



# STADIUM ECHO

The Indian Football Magazine



**INDIA'S  
PROJECT  
RESTART**

**REVIEWING  
THE I LEAGUE  
QUALIFIERS**

INTERVIEW WITH  
BRISHTI BAGCHI,  
THE FIRST INDIAN  
WOMAN TO PLAY  
PROFESSIONALLY  
IN SPAIN

INTERVIEW WITH  
NIKHIL SHARMA,  
FOUNDER OF  
ZLAIT SPORTS

MEN'S AIFF  
POTY: GURPREET  
SINGH SANDHU

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**Editor's Note**

Indian football has resumed and unsurprisingly, it has been entertaining to say the least. The Hero I-league Qualifiers produced some quality matches and there was no shortage of off-field drama either with Mohammedan's sacking of Yan Law. Despite that, the club managed to qualify (more on that in the magazine). The AIFF deserves all the credit for pulling off this tournament amidst a pandemic and it has only increased the appetite of fans in the country for the upcoming ISL and I-league season.

Stadium Echo is a humble attempt by a group of young people to cover the fascinating transition of Indian football from a footballing minnow to hopefully an Asian force to be reckoned with in the coming years. As we patiently await the resumption of football in India, we cover stories that have shaped the sport in the country over the past century or so. Quality coverage of the sport is a prerequisite to building a culture and this magazine aims to achieve that to an extent.

It is of great personal pride that we publish this issue. I am grateful to the writing team and my co-editor, all of whom worked very hard on this project to bring the readers engaging pieces and I would like to thank the designing team which has given this idea an aesthetically pleasing form. Lastly, I would like to thank you, the reader, for taking time out of your life to read and support Indian football

*Ritwik Khanna*

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*Mohammedan celebrating their win - I-league.org*

## India's Project Restart: Reviewing the I-league Qualifiers

*Saurabh Nagpal*

While the Indian Premier League is being played abroad, in the UAE, the opportunity to restart post-lockdown live-sporting action in the country was grabbed by the All India Football Federation (AIFF). It organised the I-League Qualifiers – an 11-day mini-tournament where five teams: ARA FC, Bhawanipore FC, FC Bengaluru United, Garhwal FC, and Mohammedan SC toughed it out for a spot in the I-League, with Mohammedan SC, the historic Kolkata-based club, coming out on the top and achieving promotion after seven seasons in the second division.

Undoubtedly, it was a matter of pride for the football community that I-League Qualifiers commenced India's 'Project Restart', but at the same time, the responsibility on the shoulders of the officials and the association was enormous. It can be safely stated that the endeavor turned out to be action-packed, but more importantly, the authorities kept in check the safety protocols and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), and properly maintained the bio-bubble.

After 211 long, football-less days, it was on the 8th of October when, rather poetically, in the hub of Indian football – the city of Kolkata – the first game of the tournament was played between Bhawanipore FC and FC Bengaluru United in the YBK Stadium. Even though FC Bengaluru United controlled the tempo of the

game, it was the resilient defence and efficient shooting that led the Kolkata-based club to a 2-0 victory.

It was a good day for the clubs from Kolkata – a trend that would continue throughout the campaign – as Mohammedan SC snatched victory in the dying minutes of the game against the Delhi-based underdogs, Garhwal FC. Expectedly, like all the other teams coming back from a long break with less time to prepare, the Black Panthers were patchy and tentative in their gameplay on the opening matchday. There was nothing shabby about left-back Timothy Munmun Lugun's 93rd-minute strike from distance, which was perhaps the goal of the tournament.

On Matchday 2, Mohammedan SC played ARA FC, while Garhwal FC were matched up against FC Bengaluru United. The Black Panthers shrugged off their rustiness, and justified their favourites tag with a comprehensive 4-1 victory over the newly-found club from Ahmedabad. The offensive play of the likes of Sk Faiaz, Abhishek Rijal, Willis Plaza, and Vanlalbiaa Chhange proved to be too much to handle for the ARA FC's backline.

In the following game, FC Bengaluru United sneaked a 1-0 win over Garhwal FC. Though Richard Hood's team dominated the ball, both sides created chances to score more. One of the reasons for Garhwal's loss was their sloppy and wasteful play in front of the goal – an issue that would hamper their entire campaign.

The tournament also wasn't devoid of drama off the pitch. After Mohammedan SC's win against ARA, Yan Law, out of the blue announced his decision of stepping down as the head coach of the Black Panthers. Later, club sources confirmed that it wasn't Law who left but rather the club management that had terminated his contract. Assistant coach, Saheed Ramon, was handed over the reins.

Wasim Akram, the club's general secretary, charged the head coach with leaking screenshots of their chats and of falling out with

his assistants. It was also made known that the technical director, Dipendu Biswas, was pulling the strings even on Matchday 2 against ARA FC. Meanwhile, The Bridge also reported that Law was frustrated with the management and was looking for a quick way out.

On Matchday 3, Garhwal FC faced Bhawanipore FC in the noon kick-off – a game, it can be said in hindsight, that became the stepping stone to the final showdown of the tournament. Sticking to their proven tactics, Bhawanipore FC maintained their shape; were comfortable to play without the ball; and found themselves two goals up in less than an hour. However, the final 15 minutes proved to be very tense for Sankarlal Chakraborty's team because of Afdal Varikkodan's 76th-minute strike, which was also the first goal of the campaign for the Delhi club. Courtesy of this 2-1 victory, Bhawanipore FC found themselves level on six points with their city rivals, Mohammedan FC – turning the upcoming derby into a quasi-final of the tournament.

The second game of the day was FC Bengaluru United versus ARA FC. It was a cagey, battle-of-the-midfields where ARA FC's heart was broken by Mohammad Asrar Rehber's injury-time penalty which cancelled out Pratik Swami's opener. Numerically both the teams still remained in the hunt for the top spot, but practically not so much.

On Matchday 4, the stage was all set for the big clash between the two clubs from Kolkata. Since both the powerhouses of Indian and Calcutta football, ATK Mohun Bagan and SC East Bengal, shifted to ISL, the I-League found itself lacking representation from Kolkata. Both of these clubs, coming into the qualifiers, would have felt the pressure to restore the city's pride and enter the nation's secondary league.

Mohammedan SC seized this opportunity and began the game on the front foot. Their opponents stayed true to their sit-back and counter-attack approach. However, their

defense was unlocked by an incisive team move that was finished off by Vanlalbiaa Chhangte in the 27th minute. As the game progressed, Bhawanipore FC grew into the game and created good chances. However, their inefficiency in front of the goal eventually came back to haunt them when Gani Nigam provided the cushioning of a second goal to the Black Panthers in the 67th minute. The 2-0 victory sealed their entry into the upcoming season of the I-League because of Bhawanipore FC's inferior head-to-head against their city rivals. There remained no such scenario where any team could have overtaken the Black Panthers.

In the other game of the Matchday, ARA FC drew 1-1 with Garhwal FC – a match where both the sides would have felt disappointed and rued the fact that they didn't open their wins column.

On the final Matchday as well, when the results had no substantial meaning, the clubs from Kolkata displayed why they were a cut above the rest as Bhawanipore FC comfortably overcame ARA FC 2-0 while Mohammedan SC's 0-0 stalemate against FC Bengaluru United meant that they remained undefeated throughout the campaign.

Bhawanipore FC's Pankaj Moula, Philip Adjah, and Mohammedan SC's Abhishek Rijal, with two goals each, capped off as joint top goal-scorers of the tournament. The Black Panthers' custodian, Priyant Kumar Singh and his backline ended with the most clean sheets (3). Mohammedan SC also conceded the least while scoring the most goals in the campaign, that is, one and seven respectively.

As Mohammedan SC joins the big boys after seven long years, and at the end of 11 exciting days of football festivity, the Indian football season is safely, and well and truly underway. It would be a happy thought for Indian football fans that this revamped mini-tournament was only the entrée. The main dishes, in the form of the illustrious ISL and I-League, are on their way from the Indian football kitchen.



## In Conversation With: Brishti Bagchi, First Indian Woman to Play Professionally in Spain

Speaking to Ritvik Khanna

"The path to our destination is not always a straight one. We go down the wrong road, we get lost, we turn back. Maybe it doesn't matter which road we embark on. Maybe what matters is that we embark." This is Brishti Bagchi's story - the female superstar in the making, who took the road less taken but finally bags a much-awaited contract with a Spanish football club. The Bangalore born midfielder left for Oklahoma City University and later to North Texas University to study Kinesiology, the movement of body mechanics, and live the student-athlete life. She has represented the Sports Authority of India (SAI) girls' team, Karnataka state junior and senior team, Oklahoma City University varsity soccer team, Bengaluru United F.C in the IWL and has undergone trials with numerous clubs. She sat down with us to discuss her future, how her degree and international experience has benefitted her game and how she presses to recover possession, whenever the possession of the game of life is lost.

*The Interviewer (T.I): Congratulations! You're about to join a group of elites who've played in Europe! How does it feel?*

Brishti Bagchi (B.B): Kind of feels a bit long overdue because I spent a year and a half on paperwork and I've been training with a lot of teams. However, it's one of the most humbling experiences ever. Training with amazing coaches here, signing and being part of the league, it's actually very overwhelming. I've been working

on it for a long time so it feels about time. I'm ready for it and I know what I have to do.

*T.I: How difficult has it been to bag a contract amidst a pandemic?*

B.B: Actually, I was supposed to be signing earlier this year but the coronavirus happened. They scrapped the league, and everything got postponed. I've been constantly switching teams. It's been quite a challenge, so much that even right now if the second wave hits hard, they might postpone our mid-November restart.

*T.I: What can you tell us about your new club?*

B.B: It's in the works and it's too early for me to say it officially but I have news coming out very very soon. I am signing with a club, I can't share any more details right now but you're going to hear it very soon.

*T.I: You've trained in three countries. India, US and Spain? How similar and different have these experiences been for you?*

B.B: Similar, obviously because of the passion for the game but once you're on the field it's a different experience. All of us have this crazy drive to be here and do this and be on the team. In the US it was very aggressive, very powerful. A lot more lifting, and injuries that came with it. In Spain you don't see a lot of physicality, but their touches are insane. It's like they were born with the ball at their feet. There are skills that I'd do once in a while but ever since I've come here I do them all the time because of how the game is around me. You constantly have to go back to the basics, [think of] whatever you learnt growing up, fixing those gaps and trying to replicate their game. It's funny because in India we play a lot more long balls and because I know how to time these passes, if there's an opportunity I take it more often. I take the good stuff that I've learnt in each country and use it.

*T.I: Choosing not to take the traditional path to football and leave the country at such a young age must be a tough decision. Why did you take it, and do you feel playing in a country that has won multiple world cups has benefitted your career in any way?*

B.B: I left India because I wanted to pursue my

education as well. I had my A levels [pre-university exams based on the UK education system] at the time of my India camp and that's when I really thought about what I wanted to do about football. Growing up I had a lot of coaches from abroad and they kind of planted that seed into my head [of continuing with my studies as I pursue football] so that's probably the main reason for opting for this decision. Playing in the US has benefitted hugely because if I went from India to Spain it would not have been the same experience. When I was playing at Uni, I was playing at a high level already while tackling my studies on the side and that built me up for the experience I have right now. It is easier for me now because I went through those 5-6 years which has really equipped me for this experience. I build up a lot of resistance in strength and power and that's helped me here.

*T.I: You have a degree in kinesiology, has that helped you understand your body better and improved your game?*

B.B: Yeah I keep telling a lot of my friends and people that sport specific training has given me the edge to play at a professional level. Just going to the gym and lifting doesn't get you anywhere, you'll get injured. Say you want to turn, you assume you just use your ankle or knee to turn but it's actually the entire chain of muscles from your shoulder to the opposite ankle, involving your core. And when you learn these things and apply them to training you become very specific with the things. You wanna work on and improve on your weaknesses.



When I apply the biomechanics of kinesiology that I studied, I get a huge advantage in terms of my biochemistry. It really gives me an edge to go to that pro level. Its quality over quantity. My running technique was a shitshow before I started this degree. You're not just making everything better but you're using less energy and becoming a more efficient athlete. These small things help a lot in key high pressure moments.

*T.I: Taking up sports as a profession, you've broken all societal barriers and are an inspiration to the country, did you face any challenges during this process?*

B.B: Faced almost every challenge you can think of when you think of this career. Gender discrimination in the beginning, but now that I think of it, it was one of the smallest challenges. The bigger ones have been the bureaucratic system, the funding, the pay gap and disparity in women's sports. As much as I love studying and want to continue my research in the future, it was important to do it because what if I get injured? There's no money in my career so you always need a backup. There were many times I thought about leaving football, but I can never do it. I know I can't. I didn't even think about it seriously, it just doesn't happen. I keep going back to the field I know I can't live without playing.

*T.I: Growing up who has been your idol in the world of football and outside of it?*

B.B: On the pitch, super cliché but Ronaldinho. I just love him to death. I had his posters all over my room. He's always happy and that's how I feel when playing. I'm competitive but I have to enjoy the game. If it's starting to get ugly I feel there's something wrong. For him it's all about expressing yourself and having fun with the ball. Off the pitch, my parents. They're also the same, my dad's a mathematician and mom's a statistician. No experience in sports but they supported me because their life has been loving what you do and trying to make a career in something you like to do. I can see how much they love their work, so it was easy for me and [growing up] I thought I want to be like them.

*T.I: Do you think Indian football is headed in the right direction?*

B.B: Definitely. Ever since I left in 2012, so many more players are playing. Leagues have money and people have careers in football. There has been a huge development. Definitely [in the right direction] but I still feel it needs more hype. I'm excited to see what happens in the next 5-10 years and we're going to be on the world map.

*T.I: Your secret for success that you'd share with the young women in our country?*

B.B: Just question everything. Let people say what they're saying but make sure you think about it critically. If something's not right in the system, think about how to change it. Instead of the symptom, look at the problem and work with that. I had issues with society and had to explain a lot of things. 'You're getting all tanned and skinny and scars and pimples and guys saying you can't play with us.' Ask why so many times that they are forced to give in. It doesn't always have to be either football or

studies. Both can happen at the same time. I was passionate enough to find a way and that's what took me to the US. You can have the best of both worlds if you're really serious about it. It's not about finding shortcuts but fighting the hard way out. The process of figuring it out yourself will give you greater rewards. 80% of the things I've tried I've failed. 10-15% of what I tried got me here. Fail thousands of times till it works out. That's what a lot of people don't see. The 1.5 years of paperwork was 1000s of failures. I was frozen in time, but I looked at it objectively and worked a way around it. Failure teaches you the real stuff. Success is the cherry on top. I just wanted to play and I've found a way to do things that I wanted to do. Lot of people give up as soon as they fail once or twice but getting out of your comfort zone is where you learn. Racism, sexism, lots of hurdles come but you've got to keep playing. If you lose possession what are you gonna do next? Not stand and look at the ball right? But press and get possession back. You're gonna fall but if you wanna win you'll have to go and get the ball back.





## In Conversation With: Nikhil Sharma, Founder-CEO zlait Sports Management

*Speaking to Ritwik Khanna*

Nikhil Sharma is the founder of zlait Sports Management - a strategic sports advisory that helps athletes, teams, business & enthusiasts chart their sporting paths. He has co-authored "India's Football Dream" published by SAGE that covers the journey of Indian football until the 2017 U17 World Cup. Nikhil was formerly Director at Shillong Lajong FC where amongst other work he was instrumental in the inception of the North East United FC in the ISL in 2014. He is also an AIFF, AFC, and FIFA licensed coach and teaches sports management courses at his alma mater MICA Ahmedabad, FIFA CIES Pillai Executive Programme in Sports Management & GISB, Mumbai.

*The Interviewer (T.I): What motivated you to get into Sports Management as an industry?*

Nikhil Sharma (N.S) It's not the only factor but the movie Jerry Maguire in the late 90s certainly piqued my interest in sports management. After seeing that movie I started collecting all the information I could get on the major work across the deal like the WorldTel-Sachin Tendulkar deal and IMG working wonders for their clients through papers and magazines. My father, an active sports person himself, encouraged me to play a lot of sports growing up but I didn't excel enough at any single one to play professionally. Besides, the pressures of being from a middle-class family led me to focus more on my academics and I did my engineering and then MBA but I always knew I wanted to come back to the sporting industry. Management always fascinated me too,

just needed to combine it with my love for sports.

*T.I: What were your thoughts behind creating zlait?*

N.S: I moved to Delhi in 2012 to start the sports management vertical at Anglian and was appointed as a Director at Shillong Lajong starting 2013 and then the Guwahati franchise of ISL (which was later called North East United FC) happened in 2014. That got me into the industry and I developed my own set of principles and ideas that I wanted to execute. I wanted to implement my own vision and philosophy of how the sport should be organised and nothing better than zlait to implement those.

*T.I: What have been the biggest challenges in your time in Indian football?*

N.S: I would say the most challenging thing is the lack of structure that a larger Industry would have. Management and organisation of sports & sports related activities in general in India is in general very scattered. It takes much more time to build processes and systems in such an environment. Right now, there are a lot of small players in the industry of which zlait is one. It is very entrepreneurial which in a way is good. However, it takes quite a lot of time to execute ideas.

*T.I: What are the things that you look at before signing players and finalising a transfer deal for one of your players?*

N.S: It is one of the toughest tasks because of the constantly changing environment. We work with a small set of players and we look to sign good players who have high potential. One of my teachers used to say she is most effective teaching students who have the potential but are not toppers currently. We follow the same thinking. Along with on-field potential, we also look at their persona & attitude and whether it fits with our vision of how an athlete is. We prefer to sign players who are humble, intelligent, progressive, and obviously passionate about the sport. A basic level of talent and performance at the higher levels is a given.

When we look at a transfer, we see how the season has gone. I believe that playing time

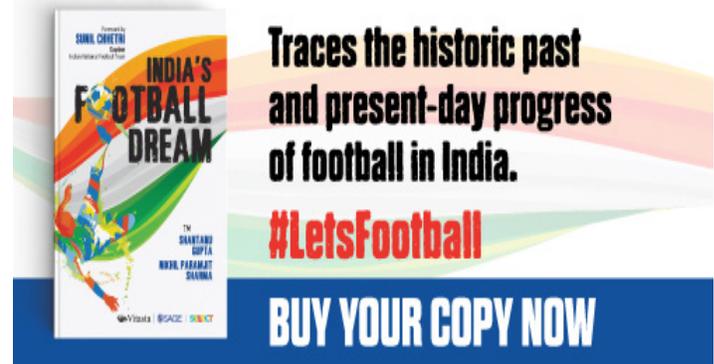
is key to a player's development so we try to get a club that will ensure that is maximized. Naturally we cannot guarantee that because one manager may think you're in the starting eleven but he can be gone the next day and the new coach can put you on the bench. Football is subjective and no can with 100% accuracy predict anything in the sport. We can only work with a certain degree of certainty so at the end of the day we just want the player's career to improve and that he gets fairly compensated for his efforts.

*T.I: You have co-authored a book on Indian football and its past but where do you think the sport is headed in the country? Do you think the AIFF roadmap is an ideal one for its development?*

*N.S:* The book is more about the socio-political development factors that have contributed to the factor. It is the story of the history of the sport in the country. India was a force in the Asian circuit for a while and pockets across the country have done well like the North East, West Bengal, Goa, Kerala. Maybe in the 80s football and hockey were on par with cricket but since then due to fantastic management of the BCCI and several other reasons, cricket exploded in the country. It became sustainable which is what we need to do in India.

We are moving up the ranks in football but the progress is still not what the better nations in the world are moving at. Now it's developing in tier one cities. For competing even at an Asian level we need more people playing the sport and for that we need more clubs. I believe there is scope for 150-200 clubs in the 50 or so biggest cities given the population of the country. These clubs should be multi-sport and have academies. If they implement a membership scheme and a pay and play type system then we can have a club for say, every five lakh people. I am not a fan of putting 20-25 kids in an elite academy and hoping for the best. There are several reasons which can prevent these kids from reaching the top. Like the old adage goes, don't put all your eggs in one basket. We simply need a huge number of kids playing great number games under coaches who can nurture their talent.

Thankfully numbers in India are not a problem. Culture, organisation & long-term planning are rather easy as compared to producing numbers.



*T.I: You mentioned pockets and you have spent a considerable amount of time working in North East India, which is one of the major pockets for Indian football and the national team. What sets that area apart from the rest of the country when it comes to producing top quality players?*

*N.S:* Football is the number one sport in the area except for maybe Assam and Tripura where cricket is still popular and might be tied with Football for popularity. More importantly, it has been popular for a long time. So, the current youth is actually the second or third generation in the family who is playing football. This is very important as in the early years it's largely the parents who passes basic technical knowledge on how to play and if they have played at a good level then naturally it's better for the upcoming players. Plus, the weather and geography are favourable in the area. It builds robust people who most often than not are natural athletes, have great resilience and a dogged mindset. There are also a lot of clubs in the North East of different types - community owned, small business backed, etc.

*T.I: You are also the technical director of the Creators Premier League. How did you get involved with the project and can you shed some light on its inception?*

*N.S:* Hemant and Arpit who run the Adidas Plaza in Delhi had tied up with Aakash and Prithvi Bajaj and Rannvijay Singh along with a couple of other fantastic guys and came up with this idea. They needed someone who had the

technical know-how and I felt it was a very good idea and product. I think they needed someone who could say no to a lot of people because that was a large part of my job. It's a wonderful way to keep people playing and it gives amateurs and working people a really professional feel. I had a really good time working on the project. Peps (Pranav Premnarayan) brought in a lot of brands. Hemant, Arpit, Prithvi, Aakash all had great events & sports experience and brought about a carnival like experience. And to have someone like Rannvijay as part of the event who is extremely hardworking and put his skin in the game was really the topping on the cake.

*T.I: Last question, with an eye on the future - what are your goals and plan for the organisation in the future?*

N.S: I would like to focus more on the sports infrastructure aspect of our business. There is huge potential for growth in the country. Zlait's goal is that we want people to play on good quality pitches and that will lead to growth of the sport and our business. We hope to continue putting in our best foot forward in player representation & consulting. Personally, I teach sports management courses at FIFA CIES Pillai and MICA Ahmedabad and I want to continue focusing on that educational aspect. I am also looking to delve into content as that is also one area that needs development.



*Sandhu at Bengaluru FC - Scroll*

## **AIFF Men's POTY: Gurpreet Singh Sandhu**

*Ishaan Takkar*

Gurpreet Singh Sandhu is more a feeling than a name now for so many of India's football enthusiasts. It inspires passion and hope in the hearts of several young players and pride amongst the goalkeeping fraternity. The Indian National team first choice goalkeeper has added another feather to his cap after being awarded the AIFF Men's Player of the year award for the season 2019-2020 recently. This is the latest achievement in a career of highs after becoming the first ever Indian player to play in the Europa league and winning the Arjuna Award in 2019. This is the first time Gurpreet has won this prestigious award but in all likelihood, won't be the last. He is just the second goalkeeper to win this award after Subrata Pal (2009). "There was always a desire to reach this point and this is an award I've always looked up to," said Gurpreet nonchalantly after winning the award.

It all started for Sandhu in Punjab at the age of eight when he started playing football. He joined the St Stephens academy in the year 2000 where he learned the basics of the game. He was then selected in the state's U16 team in 2006 and made his debut in Haldwani. Sandhu says at the age of 15 he knew that he was destined to play football. In November 2009, he joined East Bengal FC. The same year Sandhu also made his debut for the U-19 National team against Iraq in the 2010 AFC U-19 championship qualification. He received his first senior India team call up in 2011 but after just making one appearance,

he was dropped for 4 years. Sandhu was recalled in 2014 and has not looked back since.

“Son you’re wasting your time here, I believe you should be playing outside this country and you should believe that too,” was the advice from John Burridge, former Manchester City player. Burridge spotted Gurpreet during an East Bengal training session in 2011 while working as an analyst in India. At that moment, Sandhu decided that he should move abroad. After Burridge recommended Sandhu to many scouts in Europe, Sandhu earned a trial with Wigan Athletic. The coach at the time was the famous Roberto Martinez who was impressed by the Indian goalkeeper’s abilities. However, a permanent deal fell through as Sandhu was still contracted with East Bengal. His dream of playing abroad turned into reality in 2014 when he signed for Norwegian club Stabaek, after more than 100 appearances for East Bengal. It was a landmark move for Indian football as Sandhu became only the second Indian footballer to play for a top division club in European league. Only one player has previously achieved what Gurpreet had - Mohammed Salim who joined the Scottish club Celtic in 1936 albeit for a very short time. Life in Europe was hard for Sandhu. It took him some time to adjust to the conditions. He made his first league start in May 2016 and

managed to keep a clean sheet in his side’s 5-0 victory. Later that month the Indian shot stopper made history by becoming the first ever Indian to feature in a UEFA competition after being chosen to start in an away tie in the Europa League qualifiers. against the Welsh club Connah’s Quay Nomads FC.

Sandhu returned to India in 2017 as he joined Bengaluru FC after three seasons with the Stabaek. He has since been a mainstay for both club and country. Sandhu’s ISL career has been impressive having played 58 matches and conceding only 50 goals and making 158 saves. Averaging less than a goal per game is a good start but he’ll surely look to improve and keep more clean sheets in the upcoming ISL season.

Sandhu has shown his desire to play in a top European league and reach great heights there. No one knows what the future holds for the Indian National team goalkeeper but for a goalkeeper of his quality, there will always be interest from Europe. The ISL season is about to start, and Sandhu will look to show his best to many scouts and coaches around the world. His achievements make it easy to forget that his peak is still to come and it’s safe to say Sandhu is well on track to become the best goalkeeper that Indian football has ever seen.



*Sandhu at Stabaek - Khelnow*



*Bikash Yumnam - Khelnow*

## Diamonds in the Rough: Indian Football's Future Stars?

*Arnav Chawla*

Indian football seems to be in an improving position than ever before owing to the rise in popularity, improvement in infrastructure and increase in opportunities not only within the country but even abroad. In what is seen as an exciting time for Indian football, we take a look at a few emerging talents who provide great hope for the future:

### **Bikash Yumnam, Punjab FC**

Bikash recently became the first Indian to make it to The Guardian's annual list of the 60 best young talents in world football. Compiled by some of the most prominent journalists in football, the illustrious list has previously featured the likes of Trent Alexander Arnold, Christian Pulisic and Mason Greenwood before they shot to limelight. "Composed on the ball, a great reader of the game, and capable of excellent, fast, long throw-ins, the teenager has already been earmarked for a quick progression to the full international side," says The Guardian's report about Yumnam.

The 17 year old central defender from Manipur started his footballing career at the Minerva Football Academy whose graduates include India's U17 World Cup stars Amarjit Singh and Jeakson Singh. His time at Minerva acted as a foundation for his development reflected by his inclusion in the national youth set up. He was the backbone of the Indian defence that kept clean sheets in three out of four matches in

their run to the quarter-finals at the 2018 AFC U-16 Championship. He has since gone on to represent India at the U-19 level as well.

Yumnam had his breakthrough in the I-League with Indian Arrows on loan where he made nine appearances and impressed with his assured performances. It was during this breakthrough season that he garnered international recognition for the first time for a rather unique talent: his Rory Delap-esque long throw-ins.

A clip of Yumnam's long throw-in into the box against Mohun Bagan made waves on social media and eventually reached Liverpool's throw-in coach, Thomas Gronnemark, who was impressed with what he saw. This skill of his is no fluke. "Every day after the team finished, he would train for another half an hour just on that. We worked on his upper body strength. We even made him work with a throwing coach. His throwing is so good that anywhere in the opposition half is like a corner for me," said former Punjab FC owner Rajnit Bajaj.

He remains largely unfazed by what is a major boost for both his career and Indian football as a whole. "I'm both happy and surprised but I'm also realistic. I'm still at the start of my career. There's still a very long way for me to go. They aren't saying I've reached the top level, they only say I have the potential to get there," he says.

He is back at Punjab FC for the I-League season slated to begin in December. "The main priority for me is to play as much as possible and learn as much as I can," Yumnam said of his immediate future. It is good to see the youngster prioritising game time and biding his time before making a big money move. While he has a long way to go to match up to the feats of the elite company he enjoys as a member of the report, he certainly possesses the required talent and mentality to reach the very top.

### **Ishan Pandita, FC Goa**

Current and ex-footballers alike have time and again emphasised on the importance of international exposure for the development of Indian footballers. While most of the young

footballers are deprived of any opportunities abroad, Ishan Pandita is a notable exception having moved to Spain six years ago, at the age of 16.

Pandita started out his career at Alcobendas CF in 2014 and caught the attention of the youth team of UD Almeria where impressive performances sparked his upward trajectory. In 2016, the young forward became the first Indian player to sign a professional contract with a Spanish first division side, CD Leganes, representing their U-19 side in the Division de Honor Juvenil - the highest level of youth football in Spain. Consequently, there was a lot of buzz in Indian media regarding Ishan's prospects and whether he was ready to represent his nation.

Unfortunately, a meniscus tear in the knee halted his progress and kept him on the sidelines for 7 months. The hype around Pandita inevitably started to die down and the national call-up never came. His return from injury was not smooth with several stints at different clubs. Pandita found the arm around his shoulder needed to rediscover his charm at Lorca FC under coach Walder Pandiani - a former Uruguay and Deportivo La Coruna forward. Pandiani was like a father figure to Pandita. "If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be sitting here right now. He'd teach me things, he'd be hard on me. He treated me like a son," says Pandita when asked about Pandiani's influence. The influence paid dividends indeed as he

started 25 out of 27 games scoring six goals - the highest at Lorca. The return was halted by the Covid-19 pandemic forcing his hand to consider a return to India. FC Goa were quick to swoop in on the opportunity after manager Juan Ferrando received a glowing reference for Pandita from a former Espanyol teammate - Walder Pandiani. Ferrando's plan and the Spanish influence at the club convinced Pandita to sign for the franchise.

It will be interesting to see how he fares amid intense competition from a variety of attacking options at FC Goa in the upcoming season. "I am here to compete with whoever I have to. I have been competing with Spanish players since I was 16. So it's the same thing when I come back home and I'm ready. I can play on the wing as well if the coach wants me to. I'm going to compete and give my best but at the end of the day it's the coach's choice," replied Pandita when questioned about his role for his new club.

Despite the setbacks along the way, the Spanish exposure must have taught Pandita a ton about the game and strengthened his resolve. His ex-coach Pandiani has tipped Pandita to be the future of Indian football. Fans would be hoping for his claim to come true so India can find a successor to the aging Sunil Chhetri.

### **Bhupender Singh, Jamshedpur FC**

Another youngster to go down the Spanish route is Jamshedpur's FC new signing, Bhupender Singh. The 20 year old winger has returned to India after a two year stint with Spain's Tercera Division Club's U-19 team, Olímpic Xàtiva. Bhupi, as he is commonly known, was a part of Delhi based Sudeva FC's youth set-up before he moved to Spain. He initially joined the U-15 side at Sudeva and moved higher up the ranks to represent the club in the youth I-League at both the U-16 as well as the U-18 level.

He was extremely impressive and racked up goals during this time which earned him a complete two year scholarship from Sudeva to play for Olímpic Xàtiva. "Sudeva FC will always be special to me because not only did I get to



*Ishan Pandita in Spain - TOI*

learn so much about football during my time there, but it was also a major turning point in my life. I played for them in the U-16 and the U-18 Youth I-League where I scored a bunch of goals for them. That period of success motivated me to keep dreaming, keep pushing, and keep working hard," said Bhupi in a recent interview.

Things have not been hunky-dory throughout Bhupi's career as he missed out on India's final squad for the FIFA U-17 World Cup after making it to the final round of selections. However, he was quick to recover from this disappointment and was handpicked by ex-Real Madrid player and scout Oscar Rubio to play for Olímpic Xàtiva.

Bhupi speaks fondly of his stint in Spain, "I felt amazing because everyone dreams of playing abroad at least once in their career; and it's not just about playing and training there, it's also about exploring the new culture and lifestyle. My time in Spain was full of obstacles; the language barrier being one of the most prominent ones.

A couple of Spanish friends helped me adapt to the system and culture there. Also, training and playing with the youth team and seniors helped me gain tactical knowledge and grow professionally. I am fortunate that I got the opportunity to learn football from a Spanish team's point of view and I would try my best to abide by these lessons."

At Jamshedpur FC, Bhupi joins a young and exciting lot of players; reuniting with some of his former teammates from the India U-17 camp. He would also be pleased to play under the guidance of vastly experienced manager, Owen Coyle, who himself was a forward in his playing days.

Blessed with pace and flair, equipped with international exposure, and back to familiar territory under an already ISL proven manager- the ingredients seem to be well in place for the young winger to kick on and embark on a fruitful journey.



Bhupender Singh after signing for Jamshedpur - Khelnow



*Bengaluru FC's West Block Blues - Twitter*

## Fan Culture in India: A Short Commentary

*Ritwik Khanna*

At a time in world football when the role of fans in football is under the scanner, Indian football is actively making important strides towards building a modern culture for all sets of fans. While the English Premier League has just implemented a pay-per-view scheme wherein watching each match costs 15 pounds, 1sports broadcasted the entire I-league qualifiers on Facebook for free, and are likely to do the same for the I-league itself, which is scheduled to start in December. Clubs and administrators are finally recognising that building a close relationship with their fans is in their interest as well.

Indian football has not been known to be fan-friendly in general. On 16 August 1980, 16 fans lost their lives following a riot in the Eden Gardens Stadium during a match between East Bengal and Mohun Bagan. Similar incidents happened in Europe around the same time like the Hillsborough disaster in Liverpool, which led to major changes in regulation on stadiums and resulted in drastic improvements in both the safety and quality of infrastructure for fans. India made no such transition, and this widened the distinction between enthusiasts and fans. The former is more skeptical of the latter and the latter believes the former is not passionate enough. One of the major reasons for the sport's popularity across the globe has been its ability to pander to diverse audiences with specific experience expectations. Ultras have their own sections where they can sing

and create an atmosphere, families get their own space, and there are increasing provisions being made to make stadiums more friendly for differently abled people as well. Indian football has in the past few years made this transition, albeit a few decades late.

The start of the ISL was an inflection point in this context. The highly commercial league understood from the start that it needs to build a relationship with its supporters in order to succeed on and off the pitch. The league and its clubs promote making the matches as aesthetically attractive as possible in order to draw in the enthusiasts and convert them into fans. Unsurprisingly, football fans are among the most reliable consumers in terms of brand (here, club) loyalty, and it makes commercial sense to indulge them.

In fact, it is rather surprising that this transition took so long. Fans in West Bengal, Goa, Kerala and the North East have been highly passionate and charged about their clubs but this emotion had not been monetised until recently. This is, in part, telling of how the sport itself is viewed in these pockets. In West Bengal, supporting a club is a highly ideological undertaking. Abusing the opposition is just an integral part of being a fan as cheering on your own. Further, fans themselves are very skeptical of big investors and brands. This has been very visible in recent discussions wherein Mohun Bagan fans accuse East Bengal of 'selling out' to Sree Cement while East Bengal fans claim that Mohun Bagan is now ATK. Thus, clubs have a very specific image for their fans, and to make changes for capitalising their support runs the risk of polarising them.

In Goa and the North East, clubs have been historically organised around communities or small businesses. Churchill Brothers and Salgaocar are two prime examples of clubs that, despite being run by business families, are deeply rooted in the fanbase themselves. In such a scenario, using fans for personal gain doesn't fit their image and beliefs. The North East has been home to multiple collaborative clubs. TRAU in Imphal that participated in the I-league last season was the only club that

evolved from a workers union in the top two leagues. The ISL franchise of the area, North East United FC, is the only team in the league not owned by a corporation.

From a purely sporting perspective, this is a positive outlook, but this latency has kept a large amount of resources away from clubs. European clubs, barring the super clubs like Manchester United and Real Madrid, continue to rely on matchday ticketing and merchandise sales income for their financial sustainability. The absence of fans in the lower tiers has led to financial struggles for a large number of clubs.

Football clubs are usually representative of the community and they rely on community contribution in various forms for their growth. In the book *Soccernomics*, Simon Kuper and Stefan Szymanski note that football clubs very rarely shut down because there is always some good samaritan (and in some cases, several good samaritans) that bails the clubs out of financial duress. The majority of Indian clubs, on the other hand, have not invested time to build their bases in the community and thus, they often go bust. It required intervention from the chief minister of West Bengal to find East Bengal (a club over a 100 years old) a sponsor which

is symbolic of the shambolic management of Indian clubs.

However, there have been positive changes recently. As mentioned earlier, clubs are now recognising the commercial potential and are making the fan experience better. These changes have also been driven by the more active younger generation of fans. The older generation of fans (notwithstanding their passion) have a tendency to be rejective of changes and do not like to organise themselves. The newer generation has been more vocal of their demands. Ultras groups have emerged, and they have played a key role in reforming the activities of the clubs.

No entity embodies this change better than Bengaluru FC's Ultras - West Block Blues. The group works closely with the club's management and it is no surprise that it is one of the better run setups in Indian football. Delhi Dynamos ultras also unveiled a tifo expressing their displeasure at the poor performance of the club both on and off the field. While that proved to be counterproductive with the team shifting to Odisha, it shows that fans are now, well and truly, part of the football system in India, and not just passive consumers.



*A rare moment of solidarity was seen in the hotly contested Kolkata Derby earlier this year as fans of both teams unveiled tifos and banners against CAA-NRC laws - Indian Express*



ATK celebrating the 2014 ISL Title - ESPN

## Family Ties: How ISL Could Benefit from More Franchise Setups

Adibir Singh

Indian sports fans were left in a frenzy when news broke in early 2014 that Atletico Madrid—one of the biggest names in world football—would be the franchise partner and parent club of the Kolkata team to join the inaugural Indian Super League season.

Atletico de Kolkata, under manager Antonio Habas and marquee player Luis Garcia, would go on to win the first season of the ISL with promising signs of development and talent emerging in the birthplace of Indian football. They won a second title in 2016 with a star-studded line up once again—only for it to all come to an end before the 2017 season.

Atletico Madrid and Kolkata ended their partnership after co-owner Sanjiv Goenka bought out the shares from the Spanish giants. While the newly named ATK were still successful on the pitch, the other ISL teams have shied away from the idea of entering franchise agreements with other football establishments. And this doesn't bode well for the progress of the Indian game—both from a supporters' and a business perspective.

Some of the most famous clubs in the world have partnerships with smaller leagues and teams, often on different continents. The perfect example could be Mumbai City FC, who have a major franchisee partner in

the City Football Group—owning a 65% stake in the club—and have had a similar model of attracting the world's best players with names such as Nicolas Anelka, Forlan and Ljungberg donning the Mumbai colours.

Many argue that a club like Mumbai City haven't made the most of their City Group association for one reason—nurturing and acquiring talent from overseas. Mumbai have been completely missing from this co-dependent relationship—and no silverware in six years in the league is proof of it.

Their sister clubs Manchester City, Melbourne City and New York City FC have a very healthy track record of sending staff (managers, physios, coaches) and players of different ages and skillsets to the City Group clubs, be it for developing a youth player with more consistent first team action, or sending across marquee players to help build their brand on a global scale—Frank Lampard's move to Manchester on loan from New York being the perfect example.

With ISL's stringent cap of 7 foreign players, many believe it is easy to hide behind this rule as a way of not making long-term progress. This is where the importance of being tied-up with the best teams in the world could come handy. Indian football needs to make the most of bringing in younger talent from the bigger teams—perhaps players that are on the fringes of their parent-clubs' first teams, or reserve players under the age of 21. ISL has a special category for these players—known as a 'prodigy' to help clubs strengthen their overall depth, as well as provide competition to the youth already at the club.

This could also work the other way—with promising Indian talent being scouted first hand by international clubs—paving their way into the big leagues, and ultimately benefiting their ISL counterparts by providing sizeable transfer fees. One look at the Red Bull ecosystem is enough to know how well this model works, with clubs in New York and Salzburg sending their homegrown talent to the parent club—the Bundesliga's RB Leipzig.

Tyler Adams was an unknown wonder kid back in 2017, and just two years later has graduated from the New York Red Bulls academy to scoring in the Champions League quarter-finals with Leipzig- further proving the efficiency of this model.

The obvious attraction for fans is to see marquee players- especially the ones who have plied their trade in Europe's premier competitions. With franchise tie-ups, this process becomes seamless, and is an integral part to maintain fan revenue and fill out the stadium seats. The drawback for some senior players may be the salary cap- those looking for one last

paycheck may be put off by the 16.5 crore salary cap assigned to clubs, which the ISL implements. Once again, parent clubs could easily take care of these contractual formalities by paying a part of the often heavy salary, which takes away the burden of maintaining stringent budgets.

The way forward may be complicated by involving multiple parties- but if the biggest names and teams in the world can prove the systems worth, it will no doubt benefit Indian football in the long run- whether it is by sending Shubham Sarangi to the EFL Championship, or trying to lure an out-of-contract Leo Messi to Jamshedpur FC in 2021.



*The Announcement of Mumbai City's tie-up with the City Football Group - Scroll*