

# Modern sports in Northern Bengal in Colonial Period

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## **Abstract:**

India has a rich heritage of sporting culture. The history of sports in India has increasingly come under the focus of academic research in the last two decades or so. However, it is important to understand that without a careful consideration of sports' regional/ local origins, developments and specificities, the construction of its wider national history would not be viable. North Bengal is an ethnological museum of India. As Bengal's fortunes in the arena of modern sports come to be increasingly documented, sporting activities of northern Bengal still await academic investigation. The present paper is an attempt to explore the Popularisation of Modern Sports in North Bengal in colonial period.

**Key Words: North Bengal, Games-ethic, European Club, Recreation, Popular culture**

## **Introduction:**

According to Charu Chandra Sanyal, the portion of West Bengal from the Ganges on the South and the Himalayas on the North is called North Bengal. It consists of the districts Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, West Dinajpur and Malda. All under the political jurisdiction of Jalpaiguri district.<sup>1</sup> In the colonial period the word 'North Bengal' used to denote the northern part of undivided Bengal, consisting of eight districts of Rajshahi division (Rajshahi, Bogra, Pabna, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Malda, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling) and the princely state of Cooch Behar. The area of my study - Northern Bengal, the Indian portion after the Partition of India, lies in the lap of the northern part of West Bengal, comprising six districts – Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur and Malda. With the establishment of colonial rule in northern Bengal, different types of administrative set up and socio- economic and cultural atmosphere diffused. Modern sports were introduced in heterogeneous ways in different parts of this region. In the hills of Darjeeling sport was looked upon as part of British imperial enterprise called 'games ethic'; in Dooars and Terai as forms of leisure; and in the rest of northern Bengal as a part of popular culture.

North Bengal is inhabited by mixed stocks of people comprising various ethno-racial and linguistic groups who have distinctions from the people of Southern Bengal. The area is the best example of pluralistic culture representing the cultural diversity of the whole of India in the form of a mini-India. Colonial rule came in northern Bengal much later than southern Bengal. The British came to India with their new modes of economic, educational, and cultural norms. The British rule had its impact on the traditional pattern of recreation including games, sports and allied activities. This may be defined as a new type of induced

institutionalized games that altered to a large extent the passive non-induced games and sports of the earlier era. The indigenous sports in the rural culture were marked by lack of institutionalization and communication. The Christian missionaries, public school teachers, civil servants, and tea planters initiated western sports in an institutionalized way. The royal family of Cooch Behar patronized modern sports not only in Cooch Behar but also in Calcutta. A number of public schools and clubs on the western pattern were established by them, and these institutions also took initiative to popularize modern sports in different parts of northern Bengal. On the other hand, a number of enthusiastic local people took initiatives to popularize modern sports.

The concept of 'games ethic' as part of their imperial or colonial project was started by the British in Bengal as well as in Northern Bengal. The most overarching and widely popular theory of 'games ethic' was popularised by J. A. Mangan. According to Mangan, this theory of 'games ethic' had shared with the notion of 'muscular Christianity'<sup>2</sup>, propagated by moral missionary, a firm belief in sport as a tool of imperial persuasion. He pointed that the so-called 'games ethic' preached in the Victorian public schools, was a useful tool of colonial purpose. In late 19<sup>th</sup> century India, too, the public/missionary schools and the headmasters, teachers and missionaries who ran them used sports as a moral tool as part of a broader imperial project. As Mangan neatly sums up:

The game was considered by the colonizers to carry with it a series of moral lessons, regarding hard work and perseverance, about team loyalty and obedience to authority and, indeed involving concepts of correct physical development and 'manliness'. As such, it was used as key weapon in the battle to win over local populations and to begin transforming them from their 'uncivilised' and 'heathen' state to one where they might be considered 'civilized' and 'Christian'.<sup>3</sup>

Christian Missionaries played a significant role in education in North Bengal, especially in the Darjeeling district. At this stage names of various Christian missionary societies - General Baptist Missionary Society, London Missionary Society, Church Missionary Society, Scottish Missionary Society etc. may be mentioned. Christian missionaries were strongly influenced by the desire to convert indigenous people.<sup>4</sup> They used education as a powerful tool in the process of conversion and established a number of educational institutions that integrated modern games into its curriculum. As a result, modern sports began to be popularized in the Darjeeling hill region. St. Pauls School, St. Joseph's College and Mount Hermon School in Darjeeling; Goethals Memorial School, Victoria and Dowhill School in Kurseong; and Graham's Home and SUMI in Kalimpong played important role in this process. After completing education from these schools, many students in later life earned a reputation in sports at national and international level.<sup>5</sup> Among them Jerry Basi (football), C. H. Gurung<sup>6</sup> (hockey), Haripada Guha (hockey & badminton), Anne Lumsden (hockey), Michael Fereira (billiards) became prominent sporting personalities.<sup>7</sup>

With the establishment of colonial rule in Northern Bengal British civil servants, mostly reared in an English public-school spirit, were greatly inspired by the games ethic and muscular Christianity propagated by the moral missionary, tried to create a refreshing cultural ambience in the places they worked, where sport

occupied a pivotal role. Peter McWilliam, SDO of Alipurduar and John Archibold Polwhele, Manager and Engineer-in-chief of Bengal-Dooars Railway, Domohani at Jalpaiguri initiated a range of cultural welfare activities that included the foundation of schools and cultural organizations and patronage of sporting clubs. While sport was a moral tool to inculcate many qualities among locals, it was a more a cultural bond for both McWilliam and Polwhele. They had hopes of sport as a bond bringing together not only Indians, but Englishmen and Indians, bringing them together by means of shared enjoyed experiences. Under the patronage of McWilliam and Polwhele, Alipurduar Town Club and BDR (Bengal-Dooars Railway) respectively earned fame in football in Northern Bengal.

The royal family of Cooch Behar played an important role in patronizing the western sports culture in Bengal. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, himself educated in England, was inspired by the British games and the ethics and ethos associated with them. He was fond of shooting. His granddaughter Gayatri Devi mentioned in her autobiography “My grandfather was a first-class shot and achieved a rather special kind of record by shooting two rhinos with a left and a right.”<sup>8</sup> He invited British officials from Calcutta and the princes from different parts of India to take part in shooting in the jungles of Dooars and Assam.<sup>9</sup> Thus, he maintained cordial relations with the British and his contemporary native princes. The Maharaja himself played and made others play. From time to time he used to bring famous players as his guests to show his subjects their games. His successors followed in his footsteps and added an additional dimension to popular cultural pursuits of Bengalis by patronizing them in various ways. Mohan Bagan Club got patronage by the royal family of Cooch Behar for a long time. Their initiative was instrumental in establishing western sports (especially football and cricket) on a firm foundation in Bengal. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan established and patronaged a number of clubs both in Calcutta and Cooch Behar. He founded the Bengal Gymkhana Club at Calcutta and he started *Cooch Behar Cup* football tournament in 1893. He regularly brought in professional coaches from England every winter and trained his cricket team’s young players. Beri Sarvadhikari wrote, “the year 1907 saw the introduction of cricket in the Native state of Cooch Behar and the then ruling chief the Maharaja Sir Nripendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur, the grandfather of the present ruler (Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan) gave a start to the game approximately on the same lines as adopted by the pioneer of cricket in the Patiala State.”<sup>10</sup> The members of the royal family were very much passionate of modern sports and some of them wrote poems on these sports. The princesses of Cooch Behar were also adept at modern sports. Rajkumari Gayatri Devi took part in shooting, badminton and lawn tennis.<sup>11</sup> Last Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan was a great enthusiast and player, and led the Bengal team in Ranji Trophy in 1943. He introduced Cooch Behar Football tournament at Cooch Behar in which Cooch Behar XI took part under the captaincy of the Maharaja. He also led Cooch Behar XI in the IFA Shield tournament held in Calcutta.<sup>12</sup> He recruited famous players as the physical instructor for educational institutions in his state. As a result, Cooch Behar reached high standard in sports in the later period. The Cooch Behar Trophy, India’s national cricket tournament for under-19 players, was donated by, and named after the family of the Maharaja of Cooch Behar. Thus, the role of the Cooch Behar princes in the growth and promotion of modern sports in Bengal was phenomenal.

Tea-planters and local people took initiatives in this regard. In the Darjeeling hill and Dooars region of the Jalpaiguri district, tea-planters played an important role in popularizing modern sports. Planters' Club which was founded in 1868 was converted in 1908 into 'The Darjeeling Club', with Modern sports amenities including four billiard tables.<sup>13</sup> The European tea planters promoted modern sports and athletics including football, cricket, hockey, lawn tennis, table tennis, billiards, golf, polo, horse racing, shooting etc. and established sporting clubs in the tea garden area in Jalpaiguri. The list included Malbazar European Club<sup>14</sup> (Malbazar), Western Dooars Club<sup>15</sup> (near Malbazar), Chalsa Polo Club (Meteli), Nagrakata European Club (Nagrakata), Central Dooars Club (Binnaguri), Dalgaon Club (Birpara), Chuapara Golf Club (Kalchini), Jayanti-Sankos Club etc. Among the all sports, football was most popular in the tea garden area and held position of high esteemed. Not only the European and Indian managers, but also labourers and employees of the garden promoted the game of football. The Bengali Babus of the tea gardens also founded sporting clubs (Damdim Friends Union Club, Nageshwari Club of Meteli, Central Dooars National Club of Palashbari Tea garden in Banarhat etc.) and organized tournaments (Gajendra Memorial Shield, 'Buxa-Dooars Football Shield', 'Rajendra Smriti Inter-Garden Football Tournament etc.) among different tea gardens especially for football.<sup>16</sup>

It was the game of football which was a source of recreation to the employees of tea gardens in the whole Dooars region. It can be believed that the English tea planters had particularly encouraged this game as a preparation for preventing the growth of a revolutionary consciousness related to the manifold problems of the tea industry. An environment of enthusiasm and eagerness would grow around the game and if the workers were immersed in sports, then it would be possible to avoid other issues. It would also delay their efforts to oppose torture and oppression. On the other hand, the workers of the tea industry also became engrossed in the game for the sake of entertainment.

Bengali tea planters by adopting modern sports they gradually adapted western culture. Even the women members of their family took part in badminton, lawn tennis etc. in the tea garden area like the memsahibs of the English tea planters. Many football players showing skills in the football field secured employment in the tea garden. Adivasi people who were brought from Santal Pargana to work as laborer in the tea gardens also became enthusiastic about the game of football. The Bengali tea planters did not hesitate to take part as players in the inter-garden football tournaments. This behavioral pattern of the Bengali tea planters obviously cemented a co-relation with their garden employees. The Bengali tea planters followed the same strategy like the European tea planters to run their tea gardens smoothly but they maintained a completely segregated life style in comparison with their European counterparts in respect of their socio-cultural life. Hunting was favourite past time of Bengali tea planters like the European tea planters. Deer horns, nails of tigers lined the stair case within their rooms. Hanging of stuffed animals on the walls of the bedrooms also exhibited a side of their high-class living style. Female members of the Bengali babus of the tea garden also played tennis, badminton for entertainment like the memsahibs of the European tea planters.

It was the game of football which was the main source of recreation to the employees of tea gardens in the Dooars region. Starting from 1940s and continuing up to sixties an urge for games and sports was quite observable in the tea gardens of Dooars. One thing must be said in the context of playing football. Why did the sport that, with the united efforts of the workers of the tea gardens as well as the authorities, had created such enthusiasm and eagerness in the lives of the people, slowly begin to wipe out from the tea gardens? The passion began to ebb after the 1960s. Most often the spectators would refuse to accept the decisions of the referee. Gradually, the frequency of spectators breaking into the football ground began to increase. Frequently skirmishes used to break out amidst the spectators at matches. Gambling on results of victory or defeat began to rise. Moreover, local leaders began to interfere in resolving tension or conflicts at the football ground. In this manner, slowly the environment of the game began to get polluted. As the British slowly began to move out of the tea industry, the vacuum was filled by Indians. After entering into administration, their only goal or aim was greater profit. Although Government ethics, law and order, the opportunities and benefits provided to tea workers and their entertainment was there on paper, but in reality, the law was ignored and the norm became to give as little benefit as possible. The authorities saw it as a gain if such activities could be discarded with. This arrangement gradually drew the curtains on the sports in the tea gardens.<sup>17</sup>

In northern Bengal most important pockets where modern sports flourished at the initiative of enthusiastic locals included Jalpaiguri, Siliguri, Raiganj, Balurghat and Malda from the last decade of the nineteenth century. The victory of Mohun Bagan Club in the IFA Shield in 1911 gave a boost to the game of football. Town clubs (Alipurduar Town Club 1919, Balurghat Town Club in 1901, Jalpaiguri Town Club in 1898, Haldibari Town Club in 1915, Raiganj Town club in 1937, Malda Town Club) and many other sport associations were established in these towns and competitions began to take place in football. Some popular football tournament of Northern Bengal in colonial period were “*Cooch Behar Cup Tournament*”(1893); ‘*Mukunda Memorial Shield*’(1929 )and ‘*Kulada Memorial Shield*’(1940)(Alipurduar); ‘*Lees Cup Tournament*’, ‘*Sonaulla Shield*’, ‘*Begam Faizenesa Memorial Shield*’ and ‘*Prasanna Dev Raikot Memorial Tournament*’ (Jalpaiguri); ‘*Siliguri Challenged Shield*’(1920); ‘*Kulada kanta Memorial Shield*’ (Raiganj,1932-33); ‘*Baradakanta Shield*’ and ‘*Taiyab Shield*’ (Balurghat); ‘*Sitanshu Memorial Shield*’ and ‘*Kohinur Shield*’ (Malda) etc. This improved the standard of football in the later period. This led to the emergence of a group of skilled football players in northern Bengal. Some of them - Mozammel Hoque, Runu Guhathakurata, Manilal Ghatak, Runu GuhaNeyogi and S.P. Roy (Jalpaiguri); Jyotirindra Chatterjee (Balurghat); Biren Guha (Raiganj) and Subhash Bhowmik (Malda) - played for famous clubs at Calcutta, such as East Bengal, Mohun Bagan, Kalighat and Wari. Runu Guha Thakurata represented Indian football team in Olympic. On the other hand, with the growth of revolutionary activities in other parts of Bengal *akhra* culture were introduced in different towns (Jalpaiguri, Raiganj, Malda) of northern Bengal. Union Club (1901) and Adarsha Byayamagar (1932) were established in Jalpaiguri.<sup>18</sup> Many youths used to come

there regularly for physical exercise and bodybuilding. But the British government suppressed all these clubs and institutions. In Malda, the British specially inspired Muslims to play football as part of their divide and rule policy.<sup>19</sup> As a result, Mohammedan Sporting Club was established in Malda.

In Darjeeling, Adventure Sports began to popularize. The popular ones were trekking, Mountaineering, Water Rafting, Paragliding, Camping, etc. The first organized Trekking route in India began in the Darjeeling hills along the Singalila range. Darjeeling was the popular adventurous location for mountaineering. Climbing the higher peaks of Darjeeling needed tremendous strength, energy, vigor and zeal. One had to undergo tremendous training programmes in order to qualify. The Himalayan Mountaineering Institute (HMI)<sup>20</sup> was established in Darjeeling in 1954 to encourage mountaineering as an organized sport in India. Tenzing Norgay<sup>21</sup> was the first director of field training for HMI. Water rafting on the river Teesta and Rangeet, the scenic beauty of the banks, surrounding hills, its flora and fauna and sighting of several varieties of fishes is simply enchanting. Paragliding and Water Rafting were also introduced in the later period. Golf, Polo, horse racing, Billiards etc. were organized by Darjeeling Gymkhana Club. Introduction and gradual popularization of these sports helped flourish sport tourism in the Darjeeling hills in the subsequent period. It enhanced the sphere of modern sport culture and helped in the development of the economy in the Darjeeling hills.

Attention was given to the development of the modern sports and sport organizations were continued to be formed at the initiative of enthusiastic local sport organizers in every district of the Northern Bengal around the time of Independence. Foundations of district sports associations (DSA) in Malda (1945), Paschim Dinajpur (1952), Cooch Behar (1953), and Jalpaiguri (1954) were examples of this trend. In Darjeeling GDNS (Gorkha Dukha Niwarak Sangha) started to organize various tournaments for different modern sports after Independence and Partition. Satyendra Prasad Roy, eminent tea industrialist and sports organizer of Jalpaiguri, took a pioneering role in establishing West Bengal State Sport Federation in 1947 and also became the first president of that institution. He remained as the president of this organization for a long time. Under his initiative inter-district football tournament was organized for the first time.<sup>22</sup> As a result, modern sports culture became more popular in northern Bengal.

The British rule, with their new modes of economic, educational, and cultural norms, had its impact on the traditional pattern of recreation including games, sports and allied activities. This may be defined as a new type of induced institutionalized games that altered to a large extent the passive non-induced games and sports of the earlier era. As a result, institutionalized western sports began to gain in popularity in Northern Bengal. People established sporting clubs and organized tournaments in different parts of this region, though indigenous sports remained popular in rural areas till the end of the colonial rule. After independence indigenous sports came under the threat of extinction as the modern sports gradually became popularised in the region and got preference and patronage from the government. Introduction of modern adventure sports and revived interest in some traditional indigenous sports helped in flourishing sports tourism in northern Bengal to some extent.

In summary, it can be said that the paper has focussed on the introduction and popularisation of modern sports in northern parts of Bengal. It has highlighted particularly the role of public- school teachers, Christian missionaries, imperial administrators, the royal family of Cooch Behar, tea planters and local people in the process of popularisation of modern sports in the first half of the twentieth century. The process, it has argued, was neither unilinear nor homogeneous. In the hills of Darjeeling modern sports were looked upon as part of British games ethic, in Dooars and Terai as forms of leisure, and in the rest of northern Bengal as a part of popular culture. Adopting these modern sports people gradually adapted with western sport culture. These brought a change in the social and cultural arena at large in northern Bengal. At the same time, it is also evident that a section of the people retained their fondness for indigenous folk games and sports parallel to the penetration of western sports. Those games were the main source of recreation for many boys and girls as well as adult males and females and also remained as a part of cultural heritage of the diverse people of the Northern Bengal.

<sup>1</sup> Sanyal, C.C., *The Meches and The Totos : Two Sub-Himalayan Tribes of North Bengal*, The University of North Bengal, Darjeeling, West Bengal, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> In the Victorian period, Muscular Christianity helped spur the athletic movement in England. Muscular Christianity was a critique of contemporary Protestantism, especially its growing perceived 'feminization'. Sports was utilized as a net to catch young men and draw them into the fold; camping and love of outdoors were emphasized and consequently, many organizations were formed- the Young Mens' Christian Association (YMCA) sprouted in England(1884) and United States (1885), and finally the Boy Scouts(1908) of Lord Baden Powell. Gradually educational institutions began to value sports, the role of Muscular Christianity in the promotion of sports being particularly marked in the United States. This increasing games playing spirit, in fact, culminated in the founding of the modern Olympics (1896) by the Frenchman Pierre de Coubertin.

<sup>3</sup> J. A. Mangan, *Soccer as Moral Training: Missionary Intentions and Imperial Legacies*, in Demeo and Mills, *Soccer in South Asia*, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> Sankar Prasad Basu, "Darjeeling Zelay Christian Missionarider Bhumika", *Madhuparni* special number on Darjeeling District (1996), p. 285.

<sup>5</sup> Kumarnarayan Chowdhury, "Kheladhulay Darjeeling Zela", *Madhuparni* special issue on Darjeeling District (1996), p. 425.

<sup>6</sup> Chaman Singh Gurung was a member of the 1952 Helsinki Olympic Hockey team that won the gold medal. He was educated in Goethals Memorial School, Kurseong.

<sup>7</sup> Kumar Narayan Chowdhury, "Kheladhulay Darjeeling Zela", p. 425.

<sup>8</sup> Gayatri Devi of Jaipur and Santa Rama Rao. *A Princess Remembers: The Memoirs of the Maharani of Jaipur*, New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 1995. p. 61.

<sup>9</sup> For details see The Maharaja of Cooch Behar Nripendra Narayan, *Thirty-seven Years of Big Game Shooting in Cooch Behar, the Dooars, and Assam: A Rough Diary by the Maharajah of Cooch Behar*, Bombay: The Times Press, 1908.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Binay Bhushan Sen, "Maharaja Jagadwipendra Narayan o tar Purbosurider krirashaili", in *Souvenir*, Prabin Krira Sangstha, Cooch Behar, 2007, p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> For details see Devi Gayatri of Jaipur and Santa Rama Rao. *A Princess Remembers*, pp. 51, 54, 61, 177.

<sup>12</sup> *Mananyeshu: Talk in Bengali: Ami Football Kheltam*, Talks with Sri Bhabesh Guha broadcast by A.I.R., Siliguri on 22 December 1997 at 9.05 am.

<sup>13</sup> E.C. Dozey, *A Concise History of the Darjeeling District since 1835*, Siliguri: N.L.Publishers, 2011, p. 83.

<sup>14</sup> See Swapan Kumar Bhowmik, *Itikathay Paschim Dooars o Malbazar*, Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2016, p. 108.

<sup>15</sup> It has the most beautiful and largest golf court on the bank of Chel river and in the foothill of Bhutan in North Bengal. It has also a billiard board, three lawn tennis and a badminton court.

<sup>16</sup> Supam Biswas, *Tea World of North Bengal: Entrepreneurship, Society and Culture*, Kolkata: Reader Service, 2018, pp. 77-80.

<sup>17</sup> Brajagopal Ghosh, "Jalpai -Dooarser jalchhcbi" in Sanjay Saha, ed. *Titir*, Vol. xvii, No. 1 (2018), p. 64.

<sup>18</sup> Sri Jiten Mahalanbish, 'Khelar Mathe', in *Jalpaiguri Zilla Shatabarsiki Smarak Grantha* (Jalpaiguri, Sept. 1970.) p. 386.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Jadabendra Narayan Chowdhury, Veteran Player and Member of English Bazar Zamindar Family on 28. 12.2007.

<sup>20</sup> HMI was established under the active initiative by the first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru on November 4, 1954. HMI regularly conducts Adventure, Basic and Advanced Mountaineering courses.

<sup>21</sup> Tenzing Norgay reached the summit of the Mount Everest first time in the world with Edmond Hillary in 1953.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Anjan Sengupta, General Secretary, DSA, Jalpaiguri, on 27.03.2005. Also see Anjan Sengupta “Japaiguri Zillar Kheladhula”, *Paschimbanga* (2001), p. 203.

