

The Great Indian Football Mess: Bhutia, others demand overhaul of 'rotten' system

PTI, NEW DELHI: Outraged by India's 0-1 defeat to lower-ranked Hong Kong in the third round of the AFC Asian Cup qualifiers, former India captain Bhaichung Bhutia has launched a blistering attack on the All India Football Federation (AIFF), blaming the body and its President, Kalyan Chaubey, for the sport's decline in the country.

"It's very painful to see... we are struggling now to even qualify for the Asia Cup, which we had been doing regularly," Bhutia told PTI. Citing the recent World Cup qualifications of Uzbekistan, Indonesia, and Jordan, he added, "We are still struggling for the Asia Cup. Very unfortunate."

The defeat has left India's hopes of qualifying for the 2027 Asian Cup hanging by a thread, despite back-to-back appearances in previous editions. India, ranked 127 before the match, were beaten by Hong Kong, placed 153rd — a result that could drop India to 133 in the FIFA rankings.

Bhutia demanded Chaubey's resignation, citing "off-field chaos" and calling for a complete overhaul. "Kalyan Chaubey has destroyed Indian football... Three General Secretaries in two-and-a-half years — the structure has to be changed," he said. Bhutia accused the AIFF of bypassing committees and criticised the appointment of head coach Manolo Marquez, who also manages FC Goa.

Marquez, who replaced Croatian Igor Stimac after a poor run, has failed to improve results, with India registering just one win in their last eight matches. Speculation is rife that Marquez may not wish to continue in the role.

Bhutia questioned the decision to recall veteran striker Sunil Chhetri from international retirement, calling it a desperate move. "It was a bad decision. Manolo shouldn't have requested it, and now we hear the Federation pushed for it. But what's changed?"

He also criticised AIFF's incentive structure. "You're paying Rs 42 lakh (USD 50,000) for one game. Why not link it to qualification? It just shows how clueless the management is."



FOOTBALL CRISIS

- ▶ Bhaichung Bhutia has blamed AIFF President Kalyan Chaubey for destroying Indian football, calling for his resignation and a complete structural overhaul after India's 0-1 loss to lower-ranked Hong Kong
- ▶ India's qualification for the 2027 Asian Cup is in jeopardy, despite recent back-to-back appearances, and the team is expected to fall to 133 in FIFA rankings
- ▶ Current head coach Manolo Marquez, also managing FC Goa, is under fire, with criticism over his dual role and speculation that he may not continue after poor results
- ▶ Bhutia and others have slammed the federation for bypassing technical committees, recalling Sunil Chhetri out of desperation, and offering large match bonuses without performance-based incentives
- ▶ Key stakeholders including Goutam Sarkar, Subrata Bhattacharya, Parth Jindal, and Ravi Puskur have criticised the football ecosystem, calling it 'rotten', unsustainable, and plagued by fragile egos and poor governance

MATCH FALLOUT

- ▶ India lost 0-1 to 153rd-ranked Hong Kong in AFC Asian Cup qualifiers
- ▶ Ranked 127th pre-match; expected drop to 133 in FIFA rankings
- ▶ Only 1 win in last 8 matches

BHUTIA'S OUTBURST

- ▶ Accuses AIFF and President Kalyan Chaubey of 'destroying Indian football'
- ▶ Demands Chaubey's resignation
- ▶ Slams mismanagement, corruption, and bypassing of committees

DRAWBACKS

- ▶ Dual role of coach Manolo Marquez (India + FC Goa).
- ▶ Recall of Sunil Chhetri from retirement.
- ▶ Match bonus of Rs 42 lakh without qualification link

COACHING CONCERNS

- ▶ Manolo Marquez replaced Igor Stimac in July 2024.
- ▶ Performance has declined under his leadership

LOWEST POINT IN INDIAN FOOTBALL: GOUTAM SARKAR

Former international Goutam Sarkar echoed Bhutia's views. "We haven't progressed an inch. If Sunil Chhetri remains indispensable, can it get more unfortunate? The Federation has been a complete failure."

FOREIGN COACHES NOT THE ANSWER: BHATTACHARYA

Former defender and coach Subrata Bhattacharya slammed the obsession with foreign coaches. "It's no guarantee of success. Coaches like PK Banerjee and Amal Dutta brought glory. Only Indian coaches know our boys." On Chhetri's comeback, Bhattacharya, also his father-in-law, said: "It's his personal decision, but if done to serve someone's interest, it's wrong."

SYSTEM ROTTEN: FC GOA CEO RAVI PUSKUR

FC Goa CEO Ravi Puskur described the broader football ecosystem as "rotten". Writing on X, he said, "Everything moves on influence, favours, and fragile egos... We don't have the maturity to manage the system we claim to be building." While noting that blame cannot rest solely on the AIFF, he added, "We — clubs included — have inflated salaries irresponsibly. Then we act shocked when these players fall flat on the international stage. We built that illusion."

JINDAL CALLS FOR URGENT COURSE CORRECTION

Bengaluru FC owner Parth Jindal also criticised the AIFF, posting on social media: "This is completely unacceptable @IndianFootball... Get a manager and a system that works — it's high time."

Dressing room seems like a funeral, but we can still qualify: Marquez after HK defeat

PTI, HONG KONG: "The dressing room is like a funeral (site)," said Indian football head coach Manolo Marquez as he struggled to explain the 0-1 loss to Hong Kong here even though he remained optimistic about the team's chances of qualifying for the 2027 AFC Asian Cup.

India conceded in the fifth minute of stoppage time on Tuesday, slumping to a second straight goalless outing in Asian Cup qualifiers, jeopardising their chances of qualifying for the Asian Cup.

"...we are not very happy. We are sad. The dressing room is like a funeral, practically," Marquez said when a question on the future of the team came up, insisting that it was not the time to dwell on that aspect.

"...But I still think that India has possibilities to qualify," he declared nonetheless in the post-match press conference.

Ranked 26 places above their opponents in the FIFA charts, the Indians were undone by poor finishing and lack of composure in key moments. India should have taken the lead in the 35th minute when Ashique Kuruniyan misjudged the delivery and fluffed a golden chance from close range.

"The game is easy to speak. Two teams fighting and that's all. Without too many chances. I think both teams



defended both with order and one action. This is football," he said, trying hard to find the right words to explain the performance.

India now have just one point from two matches in Group C. With only the group winners advancing to the 2027 AFC Asian Cup in Saudi Arabia, the task ahead would be arduous.

"...we are not in a good moment. In terms of scores, it's difficult for us to score. But it's true that the team

played with more order than in other games. This is true. But, unfortunately, we couldn't get any points here."

Marquez also lamented his side's inability to settle for a point.

"I repeat again, it's for me a very equal game and unfortunately for us, practically in the last action, we lost at least one point and Hong Kong have three points. I told in the dressing room, obviously we want to win."

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