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**Pukhrambam Oshin Chanu**  
Graduate School of  
Comprehensive Human Sciences,  
University of Tsukuba, Tsukuba,  
Ibaraki, Japan

**Randeep Rakwal**  
Institute of Health and Sport  
Sciences, Tsukuba International  
Academy for Sport Studies  
(TIAS2.0), Global Sport  
Innovation (GSI), University of  
Tsukuba, Tsukuba, Ibaraki,  
Japan

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Pukhrambam Oshin Chanu**  
Graduate School of  
Comprehensive Human Sciences,  
University of Tsukuba, Tsukuba,  
Ibaraki, Japan

## Current status and future of talent identification and development and grassroots program of women's football in India

**Pukhrambam Oshin Chanu and Randeep Rakwal**

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### Abstract

Football is the most popular sport in the world. In India, football is emerging from the shadows of cricket and despite a long history, numerous achievements along with periods of decline has the potential (talent) to develop the country into a football powerhouse down the road. Both men's and women's (yes, more women are now into football in India) football are at a level (clubs, federations, policy and governance, organizations) where they need to be globally competitive. In other words, Indian football needs exceptional talent and high-performing players. How does one do it? The answer is obvious, investment in identifying talent (TID, talent identification and development), and nurturing their potential through well-developed Grassroots Programs (GP) and projects for both men and women. Therefore, this research aims to clarify the state of TID and GP in India at all levels of organization and structures. To do so a qualitative research design was utilized to examine the literature (research papers, documents, websites and organizations) and the gathered data analyzed and presented. The result shows a need to have a comprehensive standardized TID and GP framework as the foundation to develop and nurture Indian footballers, including women's footballer. Women footballers has come into the limelight and Manipur is a case example for such rapidly growing women football in the nation.

**Keywords:** India, women's football, talent, grassroots, review

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Football in India

Football has been introduced in India since an early period. The first ever football National Championship was held in Calcutta, 1941 in West Bengal (Agarwal, 2014) <sup>[1]</sup>. Indian football came to prominence in 2013, when the Indian Super League (ISL) was established, to bring football to the global stage (Sharma, 2017) <sup>[33]</sup>. Nonetheless, Indian football has a long history originating with one of the oldest clubs still existing today, namely, the Mohan Bagan Athletic Club since 1889 (AIFF n.d; Hossen *et al.*, 2023) <sup>[5, 14]</sup>. One of the key achievements for Indian football was its participation in the 1948 Olympic Games in London (Agarwal, 2014) <sup>[1]</sup>. Further making its growth on the international stage, one of the greatest achievements is that, India successfully hosted the FIFA U-17 Men's World Cup in 2017, which helped in promotes and uplift the popularity and infrastructure development of football across the country.

#### Women' football in India

Tracing back in history, 1990s saw the rise of Women's Football in India. The first Women's Football Federation in India was established on 1975, which was operated outside AIFF and FIFA (Olympic, 2023) <sup>[26]</sup>. Since then, women's football has seen its share of ups and downs; the team was one of the best teams in Asia in mid-70s to early 80's and its achievements was recently reviewed by (Hossen *et al.*, 2023) <sup>[14]</sup>. One of the key initiatives from AIFF was establishing the Indian Women's League (IWL) in 2016 as an official women's football league, and it has gained significant attention and popularity. The IWL gives the players and upcoming young players a platform to showcase their talent and provides an inspiration to the new players. As result of this, the number of clubs and competitions has sharply increased

along with a rapid growth in the number of women footballers (AIFF (a), 2024) [7]. The launch of IWL has made several positive impacts to the development of women's football in India. In 2024, the league was expanded into two divisions, namely the IWL and IWL-2 (TOI(a), 2024) [37]. It is noteworthy that for the first time an Indian women's football club, Odisha FC has qualified for the AFC Women's championship 2024-2025 (TOI(b) and AIFF(b), 2024) [38,8]. On the other hand, one can notice the popularity of women's football in the states of Manipur, West Bengal, Kerala, Goa and Odisha. For instance, Manipur has emerged as powerhouse of producing talented footballers over decades for India (TOI, 2017) [36] (Fig. 1). Former Indian National Women's Team Coach has said, and we quote, "Football in our blood, in Manipur's blood" (Kalita, 2022) [16]. Ever year

from this state a number of talented players join the national team that is ample proof of it being a sporting state in India. Recently, in the Women's Football SAFF Women's Football Championship, 2024 in Nepal, 9 players from Manipur were selected in the Women's National Team Squad (Manipur Sports News, Facebook, 2024) [23]. Furthermore, Manipuri society encourages its youth to play sports. The mindset of the people, where the athletes are seen as valuable contributors to the society, supports and recognizes regardless of their current standing (Editorial Team, 2024) [13]. Not only this the local clubs and the sports organizations, schools, colleges, etc. also helps in the development of sports in Manipur. They provide a platform to encourage the young and upcoming athletes to showcase their talents and passion in sports.



**Fig 1:** Manipur, Powerhouse of Sports (Source: images from the newspapers and websites are publically available, and each image has been referenced, within the figure)

## 1.2 Rising football culture needs talent

In sports, "talent" plays a key factor in the success of a player. Talent in sports can be determined in a variety of ways, including through the disciplines of kinesiology, physiology, psychology, biology, and so on (Zhao *et al.*, 2024) [42]. Many studies have shown that identifying and nurturing players early increases their chances of a successful 'sporting' future (Pruna *et al.*, 2018) [29]. Also, talent identification in sports is a broad process that goes beyond just recognizing physical power. Talent identification in football can be visualized variously, such as in the player's motor abilities, physiological characteristics, anthropometric, psychological traits, technical, tactical and cognitive skills. The identification and the realization of the football abilities at the young age ensures that players receive professional mentorship and preparation for the growth of talent (Babu and Nimkar, 2020) [11]. According to (Pruna *et al.*, 2018) [29], players are not made instantly. Even if they are born with natural talent and abilities, these need to be identified and

nurtured to achieve their full potential and succeed in the future in their chosen sport.

**TID:** Therefore, 'Talent Identification and Development' (TID) is one of the key elements in order to obtain the desired success at the world level (Leite *et al.*, 2021) [21]. Most of the world's successful clubs and academies have an excellent TID system and pathways of football and proper youth development program in place in order to identify talent at an early age. It is the foundation of building and nurturing a young talent, and this will benefit not only the players, but also the growth of the overall development in football of the club, academies and for the nation (Babu and Nimkar, 2020) [11]. Identifying sports talent is not an easy process, especially in football (Bennett *et al.*, 2019) [12]; for example, by having a TID framework and a proper system does not guarantee simplicity, as per individual differences, a player quality, and characteristics vary differently. According to (Williams and Reilly 2000) [41], in the context of football, while identifying a player's talent, it should have considered a player's physical

attributes, psychological traits, physiological capabilities, technical skills, tactical understanding, cognitive abilities, and social skills in order to get the success in the future as a professional in their particular sports.

Football, being a team sport, makes it difficult for a coach to effectively implement the TID approach because of various factors which affect performance, such as physiological abilities technical and tactical skills, and psychological attributes of a player (Larkin and O'Connor, 2017) [20]. According to Australian Institute of Sport, while identifying and scouting players, AIS has its own TID framework, namely the FTEM, this framework can be applied in schools, academies, clubs, universities and national and sporting organization in order to help in the player's growth and development till reaching at an elite level (Australian Sports Commission, n.d) [10]. Following to that the AIS launched a TID framework for women's football in preparation for the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, where the system includes detecting those who have the athletic potential in the field games, selecting them and handing them over to the fast track programs where their football skills are nurtured (Kluka, 2007) [18]. The other critical aspect in football development is the grassroots program (GP).

**GP:** Grassroots programs in football are the foundation for any aspect of football development for achieving success with the development initiatives; in term of player's development to reaching the elite level it should start from the grassroots (Prabhakaran, 2017) [28]. Football GPs have been created as the development and popularity of football has increased, and it has in turn created a baseline to the upcoming young players, to show their interest and participation in football. According to UEFA, "Grassroot football is the foundation of the game, prioritizing the love of football and joy of participation" (UEFA, 2024) [40]. When discussing football development, the main components should begin from the grassroots. And, in order to build a strong sporting nation, the foundation must start at the grassroots to achieve elite-level success. Similarly, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) defines grassroots football as, "All football which is non - professional and non-elite" (AIFF, n.d) [5]. A study in Indonesia by (Akbar *et al.*, 2024) [9] highlighted that the importance of football GPs should never be underestimated, because it plays an important role to develop and nurtured a talent to fulfill the success ladder and for the future generations as well. From the grassroots programs perspective, it can be also said that it provides youth and upcoming young players with opportunities to enjoy football, promote inclusivity, and foster a love for the sport. Strong football nation countries, renowned for football owe much of their success to well-developed grassroots systems combined with advanced scientific and medical (sport science) support to identify and nurture young talent.

## 2. Talent identification and development in football India

All the literature relevant to TID in football in India were reviewed. These are categorized below under SAI and AIFF, and described therein.

### 2.1 Sports Authority of India (SAI)

The SAI, founded in 1984, as the major governing body of Sport in India under the Government of India (SAI n.d) [32] serves to promote the coach education, improved facilities and to support and increase the engagement in physical activity and sport (Jamadar and Talvelkar, 2022) [15]. SAI has played a crucial role in the promotion and the growth of

sports culture in India providing various schemes and projects which are aimed at identifying and nurturing young talent (Nandakumar and Sandhu 2014, p. 22) [24]. One of the main goals of SAI was identifying talent at micro-level and nurturing talent towards elite level (SAI, n.d) [32]. SAI has its own talent scouting protocol and sports promotion schemes aimed to nurturing talented sportspersons from their respective sports discipline and provide the facilities and the support and a platform to compete in state/national and international level; for example, it identifies the young talent from the age of 'eight' through various schemes (Nandakumar and Sandhu, 2014, p. 22) [24]. These are the 'National Sports Talent Contest (NSTC)', 'Army Boys Sports Companies (ABSC)' for the defense service, 'Special Area Games (SAG)' focusing on rural, tribal and coastal areas, for selected athletes receive specialized coaching and facilities from experience coaches and foreign coaches, exposure with advanced training at 'Centers of Excellence (COE)' to prepare them for elite level competitions (Kumar Malhotra, 2016) [19].

**Khelo India scheme:** In recent decades, India has made steady progress in the field of sports, with one of the most significant achievements was the establishment of the Khelo India Scheme (Singh and Bali, 2020) [35]. Khelo India, "Play India" is a national program primarily focused on nurturing young talent and fostering sports development nationwide. The program aims to strengthen India's sports culture at the grassroots level by building a robust framework to support athletes in various sports and also developing the sports infrastructure and facilities across the country (Singh and Bali, 2020) [35]. According to current Prime Minister of India, Shri. Narendra Modi, at the launching of Khelo India School Games at New Delhi, and we quote, "Sports is an important means of personality development and Khelo India is not a programme, it's a mission. The Games will highlight India's young sporting talent and showcase India's sports potential" (PTI, 2018) [30]. By promoting early talent identification and comprehensive training, Khelo India envisions creating a globally competitive sporting nation (Khelo India, 2022) [17]. A study by (Parmar and Sahu, 2023) [27] highlighted that, Khelo India Program has significantly contributed to the identification of sports talent across the nation. Under the Khelo India program, talent identification has been promoted across various sports as one of its core objectives. This process includes screening, assessment camps, ongoing monitoring and review, and de-selection where necessary. For football specifically, Khelo India has a structured TID protocol for both men and women, involving a series of tests tailored to assess multiple dimensions of player performance.

### 2.2 AIFF

#### FIFA Talent Academy

Arsene Wenger, FIFA's Chief of Global Football Development, inaugurated the first-ever AIFF-FIFA Talent Academy in Odisha, India in 2023. The main goal of establishing such an academy in India is to address the challenges faced by India as a developing football nation. Arsene Wegner has mentioned that many talented players in the world still remain unidentified due to a lack of opportunities that arise due to an underdeveloped system and limited resources. To bridge this gap, FIFA has launched programs and projects aimed at giving every talent a chance to shine. The academy focuses on identifying promising players, providing them with top-level coaching, good facilities, and opportunities, ultimately helping them to build



the pathway to become a professional player or bring a bright future in football (Neeladri, 2023) <sup>[25]</sup>.

## 2.3 Grassroots program in football in India

### AIFF

#### AIFF Blue Cubs League

In recent years, India's football system has improved as compared to earlier days, however, more focus on the development of effective systems is needed. Nevertheless, football in India can still find it challenging when it comes to the development and nurturing of young talents. For better development (GP), AIFF started focusing more on the development of young talent within the grassroots level. Initiatives include, establishment of the 'Golden Baby league' which aims to have increased participation and development of young upcoming players. After the success and growing interest in this project AIFF has renamed the Golden Baby league as the Blue Cubs league. The main objective of launching this project was to develop the Indian football system by focusing on a grassroots football structure, aiming at ages 4-12 years-old, and providing the training facilities and invaluable exposure to the world of football in order to promote and produced talented players in the future (AIFF, 2023c) <sup>[2]</sup>. This program aims to spread the philosophy, that the role of the football GP lies in the process of nurturing and identifying the young talent, as well as where the participant can understand the importance of player development, fun and long-term participation through grassroots football (AIFF, 2023f) <sup>[4]</sup>. Through this program, with engaging competitions and leagues, it serves as an important platform for talent identification, allowing the young players to showcase their talents, and letting them know their potential, with a final goal of nurturing the players for the future.

According to Dr. Shaji Prabhakaran this will help to create a robust grassroots development for the nation and will have an impact on creating the vibrant structure in Indian football system – "Blue Cubs is our flagship grassroots programme" (AIFF, 2023c) <sup>[2]</sup>. Further the AIFF Grassroots Committee recommended that each state football association that every district organizes at least one Blue Cubs League, from which the young players will have the opportunity to play the sport. It was also announced that the committee would like to give an award to those organizers and the NGOs who are doing and promoting exceptional work at the grassroots levels (AIFF, 2023c) <sup>[2]</sup>.

#### AIFF Youth League

AIFF has been promoting youth development from the start and the youth league has been in place from the very beginning. The AIFF youth league is a vital initiative from AIFF, mainly aims on developing the youth talents and providing them a platform to showcase their talent. This league is of three ages competition such as U-13 (Sub-junior), U-15 (Junior) and U-17, which is officially known as elite League according to the AIFF "Vision 2047" manual (AIFF, 2023c) <sup>[2]</sup>. Every year large numbers of clubs and academies participate in this league.

#### Reliance Foundation Youth Sports

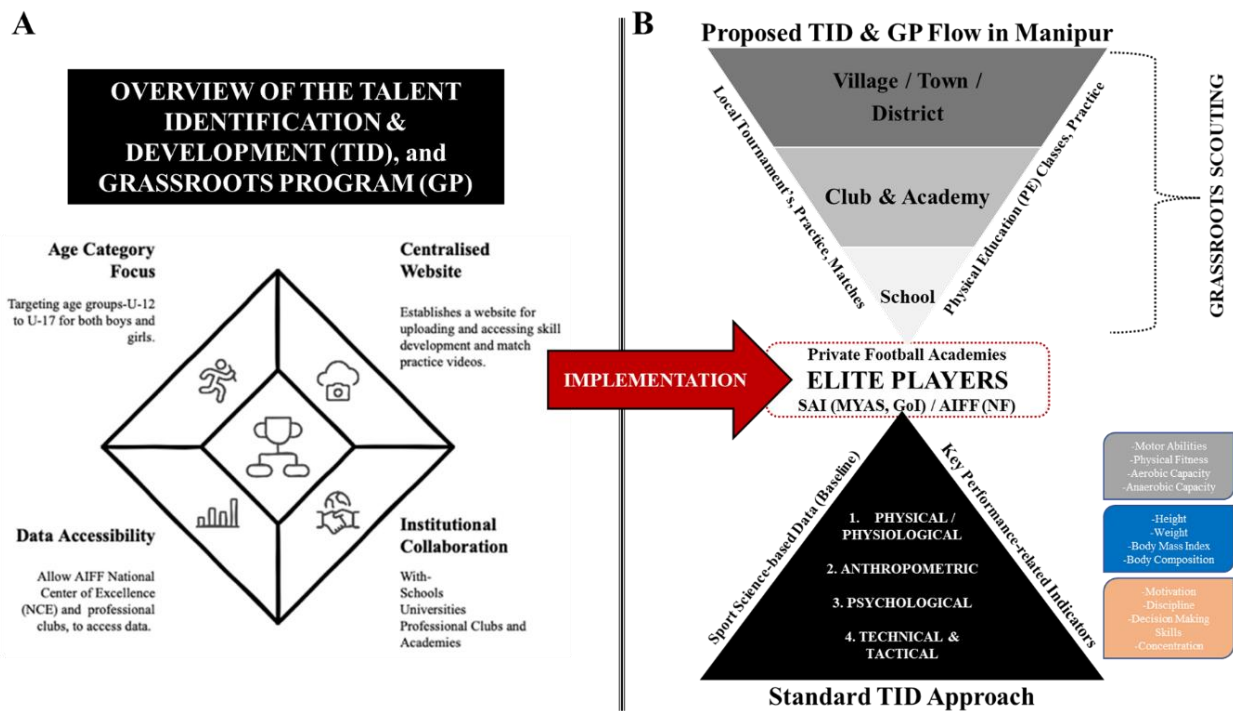
In India, big industries like Reliance, Tata, JSW group have sponsored and helped promote the sports ecosystem from investing or setting up elite academies or starting foundations to create top-level athletes (Lunawat, 2021) <sup>[22]</sup>. Under the Reliance Foundation of Sports, set up by a multinational company (RELIANCE) based in India, it took initiatives for

the development of sports in India, by catering to the sporting needs and support to improve and promote the learning of the youth particularly in the rural areas (Totala and Jha, 2020) <sup>[39]</sup>. According to (Shende, 2016) <sup>[34]</sup> a case study in India highlighted this foundation has focused on the rural and urban areas for using sports as a tool for the development to create a strong sporting nation. The foundation approached many in helping to develop the structure and to transform the football ecosystem launching three grassroots initiatives such as Reliance Foundation Youth Sports (RFYS) in 2016, Reliance Foundation Youth Sports Naupang League, and Reliance Foundation Development League. The main aims of launching these programs was to transform the ecosystem of football from grassroots level, giving the young talent a platform (Lunawat, 2021) <sup>[22]</sup>, facilities, required coaching and education, to nurture and develop their talent and promoting the Indian football in all levels (RFYS, 2024) <sup>[31]</sup>. RFYS, has the highest rate of football academies for both girls and boys in India, every year under this development scheme they have organizing competitions and tournaments under the ages of 12 to 21.

## 3. Concluding remarks

This study explores the TID and GP of women's football in India through the lens of overall talent development and grassroots promotion schemes in India in football. Despite the good beginning made in TID and GPs in Indian football as a whole, and in context of women's football, there remains a critical gap in lack of not having a standardized TID and GP, including scouting networks as well as limited research literature and scientific based research, effects the football ecosystem of the nation. On the other hand, as a whole, the women's sports in India face significant challenges. And, that is having and will in the future have an effect on the growth and development of women's sports, including the women's football ecosystem. The challenges such as lack of investment in women's sports, low awareness and limited access to education facilities, support and research, are needed to be addressed to create a strong foundation for women's sports and to build a strong sporting nation. And, it is only through a scientific investigation of the current system of TID and GP structures in India in both men's and (especially) women's sports can the current situation be assessed and a path for the TID and GP in women's football can be envisaged.

As India has a large youth population country, there are also clearly seen difference in football development systems between different regions, for example, Manipur has seen a strong foundation for producing talented players despite facing many challenges. From this comprehensive review of the various schemes and programs for TID and GP in football in India, the current status has been revealed. Specifically, for women's football, the authors would also like to propose that implementing a comprehensive standardized TID and GP framework is the foundation for developing and nurturing young women's football talents. The findings emphasize the need for more structured and scientific scouting process, to ensure a fair and efficient TID process and to support the long-term growth (GPs) of football. It can be implied that having a proper scouting network is a great beginning to identify young talents, as can be seen in the North-eastern state of Manipur, where scouting is greatly utilized (Fig. 2). Finally, the authors would like to propose a model to strengthen and enhance the identification and growth of young women football talent at the grassroots level. It must be noted that this model is not just for women, and after further study and research can be applied to all sports.



**Fig 2:** Overview of the TID and GP Models and Proposed Implementation Plan for Manipur, India. (The diagram is based on the authors framework, however, the FIFA and AIIFF websites were also referred to construct the diagram)

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