India Open 2014 - Day 1:

April 1, 2014 - Dev Sukumar

This year's India Open has attracted the strongest draw in its history. Heading the opposite ends of the Men's Singles draw are defending Champion Lee Chong Wei and China's Chen Long. The two are yet again expected to clash in the final, and at stake is the momentum and confidence gained for all-important events such as the BWF World Championships in the second half of the year.

Two Indians – Czech International winner Anup Sridhar and Shreyansh Jaiswal qualified, along with Thailand's Suppanyu Avihingsanon.

Ajay Kumar upset German Grand Prix Gold champion Arvind Bhat 22-20, 23-21 in the final qualifying round yesterday and it were his nerves that he had to control more than his opponent during the closing stages of the game. "This is the first time I was trying to qualify for a major tournament like a Super Series and I am extremely happy to have qualified," said Ajay after the match. Ajay Kumar is to earn a dream first-round date with top seed Lee Chong Wei of Malaysia.

The one significant name among the four Women's Singles qualifiers was China's Liu Xin who was once ranked No. 5 but has since dropped to No. 83. Liu was barely seen last year – she won the only tournament in which she took part but has started off this year promisingly, winning the China International Challenge. She had an easy path to the main draw where she faces fellow-qualifier Shruti Mundada of India. Two other Indians also qualified: former Spanish Open Champion Sayali Gokhale and Mudra Dhainje.

Chen Long has a tricky first round opponent in India's HS Prannoy, and possibly the exciting young Japanese Kento Momota or Denmark's Hans Kristian Vittinghus in the quarter-finals. Others, like Lee Dong Keun, Son Wan Ho (both Korea), Denmark's Jan O Jorgensen and India's K Srikanth are in his half and will be hungry for success against the second-seeded Chinese.

The Women's Singles is expected to go China's way, what with their top three – Li Xuerui (1), Wang Shixian (2) and Wang Yihan (3) – in contention. The one player who will be particularly keen to break their stranglehold will be local hope Saina Nehwal (8). Compatriot Sindhu PV, meanwhile, runs into All England Champion Wang Shixian in the first round. The Indian has an enviable record against the second-seeded Chinese – she

has an unbeaten record in three matches, and will look forward to making it 4-0. Other interesting early-round battles will be between Chinese Taipei's Tai Tzu Ying (7) and recent Malaysia Open GPG winner Yao Xue, and Wang Yihan against Thailand's Porntip Buranaprasertsuk.

In Women's Doubles, China, with the luxury of several top-notch pairs, has decided to experiment once again. This time, the finalists at the All England have been split and rejigged, so young Tang Yuanting pairs up with World champion Yu Yang, while the experienced Wang Xiaoli and Ma Jin team up once more after long stints with other partners. Suci Rizky Andini/Tiara Rosalia Nuraidah of Indonesia were among the qualifiers in Women's Doubles.

Indonesia's Tontowi Ahmad/Liliyana Natsir have a hat-trick of Mixed Doubles titles at the India Open. While the contest is essentially between them and two other pairs – Zhang Nan/Zhao Yunlei of China and Joachim Fischer Nielsen/Christinna Pedersen of Denmark – fans will also keep an eye out for Korea's Ko Sung Hyun/Kim Ha Na. Malaysia's Chan Peng Soon qualified with new partner Lai Pei Jing, as did compatriots Mohd Lutfi Zaim Abdul Rashid/Soong Fie Cho and Japan's Takeshi Kamura/Misato Aratama.

China's Zhang Nan/Fu Haifeng strode into the main draw without trouble, getting past India's Arun Vishnu/Alwin Francis 21-12 21-17. India clinched the three other spots through Tarun Kona/Jishnu Sanyal, Arun George/Santosh Ravuri and Guru Prasad/Venkatesh Prasad. What makes the Men's Doubles significant is the presence of new combinations – Kim Sa Rang/Yoo Yeon Seong of Korea and veteran Tan Boon Heong with newcomer Ow Yao Han of Malaysia. World champions Mohammad Ahsan/Hendra Setiawan have skipped the event.