The Indian Super League has the potential to catapult football to the forefront of our sporting consciousness and provide India with a realistic chance of playing the World Cup, feels Boria Majumdar

Can the Indian Super League (ISL) transform Indian football? Will the victory of Atlético de Kolkata (ATK) in the inaugural season of the competition usher a new wave of interest in Bengal's once-favourite passion?

Will Atlético's triumph, which has captured the imagination of the Bengali football fan, adversely impact the fortunes of our century old loyalties - Mohun Bagan and East Bengal - and eat into their fan base? Will it impact the I-League?

Finally, does the ISL have the potential to inspire us to dream of an Indian football renaissance in the next five years?

Detractors have argued that the ISL would affect traditional loyalties and deep passions like Mohun Bagan and East Bengal. Frankly, if that does happen, what's the
problem? Is Mohun Bagan and East Bengal anything more than nostalgia at the moment?
What have these traditional loyalties done to improve Indian football in recent years? In the absence of ISL, or any new effort for that matter, can Mohun Bagan and East Bengal lead India to playing the FIFA World Cup in the next decade-and-a-half or more?
Do these clubs have youth programmes that can supply quality talent to the national team in the wake of the U-17 world cup, two years down the line?

Whether we like it or not, Mohun Bagan, East Bengal and Mohammedan Sporting are not in the best of shapes. Semi-feudal organizational structures, failure to monetize and the inability to recast themselves in the wake of global changes have cost these institutions dear. The I-League, too, is struggling: it doesn't have sponsors, the telecast quality is poor, marketing practically non-existent and media coverage a distant second to cricket. ISL, on the other hand, has already attracted big bucks and big corporates, television coverage is of the highest international standard and the money attached to it should encourage the next generation of Indian youth to seriously consider football as a profession.

"I have won the I-League and the Federation Cup more than once. Despite these triumphs, I never felt that football was worth pursuing in India. The respect was missing," says ATK goal keeper Subhashis Roy Chowdhury. "ISL", he adds, "has given us that respect. I was having tea at a roadside tea stall in south Kolkata the day after our victory when a Punjabi family -mother, father and two kids -arrived. I could suddenly sense a degree of excitement in the boy, who started to nudge his mother. Soon after, she came up to me and asked whether I was an ATK player. When I said yes, the whole family posed for pictures with me and the mother said the boy had taken to football in the wake of ISL. Being a footballer finally meant something."

In the wake of the Ponzi bust, when the local football economy is staring at a collapse, ATK has the backing of some of Kolkata's biggest corporates. Says Harshavardhan Neotia, co-owner and the man who first mooted the idea of owning the team, "When Sourav [Ganguly] and I first met to discuss the prospect of owning an ISL franchise, we knew we were getting into a venture where we had to be ready to sustain losses
for the first three to four years. Knowing this, we committed ourselves to ATK. Seeing the response the ISL has generated in the first season, there's no doubt we did the correct thing.”

Sanjeev Goenka and Utsav Parekh, co-owners with Neotia and Sourav, almost echo Neotia and Sourav, almost echo Neotia.”Owning a football team was a dream my father had. When Sourav and Harsh mentioned the idea to me, I did not think of breaking even and losses. All I was doing was fulfilling my father’s dream. In fact, the moment we won, my first thought was that my father would have been delighted,” Goenka says. Parekh, the most hands-on among the owners, agrees.

"ISL, in its inaugural season, is the fourth highest-watched league in the world. Is there any doubt that the phenomenon is here to stay? We are committed to building ATK into a better franchise in 2015. With sponsors coming on board, I am sure the league will transform Indian football. Our loss is a very small price to pay in the wake of India's footballing revolution.”

Writing about Indian football, former FIFA communications director Keith Cooper had this to say: “...There is still a temptation to classify this, the world's second most populous nation, in the familiar category popularly and vaguely known as 'sleeping giants'. The term has been applied, with varying degrees of justification, to many other countries, especially to those in Africa, where the giant has woken and has startled others into doing so. The Indian colossus remains mostly in slumber, despite intermittent bouts of insomnia, reacting to the occasional attempts to rouse it. But such awakenings have seldom had sufficient effect as to transcend regional frontiers.”

The argument appears all the more justified when we note that nations like Costa Rica, where close to 20% of the population live below the poverty line and 10% are unemployed, make it to the World Cup quarter-finals. And Costa Rica is not an aberration. The other cases in point are BosniaHerzegovina, Ghana, Chile and Croatia.

That’s what makes the ISL relevant. The first argument that is advanced when we talk about the problems plaguing local football is that we don't have the necessary infrastructure. A look at the Mohammedan Sporting club ground is evidence of this
very dismal state of affairs. There's no money in football and every corporate worth its salt is keen on investing in cricket. ISL, thankfully, is addressing each of these issues. There are a number of big names involved, the league is promoted by the largest business group in the country, and the prize money is seriously lucrative, drawing serious global talent to the league.

"When we had arrived in India for the ISL, each of us were committed to try and improve the standard of Indian football. There's little doubt we are on the right track. The tournament has exceeded all our expectations and we are all looking forward to season two," said Luis Garcia, ATK's marquee player, after the final.

Efforts to transform Indian football have indeed been undertaken in the past. The Tata Football Academy is a case in point. It had started with much fanfare and at one point did provide a serious supply chain to the national team. Super soccer initiatives that brought clubs like PSV Eindhoven and others also did much to trigger an interest in football in India. Finally, when the National League, now the I-League, started in 1996, there was serious hope that football would finally have the infusion of positive energy it so badly needed. But the league is still found wanting in several key aspects: organization, marketing, publicity, and, above all, sponsorship.

Can all this ever change? Will we cease to be passive consumers of the global footballing spectacle and become active participants? If others can, why can't we? Is it so difficult to produce 11 world-class footballers in a nation of a billionplus? ISL is a good mesh of commerce and vision and has all the potential to help the development of football in India. To think that teams from India are training in Europe and to be able to see coaches and players like Zico, Luis Garcia, Del Piero, David James, Robert Pires, Nikolas Anelka and others train and play alongside Indian footballers is sure to give local football a boost.

Many have wondered whether the football fandom nurtured by the ISL would ever go beyond the traditional power centres of Kolkata, Goa, Kerala or Mumbai. Frankly, it need not. Cricket has never embraced the North-East. Even if the craze for the ISL is restricted to the cities housing the eight teams, the job would have been
Collectively, these cities are three times the size of Costa Rica. The talent and corporate potential is 10 times that of Bosnia's, and the television viewership more than the size of a few Eastern European nations clubbed together.

While some apprehensions concerning sustainability remain, the ISL, it can be said, has come at a time when the Indian economy has opened itself to global riches and big corporates trying to find a home in India are in search of lucrative investment platforms across the country. ISL, for many, can be the answer. At one go, it will give them a foothold in a market of a billion-plus and is expected to generate eyeballs that millions spent on advertisements won't garner.

Add to this the fact that for a nation of a billion, filling stadiums is hardly difficult with proper marketing and hype. With celebrity owners like Sourav Ganguly, Sachin Tendulkar, Ranbir Kapoor, Abhishek Bachchan and John Abraham doing their bit, fans will have more than football on offer for a couple of hundred rupees.

Sourav sums it up well. “When we decided to acquire ATK, we had serious apprehensions about what the league could achieve. Today, we have none. I don't know if India can make the 2022 World Cup, but I do know that if the ISL continues its journey, we will surely have a realistic crack at it. The revolution is well and truly underway.” The writer is a sports historian and journalist.