



TAS / CAS

TRIBUNAL ARBITRAL DU SPORT
COURT OF ARBITRATION FOR SPORT
TRIBUNAL ARBITRAL DEL DEPORTE

CAS 2025/A/11374 Inter Kashi FC v. AIFF, Churchill Brothers FC Goa & Namdhari FC

ARBITRAL AWARD

delivered by the

COURT OF ARBITRATION FOR SPORT

sitting in the following composition:

President: Mr Frans M. de Weger, Attorney-at-Law, Haarlem, The Netherlands

Arbitrators: Mr Michele A.R. Bernasconi, Attorney-at-Law, Zurich, Switzerland

Mr Jeffrey G. Benz, Attorney-at-Law & Barrister, London, United Kingdom

in the arbitration between

Inter Kashi FC, India

Represented by Messrs Antonio Rigozzi and Johannes Fahner, Attorneys-at-Law, Geneva, Switzerland

Appellant

and

All-India Football Federation (AIFF), India

Represented by Messrs Vidushpat Singhania, Prateek Chadha, Neil M. Goswami and Arnav Singhal, Attorneys-at-Law, New Delhi, India

First Respondent

and

Churchill Brothers FC Goa, India

Represented by Messrs Lucas Ferrer, Luis Torres and Joan Milà, Attorneys-at-Law, Barcelona Spain

Second Respondent

and

Namdhari FC, India

Represented by Messrs Shivam Singh, Shubham Janghu and Yoshit Jain, Attorneys-at-Law, New Delhi, India

Third Respondent

* * * * *

I. PARTIES

1. Inter Kashi FC (the “Appellant”) is a professional football club under Indian law affiliated with the All-India Football Federation, with its registered office in Varanasi, India.
2. All-India Football Federation (the “First Respondent” or the “AIFF”) is the national governing body for football in India and has its seat in New Delhi, India. It is affiliated with the *Asian Football Confederation* (“AFC”) and the *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (“FIFA”).
3. Churchill Brothers FC Goa (the “Second Respondent” or “Churchill Brothers”) is a professional football club under Indian law affiliated with the AIFF, with its registered office in Margao, Goa, India.
4. Namdhari FC (the “Third Respondent” or “Namdhari”) is a professional football club under Indian law affiliated with the AIFF, with its registered office in Punjab, India.
5. The First Respondent, the Second Respondent and the Third Respondent are hereinafter jointly referred to as the “Respondents”, whereas the Appellant and the Respondents are hereinafter jointly referred to as the “Parties”.

II. INTRODUCTION

6. The present appeal arbitration proceedings concern an appeal lodged by Inter Kashi against a decision issued by the Appeal Committee of the AIFF (the “AIFF Appeal Committee”) on 18 April 2025 (the “Appealed Decision”), following a claim lodged by Inter Kashi against the Respondents.
7. In the Appealed Decision, the AIFF Appeal Committee upheld two separate appeals lodged by the Third Respondent which were joined in appeal, against two separate decisions of the Disciplinary Committee of the AIFF (the “AIFF Disciplinary Committee”).
8. In one of these two decisions of the AIFF Disciplinary Committee, the AIFF Disciplinary Committee imposed a sanction of a 3-0 forfeit loss on the Third Respondent for fielding a non-eligible player in a match against Inter Kashi.
9. In appeal, the AIFF Appeal Committee annulled the 3-0 forfeit loss sanction on the Third Respondent. Consequently, Inter Kashi lost its first-place finish in the 2024-2025 I-League to the Second Respondent and its promotion to the Indian Super League, the highest division of the Indian football league system, for the season 2025-2026.
10. Although the Appellant only appeals against the Appealed Decision in relation to the decision as issued by the AIFF Disciplinary Committee regarding the 3-0 forfeit loss on the Third Respondent for fielding a non-eligible player, for sake of completeness, and due to a better understanding of the present CAS proceedings, the Panel will give a summary of both proceedings before the AIFF Disciplinary Committee.

III. FACTUAL BACKGROUND

11. Below is a summary of the main relevant facts, as established on the basis of the written submissions of the Parties and the evidence examined in the course of the proceedings and at the hearing. This background information is given for the sole purpose of providing a synopsis of the matter in dispute. Additional facts may be set out, where relevant, in connection with the legal discussion.

A. Background facts

12. On 15 December 2024, the Third Respondent played a match against the Indian club Real Kashmir (“Real Kashmir”) in the I-League competition for the season 2024-2025.

13. During this match, the Third Respondent’s player, Mr Cledson C. Silva (the “Player”), received a yellow card for an offence. The yellow card received in this match was the Player’s third yellow card of the 2024-2025 season.

14. Later during that same match, the Player received a direct red card for another offense, i.e. head butting an opponent player.

15. In a match of 8 January 2025 between the Second Respondent and the Third Respondent, the Player received another yellow card, which was his fourth yellow card during the 2024-2025 season.

16. On 12 January 2025, one day before the match between the Appellant and the Third Respondent, a pre-match meeting took place. This meeting was chaired by the Match Commissioner, Mr. Kozhikkaat Parameswaran Ravindaran (the “Match Commissioner”), and was attended by representatives of the Appellant as well as the Third Respondent.

17. On 13 January 2025, the Appellant played an official match against the Third Respondent in the I-League competition for the season 2024-2025. During this match, the Third Respondent fielded the Player.

18. On the same date, and after the match, the Appellant formally lodged a complaint against the Third Respondent for fielding a non-eligible player. The Appellant argued that according to the I-League regulations, a player receiving four yellow cards in four separate matches is required to serve a one-match suspension and, consequently, the Player was not eligible to participate in the match against the Appellant.

19. On the evening of Sunday, 27 April 2025, a prize ceremony was held by the AIFF and the trophy was awarded to the Second Respondent for being the winner of the I-League competition for the season 2024-2025.

20. On the same evening of Sunday, 27 April 2025, and after the ceremony had taken place, the AIFF issued a public statement:

“The I-League 2024-25 presentation ceremony was concluded on Sunday, April 27, 2025, in Goa. During the event, the champions’ trophy and winners’ medals were formally presented to Churchill Brothers FC Goa, as per Appeals Committee order and representation made by AIFF to Hon’ble Delhi High Court on April 23, 2025.”

The All India Football Federation (AIFF) would like to clarify that, with regard to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) order, due to a holiday in the AIFF Secretariat, the federation was only informed of the order at a time when the ceremony had already been concluded in Goa.

The AIFF remains committed to adhering to all regulatory and legal processes and will take appropriate action.”

21. Per letter of 28 April 2025, the AIFF communicated to the Second Respondent that it was informed by the CAS that the Deputy President of the CAS Appeals Arbitration Committee had rendered an *ex parte* Order on Provisional Measures dated 27 April 2025, which, *inter alia*, stayed the Appealed Decision. In light of the stay of the Appealed Decision, the AIFF requested the Second Respondent to “*kindly return the champions’ trophy and medals to the AIFF at the earliest*”. By letter of 26 May 2025, the AIFF reiterated its request to the Second Respondent.

B. Proceedings before the AIFF Disciplinary Committee

➤ **First Disciplinary Decision (ref. no. IL 2024-25/87)**

22. On 17 December 2024, the AIFF Disciplinary Committee issued a charge notice to the Third Respondent for violating Article 48.1.2 and Article 49.1.5 of the Disciplinary Code of the AIFF (the “AIFF Disciplinary Code”) for violent conduct of the Player against an opponent (head butting) for which he had received the red card during the match on 5 December 2024.
23. On 28 December 2024, the AIFF Disciplinary Committee issued its decision without grounds, with the following operative part (the “First Disciplinary Decision”):

“1. A charge notice was issued under Article 48.1.2 of the Code for violent conduct against the player.

2. The player is suspended for 3 (three) matches under Article 49.1.5 of the Code.

3. A fine of INR 20,000 (Twenty Thousand Indian Rupees) is imposed under Article 49.2 of the Code.

4. The fine shall be paid within 30 days of the notification of the present decision.”

24. On 31 December 2024, the grounds of the First Disciplinary Decision were issued, determining, *inter alia*, the following:

“1. Based on the referee’s report, the Committee observed that the defendant has violated Article 48.1.2 of the Code as the player was issued a red card for violent conduct which included headbutting the opposition player.

2. In absence of any written reply to the charge notice issued or a request for an oral hearing by the club on behalf of the player the Committee after perusal of the evidence available passed a decision prescribing the minimum applicable sanction as provided under Article 49.1.5 of the Code i.e., a three (3) matches suspension including the automatic suspension for violent conduct, along with a fine of INR

20,000 (Twenty Thousand Indian Rupees) under Article 49.2 read with Annexure-1 of the Code.

3. *According to Article 117 of the Code, the defendant has the right to file an appeal against the decision. ”*

➤ **Second Disciplinary Decision (ref. no. IL 2024-25/102)**

25. On 15 January 2025, the AIFF Disciplinary Committee issued a charge notice to the Third Respondent for violating Article 57 of the AIFF Disciplinary Code by fielding an ineligible player.
26. On 24 February 2024, the AIFF Disciplinary Committee issued its decision with the following operative part (the “Second Disciplinary Decision”):

“1. On the basis of the complaint received the Committee is of the view that the defendant club Namdhari FC has fielded an ineligible player resulting out of a failure to make the player serve the suspension in Match No. 45 of the I-League 2024-25 against Inter Kashi FC in accordance with Article 12.3.2 of the I-League 2024-25 Regulations for accumulation of 4 cautions in the given season.

2. The said match shall result in a forfeiture (0-3 loss) for the defendant club Namdhari FC in accordance with Article 57 read with Article 26 of the Code of fielding an ineligible player.

3. The fine applicable to the club under Article 57 of the Code is waived off in accordance with Article 40.4 of the Code.”

27. The grounds of the Second Disciplinary Decision were issued, determining, *inter alia*, the following:

“1. The player had accumulated 4 cautions throughout the season, and it was the club’s responsibility to ensure that the suspension was served in accordance with Article 12.3.2 of the I-League 2024-25 Regulations. The argument that AIFF CMS did not reflect the ban is irrelevant as the CMS is only for the purpose of monitoring and cannot be considered as a final parameter based on which the clubs should take decisions.

2. The club had sent an email seeking clarification regarding the availability of the player for selection 17.01.2025 for their next match. However, the Committee observes that the clarification email holds no relevance as it was sent much later, after the club’s match against Inter Kashi on 13.01.2025 for which Mr. Cledson Dasilva was suspended.

3. The Committee holds, especially in view of the clarification provided by the AIFF Appeals Committee on 11.02.2025 that the appeal order dated 06.01.2025 is only applicable to the suspension of sanction resulting from direct expulsion and does not apply to the accumulation of sanctions.

4. The Committee has duly taken note of the fact that the club had no mala fide intentions in fielding the player in question. However, according to the relevant provisions, the player was suspended for the club’s match against Inter Kashi on 13.01.2025 due to accumulation of 4 cautions, and thus intention becomes irrelevant here as the club is in clear violation of Article 57 of the Code.

5. Considering the arguments presented and also as informed by the club that it's a new club in the League, the Committee has decided to not impose any financial sanctions on the club resulting out of Article 57 of the Code.

6. According to Article 117 of the Code, the defendant club has the right to file an appeal against the decision which shall be subject to the exceptions provided under Article 117.1."

C. Proceedings before the AIFF Appeal Committee

28. On 3 January 2025, the Player appealed against the First Disciplinary Decision before the AIFF Appeal Committee (the "First Appeal") and requested provisional relief, seeking suspension of the First Disciplinary Decision pending resolution of the appeal, arguing that it had not been given an opportunity before the AIFF Disciplinary Committee to reply to the charges raised.

➤ First Interim Order

29. On 6 January 2025, the AIFF Appeal Committee issued a first interim order and accepted the request for provisional measures, with the following operative part (the "First Interim Order"):

"1. The implementation of sanction shall remain in abeyance partially.

2. The Appellant shall be given the opportunity of playing the removing two (2) matches subject to the decision which may take place at the time hearing.

3. It will be open to the Appellant to file any documents on or before the next date of hearing.

4. However, so far as the penalty of Rs 20,000 is concerned, the same shall be deposited before 08.01.2025.

5. The matter shall be listed on 05.04.2025, the order of this Committee shall be applicable till the next date of hearing."

➤ Clarification Order

30. On 1 February 2025, per the request of the AIFF Disciplinary Committee to clarify the First Interim Order, in which it had stayed the Player's suspension in order for him to play the matches on 8 and 13 January 2025, the AIFF Appeal Committee issued a clarification order in which it decided that the Player's suspension order only concerned the red card and not the accumulation of yellow cards (the "Clarification Order").

➤ Second Interim Order

31. On 1 March 2025, the Third Respondent appealed against the Second Disciplinary Decision before the AIFF Appeal Committee (the "Second Appeal").

32. On 15 March 2025, the Player and the Third Respondent requested for a joint hearing of the First and Second Appeal, which was accepted by AIFF Appeal Committee per email of 17 March 2025.

33. On 25 March 2025, after a procedural hearing on 24 March 2025, the AIFF Appeal Committee issued a second interim order and decided that its own Clarification Order shall not be given effect by overturning the sanction of match forfeit imposed on the Third Respondent, with the following operative part (the “Second Interim Order”):

- “1. The order of Disciplinary Committee dated 24.02.2025 after the clarification by the Appellate Committee shall remain inoperative and in abeyance as well.*
- 2. the Clarification Order dated 01.02.2025 passed by Appellate Committee shall not be given effect to and stands recalled.*
- 3. Parties shall be given due information of hearing as contained under Article 90 of the Code of Disciplinary Committee of AIFF.*
- 4. Any observations of yellow card as order passed by the Disciplinary Committee dated 24.02.2025 shall not come in the way of the Appellant in the next games.*
- 5. Relying upon the maxims of actus curiae neminem gravabit and ‘where the law prescribes a thing to be done in a particular manner following a particular procedure, it shall be done in the same manner following the provisions of law, without deviating from the prescribed procedure’, relied by the Hon’ble Supreme Court including the order of modification dated 24.02.2025 of the Disciplinary Committee shall not acted upon.*
- 6. Any entries subsequent to interim order dated 06.01.2025 and the clarification order dated 06.01.2025 shall be treated to be non-est and will be inoperative.”*

➤ **Appealed Decision**

34. On 18 April 2025, the AIFF Appeal Committee issued its decision and accepted the First and Second Appeal against the First and Second Disciplinary Decision respectively, determining, *inter alia*, the following (the “Appealed Decision”):

- *The AIFF has never rebutted the argument that its CMS portal did not reflect a ban on the player. It has also not disputed the submission on record that Namdhari FC’s manager Jodhvir Singh had sought an on-field clarification from the AIFF appointed match commissioner before the game against Inter Kashi about player ineligibility of Cledson. In fact, the AIFF DC has also noted in its impugned decision that Namdhari FC had acted in good faith. Despite such a holding, the AIFF has decided that Namdhari FC deserves to be sanctioned with a 0-3 loss.*
- *Therefore, the Appeal Committee is of the opinion that the earlier order by which shows that initial stage when the Disciplinary Committee has passed the order 31.12.2024 and at that moment the appellant was not heard. This order was passed in violation of audi alteram partem. The order passed by the Disciplinary Committee originally dated 31.12.2024 cannot be allowed stand in the light of Article 90 when the Namdhari FC was not heard at the initial stage. The appeal therefore stands allowed.*
- *Consequently, the other appeal filed by Namdhari FC Vs AIFF has become infructuous and stands allowed automatically.*

Directions

➤ “Resultantly the AIFF AC is passing the following order:

1. *The First appeal i.e. Concerning the charge notice issued against Cledson C. Silva of Namdhari FC [Ref: AIFF/Disciplinary Committee/IL 2024-25/87] is allowed.*
2. *The Second Appeal i.e. Concerning the charge notice for fielding an ineligible player of Namdhari FC (Cledson C. Silva) [Ref: AIFF/Disciplinary Committee/IL 2024-25/102], is automatically allowed.*
3. *The AIFF AC sets aside the order dated 28.12.2024 and 31.12.2024 of Disciplinary Committee.*
4. *The intervention application filed on behalf of the Inter Kashi FC is disposed of by hearing the parties.*
5. *Further the intervention application of Churchill Brothers FC is disposed of by hearing the parties.*
6. *Further the intervention application of Real Kashmir FC is disposed of by hearing the parties.*
7. *The intervention applications are disposed of as the interveners have been heard.*
8. *Both the interim orders dated 06.01.2025 and 25.03.2025 passed by the Appeal Committee shall remain effective.*
9. *The interim order dated 06.01.2025 still holds good.*
10. *Penalty of Rs. 20,000/- shall be deposited by the Appellant.*
11. *The Provisional points Table: I league 24-25 shows to the following effect:
 “Provisional points Table: I league 24-25*

Position	Team	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	Pts	Form
1	Churchill Brothers FC Goa	22	11	7	4	45	25	20	40	WWDDD
2	Inter Kashi	22	11	6	5	39	33	6	39	WDWDW
6	Namdhari FC	22	9	5	8	30	27	3	32	LLLWL ”

12. *The Counsel for parties have shown the Article 14.4 & 14.6 of the I-League Regulations. The same reads as under:*

“14.4.1 A prize presentation ceremony, managed and controlled by I-League Secretariat and coordinated with its partners including the organizing Football Association and the Competition’s marketing partner, if any, will be held immediately after the last Match of the Competition to award the Trophy and Medals.

14.6. Fair Play

14.6.1 In every Match of the Competition, Fair Play shall be actively promoted through the FIFA Fair Play flags, etc.

14.6.2 The Fair Play qualities of the participating teams and which are pertinent to the spectators will be evaluated using the FIFA Fair Play evaluation form.

14.6.3 A Fair Play contest shall also be run during the I-League.”

- *In view of the above Churchill Brothers FC Goa, Inter Kashi, and Namdhari FC has obtained 40 points, 39 points, and 32 points respectively. Accordingly, Churchill Brothers FC Goa, Inter Kashi, and Namdhari FC stands at No. 1, No. 2, and No.6 respectively at the Points table: I-League 24-25.*
- *Consequently appeal i.e. Concerning the charge notice issued against Cledson C. Silva of Namdhari FC [Ref: AIFF/Disciplinary Committee/IL 2024-25/87] is allowed and appeal Concerning the charge notice for fielding an ineligible player of Namdhari FC (Cledson C. Silva) [Ref: AIFF/Disciplinary Committee/IL 2024-25/102] is automatically allowed.*
- *So far as cost of Rs. 20,000 is concerned the same having been already deposited by the Appellant, the same shall remain in deposit and will not be refunded.*
- *As the I-League has concluded on 06.04.2025, the AIFF is directed to act forthwith by conducting a medal distribution ceremony in accordance with points obtained respectively.”*

IV. PROCEEDINGS BEFORE THE COURT OF ARBITRATION FOR SPORT

35. On 24 April 2025, the Appellant filed a Statement of Appeal with the CAS Court Office in accordance with Article R48 of the 2023 edition of the Code of Sport-related Arbitration (the “CAS Code”), naming the AIFF, Churchill Brothers and Namdhari as the Respondents.
36. On 27 April 2025, the Appellant filed an urgent application before the CAS for *ex parte* Provisional Measures to prevent the holding of a medal ceremony which was scheduled for the same day.
37. On the same day, the Deputy President of the CAS Appeals Arbitration Division issued the Operative Part of the *ex parte* Order on Provisional Measures and ordered the AIFF to not declare the winner of the I-League 2024/2025 nor organise a medal ceremony for the I-League 2024-2025 until the present CAS arbitration had been concluded.
38. On 28 April 2025, the CAS Court Office acknowledged receipt of the Statement of Appeal and invited the Appellant to file its Appeal Brief. Furthermore, the CAS Court Office invited the Respondents to file a full reply to Inter Kashi’s application for Provisional Measures.
39. On 30 April 2025, the CAS Court Office acknowledged receipt of the Respondents’ communications of 29 April 2025 enclosing their replies to the Appellant’s request for Provisional Measures.
40. On 1 May 2025, the CAS Court Office noted the Second and Third Respondent’s willingness to set forth a procedural calendar with the aim of getting a final award by

June 2025 and invited the Parties to liaise with each other and submit a joint procedural calendar.

41. On 5 May 2025, the Appellant informed the CAS Court Office that its request for Provisional Measures had become moot and that if the Parties agree on a procedural calendar its request for Provisional Measures will also become redundant.
42. On 14 May 2025, the Second Respondent informed the CAS Court Office that the Respondents had decided to nominate Mr Jeffrey G. Benz as arbitrator in the present proceedings. Furthermore, the Second Respondent informed the CAS Court Office that the Parties had agreed on the procedural calendar.
43. On 15 May 2025, the CAS Court Office confirmed the procedural calendar subject to no further objection from the side of the Appellant, the First and Third Respondents before 16 May 2025 at 12.00 noon CET.
44. On 16 May 2025, the Appellant filed its Appeal Brief. In its Appeal Brief, the Appellant withdrew its request for Provisional Measures.
45. On 19 May 2025, the CAS Court Office acknowledged receipt of the Appellant's Appeal Brief and, further to the procedural calendar, invited the Respondents to submit their Answers.
46. On 23 May 2025, the Appellant nominated Mr Michele A.R. Bernasconi as arbitrator.
47. On 3 June 2025, the CAS Court Office the CAS Court Office informed the Parties that pursuant to Article R54 of the CAS Code, and on behalf of the Deputy President of the CAS Appeal Arbitration Division, the Panel appointed to decide the case is constituted as follows:

President: Mr Frans de Weger, Attorney-at-Law in Haarlem, The Netherlands

Arbitrators: Mr Michele A.R. Bernasconi, Attorney-at-Law in Zurich, Switzerland

Mr Jeffrey G. Benz, Attorney-at-Law & Barrister in London, UK.
48. On the same date, the CAS Court Office informed the Parties that, unless they agree otherwise or the President of the Panel orders otherwise on the basis of exceptional circumstances, Article R56 of the CAS Code prohibits them from amending their requests or arguments, submitting new exhibits, or presenting additional evidence after the submission of the Appeal Brief and the Answer.
49. On 4 June 2025, the CAS Court Office informed the Parties that the hearing was scheduled, to be held by videoconference, on Wednesday, 11 June 2025 at 9.30 CET.
50. On 5 June 2025, the Appellant returned a signed copy of the Order of Procedure (with two amendments as to date of issuance of the award following the procedural calendar).
51. On the same date, the First Respondent returned a signed copy of the Order of Procedure.

52. On 6 June 2025, the Second and the Third Respondent returned a signed copy of the Order of Procedure.
53. On 11 June 2025, a hearing was held by videoconference. At the outset of the hearing, the Parties confirmed that they had no objection to the composition of the Panel.
54. In addition to the members of the Panel and Mr Fabien Cagneux, Managing Counsel to the CAS, the following persons attended the hearing:

a) For the Appellant:

- 1) Mr Antonio Rigozzi, Counsel;
- 2) Mr Johannes Fahner, Counsel;
- 3) Mr Prithijit Das, Party Representative;
- 4) Mr Aryaman Shukla, Party Representative;
- 5) Mr Bhaskar Basu, Party Representative; and
- 6) Mr Arun Joseph, Party Representative.

b) For the First Respondent:

- 1) Mr Vidushpat Singhanian, Counsel;
- 2) Mr Prateek Chadha, Counsel;
- 3) Mr Neil M. Goswami, Counsel;
- 4) Mr Arnav Singhal, Counsel;
- 5) Mr Indiradevi Kolliara, Party Representative;
- 6) Mr Tarun Sridharan, Party Representative; and
- 7) Mr Kozhikkaat Parameswaran Ravindaran, Match Commissioner.

c) For the Second Respondent:

- 1) Mr Luis Torres, Counsel; and
- 2) Mr Aditya Barros Pereira, Party Representative.

d) For the Third Respondent:

- 1) Mr Shivam Singh, Counsel;
- 2) Mr Shubham Janghu, Counsel;
- 3) Mr Yoshit Jain, Counsel;
- 4) Mr Shamsher Malhi, Party Representative; and
- 5) Ms Divija Mahajan, Interpreter.

55. The following witnesses were heard, in order of appearance:

Witnesses called by the Appellant

- 1) Mr Arun Joseph, Team Manager Appellant

Witnesses called by the First Respondent

- 2) Mr Kozhikkaat Parameswaran Ravindaran, Match Commissioner

Witnesses called by Third Respondent

- 3) Mr Jodhbir Singh, Team Manager Third Respondent
- 4) Mr Iqbal Singh, Security Officer Third Respondent
- 5) Mr Gurcharan Singh, Medical Officer Third Respondent; and
- 6) Mr Harpreet Singh, Football coach Third Respondent.

56. The witnesses were invited by the President of the Panel to tell the truth subject to the sanctions of perjury under Swiss law. The Parties and the members of the Panel had full opportunity to examine and cross-examine the witnesses.
57. The Parties were given full opportunity to present their cases, submit their arguments and answer the questions posed by the Panel.
58. At the end of the hearing, the Appellant withdrew its requests for relief no. 3, 4 and 5 (as set out below under Chapter V - Submissions of the Parties and Requests for Relief). No objection was made by any of the Respondents against this withdrawal.
59. Before the hearing was concluded, the Parties expressly stated that they had no objection to the procedure adopted by the Panel and that their right to be heard had been respected.

V. SUBMISSIONS OF THE PARTIES AND REQUESTS FOR RELIEF

60. The following outline of the Parties' positions is illustrative only and does not necessarily comprise every submission advanced. The Panel, however, confirms that it carefully heard and took into account in its decision all the submissions, evidence, and arguments presented by the Parties, even if they have not been specifically summarised or referred to in the present arbitral award.

A. The Appellant

61. The Appellant's Appeal Brief, in essence, may be summarised as follows:
 - The Appealed Decision incorrectly found that the Second Appeal against the Second Disciplinary Decision became "infructuous" and stood "allowed automatically" on account of the AIFF Appeal Committee's findings on the First Appeal against the First Disciplinary Decision, the Appealed Decision must be annulled (insofar it concerns the Second Appeal) based on that reason alone. The Appealed Decision contains no explanation for such an "automatic" consequence. Whether the Player was rightly suspended for violent conduct has nothing to do with the issue whether the Third Respondent breached eligibility rules by fielding him despite four yellow cards.
 - When asked by the AIFF Disciplinary Committee whether the stay of the First Disciplinary Decision, as ordered by the AIFF Appeal Committee in the First Interim Order, applied only to the matters related to the Player's red card or also to his yellow cards, the AIFF Appeal Committee answered by means of its Clarification Order of 1 February 2025 that the stay applied to "the red card only" and not to "the accumulation of yellow cards", which answer made total sense.

- The AIFF Appeal Committee suddenly overturned its own Clarification Order that had been issued two months earlier. In the Second Interim Order, and later also in the Appealed Decision, the AIFF Appeal Committee made some contrived attempts to justify this backtracking of its own straightforward Clarification Order, but none of these attempts is credible, let alone convincing.
- The Second Interim Order is a confusing and confused document without a clear line of reasoning. It seems written for one purpose only: to conclude that the 0-3 forfeit should be overturned, despite the AIFF Appeal Committee's own earlier distinction between the Player's suspension and the accumulation of yellow cards.
- The Second Interim Order presents various incomprehensible arguments for overturning the AIFF Appeal Committee's own Clarification Order: (i) the request for clarification by the AIFF Disciplinary Committee was made without "jurisdiction"; and (ii) the Third Respondent's right to be heard was violated.
- The Third Respondent's right to be heard was however not violated. To the contrary, the AIFF Disciplinary Commission immediately informed the Third Respondent of its instruction to the AIFF to seek a clarification from the AIFF Appeal Committee. Moreover, there was no reason for the AIFF Appeal Committee to "hear" the parties on the clarification request. The AIFF Disciplinary Committee simply asked the AIFF Appeal Committee to confirm the obvious meaning of the First Interim Order. Party submissions could not have had any relevance to this question, nor is there a conceivable argument they could have presented to support a different reading.
- In light of the *de novo* nature of the present CAS appeal and for the sake of completeness, in the Second Disciplinary Decision, the AIFF Disciplinary Committee made the straightforward determination that the Player had received four yellow cards during the I-League 2024-25, and that he was therefore ineligible during the next match in accordance with Article 12.3.2 of the I-League 2024-25 Regulations, which was the match against the Appellant.
- It is common ground that the Player received four yellow cards in four different matches. Pursuant to Article 12.3.2 of the I-League 2024-25 Regulations, this meant that he was "automatically" suspended for the next match, *i.e.* the match against the Appellant.
- It is also undisputed that the Third Respondent fielded the Player despite his ineligibility, which situation is governed by Article 57(1) of the Disciplinary Code of the AIFF. It directly follows from such provision that in fielding the Player despite his ineligibility, the Third Respondent committed an offence punishable by a match forfeit.
- Article 12.3.2 of the 2024-25 I-League Regulations contains a straightforward, "automatic" rule of suspension after four yellow cards. Similarly, Article 57 of the Disciplinary Code of the AIFF stipulates that the fielding of an ineligible player is an offence for which a match forfeit is the prescribed sanction. Neither of these provisions leave room for an assessment of "intentions".

- Also, in the present case, the Third Respondent's fielding of an ineligible player should be sanctioned in accordance with the principle of strict liability, irrespective of whether it acted in good or bad faith.
- The Third Respondent's claim that it suffered "genuine confusion" as to "whether the yellow card from the 15.12.2024 match remained in effect" after the issuance of the First Interim Order, is a fabricated argument. The Third Respondent did not raise questions with the AIFF, the AIFF Disciplinary Committee or the AIFF Appeal Committee upon receipt of the First Interim Order or after the Player received his fourth yellow card on 8 January 2025. The "genuine confusion" was only invented for the purpose of the Second Appeal.
- Also, the First Interim Order had nothing to do with other potential future grounds for ineligibility. The Third Respondent could not have reasonably believed that the First Interim Order granted the Player a right to play in the match against the Appellant, no matter if the Player committed further infractions in the meantime.
- As rightly pointed out by the AIFF Disciplinary Committee, "[t]he argument that CMS did not reflect the ban is irrelevant as the CMS is only for the purpose of monitoring and cannot be considered as a final parameter based on which the clubs should take decisions". It is each club's own responsibility to ensure compliance with restrictions on eligibility, thereby referring to Article 68 of the Disciplinary Code of the AIFF and Article 12.3.6 of the I-League 2024-25 Regulations. A club cannot invoke reliance on the CMS as an excuse for a breach of an eligibility restriction. The CMS does not absolve clubs from their own responsibility to monitor cautions and ensuring compliance with actual suspensions.
- Finally, the Third Respondent's attempt to suggest that its "due diligence" was completed by an inquiry to the match commissioner, is also fabricated. In fact, the match commissioner instructed the Third Respondent to conduct its own due diligence even if the CMS showed no suspensions.
- In conclusion, it is undisputed that the Third Respondent fielded an ineligible player in its match against the Appellant. Pursuant to Article 57 of the Disciplinary Code of the AIFF, this means that the match was forfeited, as rightly ordered by the AIFF Disciplinary Committee.

62. On this basis, the Appellant submitted the following requests for relief:

"For the reasons outlined above, the Appellant respectfully requests the Panel to rule that:

- (i) The appeal filed by Inter Kashi FC is upheld;*
- (ii) The decision of the AIFF Appeal Committee dated 18 April 2025 is partially annulled insofar as it relates to the Second Disciplinary Decision adopted by the AIFF Disciplinary Committee on 24 February 2025;*
- (iii) The points table of the I-League 2024-25 season is adjusted as follows:*

<i>Position</i>	<i>Team</i>	<i>[...]</i>	<i>Points I.</i>
1.	<i>Inter Kashi FC</i>		42
2.	<i>Churchill Brothers FC Goa</i>		40
3.	<i>Namdhari FC</i>		29

- (iv) *The AIFF shall declare Inter Kashi FC as the winner of the I-League 2024-25 season;*
- (v) *The AIFF shall forthwith hold a prize presentation ceremony in consultation with Inter Kashi FC to award the trophy to Inter Kashi FC and to shine a deserved spotlight on the club, its players and their achievements; and*
- (vi) *The Respondents shall bear all arbitration costs incurred with the present proceedings and pay a significant contribution towards the legal expenses of Inter Kashi FC.”*

B. The First Respondent

63. The First Respondent’s Answer, in essence, may be summarised as follows:

- The AIFF has established and maintained a regulatory structure ensuring the independence and autonomy of its judicial bodies, in full compliance with the requirements of the FIFA Statutes, the AIFF Constitution, and the AIFF Disciplinary Code. These committees conduct their proceedings and render decisions free from external influence, administrative intervention, or any form of instruction from other AIFF organs. The Appealed Decision was rendered by such an independent judicial body. In this context, the AIFF's role has been limited to that of a regulatory authority, without involvement in the adjudicatory process leading to the Appealed Decision. Accordingly, the First Respondent is not in a position to make any submissions on the merits of the Appealed Decision, and confines its submissions in the present proceedings to clarifying procedural and factual aspects, without entering into or expressing any opinion on the substantive reasoning or conclusions as follows from the Appealed Decision.
- The First Respondent has also fully discharged its obligations by constituting and maintaining autonomous and independent judicial bodies in accordance with the FIFA Statutes, the AIFF Constitution, and the AIFF Disciplinary Code. The decisions rendered by the AIFF Appeal Committee, including the Appealed Decision, emanate from this independent judicial framework, adjudicated exclusively by qualified and impartial members vested with exclusive jurisdiction over disciplinary matters. The present appeal, therefore, concerns a decision delivered by an independent appellate body acting within its mandate and procedural autonomy. It would not be appropriate for AIFF to comment on any aspects of the decision of these autonomous judicial bodies or for that matter seek to exercise any control over their decisions.
- The allegations regarding the prize distribution ceremony conducted on 27 April 2025 are without merit. The *ex parte* Order on Provisional Measures issued by CAS dated 27 April 2025 was received via email on a Sunday, a designated

public holiday when the AIFF Secretariat was closed. Contrary to the Appellant's conjecture, there was no actual knowledge of the CAS Order prior to the ceremony.

- The Appellant's allegations concerning the prize distribution ceremony being rescheduled post their communication and being hurriedly held on 27 April 2025 are factually inaccurate and untenable. It is pertinent to note that the First Respondent has acted in good faith at all times and took prompt measures upon becoming aware of the CAS Order. The circumstances surrounding the receipt and implementation of the CAS Order have been selectively presented by the Appellant, necessitating clarification of the factual and procedural context in which the ceremony was conducted.
- The Appellant's contention that the prize distribution ceremony was improperly advanced in defiance of the CAS proceedings is entirely misplaced. The scheduling of the ceremony on 27 April 2025 was undertaken in accordance with the revised preference of Churchill Brothers FC and at a time when no procedural bar or suspensive effect was in operation.
- Drawing a reasonable parallel, thereby referring to Article 78(1) of the Swiss Code of Obligations, Article R32 of the CAS Code and Section 10 of the General Clauses Act, 1897, where notification itself occurs on a non-business day at a general inbox without direct communication to concerned operational officials, the effective receipt and compliance opportunity should similarly begin from the next working day – in this case, Monday, 28 April 2025.
- The prompt issuance of a public statement and the formal request for the return of the trophy and medals clearly demonstrate that the AIFF acted in good faith and without any intention to disregard the CAS Order. The AIFF took immediate and transparent steps to comply with the CAS Order at the first effective opportunity, namely on the next working day following the public holiday.
- In the present case, the Appellant has not been deprived of any substantive entitlement. The question of when and how a trophy is awarded does not affect the validity of competition outcomes, nor does a delayed or subsequent ceremony render the recognition any less meaningful.
- By omitting any reference to these pending complaints and proceedings in its Appeal Brief, the Appellant has not only suppressed material facts but also sought to improperly premise its submissions on a presumption of finality regarding its league position. Moreover, such conduct of the Appellant is not merely procedurally improper, but also contrary to the principle of good faith that underpins the conduct of parties in all CAS proceedings.
- It is also pertinent to place on record that four clubs participating in the I-League 2024-25, namely the Second Respondent, the Third Respondent, Real Kashmir FC and Delhi FC, had filed formal complaints before the AIFF Disciplinary Committee alleging regulatory violations by the Appellant in relation to the fielding of ineligible foreign players during the course of the competition. At that stage, the complaints were pending adjudication before the competent judicial

bodies of the AIFF. The outcome of those disciplinary proceedings would have had a direct bearing on the final standings of the I-League, including potentially altering the Appellant's own standing within the league table. Despite the material relevance of these proceedings, the Appellant has failed to disclose the existence and pendency of the said complaints in its Application for Provisional Measures as well as its Appeal Brief.

- In this regard, it is further pertinent to note that on 31 May 2025, the AIFF Appeal Committee passed a final order in appeals preferred by the Second Respondent, the Third Respondent and Real Kashmir FC, conclusively holding that the Appellant had committed violations of Articles 6.5.6 and 6.5.7 of the I-League Regulations 2024-25 by unlawfully re-registering and fielding an ineligible foreign player, named Mr Mario Barco Vilar.
- In these circumstances, it is evident that the Appellant has withheld disclosure of material facts. The pendency of these regulatory proceedings before the AIFF judicial bodies had the potential to materially alter the league standings, which directly bears upon the question of whether the Appellant is entitled to the trophy and league title at all. This is a clear case of the Appellant selectively disclosing facts before the CAS in its urgency application for provisional measures in order to get an *ex-parte* beneficial order, while using their good offices.
- With regard to the issue of costs, the First Respondent submits that it has consistently acted in good faith and in accordance with its regulatory obligations. It cannot be penalized for the independent decision of a judicial body over which it has no control, nor for events surrounding the rescheduling of the prize distribution ceremony that were not wilful in nature.
- Upon becoming aware of the CAS Order, the AIFF took immediate remedial steps – including issuing a public clarification the same evening and requesting the return of the trophy from the Second Respondent. These actions clearly evidence that the AIFF has consistently acted in good faith. On the contrary, it is the Appellant who has suppressed material facts – particularly its knowledge of the High Court proceedings, the facts pertaining to disciplinary proceedings in Mario Barco case, the re-scheduling of the ceremony and failure to alert relevant AIFF officials of the CAS Order prior to the prize distribution ceremony, despite being in direct contact with them. In these circumstances, the Appellant's request for costs against the AIFF is entirely unwarranted and should be rejected. In fact, exemplary costs should be imposed on the Appellant for suppressing material facts in order to procure an interim order in *ex-parte* proceedings.
- There appear to be contradictions in the accounts furnished by the parties regarding what transpired before the match commissioner in relation to the match between the Appellant and the Third Respondent. Without delving into

the merits of that matter, the First Respondent places on record, for the Panel's consideration, an affidavit furnished by the match commissioner Mr. K. Ravindaran, providing his account and clarifications on the factual aspects surrounding the events in question.

64. On this basis, the First Respondent submitted the following requests for relief:

- “(i) Hold that the First Respondent did not violate the CAS Order dated 27 April 2025 issued by the Deputy President of the Appeal Arbitration Division, and that there was no deliberate or wilful non-compliance with the said CAS Order;*
- (ii) Dismiss the Appellant's request for costs against the First Respondent in its entirety;*
- (iii) Impose exemplary costs on the Appellant for its suppression of material facts and misleading submissions before this Hon'ble Panel, including a significant contribution towards the legal expenses incurred by the First Respondent in defending these proceedings;*
- (iv) Impose costs for reputational damage of the First Respondent; and*
- (v) Grant such other and further relief as this Hon'ble Panel may deem just and proper in the interests of justice.”*

C. The Second Respondent

65. The Second Respondent's Answer, in essence, may be summarised as follows:

- This is a case about a sequence of procedural failures, breaches of fundamental procedural rights, and the reasonable reliance and understanding of the Second Respondent and the Player on clear, official communications and conduct from the relevant football bodies.
- The Appellant's attempt to artificially segment the two disciplinary proceedings (one related to the red card, the other to the accumulation of yellow cards), as if they had nothing to do with each other, serves an obvious purpose: to create the illusion of simplicity, trying to isolate the yellow card issue from the broader procedural background. But this approach is both misleading and legally untenable.
- First, both disciplinary proceedings are necessarily interlinked following the decisions taken by the AIFF judicial bodies, as they derive from the First Interim Order dated 6 January 2025, which already highlighted relevant procedural flaws related to the straight red card showed to the Player. This First Interim Order expressly gave the Player *“the opportunity of playing the removing two (2) matches”*, *“[entitling] the appellant to play the two (2) matches”*. Based on this understanding, the Player was fielded in the match against the Appellant on 13 January 2025, despite having accumulated four cautions – a fact that is not disputed.
- Second, for the proper assessment of this case it is crucial to emphasize a simple yet fundamental fact: this matter concerns the Indian second division, not the

UEFA Champions League. Therefore, the analysis must be firmly anchored in this specific context.

- The disciplinary proceedings conducted by the AIFF, in both the red card and the yellow card accumulated cases, were marked by multiple – and serious – procedural violations. These violations resulted in a flagrant breach of due process, including a clear infringement of the Third Respondent's and the Player's right to be heard. It was precisely in light of these fundamental irregularities that the AIFF Appeal Committee, acting within its powers and obligations, correctly annulled the challenged decisions.
- This case is not about an isolated procedural misstep; it is about a series of failures and chaotic handling that collectively reflect a serious disregard for the most fundamental principles of due process. At every critical stage of both disciplinary proceedings – the one concerning the red card and the one relating to the alleged ineligibility – the Third Respondent and the Player were systematically denied proper notification, the chance to respond, and the opportunity to be heard. These are not two disconnected episodes; rather, they are deeply linked, both factually and procedurally. It was precisely in light of these interconnected irregularities and persistent breaches of fundamental rights that the AIFF Appeal Committee correctly decided to annul the decisions of the AIFF Disciplinary Committee.
- With regard to the proceedings in relation to the First Disciplinary Proceedings and the Second Disciplinary Proceedings, what we are facing is not a procedural accident or an isolated or irrelevant procedural flaw, but a series of repeated and cumulative violations of the right to be heard by the AIFF and its judicial bodies – each reinforcing the next – which ultimately led to a situation where the Third Respondent was deprived of its most basic procedural guarantee, also breaching Article 90 of the AIFF Disciplinary Code. These procedural breaches resulted in serious and unfair consequences for the Third Respondent, and now also directly affected the Second Respondent, whose position as league winners is being challenged by an appeal that seeks to overturn the outcome on the basis of an untenable reading of fundamentally flawed proceedings. This cannot be upheld.
- It shall be concluded that, as established by the AIFF Appeal Committee, the AIFF violated the essential principles governing fair and transparent disciplinary proceedings, breaching the Third Respondent's procedural rights in a way that amounts to a clear example of arbitrariness and abuse of process.
- Another key point that is completely ignored by the Appellant is that the AIFF Disciplinary Code grants a broad margin of discretion to the competent bodies when deciding whether or not to impose a sanction. This discretion is not incidental – it exists precisely so that all relevant objective and subjective factors may be taken into account before reaching a final decision.
- Both the structure of the AIFF Disciplinary Code and the circumstances surrounding this particular case require a contextual, fair, and proportionate assessment before any sanction can be imposed, and aims at safeguarding this applicable legal framework. Specifically, Articles 40.3 and 40.4 of the AIFF Disciplinary Code expressly grant the judging body the discretion to reduce any disciplinary measure (even where a minimum sanction is identified) foreseen in

the AIFF Disciplinary Code, depending on the particular circumstances of the case.

- The present matter reveals a combination of factors (procedural irregularities, official miscommunication, good faith, lack of clarity, and institutional omissions) that justify, exceptionally, a proportionate response. The applicable framework, i.e. Article 40, expressly allows for it. And if exceptional situations call for exceptional solutions, this is precisely one of those cases.
- One of the most crucial elements of the case is the Competition Management System (“CMS”). The Third Respondent did monitor the eligibility of its players through the CMS prior to the match in question. As confirmed in the file, at the time of line-up, there was no indication in the CMS that the Player was suspended. Far from negligent, the Third Respondent followed the route expressly indicated in the applicable regulations to verify the Player’s eligibility. There was no trace of any ineligibility for the Player to participate in the match against the Appellant.
- It was the natural consequence of a shared understanding by all relevant actors at the time – including the AIFF – that the Player was eligible to play.
- Far from being irrelevant or lacking in probative value, as submitted by the Appellant, the CMS constitutes a central element for the proper and comprehensive assessment of this case. It reflected the official position of the AIFF at the relevant time and was directly connected to the Third Respondent’s good-faith decision to field the Player. Accordingly, it shall be duly considered and afforded appropriate weight by the Panel when evaluating the conduct of both the Third Respondent and the AIFF, as well as the overall reasonableness of the interpretation adopted at the time.
- Another relevant factor behind the Third Respondent’s decision to field the Player – and, crucially, further evidence that the AIFF itself considered the Player eligible – was the confirmation provided by the AIFF match commissioner, Mr. Kozhikkat Parameswaran Ravindaran, during the coordination meeting held the day before the match. The reality is that, on the day of the match, everyone involved – including the very institution in charge with applying the First Interim Order and interpreting the CMS – shared the same understanding: the Player was eligible. That is why he played.
- Following a chronological order, the first circumstance that confirms that the AIFF did not consider the Player suspended – or at the very least, that it had genuine doubts regarding the correct interpretation of the situation – was the email exchange on 17 January 2025, in which the Third Respondent directly sought clarification about the Player’s eligibility to face Gokulam Kerala FC.
- This leads to a further, and perhaps the clearest, indication of the AIFF’s own position. Just a few days later, on 27 January 2025, the AIFF Disciplinary Committee formally addressed the AIFF Appeal Committee to request a clarification of the First Interim Order. Crucially, this request explicitly

acknowledged that, in AIFF's view, "*the player was allowed to play the match*" on the basis of the First Interim Order of 6 January 2025.

- Last but not least, the Clarification/Modification Order issued by the AIFF Appeal Committee explicitly states that it "modified" the First Interim Order issued on 6 January 2025. The language used leaves no room for doubt.
- It is inadmissible to sanction a club for actions that were taken in good faith on the basis of specific directions and understandings previously issued by the competent authority, simply because such directions were later reinterpreted or modified through a subsequent order (in this case, the Clarification/Modification Order dated 1 February 2025). This represents yet another violation of the Third Respondent's rights, which cannot be disregarded by the Panel and must be taken into consideration in the club's favour.
- It has been clearly established that the Third Respondent – with the overall circumstances at stake here – not only held a reasonable and *bona fide* understanding that the Player was eligible to play on 13 January 2025, but that this understanding was shared and reinforced by the conduct and declarations of the AIFF itself. The overall chronology of events, including the First Interim Order, the functioning and contents of the CMS, the match commissioner's confirmation, the AIFF's silence in response to the Third Respondent's request for clarification, and the AIFF Disciplinary Committee's own wording, all point in one direction: at the time, there was no doubt that the Player could be fielded.
- The principle of legitimate expectations also applies. A club acting in good faith, on the basis of official communications, omissions and conduct by the governing body, is entitled to rely on those signals – especially in a competition like the I-League, where professional structures and legal expertise are often limited.
- The present appeal lodged by the Appellant has become moot due to a supervening development. Specifically, following the Final Order issued by the AIFF Appeal Committee on 31 May 2025, which confirmed the ineligibility of the player Mario Barco in three (3) matches and ordered the application of the consequences set out in Article 6.2.6 of the I-League Regulations. Therefore, the AIFF shall deduct four (4) points from the Appellant in the 2024/25 league table. This deduction altered the final standings of the I-League 2024/25 season, placing the Second Respondent ahead of the Appellant. In line with the principle *pas d'intérêt, pas d'action*, once the main purpose of an appeal disappears during the course of the proceedings, there is no longer a legally protectable interest justifying its continuation.
- Concerning costs, the Second Respondent wishes to respectfully reject and make clear that it has not acted in breach of any order or decision in this matter. At all times, the Second Respondent has acted in good faith and in line with the applicable regulations and procedural directions. There is no evidence to suggest otherwise, and any allegation in that sense is simply unfounded.

66. On this basis, the Second Respondent submitted the following requests for relief:

“a) To admit the present Answer.

b) To confirm the Appealed Decision, rejecting the Appellant’s appeal.

c) Subsidiarily to (b), to impose no sanction on Namdhari FC, or – alternatively – a much lenient sanction to Namdhari FC.

d) In any event, to order that the Appellant shall bear the arbitration costs pertaining to these CAS proceedings; and shall pay the Second Respondent a contribution for the legal costs incurred in an amount of CHF 20,000.”

D. The Third Respondent

67. The Third Respondent’s Answer, in essence, may be summarised as follows:

- The Appealed Decision does not conflate the First Appeal against the First Disciplinary Decision and the second appeal against the Second Disciplinary Decision. Rather, the AIFF Appeal Committee acted with procedural economy in recognizing the legal interdependence between the two.
- Since the First Appeal against the First Disciplinary Decision had been allowed and the suspension of sanctions confirmed under Article 35 of the AIFF Disciplinary Code, it naturally followed that the Second Appeal against the Second Disciplinary Decision – concerning the Player’s alleged ineligibility – stood “automatically” allowed as a direct consequence.
- The right to be heard under Article 90 of the AIFF Disciplinary Code applies to *any* decision, including those rendered during interlocutory proceedings such as the issuance of the Clarification Order. Despite the gravity of the consequences, the Third Respondent was not given any prior notice or opportunity to be heard, in clear violation of Article 90.
- It is critical to note that the Third Respondent was neither served with any notice nor copied in the email dated 29 January 2025 sent by Mr. Tarun S., Legal Assistant at AIFF, to the AIFF Appeal Committee seeking clarification.
- Furthermore, the AIFF Disciplinary Committee lacked jurisdiction to seek clarification from the AIFF Appeal Committee. Under the AIFF regulatory framework, only a party to the proceedings may file an application before the AIFF Appeal Committee. The AIFF Disciplinary Committee, not being a party to the matter, had no standing to request any clarification, rendering the Clarification Order procedurally and jurisdictionally untenable.
- As to the interim order dated 6 January 2025 that had suspended the yellow card awarded to the Player, this was issued in exercise of the Appeal Committee’s express statutory power under Article 35.1 of the AIFF Disciplinary Code, which provision authorizes AIFF’s judicial bodies to suspend or partially suspend sanctions. The order specifically stated that the implementation of the sanction

would “*remain in abeyance partially*” and permitted the Player to play in two matches scheduled for 8 and 13 January 2025.

- As to the shared mutual understanding regarding suspension of the yellow card awarded to the Player, this was not only the understanding of the Third Respondent but also of AIFF itself, as reflected in the conduct of its appointed officials and the functioning of its own internal systems. During the pre-match meeting on 12 January 2025, the day before the match against the Appellant, the eligibility of the Player was explicitly raised by the Third Respondent’s General Coordinator. The match commissioner, acting in his official capacity, accessed the AIFF CMS portal in the presence of both clubs’ representatives and confirmed that the Player was eligible to play, noting that there was no indication of any active suspension (*i.e.*, no “B” mark). At every relevant juncture, AIFF officials, systems, and protocols reinforced the understanding that the Player was eligible. This shared understanding gave rise to a legitimate expectation and placed the Third Respondent in a position where it was both objectively and subjectively reasonable to rely on the status quo.
- Regarding the monitoring obligation on the Third Respondent in terms of Article 12.3.6 of the I-League Regulations, the I-League cannot be equated with top league in India (e.g., the Indian Super League) or any other top European leagues (e.g., Premier League, La Liga or the UEFA Champions League). The I-League serves a distinct purpose by providing a platform for smaller, traditional and community-based clubs across India.
- Specifically, Clause 12.3.6 of the I-League Regulations provides that “*each Participating Club shall bear the responsibility of monitoring the cautions and/or suspensions... The same can be monitored via the AIFF CMS.*”. The explicit inclusion of the AIFF CMS in this clause is a recognition of the practical realities faced by I-League clubs – namely, that they may rely more heavily on the centralized digital system to track player eligibility due to more limited administrative infrastructure. It is important to contrast this with the ISL 2024–25 League Rules (Clause 4.8(c)), while placing a similar responsibility on clubs to monitor suspensions, makes no reference to the AIFF CMS.
- In the present case, the Third Respondent took multiple proactive steps to confirm the eligibility of the Player, and hence, it is in complete compliance with obligations under Article 12.3.6 of the I-League Regulations.
- The Third Respondent raised a formal query in the official pre-match meeting Namdhari Sports Stadium on 12 January 2025, obtained confirmation from the AIFF match commissioner, verified the CMS database independently, submitted the squad accordingly, and faced no objection at any verification stage. These are not isolated or negligent oversights – they constitute systematic compliance with AIFF’s own procedural norms and systems. Both the AIFF Disciplinary Committee and the AIFF Appeal Committee recorded findings that the Third Respondent acted in good faith. The AIFF Appeal Committee noted that the Third Respondent had relied on the CMS and the verbal assurance of the match commissioner, and that this reliance was neither misplaced nor unreasonable.

- As to the Clarification Order (even if revived) that has no bearing on the Third Respondent's appeal against the Second Disciplinary Decision, the said Clarification Order was passed *ex post facto* – after the match between the Appellant and the Third Respondent had already taken place on 13 January 2025. At the time of the match, the Third Respondent had neither been served with any notice of a proposed clarification nor afforded any opportunity to be heard in that regard. Hence, any clarification issued subsequently cannot retroactively alter the legal and regulatory position as it stood at the time of the match. The Clarification Order, even if revived, cannot retroactively render unlawful what was done lawfully and in reliance on existing procedures and express institutional assurances. Therefore, it has no bearing on the outcome of the Third Respondent's second appeal.
- With regard to the validity of interim order dated 6 January 2025 passed in the First Appeal which cannot be challenged in these proceedings, the Appellant has not appealed against either the First Appeal or the Interim Order passed therein. In the absence of such an appeal, the validity of the Interim Order dated 6 January 2025 has attained finality insofar as the Appellant is concerned. The deliberate choice of the Appellant to confine its grievance to the Second Appeal against the Second Disciplinary Decision alone precludes it from now revisiting the merits or implications of the earlier interim relief. Therefore, the Appellant is barred from attacking the interim order in the First Appeal against the First Disciplinary Decision.
- Finally, the Appellant's appeal has become moot, due to a supervening event. Pursuant to the final order of the Appeals Committee dated 31 May 2025 (AIFF Appeal Committee Order dated 31 May 2025 in *Mario Barco* case], at least four (4) points were deducted from the Appellant, altering the final I-League 2024–25 standings and placing the Second Respondent ahead. Consequently, the relief sought – namely, to overturn the league result and be declared champions – has become unattainable. In line with the principle *pas d'intérêt, pas d'action*, where the core purpose of an appeal ceases to exist during proceedings, there is no longer a legally protectable interest.
- As to costs, the major point of contention due to which the Appellant has approached this forum is the prize ceremony undertaken by AIFF wherein it has crowned the Second Respondent as the Champions of I-league 2024-25. It is submitted that the Third Respondent had no role to play in the said internal communications leading to the prize distribution ceremony. Furthermore, the Third Respondent did not participate in the prize distribution ceremony in any manner.

68. On this basis, the Third Respondent submitted the following requests for relief:

- “a. To declare Namdhari FC’s Answer admissible.*
- b. To dismiss in full the appeal filed by Inter Kashi FC.*
- c. In any case, to decide that the Appellant is ordered to pay the costs of the present proceedings.*
- d. In any case, to not impose any costs on Namdhari FC.*
- e. In any case, to decide that the Appellant is ordered to pay Namdhari FC a contribution for the legal costs incurred in the present matter to the amount of CHF 15,000.”*

VI. JURISDICTION

69. Article R47 CAS Code provides as follows:

“An appeal against the decision of a federation, association or sports-related body may be filed with CAS if the statutes or regulations of the said body so provide or if the parties have concluded a specific arbitration agreement and if the Appellant has exhausted the legal remedies available to it prior to the appeal, in accordance with the statutes or regulations of that body.

An appeal may be filed with CAS against an award rendered by CAS acting as a first instance tribunal if such appeal has been expressly provided by the rules of the federation or sports-body concerned.”

70. Article 72 of the AIFF Disciplinary Code provides as follows:

*“72. Court of Arbitration for Sport
Certain decisions passed by the AIFF Appeal Committee may be appealed before the Court of Arbitration for Sport if such appeal is in accordance with the relevant Articles of the AIFF Statutes and this Code.”*

71. Article 123 of the AIFF Disciplinary Code further provides:

*“123. Body of last instance
123.1. The AIFF Appeal Committee rules, in principle, as a body in the last instance.
123.2. The right is reserved for an appeal to be made to the Court of Arbitration for Sport as set out in Article 124.”*

72. Article 124 of the AIFF Disciplinary Code further provides:

*“124. Right to appeal
124.1. The AIFF Statutes stipulate which decisions passed by the judicial bodies may be appealed before the Court of Arbitration for Sport.
124.2. The relevant competition regulations may contain further stipulations.”*

73. Article 54 of the Constitution of the AIFF (the “AIFF Constitution”) reads:

“Article 54 Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS)

1. The AIFF recognizes the jurisdiction of the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) and the International Council of Arbitration for Sport (ICAS) with headquarters in Lausanne (Switzerland) to resolve disputes between AIFF, Members, Affiliated Units, Competitions, Clubs, Players, Officials, Intermediaries and Licensed Match Agents.”

74. Article 55 of the AIFF Constitution reads:

“Article 55 Jurisdiction of CAS

1. Appeals against final decisions passed by AIFF’s judicial bodies shall be lodged with CAS within 21 days of notification of the decision in question.

2. Recourse may only be made to CAS after all previous stages of appeal available at the level of AIFF, Member, Affiliated Unit and Club have been exhausted.

3. CAS does not, however, hear appeals on:

(a) violations of the Laws of the Game; and

(b) suspensions of up to four matches or up to three months.

4. The appeal shall not have a suspensive effect. The appropriate FIFA body or, alternatively, CAS may order the appeal to have a suspensive effect.”

75. In view of the above, the Panel observes that the above provisions clearly provide a pathway to file an appeal with the CAS.

76. The CAS jurisdiction is furthermore not disputed and confirmed by the signature on the Orders of Procedure by the Parties.

77. It therefore follows that CAS has jurisdiction to adjudicate and decide on the Appellant’s appeal against the Appealed Decision.

VII. ADMISSIBILITY

78. Article R51 (1) of the CAS Code reads as follows:

“Within ten days following the expiry of the time limit for the appeal, the Appellant shall file with the CAS Court Office a brief stating the facts and legal arguments giving rise to the appeal, together with all exhibits and specification of other evidence upon which he intends to rely. Alternatively, the Appellant shall inform the CAS Court Office in writing within the same time limit that the statement of appeal shall be considered as the appeal brief. The appeal shall be deemed to have been withdrawn if the Appellant fails to meet such time limit.”

79. Article R49 of the CAS Code provides:

“In the absence of a time limit set in the statutes or regulations of the federation, association or sports-related body concerned, or in a previous agreement, the time limit for appeal shall be twenty-one days from the receipt of the decision appealed against. The Division President shall not initiate a procedure if the statement of appeal is, on its face, late and shall so notify the person who filed the document. When a procedure is initiated, a party may request the Division President or the President of the Panel, if a Panel has been already constituted, to terminate it if the statement of appeal is late. The Division President or the President of the Panel renders her/his decision after considering any submission made by the other parties.”

80. Article 55 (1) of the AIFF Constitution reads as follows:

“Appeals against final decision passed by AIFF’s judicial bodies shall be lodged with CAS within 21 days of notification of the decision in question.”

81. Since the Appealed Decision was notified to the Appellant on 19 April 2025, and the Statement of Appeal was filed on 24 April 2025, the appeal was filed within the deadline of 21 days set by Article 55 par. 1 of the AIFF Constitution. In addition, the Appeal Brief was filed on 16 May 2025, which falls within the 10-day deadline as set out in Article R51 of the CAS Code. The appeal complied with all other requirements of Article R48 of the CAS Code, including the payment of the CAS Court Office fee.

82. It therefore follows that the appeal is admissible.

VIII. APPLICABLE LAW

83. Article R58 CAS Code provides as follows:

“The Panel shall decide the dispute according to the applicable regulations and, subsidiarily, to the rules of law chosen by the parties or, in the absence of such a choice, according to the law of the country in which the federation, association or sports-related body which has issued the challenged decision is domiciled or according to the rules of law the Panel deems appropriate. In the latter case, the Panel shall give reasons for its decision.”

84. Accordingly, and pursuant to Article R58 of the CAS Code, the Panel finds that the dispute shall be decided in accordance with the rules and regulations of the AIFF, which is also in agreement between the Parties, in particular the I-League 2024-2025 Regulations (the “I-League Regulations”), the AIFF Disciplinary Code and the AIFF Constitution, and, subsidiarily, only insofar as necessary, Indian law.

IX. PROCEDURAL ISSUE

85. The Panel notes that the Appellant, the Second Respondent and the Third Respondent raise several arguments in relation to procedural failures and fundamental procedural rights that were allegedly violated during the proceedings in front of the AIFF Disciplinary Committee and the AIFF Appeal Committee. The Appellant argues that the Second Interim Order is a “sham” and finds the Appealed Decision an “incomprehensible document”, whereas the Second Respondent claims that the proceedings conducted by the AIFF were marked by multiple – and serious – procedural violations. Similarly, the Third Respondent argues it was effectively denied the opportunity to present its positions and it was not heard in the First Appeal regarding the Clarification Order issued by the AIFF Appeal Committee. It was also expressed by the AIFF Appeal Committee itself that the Third Respondent’s right to be heard was violated in both proceedings before the AIFF Disciplinary Committee.

86. Therefore, and to set the scope of the present CAS arbitration proceedings clear prior to discussion of the merits of the case itself, the Panel will first address the consequences of any procedural failures and fundamental procedural rights that may have been

violated during the proceedings before the AIFF Disciplinary Committee and the AIFF Appeal Committee.

87. As a point of departure, the Panel notes that it has the power to review the facts and the law *de novo*, in accordance with the power bestowed on it by Article R57 of the CAS Code. As such, since CAS appeals arbitration allows a full *de novo* hearing of the case, with all due process guarantees, it possesses the ability to cure any procedural defects or violations of the right to be heard under Article R57 of the CAS Code. In accordance with well-established CAS jurisprudence, any procedural flaws that might have occurred at the previous instance can be cured in the second instance (see MAVROMATI/REEB, *The Code of the Court of Arbitration for Sport*, 2015, p. 513 – 514, CAS 2016/A/4704 and CAS 2020/A/7567).
88. In other words, violations of the principle of due process occurred in prior proceedings before the AIFF Disciplinary Committee and the AIFF Appeal Committee, may be cured by a full appeal to the CAS (see also CAS 2023/A/9809). In fact, the virtue of an appeal system which allows for a full rehearing before an appellate body is that issues relating to the fairness of the hearing before a prior tribunal “fade to the periphery” (CAS 98/211).
89. The Panel emphasises that parties must thus in general be given a real and effective opportunity to present their case and an appropriate defence, which is an essential procedural right (CAS 2013/A/3155). It is a fundamental legal principle which must be respected by federations when taking their decisions and within their internal proceedings (CAS 2023/A/9757).
90. The Panel wishes to note that the Parties have had (and used) the opportunity to bring all their arguments before the CAS, where all of the Parties’ fundamental rights have been duly respected. In fact, at the end of the hearing, the Parties expressly confirmed that they had no objections in respect of their right to be heard in the present CAS arbitration proceedings. Accordingly, even if any of the Parties’ rights had been infringed upon in the prior proceedings in front of the decision-making bodies of the AIFF, the *de novo* proceedings before CAS would therefore be deemed to have cured any such infringements.
91. For that reason, the Panel does not deem it necessary to address the procedural irregularities raised by the Appellant, the Second Respondent and the Third Respondent any further. However, at the same time, the Panel cannot be blind for the fact that procedural irregularities seem indeed to have taken place in previous proceedings at national level. Although the First Respondent is right that the AIFF Disciplinary Committee and the AIFF Appeal Committee are independent bodies, both committees do operate under the flagship of the AIFF. Consequently, the Panel finds that the First Respondent shall feel responsible for procedural irregularities that have taken place at national level. The Panel will however not further address this under the merits of the case itself.

X. MERITS

A. The Main Issues

92. Having dispensed with the above procedural issue, the Panel can now turn to the main issues to be resolved. The Panel observes that the Parties are not in dispute as to the question whether or not the Player had received four yellow cards during the season 2024-25. In fact, in the match of 8 January 2025 between the Second Respondent and the Third Respondent, the Player received his fourth yellow card during the season. It is also not in dispute whether the Player was fielded in the subsequent match between the Appellant and the Third Respondent on 13 January 2025. The Panel observes that the dispute between the Parties however centres around the question whether the fielding of the Player in the match on 13 January 2025 by the Third Respondent would justify a sanction, which was in the present case a 3-0 match forfeit on the Third Respondent, as was originally decided by the AIFF Disciplinary Decision, which decision was then annulled by the AIFF Appeal Committee.

93. The Panel observes that the Second Respondent and the Third Respondent raised several arguments justifying the fielding of the Player in the match on 13 January 2025 arguing that it did not commit an offense for which it should be sanctioned, which defences will all be discussed by the Panel. In this regard, the Panel will also address, as this was specifically raised by the Second Respondent, whether, and only if the Panel finds that the Third Respondent committed an offense for fielding the Player, the sanction imposed of a 3-0 match forfeit was disproportionate. Finally, as the Respondents argue that the Appellant's appeal has become moot due to a supervening circumstance, this will also be discussed.

94. As such, the Panel shall answer the following questions in sequence:

- a. Did the Third Respondent commit an offense?
- b. If so, was the sanction of a 3-0 match forfeit disproportionate?
- c. Has the Appellant's appeal become moot?

95. With the above in mind, the Panel will now address the above issues in turn below.

B. Did the Third Respondent commit an offense?

96. As a starting point, and specifically looking at the applicable legal framework in this case, the Panel notes that Article 12.3.2 of the I-League 2024-25 Regulations reads as follows:

“A Participating Player who receives four (4) cautions (yellow cards) in four (4) different League Matches shall automatically be suspended from participating in the Match following the Match in which he received the fourth caution unless already serving a suspension, in which case, the pending suspension [on the basis of receiving four (4) cautions as mentioned above] will get carried forward to the next Match. Moreover, an accumulation of further three (3) cautions [a total of seven (7) cautions through the League Matches] by a Player shall result in another one (1) Match suspension following which any further two (2) cautions (a total of 9, 11, 13 and so on... cautions through the League Matches) shall result in a one (1) Match

suspension for the Player. The principle mentioned above regarding a previously pending suspension getting served on priority will be applicable in all situations.”

97. In addition, the Panel makes reference to Article 57(1) of the AIFF Disciplinary Code:

“If a Player is fielded in a Match despite being ineligible, an offence has been committed.

Penalty: for a Club/Member Association in an official match forfeit of the Match; and fine of at least INR 60,000 (Rupees Sixty Thousand).

.....”

98. Having the above provisions in mind, it is clear to the Panel that, pursuant to Article 12.3.2 of the I-League 2024-25 Regulations, an automatic suspension would apply from participating in the match following the match in which a player received a fourth yellow card. The above legal framework does not seem to provide much room to deviate from it.

99. As mentioned above, in the match of 8 January 2025, the Player received his fourth yellow card during the season, and consequently, pursuant to Article 57(1) of the AIFF Disciplinary Code, and because the Player was fielded in the subsequent match on 13 January 2025, despite being ineligible, a club that commits such an offense is punished with a penalty, which is a forfeit of the match as well as a fine of at least INR 60,000.

100. The Panel however notes that the Second Respondent and the Third Respondent argue that the Third Respondent cannot be blamed for the fielding of the Player and that the Third Respondent was allowed to field the Player during the match on 13 January 2025.

101. In this regard, it is argued that i) the First Interim Order had suspended the yellow card given to the Player in the match on 15 December 2024 against Real Kashmir; ii) there was a mutual understanding about the suspension of the yellow card awarded to the Player that the First Interim Order applied to the yellow cards; iii) that the monitoring obligations under Article 12.3.6 of the I-League Regulations were fulfilled by the Third Respondent; iv) that the Clarification Order has no bearing on the Third Respondent; and v) that the validity of the First Interim Order in the First Appeal cannot be challenged anymore.

102. The Panel will address these arguments separately in the following paragraphs.

➤ **The effect of the First Interim Order**

103. The Second Respondent and the Third Respondent submit that the Third Respondent could rely in good faith on the First Interim Order and that the Player was so eligible to be fielded in the match on 8 January 2025 and the match on 13 January 2025.

104. The Panel does not agree with the Second Respondent and the Third Respondent and finds that the Third Respondent could not have reasonably believed that the First Interim Order granted the Third Respondent an unconditional right to field the Player against the Appellant in the match on 13 January 2025. That would not make sense to

the Panel as was also clarified by means of the Clarification Order, issued by the AIFF Appeal Committee on 1 February 2025, from which it clearly follows that the Player's suspension order only concerned the red card and was not related to the accumulation of yellow cards.

105. The Panel is aware that the Clarification Order was overturned by the AIFF Appeal Committee when it issued the Second Interim Order in which it was decided that its own Clarification Order shall not be given effect and was considered "*void ab initio*". The Panel does however not only find this is a quite remarkable turn, to say the least, as it was the same AIFF Appeal Committee that now disregarded its own previously issued Clarification Order, but the Panel also has serious difficulties to follow such reasoning.
106. In fact, accepting that the Player would be fielded under all circumstances would simply mean that the Player was entitled to play both matches no matter what. Such reasoning already in itself does not make sense to the Panel and cannot be considered a right interpretation. The Panel finds that it could not be taken for granted by the Third Respondent, and it could not simply rely on the First Interim Order, that the Player was eligible to be fielded in the match on 13 January 2025 under all circumstances and so even after the Player had received his fourth yellow card in the match on 8 January 2025.
107. Further, to declare null and void a "clarification order" does not necessarily mean that any decision that had been clarified by such order would lose any and all legal effects. The "original" decision may not be "clarified" anymore, but stands.
108. Also, the Panel draws attention to the charge notice that was issued on 17 December 2024 which explicitly mentioned the violation of Article 48.1.2 and Article 49.1.5 of the AIFF Disciplinary Code for violent conduct for which the Player had received the red card during the match on 5 December 2024. The Panel emphasizes that there was no mention in the charge notice about any yellow cards. Specifically, looking at the First Interim Order, in particular the operative part of such order, the Appellant was given the opportunity to play the matches "subject to the decision". It is the Panel's understanding that the Player was given the opportunity to play both matches until a decision was made on the consequences of the red card. Consequently, the Panel finds that it follows from a fair understanding that there could be no doubt that the stay of the Player's suspension had no correlation with his ineligibility due to the four yellow cards. The Panel is therefore satisfied that the Third Respondent could not rely in good faith on the First Interim Order that the Player was eligible to be fielded in the match on 8 January 2025 and the match on 13 January 2025.
109. Therefore, already for this reason alone, the AIFF Appeal Committee made an incorrect decision when it decided that the Second Appeal became "infructuous" and stood "allowed automatically" on account of the AIFF Appeal Committee's findings on the First Appeal. As a matter of fact, the Panel finds that the AIFF Appeal Committee could not have decided that the Second Appeal became "infructuous" and was "allowed automatically" once it had upheld the First Appeal, this because the red card, as set out above, had no correlation with the ineligibility of the Player due to the four yellow cards. The fact that the AIFF Appeal Committee has the authority to suspend sanctions, as argued by the Third Respondent, thereby making reference to

Article 35 of AIFF Disciplinary Code, is not relevant, so finds the Panel, and does give further indications that there was a correlation with the ineligibility of the Player due to the four yellow cards.

➤ **Statements of the Match Commissioner: mutual understanding**

110. Furthermore, the Second Respondent and the Third Respondent argue that it was the Match Commissioner who confirmed that no player was ineligible to play in accordance with the CMS Portal and that this statement was the final confirmation provided by the authority entrusted by the AIFF. This was strongly disputed by the Appellant. As a matter of fact, the Appellant argued that the Match Commissioner even instructed the Third Respondent to conduct its own due diligence even if CMS Portal showed no suspensions.
111. With the above positions in mind, the Panel found it very helpful that the Match Commissioner gave his testimony at the hearing. From his testimony it became clear to the Panel that the Match Commissioner had not given any binding confirmation during the meeting on 12 January 2025, which was attended by the Appellant and the Third Respondent, as set out above, that the Player was eligible to play the match the next day, on 13 January 2025.
112. What is more, also by means of his presentation, which information was further reflected in his PowerPoint presentation, which document was submitted by the First Respondent, it was also communicated to the Appellant and the Third Respondent that each club shall bear the responsibility of monitoring the cautions and/or suspensions received by its players and that all the players fielded during the competition are actually eligible to play.
113. It might have well been the understanding of the Third Respondent that the Player was eligible to play based on its understanding of the meeting on 12 January 2025. However, this was not supported by the evidence on file, including the testimony of the Match Commissioner. There is no doubt for the Panel, which was again further confirmed at the hearing, that the Match Commissioner did not and could not confirm in binding terms to the parties present at the meeting that the Player was eligible to play in the match that was going to take place the next day. In other words, there was no shared mutual understanding that the Player was eligible.

➤ **Reliance on the CMS Portal**

114. The Third Respondent also argues that it was fully entitled to rely on the CMS Portal from which it did not follow that the Player had a ban, which was also discussed during the meeting on 12 January 2025. In fact, the typical indicator for a suspension (letter “B”) did not show up in the CMS Portal. The Panel however finds that such circumstance, in particular reliance on errors in CMS Portal, cannot exonerate the Third Respondent either.
115. The CMS Portal is a digital tool that assists clubs in monitoring cautions and suspensions. The Panel finds that the Third Respondent still had an own responsibility to keep track of any suspensions of its players, which also follows from Article 68.1.3 of the AIFF Disciplinary Code. More specifically, and in line with generally accepted practice, it clearly follows from such provision that it is the responsibility of clubs to

- monitor any cautions and/or suspensions and, pursuant to Article 68.2 of the AIFF Disciplinary Code, that failure to adhere to this provision is considered an offense.
116. A similar provision akin to Article 68 of the AIFF Disciplinary Code can be found in the I-League Regulations. As such, from Article 3.2.7(g) it follows that the participating clubs are solely responsible for fielding eligible players for the matches in the competition.
117. Additionally, the Panel takes note of the almost identical Article 12.3.6. of the I-League Regulations, to which also reference was made in the PowerPoint presentation of the Match Commissioner on 12 January 2025, from which it also follows that each club shall bear the responsibility of monitoring the cautions and/or suspensions received by its players and that all players fielded during the competition are actually eligible to play.
118. The Panel is mindful that the Second Respondent as well as the Third Respondent strongly rely on the last sentence of Article 12.3.6 of the I-League Regulations from which it follows that “[t]he same can be monitored via the AIFF CMS”. The Second Respondent argues that this provision places the obligation on clubs to rely on the CMS Portal to monitor cautions and suspensions and that it is the central system for tracking eligibility. More specifically, the Second Respondent and the Third Respondent also lay emphasis on the difference between the regulatory frameworks of the I-League and the Indian Super League. In fact, so is argued, only the I-League Regulations expressly refer to the CMS Portal whereas the regulations of the Indian Super League remain silent.
119. The Panel is fully aware of the differences in relation to Article 12.3.6. However, the Panel does not agree with the Second Respondent and the Third Respondent that this difference places less responsibility on clubs from the I-League. The Panel finds that the addition should make it more clear for clubs from this league that CMS Portal is there to assist such clubs and make them even more aware of the CMS Portal, simply because the Panel can imagine, as was also raised by the Second Respondent, that clubs from the I-League might not have the same level of expertise as the clubs from the Indian Super League. However, and be that as it may, any such addition still does not absolve clubs from the I-League from their own responsibility to track any suspensions on their players.
120. The Panel has sympathy for the context of the case in terms of that it concerns the Indian second division and that the Third Respondent is a recently established club in this league. Likewise, the Panel has taken good note and understands that the Third Respondent monitored the CMS Portal and that there was no indication in the CMS Portal that the Player was suspended, but again the Third Respondent remains responsible and cannot shift responsibility for tracking its players to others by only relying on the CMS Portal.
121. In addition to the above, the Panel does not want to leave unmentioned, and cannot be blind for the fact, either that it also explicitly follows from the Terms and Conditions in relation to the AIFF Web Portals, in particular under the “*Disclaimers*” part of these terms, as was also referred to by the Appellant in its submissions, that “*if you access and use our AIFF web portals, you do so at your sole risk*” and, further, that the AIFF cannot make warranty that the AIFF content is “*error-free*”. Clear language that speaks

for itself. The same level of responsibility for clubs also follows from Article 6.2.3 of the I-League Regulations which makes a clear distinction between the approval of the registration of a player and his eligibility to be fielded, also expressly mentioning that each participating club is responsible for and bears the onus of fielding only eligible players in its matches.

122. In conclusion, the Panel concludes that the Third Respondent was not entitled to rely on the CMS Portal in terms of shirking its responsibilities. The Third Respondent had not fulfilled its monitoring obligations under Article 12.3.6 of the I-League Regulations and it cannot justify fielding the Player based on the incorrect information in the CMS Portal.

➤ **The Clarification Order has no bearing on the Third Respondent**

123. The Panel also takes note of the Third Respondent's position that the Clarification Order, in which the AIFF Appeal Committee had decided that the Player's suspension order only concerned the red card and not the accumulation of yellow cards, has no bearing on the Third Respondent's Second Appeal as it was issued "*ex post facto*", i.e. after the match on 13 January 2025. It is true that the Clarification Order was issued after the match on 13 January 2025, but this still does not alter the fact, so finds the Panel, that the Third Respondent made a wrong interpretation of the First Interim Order, as explained above. Again, the Player's suspension concerned the red card only and was not related to the accumulation of yellow cards, which was wrongly understood by the Third Respondent.

124. To further support its position in relation to the Clarification Order, the Third Respondent again refers to the First Interim Order that expressly allowed the Player to participate in the matches on 8 and 13 January 2025. However, and even if the Third Respondent had not been served with any notice of the Clarification Order and even if it had not been afforded any opportunity to be heard in this respect, which was raised by the Third Respondent, the Panel recalls that the Third Respondent could not have reasonably believed that the First Interim Order granted it an unconditional right to field the Player against the Appellant in the match on 13 January 2025. The same applies to the understanding of the pre-meeting with the Match Commissioner and the alleged confirmation that was given that the Player was eligible, which was also raised by the Third Respondent in relation to the Clarification Order. These arguments will also not assist the Third Respondent in relation thereto. The Panel will not further discuss these arguments as these have been addressed, and rejected, under the previous paragraphs.

➤ **The validity of the First Interim Order cannot be challenged anymore**

125. Furthermore, the Panel takes note of the Third Respondent's position that the First Interim Order, in which the AIFF Appeal Committee had decided that the Player was entitled to play the matches on 8 and 13 January 2025, has become final and binding. As the Third Respondent has chosen to relate its appeal to the Second Appeal, the Third Respondent argues that the Appellant is now precluded from revisiting the First Interim Order.
126. The Panel does however not agree. As a matter of fact, even if the First Interim Order has become final and binding, the Panel reiterates that it does not follow from the First

Interim Order that the Player was entitled to play both matches no matter what. Again, as mentioned before, such reasoning already in itself would not make sense to the Panel. As set out above, it is the Panel's understanding that the Player was given the opportunity to play both matches until a decision was made on the consequences of the red card. Put differently, it is recalled that the stay of the suspension was not related to his ineligibility for the four yellow cards.

➤ **Additional circumstances**

Good faith

127. The Second Respondent and the Third Respondent argue, throughout their submissions in order to give further support to the above arguments, that Third Respondent legitimately fielded the Player and that the Third Respondent has always acted in good faith, which was also not denied by the previous decision-making bodies of the AIFF. However, and without questioning any good faith intentions from the side of the Third Respondent, having in mind the applicable legal framework, as set out above, the Panel does not find it decisive for the outcome in this case what the intentions were. The Panel finds that the above provisions are clear in that fielding an ineligible player is sanctioned with a match forfeit, independently of any fault, good or bad faith of the respective club.
128. In this respect, as was also referred to by the Appellant, the Panel attaches value to Article 6 of the AIFF Disciplinary Code which clearly provides that the principle of strict liability applies and that infringements are punishable regardless of whether they have been committed intentionally, recklessly, and/or negligently. Regardless of the intentions of the Third Respondent, the Panel finds a consistent application of such sanctions is neither arbitrary nor excessively formalistic. As a matter of fact, such a strict approach rather serves the interests of all teams players and clubs involved in the competition (see, *inter alia*, CAS 2006/A/1166). Therefore, good faith intentions are not decisive for this case.
129. The Panel wishes to add, in light of the good faith intentions, that apparently there were doubts with the Third Respondent as to the eligibility of the Player prior to the match on 13 January 2025. In fact, during the hearing, Mr Harpreet Singh, one of the witnesses and working as football coach with the Third Respondent, and also responsible for the administrative tasks, such as working with CMS Portal, did not deny that he already had doubts as to the Player's eligibility the day before the match on 13 January 2025. This would mean, so finds the Panel, that there was still time, in terms of doing further research and act diligently, to check whether the Player actually was eligible to be fielded in the match on 13 January 2025. However, the Third Respondent did not do so, which does not speak in its favour.

Post-match elements

130. The Second Respondent also refers to email correspondence on 17 January 2025 in which the Third Respondent directly sought clarification about the Player's eligibility to play against the club Gokulam Kerala FC. The Second Respondent argues that if the AIFF had been fully convinced that the Player was ineligible it would have simply responded accordingly. However, the Panel not only finds that this circumstance cannot be of relevance as it only happened after the match on 13 January 2025, but the

reply of the AIFF was clear in that it was “unable to offer any specific guidance or comment on his inclusion”. In any event, the reply did not suggest that the Player was eligible to play.

131. Furthermore, the Second Respondent argues that it also speaks in its favour that the clarification request that was made by the AIFF Disciplinary Committee to the AIFF Appeal Committee shows that also in the AIFF’s view the Player was allowed to play the match on the basis of the First Interim Order. The fact that the AIFF Disciplinary Committee itself explicitly acknowledged that “the player was allowed to play the match” under the First Interim Order only confirms, so argues the Second Respondent, that the Third Respondent’s interpretation was not only reasonable, but thus also shared “within AIFF’s own structure”. The Panel does not agree as this request was precisely made in order to get more clarity from the AIFF Appeal Committee whether or not the Player’s suspension order only concerned the red card or also the accumulation of yellow cards. As set out above, the answer was clear by means of the Clarification Order: the Player’s suspension order only concerned the red card and not the accumulation of yellow cards.
132. In this regard, the Second Respondent seems to further support its position that it was also the AIFF’s view that the Player was allowed to play the match which also perfectly aligns with the position expressed by the Match Commissioner that the Player could be fielded. However, as set out above, the Panel recalls that at the hearing the Match Commissioner was clear that he did not give any confirmation that the Player could indeed be fielded.
133. Last not but not least, the Second Respondent further submits that the modification by means of the Clarification Order is also in favour of its position and that, by definition, if something is modified, it is because the previous legal situation is being changed. The Second Respondent argues that this necessarily implies that the *status quo* prior to the Clarification Order was that the Player was eligible to play the matches on 8 and 13 January 2025. The Panel finds such argumentation difficult to understand as it was precisely because of the unclarity that the AIFF Appeal Committee was asked by the AIFF Disciplinary Committee to shed more light on the situation, which it did, by means of the Clarification Order and by informing the AIFF Disciplinary Committee that the suspension order only concerned the red card and not the accumulation of yellow cards.

➤ **In conclusion**

134. In view of the above, the Panel concludes, having carefully considered all the arguments raised by the Second and Third Respondent, that the Third Respondent was not allowed to field the Player during the match on 13 January 2025. As a consequence thereof, the Panel finds that the Third Respondent committed an offense that, based on the applicable regulations, as set out above, should lead to a 3-0 match forfeit. The Panel will now address the question if the sanction imposed of a 3-0 match forfeit was disproportionate.

C. Is the imposed sanction of a 3-0 match forfeit disproportionate?

135. The Panel further notes that the Second Respondent submits that the AIFF Disciplinary Code grants broad discretion to the CAS to reduce or even eliminate any sanctions

foreseen in such code, where exceptional objective and subjective circumstances so justify. The Second Respondent refers to Articles 40.3 and 40.4 of the AIFF Disciplinary Code allowing that no sanction is warranted or proportionate in light of the elements. The circumstances, which is argued by the Second Respondent, reasonably led the Third Respondent to believe that the Player was eligible. The Third Respondent, again, supports its position by making reference to the presence of good faith and its justified reliance on the official systems, orders and conduct of the AIFF. The Second Respondent submits that even no sanction should be imposed on the Third Respondent. At the hearing, the Appellant strongly disputed that the sanction of 3-0 match forfeit was not proportionate.

136. Against the above positions, the Panel has already clearly expressed its view on the matters of good faith, the reliance on the CMS Portal, statements of the Match Commissioner and the orders given by the decision-making bodies of the AIFF. These arguments have been extensively addressed by the Panel in the previous paragraphs and will also not be of help for the Second and Third Respondent in terms of any reductions or that even no sanctions should be imposed on the Third Respondent, let alone that there was not much to rely on for the Third Respondent in relation to the statements of the Match Commissioner during the meeting on 12 January 2025, as it was clear to the Panel that no confirmation was given to the Third Respondent that the Player could be fielded.
137. Having in mind the applicable legal framework, as set out above, the Panel recalls that the above provisions are entirely clear in that fielding an ineligible player will be sanctioned with a match forfeit and that, and thereby again referring to Article 6 of the AIFF Disciplinary Code, the principle of strict liability applies to the matter at hand. On the same note, the Panel finds that the Third Respondent could not rely on the CMS Portals and whilst taking into account that the Third Respondent monitored the CMS Portal and that there was no indication in the CMS Portal that the Player was suspended, the Third Respondent remains responsible, which follows from several provisions in the AIFF regulations, as referred to above, and the latter cannot shift responsibility for tracking its players to others by only relying on the CMS Portal. By the same token, the Third Respondent could not simply rely on any orders, such as the First Interim Order, that the Player was eligible to be fielded in the match on 13 January 2025 in any event and so even after the Player had received his fourth yellow card in the match on 8 January.
138. Therefore, and in the absence of any further justification, the Panel does not find that the sanction of 3-0 match forfeit is too harsh in light of the circumstances at hand and that the sanction should be reduced based on Articles 40.3 and 40.4 of the AIFF Disciplinary Code. The Panel concludes that the Third Respondent made a mistake in fielding the Player in the match on 13 January 2025 and is now merely seeking to find justification for such a mistake. The Panel supports a strict approach as the interests of all teams players and clubs are at stake and must be taken into account, having in mind that the given legal framework does also not leave much room to deviate, also noting that also in appeal the AIFF Appeal Committee annulled the sanction instead of reducing it.
139. Against this background, the Panel finds that the imposed sanction of a 3-0 match forfeit on the Third Respondent is not disproportionate. As such, the Third

Respondent's violation – although possibly regrettable for it in view of the severe consequences – constitutes a disciplinary infringement justifying the imposition of a sanction of a 3-0 match forfeit. The Panel wishes to mention, just as a side comment, that a forfeit sanction is generally recognised to be an appropriate sanction against a team that fields an ineligible player. This may be mentioned here to underline that the respective regulations of the AIFF is not only clear, but in line with international standards (cf. CAS 2007/A/1278-1279).

D. Respondents' position that the Appellant's appeal is moot

140. Finally, the Respondents argue that the Appellant's appeal has become moot due to a supervening circumstance, in particular because the AIFF Appeal Committee issued a decision on 31 May 2025 following which the player Mario Barco ("Barco") was declared ineligible in three matches resulting in the deduction of four points from the Appellant in the 2024/25 league table. However, the Panel finds that the position of the Respondents that the Appellant's appeal became moot, has become moot in itself as the Appellant not only, in the absence of any objections thereto, withdrew its requests for relief number 3, 4 and 5 at the end of the hearing, but also, in the meantime, the Appellant appealed against the decision of the AIFF Appeal Committee in relation to player Barco before the CAS.
141. This means that the decision of the AIFF Appeal Committee on 31 May 2025 in relation to the eligibility (or not) of player Barco is not final and binding as result of which any points deductions are not established and are under review in separate CAS proceedings.
142. Therefore, the Appellant's appeal, having in mind the changes in the requests for relief in combination with the appeal in the *Barco* case that is pending before CAS, has not lost its object and the Respondents' request in relation thereto, as a consequence, is dismissed.

E. Conclusion

143. In view of the above, the Panel concludes that the Third Respondent committed an offense by fielding the Player in the match on 13 January 2025. The Panel sees no merit in the arguments raised by the Second Respondent and the Third Respondent aiming at justifying the Player's fielding in the match on 13 January 2025. The Panel concludes that the match forfeit of 3-0 on the Third Respondent was rightfully imposed and is not disproportionate.
144. Based on the foregoing, and after having taken into due consideration both the regulations applicable and the evidence produced and all arguments submitted, the Panel finds that:
- i. The Third Respondent committed an offense;
 - ii. The sanction of 3-0 match forfeit was not disproportionate;
 - iii. The Appellant's appeal has not become moot.
145. Any other prayers or requests for relief are dismissed.

XI. COSTS

(...)

* * * * *

ON THESE GROUNDS

The Court of Arbitration for Sport rules that:

1. The appeal filed on 24 April 2025 by Inter Kashi FC against the decision issued on 18 April 2025 by the Appeal Committee of the All-India Football Federation is upheld.
2. The decision issued on 18 April 2025 by the All-India Football Federation is set aside and the Terms of the Decision issued on 24 February 2025 by the All-India Football Federation Disciplinary Committee in the matter IL 2024-25/102) are hereby confirmed:

"(1) On the basis of the complaint received the Committee is of the view that the defendant club Namdhari FC has fielded an ineligible player resulting out of a failure to make the player serve the suspension in Match No. 45 of the I-League 2024-25 against Inter Kashi FC in accordance with Article 12.3.2 of the I-League 2024-25 Regulations for accumulation of 4 cautions in the given season.

(2) The said match shall result in a forfeiture (0-3 loss) for the defendant club Namdhari FC in accordance with Article 57 read with Article 26 of the Code of fielding an ineligible player.

(3) The fine applicable to the club under Article 57 of the Code is waived off in accordance with Article 40.4 of the Code."

3. (...).
4. (...).
5. All other and further motions or prayers for relief are dismissed.

Seat of arbitration: Lausanne, Switzerland

Date: 12 March 2026
(Operative part notified to the Parties on 17 June 2025)

THE COURT OF ARBITRATION FOR SPORT

Frans M. de Weger
President of the Panel

Michele A.R. Bernasconi
Arbitrator

Jeffrey G. Benz
Arbitrator