

# Globalizing Indian Football

Research >  
India

The recent changes in Indian football concern more than just the playing of the game: they reveal the various complex processes currently being negotiated in the country relating to globalization. There is a clear desire in India to improve the game and join the world elite. There is also a willingness outside of India to provide assistance to fulfil this desire. Neither of these, however, comes without their problems.

By Paul Dimeo

The recent history of Indian football has been eventful, if not always successful. In 1995, a group of consultants from FIFA arrived in India to study the sport's development, and concluded that a National League should be formed. This was done in the 1996-97 season and, for the first time, it seemed as if the organizational structure and professionalism were in place to attract sponsorship from multinational corporations, such as Phillips, Coca Cola, and Indian manufacturer Tata, which have all been official sponsors since then. The increased sponsorship resulted in a sharp rise in players' salaries, increased revenue for clubs through advertising, and more opportunity to import foreign players and coaches. The game had shifted its emphasis, away from local rivalries, state leagues, and unofficial professionalism, and towards greater national cohesion, formalized professionalism, and integration within the global system of modern football.

The development of modern football in general serves both as a useful starting point for discussing Indian football and as a way to locate the sport within wider social, political, and economic processes. It is evident, for example, that football in India developed slowly in

comparison with the global patterns of modernization. The first national body, the All India Football Federation, was not formed until 1937. Playing barefoot was not banned until 1953. Regulation time for league matches in India was only seventy minutes, even by the 1960s. The sport was still amateur and was run by unqualified administrators in an overly bureaucratic fashion. Finally, there was no system of youth coaching or career structure for the players.

While cross-national comparison can provide an interesting analysis of Indian football, it does not take into account the set of unique issues and problems in post-colonial India which have affected the development of the local game. As such, the difficulties faced by football in India might be better understood as a legacy of both the colonial forms of sports governance and the colonial concepts of body culture: the British deemed Indian bodies not to be suited to the rigours of football; Indian players were excluded from British clubs; and Indian teams from major competitions. The new Indian administrators, furthermore, did not move to overhaul this amateurish colonial set-up.

The post-colonial internal fragmentation of India caused more problems for football than for cricket, the former becoming a platform for communal and

regional rivalries, the latter an outlet for nationalist sentiments on the world stage. Cricket was well organized and professionally managed, and overseas victories in the 1960s and 1970s boosted the sport's popularity. During this period, football was in rapid decline, as successes at the Olympic and Asian Games in the 1950s and 1960s gave way to national failings and regional problems. Of the latter, the most serious was the tragedy in Calcutta in August 1980, when sixteen fans died and over a hundred were injured in rioting at a match between traditional rivals Mohun Bagan and East Bengal. Football reflected some of the problems of post-colonial India, enhanced by the fact that it was popular in such economically marginal areas as Calcutta, the Punjab, Goa, and Kerala. The Bombay-Delhi nexus that supported cricket also happens to be the centre of political and economic power.

The new National League is a belated symbol of the shift away from the post-colonial era and towards a new global focus. Its development was followed by two pre-season tours to England in the summers of 2000 and 2001, a move that revealed the passionate interest among the Indian diaspora for the game. There is also a new-found focus on the national team, signalling a determination to be included in the global football arena. The

long-term goal is to earn a place in the World Cup Finals; short-term goals include developing the South Asian Football Federation, playing other overseas matches such as those planned for South Africa later this year, and creating football academies both in India and in places of dispersed populations such as England and Germany. The importing of foreign players at the club level, from countries like Africa and Brazil, though not necessarily new, has recently developed in such a way that Indian league football is becoming much more of an international, cosmopolitan game. The possible inclusion of non-resident Indians in the national squad could result in a more experienced national team. The downside, of course, is that local players may find themselves squeezed out at both the club and national levels, a prospect not all Indian football fans find enticing.

In fact, non-resident Indians are already proving highly influential in this process of globalization, especially through the use of the Internet. The first website to provide details on previous and upcoming fixtures, results, issues, and players, etc. was created and run by the German-Indian student Arunava Chaudhuri. Indian football clubs have followed his lead in recent years, but there is still no other generic Indian football site, and no site on any aspect of the game, to match his efforts. Nevertheless, Indian football has found a wider and more imaginative representation in cyberspace by Indians, and home and abroad.



These technological, economic, and organizational changes all reveal the desire for a successful sport in which India can be represented at the international level. So far, however, the fulfilment of that desire is some way off, if the results in England are any indication: the team failed to score a single victory over a series of English lower league clubs. There have been other problems, moreover, such as the contractual crisis with a media company that led to a lawsuit and a missed opportunity for improved coverage of the National League. Phillips withdrew its sponsorship of the league citing mismanagement as their primary reason, creating controversy over National League sponsorship as a whole. Experienced coaches continue to complain of bureaucratic short-sightedness and interference, while accusations of unaccountability are still being made by the clubs against the All India Football Federation. For the time being, amateur ideas are still prevalent throughout Indian football. <

Dr Paul Dimeo is a Lecturer in Sports Studies at University College Northampton. He has published widely on the subject of Indian sport and has co-edited *Soccer in South Asia: Empire, Nation, Diaspora* (2001). E-mail: paul.dimeo@northampton.ac.uk

## Urban Tourist

An interview with the Guest Editor, Wolfram Manzenreiter

People >  
General

Manzenreiter and Winkel at the Japan Anthropology Workshop conference at Yale, May 2002



Photo courtesy Gavin Whitehead.

By Margarita Winkel

Wolfram Manzenreiter's interest in sports is not only academic. Among others, he loves climbing, snowboarding, and skiing. His current great passion, however, is long-distance running. One of the great attractions of running is that it is easily combined with travelling and observing. To him, long-distance running means 'a kind of urban tourism, something you can do wherever you are. You just have to bring your running shoes, and you are rewarded with unusual, magnificent views and unexpected situations.' There are downsides, too. 'Training for a marathon race is quite time consuming: basically I am always on the run.'

Born and raised in Krefeld, in Germany's Ruhr area, he initially became interested in Southeast Asia after graduating from secondary school. Between 1983 and 1988, his life was divided between travelling the region and running a small import business in Germany. During one of his trips, he met his future wife and followed her to Austria: 'In 1988, I realized that I was ready for a change. I did not want to continue doing that kind of business all my life.'

The career change from a relatively independent businessman with a life of travel and action to a full-time academic with a life dominated by writing and scholarly reflexivity may seem more drastic than it really is. His decision to enroll in Japanese Studies was guided by the possibility of continued nurturing of his general interest in Asia. Sepp Linhart, Japanologist and professor at Vienna University, encouraged him to pursue his research interests in popular culture. 'I am rather attracted by concrete problems. I am interested in why, how, when, and where people are doing the things they do in daily life. My research questions are guided by practical considerations. They originate in what I see happening around me, more than from a preconceived theoretical viewpoint.'

Theories however, play a crucial role in providing a framework for understanding these phenomena. His interpretations are strongly influenced by Marxist and Neo-Marxist thought, by the work of people like Gramsci and Bourdieu, and by scholars in the field of Cultural Studies. His MA thesis on Japanese gambling (*pachinko*) resulted in a book *Pachinko Monogatari. Socio-Cultural Explorations of Japan's Gambling Industry* (Muenchen: Iudicium verlag, 1998; published in German). He chose the topic of mountaineering for his PhD research and spent the entire second year of his assignment to Vienna University in Japan doing fieldwork. The result was another book: *The Social Construction of Japanese Alpinism. Culture, Ideology and Sports in Modern Mountaineering* (Vienna, 2000; published in German).

One of his principal aims is to generate heightened awareness of the way the sociological theory of sports is usually formed. 'For many Japanese and Chinese scholars unfamiliar with the Anglo-American language and discourse practices, it is difficult to participate in the development of sports sociology on an international level. Developments in the field of

sports sociology are dominated by US, British, and, to a lesser extent, by scholars from other European countries.' The task he has set himself for the immediate future is to expose the work of Japanese (and other East Asian) sports sociologists to a broader international audience. 'There's such a vast amount of knowledge, and hardly anybody knows these resources. The inclusion of viewpoints from local Asian sports analysts will bring about a change in perspective that will be beneficial, if not to say essential, for further theoretical developments on essential concepts and the structure of sport sociology.'

To Manzenreiter, networking is a major tool for reaching this goal. 'That's essential to foster the academic understanding of variant social and subcultural aspects of sports.' He feels that his personal involvement in research projects and study groups is important for encouraging communication and information exchange between scholars of various countries. 'Sports should be viewed in relation to global developments. Football, for example, is strongly tied to global economic developments.' In every way, football and sports in general are global and interdisciplinary, and their academic study should reflect this. The way the human body is conceptualized in different regions may serve as an example here. 'Understanding and incorporating the different ways in which the body is experienced will have important consequences for general views and theories on sports and its relation to the body, and will hopefully lead to a conceptualization of sport that is not only based on Western experience and analyses.'

Wolfram Manzenreiter is assistant professor at the Institute of East Asian Studies at the University of Vienna where he lectures on modern Japanese society. He is also general secretary of the German Association for Social Science Research on Japan, and the father of two sons. — (Margarita Winkel)