

Football Culture in Princely State of Cooch Behar

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*Abstract:*One of the most striking facts about the social life in late colonial Princely state of Cooch Behar was the adoption, growth and popularisation of football. After the Revolt of 1857 a new relationship between the princes and the British was established, which guaranteed the former certain privileges in return for loyalty to the Crown. The princes were to inculcate western values with ‘a distinctively British sense of priorities’. In this way, the princes were expected to promote British hegemony in India by playing the role of honorary English gentlemen. Sports in the subcontinent came to be seen as an integral part of a wider process of incorporating the indigenous rulers into the Raj. In Bengal, the royal dynasty of Cooch Behar played an important role in patronising the western sports culture after acknowledging the supremacy of the British. This paper intends to explore the popularisation of football culture in princely state of Cooch Behar.

Keywords: Anglicize, Football, Kolkata, Patronage, Team, Tournament, Royal

Date of Submission: 05-05-2022

Date of Acceptance: 15-05-2022

Introduction

The princely state of Cooch Behar had a glorious chapter of football culture not only in the state only but also in the Bengal. In India football had its origin in Kolkata. The Britishers brought football in India for the amusement of white people. The socio-historical context into

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which football was introduced and popularized in Bengal was itself situated in a transitory phase of cultural development in a colonized society. The official policy to anglicize Indian people, established with the famous ‘Macaulay Minute’ of 1835, was aimed at creating a band of educated anglicized Indians who would imitate the imperialist in their behaviour, values and attitudes and ultimately became the protectors of the Raj.¹ After establishment of their domination on princely state of Cooch Behar the Britishers tried to anglicize the princes by giving them western education and establishing western sporting culture especially football and cricket. Adopting these games, they gradually adapted. As a result, football began to popularise in the state.

Cooch Behar was a princely state of undivided Bengal or greater Bengal. The early rulers of this state established a kingdom in North-Eastern India and in some parts of Eastern India in the medieval period. The ruler of the state was called Maharaja as in many other princely states of India. The Koch kingdom² did not last for a long time. The kingdom had fallen into trouble for internal conflicts and Bhutanese invasions. Failing to combat the Bhutanese invasion in 1773 Maharaja Dharendra Narayan took shelter in Rangpur and asked for help from the agent of East India Company over them. The East India Company and their Governor Warren Hasting agreed to extend military help on payment of annual tax to the Company. Thereupon a treaty was signed with the East India Company in 1773. Cooch Behar was made a protectorate state of the British power. The Koch Kingdom thus lost its sovereignty in 1773 and Cooch Behar entered into its modern age. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan (1863-1911) is known as the father of modern Cooch Behar. He brought the light of modernization in education, society, sport, culture and in other spheres of the state. During his reign football was introduced in Cooch Behar.

Princely patronage of sport was an established practice in India by the middle of the eighteenth century. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur (1863-1911), the founder of modern Cooch Behar,³ was in fact “a pioneer in breaking from the trammels of past traditions and superstitions in almost every respect in which they militate against the progress expected and demanded in an age when knowledge goes more to more.”⁴ Educated in England, he was inspired by the British games and the ethics and ethos associated with them. His role in the growth and promotion of modern sports especially football was phenomenal. He was, in fact, the most proficient pioneer in Indian arena to introduce all kinds of western sports to the Indians. His Calcutta Palace ground at Woodlands became a space and source of cultural as

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well as sporting interaction between the Indians and the Europeans.⁵ Under his active initiative and patronage, the game of football gradually became attractive among the students and youths of the Cooch Behar.

For football also Maharaja Nripendra Narayan gave two cups annually for matches held in Calcutta and Cooch Behar, and the same cups were continued up to the independence by the later Maharajas. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan started the 'Cooch Behar Cup'⁶ football tournament in Calcutta in 1893.⁷ Both Indian and European teams participated in this tournament for the first time. It is noteworthy to mention that the Indian Football Association (IFA) Shield⁸ was inaugurated under the active patronage of the Maharaja of Cooch Behar. Voluntary financial contributions from both the Maharajas of Cooch Behar and Patiala, Sir A. A. Apcar and Mr. J. Southerland the order for a shield with Messrs Eikington & Co. of London was placed, and the IFA shield tournament was started in 1893.⁹

Maharaja Nripendra Narayan of Cooch Behar was also a patron of the renowned Indian club of the time, Mohun Bagan Athletic Club, which was established in 1889.¹⁰ After the death of Durga Charan Laha, the first patron of the Mohun Bagan, in 1904, the club remained under the auspicious patronage of the Maharajas of Cooch Behar up to the year 1964. Mohun Bagan won the Cooch Behar Cup for the first time in 1904; this was the first trophy in the history of the club. It has been found that some players of the Cooch Behar football team including the famous centre-forward Sarat Singha played regularly for the Mohun Bagan Team in its formative stage. Sarat Singha was replaced by Abhilash Ghosh from Cooch Behar A Team while Bhuti Sukul and Kanu (Jatindranath) Roy of Mohun Bagan too played for Cooch Behar A Team in 1900. Famous Mohun Bagan centre-half-back Rajen Sen was at this time a student of Victoria college¹¹ of Cooch Behar and a player of the Cooch Behar A team as well. The *Cooch Behar Darpan* dated the 16 Sravan, 1346 B.S. recorded that the famous Bhaduri brothers of Mohun Bagan - Shibdas and Bijaydas - were both players of Cooch Behar A team, as they were engaged at Woodlands as its employees and had received inspiration from their benefactor Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. Bijaydas was the A. D. C. to Nripendra Narayan and Officer- in-Charge of Woodlands, the Calcutta Palace of the maharaja of Cooch Behar.¹² Importantly, of the eleven Bengali members of Mohun Bagan football team that won the IFA Shield as the first Indian side on the 29 July 1911 against the booted European regimental team, the East Yorkshire Regiment, at least six were from the Cooch Behar A Team, if not more. They were Bhuti Sukul, Rajen Sen, Bijaydas and Shibdas Bhaduri, Abhilash Ghosh and

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Kanu Roy. The historic victory of Mohun Bagan in the IFA Shield also greatly inspired the students of Cooch Behar.

Maharaja Jitendra Narayan (1913-1922), also educated in Eton, was not only an excellent player of football, but a versatile genius. He was an author of poems and plays, and an able editor of an English magazine, *Woodlands Wag* of which the first number was published in November 1914 from 1, Wellington Square, Calcutta. His poems from Eton were full of nostalgic reminiscences for his native land Cooch Behar and her surroundings with fancies for the delightful games that were in vogue at his capital.

He created the post of physical instructor for the first time in the Schools. He appointed Sri Manidranath Das from Calcutta, an expert of all types of games and sports as the physical instructor of Schools and colleges.¹³ The Maharaja also appointed famous footballer Sri Dwijesh Ch. Guha (Chhanada) as the game teacher of Jenkins School¹⁴. In 1918, during his reign, the Cooch Behar Victoria College football team won the famous Elliot Shield held in Calcutta.¹⁵ This was the first time the Shield was won by a mofussil team. At Calcutta, he also brought, like his illustrious father, experts from England and Australia to coach the young players of India every season.¹⁶

The last Maharaja of Cooch Behar, Jagaddipendra Narayan (1922-1970), was also a sporting personality. He was educated at Harrow and Trinity Hall in Cambridge. His reign is commonly regarded as the golden period of sports in Cooch Behar. He was himself efficient in football, cricket, tennis, polo etc., and under his patronage games and sports flourished not only in Cooch Behar but also in Bengal. He had paid special attention to the physical training of students. To enable the boys to practice games and sports, he had ordered the school authorities to commence classes at 10 a.m. in the morning and close by 3 p.m. in the afternoon. It was made compulsory for every boy to participate in one game or other. For encouraging football among the students of Jenkins School, Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan introduced inter-class and inter-house tournaments. He introduced 'Maharajkumar Victor Nityendra Narayan Football Cup', 'Rajkumar Gautam Narayan Football Cup' etc.¹⁷

Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan had not only arranged for the physical development of the boys and those living in the town but also had ensured that his subjects of the rural area were also given adequate attentions. For this, in 1937, he donated a silver cup for the football tournament where only players from the villages under the *Sadar* police station could participate. Players from the town could not take part in the tournament.¹⁸ As the contemporary

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newspapers¹⁹ show, fooding and lodging were arranged for the teams coming from distant villages to participate in the competition.²⁰ As one newspaper noted, “Last year, to encourage players from the villages, he (the Maharaja) himself stood as referee in the final match and himself gave away the cup to the winning team.”²¹

During the period of Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan the Cooch Behar XI participated in the IFA shield and earned fame for its performance. The Maharaja himself was the captain of Cooch Behar XI. The Cooch Behar Football Association Cup tournament was also started in 1939 under his initiative. The tournament was organized in the palace ground at Cooch Behar. Regionally prominent football teams like Tripura State Sporting Club, Jalpaiguri B.D. Railway Club (B.D.R.) and Dinajpur Club participated in the tournament.²² In the first year the B.D.R.²³ team won the cup defeating Cooch Behar XI in the final and the Maharaja himself gave away the cup to the captain of the victors. Besides, the Cooch Behar XI team under the captainship of Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan defeated the Calcutta University team in 1938.²⁴ The Maharaja had a famous B team of young footballers, named as Poka’s XI. In 1942 Cooch Behar XI took part in IFA Shield with Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan himself as the captain of the team. Famous footballer Bhabesh Ch. Guha (Meghada), eldest son of Sri Dwijesh Ch. Guha (Chhanada), flourished and played in Cooch Behar XI during his period. Meghada himself was a very dependable and indispensable player of Aryan Club of Calcutta. His next brother Gour Guha was attached with Kalighat Club while the younger brother Chanchal Guha was a regular player of Eastern Railway. Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan provided Meghada with a job in Cooch Behar and brought the great son of Cooch Behar to his own land.²⁵ His contemporary stalwarts of football from Cooch Behar included Jhantu Das Gupta, a player from Mohun Bagan; Azizul Haque, a player of George Telegraph; Amal Basu, a regular player of Uari Club; and Sunil Sen Gupta of Aryan Club.²⁶ The Maharaja of Cooch Behar certainly played an inspirational role as a great patron of modern sports in the region.

Inspiring by the Maharajas local people also took initiatives in establishing sporting clubs in Cooch Behar. The wave of IFA Shield victory of Mohan Bagan defeating the British army teams reached the princely state of Cooch Behar. Haldibari Town Club was established in 1915. It organized ‘Eyanat-Ulla Memorial Cup’ football tournament.²⁷ Prince Victor Nityendra Narayan donated a play-ground to Haldibari Town Committee in 1916 for the development of games and sports. Ambika Charan Majumdar of Haldibari Town Club played for Cooch Behar Palace team. Bhabesh Ch. Guha (Meghada), son of famous footballer

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Dwijesh Ch. Guha (Chhanada), formed 'Unknown Club' in 1945. Within a short time the 'Unknown Club' became a popular name in the sports world of northern Bengal. Many people of the 1950s-60s still feel nostalgic at the very utterance of the name of the club and its glory in football. Under the captaincy of Meghada, Unknown Club made their presence outstanding everywhere they went to play - Rajshahi, Natore, Gaibandha, Bagura, Dinajpur, Rangpur (now in Bangladesh), Lumding, Guwahati and other places of Assam. At that time estate managers of different tea gardens used to arrange big football tournaments and they had to toil hard to make Unknown Club agreeable to play in their tournaments in order to enhance glory of those tournaments.²⁸ In 1939 Forward Club was established at Dinhat. Due to royal objection the name of the club was changed into Pioneer Club. It earned fame in athletics, badminton, table tennis and football in 1940s. From the very beginning it started organizing annual sports (athletics) meet on 1 January every year. Pioneer Club played football against different teams of northern Bengal, Assam and Cooch Behar Maharaja's team. One of the popular footballers of the Pioneer Club was 'Peyarada' who later on became the President of Bangladesh. He is known to the world as Hossain Mohammad Ershad.²⁹

Conclusion

In summery it can be said that football became popular culture in the princely state of Cooch Behar. It is evident from the organization of tournaments and establishment of football clubs in the state. The royal family of Cooch Behar was one of the leading patrons of football not only in their state but also in colonial Bengal. This had visible impact on the development of modern sports in Bengal. The Maharajas of Cooch Behar not only patronized football but also played themselves to popularize such sports in Bengal. Their initiative was instrumental in establishing football on a firm foundation in Bengal.

Notes and References

¹ Kausik Bandyopadhyay, *Playing for Freedom; A Historic Sports Victory*, Standard Publishers: New Delhi, 2008.p. 20.

² The Koch dynasty was founded in 1523 by Biswasingha. Chila Ray and Nara Narayan (1554-1588) had extended the Kingdom. Cooch Behar came under the influence of the British in 1773. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan (1863-1911) was the founder of modern Cooch Behar. During the tenure of Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan (1922-1970) Cooch Behar merged with the India in 1949.

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³ Ratna Roy Sanyal, “Koch Rajbansher Rajnaitik Bibartaner Itihas”, *Madhuparni*, special issue on Cooch Behar, 1990, p. 62.

⁴ *The Englishman*, 19 September 1882.

⁵ Swapan Kumar Ray, “Cooch Behar’s Contribution to the Sports Heritage of India” in the Souvenir 51st National School Football Championship: 2005-2006, DSSA, Cooch Behar, 2005.

⁶ Cooch Behar Cup tournament was the first football tournament at the Indian initiative.

⁷ *The Statesman*, 8th July 1934.

⁸ I.F.A. (Indian Football Association) Shield Football tournament was started in 1893.

⁹ Kausik Bandyopadhyay, “Race, Nation and sport: Footballing Nationalism in colonial Calcutta”, *Soccer and Society*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2003), pp. 4-5.

¹⁰ Chirokaler Mohun Bagan Prokashona Committee, Chirokaler Mohun Bagan, Kolkata: Amal Kumar Sen, 2003. p. 254.

¹¹ Victoria College was established in 1888 by Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, father of modern Cooch Behar. J. D. Goodley was the first principal of the college. Acharya Brojendra Nath Seal, the great philosopher, was the first Indian principal of this college (1896-1913). The college was renamed after him in 1970 as A.B.N. Seal College.

¹² *Cooch Behar Darpan* dated the 16 Shraavan, 1346 B.S.

¹³ Dwijesh Chandra Guha, “Cooch Behar Rajye Kheladhula o tahar Byabastha” *Cooch Behar Darpan*, No-7, 18 July 1938.

¹⁴ Jenkins School was established by Maharaja Narendra Narayan (1847-63) in 1861. The school was named after Major Jenkins who was appointed as the commissioner of the Cooch Behar by the British East India Company in 1834.

¹⁵ The Elliot Shield, named after Sir Charles Elliot, the lieutenant governor of Bengal, began as a tournament for Indian school and college teams.

¹⁶ Roy, “Cooch Behar’s Contribution to the Sports Heritage of India”.

¹⁷ Annual Report of the Jenkins School for the year 1940-41.

¹⁸ Guha, “Cooch Behar Rajye Kheladhula o tahar Byabastha”.

¹⁹ These newspapers were published locally. *Cooch Behar Darpan* was the most important of these papers. It was a weekly newspaper first published in 1938.

²⁰ Guha, “Cooch Behar Rajye Kheladhula o tahar Byabastha”.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² For details, see *Cooch Behar Darpan*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 30 May 1939.

²³ BDR refers Bengal Duars Railway with its headquarter at Domohani in Jalpaiguri.

²⁴ This match was reported in a fair bit of details in *Cooch Behar Darpan*, Vol. 1, No. 17, 17 December 1938.

²⁵ Interview with Sri Bhabesh Ch. Guha (Meghada), 1 July 2008.

²⁶ *Mananyeshu*: Talk in Bengali: “Ami Football Kheltam” broadcast by AIR, Siliguri at 9.05 a.m. on 22 December 1997.

²⁷ Paritosh Ch. Roy and Basudeb Biswas, *Mitali 2010: Haldibari Atit o Bartaman*, Haldibari: Prince V.N.N Library, 2010, p. 199.

²⁸ Interview with Sri Bhabesh Ch. Guha (Meghada), founder of Unknown Club, Cooch Behar, 1 July 2008.

²⁹ *Uttarbanga Sambad*, 11 October 2009.