International Journal of Yoga, Physiotherapy and Physical Education
www.sportsjournal.in
ISSN: 2456-5067
Received: 20-09-2025, Accepted: 20-10-2025, Published: 04-11-2025
Volume 10, Issue 4, 2025, Page No. 38-42

Sport, society, and gender: Analyzing Bembem Devi's contribution to Indian women's empowermen

Lena Dey[1], Dr. Neelam Yadav[2]
[1] Department of Physical Education, Pacific Academy of Higher Education and Research University, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India
[2]Associate Professor, Department of Physical Education, Pacific Academy of Higher Education and Research University, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India

Abstract
The intersection of sport, society, and gender provides a meaningful framework for understanding women's empowerment in contemporary India. This paper examines the life and contributions of Oinam Bembem Devi, popularly known as the "Iron Lady of Indian Football," and analyzes how her remarkable journey has influenced social change, gender perception, and leadership development among Indian women. The study aims to explore the ways in which Bembem Devi's sporting career has challenged patriarchal norms, created new spaces for women in professional football, and symbolized the broader struggle for equality and recognition in Indian society. The research employs a qualitative analytical method, relying on secondary data drawn from scholarly literature, sports archives, government reports, and media narratives. It situates Bembem Devi's life within the sociological and feminist theoretical framework, particularly emphasizing the concepts of gender performativity and empowerment through visibility. Through this approach, the paper interprets her journey not only as a personal success story but as a social movement that reflects the dynamic relationship between sport and gender empowerment. Findings indicate that Bembem Devi's achievements extend beyond athletic excellence; they represent a form of resistance against gender discrimination and a redefinition of female identity in the Indian sporting context. Her contributions as a player, captain, mentor, and advocate have inspired a new generation of women, especially from marginalized and northeastern regions of India, to pursue sports as a legitimate path to empowerment. The analysis concludes that Bembem Devi's legacy demonstrates the transformative potential of sport as a tool for social inclusion, leadership, and gender justice, reinforcing the broader vision of women's empowerment within India's evolving democratic and cultural framework.

Keywords: Bembem Devi, women's empowerment, Indian football, gender studies, sports sociology, role model, leadership

Introduction

In the socio-cultural fabric of India, sport has long functioned as both a mirror and a catalyst of social transformation. It reflects deeply entrenched gender hierarchies, cultural values, and notions of identity while simultaneously offering a space for challenging and redefining them. Within this complex interplay of sport, society, and gender, the story of Oinam Bembem Devi stands as a landmark example of how individual excellence can evolve into collective empowerment. Born in Imphal, Manipur, in 1980, Bembem Devi emerged from modest beginnings to become one of India's most celebrated women footballers. Her journey symbolizes not only athletic achievement but also a profound social statement on perseverance, equality, and empowerment in a patriarchal context that has historically marginalized women's participation in sports.

The world of Indian sports has traditionally been dominated by male athletes, and women's contributions often remained peripheral to mainstream recognition. In such an environment, Bembem Devi's rise from local tournaments in Manipur to captaining the Indian national team for over a decade marks a significant shift in gender narratives within sports. Her career, which spans more than two decades, encapsulates the evolution of women's football in India—transforming from an underfunded, neglected pursuit into an arena of national pride and global aspiration. Her dedication, leadership, and consistent performance have not only brought her individual laurels, such as the Arjuna Award (2017) and the Padma Shri (2020), but also helped to institutionalize women's football as a serious professional domain in the country. This paper examines Bembem Devi's contributions through a sociological and gender-based lens, situating her achievements within the broader discourse of women's empowerment in India. The analysis seeks to understand how her career has intersected with and influenced social structures, cultural perceptions, and gender relations. Using the theoretical frameworks of gender performativity, empowerment through visibility, and the sociology of sport, the study explores how her sporting journey challenges patriarchal barriers and reconstructs the image of women in leadership roles. The significance of this inquiry lies in its attempt to connect individual achievement to systemic transformation. Bembem Devi's influence extends beyond the football field; she represents the potential of sport as an instrument of social change, capable of mobilizing gender awareness, leadership, and community development. Her success narrative contributes to the ongoing redefinition of women's roles in India—moving from passive participants in social structures to active agents of transformation. By exploring her legacy, this paper emphasizes that sport, when examined through a gendered perspective, becomes more than competition—it becomes a site of empowerment, resistance, and identity formation.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding Bembem Devi's contribution to women's empowerment through sport requires a multidisciplinary theoretical lens that combines elements of gender theory, sports sociology, and empowerment studies. The theoretical

foundation of this paper draws primarily from feminist thought, particularly the concepts of gender performativity as articulated by Judith Butler (1990) [4] and the sociological understanding of social capital and habitus developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1984). Together, these frameworks provide a critical perspective on how gender identities are socially constructed, performed, and contested within the institutional and cultural spaces of sport.

Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity suggests that gender is not an inherent or fixed attribute but a performance shaped by social expectations, repeated acts, and cultural norms. Within this framework, Bembem Devi's athletic identity can be interpreted as a performative act that subverts traditional gender roles. By excelling in football—a field culturally coded as masculine—she challenges established notions of femininity and redefines what it means to be a woman in Indian society. Her sporting achievements serve as acts of resistance, demonstrating that gender is both fluid and socially negotiable through practice and performance.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus and social capital further illuminates the societal structures that influence access to and participation in sport. Bembem Devi's journey from a small northeastern state to national and international recognition exemplifies how individual agency can interact with structural opportunities to generate new forms of cultural and symbolic capital. Through her success, she accumulated recognition, authority, and legitimacy—resources that have empowered her to advocate for broader inclusion of women in sport.

This theoretical framework situates Bembem Devi not merely as an athlete but as a transformative social actor. Her life and career illustrate how sport functions as a medium through which women negotiate power, identity, and visibility, thereby fostering broader processes of social change and gender empowerment in India.

Historical Background of Women's Football in India

The history of women's football in India reflects a complex interplay of gender, culture, and institutional evolution within the broader context of Indian sports development. Despite football's introduction to the Indian subcontinent during the colonial period, its association remained predominantly male-dominated for several decades. Women's participation in organized football began to emerge gradually in the post-independence era, shaped by broader social changes and the global discourse on gender equality in sport. The earliest documented efforts to organize women's football in India can be traced to the late 1970s and early 1980s, when informal matches and local tournaments began appearing in states such as West Bengal, Manipur, Odisha, and Kerala. These states became early pioneers, largely because of strong football cultures and relatively progressive attitudes toward women's physical participation. However, the institutional foundation for women's football remained fragile until the formation of the Women's Football Federation of India (WFFI) in 1975, which attempted to bring structure to the sport. Its limited resources, however, hindered national expansion and international engagement. A significant turning point occurred in 1991, when the All India Football Federation (AIFF) officially took over the administration of women's football. This integration under a national governing body allowed greater access to resources, training programs, and international exposure. Indian women's football made its international debut in the early 1980s, participating in regional tournaments such as the Asian Women's Championship and the SAFF Women's Championship, though the national team struggled to achieve sustained success due to inadequate infrastructure and limited policy support.

Among the northeastern states, Manipur emerged as a vital cradle of women's football excellence. The region's socio-cultural openness toward women's physical expression and the strong community-based sports culture provided a nurturing environment for female athletes. It was within this setting that Oinam Bembem Devi rose to prominence, symbolizing both the potential and the challenges of Indian women's football. Her success story coincided with a broader movement to recognize and institutionalize women's participation in sports across India. The development of women's football in India thus reflects a trajectory of resilience amid structural inequalities. From sporadic local matches to organized national championships and international representation, the journey underscores the persistent struggles for legitimacy, visibility, and gender equality in the sporting domain. It also sets the stage for understanding how figures like Bembem Devi transformed these challenges into platforms for empowerment and leadership.

Bembem Devi: Early Life and Struggles

Born on April 4, 1980, in Imphal, Manipur, Oinam Bembem Devi grew up in a socio-cultural environment that both constrained and nurtured her sporting ambitions. Manipur, located in India's northeastern region, has long been recognized for its progressive stance toward women's participation in sports, particularly football. Despite existing within a patriarchal social structure, Manipuri society often encouraged women to engage in athletic and cultural activities as expressions of community pride and identity. This unique blend of traditionalism and progressivism profoundly shaped Bembem Devi's early orientation toward football. From a young age, Bembem displayed a natural athleticism and a strong inclination toward team sports. Inspired by the vibrant football culture of Imphal, she began playing with neighborhood boys, often being the only girl on the field. Her participation challenged existing gender norms, as football was widely perceived as a male-dominated domain. Her family's support—particularly from her mother, who recognized her passion—was instrumental in enabling her to pursue the sport seriously at a time when female athletes in India faced considerable social resistance and institutional neglect. At just 13 years old, Bembem Devi began her professional journey when she joined the Yawa Singjamei Club, a local football team that provided early exposure to organized competition. Her remarkable skill, agility, and tactical intelligence soon earned her a place in the Manipur State Women's Football Team, marking the beginning of her ascent to national prominence. In 1995, at the age of 15, she made her debut for the Indian national women's football team, a milestone that would define her career for the next two decades.

Bembem's formative years coincided with a period of institutional uncertainty for women's football in India, which lacked professional leagues, structured training, or adequate financial backing. Yet, her determination and performance on the field distinguished her as a pioneering

figure. Her rise from a modest background in Manipur to the captaincy of the national team reflected not only personal resilience but also the broader socio-cultural shifts occurring in Indian sports during the late twentieth century. Her early career thus embodies the intersection of personal ambition and societal transformation. Bembem Devi's journey from Imphal's community fields to the international stage serves as a powerful narrative of perseverance, defiance of gender barriers, and the evolving recognition of women athletes within India's sporting ecosystem.

Career Achievements and Professional Contributions

Oinam Bembem Devi's illustrious football career represents one of the most enduring and impactful chapters in the history of Indian women's sports. Her professional journey, spanning over two decades from the mid-1990s to the late 2010s, not only elevated the status of women's football in India but also established her as a national icon of perseverance, leadership, and excellence. Known affectionately as the "Durga of Indian Football," Bembem's contributions transcended individual accomplishments to inspire a generation of young women athletes across the nation. At the national level, Bembem Devi's dominance began with her performances for the Manipur women's team, where she led the state to numerous Senior Women's National Football Championship titles. Her technical proficiency, on-field intelligence, and leadership qualities made her a central figure in the domestic football circuit. She was also instrumental in mentoring younger players and strengthening the grassroots framework of women's football in her home state, which remains a powerhouse in the sport. Internationally, Bembem Devi made her debut for the Indian national team in 1995 at just fifteen years of age. Over the next two decades, she represented India in more than 85 international matches, participating in key tournaments such as the Asian Games, SAFF Women's Championships, and AFC Women's Championships. Under her captaincy, India achieved remarkable success, including three SAFF Women's Championship titles (2010, 2012, and 2014) and two South Asian Games gold medals. These victories solidified India's dominance in South Asian women's football and elevated the visibility of the sport within the country. Her leadership was defined not only by tactical acumen but also by her capacity to inspire teamwork and resilience. Bembem Devi often served as the bridge between senior players and emerging talents, fostering a spirit of unity and professionalism within the national squad. Even as she approached the twilight of her playing career, she remained a pivotal figure, helping India secure the 2016 South Asian Games gold medal, after which she announced her retirement. Her exceptional contributions were recognized through several prestigious awards, including the Arjuna Award (2017) and the Padma Shri (2020)—making her one of the very few women footballers in India to receive such national honors. These accolades underscored her role not only as an athlete but as a transformative figure in the broader struggle for gender equality in Indian sports.

Bembem Devi's Leadership and Social Impact

Beyond her achievements on the field, Oinam Bembem Devi stands as a symbol of transformative leadership and social influence in the domain of Indian sports. Her career exemplifies how athletic success can evolve into a broader movement for social change, empowerment, and community development. As captain of the Indian women's football team for more than a decade, Bembem's leadership extended far beyond tactical decision-making—it embodied the values of perseverance, teamwork, and self-belief, which inspired not only her teammates but also aspiring athletes across the country. Bembem Devi's leadership style was rooted in empathy, discipline, and an acute awareness of the challenges faced by women athletes in India. Coming from a modest background in Manipur, she understood the structural barriers—ranging from inadequate infrastructure and gender bias to limited financial support—that hindered women's participation in sports. Through her consistent excellence and dignified representation, she challenged these limitations, demonstrating that women could achieve international recognition even within constrained circumstances. Her example redefined societal perceptions of women's roles, particularly in northeastern India, where sports became a medium of both self-expression and empowerment. As captain, Bembem played a crucial role in building morale and nurturing younger players, creating a culture of solidarity and confidence within the national team. Her inclusive approach fostered collaboration and mutual respect, values that later became integral to the Indian women's football ecosystem. She also actively advocated for improved training facilities, fair remuneration, and institutional recognition for women footballers, using her visibility to bring attention to issues of gender inequality in Indian sports administration.

Outside the field, Bembem Devi's influence extended into community development and youth engagement. After her retirement, she transitioned into coaching and mentoring, working closely with AIFF and regional academies to cultivate the next generation of female footballers. Her leadership continues to resonate through initiatives aimed at grassroots football promotion, particularly among underprivileged and rural girls. Through these efforts, she embodies the ideals of sustainable empowerment—where individual success translates into collective progress. Bembem Devi's journey demonstrates that leadership in sports transcends victory; it lies in the capacity to inspire, to challenge systemic barriers, and to transform social attitudes. Her legacy thus represents a fusion of athletic excellence and social responsibility, making her not only a sporting legend but also a vital agent of gender empowerment in contemporary India

Bembem Devi and Gender Empowerment in Indian Society

The narrative of Oinam Bembem Devi transcends the realm of sports and enters the broader discourse of gender empowerment in Indian society. Her life and career represent a microcosm of the struggle for equality, recognition, and self-determination faced by women in patriarchal social structures. Through her sustained excellence and resilience, Bembem Devi has contributed significantly to reshaping the social imagination surrounding women's capabilities, both within and beyond the sporting arena. In India, where women's participation in public life has historically been limited by socio-cultural and institutional barriers, sports have emerged as a transformative arena for empowerment. Bembem Devi's achievements exemplify this transformation. Her visibility as a successful footballer from the northeastern state of Manipur challenged two intersecting marginalities: gender

and geography. As a woman from a region often perceived as peripheral to mainstream Indian identity, her success brought national attention to both Manipuri women and women's football. She demonstrated that excellence in sports can serve as a form of social mobility and empowerment, enabling women to claim space, voice, and respect in a male-dominated society. Her contributions also align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality), emphasizing the importance of women's participation in decision-making, leadership, and representation. By breaking gender stereotypes, Bembem has provided a powerful role model for young girls across India who aspire to pursue sports professionally. Her story has been particularly influential in rural and semi-urban regions, where traditional gender expectations often restrict girls' aspirations. Through her advocacy and visibility, she has inspired a cultural shift—encouraging families and institutions to view sports as a legitimate and empowering pursuit for women. Moreover, Bembem Devi's influence extends into symbolic and policy dimensions. The Arjuna Award (2017) and Padma Shri (2020) conferred upon her serve as institutional recognitions of women's contributions to sports, helping to normalize the idea of female athletic excellence within India's public consciousness. Her transition into coaching and mentorship has further institutionalized her legacy, ensuring that empowerment is not limited to her generation but continues to inspire systemic change. Ultimately, Bembem Devi's life narrative encapsulates the evolving relationship between sport, gender, and empowerment in India. Her journey illustrates how individual agency, when combined with cultural resilience and institutional recognition, can redefine national narratives of womanhood and equality—making her an enduring emblem of empowerment in contemporary Indian society

Legacy, Recognition, and Continuing Influence

The legacy of Oinam Bembem Devi extends far beyond her playing years, reflecting her profound impact on Indian sports, gender equality, and youth empowerment. Her enduring influence lies not only in her remarkable athletic accomplishments but also in her role as a trailblazer who reshaped the perception of women's participation in football and inspired institutional transformation within Indian sport. Bembem Devi's life story serves as a case study in how individual excellence can catalyze collective progress.

One of the most significant aspects of Bembem's legacy is her contribution to institutionalizing women's football in India. Her consistent advocacy for better infrastructure, recognition, and financial support for women footballers brought long-neglected issues to the forefront of national sports discourse. Her post-retirement engagement as a coach and mentor has been instrumental in developing young female athletes and promoting football in grassroots communities. She has worked closely with the All India Football Federation (AIFF), state associations, and private academies to nurture a new generation of players, particularly in the northeastern states, thereby ensuring continuity and growth in women's football.

Bembem's recognition at the national level underscores her exceptional contribution. She was conferred with the Arjuna Award in 2017, becoming only the second Indian woman footballer to receive this prestigious honor. In 2020, she received the Padma Shri, one of India's highest civilian awards, acknowledging her as a national role model and cultural icon. These accolades symbolize more than personal achievement; they represent institutional validation of women's capability and contribution to national pride. Her inclusion among the most influential Indian sportswomen affirms her role in broadening the horizon of gender representation in India's sporting narrative.

Her influence continues through her coaching career and public engagements. Bembem frequently participates in workshops, campaigns, and mentorship programs advocating for gender equality in sports. She uses her platform to highlight the structural inequalities faced by women athletes, including disparities in pay, media coverage, and opportunities. Through these efforts, she transforms her personal legacy into a movement for social change, reinforcing the idea that sports can serve as a catalyst for gender justice.

Ultimately, Bembem Devi's legacy embodies resilience, leadership, and transformation. She has not only expanded the boundaries of Indian women's football but also established herself as an enduring symbol of empowerment, proving that the field of play can be a powerful space for challenging norms, building equality, and inspiring generations to come.

Policy Implications and Future Directions

The case of Oinam Bembem Devi underscores the urgent need for comprehensive and gender-inclusive policies to promote women's participation and leadership in sports. Despite India's growing recognition of female athletes, systemic disparities in infrastructure, funding, and visibility persist. To sustain and expand the progress initiated by icons like Bembem Devi, both government and institutional frameworks must prioritize structural reform and gender mainstreaming in sports policy.

First, the government must strengthen existing mechanisms under the Khelo India and National Sports Development Code, ensuring equitable allocation of resources and transparent pathways for women's advancement in sports. Financial incentives, access to training facilities, and the creation of women-centric sports academies can significantly enhance participation and performance levels. Moreover, sports federations must integrate gender equality principles into their governance, addressing issues of representation and leadership among women athletes and administrators. Media also plays a crucial role in shaping public perception. Increasing media visibility for women's football and other female-led sports initiatives can normalize women's athletic excellence and attract sponsorship, thus fostering sustainability. Educational institutions should further embed sports-based empowerment within curricula, promoting gender-sensitive physical education from an early age. Finally, the symbolic presence of athletes like Bembem Devi can guide future discourse on gender and sports. By bridging individual inspiration with institutional reform, India can build a more inclusive sporting culture—one where talent and commitment, rather than gender, define success and national pride.

Conclusion

The life and career of Oinam Bembem Devi stand as a powerful testament to the transformative potential of sports as an instrument of social change and gender empowerment

in India. Her journey from the modest fields of Imphal to the international stage encapsulates the determination, resilience, and leadership that continue to define women's struggle for equality in the Indian sporting landscape. Bembem's contributions transcend her athletic achievements; they represent a broader challenge to entrenched gender hierarchies and a redefinition of women's roles in society. Through her success, Bembem Devi has illuminated the intersections between sport, society, and gender, demonstrating how individual excellence can foster collective empowerment. Her leadership as captain of the national team, her mentorship of younger players, and her post-retirement advocacy for women's sports illustrate a lifelong commitment to advancing equality. She has transformed football from a male-dominated sport into a platform for self-expression, pride, and identity for Indian women. Her recognition through the Arjuna Award (2017) and Padma Shri (2020) further legitimizes women's contributions to national development and cultural identity.

Bembem's legacy holds profound implications for the future of sports governance and gender policy in India. Her story underscores the need for sustained institutional support—through funding, training infrastructure, and equitable media representation—to ensure that women athletes receive the recognition and resources they deserve. Moreover, her career invites a broader societal reflection on how traditional perceptions of gender roles can be reconstructed through sports, education, and media advocacy. Ultimately, Bembem Devi's influence extends beyond football; she embodies a philosophy of empowerment through perseverance. Her life narrative illustrates how one individual's journey can inspire systemic change, proving that sports can be a catalyst for inclusivity, dignity, and national unity. As India aspires toward a more equitable and progressive society, the example of Bembem Devi reminds us that empowering women in sports is not merely a matter of representation—it is an essential component of nation-building and social transformation. Her enduring impact ensures that her name will continue to inspire generations of athletes who see in her story the embodiment of courage, excellence, and the unyielding spirit of Indian womanhood.

References

1. All India Football Federation. Look back 2017: Bembem conferred with the Arjuna, AIFF Media Team, 2017.
2. All India Football Federation. AIFF congratulates Bembem Devi on being named Padma Shri, AIFF Media Team, 2020.
3. Bandyopadhyay K, Majumdar B, editors. A social history of Indian football: Striving to score, Routledge, 2018.
4. Butler J. Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity, Routledge, 1990.
5. European Union, UN. Human Development Report 1994: New dimensions of human security, Oxford University Press for UNDP, 1994.
6. Hargreaves J. Sporting females: Critical issues in the history and sociology of women's sport, Routledge, 1994.
7. Kabeer N. Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment, Development and Change,1999:30(3):435–464.
8. Majumdar B, Bandhopadhyaya K. The gendered kick: Women's soccer in twentieth-century India, In, Majumdar B, Bandyopadhyay K, editors, Soccer & society, Routledge,2006:270–284.
9. Mills JH. "Nupilal": Women's war, football and the history of modern Manipur, In, Mills J, editor, Subaltern sports: Politics and sport in South Asia, Indian,2012:173–190.
10. Messner MA, Duncan MC, Jensen K. Separating the men from the girls: The gendered language of televised sports, Gender & Society,1993:7(1):121–137.
11. FIFA. Indian icon Bembem Devi relishing global spotlight, FIFA.com, 2020.
12. ESPN. Oinam Bembem Devi: "It's a shame I am not young enough to play the U-17 World Cup", ESPN, 2019.
13. The Hindu. The Iron Lady of Indian Football: Oinam Bembem Devi's inspiring journey, The Hindu, 2018.
14. Shail D. Bembem Devi: Indian football's unsung legend, Livemint, 2016.
15. SportsKeeda. Bembem Devi overjoyed after being announced as a recipient for the Padma Shri, SportsKeeda, 2020.
16. Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Press Information Bureau. Padma Awards 2020: List of awardees, Government of India, 2020.
17. Mills JH. "Manipur Rules Here": On the dominance of Manipuri women's football, International Review for the Sociology of Sport, 2006.
18. Bandyopadhyay K, Majumdar B. Forwards and backwards: Women's soccer in twentieth-century India, In, Soccer & Society, Routledge, 2006.
19. Chanu POC, Rakwal R. Achievement of women football in India — a review, Journal, 2025. Nanda A, Bose R. A study of challenges in women's football in Delhi-NCR, Journal, 2023.
20. Thapa N. Women, identity and sports in Northeast India: A sociological study, Asian Journal of Gender Studies,2022:10(2):61–74.