**Year Ender 2021: Indian Women's Football Team in Transition Ahead of Asian Cup Test**

Heading into 2022, one conclusion can be definitively drawn. This will be a make-or-break year for women’s football in the country. The masses will either be galvanised or disillusioned, given the results at the Women’s Asian Cup and the Under-17 Women’s World Cup.

Yet, results have been poor to say the least. They have lost 11 of their 14 matches this year, under Maymol Rocky and Thomas Dennerby. Rocky’s tenure came to an end after a string of poor performances. To be fair to her, she had taken over at a turbulent time and steadied the ship for 4 years but it had become increasingly clear that a change was required prior to the Asian Cup.

Cue Dennerby. The Swede has always been meticulous and is clear with his instructions according to players who have trained under him. He had been given charge of the Under-17 team in preparation for the World Cup but with the Asian Cup looming, the All India Football Federation could ill-afford to put up a hollow show at a tournament they were hosting.

The brief for him is clear: Make sure India put up a fighting performance in a group that contains China, Chinese Taipei and Iran. India have lost their last five matches but they have come against arguably stronger opponents - Hammarby, Djurgardens, Brazil, Chile and Venezuela.

There has been a tendency to play a five-woman defence but that has backfired as the task of carrying it out of defence has fallen to Dalima Chhibber, who has become increasingly wasteful. The goalkeeping position continues to remain with Aditi Chauhan but she has been poor when called upon, for both the senior women’s National team and Gokulam Kerala FC.

An infusion of young blood saw juniors from the Under-17 team step in to the senior team, yet problematic holes in the team remain. In Bala Devi’s injury to an Anterior Crucior Ligament injury, India lost their most potent threat in attack but Manisha Kalyan’s rise has been a silver lining. She will be tasked with leading the line should India’s record goalscorer not make it back in time for the Asian Cup. The 19-year-old’s goal against Brazil will remain a highlight for years to come.

The wingbacks remain a grave concern due to the fact there are no natural wingbacks anywhere in India, either at the national or club level. Sangita Basfore is almost certain to miss the Asian Cup as well, yet there remains no natural successor to her at the crucial no 6 position. Martina Thokchom is an understudy, but it is clear that she is not ready for the senior set-up yet and was caught out in the four-nations Cup against Brazil, Venezuela and India.

One of the players who could replace Basfore is the metronomical Babysana Devi, who was the best player at the 26th Senior Women’s Nationals Championships. Babysana’s team, Manipur strolled to a 21st title - giants in their own regard - yet, it was the individual talents of some players who should have caught Dennerby’s eye.

Mizoram, put together three days before the tournament, played an electric brand of football to reach the semi-finals for the first time and were a force to reckon with. Fatigue kicked in as they lost on penalties to Railways but it was a clear warning to Manipur and the rest of the teams - the Mizos are here to stay.

Roshini Devi was a giant in goal for Manipur and should seriously be considered for the National Team. In the absence of credible shot-stoppers, her presence could prove to be beneficial for team India. Chauhan, due to the lack of credible competition, has put up middling performance without any scrutiny.

The Delhi keeper’s technique also came under fire when she conceded a soft goal in the inaugural Asian Women’s Club Championship, the second-tier continental competition for women. Gokulam won a game, but it should really have been a tournament win for the Malabarians.

Women’s football in the Western part of Asia is a polar opposite to the men’s game, nascent and lacking the years of development that the West has put into the other gender. In such a context, India were arguably the most experienced nation to field a team in the tournament but they lost to Amman and Shahrdari Sirjan to signal an end to their championship hopes.