



Sep 16, 2023

VISION 2047

T A R G E T 2 0 2 6

SAFF U-16



**CHAMPIONSHIP 2023
BHUTAN**



CHAMPIONS

**SAFF U16
CHAMPIONSHIP 2023
BHUTAN**

**“MERDEKA, ASIAN GAMES
THE TREASURE TROVES OF
INDIAN FOOTBALL HISTORY”**

- Kalyan Chaubey
President, AIFF

**U-16s PEAK IN
THE HIMALAYAS**



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President's Note

Merdeka, Asian Games, the treasure troves of Indian Football history

Kalyan Chaubey

When I met my Malaysian FA counterpart, Datuk Haji Hamidin bin Haji Mohd, a month after I took over as the All India Football Federation President, memories came rushing back to my mind. No, it wasn't because Kuala Lumpur is one of the most famous football cities in the continent, where I played more than once. My memory went back to many folklores of Indian Football, in which the Merdeka Cup Football Tournament always occupies a pride of place. From the 1960s until the mid-1980s, India's international commitments were far and few. But the Merdeka Cup was one tournament in which India regularly participated in those days, with the KL meet always attracting top teams from Asia.

And it did generate many success stories of Indian Football that are being talked about today. Having a special liking for traditional tournaments, I was prompted to speak to Datuk Haji Hamidin bin Haji Mohd immediately when I met him and requested to revive the Merdeka Cup, where India could be invited to participate. I am thankful to him that he agreed to my suggestion and hence India would be back in Malaysia for the prestigious tournament after a 22-year gap.

Those who are still young and yet to have a full grasp of Indian Football history are not aware of the fact that India and the Merdeka Cup have a special bond that goes back to 64 years ago, when the Blue Tigers first played in this tournament and returned home unbeaten with the runners-up title. My endeavour had always been to bring Indian football back to the forefront in Asia and among the top football-playing countries. Playing in the Merdeka, which will be played within the FIFA window in October, will not only revive old



memories but also make a connection that will do a world of good to Indian Football. At the same time, it could be an acid test for us before we plunge into the royal battle of the Asian Cup final rounds in January 2024 in Qatar.

I took over as the AIFF President in September last year. Since then, among my many tasks, it has been my prime aim to restore the old glory of Indian Football. This is the main reason why me and my honourable executive committee members took decisions like taking the Santosh Trophy to a bigger stage, helping to revive tournaments like the Kalinga Cup, and taking the Indian National Team to every nook and corner of the country like it did in Imphal. Participating in Merdeka is also part of the same strategy—a good result would project Indian Football in a brighter light among the football fans of Asia.



I feel the same way about the Asian Games, which is around the corner and a Sunil Chhetri led team will spearhead India's campaign. Like the Merdeka Cup, the history of Indian Football would never be complete without the history of the Asian Games. When all other AFC tournaments were either not in place or yet to take a foothold, winning the Asian Games was considered the crowning glory of continental football and India were always the frontrunners, having won the Gold medal twice and a bronze medal in 1970.

So, when I realised that India had not participated in the Asian Games for nine long years, it left me saddened. I felt a piece of history had been taken away from Indian Football. As the Olympic Council of Asia came calling asking for the list of contingent and there was confusion about the Indian Men's Football Team's participation, I convinced myself to get down to business immediately. It is not an attempt to corner glory, but I did speak to the Government, who were kind enough to clear the Indian Football Team for the Asian Games.

At the same time, I must profusely thank the Government of India and the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports for understanding the problems as well as the strategies we have adopted for taking Indian Football forward and getting the team cleared for the Asian Games.

The biggest advantage here is that Indian fans always have a huge liking for Asian Games, despite the fact that it has been reduced to a U23 tournament with only three senior players allowed to play. I could guess the anxiety of the fans when there were some uncertainties about India's participation.

Now that it is confirmed that India will be going to the Asian Games and thereafter to the Merdeka Cup, I am confident that the Indian fans will be happy with this chain of events and will keenly follow the progress of the teams. I personally thank all my colleagues in the Federation, the players, the coaching staff, the ISL clubs, the FSDL and all other stakeholders for unselfishly helping us to take our dream forward.

Shaping youth football landscape one of our top priorities

Dr. Shaji Prabhakaran
Secretary General, AIFF

Arsène Wenger will be in India, and for us football fans in India, it will be a Chandrayan-3 moment in football as he is one rare professor who has the magical expertise to turn a barren land of football into the most fertile one. India, at this stage, has woken up and is no longer a sleeping giant, and when Arsene arrives here, we will be blessed with the wisdom to make our football incredible with his guidance, philosophy, experience, expertise and vision to have a robust elite youth structure.

The launch of the FIFA-AIFF academy would be a game changer, as for the first time, we will be guided and monitored by one of the best technicians in global football. Arsène getting directly involved with Indian football will have a ripple effect on many aspects of elite player development. No doubt, we have an abundance of talent, and there are hidden gems that are yet to be identified. Under this project, our 'Project Diamond' will take shape, and we will find our one iconic star talent who will open the door for more of our talents to the world stage like a sudden volcanic eruption never witnessed in global football.

We shouldn't forget that there is much work ahead to live up to the expectations of Wenger and FIFA. One main academy and five feeder academies will be finalised, which would require a collaborative approach with multiple stakeholders, and each of the partners has to be in sync with the philosophy and vision to be successful. Our system of talent identification, educating them and identifying elite coaches will have to take shape. FIFA deputing a talent coach for the main academy and providing an additional talent coach for the feeder academies will help us in multiple ways to make a transformational turnaround in our youth and elite player development landscape.

We can't thank FIFA and Arsène Wenger enough for the trust and support to reshape the youth and elite player landscape



in India. Arsène, in his video interview, made it clear why he believes India can succeed, and why he is going to invest his expertise and wisdom in Indian football.

Let's put our best foot forward to take the best out of the celebrated former Arsenal manager to further boost the ever-growing Indian football footprint among our large-scale youth population.

We should also be proud of another achievement of AIFF. This time, we are entering into a partnership with the largest domestic airline of India, IndiGo. It is the first time IndiGo have entered into a partnership with any sporting organisation and thus, it is an achievement of the new management where the biggest airline brand in India decides to collaborate with Indian football with a



plan of action and vision. IndiGo are the AIFF's first-ever official airline partner. I am sure this brand association will help us build confidence in the market, which would lead us to collaborate with big brands from many other sectors.

This September is packed with action across the Indian footballing pyramid. Our senior men's team's performance against 70th-ranked Iraq in the King's Cup must strengthen the belief that we are on the right track. Though this time, we couldn't repeat our performance against Lebanon in the third-place play-off match in Thailand, overall, our team gained considerable experience from these two games at the King's Cup and demonstrated we are no longer a team shying from taking on the established forces on the pitch. We will continue to focus on building our national men's team for the FIFA World Cup 2026 Qualification Round 2 and the AFC Asian Cup 2023.

After a big gap, our national youth championships are back in action. Both Junior and Sub Junior National Championships (Boys & Girls) are keeping our Member Associations busy like never before, and these championships will throw up many talented youth players from across India.

The Santosh Trophy will be back in action in October, and this season, we can experience some first-of-its-kind elements added to this prestigious national championship. Arunachal Pradesh will host the final round of the championship this time, and we can already see that the Chief Minister of the State and the Arunachal Pradesh FA are making sincere efforts to organise it in a grand way. We can expect some strategic and impactful announcements involving the Santosh Trophy soon.

We are back at the Asian Games after nine years. We wish our men's and women's teams all the very best and good luck. We can't thank all the stakeholders and, especially, the government for facilitating our Blue Tigers and Tigresses to be part of the Asian Games 2022.

Our U16 men's team deserves our appreciation as they have been crowned the SAFF U16 champions. We have witnessed some bright talents in the team, and we will continue to provide this team with longer training and exposure in the coming months and years to prepare the Blue Colts for the future continental youth championships.

We would also like to wish our India U17 women's team all the very best for their participation in AFC U17 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers Round 2 in Thailand. This team has been in preparation for more than two months - first in Indore and now in Goa. Let's not forget to watch our girls play against some of the best teams in Asia.



Vision 2047 flies gracefully with nary a hitch or a stumble

Tournament triumphs, policy changes and overall holistic growth has continued without massive hurdles through the first half of the year

AKHIL RAWAT

All India Football Federation President Mr Kalyan Chaubey wasn't far from the truth when he said: "We dream of reviving the glory days of Indian Football," during the launch of 'Vision 2047'.

In fact, he was modest and chose to underplay the power beneath the dream project. In reality, January 7, 2023, will go down in history as a watershed moment in Indian Football, igniting steady growth in demand for many years. As Vision 2047 spread its wings, Indian Football, like a gliding eagle, flew gracefully with nary a hitch or a stumble.

For diligent implementation, Vision 2047 was broken down into six four-year strategic plans, the first of which is called Target 2026, and it is off to a blistering start.

Eight months into the journey, it is for everyone to see how full of activity Indian football has been this year. And now, before September, probably the busiest-ever month for India in international football, begins, we take a look at what has transpired over the course of 2023 in the country.

The SAFF Championship triumph was undoubtedly the most visible achievement of Indian football this year. Almost two months have passed since that sensational night of the final, but the sounds of the Blue Tigers and the Kanteerava singing Vande Mataram together still reverberate in the hearts of the Indian football faithful, and will continue to do so for years to come.

India have always been the king of SAFF, and this was their ninth title win. But it's no secret this was the most special of them all. And not only because of quality guest opposition like Kuwait and Lebanon but also due to the inspiring role played by the dedicated fanbase of Bengaluru. "If you weren't there, we wouldn't have got the trophy. I'm not trying to praise you or be modest. I'm just stating a fact," said skipper Sunil Chhetri.

This year, the senior men's team travelled to places it had never been in the past, returning victorious in all. The crowd at the Tri-Nation Series in Imphal was fantastic in March. Bhubaneswar, known for its love for sports, finally got the chance to witness the Blue Tigers in action at the Intercontinental Cup in June.

Plans are in place for the future as well, and a lot of them have something to do with reviving the past. The Indian men's and women's teams are set to return to the Asian Games, which had been a golden stage for the nation in the past, after nine years at Hangzhou 2022. India will also be back at October's Merdeka Tournament in Malaysia for the 18th time and the first since 2001.

At the domestic level, the Federation Cup was revived for the 2023-24 season. The Institutional League has been introduced, seeking to revive the glory of the institutional teams, who have contributed so much towards the game in India over the years.

Apart from linking the past, present, and future, it has also been a year of a lot of firsts in Indian football. The new flagship and multi-dimensional grassroots programme Blue Cubs, has generated a lot of attention since its launch in May. Part of the Strategic Roadmap, 'Vision 2047', it was accompanied by the launch of the Blue Cubs League for children between ages 4 to 12.





Punjab FC became the first side to be promoted from the I-League to the Indian Super League, doing so in dominating fashion with a ten-point winning margin over Sreenidi Deccan. Adding more clarity and structure to the football league pyramid in India was a major target of Vision 2047, and as such, the I-League 3rd Division has been introduced as the nation's fourth-tier league. At the state level, the no-foreigner rule was introduced for the first time, adding a new flavour to the local leagues. The immense popularity of the Calcutta Football League, which is in full swing at the moment with homegrown talent, is a testament to that.

As per Target 2026, the period of the first strategic plan, the Federation planned to ensure a proper pyramid for women's football in India. The league structure of the women's game is set for a total revamp. For the first time, the Indian Women's League will be played on a home-and-away basis across four months, with eight teams representing seven states. There will be promotion and relegation, of course, with the introduction of the IWL 2nd Division. The women's football structure will continue to expand gradually over the coming years, with more teams and matches across all tiers.

Football's smaller versions have also broken new ground in India. The inaugural Beach Soccer National Championship was held in January, with Kerala emerging champions in a beautiful atmosphere on the sandy beaches of Surat. Futsal went international as the Indian men's national team made its debut, playing two friendlies against Bahrain in August. In October, the Joshua Vaz-coached side will make its competitive debut at the AFC Futsal Asian Cup Qualifiers in Tajikistan.

Also going international for the first time was the Santosh Trophy. Punjab, Services, Meghalaya and Karnataka were the four lucky sides, embarking on the trip of their lives to Saudi Arabia after qualifying for the semi-final. The latter two contested a thrilling final at the King Fahd International Stadium in Riyadh, with Karnataka winning 3-2 to emerge champions for the first time in 54 years.

Indian football is moving forward at a fast pace. It's important to take a breath and look back at how far we've come. But what's more important is to keep progressing on the same path, add more firsts and create more history. There's a long way to go, and there's no ceiling for success.



State FAs laud AIFF President, Secretary General on completion of one year

All India Football Federation President Mr Kalyan Chaubey, Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran, and Deputy Secretary General Mr Satyanarayan M met with representatives from the various State Associations to discuss the achievements of the Federation since the current Executive Committee was elected, which was exactly one year ago.

Meeting with the representatives from the state associations via video conferencing, the AIFF President was congratulated by one and all for successfully completing one year in his post.

Mr Chaubey said: "I would like to thank all the member associations and their representatives for their support. There were several issues with the Federation when we took charge, but I am happy to say that with everyone's help and with a fantastic team at our disposal, we have managed to achieve a number of goals in just a year. We are now looking forward to further improving and taking Indian Football ahead in the years to come."

AIFF Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran said, "We have all achieved a great many things in the last year, but now it is the time to look ahead, move forward, and focus on Target 2026. It had been a great experience working with President Mr Kalyan Chaubey, Vice President Mr NA Haris and Treasurer Mr Kipa Ajay, and all the committee members and chairpersons. Everyone, along with the staff at the AIFF secretariat, has worked very hard towards fulfilling the targets. We need to be more proactive in doing things in the future and work beyond our capabilities." Representatives from the Member Associations lauded the AIFF for a number of achievements in the past year since September 2, 2022. They also vowed to keep up the good work at both the National and State levels to take Indian football to great heights.



Arsène Wenger confirms visit to India; pours his heart out on Indian Football

The legendary coach and FIFA Chief of Global Football Development lays emphasis on the “education of the feet”

AKHIL RAWAT

AIFF President Mr Kalyan Chaubey and Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran's meeting with legendary coach and FIFA Chief of Global Football Development, Mr Arsène Wenger, in Australia last month to finalise the setting-up of a central academy in India was the beginning of what is set to be a significant association between FIFA and the AIFF.

Mr Wenger, who is expected to visit India in October, opened up on the inspiration for working with the AIFF on such a talent development project. "I would say that football is the most popular sport in the world and it looks logical that one of the biggest countries in the world has access to football development. I'd say that India is a sporting country, and I'm hopeful that we can bring great joy to children in India and have fun by playing football. "I'm confident because I believe that success is linked to education. We want to give the opportunity to educate young people to watch football in India," he said.

According to Mr Wenger, there's a simple two-step process of developing academies in India. "Overall, it's based on two things. First, it's identifying talent. And then the quality of the educational programme and the coaching is absolutely vital. The AIFF has to take charge of the education with us and we need good cooperation.

We will need to work together with the AIFF to identify the talent first. And after that we have to group the best with the best. Under that, you have the grassroots game for the whole country. The starting point is to identify the talent and put the best with the best together."

For a country with 1.4 billion people, the vast talent pool is the biggest advantage in terms of identifying talent. But looking at the other side of the coin, it also presents an organisational challenge. "The number is an advantage, but the organisation's task gets tougher. 1.4 billion people, I'd say it's a gold mine, but a gold mine, which, at the moment, we have not analysed or identified well.

"That's why we need people inside the country who know where the talent is. This is why the cooperation between FIFA and the AIFF will be absolutely vital, with a strong desire. As per our conversation, the AIFF is highly focused and motivated to help us do that. I think we will do a great job together," said Mr Wenger.

"I met the President and the Secretary General in Australia at the Women's World Cup, and I must say I was impressed by their motivation and their capacity to organise what we want to do. I came out of the meeting very optimistic about our cooperation. We will start the work really soon," added the Frenchman.

But how soon will that be? "I'm happy to go and see how the work is taking place, and I've planned to go to India at the end of October, or somewhere around that," he shared.

It's no secret to the world that cricket is the most popular sport in India, and Mr Wenger, having spent more than two decades in England, is no stranger to the sport. For India to truly become a sporting nation, there has to be room for other sports to grow as well.

"I don't see why India would not be on the world map with the number of players. It's a sporting country. At the moment, cricket is their number one sport. I have nothing against cricket. I was in England for a long time and I know how important cricket is to England. But there is room for other sports. Not all the kids can only play cricket. We want to give them that opportunity. Football is a fantastic sport where there is no discrimination based on weight or size. If you have good technique, you play," said the man who coached Arsenal FC to their famous English Premier League title in 2003-04, a season when the Gunners did not lose a single match in the entire campaign.



Not many know that Mr Wenger coached in Asia before his monumental stint at Arsenal, leading Japanese side Nagoya Grampus Eight between 1995 and 1996. The 73-year-old believes India should adopt Japan's method of making grassroots and education a priority should they want to climb the rankings and become one of Asia's leading footballing powers again.

"I arrived in Japan in 1995. They started the professional league in 1993. But they understood very early that you need to create academies and education for young players, and did that programme very well. Look at them now, the boys as well as the girls. Japan are among the top of the world rankings. They are a good example to follow. They understood very quickly that education was the key," explained Mr Wenger.

While his decorated coaching career might be over, Mr Wenger's passion for the sport and decades of expertise fuels his dedication to keep developing the game in a different capacity, now in the shape of such talent development projects.

"I was, for a long time, in the results business. Or however you want to call that. Of course, the intensity of that life was fantastic and very, very demanding. But I'm here on a long-term project, and I would say that with what I've learnt, is how we can guide people. This will be more long-term and a deeper satisfaction. That's why I'm in the part of my life where I can help people, and the legacy I can leave in football is absolutely fantastic. I'm grateful that FIFA gave me this opportunity. And together, I'm sure we can leave a great legacy and change football in the world. Even change the world by helping everybody to develop. It's a fantastic project," he said.

For a country like India, which is known to produce great minds, great leaders and CEOs, and incredibly innovative people in the area of IT and computers, developing that expertise in the game of football is not at all difficult, according to Mr Wenger.

"I would say that the Indian people are dedicated, intelligent and ready to invest in education. It all comes down to education. There were many Indians doing very well when I was in England because they were very dedicated and invested a lot of time in education. The difference in football is that you must also educate your feet. In fact, football is doing with your feet what your brain wants. So of course, we have the brain but we want to educate the feet as well. And then we'll have great players," concluded Mr Wenger.





STATE OF AFFAIRS

High hopes for Blue Colts in Kashmir

At a higher altitude, their flag unfurled, as the Blue Colts reached the dizzy heights of Bhutan with massive help from the J&K Sports Council

SOUOMO GHOSH

The SAFF U-16 Championship 2023 in Thimphu, Bhutan, was not only a test of mettle and footballing aptitude but also that of physical strength and more importantly, stamina of the players involved on the pitch.

Standing at a staggering altitude of 7,500 feet, the Changlimithang Stadium is a rather difficult venue for footballers from the plains to get acclimatised to. However, the Indian team not only adapted swiftly to the conditions but also showed that they could excel in them. This success in terms of physical endurance can be attributed to the impressive work put in by the people who call the 'Heaven on Earth' their abode

The Jammu and Kashmir Sports Council has played a crucial role in the success of the India U-16 Men's National Team, hosting the side for a preparatory camp in Srinagar for over a month, something that head coach Ishfaq Ahmed, who is himself a local hero within the city, feels helped the Blue Colts prepare for the challenges in Bhutan.



"I think a lot of teams that are from the plains struggled initially in Thimphu, especially towards the latter end of their matches. This is where our team took less time to acclimatise, as we had trained for a month in Srinagar (5,200 feet above sea level)," said Ahmed.

"I must really thank the Jammu and Kashmir Sports Council for taking the initiative of promoting football, and for hosting the national team in Srinagar," he said. "Being a local boy myself, I can truly feel how special it is for the people here to host the national team."

The J&K Sports Council, along with the Lieutenant Governor's office opened the doors of Kashmir to the Blue Colts, helping them with logistical and infrastructural support, which ranged from accommodation to providing training grounds and equipment for the team.

Kashmir is no stranger to the beautiful game, with former international stars like Abdul Majid, Arun Malhotra, Mehrajuddin Wadoo, and Ishfaq Ahmed all hailing from the Union Territory. In more recent times, Kashmir has been enjoying the beautiful game with the I-League home matches of Real Kashmir FC being hosted at the TRC Ground in Srinagar, where the likes of Danish Farooq have now risen to play in top clubs in the Indian Super League, like Kerala Blasters and Bengaluru FC.

J&K Sports Council Secretary Ms Nuzhat Gull says, "The most popular and loved sport in J&K has always been football. We have constantly worked to maximise its appeal and draw ever-increasing numbers of players to the game. J&K has a long history of generating players for the nation at the international level, and we anticipate that thanks to these AIFF events, we will be able to continue creating players for the nation going forward.

It goes without saying that hosting a camp with such great relevance is never easy. We were able to obtain approval from the competent authority in such a brief span of time, and we made an effort to give the players the best amenities possible while still adhering to the norms," said Ms Gull. "The team was able to stay focused on the game and win the championship as a result of the camp's smooth and effective organisation."

Earlier this year, AIFF President Mr Kalyan Chaubey and Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran called upon the Honourable Lieutenant Governor of Jammu and Kashmir, Mr Manoj Sinha, Secretary, Youth Services & Sports, J&K, Mr Sarmad Hafeez and the Secretary, J&K Sports Council, Ms Gull, to hold detailed discussions on the development of football in the region.

The AIFF President had said after the meeting, "Considering the immense potential of football in J&K, which has produced many top footballers in the past, the AIFF has decided to collaborate with the local administration here to initiate projects that would unearth talents and develop the best among them through the Centre of Excellence. We will also do everything to develop a competitive structure that would encourage regular participation of local youths in football."

For the J&K Sports Council, it is all about benefiting the local athletes. "The government has been generous enough to help us build such a significant sports facility, and we are now working to make the most use of it so that the local J&K athletes may benefit," said Ms Gull.

Producing more future footballers has become a primary target for the Union Territory.

"For our younger generation, Ishfaq has constantly acted as a role model. Being able to see him grow as a National Team coach is always special. We would like to see more players and coaches in the national team, elevating J&K to the top of the sporting ecosystem of the nation," said Ms Gull.

"We will make an effort to host additional national team camps in J&K as well as a number of national-level competitions. We have previously asked AIFF to continue hosting such events in J&K," she continued. "We wish they would host more camps and competitions in J&K and help us to revive the game from grassroots to professional level."





AIFF President, Secretary General meet Ladakh Football Association officials

One of the AIFF's newest member associations, the Tsering Angmo-led Ladakh Football Association is already making great strides

AIFF President Mr Kalyan Chaubey and Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran, on Wednesday, September 7, 2023, visited officials of the Ladakh Football Association, in Leh, to discuss further development of football in the union territory.

The land also known as 'the Last Shangri-La' has been well known for its sprawling landscapes, on which little kids play football, seemingly as a hobby. With the vision to cultivate the same hobby in an arid landscape, the Federation's top brass held fruitful discussions with the LFA officials on areas where the latter may require help.



AIFF President Mr Chaubey said, “Ladakh is on a relatively new journey in football, and indeed, it was a landmark moment for them when their state team participated in the Santosh Trophy and the Women’s National Championships last season. A lot of development may be needed in many walks of life in Ladakh, but we feel that football and its subsequent development could play a crucial role in driving the region and its people towards prosperity.”

AIFF Secretary General Dr Prabhakaran said, “Women’s football is one of the key focus areas for Ladakh, as this union territory looks to make its mark in Indian football. With that in mind and the help of local administration, we have discussed how the AIFF can guide them in putting a robust grassroots structure in place, along with youth and facilities development.”

He continued, “The AIFF will actively lend its support to the LFA with regards to coach education and refereeing development, in order to ensure all-round growth in the sport as well.”



Peaking at the right time in the Himalayas

The Indian Colts grabbed their first opportunity at a trophy by the scruff of its neck, but more importantly, also heightened their own development ceiling

SOUOMO GHOSH

The Changlimithang Stadium in Thimphu does not only serve the purpose of being the national football arena for Bhutan. Surrounded by the serene Himalayan mountains, and with the colossal golden Buddha statue an everlasting presence, the area now known for hosting the finest of Bhutan and South Asian football, was once the hallowed ground where the Battle of Changlimithang was fought, followed by the unification of Bhutan, a country that has been at peace with itself and its neighbours since.

In September 2023, the football fans of Thimphu were treated to some sublime footwork by the Blue Colts in the SAFF U-16 Championship at the Changlimithang, as the boys who were experiencing international football for the first time in their lives, went on to achieve regional supremacy in their age group in South Asia, dominating the hallowed artificial turf.

To say, however, that the team was completely unprepared, and that India's raw footballing talent shone through, would be a flight of fancy, of sorts. The India U-16s, under head coach and former India International Ishfaq Ahmed, had a month's training in Srinagar, ahead of the competition, where the Lieutenant-Governor and the Jammu and Kashmir Sports Council came together with one objective – to help the team in every way they could.

Ahmed attributed the mental maturity that the boys have shown during the SAFF U-16 Championship to the fact that the coaches were able to imbibe the values that they hold dear, into the players.

“These boys have really grown not only in terms of footballing acumen but also in terms of how to be a team both on and off the pitch. We must understand that when a national team assembles in India, we have players from a vast many different regions and cultural backgrounds, and for them to be completely unified, especially at this young age, it takes a lot,” said Ahmed.

“We had a long camp ahead of the tournament, and I think we can attribute a lot of technical and mental progress to that. The Jammu and Kashmir Sports Council has helped us a great deal in organising the camp smoothly, helping us out with a range of things, including facilities and equipment,” he said. “We are extremely grateful to them for it.”

The Lieutenant-Governor of Jammu and Kashmir, Shri Manoj Sinha, along with J&K Sports Council, and senior AIFF officials, President Mr Kalyan Chaubey, and Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran, played key roles in making sure that national level matches are regularly conducted in the region. In return, Kashmir has played host to the National Team for over a month, and J&K Sports Council Secretary Ms Nuzhat Gul has played a key role in helping the team in terms of logistical support.

ONE STEP AT A TIME

The start of any journey is the most difficult part, and it was the same for the Blue Colts at the Chamglimithang. A physical battle ensued in the first half as two teams clashed with contradictory styles of play. Bangladesh looked to dominate the air, while India the turf. The match was a scrap, but the Indian boys showed a lot of grit to grind out the three points in the end, Usham Singh capitalising on a rebound to score the winning goal.





From then on, it was a picture of dominance by India, who went on to defeat Nepal 1-0 in their second Group A game, a match where the boys in blue hit the woodwork on four occasions. It was after this match that India began to enjoy the support of the local crowd at the Changlimithang. Hosts Bhutan lost a cliffhanger against the Maldives in their own group-stage game, a completely unexpected result that turned the local support in the Blue Colts' favour.

"We were arguably in the toughest group in the tournament, as both Bangladesh and Nepal are contenders, but we wanted to prove ourselves against them, so we didn't think twice about it," said head coach Ishfaq Ahmed. "Of course, the boys took a couple of matches to not only acclimatise themselves to the higher altitude in Bhutan but also to get used to football at the international level."

It was in the semi-final against the Maldives, where India truly exerted their dominance, sweeping aside their opponents 8-0 to book their spot in the summit clash.

The final against Bangladesh was completely different from the first match of the tournament, as India took the lead in the 9th minute itself through striker Bharat Lairenjam, midfielder Levis Zangminlun adding another in the second half to secure the win. This was India's third consecutive title, and their fifth overall.



The performances of certain individuals shone through for India, as Mohammed Arbash swept two individual awards alone – Highest Scorer (three goals) and Most Valuable Player. Arbash’s winning goal against Nepal, and performance from midfield against Maldives and Bangladesh played a crucial role in India’s win.

While Arbash was dominating from the middle of the park, the one player who greatly impressed one and all was goalkeeper Suraj Singh. The youngster showed amazing temperament, prowling the penalty area to make it his own territory. His calm demeanour with the ball at his feet gave India almost a man advantage in all the matches, especially when facing a high press against the likes of Bangladesh and Nepal.

Having possession for large parts of the match can be a rather tricky situation for goalkeepers, as it may hinder with their focus when they may not have much to do. However, when called into action, Suraj showed that he can flip the switch just as easily, which was amply visible when he pulled off a couple of diving saves to prevent an equaliser in the penultimate minute of the match.

“India always have to reach the final, and the expectation back home is no less than that. Winning the cup is good, but at this age, it’s more important for me to play good football, and I am really happy that the boys played well and enjoyed their game,” Ahmed summed up his side’s performance.



Usham Singh the Phoenix rises to silence doubting Thomases

From being rejected by two top academies in Indian Football, to playing a key role for the Blue Colts in their SAFF U-16 Championship Victory, Usham Singh has shown both determination and courage

SOUOMO GHOSH

The beautiful game often presents opportunities to those who play it. Perhaps more so to the attackers than to the ones at the other end of the pitch. But every once in a while, it's the defenders who turn up at the right spot at the right time, and fire it home to earn their team the points, which is exactly what happened in the India U-16s' opening match of the SAFF U-16 Championship 2023 against Bangladesh at the Changlimithang Football Stadium in Thimphu, Bhutan.

India fullback Thougamba Usham Singh made a lung-bursting run all the way into the opposition box in the 74th minute and was rewarded for his efforts when a rebound off a Manbhakupar Malngiang shot fell to the former, with the goal gaping wide.

"I couldn't believe it when I saw the ball land at my feet. The goalkeeper had just made a save and he was in no position to save it, and all I had to do was to poke it in," said a grinning Usham after the match.

It was an afternoon of hard toil for the team against Bangladesh on Saturday, September 2, but it was also a very special occasion for all the Indian boys on the pitch. This was the first time that they were playing international football at any age group.

“It was a very memorable day for us all. We had all played for our clubs domestically, but never have we operated at the international level in such a manner before,” said Usham. “It was a different feeling to experience all the pre-match ceremonies, the anthems, and the photos. We were all in a bit of awe when these things were happening.

“But once the match started, it was all about the game,” he recalled.

TRY AND TRY AGAIN

Grit and determination are two things that clearly define Usham Singh’s journey so far. The youngster, who hails from the Kakching district in Manipur, was born to a family that runs a rice mill and is one of three siblings. Growing up, Usham had played football with his friends at the grassroots level, before deciding that he may just well be good enough to go for trials at various clubs. In fact, the nimble fullback had been rejected by the academies of two major football clubs from the North and South of India, before ultimately being accepted by RoundGlass Punjab three years ago.

“It was not easy to be rejected at the trials again and again. I constantly had doubts about whether any academy would accept me. I even thought maybe I should just quit playing football seriously and focus on my studies,” said Usham.

In fact, the doubts seeped into his family as well, so much so that despite ultimately being accepted by RoundGlass Punjab, Usham’s parents were not quite convinced.

“My parents saw me being rejected by a few clubs and they did not quite buy the idea of me pursuing football. Even after I went for the U-16 National Team trials in Punjab and got shortlisted, they were not convinced,” he said.





Now, having made it to the final squad for the SAFF U-16 Championship, and after scoring in his first game, things seem a little better at home. “They’re obviously happy that I scored. I haven’t had the opportunity to speak to them for long, but we will see once I get back,” said Usham.

The 15-year-old, however, has his head placed securely on his young shoulders, even after being named the MVP in India’s match against Bangladesh.

“It’s just one game, and we have to do better in the next one. I was able to score only because the entire team worked hard as a unit. Now we need to ensure that we sustain that momentum in the Nepal match as well,” said Usham.



Winning streak halted, but steady flows the reputation

Defeat in the King's Cup hurts, but we're on the right track, says Sandesh Jhingan

AKHIL RAWAT

Dark, low clouds loomed over the 700th Anniversary Stadium in Chiang Mai right from the start of India's game against Lebanon. After almost a couple of hours of tension in the sky, the occasional drizzle finally gave way to heavy showers just as the match headed into the second-half injury time, literally washing away India's 12-match unbeaten streak.

Similar to the clouds above, India had also been threatening the entire game on the ground below. Threatening to break the deadlock against a team they had beaten twice less than three months ago. But unlike Chiang Mai's overcast weather, the Blue Tigers' build-up could not materialise into the final product. Kassem El Zein's 77th-minute overhead strike in the third-place play-off meant that India would return empty-handed from the King's Cup in Thailand.

Due credit to Lebanon. They had defended solidly the entire match and made the most of their few opportunities going forward. It was a finely struck goal too. A goal that was like a dagger through the hearts of the Indian squad, which had borne the brunt of a shootout loss to Iraq in the semi-final just 72 hours ago.

At the end of the week, India came out with two defeats in the tournament. Both are in stark contrast to each other. While the Lebanon loss can be seen as an underwhelming showing against a team India had not conceded to in the previous 300 minutes, the defeat to Iraq was a misfortunate one, with fine margins ultimately settling the contest.

Several missed chances summed up India's frustrating outing against Lebanon. What made the defeat more disappointing was the failure to replicate the same quality from three days before, especially in attack. The disappointment is a result of higher expectations from the Indian team. And the fact that fans now expect more from the Blue Tigers evidences Indian football's growth over the last few years.

In that sense, not making it to the King's Cup podium cannot be attributed to a failure. Against Lebanon, India have played four matches this year, resulting in one outright win, one shootout win, one draw and one defeat. That's not a bad series at all against a side that made it to the final round of Asian Qualifiers for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Importantly, India held the upper hand in all those clashes, creating far more chances than the West Asians.

Against Iraq, India showcased that they've got all the capabilities to brave the storm and go toe to toe with the Asian elites. Igor Stimac's men surprised the continent's seventh-ranked side by taking the lead not once but twice. In the end, two penalties came to Iraq's rescue as they managed to hold India to a 2-2 draw before nicking the win from spot-kicks.

"Anyone who's watching football for the first time anywhere in the world, if they would see India right now, how we're playing, they would regard India as one of the finest teams in Asia," remarked Sandesh Jhingan. "One or two years ago, they (Lebanon) wouldn't have been celebrating like this. They were wasting time with three players going down. That is the difference.





"I'm not getting too over-arrogant or carried away. But I think we're on the right track. It's a process that started four years ago. There were very dark times, but we kept holding each other's hands," said India's captain against Lebanon in the absence of Sunil Chhetri, who opened a new chapter in his life as he and his wife Sonam announced the birth of their son Dhruv.

Of course, India dearly missed their greatest international goalscorer in Thailand. It very rarely happens that the Blue Tigers take to the pitch without Chhetri. In fact, it has happened only five times since September 2019. But football is a team sport, and India are still a very young team. Adapting and playing without your talisman can be taken as one of the learning experiences of the King's Cup. Not just on the pitch, but off it too, as Chhetri is a leader, big brother and even a father figure to some of the younger players. The tournament served as a reminder that sometimes you have to go to the battlefield without your commander-in-chief. And sitting at home, Chhetri had no complaints with what he saw from India. "Very proud of the team we've become and the performances we are dishing out," he posted after the Iraq game.

It's important to keep in mind that these matches - the King's Cup and the upcoming Merdeka Tournament in October - are all part of India's preparations and build-up for the bigger challenges awaiting in the future. With the Blue Tigers set to face teams like Qatar, Australia, Uzbekistan and Syria in the World Cup Qualifiers and the AFC Asian Cup in the coming months, the performance against Iraq away from home could be a big confidence booster for Stimac's side.

"Coming abroad, playing on foreign soil in difficult conditions, testing ourselves, we almost beat Iraq, who are ranked seventh in Asia. It is a tournament, but they're basically friendlies. You play these games to test yourself and see where you stand," said Jhingan.

"I have a lot of positive feelings from the way we're going. I'm super proud. Since I made my debut when we were 175, we've made big strides. The sky is the limit. Trust me, 20-30 years down the line, when we tell our children and grandchildren, we'll say when this revolution was happening, we all were part of it," he added.



China campaign raises flicker of hope for Indian Youngsters

There may not be many positives to take from the AFC U23 Asian Cup Qualifiers, but international experience is an invaluable one

AKHIL RAWAT

India's hopes for a first-ever qualification for the AFC U23 Asian Cup came crashing down with two losses in as many matches on September 9 and 12 in Dalian, China. After the withdrawal of Maldives, less than 24 hours before India were supposed to play them on September 6, Group G of the qualifiers was reduced to a three-team group of death (UAE, India and China PR).

For Clifford Miranda, the opening match against China PR was his international debut for the national team. His wards, who did not have much time to prepare together for the qualifiers, gave a solid account of themselves despite coming out empty-handed from the contest after a 1-2 defeat. A 96th-minute winner stole the three points for the hosts and broke the hearts of the Indians, who just a couple of minutes before thought they were the ones with the last laugh when they equalised in the 93rd minute.

Defeats don't get more painful than those, and it was one from which the India U23s could not recover. Heading into the last match against the UAE, there was still an outside chance for Miranda's boys to qualify for Qatar as one of the best second-placed teams. However, the Gulf side, themselves needing a big win to top the group, came out all guns blazing and blew away India, coasting to a comfortable 3-0 victory. Despite dampened spirits, the Indians kept trying to find a consolation of sorts, but it wasn't to be.



The two defeats did not just result in the elimination from the AFC U23 Asian Cup 2024, but also the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. India have not qualified for the Olympics since 1960, and the 64-year wait is set to continue.

On the outside, it may seem difficult to take positives from this qualifying campaign. But putting things into perspective, and putting ourselves in the shoes of the 23 men who fought for the nation in difficult conditions on foreign soil against some of the best Asian sides, their efforts deserve to be appreciated.

While there were quite a few experienced youth team players in the Indian squad, like Prabhsukhan Singh Gill, Hormipam Ruivah, Amarjit Singh Kiyam, Narender Gahlot, Jitendra Singh and Sanjeev Stalin among others, for many, the qualifiers were their first official international competition. One of them was captain Sivasakthi Narayanan, who had impressed with 11 goals for Bengaluru FC in all competitions last season. Abdul Rabeeh, Brison Fernandes, Sourav K, Suhail Ahmad Bhat, Jiteshwor Singh, and Ayush Chhetri were the others who had their first taste of the blue of India.

And that's the big positive from the China campaign. There's a huge difference between playing for your club in domestic competitions and representing your nation on the global stage. There's nothing like marching onto the pitch wearing the India crest on your chest and singing the national anthem. No matter the result, getting that experience early on in their budding careers is invaluable. There's no dearth of potential in each of these players. Many of them may go on to realise their dream of donning the senior blue. The AFC U23 Asian Cup Qualifiers was just the beginning.



Shooting Range

49th King's Cup 2023







Merdeka's Memorable Men: The unsung heroes of Indian Football

It is a captivating story of Magan Singh's prolonged love affair with the Grand Old Lady of Asia, the nickname of Merdeka Cup. Magan was indeed a great suitor, who serenaded her on the pitch with fabulous performances

JAYDEEP BASU

Tucked in the northwest corner of Rajasthan, the thriving city of Bikaner is best known for its colossal Junagarh Fort, or the rip-roaring sand dunes safari on the Thar Desert. To say the city has much of a tradition in football would be somewhat of an exaggeration.

But please hold your tongue until you meet Magan Singh Rajvi, the 75-year-old, who lives in Bikaner and runs a village football academy along with his son, completely free of charge. Today, only a few remember the fact that the man often spotted walking quietly on Bikaner roads was once the darling of the crowd in the faraway city of Kuala Lumpur for his extraordinary ability to score goals from the most difficult angles.

There was a time in the late 1960s and 1970s when Magan Singh was all the rage in the famous Merdeka Cup in Malaysia. In every edition, the spectators used to fervently wait for the Indian National Team to turn up in Kuala Lumpur with the tall and well-built striker in the squad. In the five editions of the Merdeka Cup played between 1969 and 1974, the man with the amazing heading ability scored 13 goals in total, which is still a record for India.

It is a captivating story of Magan Singh's prolonged love affair with the Grand Old Lady of Asia, the nickname of Merdeka Cup. Magan was indeed a great suitor, who serenaded her on the pitch with fabulous performances.

"Did I really score so many goals in Merdeka? I don't remember, frankly," said Magan with a laugh from his Bikaner home. "In the 18-yard box, I always knew instinctively where exactly the ball would come, and I would be there to take advantage. Of course, I do remember that I once scored a goal against hosts Malaysia in Merdeka that brought deathly silence in the stands, but only for a few seconds. Thereafter, the spectators broke into applause that continued for a few minutes."

Magan has no regret that hardly anyone in Indian football talks about his feat these days. "Well, I played the game that I love dearly to date. It was a huge honour to be able to play for India and eventually captain the team," he said.

But then, Magan Singh is not the only forgotten hero of some of India's great deeds in the prestigious Merdeka Cup, where India participated no less than 17 times. Who recalls the diminutive Ashok Chatterjee, the fearless striker, who was famous for his flying headers through a jungle of boots in the rival box?

He has nine goals to his credit in the Merdeka Cup, but was hardly ever mentioned in any platform of Indian Football. He died nearly unnoticed in the midst of COVID-19 in September 2020. There was hardly a soul around to garland him on behalf of the Indian Football community. Ironically, all his maverick actions in Merdeka came in the month of September only.

But who bothers?

Yes, no one cares about the fact that the Blue Tigers were once considered the superpowers of Merdeka. In 1959, when India first participated in the tournament, they emerged unscathed without losing a match. That hosts Malaya (now Malaysia) could pip them for the title, was because of a superior goal difference.

That wasn't the only time India finished runners-up in Merdeka. The names of C Mustafa, Sushil Sinha, Prasanta Sinha, Ashim Moulick or Kajal Mukherjee perhaps do not ring a bell in the minds of current Indian Football fans, but they were parts of the crack Indian outfit in the 1964 Merdeka, where India struck a dozen goals in four matches before bowing to Burma by a solitary goal in the final. This particular match would also go down in history as the great Chuni Goswami's swansong tie in international football. Only 26 years old when he bid adieu to the blue jersey, much to the dismay of Indian Football fans.





Two years later, in the same tournament, India won five of their six matches without conceding a goal. Their only defeat came in the most unexpected manner, against Singapore by a solitary goal – a defeat pushed them to third place behind joint winners South Vietnam and Burma (now Myanmar).

India's tradition of coming up with some great performances in Merdeka continued until the 1980s. In 1981 and 1986, India reached the semi-finals of Merdeka, with Krishanu Dey scoring a brilliant hat-trick against Thailand, the fifth by an Indian in the Kuala Lumpur meet. The first was by Marto Gracias, another name that got lost in history. He simply pulverised the Hong Kong defence in 1967 as India romped home to a 4-1 victory.

There were also moments in Merdeka that India would like to forget out of sheer frustration. The worst was the 1970 semi-final when India led 2-0 at the half-time against formidable South Korea, only to lose the match 3-2 in the end. Subhas Bhowmick, one of the stars of the 1970 team, said, "Fifty years have passed since then. But it was a nightmarish experience I am yet to recover from. We took a vice-like grip on the match only to offer it back to them on a platter. We lost a golden opportunity to reach the final."

Now, 22 years later, India would once again step into the Merdeka Cup arena, to be played under a new format in the FIFA window. All India Football Federation President, Mr Kalyan Chaubey, has a penchant for history and tradition, and he personally spoke to his Malaysian counterpart to make India's participation possible.

The reins of the journey, which began 64 years ago, are now in the able hands of Igor Stimac and his boys.



Manisha Kalyan: The first-girl of Indian football making waves in Europe

The two-time AIFF Women's Player of the Year became the first Indian to score in the UEFA Women's Champions League

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

It was just three years ago that a nifty 20-year-old amazed the world as she sped away from her marker in Manaus, to score against hosts Brazil, sending the fans of Indian Football into fantasy land. Manisha Kalyan, over the last few years, has not only become one of the key players for the Indian Women's Team, but she has also gone on to make a name for herself in Europe.

Manisha has many firsts to her name – she is the first Indian to net a goal against mighty Brazil; she is the first Indian to score in the UEFA Women's Champions League for Apollon Ladies FC against WFC Samegrelo of Georgia this week, thus raising the bar for women's football in India.

"Going to Apollon Ladies FC in Cyprus from my small village in Hoshiarpur carries deep significance for my career. I am often the first to reach the field for training and the last to leave. It's an ample testimony to my hard work and it brought results. I earned through unwavering hard work, dedication, and determination.

Yet, I am not satisfied, and I am not going to rest. It's still a long way to go," said Manisha to www.the-aiff.com from Cyprus.

To be picked up by a club like Apollon Ladies is an achievement by itself, that too for an Indian girl. They are a leading club in Cyprus, having won nine consecutive doubles. They made headlines after beating two-time European champion Umea IK in their second appearance in the Champions League.

Manisha Kalyan's journey in football began at a young age. Growing up in Haryana, a state known for producing some of India's finest athletes, she was introduced to the sport through her local community and school. Her passion for football quickly became evident, and she started showcasing her talent on the field.

"As I said, I've made significant sacrifices, and I understand that my focus here is essential to not letting those sacrifices go to waste. Overcoming financial instability and family issues, especially after my father was involved in an accident, has been a rather difficult journey.

"These sacrifices serve as a driving force, strengthening my resolve and preparing my mind to confront any obstacle," she said.

On being asked about how she maintained balance in Cyprus, Manisha said, "Living in Cyprus, I often experienced moments of homesickness. Our culture values close family bonds and being far from home has its own challenges. Maintaining both mental and physical fitness is crucial to my journey. Physical fitness propels you forward, but without mental fitness, your performance remains incomplete," Manisha said.

"Even when facing moments of self-doubt, I remind myself of the immense effort I've invested to reach this level, pushing myself every day. I know that my future holds even more sources of motivation. My experiences in Europe, both as a footballer and as an individual, have imparted more mental strength than physical battles ever could," she further said.





After participating in two friendlies in Chennai against Nepal in February in India, this year she will be seen in Indian colours in the upcoming Asian Games and Women's Olympic Qualifiers Round 2.

"The anticipation of participating in the Asian Games and Olympic Qualifiers Round 2, fills me with excitement. Reuniting with my national team friends and coaches will be a special moment. Playing for my country gives me immense pride; there's a unique feeling when I don the National jersey that nothing else can match," said Manisha. "The Asian Games represent a significant opportunity for women's football in India, with Chinese Taipei and Thailand standing as formidable teams with good rankings. The prospect of competing against such strong opponents is truly exhilarating, keeping me focussed and motivated," the forward said.

The AIFF Player of the Year 2023, is overwhelmed with all the messages she has been receiving and said, "Seeing people's happiness when they watch me play, along with the motivating comments on social media platforms, fuels my determination.

"My next goal is to see my country compete in the FIFA World Cup, and I'm committed to contributing through even harder work, seizing better opportunities, and delivering stellar performances with my club", concluded Manisha.



Four Indian clubs in Asian fray

Mumbai City, Odisha, Mohun Bagan and Gokulam Kerala are set to fly the Indian flag in AFC club competitions in the 2023-24 season

Asian nights are back once again! This season, India will be represented by as many as four clubs across three AFC (Asian Football Confederation) competitions – AFC Champions League, AFC Cup, and AFC Women's Club Championship.

While no Indian club has won any of these three competitions, there have been some memorable performances in the past, be it Mohun Bagan's run to the semi-final group in 1988 (when the tournament was called the Asian Club Championship), or Dempo SC becoming the first-ever Indian team to reach the semi-finals of the AFC Cup in 2008, or Bengaluru FC going all the way to the final in 2016.

This season, Mumbai City FC (AFC Champions League), Mohun Bagan SG and Odisha FC (AFC Cup), and Gokulam Kerala FC (AFC Women's Club Championship) will be the four teams looking to fly the Indian flag high at the Asian level.



OPPORTUNITY OF A LIFETIME FOR MUMBAI CITY FC

The Islanders amazed one and all in the previous edition of the AFC Champions League in 2022, when they put in some heroic performances to finish second in Group B; sadly though, they could garner only seven points, which was not enough to secure them a spot in the Round of 16, as three of the best second-placed teams in the West Asia region. Despite that, their victories against Al-Quwa Al-Jawiya (2-1 and 1-0) from Iraq were much celebrated.

This time, however, Mumbai City have a much tougher challenge at hand, on paper at least. The side from the financial capital of India will be facing the likes of Nassaji Mazandaran (Iran), PFC Navbahor Namangan (Uzbekistan), and four-time champions and last season's runners-ups Al-Hilal (Saudi Arabia).

While Nassaji Mazandaran are relatively new to the continental level, Navbahor are no strangers to the Champions League. The biggest talking points, however, are Al-Hilal, who boast some big names like Yassine Bounou, Kalidou Koulibaly, Aleksandar Mitrovic, and Neymar.

It does seem to be a rather difficult proposition for Mumbai City in Group D, the Islanders will be looking to go one better than last season, and qualify to the knockout stage as one of the best 16 clubs in Asia.

MOHUN BAGAN, ODISHA LOOK FOR SOUTH ASIAN DOMINANCE IN AFC CUP

Mohun Bagan SG are no strangers to the AFC Cup, having played the competitions on countless occasions. Odisha FC, on the other hand, are experiencing their first ever Asian sojourn, and will look to make this experience count. Only one team from the South Asian Group will make it to the Inter-zone playoff semi-finals, and this is surely set to create some exciting scenarios, as both the Indian clubs look to progress further in Asia, as they face up against Bashundhara Kings (Bangladesh) and Maziya S&RC (Maldives).

The Mariners had topped the South Asian group of the AFC Cup in 2021 and 2022, against familiar foes like Bashundhara Kings and Maziya (Bengaluru FC and Gokulam Kerala being the other Indian team, respectively), and came out on top on both occasions. However, they have not been able to go past the Inter-zone playoff semi-finals, losing to Nasaf Qarsho 0-6 on aggregate in 2021, and 1-3 to Kuala Lumpur City in 2022.

GOKULAM KERALA LOOK TO MAKE THEIR MARK IN ASIAN

A lot was expected of Gokulam Kerala FC in the 2021 edition of the AFC Women's Club Championship, but they came off with only one win against Bunyodkor (from Uzbekistan). This time, however, with more teams in the fray, and a bigger competition on the cards, the Malabarians will be looking to put on a better show.

Gokulam Kerala have been drawn into the West Asian group on this occasion, and are set to face Urawa Red Diamonds (Japan), Hualien Women's Football Team (Chinese Taipei), and hosts Bangkok FC (Thailand), at Chonburi, Thailand. The winners of the two groups will play the final to decide the champions.



On-pitch strategy will make the right impact in AFC U-17 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers Round 2, says coach Priya PV



The Federation has signed an MoU to promote youth football and revitalise a tournament of supreme importance for grassroots football in the country

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

In less than a weeks' time, India's women footballers will be seen in action in different parts of the continent. While the Senior Women's National team will travel to Hangzhou, China, for the much-awaited Asian Games, the U-17 Women's team will leave for Thailand for Round 2 of the AFC U17 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers.

The Senior Women's National Team is currently training in Bhubaneswar under Head Coach Thomas Dennerby. The U-17 women's team have set camp in Goa since the past week under the watchful eyes of Priya PV.

The Young Tigresses had earned the distinction of making the Thailand trip after they emerged as Group F toppers in Round 1 of the qualifiers held in the Kyrgyz Republic in April. They beat the hosts 1-0 and Myanmar 2-1 to qualify for the second round. They are set to lock horns with hosts Thailand, the Korea Republic and IR Iran in Round 2.

In a chat with Head Coach Priya PV, who was recently named the AIFF 'Women's Coach of the Year', we discussed her team's preparations, improvements, team bonding, training strategies and much more. She is confident that Women's Football in India is making positive strides, citing the example of the senior women's team's participation in the Asian Games. She thinks this move is significant and reflects the development and increased visibility of women's football in the country.

EXCERPTS:



You have been named the 'Women's Coach of the Year'. How do you look at it?

Priya PV: I feel truly honoured and remain grateful to the Federation for this recognition. To me, this is not only a mere award, but a further motivation to work even harder. It has deepened my resolve to give each assignment my hundred percent and work to the best of my ability.

How's the preparation going for the AFC U17 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers Round 2 in Thailand?

PV: It's going great. The team is working hard in both training and strategies to bring their best performance to the field, with a focussed mind on technique and fitness.

How well have the girls settled in the National Camp?

PV: Well, some of them have come after a lengthy break. So, the fitness of a few players has naturally been impacted. Initially, the practice sessions were slightly difficult with low spirits, but now there is a positive shift in the attitude and it's definitely going well.

Korea Republic, Thailand and IR Iran – your thoughts on the opponents?

PV: After a few weeks, we will be entering the arena to play the second round. All the teams who will play in the second round are very strong teams; but I believe that if we plan accordingly and train well, we can make a very good impact and progress accordingly.

We have performed well in our previous challenge. How difficult do you think the next hurdle will be?

PV: As I told you, the teams playing in the second round are all strong and they will do their planning after watching the videos of our games. But again, I believe that if we have a good strategy in place and train the players well, we will be able to do well and achieve the best results.

What areas do you think the girls still need to improve on?

PV: Even though we have our weaknesses, my job is to train and prepare them so they are in their best form. But the areas where we struggle the most are in the goalkeeping department and finding the right strikers. We are working hard on all those areas and I have full confidence in my girls.



Shilji Shaji is back, and she has been named the 'AIFF Emerging Player of the Year'. As her coach, how do you look at her performance?

PV: I am proud of what she has achieved. She is a player, who grew up and matured through the Kerala Government Sports Division and I have had the opportunity to coach her as well. I believe this award will motivate her to work harder and reach new heights in her career.

Lastly, the Senior Women's National team will play the Asian Games next month. Your thoughts? Does this help in the development of women's football in India?

PV: It's fantastic news and hugely encouraging. The Senior Women's Team's participation in the Asian Games is a significant step forward for Indian women's football. Women's football in India is having more visibility and the coaches we have now are doing great work. So, I think that we are very much on the right track and women's football in India is definitely making the right developments.

The squad:

Anisha Oraon, Khushi Kumari, Khambi Chanu Sarangthem, Heena Khatun, Vikshit Bara, Thoibisana Chanu Toijam, Akhila Rajan, Arya Anilkumar, Sonibia Devi Irom, Lalita Boypai, Menaka Devi Lourembam, Juhi Singh, Babita Kumari, Shilji Shaji, Shivani Toppo, Sibani Devi Nongmeikapam, Cindy Remruatpuii Colney, Remi Thokchom, Sulanjana Raul, Anju Chanu Kayenpaibam, Khushbu Kashiram Saroj, Pooja and Priya Chettri.

Head coach: Priya PV

India's fixtures at the AFC U17 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers Round 2:

September 19: Korea Republic vs India (15:00 IST, Buriram)

September 21: India vs Thailand (19:00 IST, Buriram)

September 23: IR Iran vs India (15:00 IST, Buriram)



AIFF President formulates Task Force to study status of PIO footballers

All India Football Federation President, Mr Kalyan Chaubey, on Monday, August 14, 2023, constituted a Task Force for a feasibility study and evaluation of the footballers, who come under the status of Persons of Indian Origin (PIO) and Overseas Citizens of India (OCI).

The Task Force will also evaluate the players playing at a higher level and the status of youth players. The Task Force will submit its report by January 31, 2024.

The Task Force, Mr Chaubey announced, will be chaired by Mr Samir Thapar, the President of the Punjab Football Association, and a veteran sports administrator. The AIFF President will name the other members of the Task Force after consultations with the chairman and the Executive Committee.

Making the announcement, Mr Chaubey said, "The Task Force's primary objective will be to collect data on footballers who are either Overseas Citizens of India (OCI) or Persons of Indian Origin (PIO). It is a matter of great pride for us that many such footballers are playing in different countries with distinction and have made a name for themselves in the tough world of professional football."

Asked whether the data could be used to approach some of these footballers to play for the Indian National Teams at different levels, Mr Chaubey said, "We are aware that as per the existing law of the land, OCIs and PIOs are not allowed to represent India in international sporting events unless they adopt Indian citizenship.

"However, if we want to open up a dialogue and look into various ways of allowing such players to represent the Indian Football Teams, then we need concrete and comprehensive data to back up our arguments, which is why we have constituted this Task Force," said Mr Chaubey.

"We will first form a comprehensive database on the OCI and PIO footballers around the world, and then look for the best possible ways to use such players to take Indian football forward," added the AIFF President.



Competition Committee recommends launch of Institutional Football League from January 2024

The AIFF's Competition Committee met virtually on Tuesday, September 5, 2023, to discuss the way forward for various domestic competitions in the country.

In presence were AIFF Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran along with Deputy Secretary General Mr Satyanarayan M. Members of Competition Committee, Mr. Mohan Lal (Chhattisgarh), Mr. Syed Imtiaz Husain (Bihar), Mr. K Neibou Sekhose (Nagaland), Mr. Bikramjit Purkayastha (Delhi), and Aslam Ahmed Khan (Karnataka), attended the meeting.

The Committee recommended the introduction of the Institutional Football League for the first time in the country, which could be launched in January 2024. The league will be a pan-India amateur football competition to boost institutional football and encourage players' recruitment by Private Corporations, Public Sector units, State Departments, Ministerial Unites, Police/Defence/Paramilitary Forces (Unit-Level) and Railways (Division-level).

A single-division competition format will be followed if fewer than 16 teams are selected. In the event that more than 16 teams participate in the league, a multiple division format will be followed. The first division will have 10 teams and the promotion-relegation system between the divisions will be applicable.

Furthermore, the Committee recommended that the League format be decided in consultation with the selected teams. The winners and runners-up teams will be awarded direct entry into the Federation Cup 2024.

The committee also recommended that the hosts State Associations for the final rounds of the Senior Men's/Women's National Football Championships should be exempted from participating in the group stages of the competition.



AIFF holds pre-bid meeting with Institutional League teams

The bids will be subject to a two-step evaluation process - Technical Evaluation and Legacy Evaluation

The AIFF held a pre-bid consultation meeting with teams interested in the Institutional League to present the plan for the competition and understand the views of the institutional teams on Thursday, August 31, 2023.

The meeting was chaired by Deputy Secretary General Mr Satyanarayan M and was attended by 25 teams - Aeronautical Development Establishment (Bengaluru), Air India (Mumbai), ASC Centre South (Bengaluru), Bank of Baroda (Vadodara), BSF North Bengal (Siliguri), BSF Punjab, Chennai Customs, CRPF (Punjab), CSIR – National Institute of Oceanography (Goa), Dravstream Tech Pvt Ltd (Mumbai), Employee State Insurance Corporation (Chennai), Employee State Insurance Corporation (New Delhi), Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (Bengaluru), Indian Navy (Kochi), Indian Railways (New Delhi), IndiaPost Karnataka (Bengaluru), JCT (Punjab), Karnataka Police (Bengaluru), Oil India Ltd - Assam Field HQ (Duliajan), PDC Services (Alchemy Football) (Bengaluru), PFA Organization (Haryana), Punjab Police, Reserve Bank of India (Mumbai), Reserve Bank of India (Bengaluru) and Services Sports Control Board (New Delhi).

Institutional teams have been an integral part of Indian football since independence, frequently winning trophies and accolades by defeating the established clubs. Many great players have come out from institutional teams, adding a fresh flavour to the sport. More recently, the NFL/I-League contained at least one institutional side in its roster every season. AIFF is now looking to revive the amateur football structure and honour the contributions by such great institutions to Indian football.

Addressing the meeting, Mr Satyanarayanan said, "It's great to see such encouraging response from teams across the country for the Institutional League. All such organisations have been doing a wonderful job of promoting football over all these years. It's nice to see some old faces and old teams coming back.

"The Institutional League is part of our Vision 2047. Thanks to AIFF President Mr Kalyan Chaubey, Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran and the Executive Committee, we are not exactly reviving but launching a new competition for the sector which has played a major role in the years gone by," he added.

The objective of the league is to integrate institutional football with the Indian football structure and add value to the national competitive structure. It will provide aspiring footballers with employment opportunities and give a chance for the institutional teams to compete with the top clubs in India.

The Request for Proposal (RFP) document is expected to be released on the AIFF website in early September 2023. Interested teams can apply by submitting the RFP document. The eligible teams will be announced in mid-October 2023 and the league is tentatively scheduled to begin in January 2024. Depending on the number of successful applications, the league could be organised in multiple divisions. The competition format will be decided in consultation with all participating teams.

The participation is open to organisations including, but not limited to, the following - Private Corporations, Ministerial Units, Public Sector Units, Police/Defence/Paramilitary Forces (Unit-Level), State Departments and Railways (Division-level).

The bids will be subject to a two-step evaluation process - Technical Evaluation (to assess the preparedness of the applicant to participate in the competition) and Legacy Evaluation (to determine historical contribution of the applicant to Indian football). Technical credits will be used to determine the applicant's seeding for the competition, while Legacy credits will be used to determine the concession that will be awarded to the applicant on the base participation fee.

The base participation fee for the Institutional League has been set at INR 10,00,000 on an annual basis. Applicants are eligible for a concession of up to INR 5,00,000 on the base participation fee depending on their legacy evaluation score. The winners and runners-up of the Institutional League will be awarded direct entry into the Federation Cup 2024. If there is more than one division, promotion-relegation system will be applicable.

As far as the impact of the Institutional League is concerned, it will help in the positive image/recognition for institutions, additional infrastructure available for football ecosystem, greater employment opportunities for talented footballers, opportunities for players to be spotted by elite clubs, widespread popularity for institution teams and an added vibrancy to the Indian football ecosystem.



India squad for SAFF U-19 Championship announced

Indian U-19 Men's Team head coach Shuvendu Panda named a 23-member squad for the SAFF U-19 Championship to be played in Kathmandu, Nepal, from September 21-30, 2023.

The team, on Friday, September 8, 2023, left for an exposure-cum-training trip in Saudi Arabia. They will travel to Kathmandu on September 19.

The Blue Colts are drawn alongside Bhutan and Bangladesh in Group B, while hosts Nepal, Maldives and Pakistan are in Group A. The championship will be held at the Dashrath Stadium in Kathmandu.

After a single round-robin group stage, the top two teams from both groups will meet in the semi-finals.

India emerged champions in SAFF U20 held in 2022 defeating Bangladesh 5-2 in the final in Bhubaneswar.

India's squad for SAFF U-19 Championship, 2023:

Goalkeepers: Lionel Daryl Rymmei, Divyaj Dhaval Thakkar and Manjot Singh Parmar.

Defenders: Thomas Kanamoottil Cherian, Jahangir Ahmad Shagoo, Vijay Marandi, A Siba Prasad, Manabir Basumatary, Surajkumar Singh Ngangbam and Ricky Meetei.

Midfielders: Manglenthang Kipgen, Ishaan Shishodia, Arjun Singh Oinam, Yash Chikro, Ebindas Yesudasan, Raja Harijan and Thumsol Tongsin.

Forwards: Gwngwmsar Goyary, Sahil Khurshid, Linky Meitei Chabungbam, Kelvin Singh Taorem, Naoba Meitei and Dinesh Singh Soubam.

Head coach: Shuvendu Panda



Indian Football takes flight with IndiGo; announces partnership with airline giants

The All India Football Federation announced IndiGo as its global partner and the official airline for the Indian Football Team, on Friday, September 15, 2023.

Football is among the most popular sports in India, and IndiGo is the airline with the highest market share in the country, making this partnership even more significant, with a collective endeavour to unite fans and nurture the sport's growth.

AIFF President Mr Kalyan Chaubey said, "It is indeed a pleasure for the All India Football Federation to partner with IndiGo. During my travels with IndiGo, I was impressed with the service and professionalism of the airline. Being the country's largest airline, we consider this as IndiGo's first sports partnership. We are really honoured and happy.

"With a population of 1.4 billion, India is the fifth-largest economy in the world. People say it's a cricket nation, but I often say it's a cricket-watching and a football-playing nation. It's a mass sport, as every kid, you will find, is playing football. With this young population and this growing economy, we have partnered with IndiGo who can show leadership in the Indian airline market as well as in sports, where leaders from both organisations have also come up with a similar vision. I would request IndiGo to support us in every possible way and take this partnership and football forward together," Mr Chaubey added.

As the official airline for the Indian Football Team, IndiGo's network is meticulously designed to cater to the diverse travel requirements of players, officials, and support staff. From domestic tournaments to international matches, IndiGo's comprehensive route map will ensure seamless and efficient journeys, allowing the team to focus solely on their game, unburdened by travel concerns.

In IndiGo, the AIFF finds a reliable and supportive travel partner who shares their passion for the sport. IndiGo is equally excited to support the Indian women's football team as well, contributing to the empowerment of women in sports. This partnership empowers the Indian national teams to represent the nation with pride and excellence on the global stage, reinforcing the common bond they share with millions of fans. IndiGo, with its primary colour being blue, will be the carrier of the Blue Tigers and Blue Tigresses, flying them to new heights and across new frontiers.

AIFF Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran said, "It's a historic day for Indian football. The airline IndiGo is flying high, and I'm sure with this partnership, we will only fly high. We wish you will always be the market leader. We believe it's a great occasion that has never been seen in Indian football history. We never had a collaboration with any airline before; that is truly historic.

"I'm sure that this partnership will take Indian football to greater heights and we will work together to take football to a level whereby the world will look at us as we are flying very high with our collaboration. We will be there – be blue, and the Blue Tigers will take us to the skies and paint blue across and we will make India proud with this partnership. The vision is very clear: we want to be in the incredible state of sport in India, get the attention of the world, and be the biggest talent hub in the world. Maybe one day, we will be exporting in big numbers, and we will use your airline to export those talents as we fly high," Dr Prabhakaran added.

IndiGo CEO Mr Pieters Elbers said, "We are thrilled to embark on this journey with the All India Football Federation, as both organizations share a common vision of advancing Indian football to new heights. This marks the start of an official partnership for AIFF, while for IndiGo, it represents our inaugural foray into the world of sports. Together, we are committed to a long-term collaboration that will not only elevate the sport but also touch the lives of fans across the nation. We aim to provide the Indian Football Team with IndiGo's well-established strengths: on-time performance, hassle-free service at affordable fares across our unparalleled network both domestically and internationally."

The partnership between the AIFF and IndiGo is set to span one year, commencing from September 1, 2023, to August 31, 2024.





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