



# **Ngangom Bala Devi: The Football Icon of India**

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## **Abstract:**

This research article reflects Bala Devi's journey from playing football at the grassroots level in Manipur to becoming the first Asian woman footballer to play for a European club, Rangers (Scotland). Ngangom Bala Devi is regarded as an architect in Indian women's football. The three-time AIFF Women's Footballer of the Year, Bala Devi, is the first Indian woman to score 50 international goals. Through the use of qualitative research techniques, such as biographical analysis and secondary data review, the study focuses on Bala Devi's leadership in the national team, her influence on the growth of women's football, and her role in motivating young female athletes throughout India, including challenges and Comebacks. In conclusion, a brief overview highlights Bala Devi's importance as a role model, remarkable achievements, honours and impact on Indian football.

**Keywords:** Bala Devi, football, India, Rangers FC, Manipur.

## **Introduction**

Bala Devi was born in Irengbam, a small village of Manipur, a northeastern state of India. Since she was 15, she has played for India. She grew up admiring Brazilian football players like Ronaldo and Ronaldinho, but Oinam Bembem Devi, a Manipuri lady soccer player who is referred to as the "*Durga of Indian football*," became her real idol. Bala, then just 11 years old, had the chance to play with Bembem Devi at the 2002 National Games after briefly competing at the district level for her club, ICOSA (Irengbam Cultural and Sporting Association). Following several successful national championship performances, Bala eventually joined the Indian national under-17 team in 2005, which participated in the Pre-Olympic Qualifiers in South Korea and scored a hat-trick (Vats, 2023). In an interview with The Times of India, Bala Devi recalled, "I used to play with the boys when I was younger. Then, a new organisation called ICOSA was formed for girls in my neighbourhood (Irengbam)." She remarked, "I joined the club and worked my way up to play for the national team." Devi, who conducted the trials in November, claimed that the

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coaches' response provided her a clue that she would be given an opportunity. "The coaches used to compliment me when I demonstrated my abilities. Having grown up seeing Bembem Devi and others, Bala stated, "It gave me the confidence to do well." Bala won three AIFF Women's Player of the Year awards in 2015, 2016, and 2020 (All India Football Federation, 2021). Additionally, when Ngangom Bala Devi signed an 18-month contract with Rangers FC, a Scottish team, she became the first Indian woman to play professional football (Sudarshan, 2020). Furthermore, known as the "*Goal Machine*" of Indian women's football, Bala Devi achieved a remarkable feat when she became the first Indian woman to score her 50th goal for her country against Pakistan in the 2024 SAFF Women's Championship in Nepal (Chakraborty, 2024). In addition to her football career, Ngangom Bala Devi, a three-time All India Football Federation (AIFF) lady "*footballer of the year*" winner and former captain of the Indian women's football team, was appointed as an inspector in the Manipur Police Department (Khumukcham, 2023). Rise from a small village in Manipur, and represent India internationally. Bala became one of the best living examples of an Indian women's football player after overcoming many obstacles, barriers, and challenges. In the end, she turned into a role model for upcoming Indian women's football players. She is now regarded as a living icon who motivates youth and upcoming generations of football players, irrespective of gender.

### **Objective of the study**

The objective of the study is to examine the awards, achievements, recognition and honours of Bala Devi in the field of football.

### **Methodology**

Data analysis is carried out using the qualitative method. The required secondary data will be gathered from publications, books, articles, newspapers, reports, and personal records pertaining to Bala Devi. Statistical methods including tabulation is used for data analysis.

### **Journey of early childhood to national team**

For the Bala Devi family, football was a tradition rather than just a game. Together with her twin sister Nandi, Bala took on the fields near their home after receiving her first teachings from her father. Bala's potential was immediately apparent as a child growing up in Manipur, where football is played with a lot of passion. She began representing her club, ICSA, in district-level competitions at the age of eleven. She was selected for the Manipur Under-19 squad within a year, and she won the national championship's player of the tournament award. She earned a hat-trick in 2005 while playing for the India Under-17 squad in the



Pre-Olympic Qualifiers in South Korea. She competed in the AFC Qualifiers in Vietnam that same year for the senior squad. Another Manipuri football player known as the Durga of Indian football, Bembem Devi, was highly regarded by Bala. A pivotal moment in Bala's career occurred when Bembem resigned at the conclusion of the 2016 South Asian Games in Shillong, giving the armband to Bala. They played their first game together in 2002. She made sure that Bembem's final game versus Nepal would be remembered by scoring important goals (Santhosh, 2024). At the age of fifteen, she made her debut for the Indian national women's team in 2005. With 52 goals in 58 games since 2010, Bala Devi is the leading goal scorer for the Indian women's national team (McKeever, 2020).

### **Road to European Club Rangers**

As the first Indian women football player to earn a professional contract, Ngangom Bala Devi agreed to an 18-month contract with Rangers Women's FC. She joined Rangers Women, becoming the first women Asian international (Pathak, 2020).

The next generation of football players would be greatly impacted by Bala Devi's European tour, according to Ashalata Devi, captain of the Indian women's football team. After joining Rangers Women FC in January, striker Bala Devi became the first Indian women football player to earn a full-time professional deal with a European team. The team competes in the top tier in Scotland, the Scottish Women's Premier League. "This is a huge opportunity for Bala Di to play for Rangers because it teaches us how to play overseas and for the following generation as well" Ashalata Devi stated in an interview with the All-India Football Federation (Venkat,2020). Former national women's football team captain and top scorer for India, Bala Devi, is preparing for a new challenge on the field. "I want to make India proud," the 29-year-old forward Bala Devi said to the BBC. Despite playing for India since she was 15, her goal is to "motivate the next generation of [Indian] players" throughout her tenure at Rangers (BBC News, 2020). On 29 January 2020, she made history when the Rangers declared that they had signed Bala Devi. Bangalore FC, which has a partnership with Rangers FC helped to make the historic deal happen. Bala Devi said she is excited to start at Rangers and is wearing the same number 10 shirt that she wears for India (BBC News, 2020). In Rangers FC's 9-0 against Motherwell FC in the Scottish Women's Premier League, star Indian football player Bala Devi scored her debut goal for the team and became the first Indian footballer to score in one of Europe's premier professional leagues. She scored her first goal for Rangers FC in the 85th minute after coming off the bench in the 65<sup>th</sup> minutes (Press Trust of India, 2020).



On 29 January 2020 in a post on X (formerly Twitter), Bala received accolades from former Indian men's football team captain Sunil Chhetri: *"You're going where no Indian woman footballer has gone, and you will be carrying the dreams of us all. Good luck, Bala. Do us proud."*

### **First Indian Women Scored 50 International Goals**

At the 2024 SAFF Women's Championship, Bala Devi scored her 50th goal against Pakistan. She plays forward for the Manipur Police Team as well as the Indian national team. Bala Devi has created history as the first Indian woman to score 50 goals for her nation (ANI News, 2024).

### **Bala Devi's International Goals**

No.	Date	Venue	Opponent	Score	Result	Competition
1	20 Oct 2007	Tau Devi Lal Stadium, Gurgaon, India	Iran	3-1	3-1	2008 AFC Women's Asian Cup qualification
2	13 Dec 2010	Cox's Bazar Stadium, Bangladesh	Bhutan	1-0	18-0	2010 SAFF Women's Championship
7	15 Dec 2010	—	Sri Lanka	1-0	7-0	—
8	17 Dec 2010	—	Bangladesh	1-0	6-0	—
11	21 Dec 2010	—	Pakistan	1-0	8-0	—
14	18 Mar 2011	Bangabandhu National Stadium, Bangladesh	Bangladesh	1-0	3-0	2012 Summer Olympics qualification
17	14 Sep 2014	Incheon, South Korea	Maldives	3-0	15-0	2014 Asian Games
19	13 Nov 2014	Islamabad, Pakistan	Maldives	1-0	8-0	2014 SAFF Women's Championship
23	15 Nov 2014	—	Bangladesh	3-1	5-1	—
26	17 Nov 2014	—	Afghanistan	2-0	12-0	—

30	19 Nov 2014	—	Sri Lanka	2–0	5–0	—
35	13 Feb 2016	Shillong, India	Bangladesh	2–0	5–1	2016 South Asian Games
38	7 Apr 2017	Pyongyang, North Korea	Uzbekistan	1–4	1–7	2018 AFC Women's Asian Cup qualification
43	29 Aug 2019	Tashkent, Uzbekistan	Uzbekistan	1–0	1–5	Friendly
44	3 Dec 2019	Pokhara, Nepal	Maldives	2–0	5–0	2019 South Asian Games
50	17 Oct 2024	Kathmandu, Nepal	Pakistan	3–0	5–2	2024 SAFF Women's Championship
‡	4 Aug 2019	L'Alcúdia, Spain	Mauritania	3–0	7–0	2019 COTIF Cup

Sources: (Shukla, 2024).

### Achievement and Honours

India	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>SAFF Women's Championship: 2010, 2014, 2016</li> <li>South Asian Games Gold medal: 2016, 2019</li> </ul>
Eastern Sporting Union	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Indian Women's League: 2016–17</li> </ul>
Manipur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rajmata Jijabai Trophy: 2006–07, 2007–08, 2008–09, 2013–14, 2019–20, 2023–24</li> <li>National Games Gold medal: 2022</li> </ul>
New Radiant WSC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>FAM Women's Football Championship: 2015</li> </ul>
Individual Awards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Indian Women's League Top Scorer: 2017–18, 2018–19</li> <li>AIFF Women's Player of the Year: 2014, 2015, 2020–21</li> <li>AFC International Player of the Week: December 2020, May 2021</li> <li>FAM Women's Football Championship Best Player: 2015</li> <li>FAM Women's Football Championship Top Scorer: 2015 (with 25 goals)</li> <li>Rajmata Jijabai Trophy MVP: 2023–24</li> </ul>

Sources: (Wikipedia, 2025).

### Appointment as inspector of sports in Manipur Police



The only international women's football player from Asia who played in European football Club for Rangers Women's FC, Ngangom Bala Devi was honoured by then-Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh, and Bala Devi was appointed as an Inspector in the Manipur state police on January 20, 2023 and the pinning ceremony was held at the CM Secretariat. (India Today NE, 2023). She also received a renowned prize in honor of her exceptional achievements to football. Additionally, this is a clear example of the state government's support for female athletes.

## **Findings**

- Oinam Bembem Devi, a Manipuri woman soccer player known as the "Durga of Indian football," became Bala true idol despite being inspired by Brazilian football players like Ronaldo and Ronaldinho.
- In 2015, 2016, and 2020, Bala was named the All-India Football Federation Women's Player of the Year.
- Ngangom Bala Devi signed an 18-month contract with Rangers Women's FC, becoming the first Indian female football player to receive a professional contract.
- Bala Devi became the first Asian woman to play for a European football club when she joined Rangers Women's FC.
- In one of the top professional leagues in Europe, Bala Devi became the first Indian player to score. She came off the bench in the 65th minute and scored her first goal for Rangers FC in the 85th.
- During the 2024 SAFF Women's Championship, Bala Devi scored her 50th goal against Pakistan. Both the Manipur Police team and the Indian national team she plays as a forward.
- Bala Devi has created history as the first Indian woman to score 50 goals for her country.
- International football player Ngangom Bala Devi was appointed as an Inspector in the Manipur state police.

## **Conclusion**

Bala's football career, which took him from a small town to the European club Rangers FC, was more than just a personal triumph; it was about motivating the next generation of Indian women football players. Bala Devi is a legendary character in Indian women's football history; she is the architect of Indian football. She also presents and illustrates the extent of women's football in India. She now serves as an inspiration to female athletes in Indian society. Beyond her honours, accomplishments, and records, her impact will continue to influence Indian women's football.



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### Abbreviation

- ICSA = Irengbam Cultural and Sporting Association
- BBC = British Broadcasting Corporation
- AIFF = All India Football Federation
- FC = Football Club

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