

KOLKATA (CALCUTTA), 30 SEPTEMBER 2004

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## Rat Gumming Up the Works? Update on Indian Football

We like the self-critical element that seems to pervade India's culture. Thus, when a rat snuck into a power substation during an 8 September World Cup qualifier with Japan—shorting out circuitry and delaying the start of the second half at 120,000-capacity Salt Lake Stadium by 30 minutes—commentators wailed. "[Black Eye at Ballgame](#)" read the headline in *The Telegraph* (Calcutta). In the article, All India Football Federation president **Priya Ranjan Dasmunshi** terms the incident the "great Bengal flop show." *Aamader naak kata gechhe aajke!* ("We have egg on our face!") Dasmunshi continues. By the way, India lost 4–0, having lost 7–0 in Saitama in the first leg; the side sits moribund, in third place with three points, in Asia Zone Group 3. Its victory came against Singapore, 1–0.

The lede to the *Telegraph* sidebar detailing the electrical failure—few particulars of which, to be honest, we understood—sounds Aesopian: "It was a tiny rat that finally felled the mighty government and made it hang its head in shame" ("[Country's Pride to Stadium of Shame—Field Rat Ruins Day in Field](#)," 9 September). Of more consequence than a rat's fatal encounter with a "bus bar" panel, however, is the sense that football in India has lost direction. A two-part BBC documentary (listen to [parts 1](#) and [2](#); links open Real Player) shows that entanglements between entrenched state-based politicians and the amateur AIFF have produced stagnation. Dasmunshi, for example, serves also as India's Minister for Water Resources, demonstrating the organization's lack of independence, as well as a lack of professionalism. "We have 25 states but only two or three are doing anything with any success to develop youth," says India manager **Steven Constantine** (**Mike Geddes**, "[What's Holding Back Indian Football?](#)" BBC World Football, 30 July).

Youth football, in fact, falls under the purview of the Sports Authority of India, which does not receive FIFA monies. As a result, privately funded groups have tried to fill a void, groups such as the [India Youth Soccer Association](#) of Delhi. The association oversees an extensive youth system, with teams for boys and girls as well as a "street league" for homeless children (see **Ayanjit Sen**, "[Indian Street Kids Given New Goal](#)," BBC, 22 September 2003).

Throughout the discussion the question rages: which is bigger, football or cricket? From the perspective of outsiders, the answer appears to be cricket. India's success has stirred frenzy for the national team, with broadcast rights of \$308 million being discussed for the upcoming India–Australia test series (**Khozem Merchant**, "[Court to Rule in Dispute on Indian Cricket TV Coverage](#)," *Financial Times*, 28 September; subscription required). Yet football has the longer tradition, with clubs, such as Mohun Bagan of Kolkata, dating their origins to the 1880s (although see **Labonita Ghosh**'s report on the club's recent slide, "[Self-Goal Club](#)," *Outlook India*, 4 October). Kolkata-based East Bengal FC, too, has a distinguished tradition, highlighted in its summer tour of England—the first for an Indian professional team—and participation in a four-team tournament with first-division Leicester City (see **Jaideep Mukherjee**, "[Pride of the East](#)," *Leicester Mercury*, 30 July). East Bengal, despite the leadership of **Baichung Bhutia**, formerly of second-division Bury FC, finished fourth. Cricket seems better organized at all levels and has more grassroots support, but, as *Global Game* correspondent **Pallab Muhury** writes, football has a stronger competitive structure:

In cricket, guys have only one team—the Indian team—to support. But in soccer, the good club and institutional sides draw vast crowds. In soccer there are many teams . . . plus, of course, the national team. But the latter is hardly seen more than once a year on average, on TV, either cable or Doordarshan [publicly funded channel]. (personal correspondence, 24 May)

*The Global Game* will continue this conversation soon, with an interactive feature on the women's game in India and West Bengal, featuring reporting from Muhury.