



# STADIUM ECHO

The Indian Football Magazine

## INDIAN ARROWS: BULLS EYE OR MISSING THE MARK?

INTERVIEW WITH  
PRASHANT J SINGH,  
CO-FOUNDER THANE  
CITY FC AND AIFF  
COACHING  
INSTRUCTOR

IN FOCUS:  
BALA DEVI,  
INDIA'S  
FIRST  
PROFESSIONAL  
FEMALE  
FOOTBALLER

GOA'S FORGOTTEN  
HEROES,  
SALGAOCAR FC



**Editor's Note**

Indian football is at an inflection point in several ways. Prior to the pandemic, things were changing. AIFF's roadmap towards a unified league and definite future was supposed to begin this season but has seemingly been pushed back. One of the biggest clubs has been taken over by another. Throw in the lower sponsorships and revenues due to the pandemic and the future looks very uncertain. Yet, there are a lot of things to look forward to. The ISL is expanding, there are new clubs entering the I-league and there are various new grassroots initiatives in the works.

Stadium Echo is a humble attempt by a group of young people to cover this fascinating transition 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 first issue less than two months after the conception of the idea. I am grateful to the writing team which 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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## Indian Arrows: Bull's eye or Missing the Mark?

*Arnav Chawla*

"If they're good enough, they're old enough."- these golden words by Sir Matt Busby perfectly depict the Indian Arrows model. The now Vasco De Gama based club was founded as the AIFF XI in Delhi in 2010 with the goal of nurturing young Indian talents. The inception was prompted by the evident under utilisation of Indian U-19 and U-23 players in the I-League - an issue noticed by then India head coach, Bob Houghton and AIFF president, Praful Patel.

The AIFF scouts junior tournaments across the country to recruit candidates for the Arrows squad ensuring a constant supply line which is able to match the inevitable departures at the end of each season due to numerous players moving back to parent clubs or signing for bigger clubs- the motive behind the recruitment in the first place.

The AIFF XI (later called 'Indian Arrows') had a difficult start to their debut I-League campaign in 2010-11 managing just one point from their opening four games. However, their resilience, particularly at home, helped them produce some solid results during the course of the season. Home draws against Dempo and East Bengal epitomised the tenacity of the developmental side, but it was the win over giants Mohun Bagan in the last game of the season that was the cherry on the top in a highly impressive season, finishing ninth out of 14 teams.

The club changed their name to Pailan Arrows

next season after an agreement with Pailan Group to sponsor the team. Prior to the commencement of the 2011-12 season, the Arrows sacked English coach Desmond Bulpin due to his style of football replacing him with former Indian national team coach Sukhwinder Singh. The managerial change in addition to the departure of key players such as Jeje and Gurpreet Sandhu made it hard for the Arrows to replicate their earlier performance. They finished 13th in what turned out to be a relegation worthy campaign - one in which they failed to win any of the first 17 games prior to the resignation of the head coach. Relegation was exempted due to the developmental status of the side. The 2012-13 campaign under Arthur Papas didn't prove to be much better with the Arrows securing 12th place - no team lost more games (15) in the season.

While few paid much heed to the position of the side given its nature, it was the style of football especially in those two seasons that drew criticism. A striking dearth of creativity coupled with the lack of risk-taking appetite failed to provide the kind of advertisement and entertainment one would associate with a team brimming with youth. It was expected that immunity from relegation would allow players to freely express themselves. Alas, the Arrows struggled to get out of their own half for major portions of games often seeming happy not to lose. A plausible explanation for results taking precedence over style at times would be the adverse impact of multiple losses on the morale of the players.

Following the 2012-13 season, the Pailan Arrows was disbanded by the AIFF as the club sponsors, Pailan Group, could not provide financial support to the club.

It was only after the successful hosting of the 2017 FIFA U-17 World Cup that AIFF revived the club in order to provide game time to the U-17 WC players. The club joined the 2017-18 I-League season rebranded as Indian Arrows. After a last placed finish in their first season after revival in 2017-18, the Arrows improved in terms of standings finishing eighth ( out of 11)

in the 2018-19 season. The youngsters have managed to grind out commendable results over the last couple of seasons despite competing against established sides with physically superior as well as foreign players.

The same has been the case this season as well with the standings being slightly deceptive. Though the table shows only nine points from 16 games, the Arrows have played football that is pleasing to the eye. Out of the 11 losses, they have only lost four games by more than a one goal margin indicating they were in the game throughout and went down fighting in most cases. Not to mention they won away to both East Bengal and Churchill Brothers. It is the improvement in the quality of football that is especially heartening for fans.

Opponents of the project argue that keeping the youngsters under one base camp is counter-intuitive as it would lead to exclusion from training with experienced players. Another criticism is that a lack of competition for places combined with reduced importance of results could lead to complacency among players.

These arguments are overshadowed by the valuable experience gained by the players competing against the best in the business instead of wasting their potential on the bench which inevitably undermines morale at a tender age. Players are also under the guidance of top notch coaches who are expected to prevent complacency from kicking in. Furthermore, a chance to use an opportunity to catch the eyes of national selectors as well as selectors of historically great clubs should ideally

be enough motivation for any player.

The efficiency of the setup is exemplified by the likes of current India number one Gurpreet Singh Sandhu and other renowned players like Pritam Kotal, Jeje Lalpekhlua, Narayan Das, Narender Gehlot, and Amarjit Singh who have gone on to represent the Blue Army through the Arrows set up. In fact Amarjit Singh has categorically stated that he would have struggled to get enough game time had he joined any other club. He, among several others, remains grateful to the foundation provided by the project.

In the words of the current Arrows coach, Shanmugam Venkatesh, "The Arrows project has been the backbone of the senior team for almost a decade now." Besides acting as a springboard to the national team, the Arrows set up focuses on a wide range of issues right from nutrition and physical toughness to mental health of the players ensuring holistic development along the way. It is common to see young players losing track due to early rise to fame, fragility of the age, as well as the mental requirements of the game among a variety of reasons. The Arrows model aims to help players tackle these issues to ensure players go on to fulfill their potential.

It is difficult to compare the Arrows set up to that of other countries since it is rather unique. However, a parallel can be drawn with the 1940s model of Hungary's Budapest Honvéd FC. When Hungary became a Communist state in 1949, the resulting nationalisation gave an opportunity to then national team coach, Gusztáv Sebes, to take-over at Budapest Honvéd



*Hungary's Mighty Magyars ft Ference Puskas and Nandor Hidegkuti - Fortepan*



Ashish scores against Shillong Lajong - Orissa Post

and recruit the best players from the top 2 Hungarian clubs at the time. He was able to effectively use Honvéd as a training camp for the national team.

This approach paid dividends with the likes of Ferenc Puskás, Sándor Kocsis, József Bozsik, Zoltán Cibor, and Gyula Grosics forming the spine of the golden generation of the Hungarian national team ( famously called the 'Mighty Magyars' ) that went on to become the Olympic champions in 1952, Central European champions in 1953, and World Cup finalists in 1954.

It would be far-fetched to expect a similar impact from the Arrows but such a model is indeed worth replicating tweaked according to the requirements of the Indian footballing system. While the influence of the project over the past decade cannot be overstated, it is yet to put lingering doubts to bed. Perhaps, by the time the 2023 Asian Cup and 2026 FIFA WC Qualifiers come along, the current crop of youth players will be in their prime and ready to spur India's much awaited bid for a WC spot to cement claims about the Arrows project being a giant step forward for Indian football.

As of now, it remains work-in-progress.

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## In Conversation With: Prashant J Singh Co-Founder Thane City FC and AIFF Coaching Instructor

*Speaking to Ritwik Khanna*

“Initially I got some resistance as well as a few personal attacks,” Prashant J Singh reveals. He is talking of the response he got to conducting webinars and informing people on menstruation from a football perspective. This initiative is his latest in a long line of exciting projects, most of which have turned out to be very successful. “That has since improved slightly but there’s still a lot of stigma around the topic. There’s also a lack of formal education in schools and colleges. Most women get their information largely from subjective experiences. So, there is a huge vacuum that needed to be filled. I have been thinking on this for over a year now and we’ve finally taken the first step and it has been received an amazing response”

“And that goes for women’s football in the country in general. Things have improved since the IWL, but there is a lot of scope for women in Indian football. Bala Devi is already playing in Europe and it’s certainly more likely that female footballers from our country will play in the top clubs in the world. The perception of women’s football is slowly changing from being seen as a charity and obligation to something with a huge potential.”

Prashant has done considerable work in this area including projects with Football Delhi and the Odisha government. He incorporated the key aspect of gender equality in Delhi’s Golden League, India’s biggest grassroots program, as well. “It’s all about incentivizing to promote

what you want to see. So, to include more girls in the tournament we put a rule that for each girl that plays in the match you get an additional point. It changes the lens from obligation to opportunity. We implemented this principle throughout the tournament. Teams got points for code of conduct, style of play, fair play, and more. The scoring system was a big departure from the traditional children’s leagues wherein a lot of teams wouldn’t score even one point overall. It had to be changed to make it more positive for the younger enthusiast and it’s truly one of a kind. We also had data tracking after every match as an informal way of scouting talent early.”

The Golden League was his first project during his stint at Football Delhi which was sandwiched between time at private institutions. When asked to compare the difference between the government and private setup he said, “I was lucky to work on new projects because government federations tend to be more conservative than private organisations. That difference obviously has its reasons and it is so by design. In the public sector you need to have a broader viewpoint and there are more stakeholders, while there’s only one decision maker in private clubs which leads to more innovation and risk taking.”

Along with his experience with state level organisations and private clubs, Prashant is an AIFF D and E coaching certificate instructor and has now started his own club. It is safe to say that he has worn many hats but where did it all begin?

“I was in my school cricket and football team so the interest was always there but my fascination deepened during my time in the USA, when I had gone to complete my commercial pilot license. We played cricket and football at the weekends and the atmosphere of the sport was completely different. People would bring their families and it would be an outing and it was a very new culture for me. If we needed anything, we’d approach the county and they would give us space to play and I got more interested in the administrative side of things.”

Football remained a side gig until 2014 when he decided to leave his father's business and make a career in the sport. He has since been around the block and has gained a lot of experience in coach education. It is by no means an easy job and Prashant is well aware of the challenges.

"One of the biggest problems we face is that there's a lot of variation in the level of participants. Some are former players while on the other hand there are inexperienced people like parents who just want to learn for different reasons. To teach in a manner that everyone gets it and remains engaged is challenging and exciting at the same time. Along with that, people have different expectations from the course. At the basic level, I would recommend that everyone spend some time on the ground helping coaches at the least before doing courses so that it becomes easier for us as well.

"There's a language barrier when we're going around the country but you know football is a universal language so there are very few problems in the practical sessions.

For theory, you need a translator but we manage. When I had gone to Kerala, 18 out of 22 participants only spoke Malayalam but 17 out of those 18 cleared the course and got their license."

Prashant shifts his focus to the pandemic now. This interview over Zoom is nothing new to him. He has been hosting webinars throughout the lockdown and is hopeful of better times to come. There are big things to come.

"We are already coaching around 250-300 children under Thane City FC and we had a lot of things planned in the second half of 2020 which have now been postponed to 2021. It is a project that I'm very passionate about and really hoping that it grows into something big. Moreover, we have a webinar planned with Liverpool John Moores University who got in touch after seeing our work on menstruation. We are also coming out with tutorial videos on the same on YouTube in regional languages as well to make it more accessible. So, yes a lot of things to look forward to."



*Salgaocar FC - Crown jewel of Goan football*

## Putting Goa on the map: Salgaocar's Story

*Siddhant Agarwal*

Throughout the past few decades, Goa along with West Bengal and the North East has been one of the most prominent contributors to the development of football in the country. One would not expect anything less from the state which declared football as their official state sport. The tiny state of Goa has been a factory of magnificent players who have gone on to prove their mettle at the absolute highest level of Indian football. Yet Goan clubs have seen their share of ups and downs and have not been able to reach a level that they could or perhaps should have been. One such club is Salgaocar FC.

In the post-independence era when there was no national league it was the national tournaments like Federation Cup and Durand Cup which allowed the clubs to compete against clubs from other states. Clubs from Kolkata were by far the giants of the footballing world along with clubs from the armed forces. This picture started to change during the 80s thanks to Salgaocar FC. Though the club quickly became a strong contender to beat in the Goan football circuit after formation in 1956, it was not until the 80s that Salgaocar really started going toe to toe against the big clubs.

This transition from a state club to a giant hunter was brought on by S.S. Hakeem, former Olympian, and son of legendary coach Rahim

Saheb. He focused on scouting and grooming young local players and built a team around them. Salgaocar's transformation was further accelerated and their success reached their peak after T. Shanmugam took over the reigns.

Shanmugam was a former Olympian and was the central midfielder in the 1951 Asian Games winning team. He was a proponent of an attacking brand of football which involved short passes and playing out from the back, something that not a lot of clubs did at that time. He created a team with the perfect mix of youth and experience comprising players (who are now legends of Goan football) like Derrick Pereira, Mario Soares, Brahmanand Sankhwalkar and Lawrence Gomes. Their efforts paid off as the team reached the final of the Federation Cup 1987, only to be beaten by Mohun Bagan. The team did not give up and in 1988 went on to win the Federation Cup, the first top level tournament in the club's history.

Salgaocar FC won the Federation Cup for the second time running in the year 1989, and this was a much bigger achievement than the previous one. After the 1988 win, the team lost some of its players to the big-spending MRF Sports Foundation. It would have pushed the club back a few years but Shanmugam had other thoughts. He brought in young players to fill in the positions, most notably Bruno Coutinho. If building a new team was not a big enough challenge, Salgaocar did not get a favourable draw. They had to face the nouveau riche MRF Sports Foundation and two of the biggest teams at the time, Mohun Bagan and Mohammedan SC. The team, inspired by brilliant performances from the young Coutinho won the title for the second year running. Salgaocar reached the final of the 1990 Federation Cup but lost to the Kerala Police team consisting of a certain I.M Vijayan. Nevertheless, Salgaocar, having reached four consecutive finals of the Federation cup cemented their name in Indian football like no other Goan club had ever done.

For the next few years, Salgaocar underwent a redevelopment phase and did not win a major trophy for the next six years.

In 1996, Shanmugam passed on the baton to former Indian captain Shabbir Ali. Ali was a coach of great prowess and he introduced the 3-5-2 formation for the first time in Goan football and it worked wonders. The team ran riot everywhere they participated. They won the Federation Cup beating Mohun Bagan and P.K. Banerjee's East Bengal by comfortable margins. Ali also led Salgaocar to one of their greatest achievements, which was winning the National Football League in the 1998-99 season. They also won the Rovers Cup and Durand Cup that season and announced Goa as a true footballing powerhouse to the whole country.



*Bruno Coutinho - Salgaocar FC*

As has been the case for most Goan clubs, after this successful spell at the end of the last century, Salgaocar went through their share of ups and downs. The overall quality of the team deteriorated, though there were glimpses of magic like finishing runners up in the NFL in 2002-03. It was visible that the team wasn't good enough for the top level. In subsequent seasons, the club kept getting worse and ultimately got relegated from the NFL in the year 2006. Though they managed to earn promotion in 2007, they slipped back to the second division in 2008. It was evident that the team needed a major change and something close to a miracle in order to bring the club back to where it was. That miracle came in the form of Moroccan coach Karim Bencherifa. He instilled a winning mentality in the team which had not been seen since Ali's departure. The team rose like a phoenix and went on to win their first-ever I-League title in the year 2011. To top it off, the team also won the Federation Cup that year beating East Bengal in the final.

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In 2016 though, in a surprising move for the whole country, Salgaocar FC along with Dempo SC and Sporting Club de Goa decided to withdraw their participation from the I-League for the upcoming years. The reason presented for the same in a joint official statement was due to the lack of direction by the AIFF regarding the development of football in the country. The teams were also unhappy with the fact that the newly formed ISL would be named the top tier in the country and would be given the AFC spot as well. Following this move, there was a lot of criticism towards the AIFF for mismanagement and effectively ignoring the well-being of the legacy clubs in India. Nevertheless, providing a small glimmer of hope, the team owners have on numerous occasions stated that they would be open to joining back the league provided that they are given the necessary support from AIFF and a definite and suitable roadmap to the development of Indian football in the country.

Salgaocar FC is one of the biggest clubs in the country and amongst the few with a rich history and a heritage that represents the people of Goa. It deserves huge credit for putting Goa on the map of Indian football and it is a pity to not be able to see them play at the top level in the country. Thanks to the AIFF and AFC, the Indian Football has a proper plan in place for the upcoming years and with legacy clubs joining and getting closer to ISL, we hope that the Salgaocar FC owners decide to join back the league as soon as possible.

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Indian Women's team - Scroll.in

## What's Next For Indian Women's Football?

Adibir Singh

It's no surprise that women's football, just like most sports in the country, has been in the shadow of its male counterparts. Despite India being ranked a respectable 56th in the Women's World Rankings - an incredible achievement on its own - there hasn't been a concrete lay-out or system in place to enhance the growth of the women's game in the country.

Women's football on an international level has garnered huge media attention, especially over the last few years - with the USWNT being in the spotlight thanks to both their multiple successful World Cup campaigns and their off-field campaigning for gender equality. England has gone on to set an incredibly high standard of sport with the introduction of the Women's Super League, as well as two lower divisions to create a highly competitive pyramid with promotion incentives.

The stark contrast between India and the rest is visible just by looking at the investment and infrastructure that is put into the sport in India. Little to no financial support from sponsors for leagues and teams spells trouble across the board for women footballers. Add to this the lack of media coverage and broadcast revenue, it creates a vicious cycle of women settling for what they can get, rather than trying to break the norms of lower pay-grades.

This problem stems from the almost invisible

grassroots level for women's football. While men's football in India had slowly embraced investment in the grassroots area in recent years, there were no signs of progress to invest in the youth at younger ages - making the thought of becoming a professional female footballer a pipe dream.

A major breakthrough came in 2016, when the AIFF launched the much awaited Indian Women's League, a first of its kind competition to finally put the spotlight on this side of the sport. Initially starting with a mere six teams, the tournament has since expanded to 12 sides from across the country. More importantly, the



players get the chance to showcase their talent to suitors from around the world - proven by the likes of Ngangom Bala Devi and Aditi Chauhan who have played for European heavyweights in Rangers FC and West Ham respectively.

This progression combined with the successful organisation of the U17 Men's World Cup led to India being awarded the responsibility to host the Under-17 Women's World Cup this year. Despite the delay amidst a global pandemic, the tournament is a step in the right direction for the sport. Unlike their male counterparts who failed to progress from the group stages, the Indian women are tipped to perform much better in their turn. Hopes are high from a squad that has shown time and again they aren't here to be written off by critics.

The next step in the development process must be to garner media attention and to get eyes to watch the women in action. Major sports broadcasters pay huge sums of money for men's football rights, and even a fraction of

those finances can help women teams to reach a level where they can compete not just locally, but with clubs across the continent through the AFC Women' Club Championship.

While there is still a way to go for women in this sport, these torch-bearers for women's football are going to be the driving forces for India, and finally seeing our ladies in blue on the world stage might be on the horizon in the near future.



There is hope for aspiring women who love the game. Local initiatives have been at the forefront in the past year, with New Delhi based entrepreneur Aneesha Labroo launching the KICA Women's League - a seven team league built around amateur players to give them a platform to play the sport on a regular basis. Piyanka Bakshi, a 22 year-old from Bangalore, set up The Bangalore Tigers Women's Football Club - a unique and never before seen community program to try and shine the light on girls who may want to seriously consider a career in the beautiful game.



*Aditi Chauhan - Facebook*



Mohammedan S.C. - thehardtackle.com

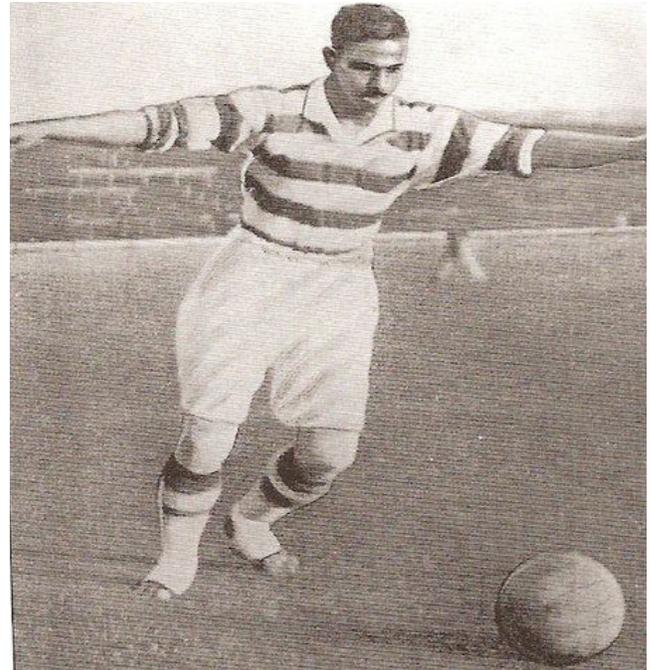
## Mohammedan Sporting: Kolkata's Forgotten Giants

*Ritwik Khanna*

Over six decades before Bhaichung Bhutia's pioneering move to Bury FC, there was Mohammed Salim. The first Indian player to have played for a European club, Scotland's Celtic no less, has long been othered by the writers of the history of Indian football much like Mohammedan Sporting-the club where he spent the prime years of his career. Mohammedan is a club like no other in the country despite their prestige being undermined by the communal masses post-Independence.

Founded in the late 19th Century by the Muslim elite of Bengal, Mohammedan spent the first four decades of their existence in relative anonymity, just winning three Coochbehar Cups. They were promoted to the first division of the Calcutta League only in 1934 and they went on to win it in their first season in the top flight, a record that stands unmatched until today. In doing so, they became the first Indian club to win the league, breaking the hegemony of the regimental English teams. That was the beginning of a run of seven league championships in eight years, barring 1939 when they did not participate as a protest against the Indian Football Association (IFA) along with other clubs including East Bengal and Aryans. The club also won the IFA Shield in 1941 and 1942, and both the Durand Cup and the Rovers Cup in 1940.

Mohun Bagan's triumph in the 1911 IFA Shield is justifiably portrayed as a symbol of resistance; of beating the British at their own game. While that victory deserves its own place, Mohammedan Sporting Club's Invincibles have been robbed of all recognition both on and off the football field. In the 1930s the club was a source of inspiration for the freedom struggle in Bengal which had lost some of its importance with the political nexus shifting northwards and westwards.



Mohammed Salim - Alchetron

It was during this period of unrivalled success, that Salim found himself on trial at Celtic in 1937. A skilful forward, he played two matches for the Glasgow giants. Despite impressing the officials of the club greatly, he did not stay on longer due to homesickness and a longing to return to Mohammedan for the upcoming Calcutta league. His legacy lives on stronger in Scotland than India with Celtic sending him a draft of £100 when his son wrote to the club stating that Salim was under financial duress post retirement.

With the parallel emergence of the Muslim League, the club was often used by separatist leaders as a symbol of superiority of Muslims in Bengal. Over time, the club came to represent the community not only in the state but

across the country. In a difficult period for Muslims, Mohammedan was a sign of hope and belongingness.

Mohammedan's success did not wane post-Independence. They won the first Calcutta league in free India in 1948 and became the first Indian club to win a trophy on foreign soil when they lifted the Aga Khan Gold Cup in Dhaka in 1960. Mohammedan won titles regularly throughout the 20th century, yet they have not been given the due respect due to their association with the Muslim community in the country.

The club's relationship with Islam has not only brought social ostracization but many more tangible obstructions in its growth as well. Their popularity and success did not sit well with the Bengali Hindu aristocracy who traditionally ran the IFA. Despite their success, Mohammedan officials had several run-ins with the federation which tended to favour Mohun Bagan, the bhadraloks' preferred club. In the near past, the club was unable to capitalise on the entry of the United Breweries group in Kolkata football at the turn of the millennium. While Mohun Bagan became McDowell's Mohun Bagan and East Bengal became Kingfisher East Bengal, Mohammedan Sporting remained as it was.

In 2014, the club reached its lowest point. They announced that due to the lack of funds to field a competitive team, Mohammedan would have to shut down. Within a week, the decision was reversed following last minute interventions from both their fans and prospective sponsors. Mohammedan now play in the I-League 2nd division, a pitiful place for an institution of its stature. A club that showed the country that it could not only defeat its rulers but dominate them has been resigned to the afterthoughts of history with its achievements overshadowed by its origins.

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*Subrata Paul - Sportstar*

## Subrata Paul: A Keeper of Faith

*Saurabh Nagpal*

Role models can often become the vehicle for a change. People tend to look outside themselves – towards an icon, an inspiration – which moves them to take up or to transform something. Today, India is spoilt for choice in the goalkeeping department. The brilliant Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, who is currently the national team's number one, is the only Indian to have played in UEFA Europa League. Players like Vishal Kaith, Amrinder Singh, and Lalthuammawia Ralte are more than able deputies for Sandhu.

Perhaps even more exciting are the youth stars, Dheeraj Singh Moirangthem and Niraj Kumar, who swayed the viewers with their strong performances in the 2017 FIFA U17 World Cup and 2018 AFC U16 Championship respectively. If the Indian Men's Football team is improving, then the men at the back are leading from the front.

However, the man, who became a telling figure in inspiring and influencing India's recent upsurge in goalkeeping talent, is none other than Subrata Paul, or as he is endearingly known amongst fans - the Indian Spiderman.

In a recent interview, Sandhu opened up on how a personality like Paul hasn't only galvanized him but a whole generation of goalkeepers. "Subrata-bhai has been one of my role models when I was starting out. I was lucky to have been able to train with him. I tried to grasp as much

as I could from observing him from so close and the experience has helped me become the player I am today," he said.

"He has been a role model for all aspiring keepers in the last decade-and-a-half." Naturally, the imprint that Paul made on young footballers wasn't limited to the goalkeepers. Pritam Kotal, who is an Indian international and recently signed a two-year extension deal with ATK Mohun Bagan FC, gushed about his fanboy moments when Paul played at his home ground.

"We used to come to know one or two days prior when Mistu-da (Subrata Paul) would come to Uttarpara for practice. He was a rockstar then, everyone's hero. For me, my classes could wait but his training sessions couldn't," the defender said on a live chat with AIFF TV.

### The Setbacks

Spiderman is a superhero, but Peter Parker isn't. Subrata Paul is the 'Indian Spiderman' but he's also a human. Hardships and obstacles are common to all of humanity, and how could it be any different for Paul. The boy from Sodepur, Kolkata had a troubled youth. Struggling to beat his situation, he often got into fights. Football was his escape from that world.

Joining the Tata Football Academy (TFA) was a watershed moment for him which changed his life. However, it could all have gone very different very easily. Ranjan Chowdhury, Paul's first coach at the academy, narrated the story of Paul's admission, "I still remember the day when Subrata first came for trials at TFA, actually they were already over and he spent two nights in front of our main gate. He refused to leave until we gave him a trial. He was the most adamant boy to ever get into TFA. We then gave him a chance; he did well and we inducted him into the academy. Later I realized that TFA was his only chance as there was no alternative in life, no chance to return home."

While still a teenager, one of the biggest clubs of the country, Mohun Bagan, picked him up

But on December 5 2004, his whole world altered tragically in a flash. He was involved in a rash on-field accident with Dempo FC's Brazilian striker Cristiano Junior, who as a result of the accident died on the pitch. Paul was slapped with a provisional suspension by the AIFF.

However, it was the mental toll that followed the tragedy which nearly ruined his life. "I went into depression. I did not know what to do. I could not train; I could not go out of my house as people were treating me as guilty. I was suspended for more than three months. But, I started following Swami Vivekananda, read a lot of his books and slowly I recovered," he said.

"My football and my life have taught me lessons that no university or school can teach you."

### International Glory

With 67 appearances, Paul is the most capped goalkeeper for India. The glorious service that he has provided over the years to his nation has made him a fabled figure and he is revered in the Indian football circuit. In 2016, he was also acknowledged with the Arjuna Award, the most prestigious sports award in India.

However, the start of his international journey had a fortuitous touch to it. In 2007, he was, almost surprisingly, picked ahead of the experienced Sandip Nandy for the Nehru Cup by Bob Houghton, the then Indian head coach. Paul grabbed that chance with both hands. India went on to win their first-ever Nehru Cup and he was adjudged the best goalkeeper of

the tournament.

From there on, Paul and India's fortunes went hand-in-hand. With him being on his top game and vital for the team's success, India went on to win multiple tournaments. In 2008, the Blue Tigers won the AFC Challenge Cup, and thereby qualified for the 2011 AFC Asian Cup for the first time in 27 years. This was followed by 2009 and 2012 Nehru Cup triumphs. The iconic image of Paul taking full flight towards his right and saving Hamez Al Aitoni's fierce penalty in the sudden-death-tie-breaker in the 2009 final is forever engraved in the hearts of Indian football aficionados. In a van der Saar-esque performance, this was the third penalty that he saved in that famous shootout. That year, Paul would go on to win the AIFF Men's Player of the Year award.

Fascinatingly, that wasn't the first time that Paul had pulled off triple-penalty-save heroics. Earlier in his career, he achieved the same feat in the U-23 Pre-Olympic qualifiers against Myanmar.

Paul touched his absolute peak in the biggest tournament of his career – the 2011 AFC Asian Cup. While India lost all of their matches, Paul emerged as their saving grace. He made 35 plus saves in three games, including an astonishing 16 against South Korea in a 4-1 defeat. Apart from displaying stunning shot-stopping abilities, his manner of dealing with crosses and quickness of coming off the line was also impressive. It was after this game that the bedazzled Asian media labeled him, 'the Indian Spiderman'.

After this tournament, his name entered the conversation of Asia's top goalkeepers. This helped him achieve his dream of playing for a foreign club. While Paul went for a trial stint with Canadian side Vancouver Whitecaps in the summer of 2010 and for a trial-cum-training stint with the German club, RB Leipzig, he finally signed for the Danish Superliga club FC Vestsjaelland in January 2014. By joining FC Vestsjaelland, he became the first Indian goalkeeper to play aboard and the second Indian to join a top-tier European side.



*Paul's infamous save vs Syria - Times of India*

## The Future

While Paul is no more the country's first choice, he's still a massive player for whichever club he features in. In his long and illustrious career, he has donned the colors of a plethora of I-League and Indian Super League (ISL) clubs. In the I-League, he has played for the powerhouses like Mohun Bagan; their archrivals, East Bengal; and Pune FC and has also featured for clubs like Prayag United, Rangdajied United, Salgaocar, and DSK Shivajians.

His journey in the ISL began with Mumbai City FC before NorthEast United snapped him up in 2016. From there, he reunited with Tata and returned to Jamshedpur FC in 2017. As a small present to the company and the city that changed his life, he won that season's Golden Glove award with seven clean sheets from 18 matches.

After playing 169 games, the 33-year old is showing no signs of slowing down. In the upcoming ISL season, he'll represent a relatively novel club, Hyderabad FC.

Sipping from the glass of the colossal Gigi Buffon, Paul also perhaps wants to show that age is merely a number. "I have served my country for the last 12 years. I feel I have a lot to give the country. If (Gianluigi) Buffon can play at that age, I can. I have time and I have belief in myself that I can play," he said.

The man who wore his heart out for the Blue Tigers on the pitch is hopeful for his future and wants to help football in India in whichever way he can.



*Paul playing for Jamshedpur - Jamshedpur FC*

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**In Conversation With: Dr. Neeraj Mahorekar  
Physiotherapist (MBSC, ACA)**

*Speaking to Ritwik Khanna*

Dr. Neeraj Mahorekar is one of the leading physiotherapists in Indian football who has worked in the sport from the grassroots level right up to the 2nd division I-league. Dr. Neeraj also has experience in physiotherapy in cricket with the Assam Cricket Association and Kings XI Punjab. He sat down with Stadium Echo to shed some light on what's it like being a physiotherapist in Indian sport.

*The Interviewer: What got you into physiotherapy as a profession?*

Dr. Neeraj: I was an athlete and used to play throwball when I was in school. I was an eight time state champion but when I was finally selected for the national level in throwball, I got an ankle injury while playing cricket with my friends. Then after I finished school I had plans to go into the medical field and my personal experience with injury pushed me towards physiotherapy.

*T.I: What are some of the most common injuries that you have to encounter in your field and why are they more frequent than others?*

D.N: Injuries in the leg are the most common in the knee, ankle, quadriceps, hamstrings and along with this shoulder injuries are found in almost all sports. The causes of injuries are divided into contact and non-contact. Joints usually face contact injuries in the knee, shoulder, and ankle and muscles suffer from non-contact injuries caused by lack of agility,

strength, and endurance. That's why these injuries are more frequent in athletes.

*T.I: Can you shed some light as to what is the ideal procedure when an injury takes place on the ground?*

D.N: So to assess the injury we follow TOTAPS - Talk, Observe, Touch, Active Movement, Passive Movement, and Skill Test. This is the on-field assessment that we run through quickly except for head and spinal cord injuries. Once the injury is detected the first treatment is PRICE - Protection, Rest, Ice, Compression, and Elevation and avoid HARM - Heat, Alcohol, Running, and Massage. This is the basic procedure that we follow in general and then we work on specific problems.

*T.I: You've been in this field for a long time and you've been around the block. So what are some of the challenges that you've faced in sports physiotherapy?*

D.N: I think the most difficult thing is managing the players. They're very enthusiastic and restless in getting back on the field so quick recovery and rehabilitation becomes one of the most difficult things for us. Similarly, prevention of injuries and mitigating them is tough because players cannot always identify when they have picked one up. I think this stems from the fact that there's a lack of knowledge amongst Indian players regarding these things which is the biggest challenge for us.

*T.I: So how do you think players can help themselves when it comes to injuries? What is something that they often do wrong or miss out on?*

D.N: I think one of the rookie mistakes is that they focus only on strength and largely aerobic training. Anaerobic training or High Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) is very important in football and a lot of players do not focus on it. Apart from that, nutrition and recovery is often overlooked because again, there is a lack of knowledge among players over what to do, what to eat and other such things. The best thing players can do for themselves is read and learn about their body.

*T.I: What are some of the key developments that you've seen in your field since you started working?*

D.N: There have been a lot of changes in the past few years. FIFA developed their SCAT (Sports Concussion Assessment Tool) program and defined rules regarding on-field and off-field assessment and whether to send the player back in or not. Guidelines pertaining to this changed a lot after 2012 when FIFA held their second medical conference. New diagnostics tests have emerged, most notably the Pre-Competition Medical Assessment (PCMA). PCMA should be held one month prior to a competition because then it can streamline the efforts of the fitness team and also, in case of an injury it tells us what was the original level of the player that we need to get back to.

*T.I: We have also seen a lot of trends emerge in the mainstream media when it comes to dieting and nutrition. Would you recommend diets like keto or intermittent to athletes?*

D.N: Keto diet is a big no for athletes. Instead carbo-loading is recommended from around three days before a match. Intermittent diet can be used but it is not necessary or recommended. A balanced diet is good for professionals with 55-65 percent carbohydrates, 15-20 percent proteins, and 20-35 percent of fats. This is the basics of nutrition that an athlete should follow.

*T.I: What about infrastructure? What role does that play in a player's fitness?*

D.N: It is key absolutely. It is the most important factor among the external ones which can cause injuries. Moving from, say, a hard ground to an astro turf can cause problems because the running style should change as the contact between the player and the ground is different and it can increase the risk of injuries. You can avoid these things by changing your gear and taking precautions but those facilities aren't always available in India.

*T.I: Recently, there's been a lot of debate over head injuries in football recently and there have been some rule changes as well in certain areas. What are your views on this issue?*

D.N: Well from a doctor's perspective I think

these rules are required because concussions and other head trauma are high risk injuries like covid-19. Even at the highest level, referees should be stricter when it comes to head problems and fouls pertaining to them.

*T.I: Coming to your personal experience, you've worked with government organisations and private clubs as well. How would you compare the experiences between the two?*

D.N: So I worked with the Sports Authority of India and I think that's the best place for a player to be in the country. The facilities when it comes to gyms, doctors, recovery, everything is top quality in SAI. The private clubs, contrary to popular belief, do not have that level of investment to afford all of these facilities. That goes for most private clubs, some of the richest ones can afford it but those are very few.

*T.I: You have worked in both cricket and football as a physio so how would you compare the two sports from your perspective?*

D.N: I think overall there is a lower scope for injuries in cricket since it's a non-contact sport. Apart from that, the infrastructure is definitely better in cricket in India and in football, the management teams are very small and the former is much more glamorous. However, as the medical team we are more involved with footballers because it's a faster, more explosive sport and they're more prone to problems. Cricket has its own challenges though because of the long hours even in a t20 match which is more than twice the length of a football match.

*T.I: One of the reasons that is stated for India's poor performance in not only football but also in other sports is that we are genetically disadvantaged when it comes to physicality. Do you agree with this?*

D.N: I think there are some things wherein we lack genetically but it is not something that we cannot overcome. For example, muscle fibres can be divided into three types - type 1, type 2a, and type 2b. African athletes tend to have more type 1 fibres which makes them suitable for long distance running and high endurance performance while Caribbean and

African-American athletes tend to have more type 2b which makes them good sprinters. Indians living in higher altitude areas are suited for endurance performance and areas in North India like Punjab and Haryana have produced excellent athletes because of their Vitamin D exposure and nutrition habits. In general however Indians have poor red fibres which are slow twitch ones.

*T.I: I'd like to wrap up with an eye on the future and ask you what things we should focus on and improve upon in the coming years?*

*D.N: Primarily, facilities. We need to improve our infrastructure because poor grounds, equipment can cause both short term and long term problems. Along with this making these facilities more accessible. Our country has the best doctors, strength and conditioning coaches, physios and nutritionists but most of the players cannot either get to them or implement their advice. So we need to remove these barriers to improve the quality of our services. Physios have a huge role to play in the development of Indian football. Take Nigel Adkins for example, he was manager of Southampton and Hull City but before that he was a physiotherapist! Similarly Jon Whitney was a physiotherapist at Walsall and eventually became their manager. Physiotherapy has a long way to go in Indian football.*



*The Indian U17 World Cup team - Indian Express*

## U17 World Cup: In Hindsight

*Ishaan Takkar*

It is a somewhat forgotten fact that India had qualified for the World Cup to be held in Brazil in 1950 but because of many administrative reasons declined to participate. At that moment India lost a huge opportunity but 67 years later, in October 2017, India hosted the FIFA U17 World Cup. In doing so we became only the fifth Asian country after South Korea, China, Japan and UAE to host the prestigious tournament. Nearly three years on, views regarding the tournament held in India are still mixed - some say it was a huge success, and some beg to differ. If we focus only on the viewership of the World Cup, it can definitely be termed as one of the more successful events. Around 1.3 million people attended the tournament beating the 1.2 million record of China set in the very first edition in the year 1985 and eclipsing the 2011 cricket World Cup figure, also attended by 1.2 million people across 49 matches. However, attendees criticised the facilities for fans that were in the stadiums and FIFA officials also said that the organisation could've been better.

The World Cup opened many doors and windows of opportunities for footballers with the quality of the game gradually but eventually increasing. Without a doubt Indian football has progressed and awareness among the masses has increased thanks to the tournament. There has been an upsurge in participation in football activities at youth level in the form of both school and club competitions, with the Youth I-league being one such competition.

Many stadiums that were developed for the World Cup are now used for conducting I-league and ISL matches like the Indira Gandhi Athletic Stadium in Guwahati which serves as the home ground of Northeast United FC. Facilities in stadiums have improved (still some way off from world class) as a consequence which is serving the staff, players and even fans well.

Another important change that can be seen after the U17 World Cup in India is increased investment at local level across India which has had a great influence towards the growth of the game. Many companies like Adidas and Reliance have increased their participation in the growth of football in India .

While hopes from the team were high from home fans, for others India was the least likely team to qualify for the knockout stages. India lost all of their group games and scored just one goal and this was no surprise considering that it was our first outing in the tournament. India was in the same group as Ghana, USA and Columbia who have participated in many editions of the competition. Indian football's failings have always been linked to poor infrastructure, facilities, nutrition, lack of opportunities but at the same time many countries which have far worse facilities have outperformed us. Ghana is a great example for this. They defeated India 4-0 in the group stage and their coach Paa Kwesi Fabian claimed that India had better infrastructure when asked to compare the two countries in an interview.

Indian football's parochialism was easily seen in the form of statements, pronouncements

by AIFF president, Praful Patel. The comments made by him during and before the World Cup pointed out his limited knowledge about the game and its history. There are plenty of comments that can be stated but the most damning one was a day before the World Cup final when Patel claimed there was no football in Chennai before 2015. Poor infrastructure has been the favourite argument of the AIFF president, he claimed that India performed exceedingly well in the World Cup as proper pitches and stadiums were made. A last place finish met his expectations.

In promoting the tournament politicians played a central role as there were slogans made like ' Yuva football ka dum, written on posters with prime minister Narendra Modi's face on it. The PM was not the only politician involved with faces of chief ministers of various states plastered on billboards. Tournament organisers then looked for promotional activities, but the weak history of Indian football left very few recognisable names. So they turned to Sachin Tendulkar, a cricket legend promoting football in the official song's video.

The U17 World Cup has always been a stage where young talented players showcase their abilities attracting attention from big clubs all over the world. Many stars of the tournament held in India are now performing well at senior level.

The U17 World Cup has always been a stage where young talented players showcase their abilities attracting attention from big clubs all over the world. Many stars of the tournament held in India are now performing well at senior level.



*Jeakson celebrates after scoring India's only goal of the tournament against Columbia - Indian Express*

Phil Foden, who was a part of England's squad that won the competition, is now a regular starter for Pep Guardiola's Manchester City and is touted as a replacement for club legend David Silva. Brazilian star Paulinho is now playing for German club Bayer Leverkusen. Spanish international Ferran Torres who impressed with his performances at Valencia has signed for Manchester City recently. Similarly, a number of players that were in the Indian squad have signed big money contracts with ISL teams.

India has always been a cricketing nation, people follow it religiously here. What changed after the U17 World Cup is that some people started following football religiously as well. The Indian senior squad is getting more support than ever, ISL's engagement on Instagram is only just behind the German Bundesliga and more than double of the Italian Serie A. The World Cup's motto, 'Football Takes Over' is still very much a work in progress. After only one major tournament we cannot say that football has taken over, what we can say is it has progressed and with more opportunities (U17 Women's World Cup) to come, football in India can be expected to reach great heights soon.

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*Bala Devi - Rangers FC*

## In Focus: Ngangom Bala Devi

*Ritvik Khanna*

“You mustn’t be afraid to dream a little bigger darling.” A life philosophy Ngangom Bala Devi’s father embedded in her heart as he tucked her pre-teen daughter into bed. While kids her age would hug their teddy bears and toys to sleep, a young Bala hugged a football. Today, our former national team captain plays for one of Europe’s most prestigious clubs becoming the first Indian woman to bag a professional contract anywhere in the world. Doing so at the age of 30, things have been far from stroll in the park.

Born and raised in Manipur, Bala was a natural talent. She recalled her favourite childhood memory to be the evenings she spent playing and beating the boys in her neighborhood. They would often fight over who got to pick her. At just the tender age of 11, in 2001, she started playing for her district level club ICSEA. People would often taunt and scold her parents as she was “a woman playing a man’s game” but her dad, a passionate fanatic of the game himself, never gave up on young Bala. To this day, Bala credits all her success to him.

Showing impeccable grit and determination, a 12-year-old Bala started playing for Manipur’s U-19 team in 2002. In her debut season, she won the player of the national championship award. In her second season, she won it again and hasn’t looked back ever since!

At 15, Bala made her debut for India’s U-19 team and went on to represent the senior team

the same year. A staggering jump for any footballer anywhere in the world. She went on to lead the national side and her state’s senior team to many laurels including three SAFF Championships and countless state championships. She has played for New Radiant SC, Manipur Police Football, Eastern Sporting Union and KRYPHSA.F.C at club level and won the AIFF Women’s Footballer of The Year in 2014 and 2015. She has been the top scorer in the IWL for the past two seasons and has 52 goals in 58 games for India.

A Semi-Professional footballer at the time, Bala was offered the job of a policewoman in the Manipur Police Department. She has proudly served the nation, both on and off the field, ever since.

Since 2016, she has captained the national team four times and led the front line for our first European tournament in 2019, the COTIF Cup. The tournament saw India face off against the likes of the Spain and La Liga giants Villarreal C.F. This was a turning point in Bala Devi’s career. Playing with her heart on her sleeve, she helped India finish the tournament as second runner-up. She realized that she was good enough for a bigger challenge, Europe.

Scotland’s Rangers Football Club, one of the biggest in the world, had recently signed a non-commercial deal with Bengaluru F.C to scout talent in India. This proved to be a blessing in disguise for Devi as a lack of female talent in Bengaluru FC led the Scottish giants to approach our No.10 for a trial. However, playing 5000 miles away from home in European winters is not for the faint hearted. Raised in chilly Manipuri weather, the blue belle did not fail to deliver. According to her agent, the club liked her so much that on the very first day of the trial, she was told she’d be a perfect fit to lead the line, not just be part of the 25-man squad.

But of course, things weren’t so easy, India being outside of the top 40 football playing nations meant that it was tough for Devi to get a work permit. She was granted a special 18-month permit on

exemption later after receiving support from the AIFF and the Rangers staff. She was given the no.10 jersey and started the first game as Rangers kicked off their campaign with a 3-0 win before the league was halted due to the covid-19 pandemic.

If Rangers live up to their expectations this season, we could potentially see Bala Devi become the first ever Indian to play in the UEFA Champions League, the biggest footballing tournament in the world at club level.

She hopes for India to have a proper women's league where lots of young girls "aim for the sky" A god for some, an inspiration for many, the girl from Manipur has shattered all norms and prejudices and has scored everything that has been kicked her way. A natural talent with an elite mentality and a supportive family. Once in a generation does one see an 18 year long playing career with the best of it yet to come, yet here she is defying all odds.

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*Bala Devi unveiling at Rangers FC - BFC Media*