

## Sports Participation Among Tribal People of Northeast India: A Cultural, Social, And Developmental Perspective

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### **Abstract:**

**N**ortheast India is a region known for its cultural diversity, home to several indigenous tribal groups with distinct languages, customs, and practices. Sports have served as a vehicle for social cohesiveness, cultural expression, and physical fitness in this area in addition to being a source of entertainment. Traditional sports have a long history and are an integral component of the cultural identities of many tribes, including those in Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh. Modern sports like football, cricket, and athletics have become more and more popular in recent years, especially with younger people. Tribal athletes confront obstacles such as poor infrastructure, inadequate training, financial constraints, and limited recognition in national sports organizations, despite their strong ties to sports.

*This research investigates the sports involvement of tribal tribes in Northeast India, with an emphasis on both traditional and modern sports. It investigates the significance of*

*sports in maintaining tribal cultural heritage, promoting solidarity, and creating socioeconomic opportunities. The study also discusses the obstacles that tribal athletes confront and proposes solutions to improve sports infrastructure and opportunities for native children. By assessing sports' potential for personal and community development, this study underlines the need for a more inclusive sports development policy that empowers tribal athletes and enables them participate on national and international levels.*

**Keywords:** *Tribal, social cohesiveness, cultural expression, physical fitness, financial constraints, socioeconomic opportunities*

## **Introduction**

There are hundreds of tribal people spread throughout eight states in northeastern India, each with its own customs and dialects. From modern sports that have gained widespread popularity among younger generations to ancient activities that have been passed down through the years, the inhabitants of this region have long participated in a variety of sports. Physical activities have long been important to the indigenous populations in this area, whether for social cohesiveness, celebration, or survival. Tribal groups still play traditional sports like polo (Manipur), archery (Arunachal Pradesh), and wrestling (Nagaland), even if contemporary sports like football and cricket are growing in popularity. These sports, which are strongly rooted in cultural rites, assist to preserve their heritage and strengthen communal relationships. Tribal athletes confront considerable obstacles to success in modern competitive sports, including a lack of infrastructure, training opportunities, and access to resources (Ghosh, 2018).

This research investigates tribal people's sports engagement in Northeast India, with a focus on the interaction of traditional and modern sports. The study looks at how sports impact cultural identity, unity, and socioeconomic development. It also analyzes the obstacles faced by tribal athletes and makes ideas for increasing sports participation and enhancing possibilities for young tribal athletes.

## **Historical Overview of Sports in Northeast India**

For ages, tribal people in Northeast India have engaged in a variety of traditional games that are strongly ingrained in their cultures. These games have not only provided entertainment, but also skill development, socialization, and seasonal

and festival celebrations. The historical growth of sports in Northeast India may be traced back to indigenous games, colonial influences, and post-independence advancements.

## **Traditional Sports and Cultural Practices**

For ages, the tribes of Northeast India have practiced traditional sports that reflect their lifestyles, traditions, and physical settings. These games were often inspired by practical demands like hunting, agriculture, or combat. Each tribe has a set of traditional sports that are specific to its culture, and these activities are inextricably linked to community rituals, festivals, and social events.

**Archery:** Archery was an important element of tribal life in Northeast India, particularly among the hill tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. The Apatani, Nyishi, and other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, for example, have a long history of archery, which was used not just for hunting but also as a critical skill in battle. In Nagaland, archery tournaments remain an integral element of the celebrations during festivals like the Hornbill Festival, where tribal youngsters exhibit their proficiency in archery (Bordoloi,2015)

**Wrestling:** Wrestling, also known as Mukna, has long been an important aspect of Naga tribal culture, notably in Nagaland. It is one of the oldest types of combat sports performed by the Naga people, with hard training beginning at a young age. Wrestling was traditionally done as part of festivals and important occasions, representing strength and valor. Mukna is still practiced in many Naga villages and plays an important role in communal ceremonies (Chakrabarti,2015)

**Polo:** Polo is a popular traditional sport in Manipur known as SagolKangjei. The game has been played for centuries, with historical sources claiming that the Manipuri monarchs introduced it to the region in the 15th century. Polo is regarded as the most popular sport in Manipur and has a strong cultural value. The Manipur variant of polo has gained international reputation, especially after the game expanded to the western world, contributing to the global popularity of polo (Bordoloi,2015)

**Hunting and Fishing:** Hunting and fishing were not only necessary for survival in many tribes in Northeast India, but they were also undertaken as competitive pursuits. Tribes such as the Konyaks of Nagaland and the Mizos of Mizoram hunted with traditional instruments such as bows and arrows, which were frequently transformed into competitions to demonstrate ability and precision. Fishing tournaments utilizing

traditional techniques such as angling or trapping were frequent in the tribal groups around the Brahmaputra River in Assam (Chakrabarti,2015)

**Football and Cricket:** Despite not being indigenous, football and cricket were brought to Northeast India during British colonial authority. British missionaries and traders played an important role in popularizing these sports. Football, in particular, gained traction early on, with Assam being one of the first places to embrace the sport in the late 1800s. Cricket, albeit less generally played, was introduced and grew popular, especially in the region's major hubs, such as Shillong and Guwahati (Ghosh,2018)

### **Colonial Influence and the Introduction of Organized Sports**

During British colonial rule, the introduction of formal sports in Northeast India followed a pattern seen throughout the Indian subcontinent. The British not only brought their own sporting culture but also established formal clubs, leagues, and competitions.

**Football:** Football quickly became the most popular sport in the region, especially after the British established the necessary infrastructure, such as playing grounds and organized clubs. Clubs were founded in locations such as Shillong, Guwahati, and Imphal, allowing British expats and locals to play together. Football competitions had become popular by the early twentieth century, and many of the region's indigenous people began to participate. Shillong, in particular, became a football hub, with the sport's popularity expanding among the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes (Lotha,2017)

**Cricket:** Cricket was another sport introduced during British control, albeit its popularity in Northeast India was restricted compared to football. Initially, it was mostly played by the elites, specifically British colonial officers and Indian nobility. Cricket, on the other hand, became a popular sport in cities such as Guwahati and Imphal, with tribal communities progressively adopting the game. Cricket clubs first appeared in Assam in the early twentieth century, and it remains one of the region's most popular sports today (Dutta,2013)

**Lack of Infrastructure:** One of the repercussions of colonialism was the construction of a sports infrastructure, which was primarily reserved to the elites. While the British concentrated on establishing sports clubs in major cities, rural and tribal communities were mostly ignored. This resulted in a disparity between access to contemporary sports in cities and the scarcity of resources in tribal areas(Das,2017)

**Hunting and Martial Arts:** The British colonial period also caused a shift in how traditional martial arts and hunting habits were perceived. The British attempted to repress certain indigenous customs, like as traditional fighting sports, while promoting their own types of organized competition. However, several indigenous sports, including as wrestling and archery, continued to be performed in tribal communities, albeit less publicly (Dutta,2013)

### **Post-Independence Era and the Growth of Sports in Northeast India**

Following India's independence in 1947, sports continued to evolve in Northeast India, albeit with some challenges. The lack of proper infrastructure and government support initially hampered the development of sports in tribal regions. However, several factors contributed to the gradual growth of both traditional and modern sports.

#### ***Government Investment:***

Following independence, the Indian government invested in sports infrastructure and developed sports policy. However, these regulations frequently disregarded the tribal parts of Northeast India, where access to infrastructure was limited. As a result, many tribal tribes continue to rely on traditional sports for cultural expression while still engaging in modern sports like as football and athletics (Das,2017)

***State Support for Football:*** Football became extremely popular in states such as Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland after independence, particularly among the youth. The state governments began to understand sports' potential for bringing people together and contributing to regional identity. Football clubs in these states became breeding grounds for talent, with many of these players going on to play for national teams in both men's and women's football (Ghosh,2018)

***Athletic Successes and Global Recognition:*** Northeast India has produced athletes with national and worldwide renown during the last few decades, particularly in sports such as boxing, football, and athletics. Mary Kom, a Manipur-born world champion boxer, has become a worldwide sports star, motivating millions of tribal kids in the region. Her achievement has highlighted the talent present in the tribal tribes and helped increase awareness about Northeast India's potential in the global sports arena (Bordoloi,2015)

**Traditional Sports Revival:** In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in traditional sports, thanks in part to cultural movements and tribal organizations' efforts to preserve their legacy. The Indian government has also expressed an interest in fostering indigenous games as part of its overall sports development goal. Traditional games like Mukna (wrestling) in Nagaland and SagolKangjei (polo) in Manipur are now acknowledged and celebrated on national platforms, ensuring that they are not lost in the face of modern sports' supremacy (Bordoloi,2015)

**Sports as a Tool for Social Integration:** Sports in Northeast India have played a key role in promoting social integration, This is especially true given the region's rich diversity. Football, in particular, has brought together individuals from many tribal tribes. Furthermore, modern sporting events such as the North East Games have promoted a sense of regional unity and helped break down ethnic barriers that have traditionally existed across villages (Chakrabarti,2016)

## **Challenges Faced by Tribal Athletes**

Tribal athletes in Northeast India encounter several hurdles in their quest for athletic greatness. Despite the region's rich sporting legacy, a number of socioeconomic, infrastructural, and cultural limitations prevent these athletes from reaching their full potential. These limitations include restricted access to resources and facilities, as well as societal conceptions about sports participation and state and national government assistance. In this section, we will go over these problems in depth.

### **Lack of Infrastructure and Resources**

One of the most major obstacles for tribal athletes in Northeast India is a lack of proper infrastructure and resources. While the region has produced outstanding athletes in sports such as football, boxing, archery, and athletics, a lack of high-quality training facilities and coaching opportunities remains a significant challenge.

**Training Facilities:** Despite the region's talent pool, most tribal areas lack modern sports facilities including gyms, swimming pools, and indoor arenas for training. Many athletes must train in inadequate conditions or travel great distances to urban hubs to access adequate facilities (Das, 2017). These constraints reduce their training time and overall performance.

**Coaching and Mentorship:** Another big concern is a lack of qualified and experienced coaches in rural and tribal communities. While several state governments and national

sports federations have attempted to establish coaching programs, the number of well-trained, competent trainers in disciplines such as boxing, athletics, and archery is limited. Without sufficient mentorship, tribal athletes frequently fail to enhance their technical skills, which has a substantial impact on their success at the national and international levels (Bordoloi, 2016).

***Financial Support:*** Many indigenous athletes confront financial challenges that restrict them from competing professionally. Athletes from economically challenged tribal backgrounds may find it excessively expensive to purchase equipment, train, travel, and compete. Many excellent athletes are driven to forsake their athletic careers in search of more stable livelihoods due to a lack of suitable financial assistance (Bordoloi, 2017).

### **Socio-Cultural Barriers**

The socio-cultural context of Northeast India poses additional hurdles for tribal athletes, particularly those from rural or indigenous areas.

***Cultural Stigma:*** Traditional gender norms and cultural expectations frequently restrict women from participating in sports. Many tribal groups expect women to focus on household tasks and discourage them from pursuing athletic careers. Although women's participation in sports is increasing, the cultural stigma connected with women in public events remains a barrier in some areas (Chakrabarti, 2015). This issue has been especially prevalent in more orthodox districts of Northeast India, where there is opposition to modifying gender norms in the public realm.

***Ethnic Stereotyping and Discrimination:*** Tribal athletes frequently confront ethnic stereotypes and discrimination, both in their own communities and on the national scene. Despite the region's strong indigenous sports culture, tribal athletes face prejudice when competing outside of their native states. In addition to regional prejudice, individuals may encounter ethnic biases that limit their acceptance and chances in athletics (Ghosh, 2018). This marginalization can result in a loss of self-esteem and isolation from the greater sporting community.

***Rural-Urban Divide:*** Another big difficulty is the resource and opportunity gap that exists between urban and rural communities. While metropolitan athletes have easier access to training, nutrition, and funding, tribal athletes in remote places face significant barriers to participation in competitive sports. Traveling considerable distances to

compete, and sometimes even to basic training facilities, adds to the pressure on these athletes (Bordoloi, 2017).

### **Limited Government and Institutional Support**

While the Indian government has made efforts to promote sports on a national scale, tribal athletes in Northeast India frequently receive insufficient attention and assistance. The lack of institutional support from state and national sports organizations exacerbates the difficulties these athletes encounter.

***Insufficient Sports Policies:*** Despite the region's rich sporting history, sports programs in Northeast India have failed to address the unique needs of tribal athletes. Policies frequently fail to address the unique socioeconomic issues that tribal people experience. While the region has produced world-class athletes such as Mary Kom (boxing) and Pukhrambam Sushila Chanu (football), government efforts to identify and develop talent from rural areas have been inconsistent and insufficient (Das, 2017).

***Inadequate Sponsorship and Recognition:*** Despite the region's rich sporting tradition, sports programs in Northeast India have failed to meet the specific demands of tribal athletes. Policies typically fail to address the specific socioeconomic challenges that tribal people face. While the region has produced world-class athletes such as Mary Kom (boxing) and Pukhrambam Sushila Chanu (football), government efforts to find and develop talent in rural regions have been inconsistent and insufficient (Das, 2017).

***Delayed Implementation of Programs:*** Although the Government of India has made efforts to promote sports in the Northeast, implementation of these initiatives has been delayed. Sports academies, athlete scholarships, and infrastructure development in native communities are frequently delayed or underfunded. Without timely and efficient implementation, these programs fail to reach the athletes who require them the most (Chakrabarti, 2016).

### **Psychological and Emotional Challenges**

Tribal athletes endure significant mental and emotional hurdles that are frequently disregarded. The pressure to perform, along with limited resources and isolation in rural areas, can have a profound psychological impact on these athletes.

***Mental Health Struggles:*** Because of the lack of support structures, tribal athletes frequently experience intense emotional stress. Many people spend significant periods

of time away from their families while attending training camps or contests. The isolation from home and family, along with financial stress, can lead to anxiety, despair, and burnout (Bordoloi, 2017). Furthermore, the psychological toll of navigating a system that frequently fails to meet their demands can undermine the athlete's self-esteem.

**Pressure to Perform:** In areas where sports are a source of pride, athletes have heightened expectations of success, which can be overwhelming. Athletes from Northeast India, particularly those from tribal tribes, understand the significance of representing their state or tribe, as their accomplishments are frequently viewed as representations of their community's strength and perseverance (Ghosh, 2018). While this might be inspiring, it can also be quite stressful, particularly for young athletes.

### **Challenges in Talent Identification and Development**

Despite the plethora of skill in Northeast India, tribal sportsmen frequently fail to get noticed due to a lack of proper scouting procedures.

**Limited Talent Identification Programs:** Talent identification programs in Northeast India are less robust than in other sections of the country. Many excellent tribal athletes go unnoticed due to geographic isolation, restricted access to urban centers, and logistical problems. The lack of regional talent scouting programs and selection trials in rural locations exacerbates the situation (Bordoloi, 2016).

**Inconsistent Training and Exposure:** Even when tribal athletes get access to competitive venues, they frequently lack the exposure needed to compete at the highest levels. For example, athletes from isolated communities may compete in local events but are rarely given the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities on national or worldwide stages. This lack of exposure makes it difficult for them to gain sponsorship or acknowledgment from national selectors (Chakrabarti, 2015).

### **Sports as a Catalyst for Tribal Development**

Despite these limitations, sports have the ability to significantly improve the socioeconomic development of tribal communities. The growing participation of tribal athletes in national and international events has not only increased regional recognition, but has also highlighted the importance of athletics in community development.

**Youth Engagement:** Sports programs in tribal areas engage adolescents in positive activities, lowering their likelihood of becoming involved in bad influences such as substance misuse or violence. Organized sports teach tribal adolescents discipline, teamwork, and leadership, all of which help to their personal development (Bordolai, 2016).

**Economic Impact:** Successful tribal athletes can generate financial benefits for their communities. Recognition in national and international sporting events can attract sponsors, resulting in economic development through the establishment of sports academies, training camps, and tourism. (Singh, 2016)

**Empowerment of Women:** Sports also help to empower indigenous women, who have historically been underrepresented in public life. Female athletes, such as Mary Kom, have broken boundaries to become role models for young girls in their communities (Maipang, 2015).

## Conclusion

Sports engagement among tribal people in Northeast India shows the region's rich cultural legacy and natural talent. Despite the region's long history of involvement in both traditional and modern sports, a number of obstacles remain to prevent tribal athletes from fully participating. The absence of sufficient facilities, restricted access to excellent coaching, financial constraints, and socio-cultural barriers all have a substantial impact on these players' potential. Tribal athletes frequently face barriers to accessing suitable training facilities and money, limiting their possibilities for professional progress and recognition. Furthermore, gender stereotypes and ethnic discrimination can limit their participation in competitive sports.

However, there is still hope for development. Government and non-governmental organizations are working to address some of these issues by investing in better sports infrastructure, providing scholarships, and raising awareness about the value of sports participation. Athletes like Mary Kom and others have drawn international notice to the potential emerging from Northeast India, inspiring future generations to take sports seriously.

In conclusion, while challenges persist, the expansion of sports in Northeast India has enormous promise. By strengthening resources, breaking down cultural and financial barriers, and promoting inclusive policies, the region can better develop its sporting talent. Given the proper assistance, Northeast Indian tribal athletes have the

potential to greatly contribute to India's sporting achievements while also continuing to make their communities proud on the national and worldwide scale.

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