

The role of media in promoting traditional sports in Assam

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Abstract

Like any other state of India, Assam too has its share of traditional games and sports, which are bound securely to the heritage and culture of the land. As far back as in 1746 A.D, the Ahom Dynasty which ruled Assam for about 600 years, had built the Rong Ghar, meaning "Amusement House", which is considered the oldest amphitheatre in Asia. This was the royal sports-pavilion from which the Ahom kings and nobles witnessed games like buffalo fights and other traditional sports at the Rupahi Pathar, which is the field surrounding the Rong Ghar, specially during the Rongali Bihu festival, in the Ahom capital, Rangpur. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the role of media in promoting the traditional games and sports of Assam, many of which, today, are on the verge of being forgotten. The methodology which was adopted for the study was that of an Indepth Study, with an exploratory approach. The major finding of the study had been that - Media is a reflection of the Society and if something is missing in the society itself, it can never be found in the media. In an Indepth Study, generalizations about the results usually cannot be made, because small samples are chosen and random sampling methods are not used. In-depth study however, provide valuable information for the subject, particularly when supplementing other methods of data collection, in Qualitative Research. This holds true for the present study also. However the results of this study can be of great importance in starting the endeavour to give a new lease of life to the dying and near extinct traditional games and sports of Assam. Traditional Games and Sports are an Identity Landmark and Milestone in the evolution of the Culture, Heritage and Tradition of the ancient land of Pragjyotishpur, now Assam.

Keywords: Promotion, Traditional Games & Sports, Media, Role

Introduction of the study

Most of the countries in the world do have their own games, that they have played for many centuries and in the long run, some of the games have become very popular and also considered for inclusion in the major International Sporting Events. For instance Judo, Hockey and Tae-kwon-do were the indigenous games of Japan, India and Korea respectively, which have now become major sports disciplines in Olympics. Off late the Government of India has also taken various projects and schemes to popularise indigenous games of the country. The only indigenous game of India which is played throughout the country is Kabaddi. The game of Kabaddi has also been included in Asian Games, where India has won consecutive gold medals.

In Assam, before the introduction of modern games and sports, various Traditional Games were played in different communities in the rural areas as recreation during leisure time, particularly after the harvesting period was over. These games have distinctive names and style of playing. Assam might be having more than fifty indigenous games. Among them the most

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popular are DHOP KHEL, PENG KHEL, KORI KHEL, HUDU GUDU, TANG-GUTI KHEL, MOH JUJ (BUFFALO-FIGHT), KONI JUJ (EGG-FIGHT), BULBULI JUJ (NIGHTINGALE FIGHT), NAO-KHEL (BOAT RACING), GHILA KHEL, MALLA JUDDHA (WRESTLING), RASHI TANA (TUG-OF-WAR), TEL KHUTA (CLIMBING AN OILY POLE), TANGON TONA, KOLOH LOI DOUR, TEKELI BHONGA & DIGHAL-THENGIA DOUR (RUNNING ON STILTS), to name a few.



A traditional sport - TEL KHUTA, in progress during Bihu festival.

National Sports Promotion Endeavour:

The major constraint in taking modern sports activity to the grassroots level is the very limited availability of basic sports infrastructure / facilities in the country. Further, the existing base too is highly skewed, as it is largely concentrated in urban areas, which account for not more than 25 per cent of the population. The remaining 75 per cent of the population, which largely lives in rural areas, is deprived of even rudimentary sporting facilities. The rural-urban gap and also that within the urban areas, especially the poorer areas, is getting even wider with large-scale augmentation of sports infrastructure in a few selected cities in connection with hosting of major national and international sporting events. Similarly, private sector participation in promoting sport activity is also extremely limited. As per some estimates of the University Grants Commission, not more than 30 million students are afforded sports and games facilities in schools, colleges and universities. Perhaps another 20 million youth are afforded such opportunities through youth clubs, sports clubs, etc. This only shows that sports is yet to become part of the formal education system, which still remains largely academic-centric. 700 million youth (including children below the age of 13 years) have little or marginal access to sporting facilities. Of these, about 500 million represent rural youth (including children below the age of 13 years), who are relatively even more deprived than their urban counterparts. Universalisation of sports cannot be achieved without adequate thrust on development of sports in rural areas.

This has been strongly advocated by the Standing Committee on Human Resource Development in their Thirty Fourth Report, which, inter alia, states that, 'the Government should plan the development of sports in a phased manner so that necessary infrastructure is built up over a period of time'. This aspect has also been highlighted by the Working Group on Youth Affairs and Sports for the formulation of the Tenth Five Year Plan, which, while referring to thrust areas for the Plan, observed that, "there is an immediate need to create a network of basic sports infrastructure throughout the country" and ensure proper access to it "to enable more people to participate in sports thereby broadening our base for scouting of talent". The Twenty Point Programme also speaks of Yuva Vikas or Youth Development by providing universal access to sports in rural and urban areas. The draft Comprehensive National Sports Policy, 2008 prepared by this Ministry proposes the implementation of a nation-wide rural sports infrastructure scheme christened the Panchayat Yuva Krida Aur Khel Abhiyan.

The Panchayat Yuva Krida Aur Khel Abhiyan (PYKKA) aims at achieving the above mentioned objectives by providing basic sports infrastructure and equipment at the panchayat level and encouraging sports and games in rural areas through annual competitions at the block and district levels. PYKKA will help States in promoting sport at the grassroots level, which they have not been able to achieve on their own so far due to severe resource constraints. It will also deepen and widen the seedbed of sporting talent, leading to better performances by our sportspersons in national and international events. But even the PYKKA endeavour does not promote the traditional games and sports of our motherland, but rather places emphasis on taking the modern popular games to the grassroots level.

The other objectives of the National Sports Policy, such as integration of sports with the formal education system and a holistic approach to the promotion of excellence in sports, needs to be simultaneously pursued by connecting sports activity at the grassroots level with competitions that already exist at the district and state levels.

The New Role of Mass-Media in the Construction of Sports Values:

The popularisation of Western Sports in Eastern Countries and the Third World Countries has been largely contributed by the invasion into the territories of these countries by Television Channels of the West.

Stadiums turned into "Television Studios". The set up of any modern stadium must include adequate and convenient spaces for television cameras and production facilities for its crews. Again the presence of television cameras in the stadiums further dictate the decorations and embellishments that must be present in any modern stadium, to satisfy the needs of a colourful television coverage and the accompanying spectacle. Business did not stay far, and advertisement hoardings began to make their presence felt in a big way, inside the stadium, to get due focus of the television cameras. A sport's popularity no longer depended on that sport's inherent spectacle but rather by its spectacular coverage by the television cameras. Thus began a new era in sports, wherein national and international sporting events had to adapt and time themselves according to the dictates of the television channels covering them, so as to avoid

major sporting events overlapping with each other and each of them getting distinct and adequate live coverage in television. Television on its part began to manipulate the coverage to make it all the more spectacular, to get the 'maximum eyeballs', as 'big money' began to get involved in popular sporting events, with the corporate world not losing the chance to make the best of every single minute in those events, to further their business interests. In these scheme of things in the sporting arena today, traditional games and sports, stood very little chance of survival, as they were still very rudimentary and were bereft of all the glitter, glory, dazzle and razzmatazz of the popular sports of today. But the fact remains that all the popular modern sports of today, had been traditional games and sports of some countries at some time, long back in the history of human civilisation and strategic promotion of them led to those, getting global acceptance, today. Thus with due promotion, many more of the existing traditional games and sports can well hope to have a global presence, in the years to come. But if those traditional games and sports, that still survive in whatever miniscule presence they may have, are not cared for, protected and promoted, they will be totally wiped off from the face of the earth. It is with that approach that the current study was undertaken. In the light of the above, this micro study attempted to find out the role, media was playing in promoting indigenous sports, which still today are quite popular in the rural areas in contrast to urban areas and do not need any of the sophisticated infrastructure of modern games. They are very much rooted into the lifestyle of the indigenous people and have an identity tag for the people of the land.

Aim of the Study

- To study the contribution of media in creating awareness about Traditional Sports in Assam.
- To study the role of media in popularising Traditional Sports in Assam.
- To study the feasibility of Traditional Games finding a berth in National Games.

Methodology

It was chosen to interview "in depth" two personalities well connected with the promotion of Traditional Games and Sports of Assam - MD. TAHER AHMED, Vice-President of the Dragon Boat Federation of India and an ardent promoter of Indigenous Sports of Assam and MR. PREMODHAR SARMAH, the Second Sports Journalist of Assam and a Veteran Sports Commentator.

Analysis of the qualitative data-

Md. Taher Ahmed was instrumental in organising the first ever traditional sports carnival - "Amar Khel, Amar Utsav" at the Lataxil Playground and the Dighali Pukhuri (Tank) in Guwahati on 24th May, 2008. The carnival had got adequate publicity in the media. His idea was to exhibit those indigenous games to the people of the capital of Assam many of whom had not seen any of those before. Ahmed was of the view that unless "professionalism" was ingrained into the Traditional Games, the games had a very bleak future. Some of the traditional games do not even find a place in the "Rural Games", which has a regular calendar, because of the lack of "competitiveness" in them. He cited the example of the Chinese people, who have put in so much of professionalism into "Dragon Boat Racing", which is an

indigenous game of the China, that today it has found a place in the Asian Games.

Ahmed also felt that media does give space to Traditional Sporting Events, when ever they are organised, but the saddest thing is that they are hardly being organised in a formal way. It is more often than not organised only very informally during festive occasions in Assam.

Ahmed said that it was now for the organisers to come together, once they have come to know from media the whereabouts of these Traditional Sporting Events, though informally, to chalk out a well documented rule book, as these games have minor variations at different locations of the state. Then only can the next step of holding these sporting events formally, can begin.

Ahmed further went on to say that the different media houses can play a major role in setting up a good archive, if they contribute their documentation, be it their writings or their recordings of the Traditional Sporting events to the apex body of the organisers of Traditional Games, which will be of tremendous help in getting recognition of these games and in training upcoming keen sportsmen in these games.

Mr. Premadhar Sarmah was of the opinion that the Traditional Games were introduced amongst the public in Assam sometime during the long AHOM RULE in Assam and had been very popular ever since. It was only after the advent of the British in our soil that Traditional Games started to take a back seat. The Britishers were successful in rallying for their games in our land, though they were a miniscule minority. Thus cricket becomes the most popular sport in India today. But as a true patriot, Mr. Sarmah, when he was the Sports Editor of the Assamese Daily - "Dainik Axom", had written regularly, once week, on every Sunday, on traditional games and sports of Assam from 1967 to 1980. That he felt was done to create awareness about the games of our soil, and also to promote them. Today media chases glamour and that is something which is yet to be found in Traditional Sports.

Mr. Sarmah was of the view that media is a reflection of the society, and if something is missing in the society itself it can never be found in the media. He said had seen for himself how MALKHAM, a traditional sport of Maharashtra, had a regular tournament for itself in the Shivaji Park, in Mumbai. And even Cricket is very popular there, the Indian Cricket Team having some notable captains from Maharashtra. The point is people should have a sense of patriotism for the indigenous games and should take keen interest to preserve them, notwithstanding their love for intercontinental games like Cricket and Football. Here he sees a great role of media in campaigning for the traditional games of our land.

Mr. Sarmah further felt that in the annual MEDIA SPORTS FESTIVAL, held at Guwahati, where the mediemen play amongst themselves under the banner of their respective media houses, traditional games too should be included as this Sports Festival gets good coverage in the media and thus a good opportunity to promote the traditional games of Assam.

Findings and Conclusion

The finding of the study is that first and foremost the organisers of the Traditional Games and Sports resident at different locations of the state of Assam must get together and for that they can take the help of media reportings of Traditional Games and Sporting Events and even seek contact details of the organisers from the reporters, if need be.

Then after a consensus has been reached regarding the rules and regulations of the games so as to standardise it throughout the state, they must chalk out a calendar of Traditional Games and Sports. Then only can "competitiveness" be ingrained into those games. Media must then play its role of promoting the traditional games by giving wide publicity to the decided calendar so as to attract talents from the length and breadth of the state, into it.

Promotion of the traditional games by way of regular features and articles on them will then automatically follow in the media. The regular tournament, needless to say, is bound to get time and space in the media, as and when the games progresses.

Professionalism will then follow. And then its entry into North-East Games and then into National Games will only be a matter of time.

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