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# VISION 2047

T A R G E T 2 0 2 6



**CREATING THE RIGHT  
DOMESTIC PATHWAY TO  
REACH PINNACLE**

**AU REVOIR  
BELOVED CAPTAIN**

- Kalyan Chaubey  
President, AIFF



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# President's Note

## *Nuts and bolts at the bottom create the bedrock of Indian Football*

### **Kalyan Chaubey**

The 10th season of the Indian Super League came to an end recently, as Mohun Bagan Super Giant and Mumbai City played the final at the Vivekananda Yuba Bharati Krirangan in front of 60,007 spectators. The final was not an exception but a testimony of how far the game has come in recent times. In the 2023-24 ISL season, Mohun Bagan's matches were watched by more than five lakh spectators.

Of course, a few clubs at the top level enjoy crowd support, but behind all the confetti and the curtains, remain the solid backdrop of the lower league structures that have been put in place in the last two years.

The I-League provides a pathway to the pinnacle, the ISL, and in turn, is supported by I-League 2 and I-League 3, making Indian Football a five-division system, including the state leagues.

Lifting the ISL league winners' shield and the eventual trophy remains the ultimate dream for all football clubs in India, a dream that in recent times, has resulted in the formation of new clubs aplenty across the country.

I-League 2023-24 itself saw the formation of two clubs that were inducted into the league after their bids were deemed to be successful.

The trend continues at the state level as well. The state leagues, being the roadway to the I-League 3, I-League 2, the I-League, and eventually to the ISL, mean that more leagues are cropping up across the country. The Gujarat Super League, which saw its completion on May 12, is a prime example of it. A new league means a new team, which increases opportunities for players and



coaches, and ultimately grows the footballing ecosystem one step at a time.

Leagues like the Meghalaya State League and the Super League Kerala have also cropped up in the two states, thus further growing the burgeoning football ecosystems in Meghalaya and Kerala.

Women's football in India has been the biggest benefactor of our efforts to create multi-league systems in the country. Previously, the Indian Women's League would be conducted at a single venue in more of a tournament format. However, the 2023-24 season saw a paradigm shift in the women's football ecosystem.

The IWL, for the first time, was held in a league format, with teams playing against each other on a home-and-away basis, paving the way for the women footballers in our country to play in a more professional setup. Women's



football only had one division with a limited number of teams. We have now initiated the IWL 2, which has automatically doubled the number of women playing in a professional setup.

It is often said that the Indian Women's Team, ranked 66th in the world, are in a much better place than the men, in terms of making it to the top tournaments. It is our hope that with more matches, increased competition, and a greater pool of players to pick from, the Blue Tigresses will push ahead towards converting such dreams into realities.

The utilisation of the FIFA windows for the women's team has long been a bone of contention. However, we have begun to amend that. The Senior Women's Team participated in the Turkish Women's Cup, where they finished second behind Kosovo, defeating Estonia and Hong Kong on the way. We have another international window coming up, where the team will travel to play matches in Uzbekistan.

The fact that we saw a 138 percent growth in terms of the number of women players registered on the AIFF CMS (Competition Management System), speaks a lot about how far women's football has come in just the last two years.

With such positive steps, we hope to keep Indian Football rolling forward in the years to come.



# A beautiful dream will come to an end on June 6, says Sunil Chhetri

*The Indian Captain took time out of his busy schedule in the National camp in Bhubaneswar to speak to the-aiff.com on reasons and philosophy behind his decision*

**AKHIL RAWAT**

The journey that began in 2006 in the faraway city of Quetta in Pakistan, will finally come to an end in Kolkata on June 6, 2024, after an eventful 19 years.

Sunil Chhetri, the conquering hero of Indian football's many folklores, has decided to gently put aside his National Team jersey after playing against Kuwait in the FIFA World Cup Qualifiers at the Salt Lake Stadium in Kolkata. On Thursday, May 16, 2024, the National Team captain spoke to [the-aiff.com](https://www.the-aiff.com) about his latest decision.

**Excerpts:**

**Q: How did you reach this decision?**

**Sunil Chhetri:** It's been a month. It started with a feeling and an instinct that it was time to call it a day. And it grew in me slowly and steadily every day. Finally, I reached this decision. And I think I made the right decision. This (match against Kuwait on June 6, 2024) is one of the biggest games of my career. It is hugely important for the National Team. So,

hopefully, we will do well against Kuwait and should be there for the (World Cup Qualifiers) third round.

**Q: Could qualifying for the third round be the best possible way for you to hang up your boots? And you said there's no pressure on you, but how badly do you want to win this game?**

**SC:** Yeah, but for my own sake, for my own satisfaction, that thing will be a secondary part of the equation. The first thing is to test for the country, man...we've got to because this is in our hands, now. We got to win at home to give us a great chance of qualifying for the third round, which we haven't done yet. And then rub our shoulders with the best in Asia. So, for the country's sake first, yes. And once we do that, it will be good to think back and remember that my last game was an important one. And I could contribute to our nation being in the third round of the World Cup Qualifiers.

**Q: Why did you choose to retire after the June 6 match and not the June 11 tie against Qatar? Because, you know, that could be the match after which we officially qualify for the third round.**

**SC:** Yeah, but then, let's say it was just an instinct. We're playing at home, that's in Salt Lake. It will not be the same. And I'm pretty confident this way or that way. Even if you need some points against Qatar, our team is quite capable. I think my team is ready. So, everything combined to make me decide that June 6 is my last game for the country

**Q: If you could sum up your 19-year legacy as a national team player, briefly.**

**SC:** It's outstanding. It's a dream. I don't know where to start. But the synopsis is that it's a beautiful dream. I think I'm highly, highly fortunate and privileged to be a part of the national team for 19 years. It's outstanding to be able to participate and play for the country. This is something no one can take away from me. I'm grateful to everyone who has contributed. And I'm not trying to sound cliché, I genuinely mean it. That's the feeling that I get.

**Q: Personally, what does this decision mean for you, your family and your life?**

**SC:** It was a mixed feeling. But when I did tell them, everyone understood. I believe my entire family is proud of whatever I have accomplished. I've done this for 19 years. They are immensely happy. I think it's one of those things that everyone knew was coming. But when I told them, they were a little bit shocked but understood that I'm fighting my own battles inside. You don't wish to stop playing for the country. But one day you have to and you will be fine.





## Big brother, wonderful human being, the GOAT: Chhetri an inspiration to teammates

*Reluctant to let him go, the coaching staff and teammates spoke about Sunil Chhetri's role and standing in the National team set-up*

### **AKHIL RAWAT**

As the Indian senior men's team gathered in the Kalinga Stadium gym for their session on Thursday morning, there was a hush in the room. Less than an hour ago, Sunil Chhetri posted a heart-touching 10-minute video announcing his retirement from national colours. Head coach Igor Stimac stood beside him, gathered everyone in a semi-circle, and gave a brief speech for the captain and the boys. This was the start of Sunil Chhetri's last-ever national team camp – 19 years after his first.

"He knows best how he feels and when it's the appropriate time to do things. I just wish we all do everything to make 6th June very memorable for him and all Indian football fans," Stimac told [the-aiff.com](https://www.the-aiff.com).

"He became a legend while still playing and that's something only a few can do. He's an inspiration to everyone, absolutely committed to the Indian jersey which is something these youngsters need to follow. Playing for the country with passion and love, and as he said with 'intense joy', Stimac added.

Having taken over the Indian national team in May 2019, the Croatian has completed five years together with Chhetri. It's not just a typical player-coach relationship, but one that extends way beyond the football pitch too. You get the sense of it with the way Stimac speaks about him and addresses him.

"I had the pleasure of coaching such a wonderful human being and getting to know his beautiful family," he said. "We were more than simply a coach and a player and I am very proud of the relationship we have amongst us and the group. I am very confident that whatever he decides to do after football will have an immense impact on society in a very positive way. He was born to become a GOAT."

Lifting weights right next to Chhetri in the gymnasium was Gurpreet Singh Sandhu. For both club and country, the goalkeeper has spent the most time together on the pitch with Chhetri in his career. They might play on opposite ends of the pitch, and on the very rarest of occasions exchange passes during a match, the chemistry has always been there.

"I am fortunate if I can claim that I spent the most amount of time in his international footballing career alongside him. I was lucky I got a senior, a big brother and a mentor like him through whom I learnt so much not just about football but life in general," said Gurpreet.

Besides being a teammate and a brother, he is also a fan of the legend after all. When he first learned about Chhetri's decision, he didn't want to believe it.

"I was a little mad about why he's doing this, it's still too early," revealed Gurpreet. "Maybe it's my inner fear of not seeing him around the team when he leaves. I still think he can go on and on. But I support him no matter what."

The journey will end on June 6, but there are plenty of memories to cherish. It's tough for Gurpreet to single out, but he tried. "I think every single goal that I have seen him score while I was on the pitch has been the most memorable moment of my playing time with him. The goal against Kyrgyzstan at the Kanteerava (Asian Cup Qualifiers in 2017), the chip against Kenya (Intercontinental Cup in 2018) and countless others. I think the banter that we have when he's practising finishing against the goalkeepers during training is something I will miss a lot," Gurpreet shared.

Memories will always stay, and perhaps the most special memory is yet to come in three weeks' time.

"It's not difficult, it's impossible to replace a legend like him in the dressing room, but we have to face the reality. I also hope Sunil bhai finds the mental and physical peace he deserves after serving the nation for almost two decades.

"My message to him would be, 'Bhai abhi bhi waqt hai, video delete kar do aur bol do, just joking. I am still around'. (Brother, there's still time. Delete the video and say that I was joking.)," laughed Gurpreet.



# Voices from #IndianFootball



**Kalyan Chaubey**  
President, AIFF

One of the best strikers India has produced is at his peak with no weaknesses. Words cannot define his greatness on the field and even better human being to ever grace the game. Congratulations to you Sunil, on what can only be described as an illustrious career.

Right now, the only thing that we can do is look back on his glorious career and celebrate it. He will certainly go down as one of the legends of Indian Football. I would like to sincerely thank him for his massive contribution to Indian Football.



**M Satyanarayan**  
Acting Secretary General, AIFF



**Sukhwinder Singh**  
Former Head Coach, India

Sunil Chhetri's biggest quality is his longevity and consistency as a playing member of the national team. From the very beginning, he was extremely serious about his game and did everything to serve the nation for a long time. He is a skillful player and has the special ability to score goals.

I consider Chhetri a great player, a terrific motivator, and an ideal captain. He is like the MS Dhoni of cricket, who has excelled both as a player and a captain. The kind of discipline Chhetri maintained throughout his career has made him a role model.



**IM Vijayan**  
Former Captain, India



**Shanmugam Venkatesh**  
Former Captain, India

His biggest quality was that he was very good at measuring himself up with other players. He was always comparing himself with the first-choice striker in any team, he was always trying to get up to that level. In that respect, his vision was always clear.

# Voices from #IndianFootball



**Mahesh Gawali**  
Former India Defender &  
Current India Assistant Coach

He's a great striker who gave us continuity after Bhaichung. He was the one who was always reliable in that position. At first, he was a bit nervous, but then he learned to adapt quickly, and once he did, he picked up himself very fast, and has scored so many goals for the nation.

I've played with him in the national team and found him to be a player who was always determined and ready to give 100 percent. He has always been hungry for goals, and his focus, concentration, and execution inside the box are worth watching.



**Climax Lawrence**  
Former Captain, India



**Oinam Bembem Devi**  
Former Captain, Indian Women's Team

When I heard the news today morning, I felt a bit sad as I thought he could play for a few more years. I haven't seen a player like Sunil Chhetri. His dedication, discipline, and hard work are second to none. We've always tried to set him as an example for all the girls in the women's camp.

I remember when I went to the first national camp, I got injured and after recovery when I went again, Chhetri bhai was my roommate. He helped me a lot those days. I will badly miss watching him play.



**Jeje Lalpekhlu**  
Former Striker, India

Playing international football for 19 years is no mean feat. The biggest positive about him is that whenever the country needed him, he delivered. I've always seen him score in the crucial moments of matches. Indian Football has reached this level because of his hard work and dedication.



**Loitongbam Ashalata Devi**  
Captain, Indian Women's Team



# Sunil Chhetri: A glorious international career at a glance

STATS BY GAUTAM ROY

**BORN:** AUGUST 3, 1984

**DEBUT ON JUNE 12, 2005:** VS PAKISTAN (QUETTA)

**MATCHES PLAYED:** 150 (CAPTAIN IN 87 MATCHES)

**GOALS SCORED:** 94 (TOP GOALSCORER FOR INDIA)

## TROPHIES WON--

- JAWAHARLAL NEHRU CUP IN 2007, 2009 AND 2012
- AFC CHALLENGE CUP IN 2008
- HERO INTERCONTINENTAL CUP IN 2018 AND 2023
- HERO TRI-NATION CUP IN 2017 AND 2023
- SAFF CUP IN 2011, 2015, 2021 AND 2023

## ACHIEVEMENTS--

- FIRST INDIAN TO SCORE 50 INTERNATIONAL GOALS
- SCORED FOUR HAT-TRICKS FOR INDIA. VS TAJIKISTAN IN THE 2008 AFC CHALLENGE CUP FINAL AT NEW DELHI; VS VIETNAM IN 2010 FRIENDLY AT PUNE; VS CHINESE TAIPEI IN 2018 INTERCONTINENTAL CUP AT MUMBAI; VS PAKISTAN IN 2023 SAFF CUP
- ONLY INDIAN TO SCORE A HAT-TRICK IN THE FINAL OF AN INTERNATIONAL TOURNAMENT - AFC CHALLENGE CUP AT NEW DELHI - 2008
- SCORED IN THREE FINALS OF THE SAFF CUP 2011, 2015-16 AND 2021
- SCORED AT LEAST ONE GOAL IN HIS FIRST, 25TH, 50TH, 75TH, 100TH, 125TH AND 150TH MATCHES

## AWARDS--

- ARJUNA IN 2011
- PADMA SHRI IN 2019
- KHEL RATNA IN 2021
- ASIAN ICON BY THE AFC IN 2018
- AIFF PLAYER OF THE YEAR IN 2007, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2019
- FPAI PLAYER OF THE YEAR IN 2009 AND 2018
- AFC CHALLENGE CUP MOST VALUABLE PLAYER IN 2008
- SAFF PLAYER OF THE TOURNAMENT IN 2011
- HERO OF THE INTERCONTINENTAL CUP IN 2018



# Blue Tigers camp begins in Bhubaneswar

The Senior Men's National Team camp, ahead of the FIFA World Cup 2026 Preliminary Joint Qualification Round 2 matches against Kuwait and Qatar, commenced in Bhubaneswar on Friday, May 10, 2024, with the first batch of 19 players. Another 13 players joined the camp on May 15. Nine players from the original list of 41 will not be present in the camp owing to their respective injuries or personal reasons.

The Blue Tigers will face Kuwait in Kolkata on June 6 before travelling away to take on Qatar on June 11 in their last two matches of Group A. India are currently placed second in the group, with four points from four matches. The top two teams in the group will qualify for Round 3 of the FIFA World Cup Qualifiers and book their berth at the AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027.

## List of players in Bhubaneswar for the Senior Men's NT Camp:

**Goalkeepers:** Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, Amrinder Singh, Vishal Kaith, Phurba Tempa Lachenpa.

**Defenders:** Nikhil Poojary, Lalchungnunga, Jay Gupta, Amey Ranawade, Narender, Muhammad Hammad, Anwar Ali, Subhasish Bose, Rahul Bheke, Mehtab Singh.

**Midfielders:** Suresh Singh Wangjam, Mahesh Singh Naorem, Nandhakumar Sekar, Brandon Fernandes, Edmund Lalrindika, Imran Khan, Jeakson Singh Thounaojam, Anirudh Thapa, Sahal Abdul Samad, Liston Colaco, Lallianzuala Chhangte, Vikram Partap Singh.

**Forwards:** Rahim Ali, David Lalhlansanga, Jithin MS, Parthib Sundar Gogoi, Manvir Singh, Sunil Chhetri.

**Head Coach:** Igor Stimac

**Players not in camp because of injuries or personal reasons:** Roshan Singh Naorem, Mohammad Yasir, Vibin Mohanan, Rahul KP, Isak Vanlalruatfela, Akash Mishra, Lalengmawia Ralte, Deepak Tangri, Lalrinzuala.



## One step back for I-League's best defender Muhammad Hammad turns into maiden national camp

*It has been a big year for Muhammad Hammad, who after being named the Best Defender in the I-League, has now earned his maiden national camp call-up.*

### **SOUMO GHOSH**

Approximately a decade ago, Muhammad Hammad, then a skinny teenager from Kashmir, was harbouring dreams of becoming a professional cricketer.

Providence, however, had different plans for him. In the I-League 2023-24, which was essentially his comeback season, Hammad not only donned the captain's armband for his hometown club, Real Kashmir FC but also won the Jarnail Singh Award for Best Defender of the season for his fine performance. Now, the 26-year-old is living his dream in Bhubaneswar, where he has been called up for his maiden national camp.

"I had no idea that I had made it to the national camp. When I first got a call about it from my club's officials, I simply could not believe it. I even asked him two-three times before it began to dawn on me," said Hammad. "It has long been a dream to play for the country, and that dream is coming true. I would like to thank my family, friends, coaches, and everyone who has supported me in this journey."

Hammad has been in the national camp for a little over a week now, and is slowly getting used to being around the best in the country.

“We’ve had some good training sessions so far, and everyone is giving it their best. The atmosphere here in Bhubaneswar is just fantastic. The coaches, staff, and all the players are very friendly,” he said. From facing an uncertain future to national camp.

It's not just the limelight of being in the national camp, or winning the best defender award that sets Hammad aside. The 26-year-old defender had suffered an ACL (Anterior Cruciate Ligament) injury a few years back, one that took him a couple of seasons to recover from.

Hammad had first joined Real Kashmir in 2017, when they were in the second division. However, he opted to move away from his hometown club when he was on the road to recovery, choosing not to rush his return. He played in the R-League (Rajasthan State League) for Jaipur Elite FC before playing for FC 1 in the Jammu & Kashmir Premier Football League.

“I realised while recovering from my injury that I could not play at a high level right away. It was either train and sit on the bench, or go play in a couple of state leagues to get my match fitness, and then play the I-League,” said Hammad. “Once you adjust to playing at a lower intensity, then you can move up the ranks to higher levels.” The results of Hammad’s patience have been amazing, to say the least. He has played every minute of Real Kashmir’s I-League 2023-24 campaign, operating in the meanest defence of the league, which only let in 19 goals in 24 matches.

“It was not easy, but the tough times gave me the discipline I needed to do this. Especially when you play for Real Kashmir, you play your home matches in extremely cold weather, but then a lot of the away games are played in exactly opposite conditions, which can be difficult,” he said. “But if you maintain your discipline, you can make sure that you are fit enough for the coach to select you for every game, no matter what the conditions are.





“Sandeep sir had a massive role not only in Real Kashmir FC but also in football in Jammu and Kashmir. I’ve been with the club from the start, so I’ve known him closely. He used to help everyone on a personal basis,” said Hammad. “It’s not easy to sustain in the I-League for so many years. Now we have an I-League club and a steady stream of players in the I-League, so it’s a big thing.

“It was a shock for all of Kashmir when he passed away. But we are all thankful to the coach, staff, and co-owners for taking the initiative to keep the club running. So far, we have not faced any issues, and hats off to them for continuing the work in the same fashion,” he said.

As everyone now looks forward to the upcoming 2024-25 season in a few months, Hammad wants to carry forward the progress he’s made since his return from injury.

“Of course, like everyone, I want to play at higher levels. I want to play in the ISL and represent India one day. But right now, I need to keep improving my game, and rectifying my mistakes. I need to raise my level with every game,” said Hammad.



# Manipur champions for the 22nd time in Sr Women's NFC for Rajmata Jijabai Trophy

Manipur defeated Haryana 2-0 in the final of the 28th Senior Women's National Football Championship for Rajmata Jijabai Trophy, to clinch their 22nd title at the Kishore Bharati Krirangan, in Kolkata, on Wednesday, May 15, 2024.

Ngangom Bala Devi (68') and Nongmeikapam Sibani Devi (83') scored the goals to hand Manipur the match, after Haryana were down to 10 players as Samiksha was sent off for a foul on Dangmei Grace in the 65th minute.

Manipur started the more potent of the sides, their gameplan inevitably being centred around mercurial striker Bala Devi, who has scored 17 goals from 10 appearances in the competition this season. However, Haryana were a determined lot, not letting the Manipur midfielders play their natural game.

The experienced Bala began to drop down to midfield in the first quarter-hour, looking to use her flair to create spaces for the wingers. In the 21st minute, she turned Aarti to create some space in an otherwise congested midfield and played an aerial through ball to Grace. Grace's shot, however, was saved by Haryana goalkeeper Shreya Hooda.

Asem Roja Devi, Bala's strike partner, would often switch her roles with the latter, Grace being the eventual benefactor on the right. Sibani had a great opportunity to score off a Grace cross, a little ahead of the half-hour mark, but she scuffed her header.

Haryana had their first real chance at the Manipur goal in the 33rd minute when Renu Rani tried her luck from a free-kick, which was aimed well at the top corner. It caused Manipur keeper Linthoingambi Devi some discomfort, but after an initial fumble, she managed to gather it.

Manipur were to have one more chance before the break, as Bala controlled a cross from Sibani Devi inside the box and attempted an acrobatic side volley. The airborne 34-year-old, however, shot wide.

Manipur came out of the blocks with great impetus after the change of ends. Roja and Grace had their respective efforts saved, as Haryana looked desperately stranded in their own defensive third.

Haryana's 17-year-old winger Neha stepped up to provide them with an outlet on the counter. Her accurate cross from the left was headed over by Pooja, just minutes before Neha burst into acres of real estate in the Manipur half, hared past two defenders and produced a powerful shot aimed at the bottom corner. Lintoingambi had to produce a magnificent save to keep out what was arguably Haryana's best chance of the match.

Haryana had their hearts in their mouths in the 65th minute, when Grace broke free behind their defence, and was pulled back by Samiksha. Referee Ruba Devi immediately pointed to the spot. Samiksha was sent off for her indiscretion.

Haryana's Shreya Hooda stepped up in the battle of the two captains, as she made a double save to keep the scores level. She first dived to her right to save Bala's spot-kick and then followed it up by deftly pouncing on the effort off the rebound by the Manipur captain.

Playing against a side reduced to 10 players, however, was a massive advantage for Manipur, and Bala redeemed her saved penalty just three minutes later when Roja flicked the Manipur captain through behind the defence inside the box. Facing just the opposition keeper from inside the box, Bala slotted it into the bottom corner.

Despite being down to 10 players, Haryana looked to get back in the match, their tactics primarily relying on the hopes that their quick forwards would run onto the long balls hooved upfield. However, it was an unsure touch by their defender Kajal that handed Manipur their second goal. Sibani did well to control the stray ball and sprinted into the box before she blasted it home.

Mr. Anirban Dutta, Honourary Secretary, IFA, presented the Rajmata Jijabai Trophy to Manipur. Mr. Subrata Dutta, Chairman, IFA, was present.

## **Individual Awards:**

**Best Goalkeeper of the Championship: Shreya Hooda (Haryana)**

**Top Goalscorer of the Championship: Ngangom Bala Devi (Manipur) & Yumnam Kamala Devi (Railways)**

**Player of the Championship: Ngangom Bala Devi (Manipur)**



# Shooting Range

Sr Women's National Football Championship for Rajmata Jijabai Trophy





# AIFF President felicitates heroes of 1974 AFC Youth Champions squad

*The City of Joy celebrated the heroes of the 1974 AFC Youth Championship, who were felicitated in the city by AIFF President Kalyan Chaubey on the 50th year anniversary of their famous win.*

All India Football Federation President Mr. Kalyan Chaubey, on Tuesday, April 30, 2024, felicitated the players of the 1974 India Youth National Team in Kolkata, who were the joint champions of the AFC Youth Championship 50 years ago.

In a packed media conference in the city, the AIFF President presented mementoes to six members of the 1974 squad, captain Shabbir Ali, CC Jacob, Dilip Palit, Shishir Guha Dastidar, Ranjit Das (Gobinda), and SP Kumar.

The coach of the winning squad, Mr. Arun Ghosh, could not be present owing to health reasons. His son-in-law received the memento on behalf of Mr. Ghosh.

IFA President Mr. Ajit Banerjee, Chairperson Mr. Subrata Dutta, and Secretary Mr. Anirban Dutta were present.

Speaking on the occasion, the AIFF President recalled the achievements of the 1974 squad, which won the AFC Youth Championship jointly with Iran in Bangkok, Thailand, after a thrilling 2-2 draw that was extended to extra time.

Mr. Chaubey said, "When I began my footballing journey, I had heard that the 1970s were a golden period in Indian Football. I would like to convey my gratitude to Shabbir da for reminding me of April 30, 1974, so that we could celebrate the 50th anniversary of this famous victory."



He said, “For 48 years post India’s independence, we never focused on utilising the FIFA friendly windows, FIFA World Cup or even to collaborate with the world of football. As per the then-policy (1948 to 1998) decisions, we chose not to look beyond the Olympics and the Asian Games.

“Could this obscure policy of the then decision makers, have led India to miss 50 years of international football exposure, when countries across the world were embracing FIFA norms and participating in the development of the game rapidly?

“We may have started to pick up the pace in the last few years. However, we have already lost those five decades, which is a long bridge to build when we know that others are way ahead,” he said.

India’s captain from the 1974 team, Shabbir Ali said, “I thank the AIFF and its President Mr. Kalyan Chaubey for making the efforts to felicitate the players who brought laurels for India, five decades ago. It was a great tournament where India remained unbeaten in six consecutive matches and did not allow overwhelming favourites Iran to defeat us.

“We were a team who were determined to win and we achieved it in the end. Under Arun Ghosh and Abdur Salaam, we were a cohesive lot who trained in Patiala for almost a month before going to Bangkok. I am happy that the current generation will be able to know about our games through these commendable efforts of the AIFF,” said Ali.

Mr. Chaubey said that there is a need to archive all the records of Indian Football and its achievements over the years.

“Independent India’s first football captain was Talimeren Ao. Very few know of him today. As per the records, he is from Assam. However, the fact remains that he is from Nagaland.

“I have recently spoken to the Nagaland Chief Minister and he assured me that the state is very serious about reclaiming its football heritage. To that extent, we are working on a biography of Mr. Ao’s life. We hope that not only will it help the people of Nagaland connect to their heroes of yesteryears, but also it will be helpful for the entire northeast to celebrate a hero from the region,” he said.

The AIFF President further elaborated on the federation’s efforts to nurture the stars of the future.

“We have been working with FIFA on building various academies across the country so that we can get back to that level once again. We have already started the AIFF-FIFA Academy in Bhubaneswar, and if footballing stalwarts like Arsene Wenger are involved in processes like talent identification and growth, then we can definitely play the FIFA U-17 World Cup on merit, soon,” said Mr. Chaubey.

“We can only think of improving the present once we obtain inspiration from the past. But it is also a double-edged sword if we remain satisfied with the past. We would, in that case, run the risk of complacency setting in,” said the AIFF President.

Mr. Chaubey highlighted the importance of generating a wider pool of players, in order to improve the levels of Indian Football.

“I am sure everyone has seen our efforts to take the Santosh Trophy to the next level. Our goal is to increase our pool of players. Getting new players is the need of the hour. To that extent, we are trying to revive as many tournaments as we can,” he said. “The Kalinga Super Cup has already been started, the Durand Cup has been conducted extremely well for the past few years. Now we are making efforts to revive the old glories of tournaments like the Bordoloi Trophy, the IFA Shield, and so on. The I-League is also receiving support from the lower rungs, which are the I-League 2 and I-League 3.”





## 1974 Asian Youth Championship: The Golden Jubilee of the Golden moment

*The 1974 AFC Youth Championship, where the Blue Colts finished joint-champions with Iran, remains the last trophy won India won at the Asian level. With the celebration and felicitation of the heroes of 1974, we take a look back in fondness at their exploits 50 years ago.*

When the All India Football Federation sent half a dozen coaches to Patiala—GMH Basha, PK Banerjee, SA Salam, Arun Ghosh, Nikhil Nandy and J Kittoo—along with two selectors, Samar Banerjee and Squadron Leader SS Hakeem—to oversee the India team’s preparations for the 1974 Asian Youth Championship, some news reports alleged that too many cooks could spoil the broth.

It turned out to be an unfounded allegation. The other way around, in fact. The 18-member India team, led by Shabbir Ali, left for Bangkok in the middle of April. On May 2, 1974, the boys returned to Calcutta (now Kolkata) an unbeaten lot with the Joint Winners title in the Asian Youth Championship in their kitty.

Grouped with them were record seven-time champions Burma (now Myanmar), Hong Kong and Laos. Skipper Shabbir Ali led from the front, scoring both decisive goals in 1-0 victories over Laos (April 17) and Burma (April 19). Shabbir grabbed the headlines, but vice-captain and left midfielder Prasun Banerjee and goalkeeper Prasanta Mitra were also praised for their displays.

Powered by a brace from Mohammed Yaqoob in a 2-2 draw against Hong Kong in their last group game (April 21), India advanced as the group champions, Hong Kong took the second spot with three points. India would have moved ahead with an all-win record had they not conceded five minutes from time against Hong Kong, having fallen behind in the first half.

## **HISTORIC QUARTER-FINALS ENTRY**

Reaching the last eight stages was an achievement for the boys, for whom maintaining focus in the knock-out stages amidst the excitement of scripting 'history' was as much a task as taking on Singapore, the runners-up of Group A, also involving Iran, South Vietnam and the Philippines.

When Jacob Chacko put Singapore ahead, the fear of elimination must have made the Indian boys work harder as Shabbir Ali brought them back into the game. Even after extra-time, when there was not much to separate the sides, it needed the glovework of the late Mitra to pull India through as they converted four spot kicks and Singapore only one in the tie-breaker.

The sound counsel of the two coaches, Arun Ghosh and SA Salam, helped the players to ease their nerves. Ghosh's advice for the tie-breaker was simple. 'Keep things simple, don't do anything fancy.'

## **TOUGHER BATTLE AHEAD**

If Singapore were tough, hosts Thailand were considered to be tougher. Playing in familiar conditions in front of a home crowd naturally made them the more fancied team for the title round. On top of that, they had an all-win record in the tournament thus far, crushing Brunei 7-0, Taiwan 3-0, Japan 1-0 in the group stages and Malaysia 2-0 in the quarter-finals.

India held a grip over the proceedings in the initial phase after kick-off. While AC Devraj and Prasun, kept the midfield zone ticking, forwards Shabbir Ali, Latifuddin and Yaqoob interchanged positions regularly to confuse the home side's defence.

Not that the Thailand attackers were keeping quiet. But the Indian defence line of Dilip Palit, Dev Anand, Amit Dasgupta and CC Jacob gave a good account of themselves. And when Thailand strikers evaded them occasionally, they couldn't get the better of keeper Mitra, whose acrobatic saves were crucial. In the end, India scored through Shabbir Ali and Yaqoob to win 2-1 after leading by a goal at half time.

## **FINALLY, THE FINAL**

But would it be enough against Iran in the final on April 30? Not only were the odds stacked against India, but the Persian princes were the defending champions. Their form, too, suggested their might. They pumped in 10 goals in a spotless group stage campaign (1-0 vs Singapore, 5-0 vs Philippines, 4-0 vs South Vietnam) and six in the knockouts (3-0 vs Hong Kong in quarters, 3-0 vs South Korea in semis). Not even once could their citadel be breached.

India, on the other hand, were on a high after their successful run to the final. And if they required further motivation, it was provided by the Iranian players themselves. Oblivious to India's strengths or just dismissive of their abilities, the Iran players sang, chatted and made merry as the two team buses travelled alongside each other towards the stadium from Hotel Sukhumvit on the day of the final. Their apparent indifference towards India wasn't lost on Salam and Arun Ghosh, who used it as a tool for motivation, insisting their boys show what they are capable of.

The Indians never dropped their shoulders, even after conceding first. Mohammad Dastjerdi put Iran 1-0 ahead at halftime. Responding with a Latifuddin goal, India pushed the game into extra time after a full-time score of 1-1. In the first minute of extra time, Shabbir Ali's fifth goal of the competition put India ahead, only for Iran to equalise a few minutes later. As per tournament rules, India and Iran were declared joint winners.

It was by far one of India's finest wins in international football. Iran were the defending champions and won the title in 1975 and 1976 as well. But in 1974, they had to share the trophy with India.

## FORMER PLAYERS LAUD AIFF PRESIDENT

On Tuesday, April 30, 2024, the All India Football Federation will hold a function in Kolkata to felicitate the heroes of the 1974 India Youth Squad. AIFF President Mr. Kalyan Chaubey has taken the personal initiative to call all living members and coaches of the squad to celebrate the golden jubilee of great achievement.

"Fifty years have passed since then. Not many people in the current generation remember our achievement," says Shabbir Ali, who truly led from the front in the historic achievement. "But I am grateful to AIFF President Kalyan Chaubey for arranging this felicitation function. It's a great gesture on his part," he added.

"We are grateful to Mr. Chaubey," said CC Jacob, who did an exemplary job as a defender in the 1974 tournament. "The AIFF President was a fine player himself. So, he has taken the lead in recalling the great achievement."

Another star in the defence, Dilip Palit, said: "The 1974 victory remained one of the greatest moments of my football career. My sincere thanks to the AIFF President for organising this felicitation function. I am sure that under Mr. Chaubey, Indian football will reach greater heights."

## THE GOLDEN SQUAD OF THE 1974 ASIAN YOUTH CHAMPIONSHIP

### GOALKEEPERS

PRASANTA MITRA  
CHANDAN CHAKRAVARTY

### DEFENDERS

CC JACOB  
JOAQUIM BARETTO  
DILIP PALIT  
AMIT DASGUPTA  
B DAYANAND  
CHINMOY CHATTERJEE

### MIDFIELDERS

AC DEVRAJ  
PRASUN BANERJEE (VICE-CAPTAIN)  
PM KUMAR  
TAPAN BOSE

### FORWARDS

HARJINDER SINGH  
SHABBIR ALI (CAPTAIN)  
LATIFUDDIN NAJAM  
SISIR GUHA DASTIDAR  
MOHAMMED YAQOOB  
GOBINDA (RANJIT) DAS

### COACHES

A SALAM  
ARUN GHOSH

### MANAGER

DILIP KUMAR GHOSH



## A bloodless coup that left our rivals bleeding

*Fifty years ago, on April 30, 1974, India created history when they won the Asian Youth Championship title jointly with Iran. This piece has been written by winger Harjinder Singh, known as the Man with a Golden Left Foot in Indian football in the 1970s and 1980s.*

### **HARJINDER SINGH**

We did not know that more drama awaited us back in the dressing room.

It happened 50 years ago; April 30, 1974, to be exact. On that day, India staged a kind of coup d'état in Asian football, when they won the Asian Youth Championship title jointly with Iran in Bangkok. I was a part of the playing eleven. Nobody in this world would bet a dime on us when we took the pitch to play Iran in the final.

Ultimately, we played out a stunning 2-2 draw and forced the defending champions to share the trophy with India. We were a bunch of teenagers who unknowingly wrote a new chapter in the century-old history of Indian football. Now, let me return to the dressing room again. As we stormed into the room immediately after the gruelling encounter, our coach, Arun Da (Arun Ghosh), hugged each of us tightly. Then he simply fainted. He was emotionally so drained that he could not take it anymore.

After a few minutes, Arun Da regained consciousness. He sat on a chair and cried like a child. He said he was an Asian Games gold medal winner, but nothing brought him more pleasure than this title. I tell you, Arun Da was not exaggerating. I have played enough football in my life with big clubs. My stint with the Senior National Team was a fairly long one. But never in my career have I played for a side that displayed more team spirit than the 1974 Indian squad for the Asian Youth Championship.

We did not have a Mental Conditioning Coach. Nobody has ever delivered a motivational speech to us. We never underwent any training for developing focus and concentration. We were 18 happy-go-lucky teenagers, who were simply determined to protect our pride and wanted to win every match, no matter how strong the rivals were. It turned us into a fiercely cohesive unit.

When I look back five decades later, I wonder how everything fell into place. Our team was packed with ball-players and a host of players, whose individual talent was above average. We had a tough time against hosts Thailand in the semi-finals and Iran in the final. But we won the ball in the middle and never lost our nerves.

Individually, I had a great tournament. My performance was noticed and both coaches were happy with me. Once the tournament ended, the accredited journalist covering the meet prepared a list of the 20 best players in the 1974 edition. I and our full-back, CC Jacob, were the two Indians, who made that list that was named Asian Youth All-Star.

I scored a goal in the tournament against Singapore in the quarter-finals. In the final, I created lots of problems for the Iran defence from the left. They were frustrated and one of their defenders punched me in the stomach. The referee did not notice. It was a nasty foul and for a few minutes, I couldn't even breathe properly. As I was lying half unconscious on the ground, Arun Da rushed in for my on-ground treatment and told me, 'Harjinder, don't forget, you are the son of a Sardar. They can't get you so easily. Just get up and fight.' I jumped on my feet and told the referee I was ready to resume.

It was a dream run. We played six matches; Laos, Burma, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand and Iran. We overcame it all. True, we were not runaway winners, but none of our opponents could lower our colours. Iran came to the final after scoring 16 goals in five matches without conceding any. We breached their citadel twice and left them thoroughly frustrated. Iran were a mighty side. They won the title in 1973, 1975 and 1976. They won the 1974 edition too, but had to share it with us.

Sharing the trophy also had its share of problems. The organisers had 20 gold medals and an equal number of silver medals ready for the prize distribution after the final. They were in a fix when the two teams were declared joint champions. We were given 10 gold medals and 10 silver medals and the team management was told to distribute them among the players. The coaches then held a lottery to identify who should get the gold medals. I was one of the lucky ones.

No, we received no prize money from the All India Football Federation. I have no regrets. Those were the amateur days. Money was not plenty. But there was no lack of professional attitude from our side. The local Indian community in Thailand was thrilled. They showered us with lots of gifts.

The style of football has changed. So have the coaching technique, approach, and attitude of the players. What has not changed is the hunger to win. That makes all the difference. That's the reason why we made all the difference in Bangkok 50 years ago.

**(As told to Jaydeep Basu)**





# CC Jacob: The man who braved a storm and immortalised the title

*Former India international CC Jacob recalls his treasured experience as a part of the 1974 AFC Youth Championship-winning squad.*

## **SRUTI CHAKRABORTY**

Nineteen-year-old CC Jacob was a rookie wide-eyed left full-back, who had no clue about the pressure and adversity of international football when he arrived in Bangkok in April 1974 for the Asian Youth Championship. It was a baptism of fire, yet a bonding experience for the teenager from Kerala. In the final against Iran, he was brutally fouled, punched in the stomach and was a victim of every unsporting trick that a footballer can face on the pitch.

But on the night of April 30, 1974, when India drew 2-2 with mighty Iran to emerge joint champions, Jacob, in the Indian defence, was like the wall topped with spikes to deter intruders. He was simply unbeatable.

As the referee blew the final whistle in front of a 15,000-strong crowd at the Suphachalasai Stadium, Jacob looked up at the sky, silently expressing gratitude to the stars. It was an unforgettable night for both India and Jacob, who returned home with the winners' medal in his maiden appearance in National colours.

"It's been 50 years now," recalls Jacob fondly from his Kochi home. "I remember I joined the Indian camp for the Asian Youth Championship almost immediately after I helped Kerala win their first Santosh Trophy title in Kochi in the 1973-74 season. If joining the National camp was a great feeling, then winning an international title in my first appearance for India gave me another level of satisfaction," said Jacob.

India kicked off their Asian Youth Championship group stage campaign with a hard-fought 1-0 victory over Laos. Facing a strong Burma side in the second match, India matched them stride for stride, getting a narrow 1-0 win. In the final group encounter, India battled to a 2-2 draw against Hong Kong.

Advancing to the quarter-finals, India held Singapore to a draw before clinching victory in the penalty shootout (4-1). In the semi-finals, India triumphed over Thailand 2-1 and in the final against Iran, India played a thrilling 2-2 draw in extra-time.

"I remember during the extra time with Iran, a rival forward punched me in my stomach, and I thought I would die of pain, but I continued playing because that's how we were trained to play," said Jacob proudly.

"Before the match, our coach Arun Ghosh told me, "If a goalkeeper comes out of his position, it is the responsibility of the last defender on the line to go to the near post and save it." And I did exactly the same. In extra time, I made two goal-line saves in a tightly contested match. It made a huge impact," Jacob mentioned.

The team trained at the Netaji Subhas National Institute of Sports ground in Patiala under the coaching of Syed Abdus Salaam and Arun Ghosh before heading to Thailand.

"After I came to the Indian team coaching camp, which was held for nearly 40 days, we had training sessions with seniors and juniors. It was really useful and I still remember that we had the chance to play some matches against the seniors, which was the biggest advantage we had before going to the championship in Bangkok," he said.

"I played as a right wing-back and used to overlap for the attacks. I used to strictly follow the suggestions of the coaches. The pattern continued even after reaching Bangkok. We never roamed around the city or went out shopping. We remained focussed on the championship, which was our primary objective. The Indian community also supported us well. Sometimes they used to bring Indian food for us to our hotel," Jacob recalled.

After the championship was over, Jacob and Harjinder Singh figured in the list of the 20 best players of the tournament picked up by the journalists covering the meet. It was named the Asian All-Star Team.

"Harjinder and I were named on the Asian All-Star team. Our captain, Shabbir Ali, and vice-captain, Prasun Banerjee, were great players and leaders. Without them, we would not have won the title. Everyone else also contributed to the team's success, which is still spoken about," Jacob said.

The former India player lauded the All India Football Federation's initiative to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of India's 1974 Asian Youth Championship triumph on Tuesday, April 30, 2024, in Kolkata and to felicitate the players. "I am thankful to AIFF President Mr. Kalyan Chaubey, and the Executive Committee members for this great initiative," he said.

The city of Bangkok remained an integral part of Jacob's international career. "My journey with the National team began and ended in Bangkok. Once I graduated to the senior level, I remained a part of the Indian team till 1983. That year, in the King's Cup in Bangkok, I suffered an injury and decided to hang up my boots," he said.





## Team spirit the foundation for India's success in 1974 AFC Youth Championship, says Shabbir Ali

*Captain of the famous 1974 India Junior team, Shabbir Ali looked back at the mental fortitude with which the players approached the tournament.*

### **SOUMO GHOSH**

Team spirit, or the importance of it, is often highlighted by players and coaches alike. It was with the help of this team spirit that a rag-tag bunch of boys in the India U-20 Men's National Team went on to create history at the 1974 AFC Youth Championship, in Bangkok, Thailand.

India were up against the odds even before they set foot in Bangkok, with the uncertainty of their travel looming large during their month-long training camp in Patiala. However, the Blue Colts overcame every one of them, as they eventually went on to become the joint-champions of the championship, alongside Iran.

Team captain Shabbir Ali, who later went on to become a household name in Indian football, recalled, "We were facing a few issues about our travel to Bangkok, but eventually, on the AIFF's request, the ministry finally sanctioned our travel. There were absolutely no expectations on us, but we managed to prove all doubters wrong." Ali, who later went on to captain the senior India National Team too, felt that the results were down to the fighting spirit that the players showed in Thailand, five decades ago.

“The boys showed some excellent fighting spirit during that tour. Most of us were playing international football for the first time, so it was a new experience for us. Playing in front of such crowds was also something that was new to many of us,” he said. “Only the boys from Calcutta (now Kolkata) had played in front of hostile crowd, and they helped the rest of us.”

The forward later went on to be one of the top stars at Calcutta maidan, East Bengal and Mohammedan Sporting. “The grit, character, and togetherness that the boys showed was all down to the team spirit that was built by our coach Arun (Ghosh) da and the team manager Mr. Dilip Ghosh,” said Ali.

“I remember that our daily allowance was not much back in the junior team, so our team manager would get us all together and make morning coffee for everyone, every day we were in Thailand,” said Ali. “These may be small gestures, but they go a long way, especially when you’re dealing with players of a certain age group.

“The main thing for us was to be confident, and we got that after we beat Laos (1-0) in our first game. That win was the most important one, as we now had the belief that this level of football was not beyond us, that we had a chance to do something,” said Ali.

The team had the rather modest target of reaching the quarterfinals, which they did with much aplomb, topping their group. However, a terrific penalty shootout performance by goalkeeper Prasanta Mitra meant that India would face hosts Thailand in the semi-final.





“That match was a real test for us. They had so many fans, and we only had about a 100 in the stands. Nobody would have given us a chance, before that game started. We were just enjoying being in the semi-finals, while Thailand were the hosts, were backed by all the fans, and had scored 11 goals, and conceded none during their group stage,” Ali recalled. “But we pushed through all the way to the final.” India won 2-1, Shabbir Ali and Mohammad Yaqoob scoring the two goals.

The final was yet another surprise for one and all, as India went on to draw 2-2 with defending champions Iran after extra time, and both teams were declared joint winners.

## **SPOILS SHARED**

Generally, a team that are declared tournament champions would expect to come back home to celebrate with the trophy. However, with two champions, it was not exactly standard procedure.

The Blue Colts returned to Calcutta with a fair amount of fanfare. Felicitations by various parites were the order of the day for the new Asian champions. However, there was one item missing from those celebrations – not that anybody complained about it.

“I do not remember coming back to Kolkata with the trophy. They had just one trophy and two champions, so it first went to Iran for six months, and then came to India for the other six, before it had to be returned,” said Ali. “We did get to click some pictures with the trphy after the match, though.”

The All India Football Federation, on Tuesday, April 30, 2024, is hosting a 50th year celebration of the heroes of the Indian team who were crowned champions of the 1974 AFC Youth Championship. The players and coaches of the famous team will be felicitated in Kolkata by AIFF President Mr. Kalyan Chaubey.

“It’s a very good initiative that the Federation President Mr. Kalyan Chaubey is taking. It’s important that we remember the past heroes of Indian football, and celebrate them,” said Ali.



## From relegation to I-League champion: Best Goalkeeper Padam Chettri vows to improve every day

*Padam Chettri has come a long way in just one season, going from the relegated Mumbai Kenkre FC to being named Best Goalkeeper of the season with Mohammedan Sporting.*

### **AKHIL RAWAT**

Only a year back, goalkeeper Padam Chettri was guarding the citadel of a club, who failed to save themselves from relegation. His then club, Mumbai Kenkre FC, managed only three wins and conceded 40 goals from 22 matches in the 2022-23 I-League season, and lost the rights to play the I-League this season.

Fast forward one year, the 26-year-old is now easily one of the most important members of the I-League champions Mohammedan Sporting, and has even been awarded the Best Goalkeeper of the Season. The boys from Shillong, who only started his senior career in football just four years back, however, learned valuable lessons when his side were down and out.

"I spent two seasons at Kenkre, and the expectations were completely different in that kind of scenario. We struggled to save our existence in the I-League for two seasons," said Chettri. "It helped me grow as a person and as a player too. I had belief in my own abilities when I joined Mohammedan Sporting. I did not think about the past and worked every day to improve myself."



From conceding 27 goals in 15 appearances with just one clean sheet, Padam Chettri has gone on to be a part of one of the most stable back-lines in the 2023-24 I-League season, conceding only 18 goals in 22 appearances, with eight clean sheets to his name.

The Best Goalkeeper of the season said, "I am very happy that my efforts have finally been recognised. We have all worked hard this season and won the league, which was the most important thing. But the individual honour is also special. I am thankful to my teammates and coaches."

The 26-year-old remained humble, attributing the stellar performances to the defenders who operated in front of him.

"I made some good saves, which is again my duty, but I had some fine defenders in front of me too. It was a team effort. I always wanted to improve and would like to thank our goalkeeping coach (Lalit Thapa) too, for his work with me," said Chettri.

For Chettri, who had started his career at Rangdajied United FC in Shillong, before moving to Ryntih S&C, and eventually to Mumbai Kenkre FC, it was a unique experience to play for a club, which has a rich history of 133 years.

"It's not easy to live up to the expectations of our fans, but it's all about the mentality. It is added pressure, but if you take it the right way, it can help you stay focussed and work harder," said Chettri. "We must understand their emotions. They are our 12th man on the pitch. We try our best, but sometimes the results are not what we expect. As a player, one needs to understand the emotions of the fans in such cases and work according to that.

"I don't know how many expected us to win, but we believed in ourselves from the start," said Chettri.



# I-League Emerging Player Gyamar Nikum turns a role model in Arunachal Pradesh

*Hailing from Arunachal Pradesh, Gyamar Nikum hopes to blaze a path for more talented players from the state.*

**SOUOMO GHOSH**

The journey of any footballer is strewn with struggles aplenty. Many have to grind it out in the academies and lower leagues before they get their due opportunities at the professional level. Inter Kashi's Gyamar Nikum, however, has had a meteoric rise through the ranks in the last three years. The 19-year-old has improved to the point that he was named the Best Emerging Player of the season, after his performance in the I-League.

"I had no idea that I was named the Best Emerging player, when it was announced. I was in my hometown, where we don't get much network," said Nikum, who hails from a small town on the Indo-China border, called Kurung Kumey, in Arunachal Pradesh. Nikum only came to know about the development a day later, when he was informed of the same by his friends.



"I did not believe it first, so I went to an area where we do get network and check it out for myself. Everyone was very happy once I informed them of it," he said. While it seems like Nikum has been around for some time, he was not able to play a full season prior to the current campaign. The 19-year-old played 22 matches for Inter Kashi in the I-League, scoring four goals and the same number of assists.

The youngster signed up with Rajasthan United in 2021, and played one and a half seasons at the club, before moving to Mumbai City FC in January, 2023. As it was difficult to get game time in a side that challenges for the Indian Super League title, Nikum took a loan move to Inter Kashi, a transfer that seems to have done wonders for him.

"This was the best season I've had so far. I didn't get so many opportunities to play when I was in my first season at Rajasthan United (2021-22), but I think my performances in the next season were quite good, which is why I got the opportunity to play for Mumbai," he said. "So getting a full season under my belt was important.

"Everyone was very supportive, right from the management, to the coaches, the players, and the support staff. The overall environment at the club was just great, so I really learned a lot. I am very thankful that I got the opportunity to come to this club on loan this season," said Nikum.

For Inter Kashi, who finished fourth in the I-League this season, it was not always an easy ride. The newly-formed club, with its band of new recruits, who for the most part, had not played alongside each other, struggled in the initial part of the season. During the first phase, they could garner only four victories. However, it was in the second phase that the club got together to rack up the wins, seven in all.

“It was quite difficult for us in the first phase. Took us a fair bit of time to understand our strengths and weaknesses, and figure out how we could operate alongside each other,” said Nikum. “But as we kept playing together, the results started to come, especially in the second half of the league. We grew more confident, and managed to put a good run together.” Inter Kashi ended the season on an 11-match unbeaten run.

## **A SOUGHT-AFTER FOOTBALLER AMONG YOUNGSTERS**

While Nikum’s climb through the ranks in the last three years has been quite a steep one, the youngster came out of the literal wilderness in footballing terms. Having picked up the sport at school, the creative midfielder was looking for academies to join, and was finally invited for trials at Rajasthan United, after he contacted the club through social media.

“I did not have much idea about how to go about the whole process. So when I got to know that Rajasthan United are recruiting players for their academy, I contacted them over social media, and they offered me a trial,” said Nikum. He has not looked back since.

Nikum spent only half a year in the academy, as he was soon drafted into the senior team for the 2021-22 season. “My parents were initially not too keen on the whole thing, but I convinced them that I wanted to give it a try. Once I made the senior team, they were happy. Now, they are very supportive,” he said.

While Nikum has made it to the top rungs of Indian Football, he feels that there are many others in his state, who can make a similar journey.





“The passion and love for football in Arunachal Pradesh is immense. We saw in the Santosh Trophy, how many fans came out to watch the matches, even when Arunachal were not playing,” he said. “People travel from far and wide to watch the Arunachal league and local matches. I feel that there are many talented players there, who have the potential to go to the top level.”

He may only be 19 years old, but Nikum has already become a role model for the aspiring youngsters of Arunachal football.

“I would love to see more players from my state get opportunities to play in the I-League or ISL. I get a lot of calls from parents who are not sure of what path to take for their kids if they want to get into football. We have not had many from the state who have done well at the top level, so parents are always unsure.” But I always try to advise them on what to do. Even if some of them make it to academies and then to clubs after seeing me as an example, I would consider that as a success,” he said.

# Sporting Club Bengaluru and Dempo Sports Club promoted to I-League



Sporting Club Bengaluru were crowned champions of the 2023-24 I-League 2 with two rounds to spare, and were promoted to the I-League 2024-25 for the first time ever. On the league's final day, Dempo Sports Club also confirmed their return to the I-League nine years following their relegation, beating Sudeva Delhi FC to finish second.

Formed as recently as 2022, SC Bengaluru's instant success story is one to take note of. It all started with their title-winning campaign in the 2022-23 Bangalore Super Division, their debut season in the league. As a result, they were eligible to participate in the 2023-24 I-League 3 and went on to top Group D only by a better goal difference over Diamond Harbour FC to qualify for the play-offs.

In the I-League 3 play-offs, SC Bengaluru finished in the top three alongside Dempo SC and Sporting Clube de Goa to book their spot in the I-League 2. Their sensational league triumph was mainly made possible by their impeccable home form. The Golden Tigers won all seven matches at the Bangalore Football Stadium, and four of the seven on the road. They finished on top with 33 points and with a tally of 28 goals, the highest in the eight-team league. The Golden Tigers also boasted of the best defence, having conceded only 12 goals - a testimony to their dominant and unrivalled campaign.

Dempo finished the season in second place with 27 points, four ahead of Sudeva Delhi, who would've secured an immediate promotion back to the I-League had they beaten the Golden Eagles on the final day.

At the opposite end of the table, both Mumbai-based sides, Mumbai Kenkre FC and Maharashtra Oranje FC were relegated. Both sides met at COE Kharghar on the final day, with Maharashtra Oranje running out 1-0 winners, but the three points weren't enough to save themselves as United SC bagged a 2-1 win over Sporting Clube de Goa in Vasco da Gama. The Kolkata side finished on 15 points, the same as Maharashtra Oranje, but pipped them based on a better head-to-head record to maintain their I-League 2 status for another season. Mumbai Kenkre, who were relegated from the I-League last season, ended bottom of the eight-team standings with just nine points in 14 games.



## AIFF records historic rise in women footballers

Indian football has recorded a historic 138 per cent surge in women's player registration for the last two years, indicating a healthy growth in the popularity of the sport as well as an increase in young female athletes opting for football, professionally.

According to the All India Football Federation (AIFF) Central Registration System (CRS) data, India has 27,936 registered female footballers as of March 2024. This is a massive 138 % rise in numbers of female footballers in last 21 months. India had 11,724 female footballers registered in June 2022.

"It's a very positive trend we are witnessing in India," said Kalyan Chaubey. "To have as many as 16,212 new female players in our football ecosystem is an encouraging sign that we are on the right track in our planning for the women's football in India."

Chaubey attributed the increase to a slew of measures including course correction that was brought in for the Indian Women's League (IWL) in the current season of 2023-24, in addition to the subsequent introduction of a second division competition IWL-2. "Availability of live broadcast has indeed helped in enhancing the profile of the sport," he added.

The 2022-23 season of IWL was played at a single venue in Ahmedabad among 16 teams, with Gokulam Kerala FC winning their third consecutive title. This season (2023-24) the format was changed to 'home-and-away', which was a big success, appreciated by the clubs, players and fans. Odisha FC emerged victorious ending GKFC's 3-year long dominance and will represent India in the AFC continental competition.



The inaugural IWL-2 saw participation of 15 clubs at the group stage, six of which have qualified for the final round scheduled next month in Goa.

Today, India boasts of 24 active State Leagues for women's football, which acts as the 3rd tier of the pyramid and has helped the national federation populate the sport among masses.

"These are baby steps we have taken in the last 16-18 months, having a focused approach on women's football. The current season is a breakaway year for Indian football in many ways.

"We are noticing a rapid growth in the women's football in India. Players and clubs are getting more game time due to increase in number of matches in domestic circuit, making it increasingly competitive. Opportunity to play the AFC organised continental championship - AFC Women's Cup - is a big motivator for India clubs today," said Kalyan Chaubey, adding that, "women's football will have priority focus in the coming years."



## Indian senior women's team to play two friendlies against Uzbekistan in Tashkent

The Indian senior women's team will play two friendly matches against Uzbekistan on May 31 and June 4 in Tashkent, during the upcoming FIFA women's international match window. Head coach Langam Chaoba Devi, on Monday, May 6, 2024, announced a probable list of 30 players, who will join the national team camp beginning from May 16 in Hyderabad.

The two-week training camp will be held at Sreenidi Deccan FC's Deccan Arena in Hyderabad. The Blue Tigresses will leave for Uzbekistan on May 29.

India were last in action during the Turkish Women's Cup in February, where they finished runners-up to Kosovo in Alanya. India last faced Uzbekistan in November 2023 at the AFC Women's Olympic Qualifiers Round 2, which was also held in Tashkent. The hosts won 3-0 on that occasion. India are currently ranked 66th in the FIFA World Rankings, while Uzbekistan are 48th.

Mr M Satyanarayan, AIFF Acting Secretary General, said, "This is the second international trip during the FIFA match window for the senior women's team this year after the runners-up finish in Turkey. They will take on Uzbekistan, who are ranked much above them, and these two games will be a good learning curve for the Blue Tigresses."



### **THE 30-MEMBER PROBABLES LIST FOR THE INDIAN SENIOR WOMEN'S TEAM'S HYDERABAD CAMP:**

**Goalkeepers:** Anshika, Maibam Linthoingambi Devi, Moirangthem Monalisha Devi, Nandini, Payal Ramesh Basude, Shreya Hooda.

**Defenders:** Aruna Bag, Astam Oraon, Hemam Shilky Devi, Juli Kishan, Loitongbam Ashalata Devi, Sanju, Sorokhaibam Ranjana Chanu, Thounaojam Kritina Devi, Wangkhem Linthoingambi Devi

**Midfielders:** Anju Tamang, Karthika Angamuthu, Naorem Priyanka Devi, Pavithra Murugesan, Sangita Basfore  
**Forwards:** Jyothi, Kajol Hubert Dsouza, Karishma Purushottam Shirvoikar, Kaviya Pakkirisamy, Lynda Kom Serto, Manisha, Neha, Pyari Xaxa, Sandhiya Ranganathan, Soumya Guguloth.

**Head Coach:** Chaoba Devi

### **INDIAN SENIOR WOMEN'S TEAM FRIENDLY FIXTURES IN TASHKENT:**

**May 31:** Uzbekistan vs India

**June 4:** Uzbekistan vs India



## STATE OF AFFAIRS

# Karnavati Knights emerge inaugural champions of Gujarat Super League

Karnavati Knights emerged as the inaugural champions of the Gujarat Super League 2024, the first franchise-based football league in the state, after a penalty shoot-out victory over Vadodara Warriors in the final on Sunday, May 12, 2024, at the EKA Arena in Ahmedabad.

Karnavati Knights, who emerged as league stage toppers with 11 points, took the lead in the 32nd minute as Irfan Abbasi let fly from 25 yards out and picked out the top corner. Vadodara Warriors equalised 10 minutes into the second half, with Manvir Singh drilling a low shot into the bottom corner from 12 yards. With the score locked at 1-1 until the end of 90 minutes, the final went into penalties, where Karnavati Knights converted all five of them to grab a 5-3 victory. Daniel Patel scored the winning penalty after goalkeeper Vishal Dube came up big to save Vadodara Warriors' Mohammed Rizwan's spot-kick.

The six-team Gujarat Super League began on May 1, and was played in a single round-robin format. Karnavati Knights remained unbeaten with three wins and two draws, while Vadodara Warriors joined them in the final as runners-up with 10 points. Ahmedabad Avengers and Saurashtra Spartans missed out narrowly, finishing third and fourth, respectively, with nine points each. Gandhinagar Giants were fifth with three points, while Surat Strikers ended up bottom with a solitary point.

Mr Lalnginglova Hmar, Hon'ble Minister of State of Sports and Youth Services, Govt. of Mizoram and AIFF League Committee Chairperson, was the chief guest at the final. The guests of honour included Mr Mukesh Puri, IAS, Additional Chief Secretary, Govt. of Gujarat, Mr Syed Husain Naqvi, AIFF Executive Committee Member, Shri Vrajraj Kumarji Mahodayshri of VYO.



**ALL INDIA  
FOOTBALL  
FEDERATION**