning. **DS:** How will BFF capitalise on this? **TA:** In three ways. First, we want players to get chances in overseas leagues. Second, we'll use this moment to attract sponsors and government attention. Third, we must admit past failures – like not having a structured women's league. This success should motivate all of us. We also need a women's football complex with training facilities and a physio centre. **DS:** How challenging is year-round training? **TA:** Very. Our current model is like a military camp – strict and result-oriented, but unsustainable. Long-term, we must shift to a league-based system. Right now, we need camps for ‘Mission Australia’,



but we can't rely forever on one coach or a handful of players. **DS:** What's the sustainable plan? **TA:** A proper women's league is key. We'll also support BKSP, cadet colleges, and service teams like Army and Police to develop women's squads. This will expand the player pipeline and access to training grounds. **DS:** Why has there been limited visible progress since the SAFF win? **TA:** A lot happened behind the scenes. We improved gear and organised friendlies to boost confidence. But now, we must improve off-field conditions – housing, nutrition, gym facilities – all tailored for women. These directly affect performance. **DS:** Players are demanding better facilities. What's your response? **TA:** We've made repeated appeals to the government and NSC [National Sports Council] – but received only promises. We didn't get funding, housing, or fields. Even just one district stadium or a government guest house could help. Without such support, quality suffers. FIFA and sponsor funds mostly go to tournaments; even day-to-day costs are tough now. **DS:** Has BFF submitted proposals? **TA:** Yes, we submitted written requests – including for airfare – but got no support. Even the SAFF-winning girls wrote to the Chief Adviser. Still no result. We haven't lost hope, but time is running out. **DS:** What about private sponsors? **TA:** Dhaka Bank has helped us a lot. A few others have supported us in small ways – for travel, salaries, or technical staff. But these are short-term. We need sustainable support – and that must include the government. **DS:** What does ‘Mission Australia’ mean? **TA:** It's a call to unite everyone behind the women's team. It's also an appeal to those who want to help – this is the time. We've already had offers of support from expatriates in Australia. From now on, everything we do – friendlies, training, salary plans – will align with this mission. **DS:** What's the plan for the women's league? **TA:** We want 6-10 clubs, running over four to six months. We'll support clubs with facilities, but they must be financially sustainable. Universities or schools can also join. The goal is a competitive and regular league. **DS:** What are the plans for the Asian Cup? **TA:** Coach Peter Butler, our women's wing, and the players themselves have submitted plans. We'll finalise our strategy once the group draw is out. Our research team also prepared a white paper benchmarking other countries. We'll combine all of this. **DS:** Players' pay is a concern. What's being done? **TA:** We'll introduce performance-based bonuses and help players get endorsements, like Afeida Khandokar did with Robi. Salary delays happened due to a backlog – we inherited pending payments. We hope to regularise everything in the next two to three months.



“We are here today because of teamwork. We, the girls of Bangladesh, know how to fight through adversity. Please keep believing in us. We will not let you down. Our goal is to take Bangladesh beyond Asia, to the world stage.” Bangladesh forward **Ritu Porna Chakma**