


PAVING A GLORIOUS PATH FOR INDIAN FOOTBALL: CONTRIBUTIONS OF FIVE KEY PLAYERS

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Indian football team has been on the journey of improving with its ups and downs, and is still on the way to make the mark at International stage. In this paper researchers have discussed the journeys and contribution of five key players namely Mohammed Salim, Bhaichung Bhutia, I.M Vijayan, Bala Devi and Sunil Chhetri towards Indian Football. One thing that Indian team still strives to do is to play at the biggest stage of world cup. In the entire history of football Indian team has never played in the world cup. In fact, there is a myth floating around that India was not able to participate in the 1950 world cup because players use to play barefoot. Researchers have also discussed the reasons behind India not participating in 1950 Football World Cups.

Keywords: • Namely Mohammed Salim, Bhaichung Bhutia, I.M Vijayan, Bala Devi And Sunil Chhetri

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Introduction

Most people in India dream about watching Indian national football team playing in the World Cup. Football has always been the second most popular game amongst Indians after Cricket. Roots of football in India goes back to the 19th century, clubs and competition originated in the 1880s (Kapadia, 2001) and still are a huge part of the football games. In the recent years, Indian football team has been on a steady rise, ranking increased from 166 in 2015 to 104 in 2022 as per the FIFA table (Banerjee R., 2021 & Nag, 2022). In the current season of World Cup qualifiers 2019-2022, India stands in third place in group E behind Qatar and Oman (Banerjee R. , 2021).

One thing that Indian team still strives to do is to play at the biggest stage of world cup. In the entire history of football Indian team has never played in the world cup. In fact, there is a myth floating around that India was not able to participate in the 1950 world cup because players use to play barefoot. The truth is that India earned the slot in the World Cup in 1950 because Asian countries like Philippines, Indonesia and Burma withdrew from the World Cup (Adhikari, 2018) but still India refused to participate. There were three key reasons for India not participating in the 1950 World Cup: first, India three years ago only got independence and was not in a condition to do a big investment for just participation. Second, India wanted to focus on the 1951 Asian Games happening in India. Thirdly, there was a misgiving that if India will play world cup, players will be treated as professionals and will be not be eligible to play Olympics (Kanthwal, 2022).

Since the start of World Cup in 1938, for the first time in 1985, India participated in the world qualifiers (Kundu, 2018). Indian football team has been on the journey of improving with its ups and downs, and is still on the way to make the mark at International stage. However, there are a few key Indian football players without whom this progress would not be possible. Time and again these players have exhibited excellent performance to make India proud. In this paper we will share the journeys of five key players from Indian football.

Mohammed Salim

Mohammed Abdul Salim Bachi

Khan aka Mohammed Salim was born in 1904 in Calcutta, West Bengal, India. He was the first player from Indian sub-continent to play for European club. He played for Celtic FC in 1936, there he had cult following of fans (Celticwiki, n.d.). His debut match for Celtic FC was against Hamilton Accies, which Celtic won by 5-1 and the second match he played was against Galston, which they also won with margin of 7-1 (Celticwiki, n.d.). But he played very few games for the clubs and returned back to India due to homesickness (Banerjee S. , 2021).

Mohammed Salim was an amazing talent India ever had. He used to play barefoot, his son Rashid Ahmed in an interview to mint lounge said “, I think he just had this habit of playing barefoot” (Sreedhar, 2020). It was said about Mohammed Salim that when he used to play in rainy season not single drop of mud fell on his cloths. He was extremely skilled in his game (Sreedhar, 2020).

Bhaichung Bhutia

Bhaichung Bhutia also known as ‘Sikkimese Sniper’ was born in 1976 in Tinkitam, Sikkim, India. He has been a torchbearer of Indian football for many years and one of the greatest player India ever had. Bhaichung Bhutia has many achievements, in 2014 he became the first Indian football player to be inducted in Asian football Hall of Fame, hall of fame for Asian football players maintained by Asian Football Federations, is highly renowned (Economicstimes, 2014). He is also the only Indian player to win Golden Boot Award in the ASEAN club Championship 2003- 2004 season, where he played from the East Bengal football club (Armband, 2019).

In 1999 Bhaichung Bhutia signed contract with English Club Bury FC, where he played three season, appeared in 37 matches and scored eight goals.

Bhaichung Bhutia is the first Indian to sign a contract with a European club. Even though Mohammed Salim is known as the first player from Indian sub-continent to play for European club, he never actually signed a physical contract with Celtic even after clearing their trails (Banerjee R. , 2021).

I.M Vijayan

Inivalappil Mani Vijayan , popularly known as Kalo Harin was born in 1969 in Thrissur, Kerala India.

I.M Vijayan faced many hardship in life, he had to sell soda bottles in the Thrissur Municipal stadium to help his family but he had a passion for football. In a very early age of 17, Vijayan was noticed by DGP of Kerala and was selected for Kerala Police football club. Soon his aggressive style of playing and brilliant performances for Kerala Police football club earned him a place in Indian team (Sportskeeda, n.d.). Vijayan always stayed away from the limelight but unquestionably Vijayan had been one of the best striker India ever had. He received 'Player of the Year' award three in his career in 1992, 1997, 2000 (Mehrotra, 2021). He has scored the fastest international goal in just 12 seconds (Harshini, 2020).

He was also appreciated Internationally by countries like Malaysia and Thailand , he got offers from international clubs but he never went to play. In an Instagram chat (2020) with Sunil Chhetri, Vijivan said:

"I wanted to stay in India. At that time, I was at Mohun Bagan and the fans loved me so much. I also had fellow players from Kerala in the team, so I felt if I left, I would cheat the fans and fellow professionals and that would be a big problem. So, I decided to stay."

He is still associated with football as 'National Observer', he role is to work towards bringing positive change in Indian football and bring out hidden talent.

Bala Devi

Ngangom Bala Devi born in Manipur in 1990, she grew up playing football with boys in her hometown. She became the first Indian female professional football player by signing a contract with Scottish Club Rangers FC, and scored her first competitive goal for Rangers in December 2020. She is also the first Asian to play for the Rangers FC (Sudarshan, 2020). She had been awarded as 'AIFF Women Footballer of the Year' three times in 2020, 2014 and 2015 (Outlook Web Desk, 2021). She also works as a policewoman for the Manipur Police.

She is an inspiration for many young players and people across the world. When she was asked by The Indian Express (March, 2022) whether we can qualify for the World Cup. She said:

"...I think so. It's been tough for the last two or three years to test ourselves in competitive

Matches. But I feel our level is high enough to compete and that we have enough quality to make it through."

Sunil Chhetri

Sunil Chhetri born in 1984 in Secunderabad, Andhra Pradesh, India is a professional football player. He is the current Captain of Indian National Team as well as for Bengaluru FC in ISL (Indian Super League). At par with international players like Ronaldo and Messi, Chhetri is now the joint second highest active goal scorer with Messi and also fifth all time goal scorer with 80 goals for India in international football (Ansari, 2021). In the steady progress of the Indian team Sunil Chhetri played a very important role, for years he has taken responsibility of the team on his shoulders as a captain. He owns an incredible record of six times winning AIFF player of the year award in 2007, 2011, 2013, 2014 , 2017 and 2019 (PTI, Sunil Chhetri named AIFF Player of the Year for a record 6th time, 2019). He was also awarded Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna Award in 2021. (TOI, 2021)

No doubt Sunil Chhetri is the most celebrated player Indian Team ever had. Even people who are not following Indian football will surely agree that his success is at par with any major player across the world.

Conclusion

In addition to these key five players discussed in this paper there are many more that have contributed to the progress of Indian football team. Such as Subrata Pal, Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, Johnny lobo, Shabbir Ali, Manprit Singh, Renedy Singh, Sandip Chandani, Royston D'Souza, Sahil Tavora, Aditi Chauhan, Dalima Chhibber, Tanvie Hans, Lako Phuti Bhutia, Avika Singh, JejeLalpekhlua, MehtabHussian, Brandon Fernandes, Brishti Bagchi etc. Indian team, both in women and men category are showing steady progress. Tournaments like ISL, I-leagues etc are a good platform for players to show their skills and prove their worth in the Indian team and help create bigger impact for India in the international football game.

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