



# Kicking Towards Success: Assessing the Progress and Future Opportunities in Indian Football

Thejashwini<sup>1</sup>, Evan Geo Kunjumon<sup>2</sup>, Chippy Mohan<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> School of Business & Management, Christ University, Bangalore

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor, School of Business & Management, Christ University, Bangalore

## Abstract

This research paper examines the current state of Indian football, focusing on the progress made over the past decade and identifying future opportunities for growth and development. Despite facing significant challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited grassroots programs, and financial constraints, Indian football has made notable strides through initiatives like the Indian Super League (ISL) and improved talent scouting. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both quantitative data and qualitative interviews with key stakeholders in the football ecosystem, including players, coaches, and sports administrators. The findings reveal that while there has been significant improvement in player performance and fan engagement, there remain critical areas needing attention, such as youth development and international exposure. The paper concludes with actionable recommendations aimed at leveraging current advancements to ensure sustainable growth in Indian football, ultimately aspiring to elevate the sport to international standards.

## Keywords

Indian football, progress, challenges, future opportunities, Indian Super League, grassroots development, player performance, sports administration, youth programs.

## Introduction

Indian football, despite its rich history and cultural significance, has not advanced as significantly as cricket within the Indian sports landscape. The sport was introduced to the subcontinent in the mid-19th century during British colonial rule, with the establishment of organized competitions such as the Durand Cup in 1888, which remains the third-oldest football tournament globally. Cities like Kolkata embraced football enthusiastically, giving rise to iconic clubs like Mohun Bagan and East Bengal. The historic victory of Mohun Bagan against a British team in 1911 became a symbol of resistance against colonialism and marked a pivotal moment in Indian sports history (Choudhary, 2020). However, the trajectory of Indian football diverged from its potential due to various structural challenges, including financial constraints, inadequate facilities, and a fragmented organizational structure. The formation of the All India Football Federation (AIFF) in 1937 was a significant milestone, yet it struggled to garner the support and resources needed to promote the sport effectively, especially as cricket rapidly gained popularity and investment (Bhat, 2018).

The landscape of Indian football began to change with the establishment of the Indian Super League (ISL) in 2014, which drew inspiration from the Indian Premier League (IPL) in cricket. The ISL attracted significant corporate sponsorship and international talent, raising the profile of football in the country. It not only provided a platform for emerging players but also rekindled public interest in the sport (Kumar & Raghav, 2021). Nevertheless, the impact of the ISL has been mixed; while it modernized certain aspects of Indian football, it has not effectively addressed deep-rooted structural issues, such as governance problems, lack of grassroots development, and inadequate facilities. The national team continues to struggle on the international stage, failing to qualify for the FIFA World Cup and underperforming in major tournaments compared to other Asian nations (Sharma, 2022).

The objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the current state of Indian football, focusing on recent improvements, particularly in the national team's performance, while identifying the main barriers hindering sustained

growth. This research will offer practical recommendations aimed at fostering long-term development and draw comparisons with successful footballing nations to highlight best practices. The significance of this study lies in India's potential to harness its vast population and growing interest in sports to elevate its football standards. By identifying key challenges—such as inadequate infrastructure, poor governance, and limited grassroots initiatives—this research aims to inform policy and strategic planning that can enhance the sport's appeal and competitiveness. Furthermore, insights drawn from successful footballing nations can guide investments in the sport, ultimately fostering community engagement, creating career opportunities for young professionals, and bolstering India's stature in the global sporting arena. As such, this research is vital for the ongoing development of football in India.

## Literature Review

The challenges faced by Indian football, including poor governance, insufficient infrastructure, and slow grassroots growth, have been extensively documented in previous research. A study conducted by the All India Football Federation (AIFF) in 2018 highlights the difficulties of establishing a sustainable football ecosystem in India, particularly given cricket's overwhelming popularity and support (AIFF, 2018). Financial constraints and governance issues impacting Indian football teams have been further clarified by reports from Deloitte (2021) and Sportz Power (2020). These studies emphasize the financial instability that many clubs experience, primarily due to their reliance on limited sponsorships and revenue streams. In contrast, some researchers have focused on strategies for enhancing fan engagement and suggest that football can leverage the marketing success seen in cricket to build its own fan base (Choudhary, 2020).

When looking at global comparisons, countries like South Korea and Japan provide relevant case studies that demonstrate how planned investments and systematic development can elevate a nation's footballing status. Both nations have established youth academies, integrated football into school curricula, and maintained well-functioning league structures, which have resulted in strong football ecosystems (Kumar & Raghav, 2021). In contrast, Indian football suffers from underfunding and disorganization, leading to a fragmented development approach. The effective models employed in these countries could serve as valuable guides for India's future growth and development in football.

Despite the increasing body of research on Indian football, significant gaps remain in the literature, particularly regarding grassroots initiatives, fan engagement strategies, and long-term infrastructure planning. The effectiveness of proposed solutions is often limited by a lack of data-driven methodologies to address these challenges (Sharma, 2022). This underscores the necessity for more comprehensive research that can provide actionable insights into overcoming the obstacles facing Indian football.

One of the most pressing challenges is the lack of infrastructure. According to a 2022 report by the AIFF, many football stadiums in India are in disrepair, with inadequate facilities for both players and spectators (AIFF, 2022). The scarcity of proper training grounds and football academies significantly hampers the development of youth talent. Government investment has largely favored cricket, resulting in a dire need for a strategic focus on building quality infrastructure that includes stadiums, training centers, and football academies to foster growth in the sport.

Limited fan following compared to cricket poses another significant obstacle. A 2023 survey by the Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC) India indicated that cricket commands over 80% of all sports viewership in the country, overshadowing football (BARC, 2023). Although the Indian Super League (ISL) has managed to attract a growing number of fans, particularly in football-centric regions like Kerala, Goa, and Kolkata, the challenge lies in maintaining and expanding this interest beyond local hotspots. Football must seek to reach new audiences by leveraging digital media and fan engagement tactics to increase its appeal.

Grassroots development is another critical area that requires attention. Despite initiatives like the AIFF's Baby Leagues aiming to promote football among youth, the impact has been limited (AIFF, 2022). Countries such as South Korea and Japan have successfully established a strong foundation for youth development by creating youth academies and integrating football into educational systems. Conversely, India's disjointed system has hindered young players from having clear pathways to professional ranks. To nurture the next generation of football talent, India needs to invest significantly in grassroots initiatives and establish youth development academies across the country.

Governance issues within the All India Football Federation (AIFF) have also stunted the growth of the sport. The AIFF has faced criticism for being ineffective, poorly managed, and lacking transparency (Choudhary, 2020). Political interference and corruption have further complicated governance, often prioritizing personal gains over the sport's welfare. FIFA's 2022 suspension of the AIFF due to external interference highlights the pressing need for reforms in governance to propel Indian football forward. Enhancing transparency, implementing independent monitoring, involving stakeholders

in decision-making processes, and providing governance training can help restore trust and foster sustainable development across all levels of the sport.

Financial constraints remain a significant challenge for Indian football teams, especially those in the I-League. Many clubs rely on modest sponsorship deals, lacking stable income sources (Deloitte, 2021). Compared to their Asian counterparts, Indian football clubs struggle with financial viability, making it difficult to invest in infrastructure, youth development, or high-quality coaching. To ensure long-term sustainability, Indian football needs to attract funding from both public and private sectors.

The poor media coverage and marketing of football in India exacerbate these challenges. Cricket enjoys far more media attention, resulting in a disparity in viewership and sponsorship revenues. Although the ISL is gaining traction, cricket's popularity continues to dominate the media landscape, limiting football's visibility and engagement (Sharma, 2022). To improve the current state, football must prioritize active promotion through digital platforms, social media, and brand partnerships, enhancing coverage of player stories, match highlights, and league developments to cultivate a stronger football culture in India.

Lastly, societal attitudes toward sports play a role in shaping the future of football in India. There exists a cultural preference for academic achievement over athletic pursuits, with parents often discouraging young athletes from considering football as a viable career option (Kumar & Raghav, 2021). In contrast, nations like Japan have successfully integrated football into school systems, fostering acceptance among parents and communities. To reshape public perception and encourage participation, initiatives aimed at raising awareness and changing attitudes toward football as a legitimate professional pathway are essential.

The recent performance of the Indian national football team demonstrates both progress and the need for further improvement. With a FIFA ranking that fluctuated between 100 and 110 over the past five years and a notable rise from 173 in 2015 to 99 in 2024, the team has shown gradual advancement (FIFA, 2024). Their achievements, including winning the SAFF Championship and qualifying for the AFC Asian Cup, indicate progress at the regional level. However, these successes highlight the need for further development to catch up with Asian footballing giants like South Korea and Japan. Continued efforts are necessary to enhance the technical skills, tactical awareness, and fitness levels of the national squad to reach competitive standards on the international stage.

### **. Analysis of the Indian Super League (ISL) and I-League**

The Indian Super League (ISL) has emerged as a transformative force in Indian football, effectively enhancing the visibility and appeal of the sport in the country. Since its inception in 2013, the ISL has attracted notable international players and coaches, which has elevated the competitive standards of the league. A study by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) in 2022 indicated that the ISL garnered over 160 million views during the 2021-2022 season, making it one of the most-watched football leagues in India (FICCI, 2022). This surge in viewership demonstrates the ISL's effectiveness in engaging fans, particularly through digital platforms like Hotstar and social media, which have revolutionized how audiences consume sports content. The league's marketing strategies and its association with popular entities have played a significant role in increasing fan interaction, thereby fostering a vibrant football culture in regions traditionally dominated by cricket.

In contrast, the I-League faces substantial challenges that hinder its growth and sustainability. Financial instability remains a critical issue, with several clubs struggling to maintain operations due to inadequate funding and sponsorship deals. Reports suggest that some clubs have been forced to cease operations due to these financial constraints (Bose, 2020). Additionally, the I-League suffers from limited media exposure, resulting in a dwindling fan base that is often overshadowed by the glamour of the ISL. This lack of visibility impacts the league's ability to attract sponsors and promote itself effectively, leading to a cycle of underfunding and reduced public interest (Rai, 2021). Consequently, without a structured and appealing framework, the I-League risks becoming irrelevant in the broader context of Indian football.

To ensure the long-term prosperity of Indian football, a well-structured relationship between the ISL and the I-League is imperative. The implementation of a promotion-relegation system akin to that of Japan's J-League could serve as a catalyst for growth. Such a framework would encourage clubs in the I-League to strive for higher performance levels, thus enhancing competition within the football pyramid (Choudhury, 2020). An organized footballing system could streamline the pathway for talent development, allowing young players to progress through various tiers and ultimately reach the professional level. Drawing lessons from successful footballing nations, a cohesive approach integrating grassroots development, infrastructure investment, and governance reform is crucial for the evolution of Indian football.

## Proposed System for India

The absence of a clearly defined footballing system in India presents significant barriers to the growth of the sport. Unlike nations such as South Korea and Japan, where organized youth leagues facilitate seamless transitions into professional football, India's fragmented structure creates uncertainty for clubs and aspiring players. As noted by football analyst Ranjit Singh (2021), this disorganized growth pattern hampers talent progression and professional opportunities, ultimately stunting the development of football in the country. Establishing a robust football framework that includes strong youth leagues as feeder programs to regional and national competitions is essential. This proposed system would ensure a continuous pipeline of talent from amateur to professional levels, supported by collaboration between the All India Football Federation (AIFF) and governmental bodies (Kumar, 2022). Investments in coaching education, infrastructure, and regional scouting programs are vital to nurturing a new generation of players who can elevate the standard of Indian football.

## Comparison with Successful Asian Football Nations

Successful footballing nations like Japan and South Korea provide valuable insights into the potential pathways for India's football development. Japan's emphasis on youth development, coupled with its integration into the school system, has been instrumental in nurturing local talent. The J-League benefits from a structured approach that prioritizes grassroots development, allowing young players to refine their skills through school teams before transitioning to professional clubs (Hirata, 2020). Similarly, South Korea's footballing success is attributed to significant government investment in grassroots initiatives and a focus on early talent identification (Lee, 2021). Both countries demonstrate that a committed approach to youth development, infrastructure investment, and community involvement can yield substantial returns in terms of national team performance and international recognition.

India stands to learn extensively from these models. By prioritizing long-term investments in infrastructure, governance reforms, and grassroots programs, Indian football can significantly enhance its prospects and reputation on the global stage. Emulating the comprehensive youth development policies adopted by South Korea and Japan can pave the way for a new era in Indian football, marked by increased competitiveness and sustainability.

## Potential Solutions and Recommendations

Addressing the infrastructural deficits in Indian football requires urgent action, particularly through public-private partnerships that can mobilize resources and expertise. Developing state-of-the-art facilities, including stadiums, training centers, and academies, is essential for creating an environment conducive to player development and match-day experiences. As emphasized by sports economist Venkatraman (2021), improved infrastructure not only enhances training conditions but also attracts larger audiences and generates revenue, laying the groundwork for the sport's growth.

Enhancing fan engagement is another critical area for development. Initiatives like school football programs and community-based leagues can play a significant role in fostering a dedicated fan base. By introducing football to children at an early age and engaging them through social media, the sport can cultivate a new generation of supporters. Hosting events that promote player interactions with fans can further strengthen community ties and deepen engagement (Sharma, 2021).

Grassroots programs must also be prioritized to ensure a consistent influx of talent into professional levels. Investment in youth academies and regional tournaments is crucial for developing not just players, but also coaches who can deliver quality training. Competitive play across age groups can facilitate early identification and development of promising athletes, ultimately benefiting the national team (Rao, 2020).

Governance reforms are imperative to address corruption and improve decision-making processes within the AIFF. Establishing independent oversight can enhance accountability and transparency, fostering trust among stakeholders (Singh, 2022). A clear regulatory framework surrounding funding and organizational procedures will promote a more efficient governance model, essential for sustainable growth in Indian football.

Lastly, increasing financial support through corporate sponsorships and international collaborations is vital for the sport's sustainability. Government initiatives to offer grants and incentives can stimulate investment in community programs and facility enhancements. Effective marketing strategies that amplify football's visibility through media coverage can also play a significant role in attracting sponsorships and increasing revenue streams (Ghosh, 2021).

Changing cultural attitudes towards football as a viable career option is equally crucial. By implementing educational reforms that integrate physical education into school curricula, India can reshape perceptions of sports as a respectable profession. Public campaigns aimed at educating parents about the potential career opportunities in football can stimulate

greater participation and engagement. By normalizing sports as a legitimate career path, India can cultivate a new generation of passionate footballers ready to compete on the international stage.

## Conclusion

Indian football stands at a crossroads, characterized by both significant opportunities and substantial challenges. While the sport has a rich history and notable achievements, it has not yet fulfilled its potential on the global stage. By addressing critical issues related to infrastructure, governance, grassroots development, and coaching expertise, India can position itself as a formidable contender in international football. Learning from the successful models of South Korea and Japan is essential, but this transformation will require a coordinated effort from governing bodies, football associations, clubs, and passionate supporters alike. Despite the hurdles ahead, the untapped potential of Indian football, coupled with the nation's deep-rooted passion for the game, offers a promising outlook for the future. However, there remains a research gap in understanding the specific impact of community engagement initiatives on grassroots football development in India. Future studies could explore the effectiveness of localized programs in nurturing talent and increasing participation, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive strategy for elevating Indian football on the world stage.

## References

- AIFF. (2018). Challenges in establishing a sustainable football ecosystem in India. All India Football Federation.
- AIFF. (2022). State of football infrastructure in India: A report. All India Football Federation.
- BARC. (2023). Viewership trends in Indian sports: A comparative analysis. Broadcast Audience Research Council India.
- Bhat, A. (2018). The Indian football landscape: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Sports Management*, 5(2), 45-60.
- Bhardwaj, R. (2017). *Football in India: A historical perspective*. Routledge.
- Bose, S. (2020). Financial stability in Indian football: Challenges and prospects. *Journal of Sports Economics*, 21(2), 112-128.
- Choudhary, A. (2020). The future of Indian football: Building a sustainable football ecosystem. *Football Studies Journal*, 13(1), 40-58.
- Choudhary, R. (2020). A historical perspective on Indian football: Triumphs and tribulations. *Indian Journal of Sports History*, 12(1), 22-34.
- Choudhury, D. (2023). The role of media in promoting Indian football. *Football India*. Available at: Football India
- Choudhury, S. (2023). India's footballing challenges: Infrastructure, governance, and fan engagement. *The Times of India*. Retrieved from Times of India
- Deloitte. (2021). The financial health of Indian football: An analysis. Deloitte Insights.
- FICCI. (2022). Sports in India: A focus on football. Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry.
- FIFA. (2022). FIFA's report on global football trends. Retrieved from FIFA Website
- FIFA. (2024). FIFA World Ranking. Fédération Internationale de Football Association.
- Ghosh, R. (2021). Marketing Indian football: Challenges and strategies. *International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship*, 22(4), 335-348.
- Gupta, R. (2022). Fan engagement strategies in Indian football: Current trends and future directions. *Sports Marketing Quarterly*. Retrieved from Sports Marketing Quarterly
- Hirata, Y. (2020). Youth development in Japanese football: A successful model. *Asian Football Review*, 5(2), 25-39.
- Kumar, A. (2020). *The rise of Indian football: The Indian Super League and beyond*. HarperCollins India.
- Kumar, N. (2022). Building the football pyramid: Structural reforms for Indian football. *Asian Sports Management Journal*, 9(1), 65-79.

- Kumar, R., & Raghav, A. (2021). The impact of the Indian Super League on football development in India. *International Journal of Sports Studies*, 8(3), 97-110.
- Lee, J. (2021). Government support and grassroots initiatives: A case study of South Korean football. *Journal of Sports Administration*, 14(3), 90-105.
- Mohan, V. (2021). Grassroots football development in India: Challenges and opportunities. *International Journal of Sports Science*, 9(1), 12-25.
- Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Government of India. (2021). National Sports Development Code of India. Available at: Ministry Website
- Nath, P. (2022). Why India is still struggling to compete on the global football stage. ESPN India. Retrieved from ESPN
- Rai, P. (2021). The I-League: A victim of neglect. *Sports Business Journal*, 12(3), 78-83.
- Rao, S. (2020). Grassroots football development in India: Current trends and future directions. *Indian Journal of Sports Science*, 18(1), 15-28.
- Sen, S. (2023). Lessons from Japan and South Korea: What India can learn from their football success. *The Hindu*. Retrieved from The Hindu
- Sharma, P. (2022). India's struggles in international football: A case study of the national team. *Asian Journal of Sports Science*, 6(4), 59-73.
- Sharma, T. (2021). Engaging the next generation: Strategies for fan development in Indian football. *Journal of Sports Management*, 15(2), 150-162.
- Singh, R. (2022). Governance issues in Indian football: The way forward. *Journal of Sports Governance and Policy*, 8(1), 45-62.
- Venkatraman, A. (2021). Infrastructure development in Indian football: Challenges and solutions. *International Journal of Sports Infrastructure*, 10(2), 22-37.