DHAKA FRIDAY NOVEMBER 6, 2026, KARTIK 21, 1433 BS

SPORT



It was not a bad game, but players need to understand how important it is to stay consistent throughout 90 minutes instead of being casual. If Pakistan had five to 10 minutes more, the game could have been different.

India head coach **Naushad Moosa**, after his team began their SAFF Championship title defence with a 3-2 win over Pakistan.



Centre-back Bishwanath Ghosh was the centre of attention during Bangladesh's SAFF Championship opener against Bhutan yesterday after head coach Thomas Dooley unexpectedly deployed the 27-year-old as a lone striker. The tactical gamble, which circulated as pre-match rumours, raised eyebrows at the National Stadium. While Bishwanath made promising runs, he ultimately lacked a natural forward's finishing instinct and spurned several chances. He was replaced in the 65th minute alongside Jamal Bhuyan in a double substitution for Mohammad Sohel Rana and Mohammad Ibrahim, with the latter eventually netting the match-winning goal. PHOTO: **STAR**

Fanfare without fever at SAFF's Dhaka return

RAMIN TALUKDER

The apprehension was there from the outset. Even on the eve of the SAFF Championship, more than 70 per cent of tickets remained unsold. Despite some matchday sales, the opening day's turnout at the National Stadium in Dhaka yesterday proved even bleaker than feared.

Only a few hundred spectators turned up for the opening fixture between subcontinental rivals India and Pakistan. Afterwards, the stadium hosted a laser show, fireworks and a cultural programme featuring British-Bangladeshi performer Sanjay Deb. Yet the spectacle failed to bring the stands to life.

There was still hope that the crowd would swell when Bangladesh faced Bhutan in the second match. Numbers rose to several thousand as kick-off approached, filling much of the upper tiers, but the lower sections remained conspicuously empty.

It was a stark contrast to the carnival atmosphere that usually accompanies Bangladesh's home matches. Just a few months ago, supporters scrambled for tickets, queued outside the gates and filled the surroundings with red-and-green jerseys and chants. Hosting an entire international tournament, however, failed to recreate that euphoria.

The SAFF Championship has returned to Dhaka after eight years, but its 15th edition has struggled to generate excitement across the capital. High ticket prices, inadequate publicity and the limited purchasing power of ordinary supporters appear to have kept spectators away.

General gallery tickets cost Tk 1,000, rising to Tk 1,070 online after service charges. While the ticket covered both matches, spectators interested only in Bangladesh's evening fixture still had to pay the full price. At that rate, a family outing could cost Tk 3,000-4,000 in tickets alone, excluding transport and food.

For Rakibul Hasan, a service holder from Hazaribagh, the total expense could reach Tk 1,500 per person. Many who might have attended for Tk 300-400 were discouraged by the thousand-taka price tag.

Businessman Saiful Islam, who travelled from Mirpur, also found watching both fixtures impractical for working spectators. Separate tickets could have made the arrangement more convenient.

The pricing was particularly striking compared with Bangladesh's recent Asian Cup qualifiers, when general gallery tickets cost Tk 400 and sold out quickly for matches against Singapore and India.

Ekramul Haque Shuvo, a cellphone technician from Kaptanbazar in Old Dhaka, closed his shop to attend because of his love for football. Rasel, an expatriate living in Malaysia who travelled from Narsingdi, bought his ticket online for Tk 1,000 but found it exceptionally expensive compared with what he was accustomed to paying in Malaysia.

Despite criticism from supporters' groups, organisers held firm on ticket prices. A last-minute 50 per cent discount was offered to just 100 students, bringing their tickets down to Tk 500. Even then, transport and food could push the expense to Tk 700-800, hardly affordable for many.

Some measures were taken to improve the matchday experience. Following complaints about water shortages and high bottled-water prices during last year's Singapore match, free drinking water was provided in the galleries and food was sold at relatively affordable prices. Neither concession drew a bigger crowd.

Publicity was another major shortcoming. Despite the tournament's return after eight years, Dhaka lacked the banners, festoons and street-level buzz expected of a regional football showpiece. Jersey vendors, supporters waving national flags and fans with red-and-green face paint were largely absent around the National Stadium.

The buzz may grow, the stands may fill as the stakes rise in the six-team extravaganza, but the opening-day turnout raises questions about the groundwork laid to bring the tournament closer to the public.

Off the bench, Ibrahim seals it for Bangladesh

SPORTS REPORTER

Forward Mohammad Ibrahim came off the bench to spare Bangladesh embarrassment, scoring a 69th-minute winner in a laboured 1-0 victory over Bhutan in their opening match of the SAFF Championship 2026 at the National Stadium in Dhaka on Thursday.

The Fortis FC forward, who has been in fine form recently in domestic circuit, struck four minutes after coming off the bench, netting in from close range after Shamit Shome's header took a slight deflection off a Bhutan defender and fell kindly for him.

The goal brought relief to around 8,000 spectators in the stands and millions watching across the country, as Bangladesh struggled to break down a lower-ranked opponent despite enjoying home advantage and being billed as title contenders.

The timing of Ibrahim's introduction and his immediate impact also raised questions about head coach Thomas Dooley's decision to deploy centre-back Bishwanath Ghosh as the lone striker from the start.

Bangladesh were dealt an early setback when captain-designate Topu Barman suffered a muscle injury during the warm-up, forcing Dooley to reshuffle his starting XI and tactical setup.

Tariq Kazi moved into central defence, while Quazem Shah Kirmanee came into midfield. Jamal Bhuyan wore the captain's armband and partnered Shamit in central midfield, with Bishwanath was given an unfamiliar role up front.

Bishwanath was involved in several attacking moves but lacked the composure and finishing touch required of a centre-forward. He had an opportunity to score in the 26th minute when a corner created a goalmouth scramble, but could only poke the ball without finding the target.

In the 40th minute, he cleverly ran on to a through ball from Rakib but failed to keep his effort on target from the edge of the box.

Bangladesh made a like-for-like change at the start of the second half, bringing on Fahamedul Islam for Foysal Ahmed Fahim on the left wing, but the hosts continued to struggle for a breakthrough.

Dooley eventually turned to Ibrahim in the 65th minute, replacing Bishwanath. Ibrahim needed little time to make his presence felt, converting the opportunity created by Shamit's header to settle the contest.

"I had been preparing myself at club level ever since the SAFF schedule was announced. I knew that if I performed well for my club, I would get a call-up to the national team.... Whenever I have got an opportunity, I have always tried to prove myself."

Goalscorer **Mohammad Ibrahim**

"When he gets in front of goal and has a chance to head the ball, he puts it away. I wasn't expecting Ibrahim to score; I thought he would set someone else up. But that's good for us that he scored."

Coach **Thomas Dooley**

With three points in the bag, the home team will watch Bhutan play against Sri Lanka in the second Group A match on November 8 before they take on the islanders three days later.

Earlier in the day, the six-team competition began with a frenetic encounter as defending champions India edged Pakistan 3-2. India raced to a 3-0 lead by the 32nd minute before Pakistan mounted a late fightback with two stoppage-time goals, but the defending champions held on for victory.

WHAT TO WATCH

T Sports
Bangladesh vs West Indies
2nd Test, Day two
Live from 9:30 am

LaLiga
Sevilla FC vs Deportivo Alaves
Live from 2:00 am (Saturday)

Rajdhani TV
Premier League
Everton vs Coventry
Live from 2:00 am
(Saturday)

Spin plans flop as Taskin seeks the 'EXTRAORDINARY'

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI *from Sylhet*

Bangladesh pacers Taskin Ahmed and Hasan Mahmud accounted for three West Indies wickets within first hour of the second and final Test yesterday, but by the day's end, they were left reflecting on what might have been.

There were no other pacers to share the workload. Taskin was hoping for the "extraordinary" after a dull day from the spinners, as the visitors reached 235 for four before bad light ended play early at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium.

Skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto banked on the same trio of spinners from the preceding Mirpur Test, which they lost by eight wickets, and they turned up with a sterile performance.

What could've led to such a decision when spinners not only struggled of late, but the Sylhet surface too provides something for the quicks?

The decision was not easy to gauge, with Shoriful Islam and Ebadot Hossain waiting in the wings, ready to fire. There are suggestions that humidity led Bangladesh to believe the ball would not stay dry enough for the quicks to generate movement as the day progressed. They might have been right on that count, but there was caution regarding spin.

The deck, as per sources, may not develop cracks to help spinners due to overcast conditions. Taskin and Hasan moved the ball around in the morning, troubling batters, finding edges and castling a few.

"We utilised the moisture in the first hour, and another seamer could have allowed us to bowl longer and potentially take a few more wickets."

Bangladesh pacer **Taskin Ahmed**

But Windies recovered and started dominating as spinners came on. Taijul Islam was nullified. He was bowling at 86-88 km/h in his first spell, not looping the ball, unable to produce turn. It was a significant indication of how the surface was. The two other spinners in Mehidy Miraz and Nayeem Hasan did not ask enough questions, the former often erring in length.



PHOTO: **FIROZ AHMED**

Nayeem bowled only eight of the 70 overs, while Taskin and Hasan delivered 14 each and would have bowled more had play not ended early. With extra bounce on the surface and the ball zipping around in the morning, the absence of another pacer was keenly felt.

"At one point it definitely felt that having another seamer would have been better. We utilised the moisture in the first hour, and another seamer could have allowed us to bowl longer and potentially take a few more wickets," said Taskin, who bowled a seven-over opening spell.

He spelled out how the wicket behaved. "As time passed, conditions got better for batting and the margin of error for bowlers was low."

After the pacers' early burst, Aamir Jangoo and debutant Kevin Wickham put on 131 for the fourth wicket. Even that stand was broken just before tea by Hasan, who bagged two, as did Taskin. Wicketkeeper-batter Jangoo was unbeaten on 111 at stumps. "The plan was that, at the end, spinners will get help to get a result," Taskin felt.

Forty-two overs of spin, 114 runs and no wicket on the opening day. There are suggestions the wicket may stay good for batting even on day four. Taskin and Hasan have been resilient even after grass was shortened in the morning from four millimeters.

"If we can do something extraordinary in the first hour, it's possible to get them all out [quickly]," Taskin said.

But the plans, just as in Mirpur, appear to be backfiring in Sylhet.