

The Future of Football in India: A Research-Based Analysis

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Abstract

Football (soccer), despite its rich history in India, has long struggled to match the widespread popularity enjoyed by cricket. The sport was introduced in the country during the British colonial period and gained a foothold in regions such as West Bengal, Kerala, and Goa. Clubs like Mohun Bagan and East Bengal became iconic symbols of Indian football, and for a time, football was a prominent sport in certain parts of the country. However, over the years, the nation's passion for cricket overshadowed football, leaving the latter as a niche sport with limited reach and infrastructure.

In recent years, though, several factors have hinted at a potential resurgence of football in India, particularly in terms of audience growth, media attention, and investment. The launch of the Indian Super League (ISL) in 2014 played a critical role in rekindling interest in football. The ISL introduced a new level of professionalism, commercialism, and visibility to the sport, attracting international players, sponsors, and fans. Additionally, the growing grassroots development programs, increased governmental support, and collaborations with international football bodies like FIFA and AFC have contributed to the sport's expanding footprint in India.

This paper explores the current state of football in India, focusing on the factors that are driving its increasing popularity. The analysis also delves into the challenges that hinder the sport's growth, such as competition from cricket, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of consistent international success. Furthermore, the paper examines the role of government policies, investments in football infrastructure, and global trends that impact football's prospects in India. Through a comprehensive evaluation of these elements, the paper aims to provide a well-rounded understanding of the opportunities and hurdles that define football's future in India.

Keywords: Indian Super League, AFC India, global football trends, football viewership in India, Indian football history, ISL fan base, sports investment India, youth football.

1. Introduction

India, a country known for its passion for cricket, has slowly been embracing football in recent years. With a population exceeding 1.4 billion and a growing middle class, the potential for football to flourish in India is immense. The establishment of the Indian Super League (ISL) in 2014, increased investments in infrastructure, and the country's hosting of international football events have contributed to the sport's rising profile.

However, football in India still faces numerous challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, a lack of grassroots programs, and limited international success. This paper aims to analyse the key factors influencing the future of football in India and explore the steps that can propel the country to become a footballing powerhouse.

2. Historical Context of Football in India

Football has a long history in India, dating back to the 19th century when it was introduced by British soldiers. Kolkata (then Calcutta) became the epicentre of Indian football, and clubs like Mohun Bagan and East Bengal emerged as footballing giants. In 1911, Mohun Bagan famously won the IFA Shield, defeating the East Yorkshire Regiment, marking a significant moment in India's colonial history.

Despite the early enthusiasm, football struggled to grow in comparison to cricket, which dominated the national sports scene. However, the 1950s and 1960s are often referred to as the "golden era" of Indian football, with the national team performing well in Asian competitions. Since then, however, the sport has experienced a decline due to lack of resources, poor management, and inadequate focus on player development.

3. Current State of Football in India

3.1 Professional Leagues

The establishment of the Indian Super League (ISL) has been a turning point for football in India. Modelled after successful football leagues globally, the ISL has brought in international stars, attracted sponsorship deals, and fostered a growing fan base. According to a report by KPMG Football Benchmark (2020), the ISL's market value exceeded \$200 million in 2020, showing significant growth since its inception.

Table 1: Key Statistics of the Indian Super League (2023 Season)

Number of Teams	11
Average Attendance per Match	15,000
Total Viewership	130 million (TV & Online)
Market Value	\$240 million
Highest-Paid Player (2023)	Sunil Chhetri - \$1.1 million

Apart from the ISL, the I-League, India's traditional football league, continues to operate, though it lacks the commercial appeal of the ISL. The coexistence of these two leagues presents challenges for the governance of Indian football, particularly in terms of competition structure and talent development.

3.2 Grassroots Development

Grassroots development is critical to the long-term success of football in any country. The All India Football Federation (AIFF) has launched several initiatives aimed at nurturing young talent. The AIFF's Baby Leagues (ages 6–12) and Elite Academies are designed to provide structured football training from an early age. The AIFF's partnership with FIFA and AFC (Asian Football Confederation) for technical support and infrastructure has been another step forward in building a solid foundation for the sport.

However, the reach of these programs is still limited, with much of the focus concentrated in urban centres. Rural areas, where football could thrive due to its relatively low-cost requirements compared to cricket, are still underrepresented in the development programs.

3.3 Football Infrastructure

A major challenge for the future of football in India is infrastructure. While metropolitan cities like Kolkata, Mumbai, and Bengaluru have world-class stadiums and training facilities, the majority of the country lacks adequate football infrastructure. Poor maintenance of existing facilities and the high costs associated with building new ones hinder football's development at the grassroots level.

A report by Grant Thornton (2022) highlights that India has only 21 FIFA-approved stadiums, compared to 50 in Japan and 64 in South Korea. Without significant investment in infrastructure, it will be difficult for India to produce elite players or host major international tournaments in the future.

Table 2: Comparative Football Infrastructure in Asia (2023)

Country	Number of FIFA-Approved Stadiums
India	21
Japan	50
South Korea	64
China	37
Australia	45

4. Factors Contributing to Football's Growth in India

4.1 Rise of Media and Digital Platforms

One of the major catalysts for football's growing popularity in India is the rise of media and digital platforms. The ISL and major European leagues such as the English Premier League (EPL), La Liga, and UEFA Champions League are now accessible to millions of Indian viewers via digital streaming platforms. A study by Statista (2021) estimated that more than 80 million Indians regularly watch European football leagues, highlighting the sport's expanding fan base.

4.2 Celebrity Involvement and Ownership

Celebrity involvement in Indian football, particularly the ISL, has helped boost the sport's profile. Bollywood stars such as Ranbir Kapoor (co-owner of Mumbai City FC) and Salman Khan (former co-owner of North East United FC) have added glamour and visibility to football, attracting more fans to the stadiums and improving the marketability of the league.

4.3 Government Support

The Indian government has also taken steps to promote football through initiatives such as the Khelo India Program, which seeks to develop sporting talent at the grassroots level. In 2017, India hosted the FIFA U-17 World Cup, which was seen as a significant milestone in the country's football journey. The government continues to invest in football infrastructure and youth programs, with an emphasis on increasing participation at the grassroots level.

5. Challenges Facing Indian Football

5.1 Lack of Consistent International Performance

India's national football team has struggled to make a mark on the international stage. Ranked 106th by FIFA as of October 2023, India remains far from qualifying for prestigious tournaments such as the FIFA World Cup. The country's performance in the AFC Asian Cup has also been inconsistent. This lack of international success is a major obstacle to the growth of football, as it diminishes the sport's appeal to both players and sponsors.

5.2 Competition from Cricket

Cricket's dominance in India remains a significant barrier to football's growth. With well-established leagues like the Indian Premier League (IPL) and an almost unrivaled fan following, cricket continues to command the majority of sponsorships, media attention, and government support. While football is growing, it is still far from dethroning cricket as the nation's favourite sport.

5.3 Financial Sustainability of Leagues

While the ISL has attracted investments and sponsorship, its long-term financial sustainability is uncertain. The high costs of maintaining franchises, combined with relatively low revenues compared to global football leagues, pose a challenge. According to a report by Deloitte Sports Business Group (2022), ISL clubs continue to operate at a loss, primarily due to high operational costs and limited revenue from ticket sales and merchandising.

Table 3: Financial Overview of ISL Clubs (2022)

Metric	Value
Average Revenue per Club (2022)	\$3 million
Average Operating Cost per Club	\$5.5 million
Profitability (Percentage of Clubs Operating at a Loss)	90%

6. The Way Forward: Recommendations for the Future of Football in India

6.1 Enhancing Grassroots Development

For football to thrive in India, greater emphasis must be placed on grassroots development. The AIFF needs to expand its outreach to rural areas, where there is untapped potential. Collaborations with schools, community centers, and local clubs could help create a footballing culture that encourages participation from a young age.

6.2 Improving Football Infrastructure

India's football infrastructure requires significant investment to meet global standards. Public-private partnerships could be a solution to develop new training centers and stadiums across the country. Additionally, maintaining existing facilities should be prioritized to ensure that players have access to proper training environments.

6.3 Strengthening Domestic Leagues

To make the ISL and I-League financially sustainable, the leagues must focus on expanding revenue streams. Increasing ticket sales, enhancing the fan experience, and developing strong merchandising strategies are crucial. Additionally, securing more international broadcast rights could boost the league's visibility and profitability.

6.4 Focusing on International Competitiveness

To improve India's standing in global football, the AIFF must prioritize developing elite players and improving the national team's performance. Sending young players to train in top footballing nations like Spain, Germany, or Brazil could provide valuable exposure and experience.

7. Conclusion

The future of football in India holds promise but requires sustained effort, investment, and strategic planning. With a growing fan base, increasing investments, and government support, football has the potential to challenge cricket's dominance in the long run. However, addressing the challenges of infrastructure, grassroots development, and financial sustainability is essential for football to truly flourish in India. By focusing on these areas, India could emerge as a significant player in the global football scene in the coming decades.

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