



VISION 2047

T A R G E T 2 0 2 6



AFC President's Recognition Award for Grassroots Football
Silver

ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION



**AIFF STRATEGIC MEET,
A RESOUNDING SUCCESS**

- Kalyan Chaubey
President, AIFF

**AIFF BAGS
AFC GRASSROOT
AWARD**



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President's Note

AIFF Strategic meet a resounding success

Kalyan Chaubey

A three-day-long conclave, relating to any issue of whatever importance, is often touted as tiring, leaving the participants somewhat weary.

But in complete contrast to this cliché, the three-day AIFF State Gradation and State Specific Strategic Plans at the Football House from November 12-14, 2024, was one of the most vibrant and unique ones I attended.

Having chaired it for three continuous days amounting to 25 hours, I felt truly refreshed in the end, and was happy to note that the members, who actively participated to make this conclave a resounding success, expressed similar feelings.

There were not one, but several reasons behind my claim. For the first time, 32 Member Associations (MAs) from across India converged to discuss and deliberate upon the diverse challenges ahead for Indian football in each state of India. They didn't stop at football, but also delved deep on taking futsal and beach soccer ahead.

The discussions, which lasted for three days, saw the principal office bearers of the federation listen to the presidents and secretaries of the respective MAs in different groups of six or seven people, who were offered the floor for 40 minutes each.

The MAs made detailed presentations of their operations at the state level over the last three years and unfolded their future plans in the next three years while realistically identifying their challenges and advantages.

The AIFF officials also deliberated upon the proposals from the respective state associations for the development of football in their respective states in alignment with the AIFF's Vision 2047 plan.



We must remember that India is a vast country, with diverse cultures. Each state and region has its own set of challenges that should be tackled in their own unique ways. The challenges that lie ahead of West Bengal or Maharashtra cannot be the same as those of Ladakh or Andaman & Nicobar. The different challenges finally comprise the central challenge that we should overcome collectively.

We must ensure that there are state-wise plans for maximum optimization of development, which will also help Indian football to move ahead in totality. Our proposals and discussions for the entire 25 hours in three days hovered around this specific thought.

The meeting agreed there is an urgent need for an advanced education system for grassroots coaches and referees. The federation currently has 13,195 licensed coaches, and 3,616 registered referees for the 2024-25 season.

The meeting felt if the coaches should undergo refresher courses for training at the grassroots level, then the same should be applied to the referees as well. The meeting deliberated upon the improvement of Indian refereeing in general and felt that this is one area that should be looked into specifically.



The members also agreed that more match time is required for Indian domestic players and discussed how the AIFF and the MAs can restructure the Santosh Trophy or the State Leagues to create more match time. It will simultaneously help in producing a bigger number of Indian strikers in the near future.

We discussed plans at length to enhance India's performance in the international arena. It chalked out a strategy of having longer camps for U20 prospects that would help India do better in the 2026 Asian Games and 2027 Asian Cup.

Our discussions weren't restricted to men's football only. All members unanimously emphasised giving equal importance to women's football and were happy with the fact that AIFF has already signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Swedish Football with a broader view in mind.

Last but not the least, we have chalked out a plan that would automatically enhance the popularity and acceptability of all tournaments like I-League, I-League 2, Indian Women's League, Santosh Trophy, and Women's Nationals for Rajmata Jijabai Trophy.

A far more professional production of these tournaments through quality specifications would take these tournaments to broader platforms and would cater to more people than it was.



AIFF wins AFC President's Recognition Award for Grassroots Football (Silver)

All India Football Federation, on Tuesday, October 29, 2024, was conferred with the prestigious AFC President's Recognition Award for Grassroots Football (Silver) during the AFC Annual Awards 2023 in Seoul, South Korea.

Since the preceding AFC Annual Awards in Doha last year, when it was handed the Bronze award, the AIFF has been endorsed with a Silver-level membership under the AFC Grassroots Charter.

The AIFF has been credited for its strong commitment towards grassroots development and establishing long-term sustainable programmes, facilitating regional involvement, and strong partnerships with various stakeholders across the country.

AIFF President, Shri Kalyan Chaubey, who accepted the award on behalf of Indian football, said: "The AFC President's Recognition Award for Grassroots Football (Silver) conferred on the All India Football Federation today didn't come overnight and is the result of a combined effort of many factors.

"The highly successful Khelo India, inspired and launched under the guidance of Honourable Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, in 90 different cities, remains a huge motivation for the All India Football Federation. The AIFF, through its member associations, took part in Khelo India football events in 87 cities and it played a big role in grassroots development. We remained indebted to our visionary Prime Minister and Khelo India.



“Similarly, the FIFA-AIFF Academy launched in Bhubaneswar is a product of FIFA Talent Development Scheme and the personal interest taken by legendary Arsene Wenger. At the same time, the AFC coaches' education guidance has helped the grassroots development programme to a great extent. On behalf of the All India Football Federation and Indian football in general, I express my gratitude and thanks to all of them for contributing to grassroots development.”

The Asian Football Confederation, in a media release said: “The AIFF’s Blue Cubs initiative, which aims to engage an impressive 35 million children by 2026, has been earmarked as a game-changer for football in India as it includes several crucial elements, ranging from establishing development centres and hosting festivals to expanding the reach of the game to schools and remote villages through active collaboration with major stakeholders such as Indian Super League clubs, local governing bodies and non-profitable organisations.

“At the same time, the AIFF’s commitment towards expanding the length and breadth of its competitions across the subcontinent has also been paying dividends with more Indian age-group sides featuring in the AFC’s competitions in recent years.”



Rahul Bheke's fiery header helps India draw 1-1 with Malaysia

AKHIL RAWAT

India displayed good domination over the proceedings before settling for a 1-1 draw against Malaysia in their final FIFA Friendly of the year at the Gachibowli Stadium on Monday, 18 November, 2024.

In an action-packed first session, India were left in arrears in the 19th minute when a rather freak goal allowed the visitors to take the lead through Paulo Josue.

Taken a bit aback by the unexpected development, Manolo Márquez's men stepped up the attacks and found the equaliser in the 39th minute when defender Rahul Bheke's powerful and accurate header off a corner crashed into the net leaving custodian Hazmi Bin very little chance to react.

A Friendly in the FIFA calendar is always fought fiercely, and the 33rd encounter between the two old Asian rivals was no different on Monday. While India came calling to find a win in the concluding International of 2024, Malaysia, under Spanish coach Pau Martí, looked for tactical domination on the pitch with clever interchanging of positions. Overall, all the ingredients were there for the entertainment of the 15,000-plus-strong crowd.



Márquez had his ideas in place, and he played his cards accordingly. He handed over the senior international debut to striker Irfan Yadwad, leaving seasoned Lallianzuala Chhangte and Farukh Choudhary his company upfront. The Indian coach certainly picked up this opportunity to test his fresh resources in the international arena. After all, this was India's last match before they plunged into the bigger battle of the Asian Cup qualifiers next March. He handed over the international caps to three more debutants—Hmingthanmawia Ralte, Jithin MS, and Vibin Mohanan—during the course of the match.

The coach later said he wasn't exactly happy with the pace of the game but felt his team were capable of doing better. With the comeback man Sandesh Jhingan wearing the captain's armband, the Blue Tigers were making repeated inroads in the Malaysian area, but the goal against them left all their plans in near disarray.

In the 18th minute, a long ball in the Indian box caught the slightly advanced defence somewhat off-guard, but there was no reason for anxiety. But panic gripped everyone around on the ground when goalkeeper Gurpreet Singh Sandhu rushed out of the box and missed the flight. As the ball was rolling freely inside the area, all the Malaysian striker Paulo Josué had to do was jog in and tap the ball into the goal. More than a goal, it was like a nasty stab in the hearts of the Indian fans.

Thankfully, India woke up immediately and launched repeated raids to repair the damage. The much-awaited equaliser finally came six minutes before half time. The Brandon Fernandes corner kick from the right landed in the area with pinpoint accuracy, and as Jhingan ran away with the marker, Rahul Bheke came up with the crucial header, much to the relief of the partisan crowd.

India's Brandon Fernandes was adjudged the Tulsidas Balaram Player of the Match.

India: Gurpreet Singh Sandhu (GK); Rahul Bheke (Hmingthanmawia Ralte 67'), Anwar Ali, Sandesh Jhingan (C), Roshan Singh Naorem; Suresh Singh Wangjam (Vibin Mohanan 90+2'), Lalengmawia Ralte, Brandon Fernandes (Liston Colaco 90+2'); Lallianzuala Chhangte (Manvir Singh 67'), Farukh Choudhary (Jithin MS 79'), Irfan Yadwad (Edmund Lalrindika 79').



You form a bond in every battle, says a revitalised Sandesh Jhingan ahead of Malaysia friendly

A long injury layoff has failed to dampen the spirit of the centre-back, now aiming for his third straight Asian Cup final round

AKHIL RAWAT

Almost 10 months since last playing for the Indian national team at the AFC Asian Cup in January, Sandesh Jhingan is finally back with the Blue Tigers after recovering from his anterior cruciate ligament injury.

Describing the recovery journey as a mix of emotions - regret, anxiety, belief and whatnot - the 31-year-old centre-back feels the same motivation as a young player about to make his debut. His actual debut was in 2015, and the friendly against Malaysia was his 64th cap. When the national team go an entire year without one of their most reliable and consistent players of the past decade, it feels like a big miss. Gurpreet Singh Sandhu labelled Jhingan's comeback as not just the return of a key player but a friend and a leader in the camp.

Speaking to [the-aiff.com](https://www.aiff.com) from the national team camp in Hyderabad, Jhingan opened up about the arduous 10 months, regret of missing out on playing for the country, mental strength and the prospect of qualifying for the third successive AFC Asian Cup.

Sandesh, first of all, welcome back to the national team. How does it feel?

Grateful. I feel pure happiness. Sometimes people use this word very lightly. It's pure happiness and gratitude. I'm motivated. There are a lot of emotions, a lot of work behind getting back in the national team. So yeah, just happy to be here. Pure happiness, I would say.

It's been almost 10 months since you last played for India in the Asian Cup. What's your recovery journey been like? If you could condense these 10 months into a few words.

Again, a mix of emotions. Of course, when it happens, you feel sad, you feel upset. Because you let the country down, you let your club down. So that was the initial feeling. Then the fear of the surgery, a little bit of optimism in between, thinking you can just carry on for two or three months more and then play those important games because we were in a very crucial part with the national team and at my club level. So I was trying to push again, to keep going for another two or three months. But it came to a moment where it became too risky. That feeling was there post surgery when the doubt, the anxiety came. Then you start walking, then you start jogging and then some motivation comes in again. The pain and the swelling comes and again the doubts resurface.

It was full of fixed emotions but all in all, the whole credit to my comeback, and I'm not just saying it for the sake of it, I'm being very honest. 90 to 95% of the credit goes to the people who were around me at that time. Starting from my teammates in the national team, national team physiotherapist Gigy George, at my club, Russell (Pinto) was there, the doctor who operated me, the coaching staff of the national team and the club, my family. They all made it possible and they deserve all the credit. I just did maybe five per cent of it. That's why I say I'm very grateful for the people around me and that's the beauty of humanity, it's the people who make you. And yeah, that was it and I really never let it put me down.

We played a lot of crucial matches this year where we missed your presence. I'm sure you must have been watching every game at home. What's that feeling like? Is there sort of a regret? I wish I were there kind of feeling?

Of course you regret it. There's no denying that. The first feeling that comes is that you let everyone down. I've been with the boys like Gurpreet, Amrinder, Manvir, everyone, playing together for many, many years. You form that bond in every battle, in every game, you go in together. And then when you're not there, you kind of feel you let your teammates down, you let the coaching staff down. But then it's just, that's football, you know. I won't lie, after the June game (against Qatar), I was on a balcony alone and I was quiet for a few minutes and I just thought... That's football.



Let's talk about mental strength. You've suffered and recovered from quite a few injuries in your career. You once said you broke your ankle when you were 17. You had an ACL in Kerala Blasters also. You had injury problems during your stint in Croatia also. And now this recent ACL. How do you treat these setbacks in life? How important is mental strength when you suffer physically?

I'll tell you what mental strength is, actually. Just go around your town and walk on the streets. There you will see what real pressure is, what people have to go through to put food on the table. That's real mental strength. What I do, mostly all athletes, we have our own struggles, but I don't call this mental strength. This is part of the job. If I cry about my situation, of course it's tough, I'm not taking it away. What I do is just part of my job. Your work is your religion. So I try to do it with full honesty and passion. But I just cannot fathom the idea that we or I have a strong mental strength. I'm just a random guy who's living his dream. Mental strength is the day-to-day life.

Let's talk about the future now. Our sole focus is to qualify for the Asian Cup for the third successive time. We have been playing a lot of quality opponents recently and Malaysia will be another one. How are the preparations? What do we expect from this game, and how will this help us ahead of next year's Asian Cup Qualifiers?

First of all, it's good you highlighted the importance of it. At least people now understand the importance of being at the Asian Cup regularly, not only keeping the idea that we want to be at the World Cup, the stage of your ultimate dream. And I've said it before also, 10 years ago when I made my debut, most of us here knew that the ultimate goal is being regulars at the Asian Cup, and we've done it in the last two editions. We are the first team/batch to go to consecutive Asian Cups. So now going in the third one will be another big step for us.

The atmosphere in the team is brilliant. And we all know the importance of these friendlies because from now till March we don't play any other international game. So we know we need to get a good result. But the whole point - because we have a new coaching staff, there's a new philosophy, a new system, a new style- is that it takes time to implement. People kind of get bored hearing this word "takes time". But it actually takes time. Everything takes time to develop. If it develops very fast, it's not gonna last long. So, one of the main objectives in this game will be, if you look at the last three games, each game we've improved as a team. So our target is to do one step better, do a much better game than against Vietnam.

And then after this, we'll go back to our clubs but we'll get an idea from here about what we need to be prepared about, individually to be ready for selection and to help the team in March because those are the main games. Get three points, get the clean sheet, give an honest performance and make the country proud. That's the thing.





Qualifying for Asian Cup bare minimum target, says Gurpreet Singh Sandhu

Every soul in the National team looks at the bigger picture and gives hundred percent, confirms the seasoned campaigner of many a battle

AKHIL RAWAT

Gurpreet Singh Sandhu is now into his 13th year of national team duty. The most experienced player in the Indian squad after Sunil Chhetri's retirement, he completed a diamond jubilee of international caps (75) against Vietnam last month, wearing the captain's armband and crucially saving a penalty.

Sandhu shared his thoughts before the Malaysia game, during a virtual media interaction.

"Everyone knows this is our last FIFA friendly window before the all-important Asian Cup Qualifiers in March. So, it's very important for us to make the most of this opportunity. We are happy to have a familiar face in Sandesh Jhingan coming back. It's great to see that he's recovered well and has already played a couple of games (for FC Goa).

We have five more days of training before the Malaysia game, which is good because it allows us time to work together as a team and get used to the new system that is in place with our coach," said Sandhu.

India faced Malaysia in the Merdeka Tournament last October in Kuala Lumpur, going down 2-4 in a fiercely-contested game, which was the first time Sandhu played against the Southeast Asian side. Sandhu believed that was an unlucky result for the Indians and the scoreline didn't justify the efforts. However, the Blue Tigers are highly motivated to change that and add a green mark to the scoreline in Hyderabad this time.

"It was a different experience playing in Malaysia. They're a good side with a lot of new faces, a lot of quality players coming from elsewhere and helping them out. We could have got something more out of that game. It was an unlucky result for us, knowing that we scored a goal which was not allowed. Things like that happen in football. We need to brush aside what happened last time. We have a clean board in front of us and we need to make sure that we get the best result at home."

Sandhu opened up about the intense competition he faces in the goalkeeping position in the national team. With top custodians like Amrinder Singh and Vishal Kaith, who are key players of their ISL clubs, every national team training session is an opportunity to push the other to their limits and bag a spot in the starting eleven.

"Playing for the national team comes with a lot of responsibility. It is a privileged position and I know the importance of it. So, as long as I am here, I will give my hundred percent. It's always a pleasure to have goalkeepers like Amrinder and Vishal in the team, knowing that they can push me and I push them. It's all about being a team here in the Indian squad. It's not about who is playing and who's not. I feel lucky to have such healthy competition. And that's not just the case in my position, but the outfielders as well. There's a lot of new blood coming into the team, who have been doing well for their clubs. Everyone wants to play for the national team. We hail from different clubs, but when we come here, it's about getting together to work for one goal. It's a very professional and healthy space in the national team right now," Sandhu said.

And at the moment, in the bigger picture, that goal is to qualify for a third successive AFC Asian Cup, which should be the bare minimum target for our team, according to Sandhu, who has been part of three Asian Cup squads (2011, 2019 and 2023).

"With every camp under Manolo, we're getting close to what he wants us to be as a team. With time and the level of coaching and experience that he has, I have no doubt that we'll be a strong team in the Asian Cup qualifiers. I think qualifying is the minimum for us as a team that we should strive to do, because we have done it already in the last two editions. This should be a no-brainer for us as a team now. We have to qualify for every single Asian Cup. So, let's keep our head down and work for that target," said Sandhu.





Three-day-long AIFF conclave pitch for more match time for domestic players

The three-day AIFF State Gradation and State Specific Strategic Plans that concluded at the Football House on Thursday, November 14, 2024, turned out to be a unique meeting on many counts. The meetings, on all three days, were chaired by AIFF President Shri Kalyan Chaubey.

For the first time, 32 Member Associations (MAs) from across India converged to discuss and deliberate upon the diverse challenges ahead for Indian football in each state of India.

The discussions, which lasted for three days, amounting to around 25 hours, saw the principal office bearers of the federation listen to the presidents and secretaries of the respective MAs, who were offered the floor for 40 minutes each. The MAs made detailed presentations of their operations at the state level over the last three years and unfolded their future plans in the next three years while realistically identifying their challenges and advantages.

The AIFF officials also deliberated upon the proposals from the respective state associations for the development of football in their respective states in alignment with the AIFF's Vision 2047 plan.

Mr. Prince Rufus, Lead Regional Office South Asia, FIFA, who was present in the meeting on all three days, said, "In my two decades with football across various roles, this is the first time the All India Football Federation is actively engaging each of its affiliated units in open discussions and reality checks on the Indian football ecosystem.

"This approach will enable AIFF to better understand and effectively address challenges. I am confident that this three-day strategic planning meeting will be instrumental in advancing Indian football."



AIFF President Shri Chaubey said, "India is a vast country, with diverse cultures. Each state and region has its own set of challenges that should be tackled in their own unique ways. The challenges that lie ahead of West Bengal or Maharashtra cannot be the same as those of Ladakh or Andaman & Nicobar.

"We must ensure that there are state-wise plans for maximum optimisation of development, which will also help Indian football to move ahead in totality. Our proposals and discussions for the entire 25 hours in three days hovered around with this specific thought."

The AIFF President further said, "We requested each MA to present their case for 40 minutes each. Along with this, we have provisioned for each MA to submit their self-evaluation cards, based on which we will make proposals on a case-to-case basis."

The self-evaluation cards are broad-based having nearly 500 points and cover several key areas like Administration, infrastructure, football ecosystem, sporting achievements, marketing and broadcasting, etc.

The meeting discussed at length the possibilities of gaining Atma Nirbhar Status (financial sustainability) for both the AIFF and its MAs. The AIFF, currently, mainly receives grants from three sources – the Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs, GoI, the FIFA, and the AFC, most of which are subject-specific grants. AIFF is now making every effort to collaborate with various State Governments and other organisations for the conduct of national and international tournaments and matches to relieve the budget constraints to an extent. These organisations have largely come forward in extending the infrastructure facilities to the AIFF.



The federation currently has 13,195 licensed coaches, and 3,616 registered referees for the 2024-25 season. The meeting felt if the coaches should undergo refresher courses for training at the grassroots level, then the same should be applied to the referees as well. The meeting deliberated upon the improvement of Indian refereeing in general and felt that this is one area that should be looked into specifically.

The members also agreed that more match time is required for Indian domestic players and discussed how the AIFF and the MAs can restructure the Santosh Trophy or the State Leagues to create more match time.

The Members were happy to note that altogether nearly Rs. 2,200 crores have been approved by several State Governments for the renovation of Football Stadium or infrastructure (like Guwahati Rs. 630 crores, Kokrajhar Rs. 140 crores, Tawang Rs. 224 crores, Nagaland Rs. 300 crores, Telangana Rs. 27 crores, Uttar Pradesh 800 football fields averaging Rs. 1 crore each field and 18 small stadiums averaging 10 crores for each stadium).



Bala Devi dedicates 50th International goal to her late father

The walking legend of Indian Women's football, passionately talked about the uphill journey that took her to the peak

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

Often referred to as the "goal machine" of Indian women's football, Bala Devi, reached an exceptional milestone by becoming the first Indian woman to score her 50th international goal during the 2024 SAFF Women's Championship in Nepal against Pakistan. Her achievement was celebrated not only by Indian fans but also by local supporters, as the crowd in Nepal honoured her with a standing ovation after the match.

Bala is not only known for her goals but also for creating history. In 2020, she became the first Indian woman footballer to sign a professional contract with a European club. She joined Rangers WFC, the women's team of the Scottish club Rangers FC, marking a significant milestone for Indian football.

After nearly a 10-month hiatus, Bala Devi rejoined the national camp to play in the SAFF Championship 2024. She was last seen in action during the AFC Olympic Qualifiers Round 2 against Uzbekistan in November 2023.

Following her achievement of reaching 50 international goals, an emotional Bala Devi spoke with www.the-aiff.com, sharing her feelings about the milestone and opening up about much more than just football.

Question: Bala, 50 international goals. How are you feeling?

Bala Devi: I feel proud to score 50 goals for India. It was a very special moment for me.

Q. After the match, you said you wanted to dedicate your goal to your father. Can you tell us something about that?

BD: Everything I am today is because of my father. He taught me everything since childhood, from kicking the ball to scoring a goal. He always encouraged me to stay connected with the game. As I stepped into the field against Pakistan, memories of him flooded back and I couldn't stop crying. I missed him so much at that moment. The motivation to score that goal came from him and everything he taught me.

Q. Your goal against Pakistan was too good. What was going on in your mind? Did you know that you were going to score?

BD: Whatever strategy the coach and players decide for set-pieces, we stick to it. Who takes the kick depends on the situation, whether it's from the right or left. At that moment, I felt I should take the kick, and Manisha came over and said, 'Di, you take it.' I asked her to just touch the ball, and I went in for the shot. Manisha's pass was perfect, with spot-on accuracy, and the ball went in.





Q. Today is 2024, many people idolise you, on and off the field. How does it feel to be liked by so many people? That's why you are still playing. How does it feel?

BD: When I arrived in Nepal, many people recognised me. Some even asked if I was coming as a coach. Some players from another team still wanted me on the field as a player. I started playing for India back in 2005, and while the atmosphere within the team has changed over the years, the support and affection everyone shows me are overwhelming. I feel proud to have continued playing for so many years and to still be loved by the fans. It's a great feeling to play in a foreign country and gain new experiences in the game.

Q. You had a month-long break, and now you're back. You dealt with an injury, but you've returned. How is your mental stability at this point? As a player, after being away for so many months, how do you feel coming back to the national camp, especially for such an important tournament like this?

BD: I have been involved with football all my life, so I know how to keep my mentality strong when I am injured. And I always try to push myself a little extra during training sessions, focusing on maintaining my fitness. A lot of people have supported me along the way, especially coach Santosh. After my injury, I didn't have the confidence to play, but he created a comfortable environment in Goa that helped me regain it. I am grateful to all the coaches, staff, and players for their efforts. Everyone contributes, from managing diets and training to the hard work put in by the young players. Together, we maintain a positive atmosphere, and that has been my biggest motivation.



Q. You have played in the Indian football structure as well as in Rangers in Europe. What is your highest and lowest point?

BD: I have learned a lot during my time at Rangers. How to stay fit, maintain professionalism, and had good experience in Europe. Indian women's football is growing and we can see now players are going abroad to play after me. AIFF has also been very supportive, and the women's department is putting in a lot of effort for us. If this level of support continues, we can achieve great things and go a long way.

Q. If you want to name your career in one word?

BD: I call it "**SHE POWER**" because I work hard from morning till evening. I take care of myself and manage my household, it's all hard work. Nothing comes easy.

Q. Any message for the fans?

BD: Keep supporting us. We will go forward as much as you support us.



Shooting Range

SAFF Women's Championship 2024





Disappointed with the result but not with the boys, says India U17 head coach Ishfaq Ahmed

AKHIL RAWAT

They worked long and hard for that dream for over a year, and were within four minutes of realising that. But it wasn't meant to be for the spirited Blue Colts, whose 2-3 loss to Thailand brought an end to their U17 Asian Cup and World Cup dreams.

Crestfallen, shattered, broken. You could run out of synonyms to describe the scenes in the Indian dugout after the full-time whistle. Some sobbed inconsolably, some had heads buried in their hands, and some were still trying to process what had just hit them. And why wouldn't they be? For 86 minutes of the match, India had the ticket to Saudi Arabia in their bag. Ultimately, one moment of quality from Thailand snatched it away from them.

Ishfaq Ahmed's boys always played with a proactive mindset and for all three points. They had been steamrolling opponents left, right and centre. 28 goals in nine matches this year say it all. They have beaten Indonesia at their home. Against Thailand, they led twice in an environment they had never played football in before - a passionate opposition crowd, jeers, whistles and non-stop drumming. But none of that prevented Ngamgouhou Mate from coolly slotting his penalty or Vishal Yadav from thumping home a stupendous volley from Ningthoukhongjam Rishi Singh's perfect cross.



There was still a glimmer of hope after the game. Had there been some results from other groups, which were yet to finish, India's ticket could still have been punched. However, after Australia and Indonesia played out a goalless draw in Kuwait, India were officially knocked out. Later in the night, Hong Kong's surprising win over Syria meant that Iran qualified, pushing India down to seventh place in the rankings for the best second-placed teams. Only the top five qualified.

Ahmed was nothing but proud of his boys, and shouldered the blame for the failure upon himself. "I'm really disappointed with the result, but not with the boys," he said. "They gave everything. They deserved more. They competed well against the hosts, they were leading twice. They were fitter than them. One lapse of concentration and we conceded in the end.

"I take the blame. We couldn't improve where we needed to. Football is cruel. If you don't take your chances, the opponents will punish you. We can't score twice and then concede three against a team like Thailand. But I'm super proud of the boys. Playing like this with that sort of a crowd behind the home team. They are just 16."

The coach had a long chat with the 23 young men, who had experienced the first big setback of their careers, in the dressing room and the team hotel afterwards. Emotions were surely running high at the moment, but the message was plain and simple. Learn from the heartbreaks and pick yourselves up because that's what makes great players.



"I spoke to all of them one by one. I told them that this isn't the last heartbreak you'll suffer in football. And it won't stay forever. You will have happy moments also. You will win matches, win trophies, get success. But you have to learn from the mistakes.

"I want to thank the federation for giving me this opportunity with this talented bunch of players. I hope they all continue the good work in their respective clubs and they keep playing more and more matches. That's the only way forward for these boys. The more they play, the better they will become. I think from this batch, most of them will progress to the under-20s, and I hope that in a few years, we will have a good, strong U20 team.

The U17 journey of the Blue Colts ends for now. However difficult a pill that may be to swallow, they will need to pick themselves up. The ending may have been bitter but they can always take heart from the many great moments that were part of the journey. The good thing is they are so young that they've still got a lot of time to develop. They can only get better from here on.



Shooting Range

U17 Asian Cup Qualifiers







Riiohlang Dhar: The Assistant Referee from India scales a new peak

In the wee hours of Friday, when the nation was sleeping after a night of exuberant Diwali celebrations, a certain Riiohlang Dhar was busy setting up a new benchmark for Indian football in the faraway Dominican Republic.

Riiohlang, the 34-year-old FIFA Assistant Referee from Meghalaya, added a new chapter in the country's football history when she supervised the semi-final between Spain and England at the FIFA U17 Women's World Cup 2024 in the Dominican Republic. Spain won the match 3-0.

It is a big achievement for an Indian referee, but Riiohlang said: "I am fortunate to have been able to offer a Diwali gift to Indian football in my small way."

She made it sound simple. Perhaps she is not the one to blow her own trumpet and talk about the hard work that earned her four matches in the ongoing U17 Women's World Cup.

Riiohlang, along with Referee Asaka Koizumi (Japan) and Assistant Referee Amal Badhafari (UAE), were the three-member group, who were among the busiest supervising officials in the FIFA U17 Women's World Cup 2024 this time.

"I am happy to have done four important matches," said Riiohlang, who is employed with the Meghalaya Police. "In the group stage, we started with Spain versus the USA and then the host team, the Dominican Republic's match against New Zealand.



“I could impress, probably. After the group stage, we were retained and entrusted with one quarter-final (Nigeria vs USA) and the semi-final. The three FIFA Referee Assessors were from Spain and Sweden. I believe they were satisfied with the job I did on the pitch,” said Riiohlang.

The toil to reach the top was tremendous. It took its toll. Reaching the Dominican Republic was the initial challenge. Riiohlang narrated the story with a giggle, but it was enough to erase the smile from the faces of many. “My journey began from my hometown Shillong to Guwahati in a car. From there, I took a flight to Delhi and then another flight to Istanbul. My next flight from Istanbul was delayed, so when I reached Panama, my scheduled connecting flight had already left.

“So I had to spend the next 14 hours at the Panama airport. I had no place to sleep and had nothing to eat. For some reason, all the shops and food counters at the Panama airport were closed. But finally, I reached Santo Domingo. It took me nearly three days.” One could clearly hear Riiohlang laughing on the phone from 14,500 kilometres away.

After reaching the Dominican Republic capital, Riiohlang could sleep for only three hours as she had to report for training for the Spain versus USA match. But she has no complaints. “I am returning home rich with experience,” she said.

In the FIFA U17 Women’s World Cup, the Football Video Support (VFS) system, a simplified alternative to VAR, was used. Under this system, the coaches (or a designated official) of the two participating teams can twice instantly challenge the referee’s decision in certain areas during a match. The referee will video review the particular incident and arrive at a decision.

“The use of this technology was new to me, but I found it interesting and adapted quickly. My offside decisions were never questioned, but my Referee Assessors offered me new tips which were hugely helpful,” said Riiohlang. “Some people are telling me that I have done well and may get selected for bigger assignments. I really have no clue. More than the money or fame, we the referees do this job out of passion and love for football. I have worked hard, tirelessly. I have sacrificed my time and energy with utmost honesty. I will leave the Dominican Republic a satisfied person,” she said.



Calicut FC lift inaugural Super League Kerala title

Calicut FC beat Forca Kochi FC 2-1 to win the inaugural Super League Kerala title at EMS Corporation Stadium, on Sunday, November 10, 2024. Calicut led 1-0 at half-time.

Kozhikode turned up in numbers at the EMS Corporation Stadium, with the total attendance amassing to 35,672 in the summit clash. Enjoying the home support, Calicut have thus secured their first Super League Kerala title, along with the ₹ 1 crore prize money. Ahead of the kick-off, Kerala Football Association (KFA) President Mr. Navas Meeran honoured the former Santosh Trophy and ISL players from the state for their contribution to Indian football.

Calicut FC took control from the start, demonstrating their game plan with a high press and precise passing that left Forca Kochi struggling for possession. Just 15 minutes into the game, Calicut's Thoi Singh put his team ahead with a clinical finish off a well-placed cross from striker Kervens Belfort.

This early goal fuelled the roaring crowd and put Kochi on the back foot, as they found it difficult to break Calicut's well-organised defence. Kochi's key striker Dorielton, who had been a consistent threat in the box, was unable to capitalise on his opportunities, leaving Calicut with a 1-0 lead at halftime.

Forca Kochi came out with renewed energy in the second half, and head coach Mario Lemos made a few strategic substitutions to bring some attacking impetus to his side.

However, Calicut's disciplined organisation kept Kochi at bay, and in the 71st minute, Kervens Belfort delivered the game-defining moment. Trapping the ball on his chest before unleashing a powerful volley, Belfort's strike found the back of the net.

Midfielder Raphael Augusto led Kochi's push to reduce the deficit, pulling the strings from the middle. The persistence paid off, when Dorielton, the league's golden boot winner, scored in the fourth minute of injury time, giving Kochi a sliver of hope. Time, however, was not on their side, and Calicut held firm to secure a historic victory.



East Bengal edge past Nejmeh to enter AFC Challenge League quarter-finals

Dimitrios Diamantakos fired East Bengal FC into the knockout stage of the AFC Challenge League 2024/25 after scoring a brace in their 3-2 win against Nejmeh SC of Lebanon in their final Group A match at the Changlimithang Stadium in Thimphu on Friday, November 1, 2024.

East Bengal finished as the Group A winners on seven points to seal progression. The Red and Golds had won 4-0 against Bashundhara Kings (Bangladesh) and drawn 2-2 with Paro FC (Bhutan) in their first two fixtures.

East Bengal, who trailed Nejmeh by two points heading into this encounter, took the lead in the eighth minute when Madih Talal's corner kick was inadvertently headed into his own net by Baba Musah.

The Indian side took further advantage of Nejmeh's slow start to double their advantage in the 15th minute when Diamantakos scored for the third consecutive match when he prodded home a low cross from Mahesh Naorem.

A shell-shocked Nejmeh, who had won their two earlier matches, fought back to quickly pull one back three minutes later when Rabih Ataya lobbed the ball for Collins Opare to stab home past Prabsukhan Gill.



The Lebanese side rediscovered their confidence and drew level two minutes before half-time when Hussein Monzer bent an unstoppable free-kick into the top corner to set up an enticing second half.

Knowing defeat could mean elimination, both teams adopted a more cautious approach in the second half although Nejme were still able to create several good chances.

Hassan Kourani missed an open goal with a header in the 47th minute before further efforts from Mahdi Zein and Ataya were safely handled by Gill as things remained level heading into the final half an hour.

Then came the defining turning point when Talal was brought down in the box by Ali Ismail with Thai referee Songkran Bunmeekiart pointing to the spot. Diamantakos put away the spot-kick with ease to restore East Bengal's lead in the 77th minute.

Nejme tried to mount another comeback and put the East Bengal defence under pressure for the remaining minutes but it was to no avail as the Indian Super League outfit held on to take the win and top spot.

East Bengal will now wait to find out their quarter-final opponents after all the AFC Challenge League group stage fixtures are over. The two-legged quarter-finals will take place on March 5 and 12, 2024.



AFC
WOMEN'S FUTSAL
ASIAN CUP™
CHINA 2025

QUALIFIERS

DRAW

India drawn with Indonesia, Hong Kong, Pakistan and Kyrgyz Republic in AFC Women's Futsal Asian Cup Qualifiers

In a landmark occasion for women's futsal in the country, the Indian women's national futsal team were drawn alongside Indonesia, Hong Kong, Pakistan and Kyrgyz Republic in Group B of the AFC Women's Futsal Asian Cup 2025 Qualifiers, following the draw conducted at the AFC House in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on Thursday, October 17, 2024.

It will mark the first time India will participate in the AFC Women's Futsal Asian Cup Qualifiers. Group B will be hosted by Indonesia from January 11-19, 2025.

A total of 19 teams will battle it out for nine places in the AFC Women's Futsal Asian Cup 2025, which will be hosted by China in May 2025. Teams were divided into three groups of five and one group of four. The top two of each group and the best third-placed side among all groups - will progress to the Finals and join hosts China PR and finalists of the AFC Women's Futsal Championship, IR Iran and Japan, to continue their quest for glory. Both prior editions in 2015 and 2018 were won by IR Iran.

The top three finishers at the AFC Women's Futsal Asian Cup China 2025 will seal their berths at the inaugural FIFA Futsal Women's World Cup 2025, to be hosted by the Philippines.

AFC WOMEN'S FUTSAL ASIAN CUP 2025 QUALIFIERS DRAW RESULT

Group A: Thailand (hosts), Lebanon, Bahrain, Palestine, Iraq

Group B: Indonesia (hosts), Hong Kong, Pakistan, **India**, Kyrgyz Republic

Group C: Uzbekistan (hosts), Turkmenistan, Australia, Philippines, Kuwait

Group D: Vietnam, Chinese Taipei, Macau, Myanmar (hosts)



I-League 2024-25 kicked-off on November 22

The 2024-25 season of the I-League action kicked off on November 22, 2024.

The 12-team league will be played through December, January, February, and March, ending on April 6, 2025. Sporting Club Bengaluru and Dempo SC are the two new entrants into the league after finishing as champions and runners-ups of I-League 2023-24.

AIFF Secretary General Mr. Anilkumar said, "Today we had a meeting with the I-League owners, and it went off well. All the clubs agreed to the proposals which we have floated to invite the potential sponsors on board and the initiative to bring the telecasting partners and broadcasting team on board for all the I-league matches, including the IWL and other elite group of competitions in AIFF.

"They expressed their gratitude to AIFF saying it is a nice initiative, which is a welcome response from the I-League clubs. Hopefully, we will be able to complete this process by the second week of November as the first match is on 22nd November. That is what we have decided and a couple of points were raised by the I-League clubs, which are being considered by the AIFF. I am confident, we will have a wonderful season ahead," the AIFF Secretary General said.



IWL 2024-25 to kick-off on January 10

The Indian Women's League is back for its second season in its current home-and-away format, and the 2024-25 campaign will begin on January 10, 2025.

This season, the IWL will be expanded to an eight-team league, with last season's IWL 2 champions Sreebhumi FC (West Bengal), and runners-up NITA Football Academy (Odisha) joining as new entrants.

The league will commence on January 10 with a double-header, as defending champions Odisha FC take on East Bengal FC at the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar at 3 pm IST, followed by the clash between Gokulam Kerala FC and Sreebhumi FC at the Payyanad Stadium, in Manjeri at 4 pm IST.



AIFF discusses setting up of Centre of Referees Excellence with SAI LNCPE, Thiruvananthapuram

The All India Football Federation Secretary General, Mr. Anil Kumar, along with the AIFF Chief Refereeing Officer, Mr. Trevor Kettle, on Friday, October 25, 2024, visited the Sports Authority of India, Lakshmi Bai National College of Physical Education in Thiruvananthapuram, with a view to create the first Centre of Referees Excellence (CORE) under AIFF VISION 2047.

The two AIFF officials were hosted by Dr G Kishore, Principal and Regional Head of SAI LNCPE Thiruvananthapuram, and Dr Pradip Dutta, Associate Professor of SAI LNCPE.

After having a look at the sporting facilities at the LNCPE, including football pitches, athletics track, gymnasiums as well as conference facilities and the sports science centre with expert lecturers in anatomy, diet and nutrition and psychology, it was agreed to create India's first CORE.

AIFF VISION 2047 aims to create five CORE centres across India with each hosting annually various residential programmes targeting new refereeing talent under the age of 23 years, National Match Officials and National Referee Assessors technical training, and all Level 1-5 fitness testing in regional centres.



Trials for first Indian women's national futsal team underway in Bhavnagar, Gujarat

In a historic occasion, trials to select the first ever Indian women's national futsal team have kicked off in Bhavnagar, Gujarat, on Tuesday, November 5, 2024.

India will participate in the AFC Women's Futsal Asian Cup 2025 Qualifiers to be held from January 11-19, 2025, in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. 121 players from 15 states are participating in the six-day trials, from which 25 players will be shortlisted for the first national team camp from November 11-25. It will be followed by a second camp before the qualifiers.

India are drawn in Group B alongside Indonesia, Hong Kong, Pakistan and Kyrgyz Republic. A total of 19 teams are divided into three groups of five and one group of four. The top two of each group and the best third-placed side among all groups will progress to the Finals and join hosts China PR. The top three finishers at the AFC Women's Futsal Asian Cup China 2025 will seal their berths at the inaugural FIFA Futsal Women's World Cup 2025, to be hosted by the Philippines. All matches will be played at the Among Rogo Sports Hall in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

SCHEDULE

14:30 IST, January 11: Kyrgyz Republic vs India

11:30 IST, January 13: India vs Indonesia

14:30 IST, January 15: Hong Kong vs India

11:30 IST, January 19: India vs Pakistan



**ALL INDIA
FOOTBALL
FEDERATION**