



DEVELOPING OPPORTUNITIES FOR BRITISH SOUTH ASIAN PLAYERS IN ENGLISH FOOTBALL

By Daniel Kilvington



INTRODUCTION

The under-representation of British South Asian footballers is 'the single largest statistical anomaly in English football' according to Kick It Out Chair, Sanjay Bhandari MBE. Considering that South Asians represent 7% of the England and Wales population and 0.5% of professional men's footballers, the word 'anomaly' is fitting.

Yet, statistically speaking, we are slowly beginning to move in the right direction. In 2005, the Asians Can Play Football Report revealed that only 0.2% of male Academy players were of South Asian heritage. However, in 2023 the Professional Footballers' Association (2023) announced that male Academy scholars of South Asian heritage represent almost 1.5% of the total number of players, adding that there has been a 29% increase in the number of professional British South Asian male players during the 2023/24 season. Although the numbers look more positive, the actual numbers are still low and strategies are at hand to help boost these figures further.

This short report attempts to outline some of the real, perceived and exaggerated barriers to progression before offering a series of research-informed strategies designed to increase the recruitment, retention and development of British South Asian players.

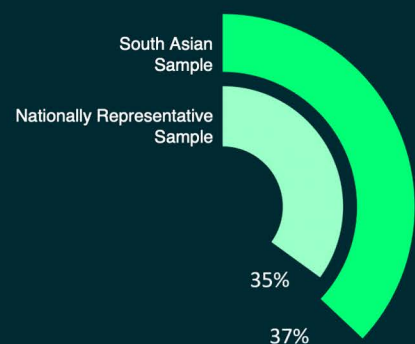
The observations here summarise almost 30 years of academic and stakeholder literature devoted to British South Asians in football. We also brought together a comprehensive list of links to the in-depth studies these observations are summarised from. If you are interested in digging deeper into the strategies we've summarised below you can find them in the accompanying table in Annex 1.

REAL, PERCEIVED AND EXAGGERATED BARRIERS

McGuire, Monks and Halsall's (2001) research found that club officials believed that cultural factors were the main barrier preventing British South Asian inclusion in football while Bains and Patel's (1996) pioneering study suggested that institutional racism was the biggest barrier, according to the British South Asian participants surveyed in their work. In other words, there are many different ideas and common-sense rationales that exist to attempt to explain 'the largest statistical anomaly'. We can now draw on almost three decades of research to help understand which barriers are real, perceived as real, and exaggerated.

Education is number one, right?

There is a perception, and perhaps a misconception, that British South Asian communities prioritise education above sport and particularly above football. Although education might be a priority for many British South Asian families, we need to guard against this often inflated viewpoint as many parents support their children in football in addition to their studies (Kilvington, 2016). Indeed, research by Kick It Out in a YouGov survey (2024) found British South Asians were more likely to watch or follow football than those from a Nationally Representative sample.



% who selected "Football" in answer to the following question:

"Which of the following sports, if any, would you say are your favourite to follow?"

Viewing British South Asian children and young adults in an otherwise homogenous way might influence decisions. For example, Fleming (1995) and Hayes and Sugden (1999) found that British South Asian children were actively steered by school teachers towards academic pursuits rather than contact sports, showcasing how perceptions help shape sporting participation and non-participation. It is crucial that we identify and challenge any misconceptions so that we view players on an equal footing.

Cricket or football?

A commonly cited view is that cricket is simply more popular than football and this is why we observe more British South Asians professional cricketers than footballers. Yet, not only is this untrue in regards to popularity, it also implies that British South Asian cultures are static, unchanged and traditional as football is 'too new'. That being said, football has been played in the Indian subcontinent as far back as the 19th century. While football might not have been the number one priority for first-generation South Asian migrants, as employment, housing and providing for the family were core concerns, it has grown in popularity among second, third and fourth-generation British South Asian communities. As a Manchester University (1991) study highlighted, from over 30 years ago, young Bangladeshi heritage boys are playing football more regularly than young White British boys. Kick It Out's YouGov survey (2024) showed that a higher percentage of under 30-year-olds were playing football (38%) than compared to a national representative sample. The results also showed an upward trend in the popularity towards football among younger British South Asians. Although cricket remains the most played sport among 35% of respondents (football was played among 31% of respondents), cricket was played less often as a child among a younger generation (18-29 year olds) than those aged 30-39, suggesting its popularity compared to football was on the wane. Therefore, the research counters the argument that cricket is simply more popular among contemporary British South Asian groups (Bains and Johal, 1998; Kilvington, 2016).



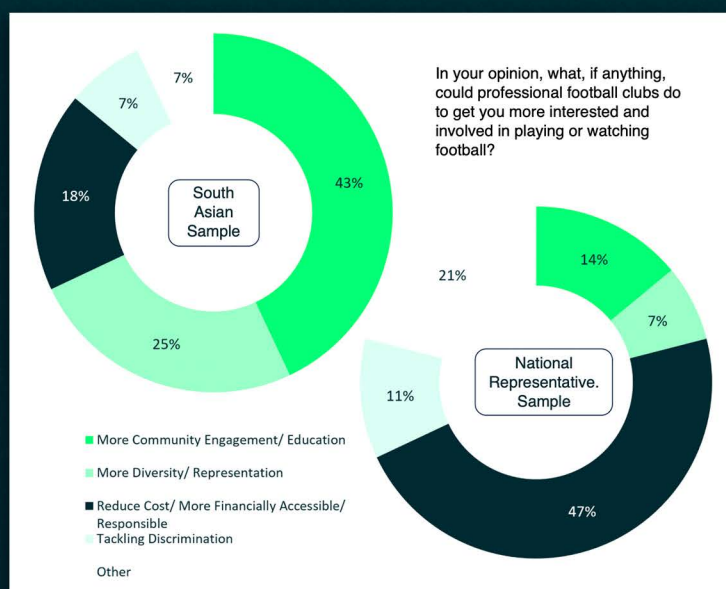
Questions of ability and physicality

The lack of British South Asian players at elite level helps reaffirm stereotypes concerning ability and physicality. Kilvington's research (2013) demonstrated that coaches and scouts have a tendency to racialise players, meaning that characteristics are given to players based on their ethnic background and/or appearance. Because of this under-representation, which means there are fewer visible role models, South Asian heritage players have been considered 'gamblers' by coaches and scouts (Kilvington, 2016). Although 'race' and ethnicity may influence how players are judged, we must be aware that there is no scientific credibility given to 'race' as human beings are 99.9% genetically identical – in fact the Human Genome Project concluded that there is actually greater genetic diversity within so-called 'racial' groups than between them. Perceiving British South Asian players as inevitably smaller, weaker or slower simply because of their ethnic identity is harmful as it may, for example, deny such players opportunities to progress.

'Asian clubs' and isolation

The FA's Bringing Opportunities to Communities Plan (2015) defines an 'Asian club' as a grassroots football club that is either populated predominantly by South Asian heritage players, is within a densely populated South Asian location, or has originated from within a local Asian community. We see evidence of many 'Asian clubs' across the country with prominent examples being Albion Sports (Bradford), London Tigers (London), and Leicester Nirvana (Leicester). Although formed in resistance to racism, and also because of geographical location, networks and friendships, 'Asian clubs', as well as 'Asian leagues' and 'Asian tournaments' have been criticised by football insiders (Bradbury, 2010). For instance, researchers have illustrated that some scouts and coaches perceive these spaces as insular and self-segregating which is used to help explain the lack of British South Asian inclusion in academies and at elite level (Bains and Patel, 1996; Burdsey, 2007).

Yet, the problem is not that 'Asian clubs' exist, it is that these clubs have traditionally had fewer links with professional clubs and scouts meaning that talented players have often been overlooked. Kick It Out's YouGov survey (2024) found that a higher percentage of people in the British South Asian sample compared with a national representative sample want to see professional clubs do more in terms of community engagement. As Bains and Johal (1998) state, the talent identification system in football has bypassed not a reservoir, but an ocean of untapped talent.

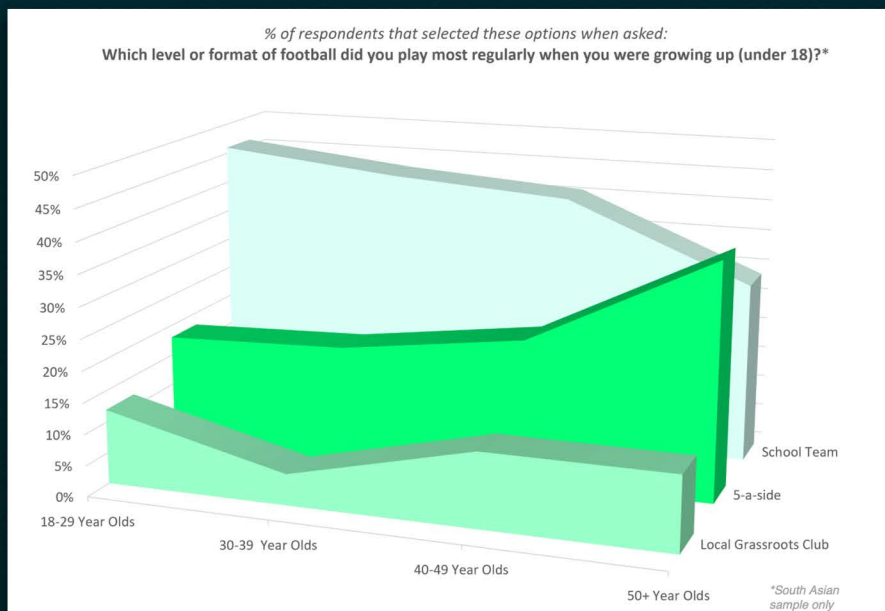


Lack of opportunities and links

It has been suggested that British South Asian players have traditionally had fewer opportunities to play affiliated football, especially if such players reside in densely populated South Asian areas (Bains and Patel, McGuire, Monks and Halsall, 2001; Randhawa, 2011). Quite simply, this is because there has been a lack of clubs available on the doorstep, financial or travel barriers, a lack of access to playing spaces, and a lack of links to existing clubs (Randhawa, 2011; Kilvington, 2016). Where clubs do exist, with some 'Asian clubs' now being decades old and very well organised, they may still encounter fewer links with the talent identification system. Randhawa (2011) suggests that professional clubs do not know how to best engage British South Asian communities, adding that the County FAs should play a role in brokering links between clubs and 'Asian clubs'. If more networks and better links are established, this will certainly have a positive effect on scouting and help diversify talent.

Talent ID and rethinking the sieve

If we think of players having to be a certain shape, size or type to fit through the talent ID sieve and into the academy setting, it could be argued that British South Asian players have historically been deemed not to fit the sieve for numerous reasons. A lack of links means that South Asian heritage players might be observed playing football less often. A lack of visibility means that stereotypes relating to physicality, culture, religion, ability or interest might not be challenged. Embracing stereotypes further prevents linkages being made. The cycle repeats. Kilvington (2016) illustrates that scouts have a tendency to a) recruit from established leagues and clubs; b) view 'specialist' leagues and tournaments, including 'Asian clubs', as being of a lower standard; c) believe that 'the cream will always rise to the top'. Kick It Out's YouGov survey (2024) shows that British South Asians are now less likely to play football in unaffiliated and unstructured spaces, such as five-a-side pitches, environments that are largely overlooked by the talent identification system. Although players competing for grassroots clubs has remained consistent across different age categories at 10%, there has been a sharp increase in players participating for school teams. The data also shows that British South Asians are beginning to play football at younger ages. But, if we are to acknowledge that some players are competing outside the recruitment radar, or those within the radar are viewed not to fit through the sieve due to preconceived ideas or stereotypes, we will make positive strides forward. Understanding this, and actively challenging these issues at every turn, will result in a more inclusive approach to recruitment.



Hostility

It is worth highlighting that 'Asian clubs', as well as leagues and tournaments, were primarily established in the 1960s and 1970s as a protection mechanism after encountering physical and verbal abuse in predominantly white playing spaces (Johal, 2001). Although overt forms of racism are no longer at the same level and frequency as several decades ago, research reveals a worrying picture in that British South Asian players still encounter overt racism on a regular basis (Bradbury, 2010; Burdsey, 2004; 2007; Kilvington, 2013; 2016). Kick It Out's YouGov survey (2024) found that British South Asian participants believed that football has a bigger issue with racism than any other sport. Thirty percent said they had experienced racism 'sometimes' or 'occasionally' while playing as a child, with 38% saying they had observed racism while playing football with most cases (41%) coming from the opposition team.

For Randhawa (2011), protection against such acts in grassroots and semi-professional spaces has been piecemeal and efforts have lacked institutional backing. Kick It Out's annual statistics revealed that during the 2023-24 season, it had received a 25% increase in reports relating to discrimination in grassroots football. It is crucial, then, that a zero-tolerance standpoint is embedded in grassroots football to ensure that players can compete in a safe, welcoming and inclusive environment. Unfortunately, as Kilvington (2016) highlights, many British South Asian players have stepped away from playing in affiliated spaces to guard against hostility.



SOLUTIONS

Across the last few decades, several academic researchers and stakeholders have put forward recommendations in a bid to increase British South Asian representation in English football. Clubs including Leicester City and West Ham United were amongst the first clubs to engage with the exclusion of British South Asian football communities while Chelsea's 'Search for an Asian Soccer Star' competition illustrates more recent efforts by clubs. Despite Kick It Out forming and facilitating the 'Asians in Football Forum' around two decades ago, and releasing the 'Asians Can Play Football' report in 2005, football's stakeholders have historically overlooked this issue. However, the FA published its 'Bringing Opportunities to Communities Plan' in 2015 - marking the first key stakeholder to roll out a strategic objective specifically devoted to challenging the British South Asian exclusion. In 2022, the Premier League, alongside Kick It Out, released the South Asian Action Plan, while the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) has pioneered the impressive Asian Inclusion Mentoring Scheme (AIMS). In 2025, the FA followed this up with a new South Asians in football plan 'Build, Connect, Support' where it states its aims and participation targets to 2028. This section attempts to bring together almost 30 years of academic research focusing on solutions and highlight examples of industry good practice

1. Build meaningful and lasting relationships

A consistent theme across the academic literature is that there has been a lack of contact and communication between football's key stakeholders, including clubs, and British South Asian communities. As Burdsey (2007) suggests, inclusion policies and any transformative action approaches must be built from British South Asian experiences. Therefore, such excluded voices need to be heard and amplified when designing inclusion measures. Yet, if those relationships are not garnered and developed, it is likely that stakeholders will continue to operate in parallel with British South Asian communities. Clubs that say 'we don't have any contacts' or 'we don't know where to begin', then look no further than the PFA's AIMS and Chelsea's 'Search for an Asian Soccer Star'. AIMS could be a game-changer in that a network of British South Asian players, parents, coaches and scouts has been formalised. In addition, 'Search for an Asian Soccer Star' is noteworthy as this annual event brings together hundreds of young British Asian players from across the country to compete in front of onlooking scouts and coaches. These programmes provide a doorway for any club wanting to begin building those relationships so that policies and practices are created in consultation with British South Asian individuals and groups.

2. Increase and develop volunteers

Bradbury (2011) argues that by increasing volunteers, which in most cases are the parents, guardians or family members of players, within grassroots spaces, it will lead to wider participatory opportunities. Following on from the previous suggestion, if stakeholders, which could be County FAs or local professional clubs, developed relationships with grassroots clubs through working with volunteers, they could guide, mentor or support them through coaching qualification courses. In turn, this relationship not only enhances the skills of the volunteer and the experience of the players, but it also develops that link between the professional and grassroots game and creates a pathway for progression. Increasing volunteers, formalising links, and highlighting skills development opportunities can create a model for sustainable youth football provision.

3. Commit to diverse scouting and coaching practice

Research by McKinsey & Company (2023) found that diverse boards are more likely to financially outperform non-diverse boards. Therefore, it is important, for a variety of reasons, that scouts and coaches working at football clubs, should come from diverse backgrounds, cultures, ethnicities, religions, etc. By having a more diverse workforce, it is more likely that personnel can draw on certain insights and experiences which can enhance organisational performance. British South Asian scouts or coaches may possess a deeper understanding of cultural barriers, have pre-established networks across British South Asian football communities, and be heralded as a 'friendly face' by parents. In turn, when the workforce diversifies, it helps educate the wider organisation. In doing so, it leads to 'cognitive diversity', the diversity of thought. Diverse workforces can share their lived experiences and check and challenge each other, for the benefit of the organisation. Clubs that commit to positive attempts to increase diversity, and educate their workforce to achieve 'cognitive diversity', will be more inclusive which can help attract and keep talent.

4. Education – it's a journey

Kilvington (2016) suggests that annual Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) workshops would be beneficial in football. It is here where updates on British South Asian progression and latest research findings can be disseminated, best practice can be highlighted, links can be facilitated, and mentoring opportunities could be formalised. Education, across stakeholders and clubs, however, should be consistently delivered throughout the season. Kick It Out has developed a range of online resources which clubs can utilise in-house while the Premier League have resources designed to create and develop inclusive coaching environments which allow players from ethnically diverse backgrounds to thrive. Educational sessions surrounding EDI should not be a one-off, they should be embedded in the workforce's diet. Kick It Out, amongst other stakeholders, play a key role in delivering impactful in-house training and education in this space.

5. Increase visibility and communication

The Bringing Opportunities to Communities Plan (2015), launched by the FA, demonstrated their specific commitment to showcasing positive British South Asian football stories, building role models, and highlighting opportunities. Now, Sky Sports has a designated section to British South Asians in football while Desiballers and Brown Girl Sport, both prominent on social media, continue to shine a light on British South Asians in football. This increases the visibility of those working in the game across all levels and helps illuminate those positive role models and stories. At a club level, websites and social media platforms can be used to showcase good work regarding inclusion which may help build relationships with marginalised groups.



ANNEX 1 - FINDING OUT MORE – RESOURCE LIST

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