

Kolkata slum kids battle it out for 'World Cup' berth

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KOLKATA: If things go according to plans, underprivileged kids from over 68 countries will converge in the city to play football in 2016. The world cup soccer tournament for underprivileged kids, organized by the Scotland based foundation called Homeless World Cup, has tied up with the Nagpur based slum soccer, a national initiative that has been working to use football as a platform to better the lives of children on the streets. The world cup happened in Amsterdam this year and the city has been chosen as next year's venue because of the city's famed love affair with soccer and also because it is among those cities of the world with the largest slum kids concentration.

The preparations have already started. Since Friday, the city has been holding a slum soccer tournament that will end with the finals at Don

Bosco Park Circus on Tuesday. Hundreds of boys and girls belonging to slums of Rajabazar, Tikiapara, Lake Gardens, Monoharpukur, Gobindopur, EM Bypass, Krishnagar and Kanchrapara were divided into teams that have been playing soccer at the Khalsa High School since Friday to qualify for Tuesday's finals. This is part of the Daan Utsav that the country has been witnessing now, of which the city has been a part for the past three years. This is the first time that slum soccer is being organized as part of the Daan Utsav that is being organized by six partners, all high placed corporate executives.

Slum soccer is an initiative that started in Nagpur a few years back by Vijay Barse, who has created waves all over with this project that aims to get all street and slum children into a football programme to keep them off streets and an eventual trafficking. The initiative has found partners in several cities and though it did make a small beginning last year in the city with two boys from the Tikiapara slum having gone for training to Manchester United, this year it has reached the desired proportion. "Slum Soccer is a movement that cannot be restricted to one small center in one slum. We have to create teams and weave together as many slums as possible so that underprivileged kids find a new meaning and enthusiasm in life. We have been able to connect with at least five NGOs working among underprivileged children in the city to bring players for the tournament. We deliberately kept rules simple to make the maximum number of children participate," said P.K. Madappa, one of the organisers of the ongoing initiative.

No boy-girl distinction was made while teams were formed and all 17 teams had mixed players, though age wise distinctions were made from 13 to 16 years. NGOs that have associated with slum soccer in Kolkata are, Anando, Calcutta Social Project, Changemaker and Premashree. "The idea is to teach them gender equality. Hence, we mixed up boys and girls in each team," explained Madappa. "I was thrilled when they said that I would get a jersey and keds to play football in a team. I have grown up playing with boys in my neighbourhood and hence my parents did not mind either!" said an excited Heena Parveen a child from the Rajabazar slums. "We have never trained under any coach but have always played by instinct. I was so happy that the seniors here appreciated the way we play," said little Gopal Sardar. What perhaps excited them more was the community feasting that happened after the match.

Football coach Homkant Surandase, who is an integral part of Barse's slum soccer programme in Nagpur is in the city and has been training the underprivileged children techniques of the game. "Kolkata is the mecca of soccer. Almost every child is talented here. It lies latent in them. Underprivileged children have all the shine because of the unbridled physical activities that they are exposed to from a very young age. I am honoured to be in this city and be a part of the project that has finally reached Kolkata," said a happy Surandase. David Leidig, a German soccer enthusiast, who is in Kolkata to study its art and culture as part of an exchange programme, has also associated himself with the effort. "It feels emancipated to see so many underprivileged kids give in to unalloyed fun and games," he said.

