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MARQUEZ'S PRESENCE IS AN ASSET

- Kalyan Chaubey
President, AIFF

RAJASTHAN, TELANGANA MAIDEN CHAMPS



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President's Note

Márquez's thorough knowledge of Indian football is an asset

Kalyan Chaubey

Going by the statistics, Indian football, over the years, has seen a dozen foreign coaches occupying the hot seat of the head coach of the senior men's national team. While Albert Flatley is the first non-Indian to get the job, the last name in the long list is Manolo Marquez.

Yet, Marquez, the 55-year-old soft-spoken Spanish coach, is unique in one way and the first among his 11 other predecessors. This is the first time a foreign coach has taken charge with adequate knowledge of Indian football. It goes beyond saying Marquez has a thorough understanding of Indian football because of his fairly long association as a coach in the ISL; he performed creditably while in Hyderabad FC and presently doing a fine job in FC Goa.

I must hasten to add that many of the previous foreign coaches with the Indian team were extremely competent and were famous in their own areas. But since they never worked in India before, it naturally took them at least six to eight months to settle down and feel the pulse of Indian football. Even if they came up with laudable plans, rolling out the entire process was delayed for this very reason.

The new coach holds this advantage. He can kick-start things from Day One because he has solid knowledge of the players, their food habits, the regions they come from, the language they speak, and all other details. I am confident and equally hopeful that would in no time reciprocate the impressive success he had in Indian domestic club football.

In the last three weeks, I had the opportunity to meet Manolo thrice. We had long discussions on Indian football and its way forward.



There is one important issue that both of us agreed on is that India's talent pool doesn't belong to the Indian Super League only. While there is no doubt that the majority of top Indian footballers play in the top league of the country, there is football in India beyond the ISL, too. There are many good players in the I-League, the Santosh Trophy and other tournaments, who can receive better opportunities on their own rights.

To spot these players and bring them to the proper channel, we need to have a plan and the scouts will have to play an important role in it. They have to watch the matches keenly all over the country and coordinate with the national team head coach constantly. Then only Indian football will benefit with the desired results. My point is very clear; no talent worth the name should remain unidentified.



On the other hand, we at the AIFF, are most serious about the U23 team and its progress. We have special plans for the U23 side and its coach will remain in regular touch with Marquez so that they can exchange views and share ideas and stay on the same plane. This coordination will be helpful as we target to achieve good results in the 2026 Asian Games.

I believe that to further elevate the senior national team's performance, we should make the best use of all the FIFA Windows available in the future. We have begun at the earnest; a three-nation meet in Hyderabad in September FIFA Window, followed by another in Vietnam in October. The third Window is in November and then, too, we will play a couple of matches. I am eagerly looking forward to the next three months and my best wishes to the national team and their new coach Manolo Marquez.





Champions Rajasthan write history in Junior Girls' NFC Tier 2

AKHIL RAWAT

The Rajasthan junior girls' team raised eyebrows across the country as they won the 2024-25 Junior Girls' National Football Championship Tier 2 title by beating hosts Karnataka 3-1 in the final on Friday, August 9, 2024, at the Sporting Planet Lovedale Central School Ground in Belgaum.

It was the state's first national level title in 60 years, and the first-ever by their women's team. Rajasthan defeated one of the tournament's favourites Karnataka in the final with a brilliant showing from Sanju Kanwar, who scored two free-kicks and Manju Kanwar, who executed a fine volley. Karnataka had been steamrolling opponents left, right and centre en route to the final, scoring a whopping 56 goals in five games. But against Rajasthan, the free-scorers were rendered silent.

Rajasthan were dominant too in their own right and began the tournament with an 8-0 thumping of Tripura, six of the goals coming in the first 20 minutes - creating a habit of early goals which would follow throughout the campaign. Requiring nothing less than a win against Maharashtra in their ultimate group match to qualify for the semi-finals, Sanju Kanwar was on target again as Rajasthan earned a narrow 1-0 victory. The Rajasthan skipper would find the net again in the semi-finals against Sikkim as early as the third minute, however, the game panned out to be a see-saw battle, which ultimately ended 3-3 after 120 minutes of action. With their India U16 international goalkeeper Muni between the sticks, Rajasthan emerged 4-3 winners in the shootout to earn a shot at the trophy, which they deservedly lifted on Friday.



WEST BENGAL END 20-YEAR WAIT FOR BC ROY TITLE

Striker Subhodip Sardar was on song as his two goals clinched the 2024-25 Junior Boys' National Football Championship for Dr. BC Roy Trophy Tier 1 title for West Bengal, who beat Odisha 2-0 in the final on Monday, August 12, 2024. It was West Bengal's record-extending 18th title in the category, and perhaps the most awaited of them all as it ended a 20-year wait since their last triumph in Giridih in 2003-04. West Bengal had lost five finals since then, but they were not to be denied at their sixth attempt at the Ramakrishna Ashrama Mission Ground in Narainpur.

It was Odisha's first BC Roy Trophy final since 1977. Incidentally, they lost to West Bengal on that occasion as well. On Monday evening, they found themselves chasing the game from start to finish as Sardar put West Bengal ahead with a second-minute strike. The forward added another in the 72nd minute as he squeezed a low shot through the legs of goalkeeper Uday Ekka to dash any hopes of an Odisha comeback.

These heroics were nothing new for Sardar, who had also scored the only goal in West Bengal's 1-0 win over Delhi in the semi-final. He also netted a brace in the 6-2 win over Tamil Nadu which opened his side's campaign in the group stage. Next, West Bengal's 2-0 win over Kerala proved to be decisive in topping Group D and qualifying for the semi-final.

TELANGANA WIN MAIDEN NATIONAL TITLE

Telangana won their first-ever title at the national level as they beat Manipur on penalties after a 1-1 draw to be crowned champions of Tier 2 of the Junior Boys' National Football Championship for Dr. BC Roy Trophy at the Nurul Amin Stadium, in Nagaon, Assam, on Sunday, August 11, 2024.

Beating one of the powerhouse footballing states in India in a final is no mean feat. After Irom David Mangang had put Manipur ahead in the 27th minute, Telangana hit back with Suhel Sekh's equaliser 15 minutes later. It was the first time in the tournament that Telangana had found themselves trailing. In the shootout, Telangana's Md Sajid, Mohammed Omar Farooq, Thongam Yaiphaba Singh and Syed Faizan Ahmed Hashmi put away their spot kicks successfully, but the biggest contribution came from goalkeeper Alok Nishad, who went on to save from two of Manipur's takers to give his side the title.



It's the mind that buttresses technique and tactics, says Manolo Márquez

Now into his fifth season of coaching in India, the Spaniard's tryst with the Indian national team is finally set to begin

AKHIL RAWAT

Spanish coach Manolo Márquez held his first media interaction on Sunday, August 11, 2024 in New Delhi, since taking over as the head coach of the senior men's national team.

While addressing the media, he was quick to acknowledge the fact that it was a dream come true for him to take charge of the Blue Tigers.

"First of all, I'm very grateful and I want to say a big thank you to the AIFF for the confidence it has in me. This is my fifth season in India and if you tell me five years ago that I will spend five years in India, maybe I would think that it was crazy. India is my country after Spain. It is the foreign country I've spent the most time in," said Márquez.

Márquez, who arrived late on Saturday night, had a hectic Sunday during his stay in the capital before flying back to Goa. In the morning, the new head coach held an extensive meeting with the Executive Committee and Technical Committee members of the AIFF. Later in the day, he visited the Football House for a meeting with the AIFF President Shri. Kalyan Chaubey, where the duo were engaged in discussions on the senior men's national team and Indian football in general.

While addressing the media, Márquez said, "For a long time, I was thinking that maybe one day I would like to coach the national team and I'm here now. I am very happy and it is a dream for me to be the national team coach of India."

Márquez first landed in India ahead of the 2020-21 Indian Super League season to take charge of Hyderabad FC and his family-like relations with Indian players are no secret, which already gives him a head start as he begins his national team journey.

"I have felt the connection in India from day one, since my first training session with Hyderabad FC. My connection with the Indian players is very nice. It's true that we spent two seasons in a bubble inside the hotel and spent a lot of time speaking. You can ask me where they are from, how many family members they have, the traditions or the different kinds of culture in every state of my players. As a foreigner, you have to adapt to new things, even in football. You need to know how the Indian players are. It's not the same to train in Spain, Thailand and India," said the 55-year-old.

Márquez will juggle between the Blue Tigers and FC Goa job for the 2024-25 season. On managing the hectic domestic and international calendar together, Márquez said, "It's true that this situation is not normal, but they are manageable. It's not the first time that the same person will coach a national team and a club together. There are many examples from the past of this happening in not just foreign countries but India as well.

"The matches are not at the same time. When the national team plays, there's a break in the ISL, so that can be shared. In the first few weeks, there will be a lot of work. But it's my passion and I know it won't be a problem. Obviously both jobs are about professionalism. And you won't have any doubt about it because we will work very hard for the national team."

India were knocked out of qualifying for the 2026 FIFA World Cup after defeat in Qatar in June, which means Márquez's first order of business, as far as official competitions are concerned, will be qualifying for the 2027 AFC Asian Cup. The qualifiers are set to begin in March 2025 in which 24 teams will be divided into six groups of four teams each, with the winner progressing to the final tournament in Saudi Arabia.



The draw for the qualifiers will take place in December and it will be important for India to keep their place in Pot 1 so as to achieve a favourable draw. Márquez will have friendly matches three FIFA International Match Windows (September, October and November) to utilise before the qualifiers. It all begins with the Intercontinental Cup in September where India will face Mauritius and Syria in Hyderabad, followed by matches against Lebanon and hosts Vietnam in the Tri-Nation tournament in October.

“The target now is obviously to qualify for the AFC Asian Cup if we speak about competitions. The target is also to improve the level of the Indian players in this case, to reach the next step individually and as a team. We need to improve. I don't like to speak about the ranking because sometimes statistics don't show the true picture. Everyone knows that progress takes time, but in this case, it depends on the attitude of everyone. Players, federation, staff, coaches. We all need to go in the same direction and then I am completely sure that we will get good results.

“We will have six, seven games before the first qualifier in March. Let's see what happens in the first FIFA window before the ISL starts. In this situation, we are playing friendly matches and need to prepare for more important matches ahead. And we can't forget we need to be in Pot 1 before December's draw. But finally it's about preparation and to find the correct people to grow as a team. We need players who play for the team, and not individually. You have to find the correct players, not just 11 but the whole group of 20 to 25. Everyone needs to know their role in the team and we need to play in the style that we want,” said Márquez.

In the previous national team camp in May and June, four players from the I-League were called up. Márquez remained of the opinion that it did not matter what tier a player plies his trade in, if he has the level, the national team doors will be open for him. However, it ultimately depends on the level of opposition the players are used to playing against.

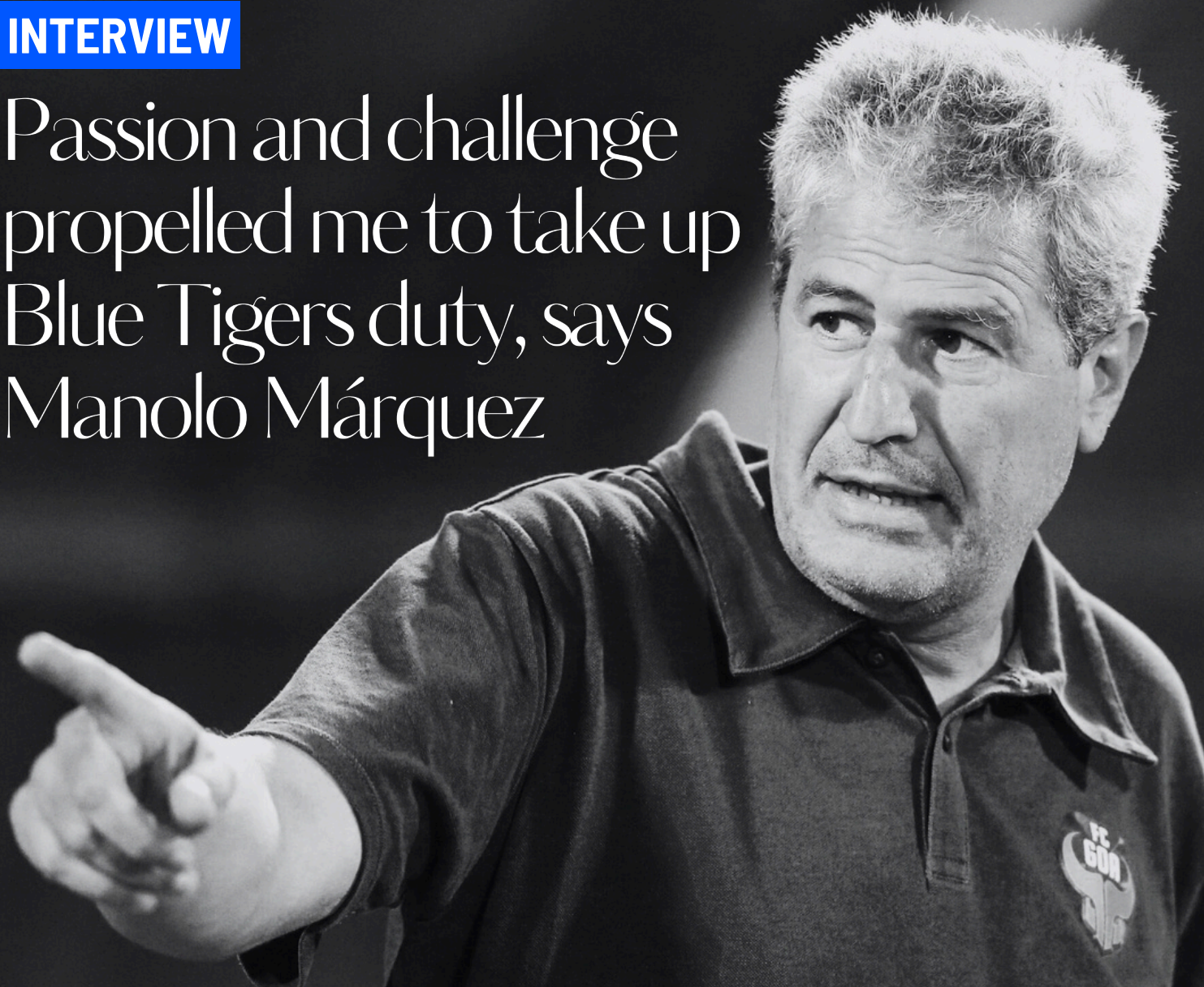
“We can speak about Edmund (Lalrindika). He was the only I-League player who played in the June matches because he had the quality. If they have the level, obviously, we will call them. But again, it would be better if these players play against stronger opposition. That's how they get better. In the ISL, there are 13 teams, which is still not too many. Obviously, the I-League players have possibilities, but the normal thing is that there will be more possibilities from the ISL and I think everyone can understand this situation,” said Márquez.

The Spaniard rounded off by speaking on the importance of mentality in players and how no skill, technique or quality will matter if the brain doesn't work in tandem. “We have to be stronger mentally. In football, technique is very important. Tactics are very important. Physical condition is very important, but if the head doesn't work, you can do nothing in life, not just football. For example, if you start a game losing 0-2 in the minute 20, you still have 70 minutes to turn the score and it is possible. This is the mentality. In the national team, theoretically, we'll play the best players in the country. Then if the mentality is correct, we will get good things with good results.”



INTERVIEW

Passion and challenge propelled me to take up Blue Tigers duty, says Manolo Márquez



SRUTI CHAKRABORTY & SOUMO GHOSH

Not many in Indian football were familiar with the name of Manolo Márquez when he arrived in India four years ago. But it didn't take time to realise that he wasn't here to add his name to the long list of foreign coaches who worked in India before slipping into oblivion. Thrown into the strenuous territory of club coaching, Márquez was like a breath of fresh air, whose consummate ability to use his limited resources to extract the best became the talking point of Indian football.

After spending four fruitful seasons in India, the 55-year-old soft-spoken Spaniard has decided to spread his wings. Apart from club coaching, he would now don the role of head coach of the Indian National Team, which, in his own words, is "a big challenge." The Blue Tigers are just about a month away from beginning their stint under Márquez, whose first assignment will be during the September international window at the Intercontinental Cup in Hyderabad, where they will face Syria and Mauritius.

Before taking charge of the dressing room, the new boss spoke to the-aiff.com about his upcoming challenges and how he plans on tackling them. Excerpts:

Welcome to the Indian football team, coach. First of all, please tell us what prompted you to take up this role. Do you consider it to be difficult terrain?

MM: It is difficult, of course, but India has become like my second country as I've spent four years here, something that I have never done before. I think I know most of the important players in the ISL and the I-League, and I have signed a player from the Santosh Trophy as well, when I was with Hyderabad. I know the traditions, and I've got a good feeling about this. Football is unpredictable, but my feeling is that I'm ready to take up this role.

Please tell us a bit about your journey so far in your career.

MM: Well, football is a religion in my country, Spain, so I would probably have to speak from the date of my birth. My father and grandfather were crazy football fans. I was not a professional player, but I've played in the third division. I started coaching at the age of 20, when I would train kids. Since I started so early, I've been fortunate to train players across all age categories, right from the kids to La Liga and even in women's football with Espanyol. I had brief stints in Croatia and Thailand before I came to India, and I have loved it here. The one thing that was not in my CV, however, was training a national team, and I am thankful for that opportunity now.

You have been coaching in India for four years now. How much, do you think, have things changed here in these years?

MM: Well, first and foremost, I feel the league has become bigger than before, we get more matches. When I initially came here, we were playing from within the COVID bubble, so the competition was short. Now we add a new team every year. When I initially arrived, the players were not as consistent. They would play well one season but fade away in the next campaign. Now that most of the players are aware of what they need to do, they are more professional, and focussed. Be it diet, rest, or training sessions, they follow all the programmes with the utmost discipline.



I can generally say that there has been a lot of improvement in the Indian players, though my feeling is that India can improve a thousand times more.

But I'd also say that there are plenty of challenges in that regard. India is like 20 countries put together. There are a lot of states where there's not much interest in football, and then there are others that are extremely passionate about the sport. Perhaps it would be better to concentrate on the few states where football is more popular initially and then grow further from there.

Performing the dual role of a national coach and a club coach is not always easy, though many top coaches have done so in the past. How do you aim to strike a balance between the two?

MM: It's all about being professional. It's not the first time that someone's done it, and it certainly won't be the last. It's all about managing the time, and that should not be a problem for me. When there is a break in the ISL, I will be with the national team. It's a big challenge, but I'm passionate about it.

I'm aware that, being in the limelight, I will receive both praise and criticism. That's part of a coach's salary. Even if you choose one lineup, the person beside you may not always agree with you, and that's fine. What we must ensure is that we all work in the same direction.

We have started the pre-season at FC Goa, and of course our focus is in the right place. But I am also keeping an eye on all the teams in the Durand Cup, as well for the National Team.

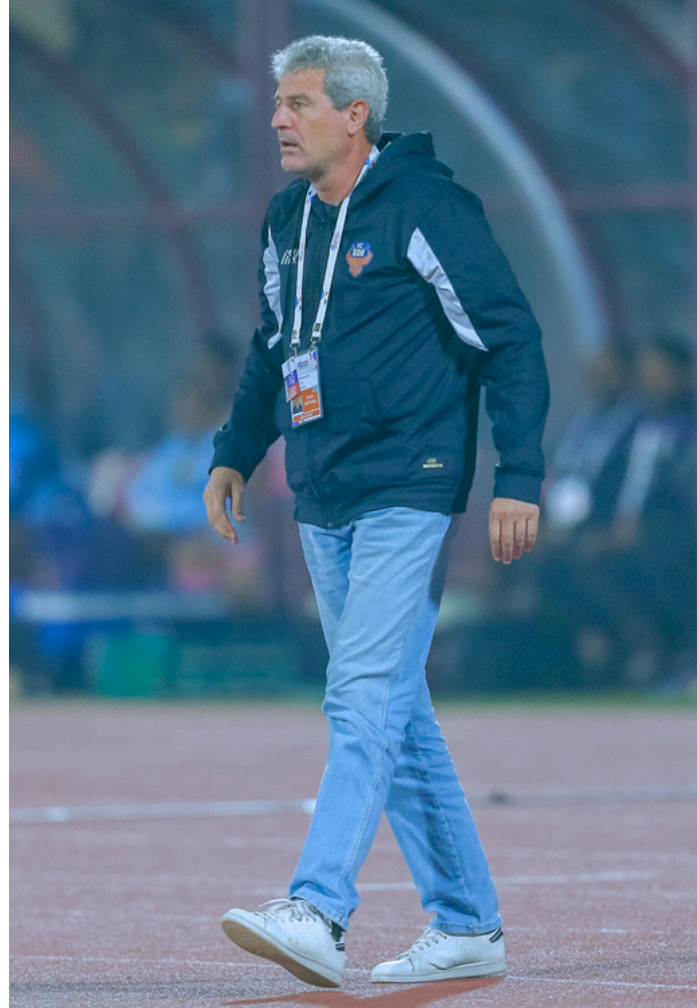
How different is being a head coach at a club from being the head coach of a National Team?

MM: I can only answer that after my first game. My relationship with the players, especially with the Indian players, is very good. With most of them, I could sit and have a long conversation. I get to learn where they are from, whether they live with their families or with their wives. I now know about the differences in cultures when it comes to people from different areas of the country. How Kerala is different from Goa, which is different from Kolkata, which again is different from the northeast.

The biggest difference with the National Team is that you don't have foreign players in the team. It's certainly a challenge, but I love it. I feel we will achieve important things in the next few seasons.

Could you briefly tell us about your footballing philosophy on the pitch?

MM: I know that there are a lot of coaches who like to dictate how the team should play. My opinion, however, is that I have come to India; India has not come to me. Therefore, I have to adapt to the players I have. It's different when you are a National Team coach, you can choose the players you want. Not like at a club where you can choose some players, but you have to work with the ones that you have on most occasions.





In general, I like to play with a lot of organisation and order, and I like to play through the wings. Every coach would like their team to play good offensive football, but the most important thing is to win. How you win is, of course, important, but we have to be a competitive team first and foremost.

We understand that you've had a discussion with the AIFF President about how to go about the next two FIFA International Windows. Could you please shed some light on how you approach the months of September and October?

MM: The reality of the situation is that we have three international windows to prepare for the AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers (Round 3), which begins in March. We need to make sure that we get good results in the three upcoming FIFA windows this year (September, October, and November), and get Pot 1 for the draws of the qualifiers for the Asian Cup.

I think September will be a little different, because the ISL season will not have started yet once we begin the international window. We will have a clearer picture before the October FIFA window, as the clubs will have played a few ISL games by then.

You essentially have six matches to prepare the team for the AFC Asian Cup 2027 Qualifiers Round 3. What are your thoughts on the possibilities of playing against higher-ranked opponents?

MM: We want to be in Pot 1. That would give us an advantage. We must play competitive games to improve, but that does not mean that we need to play the strongest teams right now. Sides like Vietnam, Lebanon, Syria are all competitive teams in Asia. All of these teams are higher-ranked than India at this moment. It would be best for India to play such teams at this moment, and not against teams that are ranked considerably lower than us. Once we show improvement against these teams, we can aim to play against even better sides.

What kind of modifications would you be looking to inculcate in the team?

MM: The main question here is whether I have to call the same players as before or new players, younger players. It all depends on the situation at that moment. You definitely need to have a group of players from which you select; you can't call 20 different players every time. It's important to pick the correct player at the correct moment, when they are in form. Maybe a relatively unknown player suddenly starts scoring a lot of goals, and then you have to call that player and give him a chance. But we can never know what will happen.

We've seen you work wonders with youngsters at Hyderabad FC and FC Goa. Would we see more focus on young players with the National Team too?

MM: When I arrived in Hyderabad, we had some young players, and a few of our crucial foreigners also suffered injuries. We essentially played the season with three foreign players and a lot of Indian youngsters. The reason they got their chance was that in every training session, they showed me that they have the capacity to play with a positive mentality.

Age is not a problem. It's all about maturity. Every player will be different from the other in this regard. Some can be mature at the age of 17, while others could still be immature till 23 or 24. Even the ones that show maturity early on could suddenly disappear later on. I think the process is very important. If a player in the U20 or U23 age groups is a level higher, he needs to aim for the next level and try to play with the senior team.

The AIFF at present is vigorously pursuing a policy of producing quality coaches all over the country. Do you think you could have a role to play in it?

MM: It's not only in India, but coach education is important in all countries. Licenses are important, and you definitely need them. But that does not mean that you will be a better coach for it. Someone may not have a license, but have more knowledge about football.

Over the four seasons that I've been here, I've seen the level of Indian coaches get better every season. Last season, there were two Indian head coaches – Thangboi Singto (Hyderabad FC) and Khalid Jamil (Jamshedpur FC). Clifford (Miranda) won the Super Cup with Odisha FC before that.

I've also seen a lot of talented Indian assistant coaches over the past four years. I am currently working with a fantastic assistant coach in Gouramangi Singh, who is a former India international himself. In the national team, I will also be working with Mahesh Gawali, another good coach who was an excellent player for the national team a few years ago.

I feel that in the next few years, the target should be that the next National Team head coach has to come from India. It's not just for the national team, but for the clubs too. Every Indian assistant coach at the clubs should aim to become a head coach in the next few years. Maybe they can also start with being the head coach of the U17 or U19 teams before moving on to take charge of the senior teams.

THE BLUE TIGERS' UPCOMING FIXTURES: 

INTERCONTINENTAL CUP (HYDERABAD, SEPTEMBER 3-9)

INDIA VS MAURITIUS 

SYRIA VS INDIA 

VFF TRI-NATION SERIES (VIETNAM, OCTOBER 9-15)

OCTOBER 9: VIETNAM VS INDIA 

OCTOBER 12: INDIA VS LEBANON 



AIFF President meets I-League clubs; Federation assures an increased ‘upto 8-camera HD broadcast’ production & geo-optimised fixtures

Club owners welcome AIFF’s commitment; all clubs term it a welcome step where AIFF addressed their feedback point-by-point

In a bid to boost the upcoming I-League season, All India Football Federation (AIFF), on Monday, August 12, 2024, assured the elite clubs on quality broadcast production ‘upto 8 high-definition cameras’ and a club-centric optimised fixture, provided the participating clubs meet a minimum infrastructure mandate.

The important decision was taken during a constructive and a progressive interaction with the I-League clubs in a two-hour long meeting called by AIFF President Mr. Kalyan Chaubey in the capital. Eight of the 12 club owners/co-owners attended the meeting at the Football House, while four joined virtually.

Addressing the feedback received from the clubs, AIFF has assured to work with the stakeholders on proactive steps to help raise the I-League profile with renewed focus on its marketing and promotion, broadcast, fixture and refereeing. Moving ahead, as an immediate step, the AIFF has formed various task force groups with representatives from I-League clubs to work on each of these aspects, to collaborate and propose a way forward. AIFF is keen to schedule the I-League games on prime time with an increased ‘upto 8 camera’ HD broadcast kit. The Federation has requested clubs to revert with updates on their home stadium infrastructure including commitment on pitch quality of international standard throughout the season, and their ability to install/upgrade 1800 lux floodlights – a minimum mandate for quality broadcast production.

It was decided that venues where home clubs are able to commit meeting the minimum mandated infrastructure, AIFF will allocate prime time broadcast schedule with increased camera kit. Such games will also be marked as marquee events in the fixtures for marketing purposes.

However, for venues which may not be able to meet the minimum requirements this season, AIFF will allocate a minimum of two to six camera kit, considering the availability of the infrastructure. For the 2023-24 fixtures, it has been decided that AIFF competition department in consultation with the club owners and the relevant task force, will present a best-scenario scheduling, geographically mapping clubs travelling and to optimise away games fixture in a way to reduce the clubs' travel cost and time.

The I-League clubs, Federation and the Task Force is scheduled to meet on 26 August 2024 to review the reports, suggestions and to decide on next course of action.

After the meeting, the club officials spoke to the-aiff.com

Mr. Ranjit Bajaj, Director, Delhi FC: "It was a much awaited and welcome meeting for the I-League clubs today. The AIFF addressed our feedback point by point. All stakeholders are committed to working towards a singular objective of making the I-League a success. As I-League clubs, the onus is on us as well to take various responsibilities to achieve this. I thank President Mr. Kalyan Chaubey for his time and efforts, and I do hope that under his leadership we will turn a new chapter in Indian football."

Mr. Aditya Barros Pereira, General Manager, Churchill Brothers, said, "I appreciate the time the President took for us and hopefully this meeting is fruitful. And him being our President, being a former football player, especially for a powerhouse state like Bengal, gives me hope. He understands the value of I-League clubs and knows the background of Indian football. So I'm looking forward to a positive outcome in the next meeting and a positive future for Indian football."

Dr. Ashok Kumar, CEO, Gokulam Kerala FC: "It was an excellent meeting. We are all glad that the President is able to give so much of time for all I-League clubs, which is most welcome. I see a new beginning for the I-League clubs in this era."



Mr. Krishna Kumar Tak, Chairman, Rajasthan United FC: "Today's meeting was a fruitful one under the chairmanship of the AIFF President, who took a very positive approach towards all problems. I'm sure under his guidance, we will be able to take it forward. When the leader is strong, then we all become stronger. We have been energised by the meeting and are confident the problems we're having will be solved with a positive outlook."

Mr. Pradhyum Reddy, CEO, Dempo SC: "I think it's a really good initiative that you can have an open discussion. I think it was long overdue. It's just the first of many and it will help the I-League and Indian football grow in the right direction if we have regular dialogue between the concerned parties. It's a great initiative by the President and I hope we have more fruitful discussions."

Mr. Arshad Shawl, Director and Owner, Real Kashmir FC: "It was a progressive meeting where all the stakeholders came together to discuss the ongoing concerns and possible solutions for the I-League. The suggestions were well accepted and a path was laid out to streamline operations and challenges for the upcoming season."

Mr. Fabio Ferreira, Chief Football Officer, Sreenidi Deccan FC: "First, I thank President, Mr Kalyan Chaubey for having this meeting, which is very important to bring all the stakeholders together to understand what are the different challenges that the clubs face and together how can we work to solve them and increase the overall value of the league, which ultimately increases the overall value of the clubs and also the Indian football ecosystem. Secondly, the discussions held were very fruitful. It brought the clubs together once again. We are stronger today than what we were yesterday. And it's good to see that everyone is working towards increasing the quality of our product, which ultimately is the football match. And I'm sure that together in the new season, the I-League will once again be successful and better than what it was in the past."

Mr. Robert Romawia Royte, Owner and President, Aizawl FC: "Today we had a very fruitful meeting under the chairmanship of the AIFF President. Participation from the elite clubs was also good. The proceedings dwelled on the points that we have been raising in the last few years and the issues were taken up point by point. I do hope that this meeting will prove important in the development of football in general and the I-League in particular."



Mr. Shamsheer Singh, Namdhari FC: "We had a productive meeting today with all the I-League clubs and AIFF officials. We met and understood the viewpoints of each other. So we can work on the sustainability of the I-League, which is the traditional Indian league. So, we have formed committees who will be working on different issues. By the next 15 days we will be meeting again to resolve all these subjects and we will come up with all the solutions which we discussed today."

Mr. Prithijit Das, President, Inter Kashi: "We are very thankful to the President for inviting us to this meeting. It's very reassuring to hear his commitment to the I-League. We had very good discussions."

Mr Kishore S Reddy, Co-founder and CEO, Sporting Club Bengaluru: "I think today's meeting is a welcoming move by the AIFF. We hope for a lot of positives from it. That's what all the stakeholders want. I think we're the fastest growing club in India. A lot of credit goes to the Karnataka State Football Association."

Mr. Habamutlang Lyngdoh, General Manager, Shillong Lajong FC: "We'd like to thank the President and Acting Secretary General for taking their time out to meet the I-League clubs and hearing out their concerns. It was probably our most productive meeting since COVID. We look forward now and hope the next I-League season will be even better."





AIFF President discusses important issues with Senior Men's and Women's National Teams players

The Blue Tigers and Tigresses exchanged points relating to the National Team performances, players' requirements, injury management and more

All India Football Federation President Shri Kalyan Chaubey, recently had an informal interaction with a few Indian senior men's and women's team players on the sidelines of a function in the capital, and discussed issues relating to the National Teams, its performance, players' requirements, injury management, scouting process, smooth transition of players from youth to senior level and many other things pertaining to Indian football and its way forward.

Present in the meeting were Sandesh Jhingan, Amrinder Singh, Jay Gupta and Amey Ranawade from the Indian senior men's team, and Loitongbam Ashalata Devi, Dalima Chhibber, Shreya Hooda, Anju Tamang and Sanju from the Indian senior women's team.

Regarding the interaction, Sandesh Jhingan said, "It was a pleasure to meet the AIFF President. We had a wonderful and fruitful interaction with him. It was great to have players from both senior men's and women's team there. It was a nice environment to have a chat and exchange ideas. We had lots of fruitful discussions and constructive dialogue about the national teams and the way to move forward, with our Asian Cup qualifying campaign beginning in a few months. Our conversation was insightful, and we all appreciated the open exchange of ideas about the current scenario and future of Indian football."



Dalima Chhibber said, "I think this was the first time for most of us that we had the opportunity to sit with the President of the Federation and discuss women's football and football in general, and the areas we could work on for the development of the national team.

"It was very good that the AIFF President took the initiative to open the floor and give the players the opportunity to share their opinions. He took the time to listen to us and considered our opinions. I think we had a very constructive discussion about what's coming further. He noted our main points and it was good for the players to have the opportunity to express our thoughts."

Shri Kalyan Chaubey thanked the players for their valuable input and assured them of full support from the Federation. Throughout the interaction, the AIFF President gave a patient hearing to the members of the National Teams and said he was always open to sharing experiences with the players, who can feel free to meet him anytime in the future whenever there is a need to.



AFC Women's Champions League: Odisha FC pitted against Jordan and Singapore clubs

Odisha FC were drawn alongside Etihad Club (Jordan) and Lion City Sailors FC (Singapore) in Group B of the Preliminary Stage of the 2024–25 AFC Women's Champions League, following the draw conducted at the AFC House in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on Thursday, July 18, 2024.

Odisha FC, the champions of the 2023–24 Indian Women's League, will travel to Jordan to play in the preliminary stage, which will be held in a centralised league format from August 25 and 31, 2024.

Thirteen sides will contest the Preliminary Stage, which features four groups – one group of four teams and three groups of three. The four group winners will qualify for the 12-team Group Stage, joining the other eight clubs that have qualified directly.

Should Odisha FC top their preliminary stage group and qualify for the group stage, they will be placed in Group C, consisting of Urawa Red Diamonds Ladies (Japan), Taichung Blue Whale Women's Football Team (Chinese Taipei), and hosts Ho Chi Minh City Women's FC (Vietnam). The Group Stage comprises three groups of four teams and will also be contested in a centralised league format from October 6 to 12.

Clubs were seeded and placed in pots for the draw according to their respective Member Association rankings, based on the FIFA Women's World Ranking (as of March 15, 2024).

The top two finishers of each group and the two best third-placed sides will progress to the Quarter-finals, to be played on March 22 and 23, 2025. A Knockout Stage draw will be conducted prior to the Quarter-finals to determine the four pairings, which will be contested in a single-leg format, with the higher-ranked team of each tie to serve as the home side.

This will be followed by a centralised Finals, which will see the Semi-finals and Final – all single-leg ties – being played out from May 21 to 24, 2025, to determine the first ever champions of the AFC Women's Champions League.



U20 squad busy finetuning battle plans ahead of SAFF Championship

The Blue Colts hope to defend their SAFF U20 Championship title before going all out in the AFC U20 Asian Cup Qualifiers

SOUMO GHOSH

The time is “prime”, as the India U20 Men’s National Team aim to shine in next month’s SAFF U20 Championship in Nepal.

It has been around two months since the team have been together, though the real preparation started in early July, after a month of trials. With his prospective players narrowed down, India U20 head coach Ranjan Chaudhuri is looking to iron out the rough edges.

“We are working on the finer points that will get the boys ready for the challenge ahead at the SAFF Championship,” Chaudhuri said to the-aiff.com from the team’s camp in Goa.

“We have identified the areas where the players have faced some difficulties and are working on them at the moment. Areas like distribution, effectiveness in the attacking third, crossing and finishing,” said Chaudhuri. “These are the areas that are essential, especially in match situations. No matter how good you are, a little extra improvement never hurts anyone.”

Earlier this month, the India U20s had travelled to Bellary, Karnataka, where they could avail the world-class facilities of the Inspire Institute of Sport, having trained there for a week, including a couple of training games. The team also had the opportunity to meet the stars of the Bengaluru FC senior team, who were also having their pre-season at the same venue.

“The boys have gained a lot of motivation and confidence from this week in Bellary. We need to ensure that we now build on this momentum and continue to grow as a team,” said Chaudhuri. “The boys also got a lot of praise from Bengaluru FC head coach (Gerard Zaragoza), who expressed how well organised our boys were, and Gurpreet (Singh Sandhu) had a lot of good words for our goalkeepers too.”

Now back in Goa, the India U20s have resumed their preparations for the SAFF U20 Championship, where India have been drawn in Group B alongside Bhutan (August 19) and the Maldives (August 23). While they are keeping an eye on their opponents, the focus for the U20s remains on their own preparedness.

“We have seen how these players have fared in previous competitions. However, these are junior teams, so a lot could change over a year or two, so we need to be prepared for anything,” he said. “Some of our players have played the SAFF competitions before, so they are using that experience to help the others as well.

“The challenge for us is to get them up to a competitive level. We will work on our deficiencies in Goa, and are also looking to play a few practice matches here, which would further help the boys,” said he.





Multitasking campaigns ahead, U17 boys busy sharpening fitness and tactics

With one eye on the AFC U17 Asian Cup Qualifiers, Ishfaq Ahmed's boys are gearing up for the SAFF U17 Championship in Srinagar

AKHIL RAWAT

The Indian U17 men's team camp has been ongoing for the last four weeks in Srinagar and head coach Ishfaq Ahmed believes it's been so far, so good. The Blue Colts are preparing for the upcoming SAFF U17 Championship in September and the AFC U17 Asian Cup Qualifiers in October.

"I am happy with how everything is going so far. I'm keeping my fingers crossed. We don't have any injury issues," said Ishfaq.

There is still more than a month until the SAFF U17 Championship begins in Thimphu, Bhutan, on September 18. So, in these early stages of the camp, the primary focus is on building fitness. "We're in 'cycle one' at the moment - focussing on the fitness part for the last two weeks. These are young boys, technically very smart, and we wish to play a good and mature brand of football for everyone to see, and for that, fitness is important. "Soon, we'll begin cycle two, where we'll try out tactics. We are going to start playing matches also, so that they can understand and implement the tactical stuff," shared Ishfaq.

There are 32 players in the camp at the moment. Exactly half of them, 16, were part of India's SAFF U16 Championship winning team, also coached by Ishfaq, in Bhutan last year. These are the players who have any prior international experience. The stakes are higher this time out though, with tougher competitions, a longer camp and a spot at the AFC U17 Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2025 up for grabs. After the conclusion of the SAFF U17 Championship, the Blue Colts next assignment will only be four weeks away, at the AFC U17 Asian Cup Qualifiers in Thailand (October 23-27), where they will face Brunei Darussalam, Turkmenistan and the hosts.

Like India, their opponents are also preparing for the qualifiers by competing in their sub-confederation tournaments. Thailand finished runners-up to Australia on penalties in the recently concluded ASEAN U16 Championship, while Brunei Darussalam were eliminated in the group stage after losing all three matches. Turkmenistan will participate in the upcoming CAFA U17 Championship.

"We definitely have an eye on the AFC U17 Asian Cup Qualifiers as well. Yeah, we know that winning SAFF is important, and we did it last year too. This time, we have new players as well, with no international experience, and I want to see them in the line-up too.

"We want to have more friendly matches against stronger teams, who can push us to our limits, to prepare for the Asian Cup Qualifiers. These boys are not afraid of losing matches. After the SAFF ends, we want to utilise the gap with some good warm-up matches before travelling to Thailand," said Ishfaq.

The scouting for the India U17 camp was conducted at the AIFF U17 Youth League, which was held from December 2023 to May 2024. "Even last year's SAFF U16 players were not selected directly for this year's camp, but based on their performance in the Youth League. It shows our scouting process is on the right track," said Ishfaq.





Draw out for 2024-25 I-League 3 Group Stage

The draw for the 2024-25 I-League 3 Group Stage was conducted at the Football House, on Friday, August 2, 2024. The fourth tier of the Indian football league system is set to begin on September 3, 2024.

Twenty-five participating teams were divided into five groups of five teams each. The group stage will be held in a single round-robin format in a centralised location. The five group hosts are - Diamond Harbour FC (Naihati Stadium, Kolkata), Sesa Football Academy (Dempo Academy Ground, Goa), Chanmari FC (Rajiv Gandhi Stadium, Aizawl), Karbi Anglong Morning Star FC (KASA Stadium, Diphu), and Downtown Heroes FC (TRC Stadium, Srinagar). No two teams from the same state association could be drawn in the same group.

Group Stage Draw for the 2024-25 I-League 3:

GROUP A: Diamond Harbour FC (hosts), Sports Odisha, Lake City FC, Ghaziabad City FC, SAT Tirur

GROUP B: Sesa Football Academy (hosts), Kerala United FC, Garhwal Heroes FC, Maharashtra Oranje FC, Dalbir FA

GROUP C: Chanmari FC (hosts), RKM Football Academy, MYJ-GMSC, Coromandel FC, HAL Sports Club

GROUP D: Karbi Anglong Morning Star FC (hosts), Jaipur Elite FC, KLASA FC, Mumbai Kenkre FC, Bhuna FC

GROUP E: Downtown Heroes FC (hosts), CVM FC, Corbett FC, Abbas Union FC, Southern Sporting Union

FIFAE WORLD CUP™ OF FOOTBALL™ MANAGER

Nirjhar Mitra, Aadit Mehta to represent India in FIFAE World Cup for Football Manager

Nirjhar Mitra and Aadit Mehta have been nominated to represent India in the FIFAE World Cup for Football Manager, to be held in Liverpool from August 29 to September 1.

The eight candidates, shortlisted by the FIFA and AIFF (from 28 applicants), participated in the domestic qualification for the FIFAE World Cup for Football Manager.

Nirjhar Mitra, 22, finished top of the table in the domestic qualifiers, which were played between the eight participants in a round-robin format. By finishing top of the qualifiers, Mitra has earned his nomination as the manager for India at the FIFAE World Cup for Football Manager.

Aadit Mehta, 23, finished runners-up in the qualifiers, and will be nominated as the assistant manager for India.



Draws out for Sub-Junior Boys' NFC and Sub-Junior Girls' NFC Tier 1 and Tier 2

The draw of the Tier 1 and Tier 2 of the Sub-Junior Boys' National Football Championship 2024-25, along with Tier 1 and Tier 2 of the Sub-Junior Girls' National Football Championship 2024-25 were conducted at the Football House, on Friday, August 2, 2024.

The Tier 1 of the Sub-Junior Boys' NFC will be played at the Bangalore Football Stadium in Bengaluru, Karnataka, from September 7 to September 22, 2024. Tier 2 will be hosted at the Jorhat Stadium and the Bapuji Stadium in Jorhat, Assam from September 7 to September 20, 2024.

The Tier 1 of the Sub-Junior Girls' National Football Championship will be played at the DSA Ground in Malda and Berhampore Stadium in Berhampore, West Bengal from September 2 to September 11, 2024. Tier 2 will be hosted at the Patva Educational Academy and the Dr Rajendra Prasad Stadium in Neemuch, Madhya Pradesh from September 8 to September 17, 2024.

The Sub-Junior Boys' NFC Tier 1 will see 16 teams equally divided into four groups with the group winners progressing to the semi-finals. The Sub-Junior Boys' NFC Tier 2 will have 17 teams divided into four groups - one group with five and three groups with four - with the group winners progressing to the semi-finals.

Both tiers of the Sub-Junior Girls' NFC will have 15 teams each divided into four groups - three groups with four and one group with three - and the four group winners will move to the semi-finals.

The 2023-24 edition of the Sub-Junior Boys' NFC Tier 1 saw Mizoram being champions in Berhampore, and Bihar winning the Tier 2 title in Ananthapuram.

Jharkhand were crowned champions of the 2023-24 Sub-Junior Girls' NFC Tier 1 in Amritsar, and Karnataka were the winners of Tier 2 in Belgaum.

The groups and fixtures for the tournaments can be read in detail on [the AIFF website](#).



STATE OF AFFAIRS

Freedom on the pitch for remarkable girls from Rajasthan's Dhingsari village

12 of the 23 girls from Rajasthan's Junior Girls' NFC Tier 2 winning squad came from Bikaner district's Dhingsari village

Thirteen-year-old Ranjana (name changed) from the Dhingsari village in Bikaner district, Rajasthan, wept through the night; tears welled in her eyes as she fought the sadness and tried to forget the severe beating she received from her parents the previous evening.

Ranjana's "fault" was participating in a district-level football tournament where she was adjudged the best player. As she proudly reached home, all she received on her smiling face was a few mighty slaps. Her father tore off the certificate and warned her of dire consequences if she played football in the future.

Ranjana pleaded for justice but received none. A couple of months later, Ranjana was hurriedly married off so that she didn't get hooked on a sport that girls play in "indecent" outfits.

But then, Ranjana was not the only girl, who suffered a similar fate. There were many in the village, whose footballing ambitions were nipped in the bud by their parents.

But things do change as lilies bloom within the sedge. The parents in the financially backward village are now not too reluctant to allow their daughters to play serious football. The change in the atmosphere has done wonders—this season, a dozen girls from the Dhingsari village were proud members of the Rajasthan squad, who recently won the Junior Girls’ National Football Championship 2024-25 Tier 2 and qualified for Tier 1 next season. In the final, Rajasthan defeated Karnataka, considered one of the powerhouses of Indian football.

Vikram Singh Rajvi, a former first-class footballer and son of former India captain Magan Singh, who runs an academy named in his legendary father’s name, says it wasn’t easy to force the turnaround.

“Most of these girls were either herding goats or working on the farmlands as daily wagers from their childhood and were expected to get married before they turned 12. We tried for years and could finally make them understand the importance of playing football. We run the academy for free; we don’t even charge a penny. Even our academy isn’t equipped with the best of facilities. The parents have now realised that football can offer their daughters a brighter future; the girls are convinced that football is their window to freedom,” said Vikram, who spends a large amount of money from his Indian Railways salary to keep the academy running.

Dileep Singh Shekhawat, the honorary secretary of the Rajasthan Football Association, said: “This is Rajasthan’s first major win in 60 years. The last title we won was the Junior National Football Championship for the BC Roy Trophy in 1964 in Ajmer.



“In this team, 12 of the 23 girls are from Dhingsari village in Bikaner. We will do our best for the entire squad. We will approach the authorities so that the girls get jobs in sports quota in different government organisations,” said the Rajasthan secretary.

It has been an incredible journey in the last few years, a hair-raising experience at times, said Vikram. “There is one girl, who belongs to an extremely poor family. I was so impressed by her skills that I decided to take care of her needs. The girl’s family agreed. In the Tier 2 NFC, she played a major role in Rajasthan’s triumph.

“Good that people in our area have now realised the importance of women’s football. Several facilitation functions were organised in honour of the team. They received some cash awards, too. I hope the girls will be given jobs and other facilities so that more girls come forward to play the beautiful game,” said Vikram.





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