

Factors Impacting South Asian Football – A Roadmap for Improvement

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Executive Summary

Problem Statement and Background Information

South Asia is one of the most densely populated geographical regions in the world with close to one fourth of the world population living in the region. Despite covering a large part of the world geographically, the growth and development of football in the South Asian Football Federation countries has been sluggish ever since the conception of Asian Football Confederation. There has been much contrast in the performance and administration of the sport in the countries under the SAFF as opposed to the other countries in AFC, let alone football in Europe and South America.

South Asian countries have also failed to produce elite professionals who can perform in top Asian or European leagues. It almost seems to have become the norm in football that South Asian footballers cannot play the game at the highest level. That is an issue that needs to be tackled now or another generation of talented footballers will again lose out on their hopes and dreams of a career in the game. Other social and cultural factors have also contributed to the development of the sport and despite vast human resources - since the South Asian region makes more than 20% of the world’s population - and a growing passion for the sport, the South Asian region is yet to make a mark in international football and be recognised on the global stage.

Purpose of the Study

The study analyses the problems and factors that the region has faced and have affected the development of football in India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Maldives and Sri Lanka. Factors such as the governance of the sport in the region, the professionalism of the game as opposed to other dominant sports in the region etc., have also been examined as contributing factors to the development of the sport. Through the analysis of these aforementioned factors, the paper suggests reformative actions that relevant stakeholders of the region can undertake to improve the status of football. The study also serves as a blueprint to other countries in the process of developing the sport which can guide and suggest actions to steer them in the right direction.

Overview of Findings

Research and survey of data suggested that it is not a single factor that has hindered the growth of football in the region, rather, an amalgamation of multiple factors

- Finance, Investment and Sponsorship. Many of the countries in the region have relied on financial support from the confederations and have been unable to generate income through investments and sponsorships. Maldives is an exception as it's GDP is triple the size of the other South Asian countries.
- Professionalism of the Game. These countries lack a definitive structure to their league system and even have irregularities in hosting the leagues. Moreover, football in the region is not professional enough where players can make a living off of just playing the sport.
- Coaching and Refereeing. The lack of quality coaches and referees is an issue that dwells in the region. Moreover the number of certified coaches and referees as opposed to the population density of the area is abysmal.
- Grassroots Football. While there has been some progress and investment in the grassroots development, it is yet to be recognised as a pertinent component in the development of high quality players and ultimately the development of the sport.
- Foreign Influence. There has been much foreign influence in terms of the players as well as collaborations with foreign leagues, clubs and organisations which has influenced the sport in a positive direction.
- Sports Culture. The viewership and fan attendance of the leagues has been staggered and on the decline. This is in part due to the influence of dominant sports in this region which have taken away the limelight from the sport of football.

Method of collecting data

The methodology used in the research was based mostly on secondary data collection. The study was probing into the data collected across various documents, journals, budgeting reports released by various federations as well as secondary data like newspaper articles, magazines, industry reports and other research papers.

Most of the secondary data is open to the general public of the AIFF, the ANFA, the Bhutan Football Federation, the Bangladesh Football Federation and the FAM. The AIFF also releases annual budgeting reports to the IOC and SAI. We have used these documents to understand the financial powers and shortcomings of the federation.

Additionally, consideration is given to data available via third party reports published by FIFA, AFC, CIES, FICCI etc.

The primary data was collected through qualitative research via an opinion survey of Mr Nabin Maharaj, The Head of Elite Youth, All Nepal Football Association. A special questionnaire was prepared keeping in mind the expert information and insights he could provide with respect to the governance and functioning of the ANFA, their upcoming plans to promote the sport and regarding the shortcoming of the federation.

Recommendations

Despite the financial, infrastructural, and cultural hurdles faced by the South Asian countries, there is massive scope for development of the sport. As we can see in the case of Maldives and India, how with the correct financial backing and a good strategic plan, which is focusing on grassroots development can play dividends in the forthcoming years.

Recommendations for underdeveloped and developing footballing nations:

- Drafting of a short-term and a long-term strategic plan which helps them set realistic goals over various time periods.
- Increasing funding for the footballing ecosystem from the private sector and other private stakeholders.
- Digitalization of footballing structure, creating a system that enables taking decisions on the basis of data analysis.
- Create a definitive footballing structure, increasing the number of teams, by reducing the requirements of the club registration systems, merging national leagues with South Asian countries under the directions of the SAFF.
- Creating a good structure and increasing the number of games and competitions for grassroots level.
- Infrastructure development like grounds, training facilities, medical facilities.
- Having a culture of football, instilling a distinct philosophy for football, and playing style from the foundation level and schools.
- Increase the number of referees and coaches per capita and improve the quality of education imparted to referees and coaches.