

Bhutia brace guides India to AFC Challenge Cup semis

A brace from skipper Bhaichung Bhutia helped India move into the semi-finals of the AFC Challenge Cup football after they defeated Turkmenistan 2-1 in their last Group A match here Sunday.

The 32-year-old striker gave India the lead in the 53rd minute and then struck the final blow off a header in the 80th minute at the soggy Gachibowli Stadium, which was unfit for any international match due to overnight rains. Yusup Orazmamedov, who came in as a substitute, reduced the margin for Turkmenistan with just four minutes from regulation time.

The score-line, however, doesn't reflect India's domination of the match right from the start, despite a light drizzle.

On the eve of the game, it seemed that India desperately needed a win to move into the knock-out stage but on the morning of the match the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) officials after calculating the points table made it clear that a goalless draw would help India move forward.

But India never played for a draw and went for the kill. With solid defending and the midfielders giving apt support to the forwards, India churned out one of its best performances in recent time.

Even in the goalless first half, India dominated with clever passing but soggy outfield made their lives miserable. With overnight rains, the turf at the Gachibowli Stadium had hardly any green on it.

The footballers failed to get a footing on the wet ground and slipped while taking the shots.

India's first chance came when Surkumar Singh's free-kick was saved by Turkmenistan goalkeeper Maksatmyrat Shamuradov.

Shamuradov was the busiest of the Turkmenistan player and had it not been for his heroics, the Central Asian country would have conceded at least three goals in the first half.

Turkmenistan forwards Dovletmurad Atayev, Berdy Shamuradov found it very difficult to penetrate the rock solid defence of hosts, despite two experience central defenders- Deepak Mondal and Mahesh Gawli missing from the line-up. But their absence was never felt and Anwar Ali and Gourmangi Singh never allowed the Turkmenistan defenders any space to attack.

Indian coach Bob Houghton's decision to rest some of the players in the last match paid off brilliantly and that was evident from Bhutia's performance.

The India captain was in his elements and with Chettri tore apart the Turkmenistan defence. The duo made two clear chances in the first 25 minutes but the slippery turf was against them. On one occasion Bhutia had only the goalkeeper to beat but slipped while taking his shot.

Bhutia, however, came lucky in the 53rd minute when after a 1-2 with Chettri, he again had only Shamuradov in front and shot from the edge of the box. The goalkeeper slipped and saw the ball roll over the line. Bhutia doubled the lead 10 minutes from the regulation time off a header from Steven Dias' flag-kick.

India finished the group stage as champions with seven points while Tajikistan emerged second with five points after they thrashed Afghanistan 4-0 in the other match of the day played simultaneously at the Lal Bahadur Shastri Stadium.

Teams:

India: Subrata Paul; Anwar Ali, Surkumar Singh, Gourimangi Singh, Samir Naik; N.P. Pradeep (Mehrajuddin Wadoo, 90), Renedy Singh, Climax Lawrence, Steven Dias (Ajayan Nair, 75); Bhaichung Bhutia, Sunil Chettri

Turkmenistan: Maksatmyrat Shamuradov; Parahat Annaberdyev, Mekan Nasyrov, Aleksey Pronchenko, Rustam Saparov; Vyaceslav Krendelev, Bhatiyar Hojaahmedov (Gahrymanberdi Ovekov, 60) Guvanchmuhammed Ovekov, Serdar Geldiyev; Dovletmurad Atayev (Vitaly Alekperov, 60), Berdy Shamuradov (Yusup Orazmamedov, 78)

Abhishek Roy (© IANS / India eNews)