Although the countries of South Asia cut a sorry figure in FIFA rankings, football in this region ranks high in terms of its culture, tradition and mass following. While South Asian society and culture have shaped the history of football in the region, the game in turn has influenced the various processes at work in South Asian society, politics and culture. The history and evolution of football in South Asia have to date centred round certain key themes – broad histories of football in these countries; history of the clubs, tournaments and associations; football’s interface with colonialism, nationalism and communalism; regional growth, politics and rivalry of soccer; the impact of Partition; the club–nation conflict; place of South Asian states in international football; football culture; fandom and spectator violence; football literature and histories; professionalism and commercialism; the impact of globalisation and satellite revolution; women’s football; and so on, in the backdrop of the game’s evolution from its introduction and adoption as an unimportant pastime to its adaptation and popularisation as a mass spectator sport in colonial and postcolonial South Asia. By revisiting these themes, the chapter will attempt to reconstruct the history of the game in South Asia through a study of the evolution of football in two of the most football-crazy nations in the region – India and Bangladesh. In the process, it will also try to identify questions that still need to be asked, raise issues that urge serious debates and offer insights that can stimulate future research on football in South Asia.

**Historiography of football in South Asia**

Scholars on sport in South Asia have mostly focused on the games introduced by the British during their period of colonial rule. Much of this work has dealt with cricket since it has become the most popular game in South Asia in recent decades. It was in this context that the works of Edward Docker (1976), Richard Cashman (1979), Ramachandra Guha (1998, 2002), Arjun Appadurai (1995), Mihir Bose (1990) and Ashis Nandy (2000) became significant. Some of the studies on colonial Indian sport focus on the colonial introduction of modern sports and explore deeper imperial motives behind it (Mangan, 1998: 122–41, 168–92; Holt, 1989; Guttman, 1994). One of the first serious academic researches on the history of football in South Asia was the M.Phil. dissertation of Soumen Mitra at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New

It is important here to assess the merit of those academic works and articles, which deal with the history of Indian/South Asian football from historical perspectives. Soumen Mitra (1991) analyses the nationalist implications of football in early twentieth-century Calcutta and explains the significance of Mohun Bagan’s Indian Football Association Shield victory of 1911 in that context. Mitra’s later book interprets the articulation of nationalism, communalism and subregionalism through football in Bengal (Mitra, 2006). Moti Nandy, the renowned Bengali sport-literate, contributed two important articles on the history of football in Bengal. In the first one, ‘Calcutta Soccer’, which is precisely informative, he neatly delineates the origin, growth and development of Calcutta soccer in its entire vicissitudes (Nandy, 1991–2). In the second, ‘Football and Nationalism’, Nandy takes up the more complex aspects of football’s socio-historical development in Bengal – nationalism, communalism, Ghoti–Bangal conflict, maidan culture, football finance and other social aspects of the game (Nandy, 1991–2). Tony Mason’s article, ‘Football on the Maidan: Cultural Imperialism in India’, deals with the implications of the concept of ‘cultural imperialism’ in a colonised society like India and takes up football on the Calcutta maidan 2 as the mirror through which specific forms of this cultural imperialism were reflected. He also discusses how the native Indian responded to this new imperial ‘offence’ with a case study of Mohun Bagan’s 1911 victory (Mason, 1992).

The publication of *Soccer in South Asia: Empire, Nation, Diaspora* in 2002 (Dimeo and Mills, 2002) was an important step in the direction of historical studies on South Asian football. This book could be viewed as part of the growing concern on the part of the sports historians in the West to give soccer its deserved status as a subject of historical scholarship so long overdue in South Asia. It contains some important essays, especially those by J. A. Mangan (2002), Paul Dimeo (2002a), James Mills (2002) and Alex McKay (2002). J. A. Mangan (2002), in unquestionably the best contribution of the volume, offers a brilliant purposive account of the introduction of football in Kashmir and NWFP in the 1890s. Mangan sees football as a worthwhile means to an imperial end, i.e. as a moral tool to strengthen the foundation of the British Empire in India. Paul Dimeo (2002a), who begins a series of regional studies that highlight the diverse histories of football in South Asia, focuses on the inception, development and politics of football in Calcutta. In focusing on football in Goa and in Tibet, James Mills and Alex McKay examine very different colonial contexts for the development of Indian football from those analysed by Mangan and Dimeo. Mills (2002) contrasts the Goan example with other regions and attributes this ‘difference’ to the unique features of Goan history that were a result of its separate experience of Portuguese imperialism. McKay (2001), on the other hand, contextualises the introduction, adaptation and rejection of the game in Tibet in the wider relational complexities of colonial policy, locals’ response and elite reaction.

Paul Dimeo (2003), in another essay, claims to introduce ‘a history of sport and politics’ and discusses ‘how a sports club took on political meaning in a charged climate of antagonism and emerging identities, when anti-colonial nationalism gave way to religious communalism between Hindus and Muslims as Indians fought over spoils of decolonization’. Dimeo’s other
article entitled ‘Colonial Bodies, Colonial Sport’ compares and contrasts the efforts of the ‘effeminate Bengalis’ with that of the ‘martial Punjabis’ in the development of Indian football, albeit the effort remaining superficial, given the dearth of primary sources to substantiate his interesting inferences (2002b). In the piece on the history of club conflict in Calcutta football, Dimeo (2001) tried to analyse the most fascinating rivalry in India’s club football between Mohun Bagan and East Bengal in terms of an ethnic conflict between the Hindu settlers of West Bengal and the Hindu immigrants from East Bengal in the aftermath of the Partition of 1947.

A more recent work on the history of Indian football, Goalless: The Story of a Unique Footballing Nation (Majumdar and Bandyopadhyay, 2006), concentrates on exploring the relationships between the national, the regional and the local in the history of Indian soccer. It seeks to explore the relationship between soccer on the one hand and forces like imperialism, nationalism, communalism, regionalism, commercialism and professionalism on the other. It has rather tried to pave the way for further and fuller coverage of the significant issues revealed through attitudes to soccer in Indian society. Dwaipayan Sen (2006), in his article on the significance of Mohun Bagan’s IFA Shield victory of 1911, examines the varied response to, and the larger meaning of, the historic event in trying to destabilise rigidly imperialist or nationalist historical interpretations of this occasion. Sharmishtha Gooptu’s article on ‘Celluloid Soccer: The Peculiarities of Soccer in Bengali Cinema’ deals with popular representations of football in Bengali cinema in the last three decades of the twentieth century (Gooptu, 2005).

My earlier work Playing for Freedom: A Historic Sports Victory (Bandyopadhyay, 2008) concentrated only on the IFA Shield victory of Mohun Bagan as the first Indian team in 1911 and tries to bring to light the political, social and cultural importance of that event in a historical perspective. My recent book Scoring Off the Field: Football Culture in Bengal, 1911–80 (Bandyopadhyay, 2011) examines how football, as a mass spectator sport, came to represent a novel and unique cultural identity of Bengali people in terms of nation, community, region/locality and club, contributing to the continuity of everyday sociocultural life. It outlines how football became a viable popular social force with rare emotional spontaneity and peculiar self-expressive fan culture against the background of the anti-imperial nationalist movement, and later, postcolonial political tension and social transformation. My most recent work Bangladesh Playing: Sport, Nation, Culture offers a brief discussion on the evolution of football in Bangladesh (Bandyopadhyay, 2012).

Indian football in transition: from colonial to postcolonial times

It is reasonably clear that football came to South Asia with the East India Company. Football’s early pioneers were the officers and men of Trading Farms and Regimental Battalions, European professors of educational institutions, and naval men who used to play at ports of call like Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Karachi (Bandyopadhyay, 2003: 1–4). The introduction and early organisation of the game in parts of South Asia is often interpreted in terms of a theory of ‘games ethic’ popularised by J. A. Mangan (1981). The concept of ‘games ethic’ had shared with the notion of ‘muscular Christianity’ (Mangan, 2003) propagated by the moral missionary, a firm belief in sport as an instrument of imperial moral persuasion. The implications of games ethic were more clearly discernible in the efforts of evangelicals like Theodore Leighton Pennell and Cecil Earle Tyndale-Biscoe in the North-West Frontier Provinces and in Kashmir respectively, who used the game as a ‘key weapon in the battle to win over local populations and to begin transforming them from their “uncivilized” and “heathen” state to one where they
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might be considered “civilized” and “Christian” (Mangan, 2002). In Bengal, especially in Calcutta, the Anglo-Indian schools certainly integrated sports including football as an integral part of their educational curriculum. Soccer, to these early missionaries as well as public school teachers, was a moral tool to inculcate a series of moral lessons, regarding hard work and perseverance, about team loyalty and obedience to authority and, indeed, involving concepts of correct physical development and “manliness” (Mangan, 2002). However, the early inspirational role of the Indian middle class schools should not be overemphasised, nor yet be incorrectly minimised. Other imperial elements like soldiers, businessmen and administrators also might have had an early influence in the process. Despite football’s inclusion and importance as a form of moral training in the public school curriculum in the leading British educational institutions, football’s popularisation in India cannot solely be attributed to this process. The attitude and response of the general Indian public towards this mass spectator sport was rather different. Football’s appropriation by the general public was a complex and both calculated and incidental process, especially in Bengal.

In the 1880s and 1890s, football was deemed as a cultural weapon to reassert Bengali/Indian physical prowess and masculinity and as a medium of social intercourse between the ruler and ruled. It was yet to become a cultural weapon to fight and beat the colonial masters in a true nationalist sense. By the end of the nineteenth century the game from being an occasional recreation of military men, a school sport and merely a leisure activity among other Europeans, soon became an arena for competition and conflict between the British and the Indians (Mitra, 2006; Bandyopadhyay, 2011). The Indian Football Association (IFA) was born in late 1892 to cater to the growing institutionalisation of the game. Football, however, at the turn of the century, may be said to have become a new and unique cultural nationalist force in Indian society although the approach of different clubs to the game was not uniform. It was Calcutta’s Mohun Bagan Club which rose from the Indian clubs to symbolise the true nationalist response of the injured ‘cultural self’ of Indians against the British. In 1911 the club, through its epic victory over the East York Regiment in the 1911 IFA Shield final, nearly brought about a national reawakening in India (Bandyopadhyay, 2008). While Mohun Bagan became a nationalist emblem in the 1910s and 1920s, it was the Mohammedan Sporting Club, originally founded in 1887, which came to represent the Muslim communities across India. It achieved greater success in the 1930s, winning nearly all the major titles in Indian football one by one (Bandyopadhyay, 2011). East Bengal Club, founded in 1920 in Calcutta, on the other hand, became the club of Hindu Bengalis of East Bengal and began to dominate the Indian football scene in the 1940s and 1950s (Bandyopadhyay, 2011).

So long as India was a colony, its true potential as a soccer power remained undetermined. After independence, however, India emerged as a formidable Asian force on the international stage. The story of India’s tryst with international football offers an interesting repertoire of stunning performances including modest success, appalling defeat and long absence, ranging from India’s decent start in the London Olympics of 1948 and its sole missed opportunity to play in the 1950 Brazil World Cup through a huge defeat in the Helsinki Olympics of 1952 to a stirring performance in 1956 (Basu, 2003; Bandyopadhyay, 2009). And when India’s spirited display in the Rome Olympics of 1960 was followed by the startling victory in the Jakarta Asian Games in 1962, the nation seemed ready to have a crack at the international level. But the momentum was lost quite astonishingly within a decade. The decline set in and the giant had fallen asleep again. Yet the slumber has been mostly dreamy with intermittent magic spells of insomnia, albeit without any sustained impact on the nation’s soccer fortune at the international level. Since 1960 the Indian football team never qualified for the Olympics, neither did it cross the pre-qualifier stage in the World Cup. India’s decline in
soccer becomes more evident if one considers its performance in South Asian tournaments like the SAF Games or SAFF Cup. Even while playing against much inferior teams and latecomers such as Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan or Sri Lanka, India won the SAF Games soccer gold only three times in its nine editions to date while it performed a little better by winning the SAFF Cup on three in five occasions.

It has become evident by now that Indian footballers by themselves are no longer crowd-pullers as they used to be in the past. This reflects a growing aversion even among the genuine supporters of Indian football to watch domestic matches. With ample opportunity to watch high-quality European and Latin American games on satellite sports channels like ESPN-Star Sports, DD Sports or Ten Sports, watching Indian football has become a matter of disgust for many. In such a situation, as Vinod (2000) points out:

the AIFF has done precious little to stem the tide by chalking out meaningful programmes for the development of the game in this country. Instead, it has preferred to remain a silent spectator, caught in the cobwebs of the power struggles within itself, untouched by the consequences of its own ineffectiveness. Should it fail to get its act together without any further delay, it certainly would not take much time for the epitaph of Indian football to be written some day or other in the none-too-distant future.

If there is any worthwhile boost the AIFF provided to Indian football, it was the introduction of the National Football League (NFL) in 1996 (now called the I-League). The event certainly infused new vigour into Indian soccer. But the NFL is still found wanting in several key aspects: organisation, marketing, publicity, itinerary and, above all, adequate sponsors. Soccer-wise it proved to be a keenly competitive league in the last sixteen years, with a lot of twists and turns till the end, but it left a lot to be desired on the organisational front. Many hold AIFF ways responsible for the shortcomings of the national league. It has been argued that the I-League itinerary and logistics have been a topic of ridicule, as teams have had to crisscross the vast country with very little or no gap between matches. Also, while promoting the I-League, the AIFF has systematically undermined important and prestigious tournaments like the Durand Cup, DCM Trophy, Rovers Cup and IFA Shield which used to act as breeding grounds for soccer talent in the country as well as to nourish a sound club culture. It is urgent to restore them to their erstwhile status and importance to broaden the base of the game throughout India. At present, regular football leagues take place only in a handful of states including Kolkata, Mumbai, Goa, Bangalore, Kerala, Delhi, Hyderabad, Manipur and Punjab. The rest of the AIFF units have nearly proved ineffectual. Even with FIFA support, the AIFF has not been able to implement to perfection the most rudimentary soccer development programme. For this, as Adams (n.d.) points out, its ‘cronyism, ageism and amateur ineffectiveness’ are much to blame.

Finally, as regards the appointment of foreign coaches with the avowed aim of raising the standard of Indian football, the AIFF has done little. In the last three decades or so, the AIFF experimented with at least six foreign coaches for the senior Indian national team, most of whom failed to deliver any long-term benefit for Indian football. The list includes Dietmar Pfeifer from East Germany, Ciric Milovan from Yugoslavia, Josef Gelei of Hungary, Jiri Pesek of Czech Republic, Rustam Akhramov from Uzbekistan, Stephen Constantine from England and Dave Houghton from England. Except Milovan, none really looked impressive enough to transform India into a sound fighting combination. And even when they tasted occasional success it was more due to the exceptional ability of some talented Indian players like I. M.
Vijayan, Jo Paul Ancheri or Baichung Bhutia than due to proper planning by the coaches. However, the foreign coaches too have had their points to offer. As Kapadia (2003) argues: ‘Inadequate foreign exposure, limited opportunity with the national team and interference in team selection [by the so-called soccer bureaucrats] dampened the enthusiasm of the foreign coaches and they did not devote adequate time with either the senior team or the age group teams.’ What India requires from a foreign coach is a sensible approach towards the anomalies of the Indian game as it is played right now. As Rodrigues (2001) points out, ‘a dedicated foreign coach who understands the Indian psyche (as John Wright and Gary Kirsten are said to have done in Indian cricket) can help Indian football take the much-needed strides in the strategic department’. The AIFF needs to rope in the likes of Guus Hiddink, who played a pivotal role in South Korea’s remarkable success in the 2002 World Cup or Russia’s returning as a soccer force in the 2008 Euro Cup, as coach of the national team. In fact, lack of a long-term perspective has been a hallmark of the organisation’s long history. The big question therefore is: will the Indian football administration be able to rise to the occasion by redefining its old priorities? Or will the AIFF be able to shake off its age-old amateur status and wear the global apparel of professionalism?

The transition from amateurism to professionalism seems to have begun with the AIFF undertaking the Vision Asia3 project offered by the Asian Football Confederation (AFC). Two Indian states – Manipur and Delhi – were initially taken under the Vision India project in 2004, an ambitious project under the aegis of the grand Vision Asia project of the AFC, envisaging the fulfilment of AFC’s latest motto ‘The Future Is Asia’ – a holistic approach towards the development of Asian soccer. Dato Peter Velappan, general secretary of the AFC, launched Vision India on 26 April 2004. Manipur and Delhi were chosen as the two sites for the implementation of the pilot projects of Vision India in the initial stage, followed by other states like Tamilnadu later on.

In the transition from colonialism to postcolonialism, football in India acted as a platform for social networks, community connections and identity formations of various sorts. But whenever the game mobilised or unified a community for a cause – be it national, religious or subregional – it always created intense club loyalty that led to the game’s widespread social popularisation as a mass spectator sport. The three clubs – all from Bengal – Mohun Bagan, Mohammaden Sporting and East Bengal – while representing respective identities and commonalities of nationalism, communalism and subregionalism also heightened the social viability and commercial prospects of the game in India. The intensive support base of these three clubs sustained the mass craze around the game all over India until the 1980s when club teams from Punjab, Maharashtra, Kerala and Goa began to challenge Bengal’s supremacy in domestic tournaments. This new challenge also signalled the beginning of a novel representational rivalry between club-based regional communities in Indian football. With the launching of the National League in 1996 this rivalry got a perfect stage for articulation. In the new century, however, this rivalry has more or less become confined between two regional communities – Bengal and Goa. On the other side, as a sequel to the unfortunate fragmentation of sporting nationalism since 1930s club loyalties became both more prominent and all-embracing, assuming an importance transcending the national significance of the football team in postcolonial India. In seems that Indian football could not cope with the requirements of a postcolonial nation state. Football’s changing role in postcolonial India produced a gradual but sharp dichotomy between club and nation. In the peculiar amateur (semi-professional since the mid-1990s!) set-up of Indian football, the increasing clash of interests between India’s leading clubs and the national team has been a bane for the standard of the game, resulting in India’s dismal show on the international circuit over the last three
and a half decades. With slow but steady commercialisation of football in twenty-first-century India club communities are on their way to growing stronger and stronger following their European counterparts. The introduction of a theme song and website, merchandising of the club’s jersey, flag and symbol, formation of local fan clubs and satellite communities, the growing importance of social media – all are attempts aimed at strengthening and widening the nationwide as well as international fan base of the clubs. Yet it is a paradox that the culture and economy of European club tournaments have of late emerged as a challenge to that of international tournaments including the FIFA World Cup, thereby pointing to a potential clash of interests between the nation and the club globally. It is the responsibility of AIFF, the apex controlling body of football in India, and its affiliated state units to ensure that the interest of the national team must not clash with that of these club communities, a reality that has plagued Indian football for quite some time.

Football in Bangladesh: an opiate for the masses?

When Bangladesh attained independence, football was the most popular sport in the country with nearly 95 per cent of its sporting activities focused on this game and more than 2,000 football clubs operating across the country (Rashid, 1988a: 78). As the war-torn nation was smarting under economic devastation, the masses, particularly the youth, became more concerned with resolving the immediate issues of economic survival. Even then, soccer soon began to draw attention as well as currency. However, the challenges before the newly formed Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) (1972) as well as the clubs were manifold, ranging from lack of resources and infrastructure to declining interest in playing the game (Rashid, 1988a: 79). The BFF could not ensure a uniform and stable set of rules in running the most important and popular event of its annual calendar – the Metropolis League, leading to confusion and anomalies almost every year. In such a context, match-fixing was also a known anomaly in Bangladesh football since the 1970s (Rashid, 1988b: 57–60). The clubs could not show earlier commitment to the development of the game by rearing young talents at their own initiatives, neither could they any longer rely upon a steady flow of talents from the suburban areas or villages. This created a paradox in football in independent Bangladesh: increasing popularity of the game ran in striking contrast to a declining interest in actual participation in the game. While there developed a paucity of sports grounds in post-independence Bangladesh, barring a few clubs that had their own grounds, most of the League clubs had to hire the grounds of the university halls for practice and training. The lower division clubs, on the other hand, failing to afford the money required for hiring such practice grounds, competed with each other to get access to the outer stadium ground of the Bangabandhu Stadium at Motijheel.

Soon after independence, Mohun Bagan Club of Calcutta came to play an exhibition match in Dhaka in May 1972. Although the new nation was yet to recover from the recent scars of war, a selected Bangladesh XI put up a spirited show against the visitors and surprised everyone by beating their more renowned opponent by a solitary goal scored by Salahuddin (Mahmud, 1999: 88). The performance instilled an enormous amount of confidence in the hearts of millions of football lovers across the country and increased the popularity of the game widely. In the same year, a Dhaka XI participated in the Bardoloi Trophy held in Guwahati in Assam, India, and became runner-up in the tournament (Mahmud, 1993b, 1999). Bangladesh got its first true international exposure at the 19th Merdeka Football Tournament held in Malaysia in 1973. It was Bangladesh’s youth team under the supervision of its German coach Warner Beckelhopt, which brought its first international victory on 10
October 1978 when it defeated Yemen 1–0 in the 20th Asian Youth Football Championship (Mahmud, 1999: 83; Mahmood, n.d.). The senior national team recorded its first victory at international level in the qualifying round of the Asian Cup in 1979 when it beat Afghanistan 3–2. However, the national team could never really come up to the Asian standard save on a very few occasions. One such occasion was the victory of Bangladesh Red team in the sixth President’s Gold Cup in 1989, where teams from South Korea, India, China, Thailand and Iran also participated (Mahmud, 1993b: 196; 1999: 83; Mahmood, n.d.). Similarly, Bangladesh’s win in the Four-Nation Meet in Myanmar in 1995, in the 1999 and 2010 SAF Games football and at the South Asian Football Federation (SAFF) Championship in 2003 were hailed high in contemporary media (Mahmood, n.d.). Meanwhile, Bangladesh organised the Bangabandhu Cup to celebrate the silver jubilee of independence, which was considered to be ‘truly a milestone in footballing history’ (Mahmud, 1999: 83). In the 1982 Asian Games, Bangladesh got its first victory as it defeated Malaysia 2–1. The nation first appeared at the qualifying stage of the World Cup in 1985 while its only attempt at Olympic qualification was in 1991 (Mahmud, 1999: 83).6

While the national team mostly suffered appalling defeats at the international level, individual clubs and players made Bangladeshis proud in the same period. Both Mohammedan and Abahani performed well in foreign tournaments (Mahmood, n.d.)7 particularly in India, while some of their players like Aslam, Najib, Munna, Kaiser and Sabbir became popular in the Calcutta League. However, it was Salahuddin who became the first ever Bangladeshi professional footballer on foreign soil when he played for Caroline Football Club of Hong Kong (Mahmood, n.d.: 197). Despite this occasional flurry in standard and quality, Bangladesh has never been able to show consistency in the development of the game either at the domestic level or at the international level. Mahmood (n.d.) identified three key shortcomings for Bangladesh’s ‘continuous naïve performance’ at the turn of the century: ‘firstly, we are poor travelers and fare badly in foreign soil; secondly, due to poor stamina and tactic, most of the goals were conceded in the last minutes of the match turning many stunning results into negative; thirdly, sharp peak-valley in the level of performance’.

Traditionally renowned football clubs of Bangladesh such as Wari, Victoria Sporting or Azad Sporting lost their earlier status as a big team in Dhaka football after independence. The most dominant feature as well as attraction of domestic football in Bangladesh in the decades following independence was the arch rivalry between Dhaka Mohammedan and Abahani, who ‘are unquestionably the forerunners to quench the peoples’ lust for football since independence, thereby taking the popularity of the game to newer heights’ (Mahmud, 1999: 83). The passion and excitement this derby match used to generate in Bangladesh in the 1970s and 1980s invites comparison with the arch rivalry between Mohun Bagan and East Bengal in India. Apart from usual scenes of excitement and emotional outbursts, the encounters between the two teams also used to, and continues to generate, rampant indiscipline, hooliganism and spectator violence as well as leading to the damage of public and government property. Many fans even fell victim to recurrent spectator clashes and hooligan violence over the years. However, the craze of this arch rivalry has dwindled in the new century with deteriorating standard of football and the concomitant decline in spectator attendance (Baki, 2008: 19).

The institution of the President’s Gold Cup in the early 1980s, donated jointly by the department of Sports and Culture, Government of Bangladesh, and the National Sports Control Board, at the instance of President Ziaur Rahman, was deemed as an important step towards the development of football in Bangladesh, particularly by giving international exposure to its footballers and spectators. While the tournament was organised with the avowed objective of bringing national teams or representative teams of similar standard from foreign countries to
give adequate exposure to Bangladeshi sides, the participating teams fell far short of such expectations. The tournament from the very beginning was marked by an utter lack of vision and planning and failure of the organising committee to organise it in due time with proper priority (Rashid, 1988c: 87). For many, the organisation of the tournament was nothing more than a political instrument to heighten the image of the government and draw international attention to its achievement. Disillusioned with the President’s Gold Cup, many tended to believe that the huge amount of money spent on the golden cup as well as on the organisation of the tournament would have been better utilised in providing basic minimum provisions to the poor clubs and arranging long-term training for young talents from across the country (Rashid, 1988c: 91). The Cup, which could have made a worthy contribution to the growth of sports movement in the country, therefore failed to fulfil such expectations.

Political turbulence and natural calamity – two recurrent features of Bangladeshi life since its independence – sometimes affected its sporting activities severely. In 1990, for example, the Dhaka Football League, the most popular annual sporting event of the country could not take place due to political movements. After the fall of Ershad’s dictatorial regime, for the first time, a sports personality, namely Sadek Hosain Khoka, became the sports minister in Bangladesh in 1991 – considered to be a much-needed constructive development for the advancement of sports in the country. However, he soon became the chairman of the National Sports Council as well. It is said that with Sadek’s accession to power, ‘corruption in sports started and the downfall of sports arena has begun’. It was also in 1991 that a ravaging tornado devastated the coastal areas of the country. The Bangladesh Football Federation organised a few exhibition matches with Dhaka’s big teams in order to raise funds for the victims hit by the natural disaster. More importantly, three Calcutta giants – East Bengal, Mohun Bagan and Mohammedan Sporting – came to Dhaka to play in a fundraising tournament, which showed the game’s role as an instrument of philanthropy.

Despite rising mass attraction to football, the game remained confined in the contours of amateurism for a long time. Neither the BFF nor the clubs made any viable long-term effort to professionalise the game. While the standard of the game began to decline from the late 1980s, the players used to receive huge sums of money, thereby creating a peculiar blend of amateurism and professionalism. For example, Salahuddin, one of the best footballers of post-independence Bangladesh, used to get around 10,000 Takas for a season in 1973, which increased up to about 3 lakhs by the mid 1980s. In striking contrast, Munna of Abahani Krirachakra was offered 30 lakhs of Takas in 1991 for a transfer (Mahmud, 1993a: 24). Along with this growing semi-professional set-up of football, the dichotomy between club and nation too became a critical factor in the development of the game. The players, attracted by the incentives of playing for the club, began to ignore their duty and performance for the national team. This was but natural in a set-up where playing for the country did not ensure them any material benefit, apart from the risk of incurring injuries which may hamper their professional career for the clubs that used to pay them handsomely (Mahmud, 1993a: 25).

In 1992, Sanaul Haque, a renowned poet and sports writer, commented:

Football in our country has come to such a plight that I have lost all interest in visiting the stadium to watch any match. Even a few years back, football in Dhaka was full of life, speed, attraction and quality players, which seem to have been lost for a while. The present state of affairs in Dhaka, the traditional bastion of Bangladeshi football, only bring to memory the past glories of the city. It’s a pity to see the present plight of football in Dhaka.

(Sohag, 1993: 124)
For many, this state of things in Bangladeshi football in the 1990s was a result of appalling failure of the BFF to adapt to the changing priorities of the global game and the peculiar semi-professional character of football administration in the country. Without caring for the standard of the game, the three top clubs of the country – Dhaka Mohammedan, Abahani and Brothers Union – indulged in the squandering of money for the purpose of gaining short-term success. Financial anomalies apart, the decline in spectator attendance became alarming in the course of the last decade of the twentieth century (Sohag, 1993: 124–5). The national team too put up dismal shows on the Asian circuit, ranging from SAF Games to the Olympics qualifiers. While in the late 1980s and early 1990s, footballers from Dhaka used to play for Kolkata’s big clubs, the trend completely changed with the progress of time. The continuous dependence of the top league clubs on foreign players (Mamoon, 2001: 38–40) for success and fanfare pointed to the sharp decline in the quality of native footballers, which became a source of worry and lamentation for the football lovers in the country. The BFF, however, seemed to turn a blind eye to this reversal of fortune. Rather, the leagues in Dhaka and in the districts became irregular around this time with the consequent decrease in the number of matches leading to a decline in public interest in the game (Mamoon, 2001: 125–6).

Peter Velappan, the Asian Football Confederation secretary, once said, ‘Bangladesh has the resources necessary for the development of football. Measures have to be taken under proper planning to get into the goal’ (Mahmud, 1999: 83). While Bangladesh had produced a galaxy of quality footballers since the 1950s (Saber, 1990; Mahmud, 2006) it could not put up a quality team with the ability to perform consistently at the international level. Foreign coaches were employed periodically, but the success could not go beyond winning the SAFF championship or SAF Games gold. While many mercurial foreign footballers raised the standard of local football in the 1980s and 1990s, the trend seems to have been reversed in the new century with a number of substandard African recruits playing for the top clubs (Momoon, 2001: 38–40). Hence, the nation’s success in football has always lagged far behind its vast popularity. The reasons behind this anomaly, already discussed above, need to be addressed immediately. As Mahmud suggested more than a decade ago: ‘Socio-economic condition may be one of the main reasons. But, perhaps even more important is the non-enforcement of a comprehensive long-term plan of action with a true spirit of professionalism. Immediate steps should include making football a regular event in educational institutions from the grass-root to the university level’ (1999: 83). The start of the professional league in 2007 – the first in South Asia – was an important move, albeit much delayed, in the direction of making the structure of Bangladesh football in tune with the changing global dimension (Manik, 2007: 17–20). It was initiated as part of the AFC’s Vision Asia programme. The selection of Kazi Salahuddin as the president of BFF, along with the installation of a new government in 2008 also raised hopes about serious changes to be effected in the structure of Bangladesh football. Despite Salahuddin’s best efforts, which have mobilised both media and sponsors for the cause of football in the midst of cricket’s enormous popularity, factionalism and politics still remain major hurdles for Bangladesh to become a worthy footballing nation on the international map.

Postscript

The cases of India and Bangladesh illustrate a general pattern of football’s development in South Asia. Other countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Maldives, Bhutan and Afghanistan sail in the same boat so far as the standard and popularity of domestic football is concerned. None of these countries has ever made their presence felt in terms of performance at the international
level. Yet, despite this apparent stagnation in South Asian football, international football has always remained hugely popular in this region. To take the instances of India and Bangladesh again, during the FIFA World Cup, every four years, the people of these countries seem to have been divided in their loyalty towards Argentina and Brazil. The mass attraction towards the global game could therefore be discerned in the everyday life of the nation, ranging from journalistic enterprise to cover and reflect the football fever to people’s intense affiliation and fanfare towards World Cup teams.

The football fever that engulfs most of the nations in South Asia for these four weeks once in four years not only shows their universal fad for the game, but throws light on football’s immense influence on their everyday life. The everyday forms of football culture have been visible in nearly every walk of real life and are well represented through various forms of popular media in the wake of the World Cup (Mahmud, 1990). These everyday experiences of football during the World Cup clearly point to the sport’s importance in the realms of society, religion and culture, beyond the spaces of leisure, entertainment or commerce. For nations which never came close to playing in the World Cup and which hardly expect to achieve so in the near future, World Cup fever remains an opiate for the masses dejected with the performance of their national teams over the years as well as an escape from the drudgeries of daily life. However, with all this fandom and fever, a lamentation continues to elude more than 1.5 billion people of South Asia: when will a South Asian nation, or rather, will any nation from the region ever, play in the World Cup? The question, given the current state of football affairs in South Asia, remains unanswered.

Notes

1 The present rankings of eight South Asian countries are as follows: India – 147; Afghanistan – 140; Bangladesh – 152; Maldives – 157; Pakistan – 168; Nepal – 171; Sri Lanka – 172; Bhutan – 207.
2 Maidan refers to the vast open playing fields of Calcutta opposite to the Eden Gardens on the eastern banks of the river Hoogly.
3 Vision Asia is the AFC’s grand plan for a continent-wide programme to raise the standards of Asian football at all levels, be it on the field of play, administration or sports science. This is the brainchild of AFC President Mohamed Bin Hammam, who launched the programme in January 2003. Nine months later, after much fine-tuning, Hammam unveiled Vision Asia as a well-defined blueprint to international delegates and VIPs during the FIFA Congress in Doha, Qatar. The president firmly believes that Asia, with its 3.7 billion population, has the potential to produce many world-class footballing nations. His ultimate goal is for an Asian team to one day win the FIFA World Cup. Hammam has identified 11 disciplines – akin to 11 players on the football field – that Vision Asia must address if Asian countries are to catch up with their counterparts in Europe and the rest of the world. They are: national associations (goalkeeper); marketing, grass roots, coach education, referees, sports medicine (defenders); men’s competitions, women’s competitions, futsal (midfielders); media, fans (forwards). AFC has already recruited experts with specialist skills in each discipline. These consultants are being assisted by development officers, one for each of the four zones – West Asia, Central/South Asia, South East Asia and East Asia (data gathered from www.the-aiff.com/vision_India.php).
4 FIFA president Sepp Blatter initially told the world that ‘The future is Asia’. The AFC has since adopted the phrase as its motto.
5 While the team with Zakaria Pintu as captain performed very poorly against Burma, its performance in other matches was not entirely disappointing. However, Bangladesh had to suffer some humiliating defeats in the next edition of the tournament in 1975 when it conceded thirty goals in seven matches.
6 While on the first occasion, its sole victory was against Indonesia (2–1), it trounced the Philippines 8–0 in the second. However, it could not qualify for the next stage on either occasion given its poor performance in other matches.
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7 It was Abahani, who fetched the first laurels of becoming a champion on foreign soil when they won the Nagji Trophy in India in 1990 (Khelar Bhuban, 1 June 1991, p. 8). Abahani and Mohammedan started representing Bangladesh at the Asian Club Cup and Cup winners Cup from 1985 and 1987 respectively.


10 Abahani emerged champions in the tournament (Khelar Bhuban, 20 June 1991, pp. 6–10).

11 Munna, however, refused the offer to play for his beloved club Abahani.

12 The only notable performance of the national team was the victory of Bangladesh in a four-nation tournament held in Myanmar in 1995.

13 Monem Munna who played for Kolkata’s East Bengal Club became the cynosure of all eyes in Bengal. He earned the greatest renown as a Bangladeshi soccer star playing in India.

14 Foreign footballers began to play in Bangladesh from 1974 when Dhaka Mohammedan employed C. Prasad and Prabhakar Mishra from Calcutta’s Mohammedan Sporting Club. Since then a host of players from different countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America have played for the bigger clubs of Dhaka. In 1989 the BFF prohibited the import of foreign players, thereby disallowing them to play in the Dhaka League. In the last two decades, however, foreign footballers, particularly from Africa, have proved to be substandard, thereby adding poorer quality to Bangladesh football’s overall standard.

15 The popularity of football has also been reflected in films. A few films like Puaskar, Chokher Jale, Saheb and Pension used football and footballers as subplots. Most recently, in 2009, Jago was made with football as its central theme, narrating the story of the struggle of a young group of footballers.

16 The delay was due to a number of factors: problems of ground, lack of preparation on the part of the clubs, lack of proper planning by the BFF and political instability.

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