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# VISION 2047

T A R G E T 2 0 2 6



**RAISING THE BAR:  
ASSAM FOOTBALL &  
BEACH SOCCER**

- Kalyan Chaubey  
President, AIFF

**AFC ASIAN CUP  
QATAR 2023**

SPECIAL EDITION



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# President's Note

## Football in Assam & Beach Soccer: Creating waves in Indian Football

### Kalyan Chaubey

When we all talk and discuss Indian football, our stress is always on the development of the game in the states. Because footballers primarily come up from the states before they emerge on the national platform.

Recently, I had the pleasant experience of being witness to things about how football has progressed in the state of Assam. For some reasons, the progress in Assam football was somewhat halted for around eight years. In my experience, huge work is going on in Assam to take football to the next level.

In my 15 months of tenure as the President of the All India Football Federation so far, I have visited many areas of Assam at least half a dozen times, if not more. What I have seen there in terms of football is really impressive. Recently, I had the good fortune of visiting the state again, where I watched deciding matches in the Guwahati Premier Football League and the Assam State Premier League.

The Guwahati Premier League finale was a thrilling affair and it turned out to be a dramatic match, with Deka Bricks Industry (DBI) emerging victorious over Barekuri FC in a nail-biting penalty shoot-out at the Judges Field in Guwahati. The enthusiasm of the players as well as the spectators was a treat to watch. Overall, it was a great show.

Equally interesting and exciting was the final of the Assam State Premier League in Diphu, in which Karbi Anglong Morning Star clinched the title, defeating United Chirang Duar. The winners were trailing at the half time, but they truly pulled up their socks in the second session to turn the tide in their favour.



It was yet another fine show and a testimony to how football is progressing in Assam. Dr. Sarma is currently the President of the Badminton Association of India, but he has equal love and enthusiasm for all other disciplines.

While talking about football in Assam, I must say that the Honourable Chief Minister of the state, Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, is instrumental in the progress of sport in Assam and is doing a commendable job of promoting football. Earlier this week, he inaugurated a multi-purpose sports complex and a 3,000-seating auditorium costing Rs. 168 crore in Karbi Anglong. Another is coming up in Kokrajhar at the cost of Rs. 150 crore for athletics and football.

This is not the end of the story. The Honourable Chief Minister has also played a crucial role in the renovation of the Nehru Stadium in Guwahati, which cost around Rs. 600 crore. The stadium has a history of hosting lots of important domestic and international football matches;



the AIFF has recently allocated a pre-World Cup match at this venue and Dr. Sarma's initiatives will definitely go a long way in taking football to greater heights.

Now, coming to a different topic, sports these days is not all about winning and losing. Football is also an integral part of the society where it helps in the growth of economics, business, sports tourism and many other areas. We, at the AIFF, are aware of the changing world of football and this is one of the reasons why we remained keen on introducing beach soccer in India. There was hardly any history of beach soccer in India, but we made sure it got a head start. If the inaugural National Championships in Surat in January–February 2023, where 19 teams participated, was a huge hit, then the eight-state team tournament during the National Games, October–November 2023, proved that the sport has come to stay in India.

Currently, beach football is on in Diu as part of the Diu Beach Games 2024, where eight state teams are playing. Given the passion and fervour shown by the spectators in Diu, I have a strong feeling that this particular sport has all the ingredients to promote tourism in India, especially in coastal areas like Visakhapatnam, Panaji, Surat, Puri, Diu, Udupi, Goa, Kozhikode, Porbandar, etc.

This is a unique opportunity. Beach soccer and sports tourism can go hand in hand. We must not miss the bus.

Finally, it is time, we should also take a lesson from the resounding success of the first National Beach Games. It has justly stretched the imagination of the participants and the spectators alike. And for this, the bulk of the credit should go to our Honourable Prime Minister Narendra Modi ji, who played a pivotal role behind this project and encouraged it at every step. His love for sports is a well-known fact by now; under him, Indian sports is bound to reach the top in the near future.



**AFC ASIAN CUP SPECIAL**

# 1964 Asian Cup: When the Indian flag flew high on the banks of the Mediterranean

*Second place at the 1964 Asian Cup in Israel remains India's best-ever performance in the continental showpiece event*

**JAYDEEP BASU**

Sukumar Samajpati, 82, hasn't met Inder Singh, 77, for the last 30 years. Yet Samajpati, a crafty right winger in the 1960s with deadly dodges, vividly remembers the passes he played with inside-right Inder Singh to leave the rival defenders baffled in the 1964 Asian Cup final rounds played in Israel.

"Playing the Asian Cup in 1964 was sheer joy. It happened 60 years ago, but is still fresh in my memory," remembered octogenarian Samajpati from his south Kolkata home. Yes, we could not win the title and finished runners-up, but India played rousing football throughout the tournament in all three matches. Inder was a young boy, but his display was marvellous," said Samajpati.

Interestingly, the fans and followers of Indian football weren't truly surprised by the team's second-place finish in the continental championship. After all, India were the 1962 Asian Games champions and one of the hot favourites to bag the Asian Cup, too. It didn't go that way, as Chuni Goswami and his men stumbled at the last hurdle and ended up runners-up behind hosts Israel. But overall, India's showings were eye-catching throughout the four-team round-robin league.

A year before this, Indian football suffered a jolt. Their long-time National Coach, SA Rahim, the man who was credited with taking Indian football to great heights, died of cancer at the age of 53. To say Indian football was orphaned won't be an exaggeration. Under Rahim, India won two Asian Games gold medals and fourth place in the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. He meticulously built a team that was regarded as one of Asia's best for nearly a decade, since the mid-1950s.

With Rahim no more, the All India Football Federation decided to hand over the baton to a foreign coach for the first time for the dual purpose of the Asian Cup and the pre-Olympics. Englishman Harry Wright, an FA coach employed by the National Institute of Sports, Patiala, for coaching and training the prospective coaches, was given the job of coaching the 19-member squad. Ten of these players had a gold medal each in their pockets from the 1962 Asian Games team.

The Indian team had a galaxy of stars in the true sense. Players like Peter Thangaraj, Jarnail Singh, Arun Ghosh, Ram Bahadur, Chuni Goswami, M. Yousuf Khan, FA Franco, Prasanta Sinha, etc. were household names for their exploits on the pitch. Joining them in the squad were Syed Nayeemuddin and Inder Singh, who went on to serve the National team for many years to come.

India didn't have to play the qualifiers as all the other teams in the group withdrew from the competition. The team travelled to Israel to play the final rounds, but they could barely imagine the devastating news waiting for them on the morning of India's opening tie against South Korea in Haifa on the slopes of Mount Carmel on May 27, 1964.

As the Indian team woke up at the luxurious Grand Acadia Hotel, the tragic news came from India that Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was no more. The team lost all motivation to play and requested the team manager, Wing Commander Kalyan Kumar Ganguly, to get the match postponed. But the organisers said a postponement wasn't possible because of the tight schedule.

"Finally, we took the field (Kiryat Eliezer Stadium) wearing black armbands. We weren't totally focused because of obvious reasons, but we still managed to beat South Korea 2-0," recalls Samajpati. Two youngsters, Inder Singh and Appalaraju, found the net.

Two days later, Asian champions India met their Waterloo against hosts Israel at the Bloomfield Stadium in Tel Aviv. The home side scored once in each half to win 2-0. On June 2, India returned to winning ways at the same venue, beating Hong Kong 3-1. Inder Singh, Samajpati, and skipper Chuni Goswami scored for India. The victory ensured India's runners-up spot in the Asian Cup. Inder Singh was adjudged the best striker of the tournament.

It was an admirable finish by the Indians, but many felt the result would have been brighter had Coach Wright played his cards more judiciously. His selection of the playing eleven before every match was always in question and raised eyebrows within the team. Wright, it was alleged, had problems maintaining discipline in the squad.

"Sixty years have gone by; many of my teammates have bid adieu to the world. Only a few like me are still there to share those moments we had in the Asian Cup," said Samajpati.

"Will the posterity remember us? Will they know that once a bunch of amazing players donned the national jersey and dominated Asian football?" asked the winger, whose back centres always reached the strikers at the right spots."

Maybe yes. Maybe not. But we did our best to keep the Indian flag flying high on the banks of the Mediterranean," Samajpati whispered under his breath.

**Goalkeepers:** Peter Thangaraj, SS Narayan | **Defenders:** Syed Nayeemuddin, O Chandrasekhar, Jarnail Singh, Mritunjoy Banerjee, Arun Ghosh | **Midfielders:** Fortunato Franco, Prasanta Sinha, Ram Bahadur, Ajay (Kajal) Mukherjee | **Forwards:** K Appalaraju, Inder Singh, Chuni Goswami (C), HH Hamid, Sukumar Samajpati, I Arumainayagam, M Yousuf Khan, B Narayan  
**Head Coach:** Harry Wright (ENG)

#### 1964 AFC Asian Cup India Results

May 27: South Korea 0-2 India (Appalaraju, Inder Singh)

May 29: Israel 2-0 India

June 2: India 3-1 Hong Kong (Inder Singh, Samajpati, Goswami)



AFC ASIAN CUP SPECIAL

# 1984 Asian Cup: When India rose rejuvenated like a phoenix

*Twenty years after finishing runners-up in Israel, India earned the opportunity to rub shoulders against the very best in Asia again following a remarkable qualifying campaign in Kolkata*

**SRUTI CHAKRABORTY**

The year 1984 has been immortalised by English writer George Orwell through his classic novel 'Nineteen Eighty-Four'. Though it has nothing to do with Orwell's portrayal of a dystopian society, the year 1984 has huge significance in Indian Football, too.

It was the year when Indian Football made a huge turnaround to qualify for the Asian Cup after 20 long years in the wilderness. 1984 was a year of celebration for Indian Football as Sudip Chatterjee and his men marched into the final rounds of the Asian Cup for the first time since 1964. They displayed great team spirit in the qualifiers, and gave a good account of themselves in the finals in Singapore, which included a goalless draw against mighty Iran.

Sadly, Chatterjee is not among us anymore. But there are others to tell the tale about how a bunch of 20 players stood united to accept the challenge of taking India to the elite group. It was like the iconic dialogue from Shahrukh Khan's Bollywood movie 'Chak de! India': "Mujhe States Ke Naam Na Sunai Dete Hai Na Dikhai Dete Hai ... Sirf Ek Mulk Ka Naam Sunai Deta Hai - India!" (I can neither hear, nor see the name of any state ... I can only hear the name of one nation - India).

While players performed commendably, many believe the driving force behind India's success was Yugoslav coach Milovan Ciric, who was then known as one of the finest in the business in the world of football. He made it clear that the team is above any individual. India earned a significant amount of success under Milovan and everybody who got the chance to play under him cherishes their memory to date.

“As a coach, Milovan Sir was exceptional. He knew Indian players came from different states, different cultures and different food habits. Yet he managed to jell us up as a team. He was aware of the capabilities of each player and used them accordingly. He taught us that football is a team game; victories or defeats are part of our collective responsibilities,” Atanu Bhattacharya, the number one custodian of the 1984 Asian Cup squad, told the [www.the-aiff.com](http://www.the-aiff.com) from his Kolkata residence.

Under the guidance of Milovan, the team successfully navigated their qualifiers in Calcutta (now Kolkata). They defeated Yemen Arab Republic (4-0), Malaysia (2-1), and Pakistan (2-0) before losing to South Korea (1-0). It, however, did not stop the Blue Tigers from earning their spot in the Singapore 1984 tournament.

Drawn into a challenging group with hosts Singapore, China, Iran, and the UAE, India faced formidable competition. Unfortunately, India lost three of the four matches they played, but stunned the fans by forcing hot favourites Iran to share points with a draw.

A significant portion of the credit for this successful campaign goes to Atanu Bhattacharya, who exhibited exceptional goalkeeping skills. Standing tall between the sticks, Bhattacharya made numerous brilliant saves, playing a pivotal role in India's qualification for the final round. Atanu played for Asian All-Star, India, Bengal, Mohun Bagan, East Bengal, and Mohammedan Sporting besides, wearing the national team colours.

“The 1984 Asian Cup final rounds remain etched in my memory for two reasons. First, we played well in the tournament against the top teams in Asia, though we could not win any matches.”

“I had a great tournament and eventually was named in the Asian All-Star squad for the two exhibition matches against Hungary in Saudi Arabia. It was a huge achievement since I was the only Indian player to be picked up for the continental squad.

“In the Asian Cup final rounds, we lost three of our matches against Singapore, UAE and China, but surprised everyone by drawing goalless against Iran, the best team in the group. I was determined to give my best in this match and eventually came out without being beaten once. Even the Iran coach had lots of good things to say about me in the post-match press conference,” Atanu remembered.

The National Team faced formidable challenges in terms of facilities and exposure tours, making the journey far from a walk in the park. Nevertheless, each individual battled valiantly for the honour of the country.

On being asked about the preparations the team made earlier, Atanu said, “During our playing days, there was hardly any exposure for the National Team. We only played in regulation tournaments like the Asian Games, Asian Cup, pre-Olympics, etc. Before the Asian Cup qualifiers, we had a one-month camp in Kolkata and that was all. We had a coach and an assistant coach, but no specialised goalkeepers’ coach. Frankly, I learned my tricks on my own. In the Asian Cup final rounds, I knew the pressure would be on me since our defence would be under pressure against the best teams in Asia. I stayed alert and confident under the bar.



"I still feel proud of the way we played in the qualifiers in Kolkata. Our boys were in roaring form. Only two goals were conceded in the qualifiers," the Indian goalkeeper, who played 41 matches and has 10 clean sheets, said.

"We had a strong team with a few very good players like captain Sudip Chatterjee, Parminder Singh, Prasanta Banerjee, Mauricio Afonso, Shabbir Ali, Krishanu Dey, Bishwajit Bhattacharya, etc. They could dictate terms on the pitch and had fine attacking qualities. It made the difference," Atanu said.

Another name that comes up with Atanu Bhattacharya when anyone speaks about the 1984 Asian Cup is Mauricio Afonso. The Goa medio is among the best midfielders the country has produced and has played for Salcete FC, Salgaocar FC and Dempo FC for a good 15 years. A star of the 1984 team, Afonso played 49 matches for India and scored four goals.

"How many tournaments have I played for India? I don't remember. In how many matches have I donned the National jersey? I never maintained those statistics," said Afonso with a laugh.

"All I know is that I was fortunate to play with some wonderfully talented footballers in the National Team. And one of the best was the 1984 Asian Cup squad. Sudip Chatterjee, Krishanu Dey, Parminder Singh, etc. were ball players of excellent quality who could take charge in the middle at any point in time," Afonso told the [www.the-aiff.com](http://www.the-aiff.com) from Goa.

Like Atanu, Afonso also remains a Milovan Ciric fan to date. "Another big advantage was the presence of Milovan Sir.

His understanding of the game was amazing. He knew that we were playing club football continuously throughout the season. So, he would never push us beyond a certain level. His training sessions were limited but highly effective.

The few strategic changes he would make were enough to add an extra punch to our game. I remember Milovan would never get angry, even if the result was bad. The next day, he would do the analysis and explain to us what exactly went wrong.

"He was a classic coach," recalls Afonso.

"The qualification round gave us strength and confidence. We knew that for 20 years India had not qualified for the Asian Cup. But that didn't deter us from believing in ourselves. We started with a bang, defeating Yemen by four goals in the qualifiers' opener. Thereafter, we never had to look back."

To judge our team by its performance only in the 1984 Asian Cup final rounds would not be fair. Unlike the current practice, we didn't have a goalkeeper's coach, a fitness coach, or a video analyst. You won't believe it; the team didn't even have a doctor. We were left to fend for ourselves. But we managed things on our own and delivered a good performance. After that, it took India another 27 years to play the final rounds again," Afonso pointed out.

**Goalkeepers:** Atanu Bhattacharya, Brahmanand Sankhwalkar | **Defenders:** Pem Dorji, Tarun Dey, Sudip Chatterjee (C), Krishnendu Roy, Subrata Bhattacharya, Derek Pereira | **Midfielders:** Bikash Panji, Prasanta Banerjee, Parminder Singh, Mauricio Afonso, Narender Thapa | **Forwards:** Shabbir Ali, Babu Mani, Krishanu Dey, Bishwajit Bhattacharya.

#### 1984 Asian Cup results:

December 2: Singapore 2-0 India

December 4: UAE 2-0 India

December 7: Iran 0-0 India

December 9: China 3-0 India



# 2011 Asian Cup: When a bunch of bravehearts broke a 27-year Hoodoo

*The sensational 2008 AFC Challenge Cup triumph in New Delhi booked India's berth among the 16 elite teams of the continent*

## **AKHIL RAWAT**

Twenty-seven years is a long time. That's how much India had to wait to make it to the AFC Asian Cup for the first time since 1984. A sensational 4-1 triumph over Tajikistan in the 2008 AFC Challenge Cup Final at the Ambedkar Stadium in New Delhi was not only remarkable for Sunil Chhetri's first international hat-trick, but India's return to the continent's biggest stage.

Left-back Syed Rahim Nabi, who started all three matches in the 2011 Asian Cup, shares his fond and everlasting memories from the tournament, the journey of making it to Qatar and the profound impact it had on his marvellous career. Only 16 teams made it to the Asian Cup, and India were one of them.

"Playing the 2011 Asian Cup was the biggest achievement of my football career," Nabi utters without a doubt. "For us, it was like the World Cup because you don't get opportunities like this again. We waited three years for the tournament after qualifying for it. Those three years were very important ones in our lives."

Nabi was not your ordinary full-back. Speed, guile and a genius mind. You don't earn 62 senior national team caps if you're an average player. He revolutionised the full-back position, and that's a bit funny considering the fact that he didn't even begin his playing career there.

Three head coaches hold a special place in Nabi's heart. Sukhwinder Singh, who handed him his India debut in 2005 in the very same match as Chhetri - against Pakistan in Quetta. Then, Subhash Bhowmick, who converted the 'striker Nabi' into the 'left-back Nabi'. And finally, Bob Houghton, who never lost trust in him and under whom he played his career's three biggest matches out of the 62.

However, Nabi was not Houghton's first choice at the start of his reign. The Hooghly-born defender did not play a single minute in the AFC Challenge Cup.

"I was not part of the playing eleven during the qualification process. I did not start a single match, but I was always in the squad. Coach Bob always kept me. There was a lot of competition to get into the team. Sometimes Surkumar (Singh) used to play, sometimes it was Deepak da (Mondal)," says Nabi.

"My advantage was that I could play in a variety of positions - left back, right back, in the wings or the midfield." And that's what kept his berth secured in the national team. It would only be a matter of time before Nabi transitioned into an indispensable member of the team. He was winning trophies every year with India. The Nehru Cup in 2007, 2009 and 2012 and the SAFF Championship in 2011. His contribution to the Blue Tigers was aptly rewarded with the AIFF Player of the Year honour in 2012.





As one would imagine, the 2011 AFC Asian Cup was a life-changer for not just Nabi, but all 23 members of the Indian squad. By far the lowest-ranked team at 133rd in the FIFA Rankings, 27 places below the second-lowest North Korea, India had absolutely nothing to lose. A once-in-a-lifetime trip to Qatar to rub shoulders against the continent's elites.

"Playing against teams like Australia, South Korea and Bahrain was an extraordinary experience for me. Yes, we suffered three heavy losses, but I wouldn't say we played as badly as the scoreline suggested. We were up against some of the very best in Asia. That experience changed our lives. There was so much to learn from it," shares Nabi.

India were beaten comprehensively by all three of their much higher-ranked opponents. But plainly looking at the results would not be the right way to judge this talented bunch of players. After all, qualifying for the Asian Cup back when it used to be a 16-team tournament, in its own right, was one of Indian football's major achievements in the recent past. It's no surprise Nabi credits that accomplishment to Houghton.

"The coach played an important role in our success. Nobody has done what Bob Houghton did for the Indian team. He changed the footballing system of India," Nabi says.



"We never knew how to win the second ball on the pitch. He taught us that. He taught us the English way of playing football. Every coach tells his players to give their hundred per cent, but Bob was different. He was utterly disciplined about sticking to our formation and tactics. Only those who were able to learn his trade quickly enough made it into his squad," he further explains.

"Even after Bob left, his learnings stuck with us. Playing football became easier."

Now, 12 years down the line, playing an Asian Cup is no longer a dream. It's the bare minimum. India have qualified for successive Asian Cups for the first time in their history. And while the Blue Tigers missed out on the knockout stage by the thinnest of margins in 2019, Nabi believes they can make that happen this time despite India landing themselves in a relatively tougher group.

"Now, our football has developed a lot. I like Igor Stimac. I've met him. He knows how to build his squad. After his arrival, the team has seen lots of improvements.

"The current bunch of boys is excellent. They are playing fast football, beating big and strong teams. Sunil (Chhetri) is still going strong. I have the feeling that our boys can do something this time. We will face Syria again, a side we had beaten twice in Nehru Cup finals. We will definitely fight against all three teams. I have full confidence in them," Nabi believes.

**Goalkeepers:** Subrata Pal, Subhasish Roy Choudhury, Gurpreet Singh Sandhu | **Defenders:** Anwar Ali, Mahesh Gawali, Deepak Kumar Mondal, NS Manju, Rakesh Masih, Syed Rahim Nabi, Gouramangi Singh, Govin Moirangthem Singh, I Surkumar Singh. | **Midfielders:** Steven Dias, Climax Lawrence, Clifford Miranda, NP Pradeep, Baldeep Singh Jr, P Renedy Singh, Mehrajuddin Wadoo | **Forwards:** Bhaichung Bhutia (C), Sunil Chhetri, Sushil Kumar Singh, Abhishek Yadav

#### 2011 AFC Asian Cup Results:

January 10: India 0-4 Australia

January 14: Bahrain 5-2 India (Gouramangi, Chhetri)

January 18: South Korea 4-1 India (Chhetri)



AFC ASIAN CUP SPECIAL

## 2019 Asian Cup: When the journey mattered more than the destination

*It wasn't to be a happy ending, but the entire two-year campaign was a journey to remember forever*

**SOU MO GHOSH**

The AFC Asian Cup 2019 sits dearly in the memories of the modern Indian Football fan. The Blue Tigers lost two of the three matches and failed to make it into the knockout rounds by a last-minute penalty goal conceded against Bahrain.

But not everything in life and football is measured by success on paper.

It remains the only occasion when India qualified for the AFC Asian Cup after participating in the qualifiers on a home-and-away basis, a monumental campaign that began two years before the tournament itself, with the eventual top spot in Group A of the Third Round Qualifiers being sealed by India in Goa, by dint of a 2-2 draw against Myanmar in their penultimate match of the campaign.

The Blue Tigers had to contend with the likes of the Kyrgyz Republic, Myanmar, and Macau in Round 3 of the AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers and ended the successful campaign with four wins, one draw, and a solitary loss, the last of which came in the last game, a dead rubber from India's perspective, against the Kyrgyz Republic (1-2).

Jeje Lalpekhlu, the former India marksman, who hung up his boots earlier this year, recalled the days with much determination. "It was a tough campaign," sighed Jeje. "We had to fight tooth and nail in every match. It was a really special moment for us to finally get there in the end."

The strength of character that the team showed during the qualification campaign could well have stemmed from a generation of players that were either not picked for the final squad in the 2011 edition, or faced the disappointment of a failed qualification campaign for the 2015 edition.

"I had never played a major AFC international tournament before, even at the senior level. It was a similar situation for all the other guys around me – all except Sunil Chhetri," said Jeje. "So we were all quite determined to not watch it on TV."

The qualification campaign was one that was carried out by a team that mostly consisted of a fresh batch of players, with the stars of yesteryears waning away. Not everyone that played their respective roles during the qualification campaign, however, made it to the final squad, a part and parcel of the game, says Jeje.

The likes of goalkeeper Subrata Paul, defender Arnab Mondal, midfielder Eugeneson Lyngdoh, striker Robin Singh, among a few others, had played their roles over the course of time in the National Team in the years leading up to AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019, but were eventually not a part of the final squad that represented India in Asia.





“The night before our first game (against Thailand), we all met after the team dinner and our captain gave an inspiring speech about the struggles and sacrifices that we had all made to reach the place that we were all in, that day,” said Jeje. “We also spoke about those who had helped us get there but were not in the squad in that tournament for various reasons, be it injury or form. It’s all a part of football. They may not have been physically with us, but they were very much present in spirit.”

### **A MEMORABLE NIGHT AGAINST THAILAND**

The Blue Tigers began the 2019 AFC Asian Cup with an inspired performance against Thailand, a 4-1 victory, that set the country into dreamland. While that was followed by defeats against hosts UAE (0-2) and Bahrain (0-1), the game against their Southeast Asian counterparts remains India’s only Asian Cup win in 55 years.

Captain Chhetri scored twice, while Jeje and Anirudh Thapa netted one each in the 4-1 win. Thapa said, looking back at the game, “That was definitely one of the favourite moments of my career so far. Winning that at stage against a team like Thailand, and with me scoring that goal, was quite special.”

For Jeje, it was his one and only chance to score at a tournament of such a level, one that he grabbed with both hands, or rather with the toe of his right boot.

“I’ve always regretted not playing an AFC tournament at any level earlier. In 2011, I was knocking on the doors of the national team but was not picked. I only made my debut later that year. We were also disappointed to not qualify for the 2015 edition. So when I finally came on as a substitute in that game, I felt that it was my only opportunity to score,” he said.



The Blue Tigers have built on the 2019 Asian Cup, and are now looking forward to the 2023 edition in Doha Qatar, but the win against Thailand in Abu Dhabi, and the fervent qualification campaign that preceded it, have been imprinted in the memory chips of Indian Football as a resurgent moment.

#### **2019 Asian Cup India squad:**

**Goalkeepers:** Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, Vishal Kaith, Amrinder Singh.

**Defenders:** Pritam Kotal, Sarthak Golui, Sandesh Jhingan, Anas Edathodika, Salam Ranjan Singh, Subhasish Bose, Narayan Das.

**Midfielders:** Udanta Singh, Jackichand Singh, Germanpreet Singh, Pronay Halder, Anirudh Thapa, Vinit Rai, Rowllin Borges, Ashique Kuruniyan, Halicharan Narzary.

**Forwards:** Sumeet Passi, Balwant Singh, Sunil Chhetri, Jeje Lalpekhlua.

#### **2019 Asian Cup India results:**

January 6: Thailand 1-4 India (Chhetri 2, Thapa, Jeje)

January 10: India 0-2 United Arab Emirates

January 14: India 0-1 Bahrain

# India's 26-member squad for AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 announced

The Indian senior men's team head coach Igor Stimac, on Saturday, December 30, 2023, announced India's 26-member squad for the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023.

The Blue Tigers are due to arrive in Doha later on Saturday, ahead of marking their fifth appearance in the Asian Cup. India will play their opening Group B match against Australia on January 13, 2024 (17:00 IST), at the Ahmad bin Ali Stadium in Al Rayyan before facing Uzbekistan on January 18 (20:00 IST) at the same venue. Stimac's men will then move to the Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor to take on Syria on January 23 (17:00 IST).

"All these boys are very similar in terms of football quality. We are a team, a family. But no matter the talent, if there is no character, nothing can be achieved," Stimac said.

Sharing the areas he would want to improve upon ahead of the tournament, Stimac said, "The things we are looking to work on are defensive compactness, offensive transitions, and the set pieces, mostly. It will be very important to work on man-marking inside the box because I was not happy with that part of our game. In the last few games, we started leaking some unnecessary goals inside the box."

"All three of our opponents are very good technically, physically stronger with great speed. So, we are not going to have much difference in approach to all these three games, I can tell you that. We need to check the fitness level of our players at present and see how much we can develop in the next two weeks," he added.

Off the pitch, encouraging the Indian contingent will be their passionate fans. The Blue Tigers are no stranger to competing in Qatar, playing four of their 2022 FIFA World Cup Qualifiers matches there, including two against the hosts. Moreover, Sunil Chhetri and Gurpreet Singh Sandhu were part of the Indian squad at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup which was also held in Qatar. Chhetri scored a goal each against Bahrain and South Korea.

The graphic is a blue and red design with the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 logo in the top left and the Indian national flag in the top right. The title 'AFC ASIAN CUP QATAR 2023' is prominently displayed in white, with 'SQUAD' in a red box below it. The squad members are listed in white text under their respective position categories: Goalkeepers, Defenders, Midfielders, and Forwards.

**AFC ASIAN CUP QATAR 2023**

**SQUAD**

**GOALKEEPERS**  
AMRINDER SINGH  
GURPREET SINGH SANDHU  
VISHAL KAITH

**DEFENDERS**  
AKASH MISHRA  
LALCHUNGUNGA  
MEHTAB SINGH  
NIKHIL POOJARY  
PRITAM KOTAL  
RAHUL BHEKE  
SANDESH JHINGAN  
SUBHASISH BOSE

**MIDFIELDERS**  
ANIRUDH THAPA  
BRANDON FERNANDES  
DEEPAK TANGRI  
LALENGMAWIA RALTE  
LISTON COLACO  
NAOREM MAHESH SINGH  
SAHAL ABDUL SAMAD  
SURESH SINGH WANGJAM  
UDANTA SINGH

**FORWARDS**  
ISHAN PANDITA  
LALLIANZUALA CHHANGTE  
MANVIR SINGH  
RAHUL KANNOLY PRAVEEN  
SUNIL CHHETRI  
VIKRAM PARTAP SINGH



"I'm looking forward to seeing our Indian fans in Doha. They came in massive numbers to support the Indian team during the qualifiers, and that was one of the reasons why we had two great performances against Qatar here. So, I'm well aware that there will be massive support for our boys. Hopefully, we can pay them back and celebrate some good results," said Stimac.

### **India's 26-member squad for the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023**

**Goalkeepers:** Amrinder Singh, Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, Vishal Kaith.

**Defenders:** Akash Mishra, Lalchungnunga, Mehtab Singh, Nikhil Poojary, Pritam Kotal, Rahul Bheke, Sandesh Jhingan, Subhasish Bose.

**Midfielders:** Anirudh Thapa, Brandon Fernandes, Deepak Tangri, Lalengmawia Ralte, Liston Colaco, Naorem Mahesh Singh, Sahal Abdul Samad, Suresh Singh Wangjam, Udanta Singh.

**Forwards:** Ishan Pandita, Lallianzuala Chhangte, Manvir Singh, Rahul Kannoly Praveen, Sunil Chhetri, Vikram Partap Singh.

### **India's Group B fixtures at the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023**

January 13, 2024: Australia vs India (17:00 IST, Ahmad bin Ali Stadium, Al Rayyan)

January 18, 2024: India vs Uzbekistan (20:00 IST, Ahmad bin Ali Stadium, Al Rayyan)

January 23, 2024: Syria vs India (17:00 IST, Al Bayt Stadium, Al Khor)

# KNOW YOUR #BLUETIGERS

## **#1 GURPREET SINGH SANDHU, GOALKEEPER**

Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, originally from Punjab, has cemented his position as the first-choice goalkeeper for the senior Indian team over the past few years. Since his international debut against Turkmenistan in 2011, the 198 cm tall custodian has made his name as one of the all-time greats and is the nation's record clean-sheet keeper. Some of his notable performances include clean sheets away in China and against reigning Asian Champions Qatar, and match-winning saves in the penalty shoot-out wins over Lebanon and Kuwait en route lifting the SAFF Championship 2023 in Bengaluru.

Gurpreet has won the SAFF Championship in 2011, 2015, 2021 and 2023, the Intercontinental Cup in 2018 and 2023, and the Tri-Nation Series in 2023. In 2019, he received the prestigious Arjuna Award. The AFC Asian Cup 2023 will be his third outing on the continent's biggest stage after Qatar 2011 and UAE 2019.

## **#23 AMRINDER SINGH, GOALKEEPER**

Hailing from Mahilpur, Punjab, Amrinder Singh was the starting goalkeeper at the 2014 Asian Games in Incheon, South Korea. His senior India debut had arrived at the Tri-Nation Series in August 2017 against Mauritius. Amrinder boasts a fine record between the sticks for India with six clean sheets in 13 caps so far. He has been part of the title-winning squads at the 2023 SAFF Championship in Bengaluru, Tri-Nation Series in 2017 (Mumbai) and 2023 (Imphal), and the Intercontinental Cup in 2018 (Mumbai) and 2023 (Bhubaneswar).

## **#13 VISHAL KAITH, GOALKEEPER**

A talented goalkeeper from Himachal Pradesh, Vishal Kaith was the Golden Glove Winner at the 2022-23 Indian Super League. His journey with the national team began at the 2014 AFC U-19 Championship Qualifiers and continued at the 2018 AFC U-23 Championship Qualifiers. He received his first call-up for the senior team camp by Stephen Constantine for the AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers match against Kyrgyzstan in June 2017. He started in all four games at the 2018 SAFF Championship, keeping two clean sheets against Sri Lanka and Maldives.

He was included in the squad for the 2019 AFC Asian Cup, and has won the 2018 Intercontinental Cup and 2021 SAFF Championship with India.

## **#5 SANDESH JHINGAN, DEFENDER**

A leader of the Indian defence for almost a decade now, Sandesh Jhingan was named the AIFF Player of the Year in 2021 and honoured with the Arjuna Award in 2020. The six-foot-two centre-back isn't just known for his crunching tackles at the back but also his aerial prowess in attack, evidenced by his five goals for the Indian senior team, the first of which came against Turkmenistan at the 2018 FIFA World Cup Qualifiers in Kochi.

Jhingan captained India to the 2017 Tri-Nation win, and has since worn the armband many times in the absence of Sunil Chhetri. He played every minute of the 2019 AFC Asian Cup in the UAE, and was immense at the back in the historic 0-0 away draw against the reigning Asian Champions Qatar in the 2022 FIFA World Cup Qualifiers in Doha.

Arguably, 2023 was his best year yet in the blue of India as he formed a vital part of the Blue Tigers' triple crown at the Tri-Nation Series, Intercontinental Cup and the SAFF Championship, which included a run of eight straight clean sheets.

## **#6 AKASH MISHRA, DEFENDER**

The 2023 AIFF Emerging Player of the Year, Akash Mishra's rise at the left-back position has been phenomenal. He represented India U18 and U23 before donning the senior shirt for the first time in a friendly against Oman in March 2021. A pacy full-back who relishes overlapping runs, Mishra was influential in the 2023 AFC Asian Cup qualifying campaign in Kolkata. He cemented his position in the India squad in 2023, helping the Blue Tigers win the Tri-Nation Series, the Intercontinental Cup and the SAFF Championship.

## **#7 ANIRUDH THAPA, MIDFIELDER**

A classy midfielder from Dehradun, Uttarakhand, Anirudh Thapa has been one of India's lynchpin in the middle of the park since his debut with the national team at just 19 years of age. He first shone to limelight in the 2018 Intercontinental Cup in Mumbai, delivering two assists as India coasted to the title.

Thapa's first international goal could not have come at a bigger stage than the 2019 Asian Cup win over Thailand, a delicate dink over the goalkeeper to push India towards their first win in 55 years in the continental showpiece event. He was on target against Thailand again in June 2019 as India won bronze in the 2019 King's Cup. Thapa is the only player to win the AIFF Emerging Player of the Year award twice, doing so in 2017 and 2020. With the Indian senior team, Thapa has won the SAFF Championship (2021, 2023), the Tri-Nation Series (2017, 2023) & the Intercontinental Cup (2018, 2023).

## **#11 SUNIL CHHETRI, FORWARD**

Sunil Chhetri simply does not need an introduction. The 39-year-old is not just India's all-time top-scorer, but one of the greatest international goalscorers in the history of the sport. 93 goals in 145 appearances for India - there's a miniscule chance of anyone even coming closer to those numbers.

But to articulate Chhetri's success in just numbers would be gravely disrespectful. The captain, the leader and the legend. These three words convey more about his stature than any numbers will ever do. One of India's greatest sportsmen, he was awarded the Padma Shri, the country's fourth-highest civilian award, in 2019 and became the first footballer to win the Khel Ratna Award in 2021.

Chhetri has lifted 11 trophies with India - the AFC Challenge Cup in 2008, where he scored his first international hat-trick in the final against Tajikistan in Delhi to break India's 27-year absence from the AFC Asian Cup, the SAFF Championship in 2011, 2015, 2021 and 2023, in which he is the tournament's top-scorer with 23 goals, the Nehru Cup in 2007, 2009 and 2012, the Intercontinental Cup in 2018 and 2023, and the Tri-Nation Series in 2023.

Individually, Chhetri has been named the AIFF Player of the Year seven times, winning the first one in 2007 at just 23 years of age, and is still going strong at 38, when he won his most recent one in 2022. Chhetri is India's top scorer at the AFC Asian Cup with four goals (two each at Qatar 2011 and UAE 2019), and will become the first-ever Indian to feature in three Asian Cups at Qatar 2023.

## **#17 LALLIANZUALA CHHANGTE, MIDFIELDER**

Hardly any player has broken onto the international scene with India as Lallianzuala Chhangte. When an 18-year old struck two amazing goals against Nepal at the 2015 SAFF Championship in Thiruvananthapuram, the entire nation was left awestruck. Fast forward to 2024, Chhangte is now one of India's finest players, indispensable in the national team and a man resurrected.

In and out of the Indian team through the years battling through injuries and inconsistencies, Chhangte is now all geared up to finally debut in a major tournament, the 2023 AFC Asian Cup. He was named the AIFF Player of the Year in 2023, and was crucial in India's triple crown of the Tri-Nation Series, the Intercontinental Cup and the SAFF Championship. An incredibly fast player with terrific dribbling skills and clinical finishing, Chhangte is a complete package on the wings.

## **#21 NIKHIL POOJARY, DEFENDER**

Starting off his career as a winger, Nikhil Poojary has now cemented his place in the national team at right-back. Returning to the senior side after a gap of almost four years ahead of the Intercontinental Cup in June 2023, the Mangaluru-born Poojary became an instant hit.

He made his debut in the Tri-Nation Series in 2017, also winning his first silverware with the national team. His first goal came against Maldives at the 2018 SAFF Championship in Bangladesh.

An elegant backheel nutmeg which set up India's opening goal against Lebanon in the 2023 Intercontinental Cup final against Bhubaneswar made Poojary a fan favourite across the country. He played every match of the 2023 SAFF Championship in Bengaluru, helping India win their ninth crown.

## **#20 PRITAM KOTAL, DEFENDER**

Born in Uttarpara, West Bengal, Pritam Kotal is a versatile defender capable of operating at right-back or centre-back. His senior international career started in 2015 in the FIFA World Cup Qualifiers against Nepal in Guwahati, and he reached 50 caps during the 2023 SAFF Championship in Bengaluru.

Prior to that, Kotal had represented the India U19s and U23s and also been part of the 2014 Asian Games in Incheon, South Korean. He was named the AIFF Emerging Player of the Year in 2015.

Kotal played every minute of the 2015 SAFF Championship triumph in Thiruvananthapuram, and was an integral part of the qualifying campaign for the 2019 AFC Asian Cup. He started in all three matches at the final tournament as a right-back. With the Indian team, Kotal has won the SAFF Championship in 2015, 2021 and 2023, the Tri-Nation Series in 2017 and 2023, and the Intercontinental Cup in 2018 and 2023.

## **#2 RAHUL BHEKE, DEFENDER**

Mumbai-born Rahul Bheke brings plenty of experience and versatility to the Indian defence. Making his international debut against Curacao in the King's Cup held in Thailand in 2019, Bheke has since shone at both right-back and centre-back positions.

One of his mighty performances came in September 2019 at the home of reigning Asian Champions Qatar in a 0-0 draw at the FIFA World Cup Qualifiers. Bheke played every minute at the 2021 SAFF Championship, where India conceded only twice in five matches en route to winning the title in Maldives.

His first international goal came against Bahrain in a friendly in March 2022. After being sidelined for most of 2023, he bounced back with a solid showing in India's crucial 1-0 win over Kuwait in their opening match of the 2026 FIFA World Cup Qualifiers.

### **#3 SUBHASISH BOSE, DEFENDER**

A robust left-back from Kolkata, Subhasish Bose made his senior India debut as a first-choice player at the 2018 Intercontinental Cup in Mumbai, where India beat Kenya in the final.

The 23-year old was entrusted with the captain's armband at the 2018 SAFF Championship in Bangladesh in the absence of several stalwarts, and rapidly made his name as a starting eleven member of Stephen Constantine's squad in the build-up to the 2019 AFC Asian Cup, and played every minute at the final tournament in the UAE.

Bose has also displayed his versatility and featured as a centre-back when called upon, notably doing so during the 2022 FIFA World Cup Qualifiers in Qatar and the 2021 SAFF Championship in Maldives. He was one of the penalty scorers at the 2023 SAFF Championship Final shootout against Kuwait in Bengaluru as India lifted their ninth title.

### **#9 MANVIR SINGH, FORWARD**

A tall and strong striker, Manvir Singh is no stranger to scoring on the big stage. Left foot, right foot, header, the man from Punjab can do it all.

His first international call-up came in 2017 for the Tri-Nation Series in Mumbai, as he won his first trophy with India. In a youthful Blue Tigers squad, Manvir led the attack at the 2018 SAFF Championship in Bangladesh, scoring three goals, including a brace against Pakistan.

He also shone brightly in the 2021 SAFF Championship in Maldives, scoring one and assisting another against the hosts to book India's place in the final. The 188 cm tall forward also found the net against Hong Kong in the 2023 AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers in Kolkata.

Injury concerns kept him out of action for most of 2023, but he marked his return to the national team in November with a bang - scoring the only goal in the opening match of the FIFA World Cup Qualifiers against Kuwait, a stunning left-footed finish.

### **#14 RAHUL KP, MIDFIELDER**

A diminutive young attacker, Rahul KP can operate in a variety of positions up front. Hailing from Thrissur, Kerala, he was part of India's FIFA U17 World Cup squad in 2017, and also represented the U20s and U23s subsequently. Known for his explosive pace and dribbling skills, Rahul made his senior India debut against Singapore at the Hung Tinh Friendly Tournament in Vietnam in September 2022. Rahul's most notable moment in the national shirt was a stunning right-footed finish from a near-zero angle against hosts China at the Asian Games in September 2023.

## **#4 LALCHUNGNUNGA, DEFENDER**

A solid defender from Aizawl, Mizoram, Lalchungnunga made his breakthrough into the national team setup in 2023. The no-nonsense centre-back earned his first call-up in September for the King's Cup in Thailand, but had to wait for his debut, which came in November against Qatar in the FIFA World Cup Qualifiers in Bhubaneswar.

Prior to this, Lalchungnunga represented India at the Asian Games in Hangzhou in September 2023, where he played two matches against China and Bangladesh.

## **#24 VIKRAM PARTAP SINGH, FORWARD**

The AIFF Emerging Player of the Year in 2022, Vikram Partap Singh is yet to make his senior international debut, but has been a long-time servant of the Indian team at the youth level.

The young forward from Chandigarh played an instrumental role in India's title wins at the 2017 SAFF U15 Championship, 2019 OFC U18 Youth Development Tournament and the 2019 SAFF U18 Championship. Vikram scored the lone goal at the AFC U16 Championship in Malaysia in 2018 as India reached the quarter-finals. He also found the net at the AFC U23 Asian Cup Qualifiers in 2021 in the UAE.

Vikram was first called up by Igor Stimac to the senior team for the Hung Tinh Friendly Tournament in Vietnam in September 2022, and is part of the 26-man squad for the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023.

## **#10 BRANDON FERNANDES, MIDFIELDER**

A master of assists, Brandon Fernandes made his senior international debut in Igor Stimac's first match in-charge, against Curacao at the 2019 King's Cup in Thailand.

Renowned as a set-piece specialist, Brandon first donned the India blue against Turkmenistan in 2011 in the AFC U19 Championship Qualifiers, where he also opened the scoring. The creative midfielder registered three assists in the 2022 FIFA World Cup Qualifiers.

With the Blue Tigers, Brandon has lifted two trophies - the 2021 SAFF Championship and the 2023 Tri-Nation Series.

## **#26 ISHAN PANDITA, FORWARD**

Delhi-born Ishan Pandita has made his name as an impact substitute over the past couple of years. He made his senior India debut against Oman in a friendly match in March 2021, and scored his first international goal in June 2022 against Hong Kong in a 4-0 win in the 2023 AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers, a composed finish in the Kolkata rain.

A tall and physically strong striker, Pandita is known for his clinical finishing, aerial prowess and quick instincts in the attacking box.

## **#25 DEEPAK TANGRI, MIDFIELDER**

Hailing from Punjab, Deepak Tangri is another multi-faceted player in the Blue Tigers' ranks, and can play as a defensive midfielder and a centre-back. Tangri has represented India at the U18 and U20 level, and was part of the U23 squad which narrowly missed out on qualifying for the AFC U23 Asian Cup in 2021. He earned his first senior international call-up by Igor Stimac ahead of the prestigious AFC Asian Cup 2023 in Qatar.

## **#19 LALENGMAWIA RALTE, MIDFIELDER**

Better known as Apuia, Lalengmawia's has risen leaps and bounds over the last few years. From being part of India's FIFA U17 World Cup squad in 2017, the midfielder has grown into a highly mature figure now forming an important part of the senior team.

Known for his excelling game-reading, Lalengmawia made his Blue Tigers debut against Oman in a friendly in March 2021 at the age of 20. The Aizawl-born midfielder played a key role in India's 2021 SAFF Championship triumph in Maldives, and performed exceptionally well in the crucial 1-0 victory over Kuwait in the opening match of the 2026 FIFA World Cup Qualifiers in November 2023.

## **#14 NAOREM MAHESH SINGH, MIDFIELDER**

The year 2023 was the year of Naorem Mahesh Singh. The unpredictable winger got his senior India debut in front of his home crowd in Imphal at the Tri-Nation Series, and has not looked back since.

While his first goal may have been a scrappy one against Nepal in the 2023 SAFF Championship in Bengaluru, two stunning strikes - first against Iraq at the King's Cup in Thailand, and then against hosts Malaysia at the Merdeka Tournament - proved why he is one of the most exciting players to watch in the Blue Tigers squad.

Mahesh has been praised for his fast pace, strong dribbling skills, intelligent passes and crosses, and good decision-making in the final third.

## **#8 SURESH SINGH WANGJAM, MIDFIELDER**

Articulate midfielder Suresh Singh Wangjam has been a pivotal part of the Indian senior team's midfield ever since his debut against Oman in a friendly in March 2021.

An experienced player at the youth level, where he represented India at the 2017 FIFA U17 World Cup, Suresh has transitioned smoothly into the senior setup, and played a crucial role in the 2021 SAFF Championship triumph in Maldives, scoring his first-ever India goal in the final against Nepal. He was also named the AIFF Emerging Player of the Year in 2021. In 2023, Suresh was part of the Blue Tigers squad which won the Tri-Nation Series in his home soil of Manipur.

## **#15 UDANTA SINGH, MIDFIELDER**

Nicknamed the 'Flash' for his bombing runs down the right flank, Udanta Singh made his senior India debut at just 19 years of age in a FIFA World Cup Qualifier against Iran in 2016.

The Manipur-born winger's first goal came in the 5-0 rout of Chinese Taipei in the 2018 Intercontinental Cup in Mumbai, but perhaps his greatest moment in the India shirt was his terrific assist for Sunil Chhetri against Thailand in the 2019 AFC Asian Cup. Setting up the skipper with a low cross from the right in classic Udanta style, it was a goal which earned India's first win at the continental stage in 55 years.

As part of the Indian squad, Udanta has won the SAFF Championship in 2021 and 2023, and the Intercontinental Cup in 2018 and 2023.

## #18 SAHAL ABDUL SAMAD MIDFIELDER

A magician with the ball, and that's putting it simply. Kerala's very own Sahal Abdul Samad runs the show in the middle of the park, oozing confidence with every touch. Debuting against Curacao in the 2019 King's Cup, his career with the national team can be highlighted with some sensational moments.

Be it a stunning solo goal in the 2021 SAFF Championship Final against Nepal or the last-minute winner over Afghanistan in the Asian Cup Qualifiers in front of a packed Kolkata crowd in June 2022, Sahal has proven why he could be the x-factor in every game he plays.

The year 2023 was his most consistent one for the Blue Tigers. It was with his goal inside two minutes against Mongolia in the Intercontinental Cup which began India's unbeaten nine-match run, concluding in the SAFF Championship Final triumph in Bengaluru, where he proved clutch again with an assist.

In the blue of India, Sahal has been honoured with the SAFF Championship in 2021 and 2023, and the Intercontinental Cup in 2023. In 2019, he was named the AIFF Emerging Player of Year.

## #22 MEHTAB SINGH DEFENDER

A centre-back from Punjab, Mehtab Singh broke into the international scene in 2023, debuting in the Tri-Nation Series against Myanmar in Imphal. Part of India's silverware-laden run with triumphs in the Intercontinental Cup in Bhubaneswar and the SAFF Championship in Bengaluru, Mehtab, remarkably, did not concede a goal in his first 498 minutes in national colours.

One of the many versatile defenders in the Blue Tigers squad, Mehtab is also efficient as a right-back.

## #12 LISTON COLACO MIDFIELDER

A talented attacker from Goa, Liston Colaco is known for his sharp dribbling skills and shooting ability. He made his senior India debut in a friendly against the UAE in March 2021. Liston has been deployed as a striker, winger and an attacking midfielder during his brief time with the national team. His international accolades include the SAFF Championship in 2021 and 2023, and the Intercontinental Cup in 2023.





**AFC ASIAN CUP SPECIAL**

# Grand stage, robust antagonists: Blue Tigers await Asian heist

*A week into their training, the Blue Tigers are now shaping up well for the upcoming AFC Asian Cup campaign*

**SOU MO GHOSH**

Just a couple of months ago, the India Senior Men's Team went to Kuwait expecting a hostile reception after two feisty matches against Al Azraq in the SAFF Championship. However, what they saw in their first match of the FIFA World Cup 2026 Qualifiers was something that amazed not only the Indian players on the pitch but also the worldwide fans watching on television.

Tens of thousands of Indian fans gathered at the Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium to witness the Blue Tigers begin their campaign with a 1-0 victory over their hosts.

History, more often than not, repeats itself, or so they say. In this case, yesterday came back just two months later when the Blue Tigers landed at the Hamad International Airport in Doha, Qatar, for their preparatory camp ahead of the AFC Asian Cup 2023.

The arrivals gate of the airport was swamped with fans, most of them expats who had come to show their love and support for the national team stars, who played more than their part in energising the spirit of players jaded after a long day of travel.

India head coach Igor Stimac exclaimed about the key role that the fans have played. He said, “We love them! We know how much they expect from us, and we will do our very best to make them happy here in Doha. Hopefully, we can give them some happy moments.”

The rapturous welcome done, it was time for the Blue Tigers to get straight down to business as they commenced their pre-Asian Cup training camp in the Qatar capital. Having trained for over a week in Qatar, India are now solely focussed on their first match of Group B against the mighty former champions Australia (January 13).

It's a packed schedule for the Indian football team, who head straight to the gym after breakfast, followed by a meditation session to bring down the adrenaline levels. A hearty lunch, followed by a couple of hours of rest, precedes the training sessions, where the lads slog it out for two and a half hours at the training ground.

“We wanted to come out here early, settle down properly, and not waste time travelling later. We started our work together, planned our schedule with four sessions in two days, followed by rest on the third day,” said Stimac.

One of the key areas that the coaching staff is currently working on away from the pitch is the confidence levels of the players ahead of such crucial matches.

“We have many players from Mohun Bagan SG, who have had poor results recently. So, we needed to bring the confidence back into these players who had low self-esteem when they joined us,” said Stimac. “But I’m also happy with how some of our players performed with their clubs, like Sahal Abdul Samad, who has been assisting a lot, and Sandesh Jhingon, who has stabilised FC Goa’s defence.”

### **DÉJÀ VU FROM A NOT-SO-DISTANT PAST**

An Asian Cup in Doha, with India facing Australia in their opening match of the competition seems all too familiar. It just so happens that the Blue Tigers began their 2011 Asian Cup campaign in the same manner in Doha.





This time as well, India are set to face the Socceroos in their first match, as they have been drawn in Group B alongside the Aussies (January 13), Uzbekistan (January 18), and Syria (January 23). Only two people remain in the current Blue Tigers side from the outfit that faced Australia 12 years ago – striker Sunil Chhetri and goalkeeper Gurpreet Singh Sandhu.

One thing that has changed, however, is the amount of knowledge available on the opposition. “We didn’t have much knowledge of the Australian back in 2011. Not when compared to the minute details we have now,” said captain Sunil Chhetri. “We’ve watched their friendlies against Palestine (1-0) and Bahrain (2-0), so we know about the challenges we are facing ahead.

“I must admit, however, that with such familiarity, the fear factor goes out of the window,” he said.

Goalkeeper Gurpreet is relishing the opportunity to play one of the top sides in Asia: “It’s not an easy group to be in, but it’s where we should aim to be. Only when you face challenges and discomforts, do you know where you stand. Australia are a World Cup side, and Uzbekistan and Syria have also done quite well. But we should not think too low of ourselves. We’re also here on merit, and we will do our best to make the most of it.”

At the end of the day, belief could make all the difference for everyone. “We need to believe in the work you do, believe in your group, and the sky’s the limit for this batch. We must stay humble, keep improving, and hopefully do something special,” said Sandesh Jhingan.

# AUSTRALIA



**TEAM NICKNAME: SOCCEROOS | FIFA RANKING: 25**

**AFC ASIAN CUP RECORD (QUARTER-FINALS AND BEYOND):** 2007: QUARTER-FINALS; 2011: RUNNERS-UP; 2015: CHAMPIONS; 2019: QUARTER-FINALS

**HEAD COACH:** GRAHAM ARNOLD (AUSTRALIA)

**HEAD-TO-HEAD RECORD**

3 MATCHES: INDIA WON 2: LOST 1: GOALS SCORED 11: GOALS CONCEDED 5

## MATHEW RYAN, GOALKEEPER

Like Indian skipper Sunil Chhetri, his Australian counterpart, Mathew Ryan, will play his third Asian Cup final rounds in Doha. Having also played in three World Cups, the seasoned goalkeeper recently underwent surgery for a fractured cheekbone and is doing his best to regain the highest level of fitness. Yet, the much-travelled Ryan, who currently plays in the Dutch league for AZ Alkmaar, is there in Doha as the leading figure in the upcoming campaign.

## HARRY SOUTTAR, DEFENDER

Often described as an “unbelievable” defender, the 25-year-old Leicester City centre-back played for Scotland at the youth level before opting to play for Australia in the seniors at the age of 20. A highly dependable player, he made his senior debut against Nepal and also played in the Olympics. However, Souttar is in Doha gaining little game time this season in the league under Leicester City coach Enzo Maresca.

## RILEY MCGREE, MIDFIELDER

A versatile attacking midfielder with a keen sense of scoring, McGree’s selection is a huge boost for Australia. He sustained a foot injury while playing for Middlesbrough in early October last year and could not play a few of the crucial friendly matches. Despite a few disciplinary issues, McGree has been an exceptional player for the National Team since his debut at the U17 stage, which was evident in the Qatar World Cup.

# UZBEKISTAN



**TEAM NICKNAME: WHITE WOLVES | FIFA RANKING: 68**

**AFC ASIAN CUP RECORD (QUARTER-FINALS AND BEYOND):** 2004: QUARTER-FINALS; 2007: QUARTER-FINALS; 2011: FOURTH PLACE; 2015: QUARTER-FINALS

**HEAD COACH: SRECKO KATANEC (SLOVENIA)**

**HEAD-TO-HEAD RECORD**

8 MATCHES: INDIA WON 1: LOST 5: DRAWN 1: GOALS SCORED: 6: GOALS CONCEDED 14

## IGOR VLADIMIROVICH SERGEYEV, FORWARD

Currently, with PG Pathum United at the club level, Sergeyev is a natural striker with power and precision who scored several key goals for his National Team. An automatic choice of almost every National Coach, the former Pakhtakor Tashkent star has appeared for his country 69 times so far and is expected to be one of the mainstays of the team. He has been a rage in domestic football for his glamorous flair on the pitch.

## ABBOSBEK FAYZULLAEV, MIDFIELDER

The 20-year-old burst onto the scene like a raging fire that saw him finding a berth in the Senior National Team soon after making his mark for the Uzbekistan U20 and U23 sides. In the AFC U20 Asian Cup, Fayzullaev bagged the Most Valuable Player award with an impressive display. In Doha, the youngster, who plays for CSKA Moscow, could play a key role in Uzbekistan's campaign.

## OSTON URUNOV, MIDFIELDER

Indian fans following Mumbai City FC got a taste of Oston Urunov's impact in the midfield for Navbahor FC during the AFC Champions League campaign. Having made his debut for the National Team in 2019, the 23-year-old has become an integral part of Srecko Katanec's squad because of his ability to adapt to the situation during difficult times on the pitch.

# SYRIA



**TEAM NICKNAME: EAGLES OF QASIOUN | FIFA RANKING: 91**

**AFC ASIAN CUP RECORD (QUARTER-FINALS AND BEYOND): APPEARED IN SIX EDITIONS, BUT WERE ELIMINATED IN THE GROUP STAGE**

**HEAD COACH: HECTOR CUPER (ARGENTINA)**

**HEAD-TO-HEAD RECORD**

**6 MATCHES: INDIA WON 2: LOST 2: DRAWN 1: GOALS SCORED: 7: GOALS CONCEDED 7**

## OMAR KHRIBIN, FORWARD

The 29-year-old is a celebrity back in his country and one of the finest players to be seen in Doha during the Asian Cup. The first Syrian footballer to win the Asian Footballer of the Year award, Khirbin is skillful and possesses all the weapons to catch his rivals on the wrong foot. Having already scored 21 goals in 54 appearances for the National Team, he could well be the man to watch out for in the Indian defence.

## IBRAHIM ALMA, GOALKEEPER

A hugely reliable goalkeeper, the Syrian star is one of the most experienced players in this edition of the Asian Cup in Doha. The 32-year-old made his debut for the National Team in 2012 and has since guarded the citadel on 84 occasions. He is no stranger to Indian football, as the Blue Tigers have often played against Syria in the recent past, with Alma always there under the goal.

## AMRO JENIAT, DEFENDER

One of Syria's most trustworthy defenders, Jeniat, has been a part of the National Team for nearly 10 years now and has so far appeared in 48 matches. He plays for Al-Karamah in club football and this would be his second appearance in the Asian Cup after 2019.



AFC ASIAN CUP SPECIAL

# We need to be clinical against superior opponents, says Igor Stimac

*Chances may be scarce, but you've got to take each one of them, is what the Croat demands from his motivated squad*

## **SOUMO GHOSH**

Landing on Saturday evening, India became the first of the 23 visiting teams to arrive in Qatar for the AFC Asian Cup 2023. With less than two weeks until the Blue Tigers' first game against Australia, head coach Igor Stimac and his boys have no time to waste.

Ahead of the team's first training session on New Year's Eve, Stimac spoke to the media in a pre-tournament press conference from the team hotel in Doha. "We wanted to come here early, settle down properly, and not waste time travelling later. We start our work together today. We've planned our schedule with four sessions in two days, rest on the third day, and so on. On 7th January, we will have a training game among us."

The batch of 26 players come to Doha on the back of a demanding domestic season, which has also seen some key names like Anwar Ali, Jeakson Singh Thounaojam, Ashique Kuruniyan and Rohit Kumar miss out on the Asian Cup due to injuries. Expanding more on how that will shape up the team, Stimac said, "Things changed dramatically for us with injuries in the last few months. We are not as good as we could be at the moment. We have lost physicality and passing ability. But we have no time to think about that and need to focus on those who we have here."



"We need good height and strong players to defend against set pieces and crosses as all our opponents pose a real threat in that sense. There's no option of experimenting and bringing new faces in at this point in time. We have players who have been with us in the past. Never mind the fact that for 17 of the 26 players, it's their first time being on a big stage like this. It will be a great experience for them," the Croatian added.

Skipper Sunil Chhetri is set to partake in his third Asian Cup campaign. The 39-year-old is India's top-scorer at the tournament, having netted twice each in 2011 (also in Qatar) and 2019. Apart from Chhetri, goalkeepers Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, Amrinder Singh and Vishal Kaith, defenders Sandesh Jhingan, Pritam Kotal and Subhasish Bose, and midfielders Udanta Singh and Anirudh Thapa make up the nine players who have been part of a past Asian Cup squad.

"The first part we need to work on is bringing the focus back to the national team and raising our fitness levels. We will then see where we stand and decide on our approach against Australia. We have many players from Mohun Bagan, who have had poor results recently. So we need to bring the confidence back in the players who have low self-esteem. But I'm also happy with how some of our players have performed with their clubs, like Sahal (Abdul Samad), who has been assisting a lot and Sandesh (Jhingan), who has stabilised FC Goa's defence," said Stimac.

Mental development aside, Stimac also has a clear idea of what needs to be done on the pitch and stressed the aspects of the game which need redressal ahead of the three big games. Former England international Trevor Sinclair has joined Stimac's staff as an assistant coach, which could prove fruitful considering the short preparation time.

"We are rank outsiders in our group. What can I say about Australia, they are one of the favourites here. Uzbekistan are the dark horses with some excellent recent results. We know that we will not have much ball possession and will not get many chances to come near their goal. But whatever we get, we need to be clinical and have a clear idea.

"But first, we need to work on not conceding from set pieces, and then on scoring them. It's great to have Trevor with us. He has great experience. He has been part of player development programs and academies which have produced great players. We needed a guy like him to help us in a short time," shared Stimac.

All in all, as India gear up for a second straight Asian Cup campaign for the first time, Stimac has only one message for his boys - enjoy yourselves. A tournament like this comes only once every four years, and you've got to make the most out of it.

"I want our boys to enjoy the tournament, get great experience, keep their shape tight, and not think about the results. I'm not putting any pressure on players. We will go out and fight."





AFC ASIAN CUP SPECIAL

# Father figure Sunil Chhetri is now a calmer and happier No 11

*Now literally a father figure, Sunil Chhetri opens up on how becoming a parent has been a life-changer*

**SOUMO GHOSH**

June 12, 2005, was when a certain 20-year-old striker stepped on to the pitch in Quetta, Pakistan, to clock his first international game for the Blue Tigers.

Nineteen years, 145 international matches, and 93 goals later, a 39-year-old Sunil Chhetri is seen going through a daily transformation, as he, along with the Blue Tigers, prepare for the upcoming AFC Asian Cup 2023, in Doha, Qatar. For it is when the India captain takes to the pitch, that he transfigures himself into an 18-year-old playing for the love of the beautiful game.

"That's the way I want to play, whatever time I have left with the National Team," said a smiling Chhetri to [the-aiff.com](https://www.aiff.com). "I had a chat with my wife about the Asian Cup and the World Cup Qualifiers against Afghanistan later, and it seemed to her that I was taking too much pressure with these matches.

"She told me to just go out there and enjoy. You start playing football because you love it. When we used to play the small sided games as kids, it was for the enjoyment of the game. But when you become pro, you get bogged down by all the noise and expectations, and the wins and the losses. Sometimes we tend to forget why we started it all. The essence of football is lost," he said.



“It’s all about the mindset of going out there and enjoying it. Of course, you still have to maintain discipline, and do all the things that you have to do around football, you can’t forget your duties, but at the end of the day, once you go out there, you should enjoy what you’re doing,” said Chhetri.

It’s been just over a week that the Blue Tigers arrived in Doha ahead of the Asian Cup, where they have been drawn in Group B, alongside Australia (January 13), Uzbekistan (January 18), and Syria (January 23).

Chhetri is now on the brink of playing his third AFC Asian Cup, the other two editions coming in 2011 and 2019, and the India captain has a special feeling for the tournament.

“It’s a massive tournament for us, purely because we get to rub shoulders with the best in Asia. Teams like Australia and Uzbekistan are probably of the World Cup level, so you can test yourself against them,” he said.

“What is sure is that we have improved in the last seven-eight years. but then you play them and you see how far you are, and how the tempo of the game is. It’s just important to play your best, and generally it’s a good marker for the nation to test where we are.

“So far, we’ve worked pretty hard over the last week, a lot of us got better in terms of fitness, and some have recovered from the little niggles they were carrying. Everyone seems focussed, which has to be a given at this stage. But one thing is that the camaraderie between the boys is absolutely amazing,” he said.

The 2023 edition of the AFC Asian Cup is much akin to the 2011 edition, where India began their campaign against Australia (0-4). However, Chhetri feels that the Blue Tigers are better prepared now.

“We did not have much knowledge of the Australian team back then. Not when compared to the minute details we have now. We’ve watched their friendlies against Palestine and Bahrain, we know which leagues their players are in, and individual clips on them,” explained Chhetri. “With this familiarity, the fear factor goes out. I must admit, of course, that they are extremely good. They’re a couple of levels above than what we play in the ISL, but at least we know what we’re up against.”

They key, believes the India captain, is not to ponder too far ahead. “We will take it one game at a time and try to give a good account of ourselves. We will prepare as much as possible, gather as much knowledge as we possibly can, and then act according to that,” he said.

### **A ‘HAPPIER’ NO. 11**

While Chhetri has scored four goals in his six matches at the AFC Asian Cup, the 2023 edition will be an altogether different one for him. Not only is the India no. 11 older and wiser, but he also became a father last year.

That many not have changed his perspective on football, but it certainly has changed his outlook on life.

“I’m so much happier and calmer now. It’s like I’ve had a different responsibility and purpose ever since I became a father, it’s something that I can’t explain,” he said. “I’m so fortunate that my wife is doing all the heavy lifting so I can come here and train, play, and get my eight hours of sleep,” said the Blue Tigers captain.

“A lot of people who became fathers before I did, had told me about it, but I never understood it back then. But I am certainly much calmer, much cleaner and much happier in life now.”





**AFC ASIAN CUP SPECIAL**

## Hardworking, humble Blue Tigers 'impress' newly-appointed assistant coach Trevor Sinclair

*Former England international Trevor Sinclair has joined Igor Stimac's coaching staff ahead of the all-important AFC Asian Cup*

### **SOU MO GHOSH**

The Blue Tigers have put their grand reception in Doha behind them, and have now begun training for the upcoming AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023. While there are plenty of familiar faces around, a few are yet to make their senior international debut.

The coaching team, which has remained the same over the last year, has, however, had a new edition – a certain Trevor Sinclair, a former England international and World Cupper (2002).

The 50-year-old has joined the National Team as an assistant coach along with Mahesh Gawali, and attended the Blue Tigers' training session for the first time on New Year's Eve. "It's been a hectic few days with all the travel, but we've gotten things underway with a gym and a training session, and frankly, I'm impressed," Sinclair said to [the-aiff.com](https://www.the-aiff.com). "It's a set of hardworking, humble, enthusiastic, and talented group of lads. They have a very good relationship with (head coach) Igor (Stimac) and the staff, and they want to try and do their best for the country," he said.



A speedy winger in the Premier League with clubs like Manchester City and West Ham back in his days, Sinclair specialises in training set-pieces, which he believes, could give any team the advantage at various times during a match.

“I was a forward, a creative player, so I know very well that when you enter the final third, it’s not always about things that are in the coaching books. It’s what you see in the players and work situations to your advantage,” said Sinclair.

“We all know how statistically important set-pieces are in any football match. It’s not just for the corners and free-kicks, but also simple things like throw-ins that, if worked on, can help you,” he said. “If you are on the back foot, and you can keep possession from a throw-in, it’s as simple as that. It’s all about those little details, and making them work to eventually put the ball into dangerous positions.”

While Sinclair has not worked with Indian footballers before, he has shared some understanding of the country, its culture, and more importantly how the beautiful game is growing in it.

“I’ve got an ex-teammate (Robbie Fowler), who had coached in India before and worked for Indian broadcasters. So, I understood that there was a growing appetite for the game in India over the last decade,” he said. “Of course, we all know about Sunil (Chhetri), and the huge mark he’s made in the world of football. It’s not just what he does on the pitch, but also how he conducts himself off it.”

Having coached mostly in the UK, Sinclair feels that simplicity is the key for India, especially before facing opponents like Australia (January 13), Uzbekistan (January 18), and Syria (January 23).

“When Igor sent me the videos of the team before coming here, I could see the considerable work that’s gone into this side. It’s a nuance, not quite obvious to all people,” said Sinclair. “I was impressed with how Igor has built this team. He’s had the maturity to get the boys to do the basics well and showcase them in the match situations.”

Facing an Australian side placed 25th in the FIFA World Rankings could be a daunting task for India (102), but the 50-year-old is relishing the challenge ahead.

“We are the underdogs, but I like the challenge that comes with that status. I myself have come through from the fourth tier of English football, so I know it’s all about hard work and creating a culture amongst the players so that they can supersede the expectations and create more belief in the group,” he said. “We’ve got to fight for the shirt.”





AFC ASIAN CUP SPECIAL

# Miracle Worker Milutinovic comes calling in Blue Tigers' training

*The legendary Serbian coach, who coached five different teams in five consecutive FIFA World Cups, dropped by in the India training in Doha*

**SOU MO GHOSH**

The Blue Tigers began 2024 with a rather pleasant surprise on New Year's day, when they were visited by a behemoth of the footballing world.

Former coach Bora Milutinovic from Serbia may be well past his glory days, but what glorious days they have been. To coach five teams like Mexico (1986), Costa Rica (1990), United States of America (1994), Nigeria (1998), and China (2002) to five consecutive FIFA World Cups is no mean feat, and the man has done and seen it all.

Born in Yugoslavia, during the latter stages of World War II, Milutinovic commands massive respect from the footballing community in the Balkans, and was immediately greeted by India head coach Igor Stimac, along with fitness coach Luka Radman and goalkeeping coach Frano Srdarev.

Milutinovic spoke at length to the India players ahead of their training sessions, sharing many inspiring words, before having a few candid words with the coaching staff.

Goalkeeper Gurpreet Singh Sandhu was in awe of the 79-year-old. "It was an honour to meet a big personality like him and listen to his words. The first thing he reminded us of the most important thing in football," said Gurpreet. "He asked us, 'What is the most important action in a game'? Then he went on to answer his own question: 'It is the next action'. That really struck deep," he said. "If you score, your next action is to defend; if you concede, your next action is to attack. It was an honour to listen to his words of wisdom."

Defender Sandesh Jhingan marvelled at the simplicity and humility of someone who has achieved so much. "The first thing he told us was that his English was not that great, and then he proceeded to speak to us in perfect English," smiled Jhingan.

"He used certain words and phrases that made a big impact on me. He told us about the importance of having a dream and following it," he said. "I didn't think much about it at that moment because we were about to start training, but later when I came back to the hotel to reflect on the whole thing, it really got me thinking. Speaking to him was inspiring indeed."





AFC ASIAN CUP SPECIAL

# Three Wise Men dream of displaying the right intent in Doha

*Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, Sandesh Jhingan and Subhasish Bose know exactly what to expect from a stage as big as the AFC Asian Cup*

**SOU MO GHOSH**

India are all set to participate in the AFC Asian Cup for the fifth time in history, once the ball gets rolling in Doha, Qatar, on January 13, the previous editions being in 1964, 1984, 2011, and 2019.

While the first edition remains India's most successful stint at the Asian Cup after they finished runners-up behind Israel (it was a round-robin tournament), the Blue Tigers have never made it past the group stage after that.

Many of the current batch of players, however, have the unique experience of playing in multiple editions of the Asian Cup, something that India were not privy to previously. As many as eight players in the current squad have experienced the magic of the Asian Cup final rounds before, while two players at opposite ends of the pitch have been a part of the continental showpiece on three occasions – Gurpreet Singh Sandhu and Sunil Chhetri.

While the 2011 edition was remembered for former India captain Subrata Paul's exceptional performance between the sticks against a strong Australia side, an 18-year-old Gurpreet was sitting on the sidelines, soaking it all in.

“The experience of sharing the dressing room with the likes of Subrata Paul, Bhaichung Bhutia, Renedy Singh, and all these legends and seeing them at the height of their careers was an absolute joy. I used to enjoy myself in training a lot,” Gurpreet said to [the-aiff.com](http://the-aiff.com).

“I would get pushed around a lot as a young, skinny, lanky keeper. But I was just like a sponge, learning on and off the pitch. Now as one of the senior members of this team, I just share whatever knowledge I have acquired in these years.”

The 31-year-old believes that the transition of the Indian team began after the 2011 Asian Cup, which has now resulted in a bunch of experienced players in the 2023 edition.

“There’s been a big transition over the years. A lot of the players in 2011 were on the verge of ending their careers, so we had fresh players come in after that,” he said. “Now we are at a stage where many of the boys have already played an Asian Cup before – Sandesh (Jhingan), Subha (Subhasish Bose), and Anirudh Thapa were all part of the Asian Cup last time and will be playing their second edition this time around.

“Over the years, this has grown to be an experienced and educated lot in terms of footballing aptitude, albeit a hungrier side,” said India’s No. 1 custodian.

For the Blue Tigers goalkeeper, turning up with the right intent could be all it takes. “I’ve learnt over the years that one needs to show the right intent that we have. As a player, I did not know how important it could be to show intent in the last two Asian Cups. In 2011, I was just 18 and was lucky to even be in the side, and in 2019, I was playing at that stage for the first time, but I think I have the correct experience now to come with that intent and have it rub off on the others,” he said.



Centreback Sandesh Jhingan has been a key fixture at the heart of the Indian defence for the better part of a decade now. The 30-year-old has played a key role in India's qualification campaign for both the 2019 and 2023 editions. However, the defender feels that the Blue Tigers are at a stage where qualification for the AFC Asian Cup should no longer be something to celebrate.

"When we had all just come into the national team at that time, Gurpreet, Amrinder (Singh), myself, and we all had a dream to see India in the World Cup one day. That may still be a distant dream, but being a regular in the Asian Cup is certainly one step closer to it," said Jhingan. "I feel we are now at a stage where qualification to the Asian Cup should be normal and that we should not celebrate it.

"We should instead be looking forward to making it to the next stage, which is to qualify from the group stage onwards," he said. "For sure, it feels good to play in consecutive Asian Cups, but right now, it's time to work more with more intensity and passion."

The Blue Tigers centreback remembers the 2019 edition of the Asian Cup clearly, when India won the first game against Thailand, before losing against hosts UAE and Bahrain, to be knocked out.



“Everyone talks about the Bahrain game, but I think we should have done better against the UAE. We should have taken our chances against them. This is a stage where the margin for error is very low, and even the smallest of mistakes can really hurt you,” he said.

Fullback Subhasish Bose chimed the same tune as Jhingan and said that the next step for the Blue Tigers is to attempt to make it past the group stage, no matter the challenges.

“We did well in 2019 to win the first game against Thailand but lost the next two games. This time, we have a difficult challenge ahead, but our mentality should be to try and qualify for the knockout round,” he said. “We have certainly improved a lot as a team in the last few years, and now we want to prove it on the pitch.”





AFC ASIAN CUP SPECIAL

# Battle-hardened Nikhil Poojary fights 'inner demons' for Asian Cup opportunity

*Resurrected at right-back, the 28-year-old made an extraordinary return to the national team in 2023, and now, is ready for the big one*

## **SOU MO GHOSH**

It's a tough job to find a spot in the Indian Football Team. Perhaps nobody has had it tougher in recent times than Nikhil Poojary, whose career has been mired by injuries and omissions, just when things looked like they were beginning to get better.

While an ACL injury in 2017 right after his first call-up to the National Team slowed his progress, eventually leading to him not being on the flight to UAE for the AFC Asian Cup 2019, a call-up to the national squad later that year would end unsatisfactorily in Qatar, where he would be substituted off in India's famous stalemate against the hosts in the FIFA World Cup 2022 Qualifier.

Poojary would not resurface in the international arena for another four years, when he was finally called back for the Intercontinental Cup, followed by the SAFF Championship. The winger-turned-fullback, however, has grabbed the opportunity and produced performances that have merited his spot in the 2023 edition of the AFC Asian Cup.

“People just see the international level, but there are so many battles one has to fight, just to be there. You need to go through so many steps to make your comeback,” said Poojary to [the-aiff.com](https://www.the-aiff.com). “You battle injuries, you battle form, you have your battles at your club at the domestic level, and if these were not enough, you have to battle your internal demons as well.”

“I am very thankful to the coaches for showing their trust and support in me,” he said. The 28-year-old has since then been a part of the National Team in the SAFF Championship, King’s Cup, Merdeka Tournament, and the FIFA World Cup Qualifiers. “Last year was very important for me, and for us as a team. We have played so many matches together, won and lost together, we have grown as a team and as a unit,” he said. “Personally, I have really enjoyed this time, and I just want to keep playing at this level for as long as I can.”

The Blue Tigers received a rapturous welcome at the Hamad International Airport in Doha, where hundreds of fans turned up to chant the names of their favourite heroes. For Poojary, the experience at the Doha airport was only second to India’s match against Kuwait.

“The reception we got was absolutely amazing in Doha. I never expected it. Probably the only thing I would rate higher than that was the World Cup Qualifier in Kuwait (November 2023),” said Poojary. “We had had a couple of difficult games against them, and expected to play in front of hostile galleries. But as it turned out, the stadium was filled with Indian fans. I still get goosebumps when I think about it.”

“I hope we get similar experiences in Doha,” beamed Poojary. India have been drawn in Group B of the AFC Asian Cup, where they will face the likes of Australia (January 13), Uzbekistan (January 18), and Syria (January 23). While the group looks relatively tough, Poojary and the boys are not deterred.

“It’s going to be special, especially for those like me, who will make their Asian Cup debuts here. It’s like a mini World Cup for us,” he said. “All the top teams and players from Asia will be here, so it will be a good opportunity for us to test our levels.”





AFC ASIAN CUP SPECIAL

# Subhasish Bose looks for silver lining in Qatar

*Having played every single minute of the 2019 campaign in the UAE, the left-back looks to make his experience count in Qatar*

## **SOUMO GHOSH**

The Blue Tigers squad is ever-evolving, with new players always giving competition to the established ones. The side that played the 2019 edition of the AFC Asian Cup is starkly different from the one currently preparing for the 2023 edition in Doha, Qatar.

However, some like defender Subhasish Bose are on the verge of playing at the continental level for the second consecutive time, which means that the experience they can dole out to the younger lot, could come in handy in crucial situations.

“We had started well in 2019 against Thailand but then lost the next two matches, which eventually knocked us out. We fought, we gave it our all right until the bitter end,” Bose said to [the-aiff.com](https://www.the-aiff.com).

There is, however, a silver lining to all clouds, and for Bose, that came in the form of a second shot at the Asian Cup after the Blue Tigers sealed their spot in the tournament proper after the qualification campaign in 2022, in Kolkata. Armed with the knowledge gained from the last edition, India are ready to have another go. “Yes, we were devastated after in 2019, but as they say, for any sportsperson, it’s important to have the memory of a goldfish in such circumstances,” said Bose. “Every setback is an opportunity to learn, and those of us here today have experienced that, and are helping the younger lot with that knowledge.”

“The good thing is that most of them have already played so many matches for the National Team before the Asian Cup, I think that this will turn out to be a very good opportunity for them to prove their mettle against the very best of Asia,” said Subhasish.

India have been drawn in Group B of the AFC Asian Cup, against Australia (January 13), Uzbekistan (January 18), and Syria (January 23). The 28-year-old feels that the team have shown that they can hold ground against the best in the continent, and it is a matter of turning up with the best intent.

“The Asian Cup is the biggest tournament for us, so we are all stoked to be here. We’ve had a few training sessions here in Doha, and I can say that everyone is putting in their full effort, and it’s going to be the same in the matches as well,” he said. “We will give it our best shot, no matter who the opponents, or what the outcome.”

The Blue Tigers enjoyed a rapturous welcome at the Hamad International Airport in Doha, where they were greeted by the Indians living in Qatar. With the stands expected to be brimming with Indian fans, the Blue Tigers fullback feels thankful.

“We are fortunate to play for India. No matter where we go abroad, we always have healthy support from the stands, especially in the Middle East. We were welcomed so warmly at the airport, hundreds of Indians had come to greet us,” said Bose. “And now we are hearing that a lot of the Indian fans will be coming to our matches, which will really boost us. You always get an extra chip on your shoulder when you get support from the galleries.



# ‘Mature man’ Chhangte ready for the road ahead



**AFC ASIAN CUP SPECIAL**

*After missing out on a place in the 2019 squad, it's a dream come true for Lallianzuala Chhangte to make his Asian Cup bow*

**SOUMO GHOSH**

Lallianzuala Chhangte is a man resurrected. In the international arena. Since his debut as a teenager in 2015, the 26-year-old has been erratically a part of the National Team; until 2023.

Over the last couple of years, the diminutive winger has put in some inspiring performances that have now made him a key member of the Blue Tigers' squad. While Chhangte had missed selection for the final squad for the Asian Cup in 2019, his selection for the 2023 edition came as no surprise to anyone.

"I'm really excited and looking forward to it," beamed Chhangte, speaking to [the-aiff.com](https://www.the-aiff.com).

"It's an honour to be able to represent my country at the highest level. I could not make it to the final squad in 2019, so it really is a dream come true for me to be here now."

Chhangte has had a phase of his career where he's had to go through a trial by fire, juggling rejections and injuries at the same time. However, it is an experience that the 26-year-old believes has made him what he is today – a "mature" man.



"I've been more mature as a player and a human being in the last few years, and I think that's what has helped me get to this stage at the moment," he said. "Mostly during the hard times when I would be dropped from the team or suffer injuries (in 2021), I learned so many lessons. It was a very hard time, but it helped me focus on the important things and become a better human.

"I would not be the player I am today, had I not experienced them," he said. "I'm much clearer in my mind about what I have to do."

Chhangte has played at some of the biggest stages for both club and country in 2023, an experience that he feels puts him in good stead ahead of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023.

Not only did he play a crucial role in helping India win three international trophies, the Tri-Nation Cup, the Intercontinental Cup, and the SAFF Championship last year, but he also represented his club Mumbai City FC in the AFC Champions League last year, facing some of the best teams in West Asia, like Al Hilal (Saudi Arabia), Nassaji Mazandaran (Iran), and PFC Navbahor (Uzbekistan).

"You want to look back at the end of your career, and you want to say that you played at the highest level. These memories will stay with you forever. I am really fortunate to have had these experiences and to be a part of this Asian Cup squad. It's a really big thing for me," he said. "Having played in the AFC Champions League gave me a feel for how it could be against teams like Australia, Uzbekistan and Syria. We know what to expect and how we need to approach such games. I feel stronger mentally because of them," said Chhangte.



AFC ASIAN CUP SPECIAL

# Blue Tigers hungrier than ever before, says Gurpreet

*Gurpreet Singh Sandhu is the only other player apart from Sunil Chhetri gearing up for his third AFC Asian Cup campaign*

**SOU MO GHOSH**

It seems only yesterday that the selection of a lanky 18-year-old goalkeeper in the Blue Tigers squad for their most important tournament in 27 years might have confused a few.

With India facing teams like Australia, the Korea Republic, and Bahrain, the youngster did not get any game time. It was, however, an experience of a lifetime, one that he would make full use of.

Gurpreet Singh Sandhu is now one of the first names on the Indian squad, having represented the nation in 66 international matches and worn the captain's armband in 10.

"It's an honour and a privilege to look back at those times and think that I'm now a part of three AFC Asian Cups. It is a special tournament, probably the closest we can get to a World Cup atmosphere," said Gurpreet to [the-aiff.com](https://www.aiff.com). "We just need to enjoy, be happy and confident, and make sure that we perform."

The India custodian, from his spot at the goal-line, has seen a massive transition take place in the Blue Tigers' lineup, with the likes of Bhaichung Bhutia, Renedy Singh, Steven Dias, and Gouramangi Singh making way for the then younger lot, Sandesh Jingham, Pritam Kotal, Subhasish Bose, and then further on to Anirudh Thapa and the rest. The latter lot are, however, quite the experienced bunch now, having already played in one Asian Cup (2019).

“It’s been a massive transition, and a lot of players were on the verge of ending their careers back in 2011, and we had so many new guys come in,” said Gurpreet. “I would say that we are still a majorly experienced side right now. Over the years, we have developed a lot, and the players are now hungrier than ever before and are educated in a professional environment in terms of football knowledge.”

Much like the 2011 edition, India are set to face Australia again in the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023, having been drawn in the same group (B), with Uzbekistan and Syria being the other two teams.

For Gurpreet, it’s all about taking inspiration from a memorable performance by his former teammate Subrata Paul in 2011.

“It was a dream to watch Subrata bhai fly around in goal, not letting Tim Cahill score that night. Tim was known for his headers, and Subrata bhai was brilliant, the way he just cancelled out those aerial balls, both crosses and shots,” said Gurpreet. “I wanted to be that, to do what he was doing, just living that moment he was playing. That’s what created the legend of the No. 1 spot in the national team.”

The 30-year-old, however, is under no illusions about the task ahead for India, as they face Australia (January 13), Uzbekistan (January 18), and Syria (January 23). “It’s not an easy group to be in, but it’s where we should be. It’s only when you face the challenges and discomforts that you know where you stand. As a nation and a team, this is the best place to be,” he said. “Australia are a World Cup side, and Uzbekistan and Syria have also done quite well. But we should not think too low of ourselves. We’re also here on merit, and we will do our best to make the most of it.”

Having spent his due time on the sidelines, soaking up information like a sponge, Gurpreet is one who puts a price on his spot as the numero uno keeper in the team. However, constantly jostling for the spot with his fellow keeper, Amrinder Singh, has helped him maintain his performance throughout. “I know the value of my spot. For a long time, I was on the sidelines and tried to grab it whenever possible, so I don’t like to share my spot,” he said.

“But when you play in a national team, there is a bigger responsibility. I think Amrinder and I have done well as a team. We’ve pushed each other, and I don’t think I would have grown as much had it not been for him. I’m sure he can vouch the same for me. We just try to keep going like this till we can as players and enjoy this responsibility.”





# Shooting Range

AFC Asian Cup 2024







# AIFF President evaluates the possibility of implementing 'Additional Video Review System' (AVRS) in India

All India Football Federation (AIFF) has written to IFAB to explore the possibility of India participating in the trial of the 'Additional Video Review System' (AVRS).

The President's recommendation aims to consider the extension of the existing technical infrastructure to accommodate an 'on-demand' video review request from the referees through a multi-angle, multi-camera broadcast feed.

Mr. Chaubey said, "Our prime objective here is to reduce the margin of error by empowering match officials with the technology to assist in their decision-making. While we will continue to work to implement VAR, I feel that, to begin with, AVRS can be a great option for a country like India. AVRS would help us study the impact of the technology, train our match officials with the new concept, and assess its adaptation by players, coaches, and clubs alike."

Currently, the mass adoption of VAR is limited due to financial and infrastructure requirements set out in FIFA's Implementation Assistance and Approval Programme (IAAP). "Only about 30 percent of the 211 football-playing nations—mainly in Europe and South America—currently have VAR subscriptions for either full domestic seasons or selective stages.

The President has suggested the AIFF Referee Department undertake the study to seek FIFA's suggestions and approval.



# 16 teams, one worthy champion in Bhubaneswar

*Odisha FC's title defence is set to take place in their comfort zone, the Kalinga Stadium*

## **RIGSUM TAMANG**

India's domestic football is ready for a spectacle at the start of the new year as 16 powerhouse teams from around the nation converge in the highly-anticipated Kalinga Super Cup 2024. With the group stage scheduled to kick off on January 9th and run through January 28th, this tournament promises to be a riveting display of skill, strategy, and pure footballing brilliance as the tournament returns to Odisha for the first time since 2019.

### **LOCAL RIVALRIES ON THE NATIONAL STAGE**

***Mohun Bagan Super Giant, East Bengal FC, Hyderabad FC, Sreenidi Deccan FC***

There will be high expectations from East Bengal FC, who have been a tough nut to crack in the ISL this season and come into the tournament on a five-game unbeaten run. Their local rivals Mohun Bagan Super Giant had made a blistering start to the season but three straight losses have seen them slip to fifth place in 10 matches. As such, the Kolkata derby on January 19 is the fixture to watch out for, and East Bengal will have redemption on their minds following their defeat in the Durand Cup final to their arch-rivals just four months ago.

The other two sides in the group also hail from the same city – Hyderabad, but different leagues. While Hyderabad FC are having a horror of a campaign as they are bottom of the ISL table with just four points from 11 matches, failing to register even a single win this season, Sreenidi Deccan currently sit in third place in the I-League, hot in the chase for the promotion to the ISL.

## FOUR TEAMS HUNGRY FOR SILVERWARE

### ***Kerala Blasters FC, NorthEast United FC, Jamshedpur FC, Shillong Lajong FC***

Group B of the Kalinga Cup 2024 promises more exciting fixtures as the current ISL leaders Kerala Blasters FC open their campaign against I-League's fifth-placed side Shillong Lajong FC. Ivan Vukomanović's side, boasting an array of world-class talent, are the favourites to top Group B, but they won't have it easy against NorthEast United FC and Jamshedpur FC.

Juan Pedro Benali's NorthEast United find themselves in the play-off spot in the ISL and will hope to replicate their semi-final run in last season's Super Cup. On the other hand, Jamshedpur haven't had the best of ISL campaigns this time around, but will hope to make a fresh start in the cup competition.

Bringing an air of unpredictability into the group are Shillong Lajong. The newly-promoted I-League side have enjoyed a great deal of success in front of their home crowd in Shillong, and it will be interesting to see how they perform outside their comfort zone in their first appearance in the Super Cup since the inaugural edition in 2018.

## CAN THERE BE A SURPRISE?

### ***Mumbai City FC, Chennaiyin FC, Punjab FC, Gokulam Kerala FC***

Group C offers a fascinating array of footballing styles and promises a taste of brilliant footballing display, setting the stage for a battle between creativity and structure.

Mumbai City FC may seem like favourites to win the group with regards to their consistency in the ISL, but anything can happen in a three-game group stage. Their first challenge will come from Gokulam Kerala, who are buoyed by their 4-1 success over I-League title challengers Sreenidi Deccan, a win which ended their six-game winless run and gives them a much-needed boost ahead of the Kalinga Super Cup.

The other two teams that complete Group C, Chennaiyin FC and Punjab FC, may have had below-par performances in the ISL, but are sure to come out all guns blazing in Bhubaneswar, fighting for pride and silverware.

Chennaiyin and Punjab face off against each other to open their campaigns, which will be chapter three of the season. They have met twice already this season in the ISL, producing two contrasting results, a 5-1 thumping for the Marina Machans at home, before a 1-0 win in Delhi for Punjab, their first-ever in the ISL.





## **THE LIKELY GROUP OF DEATH**

### ***FC Goa, Odisha FC, Bengaluru FC, Inter Kashi***

Group D kicks off with an exciting fixture between FC Goa, the only unbeaten side in the ISL this season, and Inter Kashi, who thrashed Rajasthan United 5-0 in the qualifying play-off to complete the cast of 16 at the Kalinga Super Cup group stage.

The two sides have had contrasting seasons in their respective leagues. While FC Goa are living the dream in the ISL sitting in second place, two points behind Kerala Blasters but with two games in hand, I-League newcomers Inter Kashi are struggling in eighth place, but have found some form of late, losing only once in their last six games.

Bengaluru FC will aim to erase the memories of a disappointing 2023 Super Cup final and reclaim the title they won in 2018. However, the path to success is laden with challenges, as they face the defending champions Odisha FC, in the repeat of the 2023 final in the first match on January 12.

Odisha are in stellar form, unbeaten in 11 matches in all competitions, and playing in front of their beloved Kalinga crowd is only going to spur them on even more. Bengaluru FC, on the other hand, have had a troubling ISL campaign as they sit in ninth place with only 11 points in 12 games. The mid-season Kalinga Super Cup presents a great opportunity to take their mind off the sticky situation in the league and start with a clean slate.

All the matches will be broadcast Live on Jio Cinema.



## 2023-24 I-league: Plot thickens, but Mohammedan fly ahead on wings of consistency

*Can the Black and White Brigade continue their red-hot form in the second half of the I-League season?*

**SOUOMO GHOSH**

It's that time of the year again! We are almost at the halfway point of the I-League 2023-24 season, as the teams go into the winter break, which will be followed by the Kalinga Super Cup, before league action finally ensues next year.

While certain teams like Mohammedan Sporting would have liked to have carried on with the momentum they had gained in recent weeks, others like NEROCA FC and TRAU FC would welcome such a pause to look inward and find the answers to their respective questions.

### **11 MATCHES UNBEATEN**

Since their promotion back to the I-League in 2020-21, Mohammedan Sporting have shown flashes of brilliance but lacked consistency. They seem to have struck the correct chords this season, however, the symphony presenting itself in the form of a seven-point lead at the top of the table at the winter break. Andrey Chernyshov's men have been on rampant form, and have shown the knack of getting the desired results, which is amply evident from their eight victories, three draws, and zero losses from 11 matches in this I-League campaign. Their 2-1 win against NEROCA in the last I-League match of the year, showed how much control Mohammedan are exerting over their opponents.

## **SREENIDI DECCAN, REAL KASHMIR PLAGUED BY INCONSISTENCY**

Both Sreenidi Deccan and Real Kashmir have fancied themselves to be championship contenders for more than a few seasons now. However, much like Mohammedan in the past seasons, they seem to be missing the magic ingredient – consistency. Both clubs could have been behind Mohammedan Sporting by only four points by the winter break, but both lost their respective last matches of the year, against struggling teams – Sreenidi fell 1-4 to Gokulam at home, while Real Kashmir suffered a 0-1 away defeat against Delhi FC.

While Sreenidi have done well against most mid and lower-table teams, they have struggled against the likes of Mohammedan Sporting (1-2), and Aizawl FC (1-2), their recent 1-4 defeat at home against a struggling Gokulam Kerala would point to deeper troubles, which they will need to fix through the winter break. For Real Kashmir, however, it has been a question of inconsistency. Their three defeats have come against teams in the bottom half of the table, despite having some decent results against the stronger opponents.

## **TWO SURPRISES FROM THE NORTH-EAST**

Teams from the Northeast should perhaps not be called surprise packages, given that several top Indian players come from that region. However, clubs like Shillong Lajong and Aizawl FC have their resources stretched thin and often have to make do with inexperienced youngsters. Though they rely on a model of bringing young players through their systems, Newly promoted Lajong, and former champions Aizawl have been right on the money this season.

Aizawl will not be happy to close the year with consecutive draws in home matches against mid-table sides like Gokulam Kerala and Inter Kashi (both 1-1). They could have been challenging for the title once again, but they are now eight points adrift. Shillong Lajong, on the other hand, have had their fairy tale start to the I-League campaign curtailed after their recent losses against Aizawl (0-3) at home and Real Kashmir (1-3) away. However, a 3-0 victory over relegation strugglers Namdhari FC will give them some much-needed confidence boost as they head into the break.





### **GOKULAM KERALA MILES BEHIND**

Only a couple of years ago, Gokulam Kerala were considered to be one of the more ferocious teams in the I-League, after they won back-to-back titles in the 2020-21, and 2021-22 seasons. However, the Malabarians have experienced quite the slump since then and now find themselves 10 points adrift from top dogs Mohammedan Sporting.

There is hope yet for the Malabarians, as the silver lining peeks over the dark wintry clouds. They have shown that they can beat the best in the league, and a 4-1 victory against Sreenidi Deccan away from home will go a long way to boost their confidence ahead of Christmas.

### **IMPHAL CLUBS IN TROUBLE**

Balancing out the performance of Lajong and Aizawl are two other clubs from the Northeast – both from Imphal. Both NEROCA FC and TRAU FC are in trouble, and we could see a situation when the capital city of Manipur is no longer represented in the I-League any longer. NEROCA were under no illusions when they squared up against Mohammedan Sporting on Christmas Eve, and the result was as expected, with the Black and White Brigade running away with the three points. NEROCA managed to lodge only one shot on target, which mercifully came in the form of their consolation goal.

TRAU, on the other hand, have shown more of a fight in their last three matches. They lodged their only win of the season so far in the form of a 3-0 drubbing of Inter Kashi earlier this month, before putting up fighting performances against Namdhari (1-2) and Rajasthan United (4-5). However, much like their rivals from across town, the Red Pythons also need to find solutions during the January transfer window, or potentially see their ship go down.





## AIFF President calls for accountability on part of refereeing in India's top football leagues

All India Football Federation (AIFF) President Mr. Kalyan Chaubey has called for an urgent need for accountability on the part of the Referee Department, urging officials to take serious note of the continuous errors and mounting refereeing issues this season in India's top two leagues, the ISL and the I-League.

The AIFF President chaired a virtual meeting on Sunday, December 31, 2023, to discuss ways to further elevate the standard of Indian refereeing and take it to the next level in the time to come.

Mr. Chaubey was in chair to oversee the mid-season 'Refereeing Review Meeting', held on the eve of New Year, ie Sunday, 31st December 2023. The meeting, which lasted for over 4 hours was attended by Acting Secretary General M Satyanarayan; Treasurer Kipa Ajay, Chairman of Competition Anil K Prabhakaran, Chairman of League Lalnghinglova Hmar, Chairman of State Development Avijit Paul, Chairman of Finance Menla Ethenpa, Chairman of Referee K Sankar, Chief Referee Officer Trevor Kettle along assessors, match commissioners and all 12 referees empanelled for ISL.

***Expressing concern over the mounting referee issues and deprivation of 'fair play' due to plain sight errors for participating clubs, Mr. Chaubey urged individuals involved in referee regulations, match officials and assessors to uphold 'natural justice'.***

A total of 24 controversial Key Match Incidents (KMI) from seven ISL and four I-League games were presented for discussion. After hearing explanations and analysis from the panel on the decisions of the referees, Mr. Chaubey said: "The season has seen increasing concerns over referee decisions with complaints and counter-claims. Clubs have submitted hard evidence in the form of videos to back their claims. Several games have been impacted due to unfortunate 'plain-sight errors', and admittedly below the acceptability of standards expected from us."

The AIFF President emphasised that the federation has made rapid strides in the highly competitive environment, leading to a welcome change of having a 12-month packed football calendar as compared to 7-9 months in the recent past.

“We are fortunate to serve the sport followed by millions of fans today. We are not into 7-8 months of business anymore. We are engaged throughout the year, 365 days of the calendar, in running tournaments and developing the sport at various levels and geographies in the country. Our paramount responsibility is to serve the sport, and the fact that we all have assembled today on the eve of the New Year to spend four hours reviewing the issue at hand, reaffirms our belief and commitment,” he said.

Mr. Chaubey acknowledged that with the competitive growth of the sport, AIFF has made equal efforts in the development of referees over the last year.

AIFF has been heavily invested in the referees’ development through the set-up of the Elite Development Referee Programme since January 2023. The Elite Referee Panel has been absorbed into the full-time payrolls of AIFF. In addition, there have been continuous efforts, with theoretical and practical training and refreshment courses being conducted with AIFF in partnership with FIFA, PGMOL and FSDL.

Recently, AIFF has appointed five Zonal Referee Development Officers with teaching knowledge, which will have a far deeper impact on imparting referee courses across the country.

“As officials and administrators, we have to work towards minimising these mistakes,” emphasised Mr. Chaubey, adding, “We can’t hide behind the mask of the ‘acceptable 15 % human error norm’. Most of these complaints are of plain sight errors falling under the 15 % norm, which hampers the clubs, players and leagues,” he said.

“I urge you all to look at these incidents from the emotional investment of the fans and the financial investment of the clubs. Safeguarding these emotions is the key here, and it will provide our assurance of fairness and consistency in the decisions,” he added.

Mr. Chaubey said: “Through the reviews of the videos today, we have a clear case of one club being at the receiving end for refereeing decisions that went against them twice in two games of the 10 played so far. In their argument, that’s 20% of wrong decisions on them, ruining their prospects in the season campaign,” adding, “While we are for the independence of referee functioning and development, we also have to follow the international examples of rewards and consequences.”

Chaubey also called on fans and club officials to develop a fair understanding of the laws of the game and to avoid undue criticism. “We need to not just educate referees, but also the fans and club officials. Some of the criticisms are uncalled for due to a lack of understanding of referee regulations. The clubs need to take an active lead in acquiring and imparting such knowledge to their patrons and fans.”

***The AIFF President has suggested a follow-up meeting during the Kalinga Super Cup in Bhubaneswar to discuss the way forward on these issues. AIFF will also call ISL and I-League club coaches and managers for a meeting in Bhubaneswar to emphasise ‘Do’s and Don’ts’ for the club officials, with CRO Mr. Kettle leading the discussion for collective decisions.***



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