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A critical review on the Indian super league (ISL)

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Abstract

The Indian Super League was founded in 2013 in an effort to make football a top sport in India and to increase the level of Indian football worldwide. The league currently features eight teams from around India, with four of the top five cities by population represented in the league. Unlike other football leagues from around the world, the ISL is one of the few leagues to not use the promotion and relegation system but instead a franchise system along the lines of the Twenty20 cricket league, the Indian Premier League, Major League Soccer of the United States and Canada, and the A-League in Australia. Since the inaugural season, two teams have been crowned the champions of the Indian Super League. Atlético de Kolkata have won the league twice, in 2014 and 2016. Chennaiyin are the second team to have won the league, winning in 2015. In this article the growth and impact of ISL have been traced out.

Keywords: ISL, I –LEAGUE, FIFA, AIFF, Federation

Introduction

The general opinion among Indian football fans regarding the Indian Super League is surprisingly negative, and the tendency to class it as futile after just 3 months, unfortunate. The number of people using social media platforms like Twitter over the past month to criticize the concept of the Indian Super League leads me to believe that it is perceived as detrimental to the country's progress; which, if true, means they don't fully understand its design.

For those unaware of India's position on the football map, they're ranked 171st per the latest FIFA rankings behind Montserrat, an island in the Caribbean with a population of 4900 (as of 2012). This isn't the problem; it's simply the manifestation of several underlying issues including (but not limited to) the absence of effective grassroots initiatives, a football culture and infrastructure to facilitate youth development. These bottom-level aspects of football are vital for a footballing nation to succeed; and India's problem begins and ends with the fact that it lacks in each of these departments.

The Indian Super League (ISL)

Contrary to what you might have read about the Indian Super League being "Football's version of the Indian Premier League", there are few similarities between the two. In fact, owing to the intricate nature of the challenge faced by the organizers of the ISL, the tournament is designed to function in an equally complex manner. The IPL's main objective is to discover talented Indian cricketers; the ISL, in addition to discovering local footballers, is set up to revolutionise and revamp the entire national football scene – the cultural, political, and infrastructural aspects – which makes it a far riskier and more complex venture than the IPL. The tournament aims to fix the aforementioned core problems while simultaneously maintaining (and improving) the status quo. What we need to understand is that the Indian Super League is merely a vehicle set up to achieve certain long term goals. Expecting improvements overnight is naïve.

The basis of a sound footballing system is found in its roots. These include, among others, a solid grassroots setup. *Grassroots* represent the most elementary form of the game in any society. The sad reality is that though India is awash with talented footballers, they invariably go unnoticed because children are advised against a career in sport; and rightly so. Tournaments at the school level aren't taken seriously.

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Here's a painfully intriguing statistic I came across the other day – India has less than half a million registered footballers with a population of 1.3 billion, while the Netherlands with a population of 16 million, has over a million registered players.

I strongly believe that discovering talent at a young age is half the problem solved. Sachin Tendulkar highlighted the importance of the same, "Schools should encourage kids to take up sports. I am not saying that all of them should become sports persons but we can become a healthier nation this way. The idea is to identify talent."

The ISL grassroots program allows this – it is a multi-layered initiative that aims at exposing kids to football at a young age, thereby getting them to develop an interest in football, then cultivating said interest into something bigger. The umbrella program undertaken by the ISL aims to reach out to 500,000 children through in-school initiatives starting this year. These efforts will focus on introducing kids to the sport, providing professional training, and talent-scouting. The best talents will be inducted into professionally managed football academies for further development. Additionally, a second layer involves mandatory grassroots participation by all the franchises with the sole objective of promoting youth football in their respective regions. These franchises are required to pay an annual franchise fee of 15 crores (1,605,000.00 GBP) for 10 years, which includes a specific allocation of 2 crores (214,000.00 GBP) towards grassroots projects. The same shall be implemented in collaboration with UEFA and the English Premier League to ensure use of best international practices.

For the grassroots to be efficacious, it needs to be complemented by a culture that identifies football as more than just a hobby. FC Goa's manager Zico summed up the significance of a football culture: "Football is very closely linked to culture. If a country's culture is not in sync with its football culture, it's difficult to make good players and build teams." In this regard, the status quo is poor. I know people who'd rather stay up until 3 am to watch a low quality stream of Brazil's Serie A than an evening telecast of the I-League on TV. This needs to change.

The first step towards creating a football culture is ensuring involvement. We need to make an effort to watch the I-League and other domestic cup competitions with the knowledge that it likely won't live up to our expectations. You can't bemoan the dire state of football in India when you, as an individual have the ability to change it. Initially, although it may seem like a drop in the ocean, more people are bound to follow.

"Why hasn't it happened all this while?" you might ask. I'd cite the flawed administrative system as the root cause. It's natural for people to want to be associated with the city they were born and raised in, and the organizers of the Indian Super League have, unlike the Indian Football Federation (the AIFF), identified this natural human tendency as a market to instill several aspects of fan culture – such as love and passion for the sport, loyalty to their teams, chants, pre-match rituals, etc – among fans. Novy Kapadia, a leading football expert in India, rightly believes that creating a football culture from scratch will take many years, which I think is primarily because we don't see any reason to participate and get involved.

The acute lack of infrastructure is another major factor that has held Indian football back for decades because of the typically casual attitude shown by the AIFF towards the sport; the same attitude that forced the Indian national team to back out of the 1950 FIFA World Cup, held in Brazil. There are

numerous examples to show that the AIFF is incapable of resurrecting the sport without external support:

- A world cup qualifier between India and the UAE in Delhi was played on a partially waterlogged pitch where the ball would die the second it hit the turf.
- Many I-League matches still kick off at 3 PM when the temperatures soar;
- The number of youth academies in a country of over a billion people is embarrassingly low.
- There aren't enough football-specific stadia in India. The only stadium that is fit, as per FIFA criteria, to host a World Cup fixture is an athletics stadium in Chennai, a city that doesn't even have an I-League team;
- There's no telecast of matches at the national or the domestic level.

The list is endless

Bob Houghton, former head coach of the Indian national team, narrated an incident in 2011: "The AFC (Asian Football Confederation) President came to India three years ago and said Indian football is 100 years behind. Then he came again last year and said nothing has changed." Houghton strongly criticized the AIFF's nonchalance: "I don't know how long or how many times people have got to say that to get the authorities to come to grips with it."

But it looks like there is finally a general realization that the AIFF cannot function in isolation, and that it's beyond shameful for one of the fastest developing economies in the world to be invisible on the global football map.

The ISL is organized by private entities (Reliance, IMG and Star) that are ambitious, financially sound and genuinely believe the need for a "Football Revolution". Infrastructurally, the first edition of the ISL is already seen by Indian players as a positive deviation from the past. Atletico de Kolkata's Arnab Mondal said, "We won't get the same facilities in the I-League." Another Indian player expressed a lack of motivation at the prospect of returning to the mediocrity of the I-League.

Notwithstanding the substantial improvement, former Liverpool and England goalkeeper David James thinks the infrastructure in India is far from adequate, "They have to do some heavy investment. The infrastructure is nonexistent. There were 4 sides that were playing on cricket pitches. Training facilities were hard to come by." He does, however, believe that if these areas are worked upon, "the potential is massive". This amplifies the fact the necessary result can only be achieved in the long run.

That India will host the U-17 World Cup in 2017 serves as an enabling factor as it demands compliance with a certain minimum standard as prescribed by FIFA. This means the organizers will be under constant scrutiny until they meet said standard.

While the above are development-oriented issues that require serious long term commitment from the bottom up, the ISL exerts certain downward forces that allow the positive impact it creates to permeate into the lower levels of Indian football – in other words, short term fixes.

You'll find the word 'popularize' used extensively in articles that talk about the Indian Super League. Popularizing football is pivotal to any hope of all-round development of the sport. History suggests that national football within has been out of favor among the masses since cricket took off in the late 1970s.

The ISL has taken several initiatives to remedy this:

- Social media becoming an indispensable part of our lives

makes it a market for brands to create (and retain) customers. The Indian Super League and the 8 franchises have successfully sold themselves to millions of prospective customers over platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

- The Indian Super League also roped in some big names to boost its brand – globally renowned players like Del Piero, Ljungberg, Trezeguet and Pires had been afforded something of a celestial status by Indian football fans during their primes. For these ‘heroes’ to now represent Indian cities is massive. They were responsible for not only pulling crowds but also to pass on the vast ocean of knowledge they had gathered over the years to the Indian footballers playing alongside them.
- As part of a family of Indian sportspersons, footballers have lived in the shadows of cricketers for too long. They were underpaid and unrecognized; but they finally have a stage that puts them directly under the spotlight. They can use the Indian Super League to develop into footballing icons that India so desperately needs.
- The unique shareholding patterns of the franchises enable them to popularize football within their regions in addition to helping them win the trophy. It’s no myth that cricket and Bollywood are two things that most Indians relate to, so franchises have incorporated these two factors into their corporate structures to try and seduce the football lovers and cricket fanatics, together representing India’s largest sport demographic. Many franchises also have affiliations with major European clubs and millionaire businessmen, which should take care of the technical and financial aspects. For example, Atletico de Kolkata is co-owned by Sourav Ganguly and Atletico Madrid; Pune City FC, by Hrithik Roshan, ACF Fiorentina; Chennaiyin FC, by MS Dhoni and Abhishek Bachchan; Delhi Dynamos affiliated with Dutch side Feyenoord.

Employing these mechanisms has so far proved successful, as the attendance figures suggest. The ISL recorded the highest average attendance (over 26,000) for a football league in Asia and the 4th highest in the world behind the Bundesliga, La Liga and the English Premier League. In terms of TV viewership, it received over 430 million views from across the globe.

An annual implementation of these efforts will no doubt benefit the game in the short run; however, whether such a high maintenance project will sustain itself in the long run is the important question. What’s certain, though, is that the Indian Super League is by no means a hindrance to Indian football, which has already hit rock bottom.

An initial glance at the latest FIFA World Rankings yields few surprises: world champions Germany sit top while Argentina, the runners-up in Brazil, are second. However, as you scroll further down the list, one name sticks out above all others. Way down in 158th place, below Puerto Rico, Curacao and Kyrgyzstan, are India.

In Soccernomics, Simon Kuper and Stefan Szymanski argue that population, football experience and per capita income are the best indicators of the strength of a national side. With 1.2 billion people and the world’s tenth largest economy, India – all set for the launch of the Indian Super League on Sunday – are undoubtedly the planet’s biggest underachievers.

Football was introduced to the Indians by British colonists in the mid-nineteenth century to provide a form of entertainment for the armed forces, who competed with each other in games

across the country. The Durand Cup – the third oldest competition in world football behind the FA and Scottish equivalents – was created in 1888, around the same time that clubs began to spring up in Calcutta, the capital of British India. In 1937, the All Indian Football Federation (AIFF) was established and, when independence was accomplished ten years later, the governing body quickly gained FIFA recognition.

Moderate success followed. India made their first official tournament appearance at the London Olympics in 1948, where they were narrowly defeated by a France side who required an 89th minute goal to seal a 2-1 victory in a game which saw the Indians miss two penalties and play in bare feet. Two years later, India were due to be Asia’s sole representative at the World Cup in Brazil, but withdrew due to travel costs (the story that they refused to participate because of FIFA’s insistence that they wear boots is actually false, a myth propagated by the AIFF to cover up what was, in hindsight, a terrible decision).

Nevertheless, gold medals were attained at the Asian Games in 1951 and 1962, and India placed fourth in the 1956 Olympics, memorably defeating hosts Australia in Melbourne in the quarter-finals. Under the management of Abdul Rahim, India were increasingly seen as the continent’s best side.

It would not last. Rahim, regarded as a real football scholar, died from cancer in 1963, and India’s rise was stopped in its tracks. Asian Cup runners-up in 1964, they failed to qualify again until the 1984 edition, when they finished bottom of their five-team group and were eliminated without scoring a goal. Results dipped just as the likes of Iran, Kuwait and South Korea started to come to the fore, yet it was a non-footballing event that provided the most decisive blow to the sport in the country. In 1983, India won the Cricket World Cup.

The impact was colossal. Cricket instantly became the face of India’s growth and prosperity and was now undoubtedly the nation’s most popular sport. Politicians recognised its worth and the state began to invest heavily, while businesses scrambled to land potentially lucrative sponsorship deals. Inspired by the underdog story of India overcoming their former colonists England in the last four and the West Indies in the final, children across the nation decided to pick up a bat and ball to try and replicate their heroes. ‘The 1983 World Cup’, says team captain Kapil Dev, ‘changed the entire sport in our country’.

Football was suddenly emphatically second-best, and its subordinate status persists today. Cricket, seen as India’s greatest chance of global success, receives substantially more government funding, and the resultant difference in infrastructure between the two sports is significant. Even at the highest level, football stadiums are grossly inadequate: the national team has had no permanent home since 2011 after multiple arenas were found to be in breach of FIFA’s health and safety guidelines, while communal grass pitches are scarce and extremely prone to flooding, particularly in the monsoon season. For the most part, it remains difficult for the game to secure private investment, with firms seeing little value in associating themselves with a sport that is widely perceived to be in a deep malaise.

Although millions tune into the Premier League and La Liga every weekend, local matches have hitherto been poorly attended, a consequence of a globalised world which allows Indian fans to watch world-class talent from the comfort of their own homes. Indeed, 67 million tuned into the 2008 Champions League final between Chelsea and Manchester

United, yet many Indian clubs struggle to fill their 6000-capacity stadiums, not helped by the need to stage many games during midweek afternoons because of the lack of floodlights.

Even when there is support – football is huge in the northeast, and there are significant fan bases in the states of Goa, Bangalore, Kerala and Calcutta – it is often taken for granted: the Calcutta derby between Mohun Bagan and East Bengal regularly attracts 100,000 spectators, yet the unwavering loyalty of the Calcuttans has been used as an excuse by the authorities to not update or renovate facilities and infrastructure.

While football's popularity has clearly grown in recent years, it has not been the Indian version that has attracted attention: Barcelona shirts and Brazil flags are commonplace, but there has generally been little appetite for the substandard local product, a situation that the authorities are hoping to redress with the launch of the more glamorous Super League, which will see European stars of yesteryear such as Alessandro Del Piero, Robert Pires and David Trezeguet line up alongside homegrown talent.

The lack of a national league until 1996 certainly contributed to the widespread indifference shown towards football. By the time of the National Football League's inauguration, cricket had firmly established itself as the nation's principal sport, and football found it difficult to entice fans and sponsors. The division received very little attention and was replaced by the I-League in 2007 in an attempt to professionalize the game; hopes were high, particularly as the launch was accompanied by a long-term broadcast deal with Zee Sports, who secured the rights to air games throughout the country. The contract, however, was cancelled after three years, meaning the 2010-11 season went totally untelevised, and two I-League clubs were forced to fold due to financial issues and difficulties in marketing themselves to their communities.

Australia, Japan and South Korea have demonstrated the value of a strong domestic league when football is not the country's traditional sport, but India lags some way behind, the I-League damaged by organisational problems and a general disinterest. The hope is that the Super League – which runs in the I-League's off-season – will be a catalyst for growing interest in football generally and that once it has reached its denouement Indian locals will tune into the nation's primary domestic competition, but the claim is arguable and it is not difficult to envisage a situation whereby the population turns back to either cricket or the major European leagues once the initial curiosity of seeing foreign stars perform on Indian soil has been satisfied.

There is also a cultural aspect to India's footballing underachievement. Despite being one of the planet's fastest growing economies, 33 per cent of Indians live below the international poverty line, and the nation is thought to be home to a third of the world's poor. Rags-to-riches stories are commonplace in football, and entrenched poverty and inequality have not hindered the production of talented footballers in places like Brazil, but in India, football is not seen as a viable way out. Education is heavily emphasised, and parents tend to discourage their children from wasting their time on a sport viewed as inferior to professional roles in fields such as engineering, law and medicine.

Exceptions may be made for cricket, which is seen as a potentially fruitful career due to India's lofty standing in the world game, but with extensive parental pressure leading to extra-curricular tutoring and homework, sport remains a mere luxury to many Indian youngsters. Indeed, something of a

catch-22 exists: football is not seen as an expedient path out of poverty because of a lack of success stories, but talented Indian footballers can only emerge if the game is held in a higher regard.

Despite all of this, some promising signs for Indian football can be found. Although there has traditionally been very little focus on youth development – the import of players from Africa and Latin America is such an embedded practice that the lengthier process of producing young Indian footballers has often been discarded – the AIFF finally seem to have recognised the importance of producing Indian youngsters: I-League clubs must now enter an under-19 team into a national league, and a recent grassroots project has seen the opening of residential academies across the country, providing excellent facilities for coaches and young players alike.

FIFA, meanwhile, has committed itself to three projects since 2001: the building of headquarters and offices for the AIFF in Dehli, the construction of pitches in the northeast and south, and the creation of regional academies focused on producing players in the under-14 and under-15 age group. India's potential has not been lost on European giants either, with Manchester United, Liverpool and Barcelona all forming links with academies in the Southern Asian state in the past few years.

Perhaps the biggest boost to football in India would be a successful export akin to Japan's Shunsuke Nakamura, South Korea's Park Ji-Sung or Australia's Tim Cahill. Sunil Chhetri, the best of India's current crop, signed for Sporting Lisbon reserves in 2012 but played only three times before returning home; Baichung Bhaita, who joined Bury in 1999, and Mohammed Salim in the 1930s are the only other Indians to play professionally abroad. Talented footballers do not just emerge in isolation, however, for they are reliant on the facilities, conditions and environment in which they find themselves, and further investment is required in order to give youngsters the best chance of prospering. It is to be hoped that the launch of the Super League does not come at the expense of bottom-up initiatives: the nascent competition based on the model of cricket's IPL must work in conjunction with sustained youth development for India to begin to realise its potential.

India will not be represented at the Asian Cup in Australia in January, failing to qualify where the likes of Bahrain, Oman and Palestine succeeded. A 27-year absence from the competition was ended by an appearance at the 2011 edition in Qatar, where the Blue Tigers lost all three group games, conceding 13 goals. Nevertheless, the squad received a warm welcome on their return home, special praise reserved for goalkeeper Subrata Pal after a string of impressive saves and performances.

Fellow participants may tend to be very week but triumphs at the Nehru Cup in 2007, 2009 and 2012 offer small signs of encouragement, and FIFA's decision to award India with the right to host the 2017 under-17 World Cup could serve as a real boost to the country's football culture and youth development.

There is still a long way to go but if India can use the razzmatazz of the Super League to grow support for the game while concurrently continuing to invest at grassroots level, progress can be made. If India could punch just a quarter of their weight on the international stage, they would be a force to be reckoned with. Kyrgyzstan, you feel, would not stand a chance.

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