

Chettri header takes India to AFC Challenge Cup final

India defied inclement weather and a slushy outfield to beat Myanmar 1-0 and move into the AFC Challenge Cup football final at the Gachibowli Stadium here Thursday.

India scored the all-important goal in the 81st minute from a Sunil Chettri header and in Sunday's final will face the winner of the second semi final match between Tajikistan and North Korea to be played later Thursday.

Heavy seasonal rains for the last 36 hours made the ground slushy. And as the match started, a light drizzle turned into a heavy shower making life tough for both the sides in the first semi final.

Both the teams could hardly play the passing game as the ball refused to budge and the long ball was ineffective as the players hardly found a solid footing to take the shot.

But Indian players, accustomed to such conditions, started on an attacking note with skipper Bhaichung Bhutia taking the first shot at the goal in the second minute but the powerless kick hardly threatened Myanmar goalkeeper Oo Aung Aung.

With the ground conditions unsuitable for a free-flowing game, India played a calculative brand of soccer and ensured the action was in the rival half.

The Indians maintained the edge all through the match creating chances and should have won by a bigger margin.

Both Chettri and Bhutia were well marked but they came close to scoring on more than one occasion, despite having difficulty in getting to the ball on the slushy surface.

The young Indian defence looked a bit jittery at times, but Surkumar Singh and Anwar Ali made life difficult for the Myanmar forwards. Surkumar, playing as a wing-back, raced up and down the wing and when it came to clearing the ball, he was the best in the business.

Myanmar failed to adjust to the ground conditions, but still their strikers Myat Min Soe and Paing Yang gave the Indian defence some anxious moments. However, an athletic Subrata Paul had a brilliant day under the Indian bar and thwarted several goal-bound moves by the Myanmarese.

In the later stages of the first half, an unmarked Chettri raced into the box, but managed to find only the side netting with the goalkeeper at a handshaking distance.

The Indian forwards were well supported by the midfielders. N.P. Pradeep, declared fit just hours before the match, was still far from his best but tried hard. He was unlucky not to score when his well-timed header skimmed the bar on its way out in first half.

As time passed by and with chances missed, India stepped up the attack in the second session and were awarded for their perseverance just nine minutes from the final whistle. A Renedy Singh cross found Bhutia, who directed it towards the far post where an unmarked Chettri headed in the winner.

Teams:

India: Subrata Paul; Anwar Ali, Surkumar Singh, Gourmangi Singh, Samir Naik; N.P. Pradeep, Renedy Singh, Climax Lawrence (Mehrajuddin Wadoo, 87), Steven Dias (Clifford Miranda,89) ; Bhaichung Bhutia and Sunil Chettri

Myanmar: Oo Aung Aung; Aung Htay, Moe Win, Khin Maung Lwin, Han Win Aung; Zaw Htet Aung, Myo Min Tun (Win Thein Yaza,68), Tun Tun Win, Aung Kyaw Moe (Myo Thant Aung, 83); Yan Paing, Soe Myat Min (Thu Win Si, 59)

Referee: Tyeb Hassan Shmasuzzaman (Bangladesh)

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