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Before the stadiums, contracts and national records, Sabitra Bhandari played barefoot on a muddy field in Lamjung. The ball might be made from bundled socks. Her school clothes collected dirt, and the morning assembly made that difficult to hide.

There were cattle to feed and fodder to collect before class. Football was fitted into the spaces left by family work and social expectations. A girl running after a ball was still unusual enough to attract disapproval.

Bhandari kept playing. Years later, known across Nepal as Samba, she became the country’s leading international goalscorer and the

first Nepali footballer—woman or man—to appear in a top-tier European league. The distance from the village field to France and then Australia was not a single leap. It was a series of moves into places where no Nepali player had established a path.

The girl with the ball

Bhandari was born in 1996 in Simpani, Lamjung, north-west of Kathmandu. Her family farmed, and childhood responsibilities followed the rhythm of rural life. Football entered without formal coaching or equipment.

She played with boys because organised girls' teams were scarce. Speed and persistence were more immediately useful than technique. If she wanted the ball, she had to win it in spaces where nobody was required to include her.

A local women's tournament created the first opening. Bhandari assembled school friends and entered. In the final, she scored both goals in a 2-0 victory, including a run that began near halfway and continued past defenders before she shot from distance.

The performance caught the attention of referee Shukra Tamang, who encouraged her to go to Kathmandu and pursue football seriously. Talent had finally met someone who could identify the next door.

Kathmandu and APF

Moving towards the capital meant entering a more structured sporting world. Bhandari joined the Armed Police Force club, one of Nepal’s strongest women’s teams. Institutional clubs have long provided athletes with employment and regular training in a country where professional domestic leagues are inconsistent.

She developed from an instinctive village player into a striker who understood movement, timing and finishing. The nickname Samba connected her with the attacking flair associated with Brazilian football, but her game was built on directness. She ran behind defences, attacked loose balls and treated the penalty area as a place to act before hesitation arrived.

Her Nepal debut came in 2014. Goals followed quickly, sometimes in large numbers against developing regional teams. International scoring records can be distorted by uneven opposition, but Bhandari’s value was not limited to easy matches. She remained Nepal’s central threat when stronger teams knew exactly whom they needed to stop.

The national team’s repeated pursuit of a South Asian title created both hope and frustration. Nepal reached finals and came close, yet the regional trophy remained elusive. Bhandari’s goals could carry the side through rounds, but one player could not solve every structural weakness in the women’s game.

India opens the professional route

The Indian Women's League gave Bhandari a larger domestic stage. With Sethu FC, she scored 15 goals in seven matches during the 2018–19 season and helped the club win the title. At Gokulam Kerala, her scoring became even more prolific.

India mattered because it offered repeated competitive matches, professional expectations and opponents from beyond Nepal's limited club calendar. Bhandari was no longer only representing national pride; she was responsible for delivering results under contract.

The numbers were extraordinary, but the experience also exposed the difference between dominating one level and preparing for the next. A striker improves through defenders who reduce her time, teammates who demand sharper combinations and coaches who analyse weaknesses rather than celebrate reputation.

The injury

In February 2021, Bhandari tore the anterior cruciate ligament in her right knee during a domestic match. For a player whose game depended on acceleration and changes of direction, the injury threatened the foundation of her career.

ACL recovery is long and psychologically difficult. Surgery repairs the structure; rehabilitation rebuilds strength, balance and trust.

The athlete must perform movements that once happened automatically while remembering the moment the knee failed.

Bhandari underwent treatment and spent more than a year away from competitive football. Public attention moves quickly during absence. Records belong to the past, while a younger player can take the available place.

She returned in 2022 and resumed scoring. The comeback was not simply evidence of toughness. It reflected monotonous rehabilitation, careful workload and the willingness to accept that progress would arrive in small measurements before it appeared as a goal.

Israel, interrupted

In 2023, Bhandari signed with Hapoel Ra’anana in Israel, becoming the first Nepali woman to play in the country’s top division. She scored regularly in her opening appearances, another sign that her Indian success could travel.

The spell ended for reasons outside football. The 7 October attacks and the war that followed made normal sporting life impossible. Bhandari returned to Nepal, leaving a contract and momentum behind.

Athletes are often told to control what they can. War reveals the limit of that advice. Fitness, form and ambition cannot stabilise a

country. The interruption added another uncertain turn to a career already shaped by injury and a fragile domestic system.

France and the European first

In February 2024, Bhandari joined En Avant Guingamp in France. Two days after signing, she came off the bench against Bordeaux and became the first Nepali footballer to play in a European top-flight league.

The debut was a national milestone, but for Bhandari it was also an assessment. European football brought faster decisions, stronger defenders and a tactical environment where goals alone did not define a forward’s contribution. Pressing, positioning and combination play affected whether she stayed on the field.

She scored her first French league goal soon afterwards. During the 2024–25 season, she became Guingamp’s leading scorer, including important goals against major opponents. The performances turned a symbolic signing into a competitive case: she was not in Europe only to be the first.

Her move also widened the imagination of Nepali footballers. Europe had often appeared as a television product rather than a reachable workplace. Bhandari’s minutes and goals gave younger players a route they could name, even if the pathway remained difficult.

A new league in Australia

In July 2025, Wellington Phoenix signed Bhandari on a two-year contract for the A-League Women. The move took her from Brittany to a competition spanning Australia and New Zealand, with a different climate, style and travel burden.

Her first league goals arrived against Sydney FC in December. She scored twice and assisted another, becoming the first Nepali player to score in the A-League Women. The match reflected what had defined her career: once the first goal created space, she looked for the next action rather than stopping at the milestone.

Professional migration brings opportunities, but it also means repeated adaptation. A player must learn new teammates, coaching language, food, recovery routines and defensive habits. Home is experienced through short international windows and messages sent across time zones.

For Nepal, every club season abroad carries a tension. Bhandari gains sharper competition, while the national team depends heavily on her availability. Her development abroad can lift the side, but it also highlights how far Nepal’s domestic women’s league must travel.

More than one goalscorer

Bhandari’s international total has made her Nepal’s leading scorer by a wide margin. Records offer recognition, but they can create dependence. Opponents build plans around containing her, and national expectations can reduce a team game to one forward’s finishing.

Nepal needs more than Samba to move beyond regional near-misses. Young attackers need regular leagues. Midfielders need competitive minutes. Coaches need time and analysis. Players need contracts that allow football to be a profession rather than a temporary camp before a tournament.

Bhandari has spoken openly about those shortages. Her own escape from them should not make the system appear successful. Exceptional individuals often reveal institutional weakness precisely because they must travel so far to find the competition they need.

The path behind her

The most useful part of being first is not the label. It is the path left visible afterwards. Bhandari’s career now connects a Lamjung school field with clubs in Kathmandu, India, Israel, France and Wellington.

None of those moves was inevitable. A local referee had to recognise her. Institutional football had to provide a place. Foreign clubs had to look beyond familiar markets. After injury, rehabilitation had to work. At each stage, ability required access.

Girls in Nepal can now point to a Nepali woman playing professional football abroad. They can study her movement and see a contract as a possible goal. But inspiration will matter most if it is supported by pitches, coaches, leagues and families willing to let girls use them.

Samba began with a ball made from socks and the fear of dirty clothes at assembly. She now plays in stadiums far from home, carrying a name known across South Asian football.

She is still chasing the next goal. Behind her, the field has become wider.

Featured image: Football training scene. Illustrative photograph from Unsplash, used under the Unsplash free-use licence.

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