

## **Indian Football is on the Rise, Here's How**

When India qualified for the AFC Asian Cup last year and rose to the 104th position on the FIFA rankings, it rekindled interest in the game, captured media attention, and established hope in people. Here are some inconspicuous events that led to the rise of Indian football and sparked a furor in the country:

### **1. Youth Academy:**

In 2013, The AIFF, with the help of FIFA, set up elite academies across the country to produce high-quality players in multiple age categories. Since 2014, these players have had access to opportunities like playing in the ISL with scope for professional development.

### **2. AIFF club:**

Identifying numerous clogs in the previous system hindering player development, the AIFF introduced a new club in the I-League, letting them compete and acquire professional game time.

### **3. Hosting:**

India successfully hosted the FIFA Men's U-17 World Cup and became known for their hospitality. They also witnessed outstanding performances from players in their team. India sure lost all its matches and did not qualify for the next round, but they left an indelible mark on the viewers worldwide, thanks to the gritty fight they put up. Owing to the tournament's overall success, India later bagged the rights to host the FIFA Women's U-17 football World Cup and the AFC Men's Asian Cup in 2022.

### **4. Corporate Bolster:**

Earlier this year, the Reliance Foundation Youth Club (RFYC) hosted a junior football cup inviting premier EPL youth clubs like Chelsea, Manchester United, and Southampton FC for participation. At the end of the cup, the Indian club gained invaluable lessons and experience from their English counterparts.

The tournament especially got traction in the media when a game between the RFYC and Manchester United saw the latter going down one-nil to the Indian club. Given the investment and training that the premier clubs have access to, the odds were heavily against RFYC. Yet, with an exceptional display of skill, they managed to silence the naysayers.

For the Premier clubs, a high percentage of their expenditure goes into grassroots development and junior football. Interestingly, the BFC and RFYC are two Indian clubs that have successfully adopted and deployed this model. They remain the only two clubs whose academies have been awarded the two-star status by AFC.

### **5. Collaboration:**

Some Indian clubs like the Bengaluru FC and FC Goa have sought ties with select foreign clubs to send their players abroad for pre-season training and other developmental activities. They also signed MOUs, agreeing to compete in friendly games.

### **6. Asian Success:**

The Indian Blues will contest the AFC U-16 Championship next year. Thanks to continental quotas in the qualification scheme, the top four teams shall also sail through to the 2021 FIFA U-17 Men's World Cup, set to be hosted in Peru. If India can make it to the semifinals by repeating its performance in the qualifiers, India will, for the first time, qualify for a FIFA World Cup on merit.

Closing remarks: Fostering young talent inside a sound sporting ecosystem remains key to building a world-class team. The recent developments in Indian football have resulted in progress and aspirations, inside and outside the sport. Here is hoping that these developments lead to a day when the Indian football team is poised to bring silverware and glory to the country at the highest level.