



THE RISE OF THE BLUE TIGRESSES:

INDIA'S PATH TO
CONTINENTAL DOMINANCE



The Indian women's football team, affectionately known as the Blue Tigresses, has emerged as a symbol of resilience and rising athletic ambition.

As the AFC Women's Asian Cup 2026 is currently underway in Australia, the team is no longer just a participant; they are a squad defined by a journey of rebuilding and legitimate merit-based qualification. Today, women's football stands as a central pillar of India's "Vision 2047," reflecting a massive shift in both technical quality and commercial viability.

1. THE GOLDEN ERA AND THE LONG WAIT

India was once a dominant force in Asian women's football, a legacy many modern fans are just beginning to rediscover:

1979 & 1983: India finished as Runners-up in the AFC Women's Championship (now the Asian Cup).

1981: Secured a third-place podium finish in Hong Kong.

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The Decline: Following the early 80s, a lack of professional infrastructure led to a decades-long slump, with the team failing to qualify for the tournament through the traditional route for over 20 years.

2022 Heartbreak: While India hosted the 2022 edition, a COVID-19 outbreak within the camp forced a withdrawal after just one match.

2026 Milestone: This marks the first time in over 20 years that the team has qualified for the tournament through the traditional qualification route, rather than as hosts.

2. THE MODERN PIVOT: INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE IWL

The launch of the Indian Women's League (IWL) in 2016 acted as the primary catalyst for the current squad's professionalization.

Growth in Participation: Registered women footballers in India have increased more than fourfold since 2016.

The World Cup Effect: Hosting the FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup in 2022 led to a staggering 232% increase in young girls registering to play across the country.

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Grassroots Scale: In the 2025-26 cycle, over 850 ASMITA leagues were planned across India, engaging more than 70,000 female athletes.

Merit-Based Growth:
AIFF President Kalyan Chaubey noted:

"Qualifying for the AFC Women's Asian Cup on merit was a proud moment. This success was built on years of planning, structured development, and grassroots initiatives. There were no shortcuts."



3. THE ROAD TO AUSTRALIA 2026

India's path to the 2026 tournament was defined by clinical dominance in the qualifiers:

ELITE PREPARATION

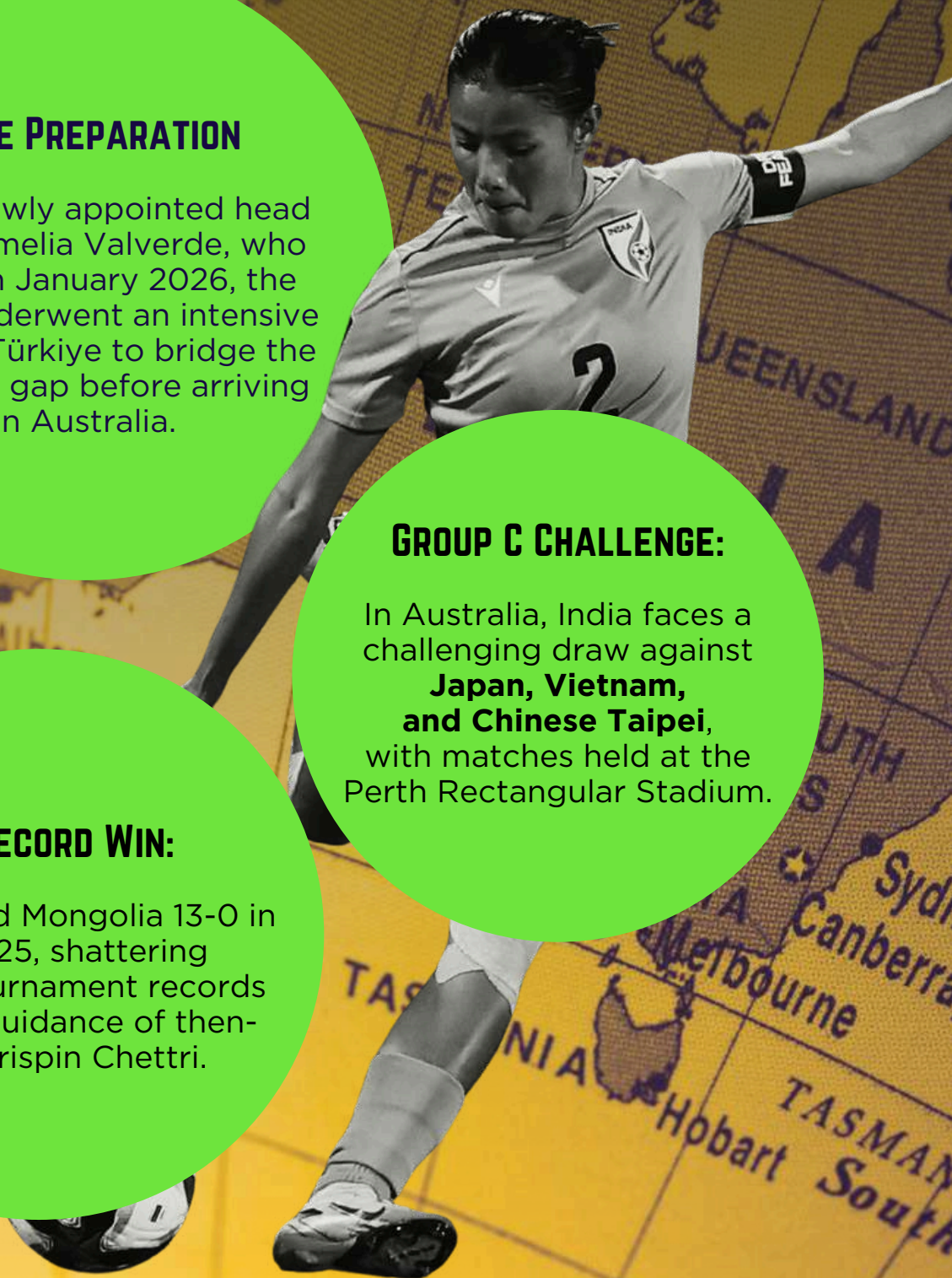
Under newly appointed head coach Amelia Valverde, who joined in January 2026, the squad underwent an intensive camp in Türkiye to bridge the technical gap before arriving in Australia.

GROUP C CHALLENGE:

In Australia, India faces a challenging draw against **Japan, Vietnam, and Chinese Taipei**, with matches held at the Perth Rectangular Stadium.

THE RECORD WIN:

India crushed Mongolia 13-0 in June 2025, shattering previous tournament records under the guidance of then-coach Crispin Chettri.



4. COMMERCIAL MOMENTUM AND MEDIA GROWTH

Following the blueprint of the Women's Premier League (WPL) in cricket, football is seeing a surge in brand confidence:

MARKET PROJECTION:

The commercial value of women's sports in India is projected to reach nearly \$900 million by 2030.

GLOBAL REVENUE

Total revenue for women's sports reached \$2.35 billion in 2025, triple the value of 2022, driven by digital engagement and high-profile sponsorships.

ENGAGEMENT:

The 2026 Asian Cup is expected to hit record viewership numbers in India, following the trend of the 2023 World Cup which drew 2 billion viewers globally.



5. THE ICONS: LEADERS OF THE PACK

The current squad is a blend of seasoned veterans and "New Gen" global-level players:



MANISHA KALYAN

The "Poster Girl" of Indian football and the first Indian to play in the UEFA Women's Champions League. In early 2026, she made a historic move to South American giants Alianza Lima.

"I am still dreaming of playing in the FIFA World Cup. After we qualified for the AFC Women's Asian Cup in Australia, our belief has grown stronger."



SANGITA BASFORE

The midfield engine and heartbeat of the team. Her two-goal performance against Thailand was the decisive factor in securing qualification.



GRACE DANGMEI

The most experienced player in the current squad with **92 caps** and **23 goals**, providing the veteran leadership needed on the big stage.



PYARI XAXA

A clinical finisher who scored five goals in a single match during the 2025 qualifiers.



AMELIA VALVERDE

The head coach with two World Cup appearances for Costa Rica, who stated:

"We will do our best... take a luggage full of dreams to Australia, and see what happens."





6.

MISSION BRAZIL 2027: THE WORLD CUP AMBITION

For the Blue Tigresses, the 2026 Asian Cup is more than a trophy hunt—it is a direct gateway to the global stage.

Direct Qualification:

This tournament serves as the final qualifying stage for the **FIFA Women's World Cup Brazil 2027**.

The Slots:

Asia has **six direct tickets to Brazil**. This means the four semi-finalists and the winners of the playoff matches between losing quarter-finalists will secure their spots.

The Mindset:

As Sangita Basfore noted,
*"The Asian Cup was never the destination.
It was the gateway to the World Cup."*