
The Sign of a Victory: A glimpse of Indian Football

- Arindrajit Basu, Grade XII

It was nearly six on a Monday morning. Under normal circumstances, those two factors would have combined to bring about the activation of an alarm that would rouse me from the oblivion of sleep and then force my reluctant person to the shower to face the trials of a new day and receive the joys of education. Yet, this Monday morning was no usual one. In fact, speaking generically, it wasn't morning - just a very late night I had wrestled with the perils of sleep since ten PM the previous night just to catch a glimpse of the spectacle that was unfolding before my eyes- the 'mother of all earthly events': The finals of the 2010 FIFA World Cup. The deprivation of sleep couldn't impede the excitement that swept through me as Andres' Iniesta smashed the golden Jo'bulani (an alternate spelling of the conventional 'Jabulani' was used by FIFA themselves to acknowledge the efforts of Jo'burg in making the event at Soccer City possible) past the Dutch goalkeeper Stekelenburg. As Iker Casillas, captain of Spain, lifted the glorious World Cup with his saintly hands that have been insured for a million pounds, the whole of Spain rejoiced. My father couldn't help commenting on the fact that the Spanish national colors were notoriously similar to that of our own East Bengal FC. That caused me to wonder: Would our tri-colours ever be waving among the 31 other flags at a senior men's football world cup?

Now, several readers might be of the impression that India has failed to qualify for any of the FIFA world cups to date that is a misunderstanding... The 1950 World Cup held in Brazil saw the Indian contingent qualifying to the tournament by default due to the withdrawal of its scheduled opponents at the preliminary qualifiers. However, the governing body, the All India Football Federation (AIFF) forced this contingent to withdraw from the tournament as they failed to recognize the significance of the event at the time. The official excuse made by the AIFF stated that the team did not have sufficient practice and were undergoing severe selection problems. Later, the organization has gone onto modify this tale by claiming that they were compelled to withdraw due to rules against barefoot football. Shailen Manna, captain at the time, declared that this was simply a myth designed to cover up to the outrageous decision made by the AIFF. Sixty years have passed since this fiasco and still, Indian boots have failed to tread on World Cup soil.

Even so, after the mishap, Indian football

entered what is still referred to as its 'Golden era' with stars like Chuni Goswami and Balaram leading the charge. India won gold medals at the 1951 and 1962 Asian Games, and reached the semi-finals of the next two Asian Games. The Indian team also set a new record in 1956 with their semi-final appearance in the Melbourne Olympics as it represented, at the time, the best performance by an Asian team in an Olympic football tournament. The record stood until the 1968 tournament when Japan also reached the semi-finals before capturing the bronze medal that had eluded the Indian squad. India went on to qualify to the 1960 Olympics but failed to make an impact and had the distinction of being runners-up in the 1964 AFC Asia Cup with a narrow defeat to Israel in the tournament (that was played in a round-robin format only) by two points.

Alas, all good things must cease and India's football laurels have stagnated for decades now. With such abject failure, the Indian youth have stopped following the performance of the national team and the domestic I-League. I must confess that I am guilty of the above mentioned crime. The most recent travesty that comes to mind is the plight of the Mahindra United Football Club (MUFC), a team that ironically shares its initials with a more reputed club based in Old Trafford. Anyhow, the Indian MUFC finished third in the I-League and as a reward for their efforts, will be disbanded next season. Imagine a team in the Premiership or La Liga sharing their fate? The reason lay in the literal dearth of supporters who bought tickets for their matches. Attendance at the I-league encounters may be less than the attendance at the fifth day of an inter-school cricket test match. The wealthy sponsors of Mahindra United did their best to keep the club alive but even the wealthy do (sometimes) have their limitations.

Obviously, there is an overgrown elephant occupying the cage of Indian sports and the criminal is indeed cricket. While, I am a keen supporter and follower of cricket myself, it is clear that cricket has robbed Indian football of its necessities-both financial and psychological. Off-season often causes goalposts to be moved around in major football pitches to enable the creation of makeshift cricket squares without much hassle. I'm sure the installation of numerous zealous footballers onto the lush Eden Gardens would make the front page of The Telegraph before long.

Indians love football. Most of my friends in

India ignored the wants of the demanding ISC and CBSE curriculums and stayed up long nights, claiming to be indulging in futile matters such as Calculus or Chemistry, but in reality, following the World Cup exploits of Forlan or Messi. These folks have favourite clubs as well ranging from Chelsea FC in the Premiership to Barcelona in the Primera Liga (albeit they may know zilch about the geographical location of these clubs). I am no exception. My interest in Indian football remains limited to the annual domestic encounter between East Bengal and Mohun Bagan in the Kolkata Football league.

This could change. This should change. No sport can survive solely on players. The fans form an integral part of the equation. The only catalyst that could be used to change the perception of Indian football needs to be the media. Scores need to be published on time. Fans need to be made aware of the kick-off times and the TV channels have to broadcast the club matches. The national team requires more promotion than 1 minute ads made by hack promoters. Talent doesn't show up at one's door. A search has to be made. The AIFF needs to exert itself more and ensure that these

hunts do actually take place. On too many occasions, over my 'para' footballing career on the streets of Mumbai and Kolkata, I have seen poverty-stricken youngsters dribble past the college-going veteran in style. Invariably, a few months later, the youngsters have departed from our league to work (or beg) in order to supplement their family's limited gross income

Indian men's football is showing faint signs of a revival to its glory days. The Nehru Cup has been won consecutively in 2007 and 2009. With a 4-1 victory over Tajikistan in the 2008 AFC Challenger Cup, India has managed to qualify for the Asia Cup in Qatar next year after 27 long years. 'God's gift to Indian Football', skipper Baichung Bhutia is alive and well. Sunil Chettri, the centre-forward has been recruited to play for the Kansas City Wizards, a club that competes at the first division of the US club scene. There is also talk of a bid for hosting the 2022 World Cup. Perhaps, these are, in the words of R. Kelly, the 'Signs of a Victory.' As the Indian contingent graces the pitches of Qatar in January next year to compete in the Asia Cup, we'll know just how reliable these signs are. □

Butterfly



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Oh dear little butterfly,
I wonder how do you fly so high !

You are so bright and colorful,
You look like a fairy,
Who is so beautiful !

I also want to fly like you,
But my mother says,
I don't have wings like you ...

But one day I'll also fly high,
That's my promise to all of you.

