

Can India ever qualify for the World Cup?

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EVERY four years when the football World Cup is played, one question nags Indian sports fans: Why has India never been part of the world's premier football tournament?

The closest India has come to playing at the World Cup was in 1950 when it was invited but could not afford the passage to Brazil.

India is currently placed 97 in the Fifa rankings. But it was not always so poor in football. In the 1948 London Olympics, the Indian team, the majority of who played barefoot, was impressive in the only match they played, losing 1-2 to France.

The Indian team of the late 1950s and early 1960s, under coach Syed Abdul Rahim, was an Asian powerhouse.

The team, comprising players like P.K. Banerjee, Chuni Goswami and Jarnail Singh, beat future Asian football powers, Japan and South Korea, to win the 1962 Asian Games gold.

Even in the 1970 Asiad, India won a bronze, possibly its last major international title. Since then, it has been a downward slide.

While several reasons can be offered for India's decline – the lack of international success in football for nearly five decades, poor infrastructure and coaching, absence of a proper professional

structure, confinement of the game to certain parts of India and the popularity of cricket – it still remains a bit of a mystery as to why the slide was so calamitous.

Indeed, Simon Super and Stefan Ozymandias, the authors of *Ergonomics*, had famously labelled India as the worst footballing nation, given its population, gross domestic product and sporting experience. Their analysis has been borne out by India's ranking, which has languished between 100 and 170 for the past two decades.

So, is there a way out? Several studies have shown that, not just for football, but also for sports in general, the wealthier countries tend to do better.

This is connected to the number of people who can afford to take up sports as well as having access to sporting facilities.

However, there are many exceptions to the rule. One route to success is to invest in football infrastructure. This is the path being followed by China to achieve its professed goal of having a team capable of winning the World Cup by 2050.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has expressed the desire to have 20,000 football centres and 70,000 pitches in place by 2020 and Chinese football clubs have paid astronomical sums to attract foreign stars to play in China and improve the country's standard of football.

However, the efforts have yet to pay off. It is currently placed at 75 in the Fifa rankings and has qualified for the World

Cup only once.

This might have something to do with team sports not being as amenable to the kind of state intervention that China has put in place to harvest Olympic medals.

However, investment in football infrastructure has paid dividends in other smaller countries.

A statistical model created by the Economist – based not only on GDP and population but also football's popularity and Olympic medals won – found that countries like Uruguay are performing much better than expected.

This is partly due to a national scheme called "Baby Football" involving thousands of children from ages four to 13.

Similarly, tiny Iceland, which has a population of less than 350,000 and has of late been punching well above its weight, has over 600 coaches working with clubs at the grassroots level.

Such schemes are what India should aim at, though they are also more difficult to replicate in larger countries.

Yet, another route to success is to export players to competitive leagues as well as to tap into the diaspora. This is what many of the African and Balkan countries have done to great effect.

Again, this is a model that India has been unable to replicate, mainly due to its marginal presence on the international stage. Indeed, very few Indian footballers have played at the highest level in a foreign league.

To qualify for the World Cup, India has to go through the grind of investing in grassroots programmes and infrastructure, preferably in locations such as the Northeast, Kerala, Goa and Bengal, where interest in football is high.

Some of the ingredients for footballing success are already present – economic growth, a professional league and new centres of football.

Some of these have contributed to India's recent rise in the rankings. However, to reach the next level, the passion for football, which exists despite cricket's omnipresence, must be harnessed.

Children who avidly follow the World Cup and European league matches need to start playing the game, preferably under expert guidance. There is no substitute to the policy of catching talent young and nurturing it.

But, before India can dream of being a part of the World Cup, it must first improve its global standing in football. It must be willing to make significant investments in grassroots programmes and infrastructure and further develop its nascent professional league.

Much work needs to be done at various levels of the sport in India.

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