

# Globalizing Indian Football

Research >  
India

The recent changes in Indian football concern more than just the playing of the game: they reveal the various complex processes currently being negotiated in the country relating to globalization. There is a clear desire in India to improve the game and join the world elite. There is also a willingness outside of India to provide assistance to fulfil this desire. Neither of these, however, comes without their problems.

By Paul Dimeo

The recent history of Indian football has been eventful, if not always successful. In 1995, a group of consultants from FIFA arrived in India to study the sport's development, and concluded that a National League should be formed. This was done in the 1996-97 season and, for the first time, it seemed as if the organizational structure and professionalism were in place to attract sponsorship from multinational corporations, such as Phillips, Coca Cola, and Indian manufacturer Tata, which have all been official sponsors since then. The increased sponsorship resulted in a sharp rise in players' salaries, increased revenue for clubs through advertising, and more opportunity to import foreign players and coaches. The game had shifted its emphasis, away from local rivalries, state leagues, and unofficial professionalism, and towards greater national cohesion, formalized professionalism, and integration within the global system of modern football.

The development of modern football in general serves both as a useful starting point for discussing Indian football and as a way to locate the sport within wider social, political, and economic processes. It is evident, for example, that football in India developed slowly in

comparison with the global patterns of modernization. The first national body, the All India Football Federation, was not formed until 1937. Playing barefoot was not banned until 1953. Regulation time for league matches in India was only seventy minutes, even by the 1960s. The sport was still amateur and was run by unqualified administrators in an overly bureaucratic fashion. Finally, there was no system of youth coaching or career structure for the players.

While cross-national comparison can provide an interesting analysis of Indian football, it does not take into account the set of unique issues and problems in post-colonial India which have affected the development of the local game. As such, the difficulties faced by football in India might be better understood as a legacy of both the colonial forms of sports governance and the colonial concepts of body culture: the British deemed Indian bodies not to be suited to the rigours of football; Indian players were excluded from British clubs; and Indian teams from major competitions. The new Indian administrators, furthermore, did not move to overhaul this amateurish colonial set-up.

The post-colonial internal fragmentation of India caused more problems for football than for cricket, the former becoming a platform for communal and

regional rivalries, the latter an outlet for nationalist sentiments on the world stage. Cricket was well organized and professionally managed, and overseas victories in the 1960s and 1970s boosted the sport's popularity. During this period, football was in rapid decline, as successes at the Olympic and Asian Games in the 1950s and 1960s gave way to national failings and regional problems. Of the latter, the most serious was the tragedy in Calcutta in August 1980, when sixteen fans died and over a hundred were injured in rioting at a match between traditional rivals Mohun Bagan and East Bengal. Football reflected some of the problems of post-colonial India, enhanced by the fact that it was popular in such economically marginal areas as Calcutta, the Punjab, Goa, and Kerala. The Bombay-Delhi nexus that supported cricket also happens to be the centre of political and economic power.

The new National League is a belated symbol of the shift away from the post-colonial era and towards a new global focus. Its development was followed by two pre-season tours to England in the summers of 2000 and 2001, a move that revealed the passionate interest among the Indian diaspora for the game. There is also a new-found focus on the national team, signalling a determination to be included in the global football arena. The

long-term goal is to earn a place in the World Cup Finals; short-term goals include developing the South Asian Football Federation, playing other overseas matches such as those planned for South Africa later this year, and creating football academies both in India and in places of dispersed populations such as England and Germany. The importing of foreign players at the club level, from countries like Africa and Brazil, though not necessarily new, has recently developed in such a way that Indian league football is becoming much more of an international, cosmopolitan game. The possible inclusion of non-resident Indians in the national squad could result in a more experienced national team. The downside, of course, is that local players may find themselves squeezed out at both the club and national levels, a prospect not all Indian football fans find enticing.

In fact, non-resident Indians are already proving highly influential in this process of globalization, especially through the use of the Internet. The first website to provide details on previous and upcoming fixtures, results, issues, and players, etc. was created and run by the German-Indian student Arunava Chaudhuri. Indian football clubs have followed his lead in recent years, but there is still no other generic Indian football site, and no site on any aspect of the game, to match his efforts. Nevertheless, Indian football has found a wider and more imaginative representation in cyberspace by Indians, and home and abroad.



These technological, economic, and organizational changes all reveal the desire for a successful sport in which India can be represented at the international level. So far, however, the fulfilment of that desire is some way off, if the results in England are any indication: the team failed to score a single victory over a series of English lower league clubs. There have been other problems, moreover, such as the contractual crisis with a media company that led to a lawsuit and a missed opportunity for improved coverage of the National League. Phillips withdrew its sponsorship of the league citing mismanagement as their primary reason, creating controversy over National League sponsorship as a whole. Experienced coaches continue to complain of bureaucratic short-sightedness and interference, while accusations of unaccountability are still being made by the clubs against the All India Football Federation. For the time being, amateur ideas are still prevalent throughout Indian football. <

*Dr Paul Dimeo is a Lecturer in Sports Studies at University College Northampton. He has published widely on the subject of Indian sport and has co-edited Soccer in South Asia: Empire, Nation, Diaspora (2001). E-mail: paul.dimeo@northampton.ac.uk*