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Key factors contributing to the rise of Northeast in Indian football

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Abstract

This article highlights the achievements of Northeast in Indian football and the underlying reasons for the same. Northeast India has been a torchbearer in sports and Indian football in particular, has been characterized by dominance of players from Northeast region of India. Work by All Indian Football Federation (AIFF), lack of cricket fanaticism, upward economic mobility and the lure of government jobs, state and local interest towards the game, nature of football, tenacity of the players, and suitable climate are some reasons behind the ascendancy of Northeast in Indian football. For further development of football in the regions, steps like monetary incentives, development of strategic and talent academics, world class infrastructure, foreign trips and recruitment of professionals should be undertaken. There is still a long way to go, for India to be called a sports superpower. One way for the nation to own the tag is through football which is the most popular game and has one of the highest viewership in the world. Although the nation's FIFA ranking stands at a dismal 106, despite a population of 1.4 billion, Indian football can look forward for its improvement and eventual dominance by deriving the benefits of talents and quality Northeast has been consistently producing. With the right steps and directions, we may not need to wait for too long to cheer for our own country in the coming editions of FIFA World cup.

Keywords: Northeast India, game, football, local, talent, clubs

1. Introduction

Amongst its various functions, sports serves as a powerful medium for sportspersons in gaining recognitions, who previously would be ignored purely for their geographical locations and morphological characters. Sports also plays a defining role in advancing economic, sociological, and personal growth of a sportsperson. Northeast India shares more similarities with the five countries it borders with. However, sports has come to play a crucial role in bringing the region closer to mainland India. The eight states of the region-Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Tripura, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Sikkim make up only 3.8% of the national population and occupies 8% of India's geographical area. However, it is well-known for producing some of India's finest performance in several international sporting events ^[1]. While it was Dingko Singh and Kunjarani Devi who were flagbearers in the 1990s, they were followed by Mary Kom, Sarita Devi and Lovlina Borgohain in boxing, Mirabai Chanu, Bindyarani Devi and Jeremy Lalrinnuga in weightlifting and Sushila Devi in judo ^[2]. Northeast has been consistently producing outstanding footballers for several decades both at international and national level. It was a turning point in 1948 Olympics when Dr. Talimeren Ao from captained the national side and thereafter, the rest of the states in the region have been a birthplace for football players, representing the Indian tri-colour. During the late 1980s, North-eastern states sprung their dominance in Indian football. The inception of the Special Area Games (SAG) scheme under the Sports Authority of India in 1986 happened to be a game-changer. The SAG program was constituted to financially support talented sportspeople from the tribal, rural, hilly, and coastal communities. Through the scheme, many North-east footballers were identified. Looking at the untapped potential, few private organizations started scouting from the region. In the last decade of the century, courtesy showings in the Subroto Cup, players from Manipur started to make their mark at the national stage. The Tata Football Academy (TFA), in 1987 was instrumental in identifying players ready to represent

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the country when they sent coaches to identify talents for trials in Jamshedpur. As a result, names like Somatai Shaiza, Kiran Khongsai, Gunabir Singh, Bungo and Tomba Singh began to emerge. At the start of the millennium, players from Manipur with the names of Surkumar Singh, Renedy Singh, Gouramangi Singh and Govin Singh emerged. Current national female players like Oinam Bembem Devi, Ashlata Devi, Bala Devi, Grace Dangmei are all products of Manipur. In the 2017 U17 FIFA World Cup in Delhi, Amarjit Singh Kiyam, the young lad from Manipur led his India side. Manipur's Jeakson Singh Thounaojam scored the first goal by an Indian in any FIFA World Cup match against Colombia during the event. Malsawmtulanga, in 2002 from Mizoram became the first ever Mizo to get a contract with East Bengal Football Club. The likes of Jerry Zirsanga, Robert Lalhlamuna, and Indian Jeje Lalpekhluva, all from Mizoram followed suit [3]. Northeast United FC, the sole ISL representative of the North-eastern states, has its base set up in Guwahati, the capital city of Assam. Assamese footballers Gaurav Bora, Vinit Rai, Rakesh Pradhan, have contributed to the Indian football team in the last few years. Halicharan Narzary, who scored the winning penalty in 2022's ISL final for Hyderabad FC, hails from Assam too. Around 20 players from Meghalaya play in India's elite leagues. Phrangki Buam, Redeem Tlang, Samuel Shadap, Ricky Shadong are some of them. The state has also run the Shillong Premier League since 2010, which comprises seven teams. The tournament provides opportunities for deserving talents to rise through the ranks. Speaking of Sikkim, the state is home to Bhaichung Bhutia, India's longest-serving football captain and the co-founder of Bhaichung Bhutia Football Schools. Bhaichung, post-retirement, has been playing a pivotal role in developing football in the state. He founded United Sikkim FC, which played in the I-League. Alongside Bhaichung, Sikkimese footballers Pem Dorji, Nirmal Chhetri, Sanju Pradhan, Komal Thatal, Asish Rai, and others have represented the national team [4]. Contrastingly, no player from Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura has represented the national side till date.

Indian Super League, officially known as Hero Indian Super League was founded on 21 October 2013, primarily for growing the sport of football and increasing its exposure in the country. It started in October 2014 with eight teams, with the number of team increased to eleven currently. In proportion to geographical area and population, bulk of the players are from Northeast. There is also the Northeast United Football Club, the region representative in Indian Super League that has been continuously scouting and recruiting new talents and introducing them to the national stage.

State-wise representation of players from Northeast in ISL season 9(2022-2023) [5]

State	Number of Players
Assam	9
Arunachal Pradesh	Nil
Mizoram	30
Manipur	37
Meghalaya	4
Nagaland	Nil
Sikkim	6
Tripura	Nil
	Total=86

Manipur is the highest supplier of talent in the nation's top leagues, contributing the Indian Super League (37), the I-League (65), and the Indian Women's League (60). Mizoram

comes next with 69 players in the male leagues and 10 players in the female league. Meghalaya contributes a total of 15 players in Indian Super League and I-League altogether. The share of Assam in Indian Women League is 24 players.

2. What makes Northeast a dominant force in Indian football

Owing to Northeast's rich history of the game, dominant participation in nation's top leagues and a proclivity to produce outstanding talents and match-winners, Indian football as a whole has been the ultimate beneficiary. The region's involvement in the game has only been increasing and most of the elite clubs in the country are heavily dependent on footballers in the region. How has the game progressed to become the region's most popular game and how has the people come to embrace it?

2.1 Efforts of All India Football Federation (AIFF)

Realizing the potential of the region, AIFF has started to engage into Northeast by appointing people from the same as its members, who with their ground-level understanding and experiences can provide valuable insights about region's existing conditions and share valuable recommendations. This ensures that the federation's planning and policies are viable and practical for further development of football in the region. The federation is credited for scouting talented players. Out of the ten Northeastern players in the Indian squad for the FIFA U-17 World, seven were from AIFF Elite Academy. The number of qualified coaches has also been increased by AIFF. To increase accessibility of football by school children by including football activities in the education system, it has launched the project 'Football for Schools' across several states in Northeast. Another initiative of AIFF is the launch of Golden Baby League that aims to grow a new generation of players, boys, and girls, that start playing football from a very young age.

2.2 Apathy for cricket

Only three teams i.e. Assam, Tripura and Nagaland from Northeast are among the 32 teams in Elite Groups in Ranji Trophy. Assam Cricket Association Stadium, Guwahati is the only active international cricket stadium in the region. No Northeastern player has represented the Indian senior national team till date. The region also receives heavy rainfall throughout the year and thus, cricket is limited only to a few months. Lack of infrastructure, local star cricketers, geographical difficulties, indifference of the local, state and regional government toward cricket is prompting youngsters in the region to play football which offers a better career option.

2.3 Scope for socio-economic advancement and government jobs

There are important socio-economic reasons behind the popularity of the sports. The economy in the region is comparatively weak and there are not many industries to work in. Therefore, in order to support themselves and their family, many has pursued professional football. Like talented players from Africa, the young footballers from the North-east also realize that football is a way of upward socio-economic mobility. So, parents encourage their talented children to follow their chosen career path [7]. "There is little incentive to stay home and parents, realizing sporting talent in children, give every encouragement to chase a career playing football or whatever they are good at. Football is a craze among youth,

getting into a top club anywhere was the way out, “Kashyap (2015) [8]

Most north-eastern players, both past and present, have the Subroto Cup on their CVs, and it is from there that many were signed by the (Tata Football Academy) TFA. Along with the TFA, the SAI's (Sports Authority of India) Special Area Games Programme (SAGP) bypassed every north-eastern state's own inadequate structures and drew junior talent into its own institutional programs. From the TFA and the SAGP came football livelihoods and contracts with the big clubs or jobs into the lesser-paying but more secure government bodies like the railways, banks and petroleum companies [9]

2.4 Promotional roles of respective state football associations and government

The interest shown by prominent government officials, in footballing activities gives further boost for its promotion. In Mizoram, its former Chief Minister Lal Thanhawla is credited with the founding of Mizoram Football Association and is still actively involved. Lal Thanzara, a MLA from the state is the current president of the association. Likewise, Chief Minister of Manipur, N Biren Singh who previously acted as the Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports in the state government is a former footballer and Journalist. Pema Khandu, Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh has been serving as the president of Arunachal Pradesh Football Association since 2019. As a result, vast improvement in infrastructure has been observed.

A number of grassroots programs, clubs and successful leagues have been established by the respective state football associations to train young players, develop potential talents and expose them to national stage. Aizawl FC, a professional football club based in Aizawl, Mizoram won the 2015 I-League Second Division and subsequently 2016-2017 I-League. The club [Aizawl FC] always wants to promote the players of the state of Mizoram and players from the academy, which is fantastic and which I also strongly believe in. They are the factory of Mizoram football” Head coach Yan Law, on Aizawl FC's impact in Indian football [10]. Notable clubs from northeast states includes (Northeastern Re-Organizing Cultural Association) NEROCA Football club, (Tiddim Road Athletic Union) TRAU Football club, Shillong Lajong, United Sikkim FC. Besides, most of the state have leagues of their own, the result of which rising stars and healthy competition among the locals can be attributed to.

2.5 Local support and attitude

Every free space, street corner, flat land is utilized by kids and young people to play football, to which the owner or nearby inhabitants has little or no objection despite the occasional thumping of the walls and roofs by balls. Parents rarely hesitate in buying equipments for their kids or sourcing their travelling expenses to nearby places for football matches. Local communities establish local clubs and helps in their maintenance and funding. Former players offer their services for free, sometimes equipment too, and also pay for the meals of the players. Football spectators entails people of all ages and demographics and always pulls in huge crowd, regardless of the location, ground surfaces. Mostly, tickets are free or cheap. Majority of the people in Northeast favors physical activity and education. Children are encouraged to play football from a young age and the general consensus Northeast people is that physical education should be implemented as a compulsory part of school and college curriculums. They believe that sports leads to the overall

development of their youth, unlike other states in the country where sports and games are thought to be a waste of time and a distraction from studies [11].

Dr Mili's study revealed that 82.77% of the respondents from Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur and Nagaland opined that “physical education and sports may be helpful in curbing the menace of drug addiction, HIV, alcoholism, terrorism etc.” amongst the youth.

2.6 Low-cost nature and simplicity of the game

Football, unlike hockey or cricket does not require any expensive kits. In Northeast India, it is not uncommon to see children playing barefoot in many villages. At times, the balls are inflated pig bladder or rag-stuffed socks and pomelos. In a region where the economy is basically underdeveloped and characterized by agriculture, if a game that offers past times, physical fitness and the promise of lucrative deals with top country clubs is to be chosen, football is unrivalled. Therefore, the low- cost and simple nature of the game, combined with inherent fitness and natural talent kids acts as a perfect recipe for future development for Northeast kids who are motivated by the success of their elder “siblings”.

2.7 Grit and determination

Even though composition of the country's top clubs squad is dominated by Northeast players in numbers, it is not a case of mere quantity but rather quality. The road to success for them has never being an easy one. Profiles of many former and current Northeast players thriving at the elite level reveal an interesting commonality: a poor background. Dealing with paucity of government jobs, insurgencies, poverty and corruptions, they have come a long way to be at where they are now. Despite the improvement in their region's set up and infrastructure, many had to leave the company of their families, closed ones and communities at a very young age to seek exposure and train at academies of frontline clubs outside their state.

2.8 A favorable climate and geography

Northeastern India is one of the coldest regions in India with an average daily high temperature of only 31 degrees. Being relatively cold and hilly makes the region suitable for football. Most areas in Northeast does not experience excessive heat. The cold weather and difficult terrain in the region makes it somewhat easier for the people to take up high endurance sports such as football. The rest of India's climatic condition renders it very challenging to play football which is physically demanding in comparison to other sports.

3. Recommendations

The fact that Northeast India is a breeding ground for football talents and that it has produced some of India's finest players cannot be underestimated. Northeast football holds a crucial role in addressing the gap between the current state of India's football stand in global arena and its improvement. This study has highlighted a number of steps that can be taken in that direction.

1. Larger amount scholarships to young, talented player should be given to ease the burden of their families.
2. Viable tactical and strategic development programs to streamline the natural talent should be established to enable them to reach the next level.
3. Government should offer job more opportunities or incentives to players so that they can become professionals rather than relying on other jobs to subsist.

4. Setting up more grassroots and training academies for complete realization of potential.
5. Arrangement of foreign trips and tours, to enable the player to help them hone their technique, pique their interest, enhance their skills and motivate them.
6. Development of world class infrastructure to improve playing condition and attract larger number of spectators.
7. Recruitment of the game-related professionals to maintain the players in top form and best health.

4. Conclusion

Northeast has become the sporting hub of the nation. Particularly a football-crazy region, it has been producing some of India's finest players. Also, the hardworking, talented and progress-oriented Northeast player has made top Indian clubs heavily dependent on them. It is no doubt that multiple efforts of the players in conjunction with their local governments is coming to fruition. The sport can bring the region closer to mainland India.

However, India, given the size of its population and its fanaticism for cricket has not been able to prosper at international level football. Primarily, the development of football in the country should start at the grassroots level and therefore, the rest of India can follow the template Northeast states and their players have created to be at where they are now. Football, one of world most popular games should be given due recognition, interest and importance as it is, in Northeast. Only then, India will transform from being a "sleeping giant" as described by Sepp Blatter to an "awakened giant".

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