

# KICKING AROUND: ON FUTURE OF FOOTBALL IN INDIA

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Human resources, Youth, Sports and related issues

With the [ninth season of the Indian Super League \(ISL\) commencing in Kochi](#) and the ball set to roll at the [FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup in Bhubaneswar](#) from Tuesday, football in India can finally put behind a chaotic and unpleasant period that was littered with boardroom battles and litigation in the nation's highest courts. The two competitions have received fresh leases of life: the ISL has returned to the traditional home-and-away format after two stifling seasons in a bio-bubble, while the World Cup is back in the country's embrace after seemingly slipping out of it, once in 2020 because of COVID-19 and then two months ago when [FIFA suspended the All India Football Federation](#) (AIFF) and withheld the hosting rights. Under the new AIFF administration, the expectation is for these two championships to usher in a productive era for the sport in India. The ISL is crucial for players' preparation ahead of the 2023 AFC Asian Cup. A good performance at the premier continental tournament can enhance the nation's standing. The World Cup may provide impetus to further the overall development of women's football in the country, which is still in its nascent stages.

It was eight years ago that the ISL was introduced with the aim of revolutionising the game. Months before that, in December 2013, India had won the rights to host its first global competition — the 2017 FIFA U-17 World Cup. But since then, progress has been only incremental. The ISL's top-down approach, the lack of a pyramid of leagues held together by the principle of promotion and relegation, and the absence of qualitative reforms at the grassroots have resulted in India languishing at 106 in the world rankings and at 19 in the Asian pecking order. The 2026 FIFA World Cup will be a 48-team affair, expanded from the current 32. Eight spots are guaranteed for Asia, but India has to at least be in the top 10 at the continental level to have a realistic chance of qualification. The U-17 World Cup did trigger a change. A bunch of players, including the likes of Suresh Wangjam, Aniket Jadhav and Lalengmawia Apuia, flourished together at the AIFF's developmental side Indian Arrows, then went on to become regulars for their ISL clubs and eventually secured berths in the Indian national team. Such a clear-cut trajectory does not exist for the women. If the U-17 Women's World Cup can help lay a similar pathway, it would have done its job.

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