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## How long will football remain Cinderella of Indian Sports?

...lovely, enchanting & beautiful but always waiting for prince charming to come and rescue it.



Prakash Bhandari  
The writer is a senior journalist

Soccer or football is truly a world game that is played in virtually every country on earth. But in India, soccer has been overtaken by cricket. Football is played with a single ball and it is far cheaper than playing cricket, but in a country of 130 crore, with a majority of its population poor, what is surviving and flourishing is soccer, not cricket, interestingly both sports were parting gifts of the British to India. While cricket was one of the richest nation in the world, but we are among the poorest among the football-playing nations. There are over 200 members of the world body FIFA, but we stand 106th in the World, and with all the qualifying rules for the Olympics and World Cup playing in a World Cup football will remain a distant dream, we can play in the World Cup only if we host it. As a nation, one automatically qualifies for the World Cup. India has hosted the under-17 World Cup and also the under-17 girl World Cup. But the main event which is a big money game is out of reach for us as playing in the main World Cup. Soccer is an all-season sport and foremost of all sports.

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cricket. But in the World Cup, where Asians have fewer presence and with South Korea and Japan both qualifying for the round 16, the question that is asked is why India has shown such a great interest in World Cup when its not playing.

Arbit spoke to veteran sports journalist, Shyam Sundar Ghosh to know why football, which was the most popular sport in India had declined and when we would be able to make it big in the international soccer scene. Ghosh who has covered seven World Cups and has also covered Asian Games and Olympics is an eminent person having a storehouse of knowledge about international soccer.

**Arbit: Why is India not there in the World Cup?**  
Ghosh: It's because India is nowhere in the Asian football scene. Once the champions of Asia, India is precariously placed even in Asia. Its current rank in Asia is 19th, thus it's not even among the 16 Asian nations that could compete in the World Cup qualifier. Similarly, unless we improve we would never be able to make it into the Olympics and World Cup, and even Asian Games.

**Arbit: What are the processes for qualifications from Asians to figure in the World Cup?**  
Ghosh: There are six qualifiers from Asia including host Qatar. Apart from South Korea, Japan, Saudi Arabia and Iran, Australia, which is part of the Asian Football Confederation, are the qualifiers. Australia was in the Oceania zone, but now they are part of the AFC, so they are part of the Asia zone.



Fans crazy about football in Kolkata.

### #INDIAN FOOTBALL



Shyam Sundar Ghosh.

**Arbit: So India failed to make it to the World Cup?**  
Ghosh: India has not qualified for the World Cup in years. India has been a hard trier, but it could not figure among the 16 teams from Asia and is holding 19th position, so they could not qualify. India will have to improve its ranking in the Asian zone to qualify.

**Arbit: It's said that India qualified for the World Cup in 1950, but it did not take part.**  
Ghosh: It's all bull shit. I asked T Balaram, the sole surviving member of 1956, who is 86 now and lives in Uttarpara, a suburb of Kolkata, he told me that the All India Football Federation had no clue of the World Cup. All we knew was the Olympics and we participated in the London Olympics of 1948 and then two successive Olympics in Helsinki in 1952 and Melbourne in 1956. We never qualified for the 1950 Brazil World Cup, we had no clue of that.

**Arbit: What were the best period of Indian football?**  
Ghosh: From 1951 to 1962 when we won two Asian Games and reach the semi-final of the Olympics in 1956 Melbourne Olympics. This was the time when Syed Rahim of Hyderabad was India's coach. Rahim was the coach of the Hyderabad Police and was gifted to

knit and raise a team. In the beginning Rahim, Balaji Das Chatterjee and Tejesh (Bagha) Shome were the Indian coaches. Rahim was the coach of the Indian team that played in the last Olympics in 1960. After that India's best performance came in 1962 when under Chuni Goswami India won the football gold in Jakarta Asian Games. It was quite an improvement as in the 1958 Tokyo Asiad we finished fourth. Chuni Goswami, P K Bannerji, Jarnal Singh, and Balram all played well to see India with the gold under Rahim's coaching.

**Arbit: While you were all praise for Rahim, though he had only two successes as a coach in Melbourne Olympics and then Asiad victory in Jakarta. But in your book "Kick Off: The Untold Story of Indian Football", you have been very critical of PK Banerjee. You have devoted an entire chapter to criticize PK as a coach. Was this because of any personal animosity?**  
Ghosh: No, I would call PK Banerjee as an Indian legend. But PK as a player was different than PK as a coach. An unemotional scrutiny of his coaching record, without the haze of hero worship,

**Arbit: But now players from Goa, Kerala, Punjab, Maharashtra and even Manipur are in the India team**  
Ghosh: Yes, Calcutta Football League which used to bring thousands of football lovers from the month of May to September with teams like Mohun Bagan, East Bengal and Mohammedan Sporting. It was a dream of any footballer to play for the country. Since the football of Kolkata was very developed in India, so players from Bengal naturally found more place in the Indian team.



Pk Banerjee.

will give a far different picture. How many matches India won under PK as a coach? PK was the coach of the Indian team for an astonishing period from 1971 to 1986. A heart-breaking zero is the answer, yet he was rewarded with coaching assignments. PK was good as a coach for the club teams like East Bengal and Mohun Bagan, but later there also he got exposed. The less said the better.

**Arbit: Is this because of cricket, the youth has overlooked football and taken fancy to cricket?**  
Ghosh: Yes, but football did not get its due in India and there are multiple reasons for it. Look at the size and population of our country. Football is a cheaper sport, than football, but while cricket has overgrown, football because of a lack of dedicated officials lacked behind. There is numerous cricket stadium, but there is not one single dedicated football stadium in the country, not even in Kolkata, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai, or Kerala. But, Goa has an exclusive football stadium.

**Arbit: What do you suggest as a senior journalist and how to improve Indian football?**  
Ghosh: You will have to have a re-look at the football. Forget cricket and we should stop comparing cricket with football. Even today a footballer gets more money than Virat Kohli and the amount of money that football has cricket just does not. It's all on how to attract a child to opt for football. Nurture the talent on a pan India basis and train the youth is a scientific way. With such a large population, India can build its football infrastructure with an aim to make India regain its lost position in the Asian football. Gradually, it could be achieved, but the administrator of the sport should have the will to do it.

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The trio of Indian Football Chuni Goswami, Pk Banerjee and T Balaram.

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Chuni Goswami.



Thulasi das Balaram.

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### International Cheetah Day

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### #HAPPENINGS@QATAR

## Change of mind-set in Asian Teams



Three Asian teams in the World Cup pre-quarters and two from South America? Four Asian teams putting it across three World Cup winning nations and two Euro champions? Culmination of these scarcely believable eventualities is the maximum number of Asian teams in the knockouts of the FIFA World Cup ever: Japan, South Korea and Australia all had been there



Australian team.

before. Australia made it to the round of 16 in 2006, Japan reached the same stage in 2002, 2010 and 2018. South Korea stunned the world by finishing fourth in 2002 when they were the co-hosts with Japan and made it to the last 16 eight years later. That way, none of them have done anything they had not done before.

But what stood out in Qatar was the way they made the cut. Japan snatching victories against Germany and Spain after trailing by a goal in both games, South Korea netting an added-on time winner against Portugal to move to second from the bottom of the group and Australia eking out 1-0 wins against Tunisia and Denmark after being thrashed 4-1 by France. An interesting point is, coaches of none of the three teams

There may not be an Asian era yet but definitely in Asian flower at Fifa



are foreigners. All these teams have players playing their trade in various European leagues. That has been the case for a few years. They knew what to expect from the European teams. Somehow, when they faced them on the same stage, they tended to wilt. Remember Japan squandering a 2-0 lead against Belgium in 2018 and conceding a winner in the 95th minute? That has changed. Now they seem to have worked out how to combat them. Instead of retreating into a shell, they are unafraid to throw a

punch or two or more at them. The mind-set has changed. The belief is greater. Also, they have a better understanding of their strengths these days, which was best demonstrated by Japan against Germany and Spain. They unsettled these powerhouses with sudden bursts of speed instead of resorting to a physical game. Before understanding what had hit them, the former world champions found the ball inside the net. Japan also displayed sound tactical maturity in these games.

## Has African football finally come of age?



He may have been the greatest footballer that the World Cup has seen, but he was never a sooth-sayer. When it came to predictions, Paul the Octopus had considered

greater success. It was something in the late 1970s, not long after a Zaire team had been annihilated 9-0 by Yugoslavia at the 1974 World Cup, that he said an African team would win the trophy before the turn of the century. In 1991, after Ghana's Nii Lamptey had won the Golden Ball for Best Player at an Under-17 World Championship that included future stars like Italy's Alessandro del Piero and Argentina's Juan Sebastian Veron, the Brazilian great announced that Lamptey would be the "next Pele". Lamptey won the last of his 38 caps for the senior team at the age of 21, and had a journeyman career that took in as many as 14 clubs on four continents. He never even played at a World Cup.

As for African teams, not one has reached the semi-finals of the competition. Every other continent - even North America - has had at least one representative in

the last four. It's all too easy to laugh at Pele and his prediction, until you look at the top European clubs and see just how many of their players have roots in Africa. Why then have the national teams from the continent not been able to go past the quarterfinal barrier, and might 2022 finally see the wind of change? The early signs are certainly promising. The group stage has seen Africa's best performance by far at any World Cup, with the five teams from the continent accounting for seven wins (from 15 matches), and two of them - Morocco and Senegal - marching into the last 16.

Tunisia upset France and drew with Denmark, while Cameroon go home with the satisfaction of having become the first African team to beat Brazil. Even Ghana, the only African side to lose two matches, leave Qatar after having defeated a South Korean team that was ranked 32 places higher than them when the World Cup draw was made on April 1, 2022.

If we chart the journey of African teams from 1950, when Cameroon's formidable Lions beat Argentina, the reigning champions, on their way to the quarterfinals, it's easy to see why many think that football on the continent has stagnated. Since the World Cup expanded to 32 teams in

1998, with Africa getting five slots, the contingent has never won more than three matches in the group stage. That was the case even in 2010, when South Africa, the hosts, swelled the number of teams to six.

The nadir was reached in Russia four years ago, with not one African side making it out of the group phase. Only Senegal came close, eliminated on the basis of Fair Play points, after they picked up six yellow cards to Japan's six in a group that also included Colombia and Poland. Morocco's Walid Regragui reached the African Cup of Nations final as a player in 2004, one of his 45 caps. And Otto Addo, though born in Germany, played 137 times for the Black Stars between 1999 and 2006.

It would be stupid to dismiss all foreign coaches as mercenaries out to make a fast buck. Senegal's emergence as a football power, for example, was so much because of the coaching of the great Bruno Metsu. The Frenchman saw immersed himself in the country and its culture that he married a Senegalese woman and converted to Islam. When he tragically passed away from cancer nearly a decade ago, none less than the Senegalese president, MackySall, attended his funeral, calling him a "hero among Senegalese heroes".

There's little doubt though that there have been plenty of other coaches who have shown very little inclination to learn about the countries or the players they take charge of, who have tried to impose European or Latin American methods on groups with unique skills and emotional sensibilities. Vahid Halilhodzic, the Bosnian, who led Morocco to World Cup qualification is an accomplished coach who has previously enjoyed success with Japan and Ivory Coast. His disciplinary methods alienated many though, and his clashes with Hakim Ziyech, Morocco's most gifted player, were a big reason behind his departure.

After more than a generation of serving as assistants to overseas coaches, Africa's finest are more than ready to take over the mantle. Those like Cisse and Song know exactly what it means to wear the national team's shirt, and even when they take controversial decisions - like Song dumping the



Abédi Pele.

opener, and has been at the helm since 2015. Rigobert Song, who played his first World Cup as a teenager in 1994 and retired with 137 caps, is a Cameroon legend next only to Roger Milla and Samuel Eto'o. Morocco's Walid Regragui reached the African Cup of Nations final as a player in 2004, one of his 45 caps. And Otto Addo, though born in Germany, played 137 times for the Black Stars between 1999 and 2006.

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After taking the lead, they brought everybody down in their own half and made it impossible for the opposition to find gaps. It meant that Germany and Spain found little room to play that pass which could lead them to goalmouth. At the same time, Japan kept threatening with those lightning counterattacks.

South Korea's win against Portugal was a story of resolve. True, the 2016 European champions had kept some their top players on the bench since they had already qualified. Even Cristiano Ronaldo was substituted in the second half. But one has to give the South Koreans credit for the way they equalised in the first half itself after conceding in the sixth minute. Then, knowing that only a win could keep them alive, they withstood prolonged periods of Portuguese pressure and snatched the winner in the most dramatic manner possible, seconds before the final whistle.

Australia's progress was quieter and less dramatic. But edging out Denmark and Tunisia and getting the job done in clinical manner was an example of clever football. Denmark were semi-finalists in last year's Euro. Tunisia are no mean side either, as their victory against France suggests. Securing victories against them after losing the opener was a testament of the Aussie resolve. Cricket fans are familiar with these three teams may or may not be able to sustain the tempo. But collectively, they have already made history.

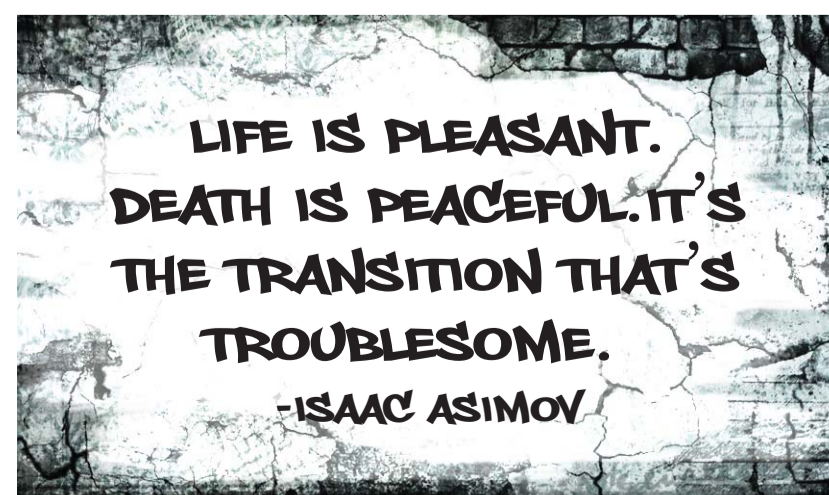
brilliant Andre Onana as his goalkeeper - they're able to carry the majority of fans along with them. Senegal and Morocco couldn't have chosen tougher paths to the last eight. Senegal will have to get past unbeaten England, while Morocco will hope to reprise their performance of 2018 against Spain, themselves slightly less assured after the shock defeat to Japan. Should one or both manage to negotiate those stiff hurdles, the sky really is the limit for Africa. Pele's prediction may not come true in Qatar, but after two decades of no significant progress, big strides have been made in the past fortnight.

- African teams at past World Cups since 1998
- 2022: 7 group stage wins. Morocco and Senegal into the last 16.
- 2018: 3 group stage wins. Nigeria and Algeria reached the round of 16.
- 2010: 3 group stage wins. Ghana reached the quarterfinals.
- 2006: 3 group stage wins. Ghana reached the last 16.
- 2002: 3 group stage wins. Senegal reached the quarterfinals.
- 1998: 3 group stage wins. Nigeria reached the last 16.



Former Aston Villa striker Nii Lamptey.

### THE WALL



### BABY BLUES



By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

### ZITS



By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman