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# **GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT: WHY INDIA LAGS BEHIND ASIA**

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## **Abstract**

Football has experienced significant global growth in participation, commercial value, and professional infrastructure; however, its development remains uneven across nations. Despite a rich historical legacy, Indian football continues to face persistent structural challenges that limit its progress on the international stage. This study critically examines the current state of Indian football by analysing historical development, recent trends in national team performance, and the functioning of domestic leagues, particularly the Indian Super League (ISL). The research highlights key constraints such as weak governance, inadequate infrastructure, financial instability, limited grassroots development, and inconsistent league operations, including recent delays in the ISL. Using secondary data and comparative analysis, the study contrasts India's football ecosystem with successful Asian footballing nations such as Japan and South Korea to identify best practices in youth development, league management, and governance. The findings suggest that while initiatives like the ISL and club-led grassroots programmes have increased visibility and participation, their impact remains limited without systemic reforms. The study concludes by proposing strategic recommendations focused on governance reforms, infrastructure investment, grassroots expansion, and long-term policy planning to enhance India's competitiveness and sustainability in global football.

## **Keywords**

Indian football; Indian Super League (ISL); grassroots development; sports governance; football infrastructure; youth development; Asian football models; sports policy.

## Introduction

Football has achieved unprecedented global growth in terms of participation, revenue, and professional infrastructure. But its uneven development across nations reveals deep structural disparities. Despite of the international growth, Indian football continues to struggle with systemic, institutional, and developmental constraints. Football was introduced to India during British colonial rule, primarily through British soldiers, sailors and civil servants. The game gained popularity among Indian people in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Cities like Kolkata embraced football enthusiastically, giving rise to iconic clubs like Mohun Bagan and East Bengal. The historic victory of Mohun Bagan against a British team in 1911 became a symbol of protest against colonialism and marked a significant moment in Indian sports history. But the growth of Indian football didn't reach its full potential because of many factors like weak grassroots, poor infrastructure, inadequate coaching, administrative issues, and overwhelming dominance of cricket, leading to a lack of funding. The formation of the All-India Football Federation (AIFF) in 1937 was an important step, although it struggled a lot to gain the support and resources needed to improve the sport.

The popularity of Indian football peaked with the establishment of the Indian Super League (ISL) in 2014, which was inspired from the Indian Premier League (IPL) in cricket. The ISL gained many corporate sponsorships and attracted many foreign players which indirectly attracted the fans. But the impact of ISL has been mixed on Indian football, though it provided a platform for emerging players, raised the popularity of football in the country but it doesn't address the grass root development, inadequate coaching, poor facilities, governance problems etc. The national team continues to struggle on the international stage, failing to qualify for the FIFA World Cup and underperforming in major tournaments compared to other Asian Nations like Japan, South Korea, Uzbekistan, Iran, Qatar etc.

This study examines the current state of Indian football by analysing recent downfall, particularly in the national team's performance, alongside with the adequate facilities, funding that challenges the growth of Indian football. It also considers recent disruptions in domestic football, including the delay of the Indian Super League (ISL), as indicators of governance and administrative shortcomings. By comparing India's football ecosystem with successful footballing nations, the research identifies best practices and proposes practical strategies for long-term development. Given India's vast population and increasing interest in sports, addressing issues such as inadequate infrastructure, weak governance, and limited grassroots

development is essential for enhancing competitiveness, expanding career opportunities, and strengthening India's presence in global football.

## Literature Review

Existing literature extensively documents the multifaceted challenges confronting Indian football, including weak governance structures, inadequate infrastructure, financial instability, and slow grassroots development. The All-India Football Federation (AIFF, 2018) identified the difficulty of establishing a sustainable football ecosystem in India, particularly in a sporting landscape dominated by cricket in terms of institutional support, public interest, and commercial investment. This imbalance has significantly constrained football's growth and long-term planning.

Financial and governance-related concerns have been further explored in reports by Deloitte (2021) and Sportz Power (2020), which highlight the economic fragility of Indian football clubs. These studies reveal that many clubs rely heavily on limited sponsorships and unstable revenue streams, undermining their ability to invest in infrastructure, youth development, and professional management. Governance inefficiencies, coupled with inconsistent league operations, have compounded these financial challenges.

Recent disruptions in domestic football have reinforced concerns raised in earlier studies. The delay in the Indian Super League (ISL) season has exposed persistent administrative and planning shortcomings, raising questions about the reliability of league structures and investor confidence. Such instability directly affects player development, fan engagement, and the commercial credibility of Indian football, reinforcing arguments made by scholars regarding systemic governance failures.

Comparative studies emphasize that nations such as Japan and South Korea provide effective models for football development through structured governance, sustained investment, and integrated youth systems. Kumar and Raghav (2021) note that both countries successfully embedded football within school curricula, established robust youth academies, and maintained professionally managed league systems. In contrast, Indian football remains underfunded and fragmented, lacking coherent pathways from grassroots to elite competition.

Infrastructure inadequacies remain a recurring theme in the literature. AIFF reports (2022)

indicate that many football stadiums and training facilities across India suffer from poor maintenance and insufficient amenities. The scarcity of high-quality academies and training grounds continues to hinder youth development, highlighting the need for targeted public and private investment beyond cricket-centric infrastructure policies.

Fan engagement and media visibility present additional challenges. A BARC India survey (2023) revealed that cricket accounts for over 80% of sports viewership in India, marginalizing football despite the ISL's regional popularity in states such as Kerala, Goa, and West Bengal. Scholars argue that while marketing strategies inspired by cricket could enhance football's fan base (Choudhary, 2020), inconsistent league scheduling and limited media coverage restrict sustained audience growth.

Grassroots development has also been identified as a critical gap. Although initiatives such as the AIFF Baby Leagues aim to promote youth participation, their overall impact remains limited (AIFF, 2022). Unlike successful Asian counterparts, India lacks a unified and data-driven grassroots framework, resulting in unclear progression routes for young players (Sharma, 2022).

Governance issues within the AIFF further exacerbate these structural weaknesses. Studies have criticized the federation for inefficiency, lack of transparency, and political interference (Choudhary, 2020). FIFA's suspension of the AIFF in 2022 due to third-party interference underscored the urgency for institutional reforms, independent oversight, and stakeholder-driven decision-making.

At the national level, recent literature notes mixed performance trends. While India experienced gradual improvement in FIFA rankings over the past decade, recent fluctuations and declines in ranking and on-field performance reflect deeper systemic weaknesses. Although regional successes such as SAFF Championship victories indicate progress, researchers agree that India continues to lag behind established Asian footballing nations in technical depth, tactical sophistication, and competitive consistency.

Despite the growing body of research, significant gaps persist, particularly in empirical analysis of grassroots effectiveness, fan engagement strategies, long-term infrastructure planning, and governance reform outcomes. This underscores the need for comprehensive, data-driven

research that integrates domestic league stability, national team performance, and institutional reform to provide actionable solutions for Indian football's sustainable development.

### **Analysis of the Indian Super League (ISL)**

The Indian Super League (ISL) has played an important role in increasing the popularity and visibility of football in India. Since its launch in 2013, the league has attracted well-known international players and coaches, which has improved the overall quality and competitiveness of Indian football. According to a FICCI report (2022), the ISL recorded over 160 million views during the 2021-22 season, making it one of the most-watched football leagues in the country. Digital platforms and social media have further helped the league reach a wider audience and engage younger fans. However, the recent delay in the ISL season has raised concerns about administrative efficiency and long-term planning, highlighting ongoing governance challenges within Indian football.

In comparison, the I-League continues to face serious difficulties. Many clubs struggle with financial problems due to limited sponsorships and poor revenue generation, and some have even been forced to shut down operations (Bose, 2020). The league also suffers from low media coverage, which reduces public interest and makes it harder to attract sponsors (Rai, 2021). As a result, the I-League remains overshadowed by the ISL.

For Indian football to grow sustainably, a strong and structured link between the ISL and the I-League is necessary. Introducing a promotion and relegation system, similar to Japan's J-League, could increase competition and motivate clubs to improve performance. A unified football structure, supported by better governance, infrastructure, and grassroots development, is essential for the long-term progress of Indian football.

### **Grassroot Football development in India**

Grassroots football is widely recognised as the foundation for sustainable football development, as it introduces children to the sport at an early age and provides pathways for long-term talent progression. Bengaluru FC's grassroots initiatives offer an important example of effective club-led development. Through BFC Soccer Schools, the club has expanded football access to schools and neighbourhoods across Bengaluru, providing inclusive programmes for children aged 5 to 16 (Bengaluru FC, 2023). The progression of players such

as Vinith Venkatesh and Sohum Utreja illustrates how structured training and long-term support can enable young players to reach professional levels (Bengaluru FC, 2023).

However, the success of Bengaluru FC also highlights the uneven and fragile nature of grassroots football in India. Such structured programmes remain limited to a few urban clubs, while most regions lack basic facilities, qualified coaches, and organised youth competitions. The article itself acknowledges that many talented children are unable to progress due to inadequate systemic support and limited access to opportunities (Bengaluru FC, 2023). In many parts of the country, grassroots football is poorly funded, infrastructure is inadequate, and development pathways are unclear, leading to the loss of potential talent at an early stage.

Furthermore, social and economic barriers continue to restrict participation, particularly for girls and children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Bengaluru FC, 2023). These weaknesses reflect the absence of a unified, nationwide grassroots framework. Without consistent investment, better coordination between schools, clubs, and governing bodies, and stronger policy implementation, grassroots football in India risks remaining fragmented and ineffective despite isolated success stories.

### **Comparison with Successful Asian Football Nations**

Successful Asian football nations such as Japan and South Korea offer important lessons for the development of football in India. Japan's success is largely based on strong youth development systems that are closely linked with schools. Young players are introduced to football early and progress through school teams before moving into professional clubs under the structured framework of the J-League (Hirata, 2020). Similarly, South Korea has achieved consistent international success through sustained government investment in grassroots football, modern training facilities, and early talent identification programs (Lee, 2021).

These countries also benefit from stable league structures, clear development pathways, and effective governance, which have helped maintain competitive national teams over time. In recent years, Japan and South Korea have continued to perform strongly at major international tournaments, reflecting the long-term impact of their youth-focused systems.

India can learn from these models by adopting a long-term approach to football development. Greater investment in grassroots programmes, improved infrastructure, and stronger

governance reforms are necessary to create a stable football ecosystem. Recent challenges in Indian football, such as disruptions in domestic leagues and inconsistent national team performances, highlight the urgency of adopting proven development strategies. By adapting successful Asian models to local conditions, Indian football can work towards greater competitiveness and long-term sustainability.

### **Potential Solutions and Recommendations**

To improve the current state of Indian football, addressing infrastructure gaps must be a top priority. Public-private partnerships can play a key role in building and upgrading stadiums, training centres, and football academies across states. Better facilities not only improve training conditions for players but also enhance match-day experiences for fans, helping generate higher attendance and revenue (Venkatraman, 2021). Recent disruptions in domestic leagues, such as delays in the Indian Super League (ISL), further highlight the need for stable planning and reliable infrastructure.

Strengthening fan engagement is equally important. Introducing football through school programmes, local leagues, and community events can help build long-term interest in the sport. Increased use of digital platforms and social media can attract younger audiences and keep fans connected to clubs and players (Sharma, 2021).

Grassroots development requires sustained investment in youth academies, regional tournaments, and coach education. A structured pathway from school football to professional leagues is essential for identifying and nurturing talent early (Rao, 2020). Governance reforms within the AIFF are also crucial. Transparent decision-making, independent oversight, and clear regulations can restore trust and ensure consistent growth (Singh, 2022).

Finally, greater financial support through corporate sponsorships, government schemes such as Khelo India, and international collaborations can strengthen football's ecosystem. Changing social attitudes by promoting sports as a viable career option through education and awareness campaigns will further support long-term development and competitiveness of Indian football.

### **Conclusion**

Indian football stands at a critical crossroads where growing interest and commercial visibility coexist with deep structural weaknesses. While initiatives such as the Indian Super League and

club-led grassroots programmes like Bengaluru FC demonstrate the sport's potential, inconsistent governance, weak grassroots systems, inadequate infrastructure, and financial instability continue to hinder sustained progress. Comparisons with successful Asian nations highlight the importance of long-term planning, youth development, and institutional stability. For Indian football to realize its potential, coordinated reforms across governance, grassroots development, infrastructure investment, and fan engagement are essential. Addressing these systemic gaps can transform football into a competitive, inclusive, and sustainable sport in India.

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