

# "Maybe my achievements don't get enough respect because they are outside of Europe"

In a globe-spanning coaching career, Stephen Constantine has seen everything. From dealing with dysfunctional federations to coaching during a civil war, the former India and Pakistan head coach looks back on his rollercoaster journey

**You have managed India twice in the past, and recently came close to being appointed by the country again. How did it feel to miss out on the job to Khalid Jamil?**

I respect and understand why they selected Khalid because he has done some good things. However, I do think they made a mistake by not bringing me back.

My track record speaks for itself. The highlight of my first spell [2002–2005] was winning the LG Cup [with the Under-23s]. We were not expected to beat Vietnam on their home patch. It was a major boost for Indian football, and over 10,000 fans greeted us when we got back to Kolkata. It was my first international trophy, so very special. When I returned [2015–2019], India were ranked 173rd by FIFA. In the space of just over two years I played my part in taking them inside the top 100. I took them to the Asian Cup. We beat Thailand 4–1 in our first game [India's first win in the competition for 55 years]. Had it not been for a 91st-minute penalty against Bahrain, we would've been the first Indian team to reach the knockout phase.

**So why did you leave after the tournament?**

When I was appointed, I told the president I would take India to the Asian Cup. I did that, so it was a case of mission accomplished. Had they offered me a contract extension, I would have stayed.

**Jamil is the first Indian to lead the national team in 13 years. Doesn't his appointment reassure homegrown coaches that the top job in men's football isn't necessarily the preserve of foreigners?**

Khalid had no previous experience in international football. The Indian team is in freefall. I believe that the majority of players and the wider Indian football industry would've been happy for me to come back. It goes without saying not everyone would have been pleased, and that's because I make it about the team and not about the egos of individual players.

**But how can Jamil gain experience if he's not given the opportunity in the first place?**

That's a fair point but he could've managed the Under-23 team and, if successful, been promoted to the seniors. I wish him well, I genuinely do. I may not agree with the federation's decision, but I respect it.

**As a country with a rich football history and a population of close to 1.45 billion, why is the India national team in "freefall"?**

At the [2019] Asian Cup the average age of the players was around 23. It was a very young team. The foundations were in place for success in future tournaments. The results under Igor Stimac were underwhelming. He won the SAFF [South Asian Football Federation] Championship and other regional competitions, and I did the same. But with India's resources winning SAFF should be a given. And yes, Stimac did take

India to the [2023] Asian Cup, but when they did get to Qatar they lost all three games and didn't score a single goal.

After Stimac, Manolo Marquez came in, but he was coaching Goa in the ISL [Indian Super League] at the same time. Such an arrangement was doomed from the start. It would've been very difficult for him to juggle the two. The national team job is a full-time position, in my opinion.

The real test for India is the Asian Cup and World Cup qualifiers. It is easy to say: "We will qualify for the 2034 or 2038 World Cup", but they are vague statements when there is no blueprint in place.

**You were head coach of Pakistan from 2023 to 2025. How would you describe your time there?**

Unbelievable. Where do I start? I'd spent a long time working in South Asia, so I didn't go into the job completely blind. At the same time, you can't cover all bases. You can't discount the element of surprise. As a head coach I've got enough on my plate with team selection, training, tactics, scouting, and looking at the opposition and how to break them down. With Pakistan I ended up getting involved in chasing up match fees, dealing with visas and accommodation.

If you tell some people in Europe about some of the stories, they wouldn't believe you. For a match against Tajikistan, we left Pakistan in three separate groups. Nine of the players







**Favourite win...**  
Pakistan players  
celebrate beating  
Cambodia in  
October 2023

turned up on the morning of the game, and that was thanks to the efforts of the Pakistan Air Force and Pakistani Embassy. Had they not got involved it would have been 11 against seven.

On another occasion it took us 15 hours to get to Jordan, partly because there weren't enough funds for direct flights. We got there at 1am and the hotel they booked for us was horrendous. I demanded we move to another one.

Too many times, it felt like we were going on to the pitch not just with one hand behind our back but two.

**The Pakistan Football Federation (PFF) has been suspended by FIFA three times since 2017, but now has a new president and a new head coach in Nolberto Solano. What does the future hold for football in the country?**

If the new regime prioritises football rather than other agendas, then I don't see why Pakistan can't become a force in South Asia. Football is very popular in Pakistan and don't

let anyone tell you otherwise. The talent and passion are there.

A key issue is that there is no domestic league. Players therefore are not playing and training regularly. Their fitness and diets are all over the place. They are not being coached. It would take time to form a national league. Not to mention finance. My preference would be to initially start with state or province leagues. They don't have to be the best in the world, but they need to provide a platform where players are playing on a weekly basis. That's the first step and then you build on that.

**What was your highlight in Pakistan?**

That's easy, the win over Cambodia [in October 2023]. It was Pakistan's first-ever World Cup qualifying win. There was a great atmosphere inside the Jinnah Stadium. It wasn't full but it was a good crowd. Bear in mind this was Pakistan's first home game since 2015.

After the final whistle I looked around and I saw grown men in tears. They were tears of

joy. You just don't know and appreciate what it took behind the scenes to get that match to take place. It's a day I'll never forget.

**After that win, Pakistan got through to the second round of qualifying in a group with Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Tajikistan. Judging by social media, some supporters expected the team to go all the way and win the World Cup...**

I think it's fair to say some of them got a bit carried away, but I don't blame them. Let them dream. They had been starved of international football.

It's the story of my life, to end up in the Group of Death. Those three teams are powerhouses in Asia. Some of the Pakistani media were unhappy at the performances and results against Saudi Arabia. I told them that they have to be realistic. They know the major obstacles we face just to get players on the pitch. Playing the likes of Saudi Arabia is our World Cup final.





**India icons...Constantine alongside India's all-time top appearance maker and record goalscorer Sunil Chhetri**

**You've travelled around the world. Which places and incidents stay in your mind?**

I have an app which tells me I've travelled to 92 countries so far and I'm not yet done.

I try to adapt to my surroundings. In Nepal I wore traditional clothing to some of the games. In Sudan and Pakistan, which are majority Muslim countries, I fasted during Ramadan. I am the foreigner. I'm the one that has to adapt. I try to eat the local cuisines. I pick up phrases in various languages, which breaks the ice. Small gestures make a big difference.

I've been to the Azadi Stadium in Iran, which officially holds around 80,000 but on matchdays over 100,000 find their way in. I've seen and heard the Blue Wall in Japan.

I went to North Korea with India for an Olympic qualifier. Over 50,000 people inside the stadium but you could hear a pin drop. The match was played in virtual silence. The only noise was when they scored, but there was no shouting or jumping up and down. Just polite applause. From the minute you arrive to the moment you leave North Korea was a surreal experience.



**India coach...directing his players at the 2019 Asian Cup**

When I arrived in Sudan, the country's leader was charged with war crimes and threatened with arrest. I was told by the British Embassy to leave. But I had a training session organised for the next day, so I ignored them. There was a rule that I could only pick players who were based in the capital, Khartoum. However, I wanted to see some players who were based at the other end of the country. The president of the football federation told me that they couldn't offer me security and advised me not to travel. I convinced my driver to go. We were about 45 minutes away when a military style jeep appeared out of nowhere. There were about eight guys carrying AK 47s. Their faces were covered, and they were dangling from the side of this jeep. They pulled me out of the car and bundled me into the jeep. I was s\*\*\*\*\* myself. I'm thinking, "this is the end" I couldn't communicate with them because they spoke no English. Turns out they were the police and they were giving me a personal escort to the ground.

**"After the final whistle I looked around and I saw grown men in tears. They were tears of joy...it's a day I'll never forget"**

**Constantine on leading Pakistan to their first-ever World Cup qualifying win**

That was the only time I feared for my safety in Sudan.

**What does the future hold for you?**

I would love to get a job back home in England. Maybe my achievements don't get the respect because they are outside of Europe. It's difficult if you are outside of the system – people don't always want to consider someone out of the box, and I'd be your classic outside of the box.

I recently finished my MSc in Sports Directorship. I love coaching, it is my life, but as a coach you can only influence 30 or 40 people. As a director of sport, you can influence ten times that in an organisation.

I live in Cyprus so if a job comes up in Europe, then that's not an issue. Otherwise, I'll be on my travels.

*Interview by Imran Azam*



**Pakistan head coach ...Constantine's last game with the country was in June 2025**