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1. Why does this immersion matter?

Nike was founded in 1964. Adidas in 1949. Puma in 1948. Nivia Sports, a company most Indian consumers have never heard or mentioned in the same breath as those three, predates all of them, tracing its roots to 1934. That single fact should reframe how you think about this visit. It's a story about a company that is, by age, older than its biggest global competitors and yet remains a fraction of their size, their visibility, and their cultural cachet. The genuinely interesting question isn't "How did Nivia survive?" It's "Why hasn't nine decades of survival translated into the kind of global brand power its age alone would suggest it deserves?"

Nivia's history is inseparable from Partition. The company began as Freewill & Company in Sialkot, in what is now Pakistan, a city that was, for decades, the undisputed centre of hand-stitched football manufacturing in South Asia. When the subcontinent split in 1947, the Kharabanda family, like thousands of other artisan families in Sialkot's sports goods industry, had to rebuild from nothing on the Indian side of the new border. What they rebuilt, in Jalandhar, Punjab, eventually became one of the primary reasons Jalandhar itself is a global sports manufacturing hub today; alongside Meerut, the two cities together account for roughly 75–80% of India's total sports goods production.

Two things are worth holding in tension throughout this visit. First, on manufacturing: Nivia has remained committed to in-house production at a time when most sportswear brands, including giants like Nike, manufacture almost nothing themselves and instead outsource to contract factories across Asia. Is that a genuine strategic advantage or a legacy habit the company hasn't yet been forced to question? Second, on storytelling: Nivia's products have quietly touched some extraordinary moments; a Nivia ball was chosen over international competitors for a Lionel Messi exhibition match in Kolkata in 2011, and Jalandhar supplied tens of thousands of footballs to the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil. Yet almost no consumer buying a football in India today would know either fact. That gap, between what Nivia has actually done and what it has actually told people, is the central puzzle of this immersion.

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2. Company snapshot

Item	Detail
Founded	1934, as Freewill & Company, Sialkot (undivided India)
Founder	Nihal Chand Kharabanda
Brand name "Nivia" registered	1962, a portmanteau of "Ni" (Nihal) and "Vi" (Vijay, his son)
Key builder of the modern brand	Vijay Kharabanda (Chairman & MD, 1940–2017)
Current leadership	Rajesh Kharabanda (Managing Director)
Headquarters	Leather Complex, Kapurthala Road, Jalandhar, Punjab
Product categories	Footballs, basketballs, volleyballs, handballs, cricket gear, badminton, sportswear, footwear, accessories

3. The founding story: Rebuilt twice, by the same family

Nihal Chand Kharabanda founded Freewill & Company in Sialkot in 1934, initially as a trading firm for sports raw materials, principally leather, rather than a manufacturer in its own right. Sialkot at the time was the established centre of the subcontinent's sports goods industry, a status it retains in Pakistan to this day. Kolkata, not Jalandhar, was India's other established football-manufacturing centre through the mid-20th century.

Partition in 1947 forced the family to abandon Sialkot entirely. The company's own history moves through Mumbai and Meerut before finally settling permanently in Jalandhar in 1950, a relocation pattern that mirrors what happened to the entire Sialkot sports goods workforce: skilled artisans, stitchers, and traders scattered across northern India, and wherever enough of them regrouped, a new manufacturing cluster took root. Jalandhar's emergence as a sports goods hub isn't an accident of geography; it's a direct, traceable consequence of a refugee industry rebuilding itself, and Freewill & Company was one of its founding participants.

The brand name "Nivia" itself wasn't registered until 1962, under Vijay Kharabanda, Nihal Chand's son, who took over leadership in the early 1960s. It's a deliberately literal act of legacy-building, "Ni" from the father and "Vi" from the son, fused into a single identity years

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before "co-branding" or "founder storytelling" were marketing terms anyone used. Under Vijay's leadership, the company introduced India's first moulded basketballs and volleyballs, in collaboration with another ball-bladder manufacturer, at a time when the entire domestic industry had effectively surrendered to imported rubber and synthetic materials. Rather than accept that dependency, Vijay Kharabanda took on the harder task of upgrading local rubber material to international standards, a manufacturing decision that would, decades later, become the platform for the company's FIFA approval, India's first for any domestic football manufacturer.

4. Manufacturing strategy

The industry norm, and why Nivia's choice is unusual.

Across the global sportswear industry, the dominant manufacturing model for decades has been outsourcing. Nike, the world's largest sportswear company, owns almost no factories; it designs, markets, and distributes, while contract manufacturers across Vietnam, Indonesia, and China do the actual production. This isn't laziness; it's a deliberate strategic choice: outsourcing lets an asset-light brand scale production up or down with demand, shift suppliers if costs or quality slip, and focus its own capital and management attention on design and marketing, the activities it believes actually create brand value.

Nivia has, by contrast, remained committed to in-house manufacturing at its Jalandhar headquarters, integrating state-of-the-art machinery with a large skilled workforce under one roof, rather than distributing production across third-party contractors. The company's own stated reasoning is that in-house manufacturing gives it stricter quality control and faster innovation cycles, since a design change or a material improvement doesn't have to be negotiated and verified across an external supplier relationship; it can be tested and implemented on the same factory floor where the product is designed.

How to evaluate this choice properly, rather than simply accepting either side's framing.

The relevant question isn't whether in-house manufacturing is inherently better or worse than outsourcing; it's what kind of product and what kind of brand promise each model actually supports. A brand like Nike sells primarily on design, image, and marketing velocity, with

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dozens of new colourways and silhouettes a year: a business where speed and flexibility across many contract factories matters more than owning any single one. Nivia's genuine points of credibility, FIFA and FIBA approval, and the trust of national sports federations to supply official match balls rest on a different kind of promise: consistent, certifiable, testable product quality, exactly the kind of promise that's easier to keep and easier to prove when you control your own production line end to end. In-house manufacturing may be a genuine source of competitive advantage, specifically because Nivia's brand claim is about performance credibility, not fashion velocity.

The question is worth testing directly on the shop floor.

Does Nivia's in-house model actually let it move faster on genuine product innovation, as claimed, or does it simply carry higher fixed costs and lower flexibility than the outsourced-manufacturing model most of its larger global competitors use? A useful comparison worth observing: has Nivia ever seriously modelled what outsourcing part of its production would do to its cost structure and its certification credibility, and if the in-house model has never been genuinely stress-tested against that alternative, is it a strategy, or simply how the company has always operated?

5. Brand building and storytelling: Applying Markides' "Fast Second" strategy

The framework

Costas Markides of London Business School and Paul Geroski, in their INSEAD-affiliated research on market disruption (developed and taught extensively within INSEAD's strategy curriculum), challenge a widely held assumption in strategy: that being first to market is the primary source of long-term advantage. Their research shows the opposite is often true. Market pioneers frequently do the hardest, most expensive, and riskiest work, proving a new category exists, educating a sceptical market, and absorbing the failures of early, imperfect versions of a product. The company that actually captures the majority of long-term profit is often not the pioneer but a disciplined "**fast second**", a company that watches the pioneer

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prove the market, then enter with superior execution, manufacturing discipline, distribution reach, or scale, and outcompete the very company that took the initial risk.

Markides is precise about what separates a genuine fast-second winner from a company that's simply late: it isn't enough to arrive after the pioneer; the fast second has to bring a genuinely different, superior capability to the table, not just a copy of what the pioneer already built. The framework also asks a second, sharper question that applies directly to Nivia: once a company has successfully executed a fast-second strategy in one dimension, can it repeat that same disciplined execution in the next dimension the market demands, or does it stop at the first win and let a new generation of competitors do to it what it once did to the pioneer?

Applying this precisely to Nivia's manufacturing history. Nivia was never first with moulded ball technology, first to synthetic football materials, or first with organising sports goods manufacturing itself. What Nivia's founding generation did and did well is a textbook fast-second move: watch an existing technology and quality standard prove itself elsewhere, then bring superior execution, upgrading local rubber to genuinely international standards, pursuing FIFA certification nobody else in India had, and building moulded ball manufacturing capability from scratch in a city with no prior history of it to become the dominant domestic player in a category it didn't invent. This is precisely why Jalandhar today outproduces cities with a much longer sporting-goods pedigree: Nivia and its cluster peers didn't need to be first; they needed to be disciplined seconds who out-executed the incumbents on quality and reliability.

Where the framework gets genuinely uncomfortable, and this is the real value of using it here.

Markides' model isn't just a story about one successful catch-up move; it's a test of whether a company can *keep doing it*. Nivia executed a brilliant fast-second manufacturing strategy in the mid-20th century. But brand building, storytelling, digital marketing, and athlete endorsement culture, these are the new "categories" where Nike, Adidas, and Puma have spent the last three decades as the pioneers, absorbing the cost and risk of building global fan cultures, sponsorship ecosystems, and social media storytelling machines from scratch. The uncomfortable question the fast-second framework forces onto this visit is simple: has Nivia even attempted a disciplined fast-second move in *brand building*, the way its founders once did in *manufacturing*, or has it simply stopped, sitting on ninety years of manufacturing credibility while treating brand-building as someone else's game?

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Why this matters more than it sounds.

A genuine fast-second brand-building strategy for Nivia would not mean copying Nike's playbook outright or expensive global athlete endorsements or mass-market lifestyle advertising; that would be entering a race it cannot win on cost. It would mean identifying the specific, narrower dimension where Nivia's real, underused assets, the Messi ball story, the FIFA World Cup supply chain connection, decades of institutional federation trust, and the Partition-era origin story could let it out-execute larger rivals on *authenticity and provenance storytelling* specifically, a dimension where a company with Nivia's actual history has a structural advantage no amount of Nike's marketing budget can manufacture from scratch. The test for this visit: does Nivia's leadership see this opportunity in these terms, a disciplined, narrower fast-second play in storytelling, or are they either trying to out-market Nike directly (a losing game) or not trying at all (a wasted asset)?

6. The industry context: Building a brand inside a manufacturing cluster

Nivia doesn't operate in isolation; it operates inside one of India's oldest and most concentrated industrial clusters, and understanding that cluster is essential to understanding Nivia's own strategic choices.

Jalandhar and Meerut together account for roughly 75–80% of India's total sports goods production, hosting more than 3,000 manufacturing units. India's sports goods sector overall employs close to 500,000 people, exports to over 150 countries, and exports goods worth roughly \$398.6 million in HS Chapter 95 categories (toys, games, and sports requisites) in FY26 alone. The domestic Indian sports goods market itself was valued at roughly \$52 billion in 2024 by a Deloitte-Google study, projected to reach \$130 billion by 2030, a genuinely fast-growing category that global brands like Decathlon, Nike, Puma, and Adidas are all increasing their own investment and manufacturing footprint inside India to capture.

That last point is the real strategic threat worth naming directly. Global brands entering India aren't just competing with Nivia for shelf space; they're increasingly manufacturing in the same country, potentially even the same clusters, that gave Nivia its original cost and craftsmanship

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advantage. If Nike or Decathlon can source India-made product with India-level costs and pair it with decades of established global brand salience, the manufacturing advantage Nivia has relied on for ninety years stops being a differentiator and becomes table stakes. Worth noticing: how does Nivia's leadership think about competing against brands that may soon match its manufacturing quality and cost base while starting from a vastly stronger position at the base of Keller's pyramid, a salience that Nivia has never fully secured for itself?

7. Guiding Questions

1. The Messi ball story from 2011 is a genuinely compelling piece of brand narrative that almost nobody in this room knew before reading this pre-read. Why has a story this strong never been built into the brand's core marketing?
2. Nivia has stayed committed to in-house manufacturing while most large global competitors outsource. Has that choice ever been rigorously tested against the outsourced alternative, or is it simply how the company has always operated?
3. As global brands like Nike, Puma, and Decathlon increase their own manufacturing footprint inside India, does Nivia's traditional cost and craftsmanship advantage still hold, or is it eroding?
4. Nivia's strongest brand assets, federation partnerships, and FIFA/FIBA approvals are live almost entirely at the professional and institutional level. What would it actually take to convert that credibility into resonance with an ordinary consumer who has never heard of Nivia?
5. If you had to choose one single story, one moment, one certification, to build Nivia's entire next brand campaign around, what would it be, and why that one over everything else in the company's ninety-year history?

8. Resources to go through before immersion:

1. [LinkedIn Article](#)
2. NIVIA - A Short Profile | "The future depends on what you do today"
3. NIVIA - A Short Profile | "The future depends on what you do today"

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9. Glossary

Term	Meaning
Fast-second strategy	A strategic approach (Markides & Geroski) where a company deliberately lets a market pioneer prove a new category or technology, then enters with superior execution, scale, or manufacturing discipline to capture the majority of long-term profit.
Market pioneer	The first company to enter a new category or introduce a new technology, often bearing the highest cost and risk of proving the market exists.
In-house manufacturing	A model where a company owns and operates its own production facilities, rather than contracting production out to third-party manufacturers.
Outsourced manufacturing	A model where a company designs and markets a product but has it physically produced by external contract manufacturers, common among large global sportswear brands.
Asset-light model	A business strategy that minimises ownership of physical infrastructure (like factories), focusing capital and management attention on design, marketing, and distribution instead.
Brand salience	How readily and easily a brand comes to a customer's mind within its product category, often the foundational, most overlooked layer of brand strength.
Performance credibility	The degree to which customers, experts, or institutions trust that a product genuinely works and meets a stated quality standard, often built through certifications or endorsements.
Storytelling gap	The distance between what a company has genuinely achieved or is capable of, and what it has actually communicated to its audience through narrative.
Manufacturing cluster	A geographic concentration of interconnected manufacturers, suppliers, and skilled labour in a single industry, generating shared infrastructure and cost advantages (e.g., Jalandhar, Meerut).
Certification-based trust	Brand credibility built through third-party verification (such as FIFA or FIBA approval) rather than through marketing claims alone.
Country-of-origin effect	The influence a product's perceived country of manufacture has on consumer quality perception, which can help or hurt a brand depending on existing associations with that country.

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10. Sources

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2. [About Us](#)
3. <https://tracxn.com/d/companies/nivia-sports>
4. [Rajesh Kharabanda, Chair & Managing Director of NIVIA Sports](#)
5. [Nivia Sports: India's Legacy in the Global Sportswear Market](#)
6. [Basketball Federation of India onboards Nivia as official ball partners](#)
7. Keller, Kevin Lane. "Customer-Based Brand Equity Model." Dartmouth Tuck School of Business (foundational brand strategy framework, widely taught in MBA marketing curricula).
8. [India's Sports Goods Manufacturing and Export Outlook 2025](#)
9. [Sports Industry and Export in India](#)
10. [India's Sports Manufacturing Industry: Driving Economic Growth and Exporting Excellence](#)
11. [The Sports Goods in the Jalandhar Cluster in Punjab – A Case of Adaptive Growth in the MSME](#)