

ISAS Brief

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Can India ever qualify for the World Cup?

India has never ever played in the football World Cup though it had an invitation to the 1950 edition. Currently ranked at 97 by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association, the global footballing body, India has, however, not always been poor in football. Till the 1960s, it was a major footballing power in Asia before it started to decline. In order to improve its standing in football, India must invest in grassroots programmes and infrastructure.

Ronojoy Sen¹

Every four years when the football World Cup is played, one question nags Indian sports fans – why has India never ever been part of the world’s premier football tournament? The closest India has come to playing at the World Cup was in 1950 when it was invited but could not afford the passage to Brazil.²

India is currently placed 97 in the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) rankings³ though it was not always so poor in football. In the 1948 London

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² The first part of the article draws from Ronojoy Sen, *Nation at Play: A History of Indian Sport*, New York/New Delhi: Columbia University Press/Penguin, 2015.

³ FIFA/Coca-Cola World Ranking. <https://www.fifa.com/fifa-world-ranking/associations/association=ind/men/index.html>. Accessed on 4 July 2018.

Olympics, the Indian team, the majority of who played barefoot, was impressive in the only match they played, losing 1-2 to France. The score might have been different if India had not missed two penalties and conceded a goal seconds before the final whistle. However, the barefoot Indian footballers so captivated King George VI that he apparently asked one of them, Sailen Manna, to roll up his trousers to check if his legs were made of steel.⁴

This was not, however, the first time that Indian football players had played outside the country. An Indian team toured South Africa in 1934 to play against teams formed by Indians settled in South Africa. In 1936, an Indian team played the Chinese Olympic team in what was the “first soccer international to be played in India”.⁵ The match, played before a crowd of 20,000, with another 100,000 spectators outside, ended in a thrilling tie. In 1938, another team selected from the best players in the Bengal clubs, toured Australia.⁶

Not surprisingly, India received an invitation from FIFA to play in the 1950 football World Cup. Despite doubts about whether India’s players would lose their amateur status if they played in the World Cup, practice began in Calcutta under the supervision of their foreign coach, Harry Wright. There was even a suggestion, which was accepted by the organisers, that the Indian team travel to Egypt and be “picked up” from Cairo, which would result in a saving of ₹40,000 (\$793) for the Indian football federation.⁷ However, eventually, it was decided that India would not participate in the tournament. It was widely believed that India pulled out because the players would have had to play in boots, but the official reason cited by the All-India Football Federation was the lack of funds to travel to Brazil.

However, more than the novelty of India’s barefoot footballers, the Indian team of the late 1950s and early 1960s, under Coach Syed Abdul Rahim, was an Asian

⁴ “Sailen Manna”, *The Economist*, 17 March 2012. <https://www.economist.com/obituary/2012/03/17/sailen-manna>. Accessed on 4 July 2018.

⁵ *The Times of India*, 6 July 1936.

⁶ *The Worker*, 13 September 1938.

⁷ *The Times of India*, 10 May 1950.

powerhouse.⁸ The team, comprising players like P K Banerjee, Chuni Goswami and Jarnail Singh, beat future Asian football powers, Japan and South Korea, to win the 1962 Asian Games gold. Even in the 1970 Asiad, India won a bronze, possibly its last major international title. Since then, it has been a downward slide.

While several reasons can be offered for India's decline – the lack of international success in football for nearly five decades, poor infrastructure and coaching, absence of a proper professional structure, confinement of the game to certain parts of India and the popularity of cricket – it still remains a bit of a mystery as to why the slide was so calamitous. Indeed, Simon Kuper and Stefan Szymanski, the authors of *Soccernomics*, had famously labelled India as the worst footballing nation, given its population, gross domestic product (GDP) and sporting experience.⁹ Their analysis has been borne out by India's ranking, which has languished between 100 and 170 for the past two decades. So, is there a way out? Several studies have shown that, not just for football, but also for sports in general, the wealthier countries tend to do better.¹⁰ This is connected to the number of people who can afford to take up sports as well have access to sporting facilities.¹¹ However, there are many exceptions to the rule.

One route to success is to invest in football infrastructure. This is the path being followed by China to achieve its professed goal of having a team capable of winning the World Cup by 2050. Chinese President Xi Jinping has put his weight behind this initiative and expressed the desire of having 20,000 football centres and 70,000 pitches in place by 2020. Chinese football clubs have also paid astronomical sums to attract foreign stars to play in China and improve the country's standard of football. However, the efforts are yet to pay off. It is currently placed at 75 in the FIFA rankings and has qualified for the World Cup only once. This might have something to do with team sports not being as amenable to the kind of state intervention that

⁸ Novy Kapadia, "Rahim, Amal Dutta, P.K. and Nayeem: The Coaches who Shaped Indian Football", *Football Studies* 5:2, October 2002. <https://docplayer.net/42917429-Rahim-amal-dutta-p-k-and-nayeem-the-coaches-who-shaped-indian-football.html>. Accessed on 5 July 2018.

⁹ Simon Kuper and Stefan Szymanski, *Soccernomics*, New York: Nation Books, 2010, p 289.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Melanie Krause and Stefan Szymanski, "Convergence vs. the Middle Income Trap: The Case of Global Soccer," *Society for the Study of Economic Inequality Working Paper Series* 453, December 2017.

¹¹ Anirudh Krishna and Eric Haglund, "Why do Some Countries Win More Olympic Medals? Lessons for Social Mobility and Poverty Reduction," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 12 July 2018.

China has put in place to harvest Olympic medals. In fact, China has notably been less successful in team sports compared to individual events.

However, investment in football infrastructure has paid dividends in other smaller countries. A statistical model created by the *Economist* – based not only on GDP and population, but also football’s popularity and Olympic medals won – found that countries like Uruguay are performing much better than expected.¹² This is partly due to a national scheme called ‘Baby Football’ involving thousands of children from ages four to thirteen. Similarly, tiny Iceland, which has a population of less than 350,000, and has of late been punching well above its weight, has over 600 coaches working with clubs at the grassroots level. Such schemes are what India should aim at, though they are also more difficult to replicate in larger countries.

Yet, another route to success is to export players to competitive leagues as well as to tap into the diaspora. This is what many of the African as well as Balkan countries have done to great effect. Countries like Senegal not only export players to top leagues in Europe, but also attract diaspora talent when putting together its national team. Croatia has a team that is entirely made up of players turning out in foreign leagues. To a lesser extent, some Asian countries, like Japan and South Korea, are following this route. Again, this is a model that India has been unable to replicate, mainly due to its marginal presence on the international stage. Indeed, very few Indian footballers have played at the highest level in a foreign league. The enigmatic Mohammed Salim played several matches for the Scottish club Celtic in 1936.¹³ More recently, India’s former captain, Bhaichung Bhatia, had a stint with the English Second Division club, Bury, while Gurpreet Singh Sandhu played a few games for the Norwegian club Stabaek IF.

For India, neither is a Chinese-style investment nor players in foreign leagues feasible. To qualify for the World Cup, India has to go through the grind of investing in grassroots programmes and infrastructure, preferably in locations such as the Northeast, Kerala, Goa and Bengal, where interest in football is high. Some of the

¹² “What makes a country good at football?”, *The Economist*, 9 June 2018. <https://www.economist.com/international/2018/06/09/what-makes-a-country-good-at-football>. Accessed on 5 July 2018.

¹³ Sen, Ronojoy, *Nation at Play: A History of Indian Sport*, op. cit., pp 124-25.

ingredients for footballing success are already present – economic growth, a professional league with decent salaries and new centres of football. Some of these have contributed to India’s recent rise in the rankings. However, to reach the next level, the passion for football, which exists despite cricket’s omnipresence, must be harnessed. For a start, the children who avidly follow the World Cup and European league matches need to start playing the game, preferably under expert guidance. There is no substitute to the policy of catching talent young and nurturing it.

For India, the road to qualifying for the World Cup is long one. It is not going to happen anytime soon. Before India can dream of being a part of the World Cup, it must first improve its global standing in football. It must be willing to make significant investments in grassroots programmes and infrastructure, and further develop its nascent professional league. Much work needs to be done at various levels of the sport in India.

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