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SCORING OFF THE FIELD

Football Culture in Bengal,
1911-80



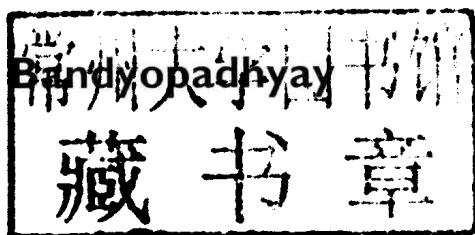
KAUSIK BANDYOPADHYAY

ROUTLEDGE

Scoring Off the Field

Football Culture in Bengal, 1911–80

Kausik Bandyopadhyay



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Scoring Off the Field

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For

Baba, who gave me football

and

Mono, who keeps me playing

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Acknowledgements



I was only 4 when my father first took me to Kolkata *maidan* to watch a football match. He introduced me to the world of football with a number of stories on Bengali football including the Mohun Bagan Club's epochal Indian Football Association (IFA) Shield victory of 1911. This was something that became an inspiration for me to look upon sport as an integral part of my life. Although I never played the game beyond the standard of school, I have never lost an occasion to watch the Kolkata League or Shield matches since the early 1980s. The passion for the game drove me to take up the social history of Bengali football as the subject of my doctoral research. Thanks to all who have either inspired or discouraged me in my short journey to study sport in a historical perspective.

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Introduction



And across the globe, sport is now too important to be left in the hands of sportsmen and women. More and more, it is the property of the 'People' in their various manifestations as politicians, entrepreneurs, educationists, commercialists, publicists, and, not least, academics.¹

As such the history of sport gives a unique insight into the way a society changes and impacts on other societies it comes into contact with and, conversely, the way those societies react back upon it.²

As a distinctive part of human civilisation, sport has always been an interesting and complex aspect of social life. Eric Hobsbawm described it as 'one of the most important new social practices' of Europe of the late 19th and early 20th centuries,³ which, as such, 'played a central role in the creation of politically and socially cohesive "invented traditions"'.⁴ However, it became a major social phenomenon in the modern world, particularly in the 20th century with political, cultural, economic, spiritual, and aesthetic dimensions. When James Walvin wrote his influential essay, 'Sport, Social History and the Historian', for the first volume of the *British Journal of Sports History* in 1984, he was fully convinced that 'the history of a

¹ J. A. Mangan, 'Series Editor's Foreword', in Mike Cronin and David Myall (eds), *Sporting Nationalisms: Identity, Ethnicity, Immigration and Assimilation*, London: Frank Cass, 1998, pp. xi–xii.

² Harold Perkin, 'Teaching the Nations How to Play: Sport and Society in the British Empire and Commonwealth', in J. A. Mangan (ed.), *The Cultural Bond: Sport, Empire, Society*, London: Frank Cass, 1992, p. 212.

³ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 298.

⁴ J. A. Mangan, 'Introduction', in J. A. Mangan (ed.), *Pleasure, Profit, Proselytism: British Culture and Sport at Home and Abroad: 1700–1914*, London: Frank Cass, 1988, p. 1. For a study of how mass and middle-class sport combined the invention of political and social traditions in Europe between 1870 and 1914, see Hobsbawm, 'Mass-Producing Traditions', pp. 300–2.

particular game had an importance which far transcended the game itself and that 'ultimately, sport could (and perhaps ought to) provide a reflection of wider issues and relationships in society at large'.⁵ Yet what seemed difficult for him to reconcile at that time was 'the manifest discrepancy between the undeniable significance of sport in the contemporary world and the refusal of many to accept the importance of sport in its historical setting'.⁶

While sport in the modern world is a proper subject of study for historians, it has taken an inordinately long time for them to appreciate its relevance for the lives of both the influential and the insignificant of past communities.⁷ Failure to get sport into sharp academic focus may be 'a form of intellectual myopia born of long-established prejudice'.⁸ Sport now has a significant place in Indian life. The study of sport as a serious intellectual discipline, however, remains underdeveloped in India.⁹ While the Western academic world in the past three decades has appreciated the relevance of sport in the history of past and present communities, India remained for long far backward in its appreciation of the role of sport in Indian society.¹⁰ In the same way, football, one of the central components of the popular culture of 20th-century India, was mostly neglected by

⁵ James Walvin, 'Sport, Social History and the Historian', *British Journal of Sports History*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1984, pp. 5–13, especially p. 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁷ Mangan, 'Introduction', p. 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Boria Majumdar, 'The Vernacular in Sports History', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 37, no. 29, 2002, p. 3069.

¹⁰ Academic pursuit of sports history in the West began in the 1970s and was concretised in the next decade with the publication of a series of works by a galaxy of social scientists that included such names as J. A. Mangan, Wray Vamplew, Tony Mason, Allen Guttman, Richard Holt, and Peter McIntosh. Institutional organisation to support their efforts began in 1982 when the British Society of Sports History was founded. Distinguished publishers such as Frank Cass offered instant active support and launched the *British Journal of Sports History* that was later transformed into *The International Journal of the History of Sport*. These institutional efforts met with welcome parallels in other Western countries like Scotland, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Brazil, and the USA. Scholars from Asian countries like China, Japan and South Korea as well as Australia too were quick to recognise the importance of sports history and joined the venture in right earnest since the early 1990s. Finally, Cass launched three more journals, viz., *Culture, Sport, Society*; *Soccer and Society* and *European Sports History Review* and most importantly the *Sport in*

historians as unworthy of serious research until recently.¹¹ The present work is set in this context, and makes an attempt to understand the growth of football culture in Bengal from 1911 to 1980 in a historical perspective and to demonstrate its social and political implications.

Sport in Social History: The Indian Context

Like many other forms of social behaviour, as Walvin rightly noted, sporting activity is largely socially and historically determined.¹² He further pointed out that 'the sports historian and sociologist need to reach beneath the surface, behind the obvious facts of sporting history, if their studies are to be any more than yet another quasi-antiquarianism masquerading as serious social history'.¹³ Following Walvin, Boria Majumdar argues that 'a study of sport history is crucial not only for an understanding of the evolution of the sporting heritage of the Indian nation, but for a deeper appreciation of the seemingly unrelated political processes such as nationalism, [and] colonial culture . . .'.¹⁴ The prime purpose in this academic exercise is not the descriptive study of a particular sport, but what it says about the society of a particular period. There have been, as Ramachandra Guha has suggested, two approaches to the Indian history

the Global Society Series in the late 1990s under the auspices of the International Research Centre for Sport, Socialisation and Society instituted at the Strathclyde University, Scotland with J. A. Mangan as the executive academic editor. The huge success of all these ventures further point to the current healthy state of sports history in the West.

According to Gautam Bhadra, professor of History, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata, the aversion of Indian historians to study sport as part of history probably emanates from their uneasiness about the *unconventionality* of the subject as well as the sources of research, which mostly lay beyond the archives and libraries. Discussion with Gautam Bhadra, February 2000. Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, former professor of History, Calcutta University, also considered this very *unconventionality* of research to be a hindrance in accepting sport as a viable theme of historical research for long in Indian academia. Discussion with Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, 28 May 2001.

¹¹ Surendra Gopal, former professor of History, University of Patna, argued that neglect of football as a subject of historical study has much to do with the over-emphasis on cricket even in Indian academia in the last two decades of the 20th century, a period which witnessed huge strides being made in the history of sport in the West. Interview with Surendra Gopal, February 2001.

¹² Walvin, 'Sport, Social History and the Historian', p. 8.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Majumdar, 'The Vernacular', p. 3069.

of sport.¹⁵ The first has focused narrowly on its practice, the background of its patrons and players, the evolution of its associations and tournaments, and on how it pays or does not pay for itself. The second approach, which Guha himself prefers, uses sport to illuminate themes of wider interest and relevance. 'It views sport as a *relational idiom*, a sphere of activity which expresses, in concentrated form, the values, prejudices, divisions and unifying symbols of a society.'¹⁶ He goes on to suggest proficiently that the game of cricket can provide valuable insights into the history of modern India, in particular to the three overarching themes of Indian history: those of race, caste and religion.¹⁷ Guha further asserts that the sociology and politics of cricket 'presumes no technical knowledge of the game itself'.¹⁸ This view, however, is not tenable because, as the history of the game over the last century ranging from the infamous 'Bodyline' series of the 1930s to the launch of the T-20 Indian Premier League shows, changes in its rules, rituals and vocabulary are intimately related to, and highly influenced by the politics, culture and economy of the game.¹⁹

To study sport in the wider perspective of history and culture will help us understand the importance of sport as more than entertainment and locate sport within the broader cultural, social, political, and economic

¹⁵ Ramachandra Guha, 'Cricket and Politics in Colonial India', *Past and Present*, no. 161, November 1998, p. 157.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Guha deals with these themes in his later publication, viz., *A Corner of a Foreign Field: The Indian History of a British Sport*, Delhi: Picador, 2002. For a more elaborate but different analysis of these important aspects of Indian history through cricket, see Boria Majumdar, 'Cricket in Colonial India, 1850–1947', D. Phil. dissertation, University of Oxford, spring 2004. See also his *Twenty-Two Yards to Freedom: A Social History of Indian Cricket*, New Delhi: Penguin/Viking, 2004.

¹⁸ By this, Guha in fact suggests that the 'sociology and politics' of sport can be studied without any 'technical knowledge of the game', which, broadly speaking, includes, apart from playing style and techniques, the rules, rituals and vocabulary of the game. By implication, therefore, it leads to the conclusion that the technicalities of the game have no bearing on the 'sociology and politics of the game'.

¹⁹ In the 1930s, English fast bowler Douglas Jardine used the method of 'bodyline' bowling to stop Don Bradman, the Australian batting wizard, from scoring runs. Hence the series goes down in history as the 'Bodyline Series'.

The Board of Control for Cricket in India in 2008 launched IPL cricket tournament in India, which attracted as much big money as mass support. The teams, named after some of the most important cities of the country and comprising players from India as well as other test-playing nations, bought by the respective teams in a live auction, played 20-over games with each other on a double leg format followed by semi-finals and a final.

contexts of colonial and post-colonial South Asian societies. The study of sport as history offers major correctives to the range of our understanding of the social and economic history of late 19th- and 20th-century India. For instance, the existing historiography of nationalism, communalism, social conflict, colonial culture, or developing economy in India fails to recognise the importance of football as an arena for spontaneous articulation of nationalism, communalism and popular culture or the role cricket has played as a major nationalist, communal and commercial force in the 20th century.²⁰

There has also been an irrational yet popular belief that only the 'committed', the insiders or the practitioners are qualified to pursue sports history. This is certainly a flawed assumption. Personal experience or membership of course can be useful at times in understanding 'certain distinct sensibilities which outsiders could never experience'.²¹ But that should never be considered a deciding factor in pursuing academic research on sport. Walvin is again pertinent in his comment:

(S)uch claims to exclusivity are intellectually crippling and depend ultimately for their *rationale* on the belief that there is, or ought to be, only one particular approach or interpretation of historical experience. It is to be hoped that sports history will avoid such factional fights, although this is not to claim that sporting practitioners have *nothing* to tell us. Far from it. What is quite clear however is that one does not need to be player, spectator or *aficionado* — of any sport — to appreciate its broader social, or historical significance.²²

It is not necessary therefore for social historians to describe events or matches that they never saw or to engage in discussions of the tactics employed in a match. In other words, it is less important for our purposes to understand the genius of Sachin Tendulkar and Diego Maradona than to analyse what sport means and why it matters.²³ Nevertheless, as noted earlier, it can be useful to have a workable knowledge of the evolution of a game's technicalities, which sometimes exert important sway on its social history and vice versa.

²⁰ The case of cricket in this regard is illustrated in the thesis of Boria Majumdar mentioned earlier.

²¹ Walvin, 'Sport, Social History and the Historian', p. 7.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Sachin Tendulkar, the batting maestro of the present Indian cricket team, is considered to be one of the greatest batsmen world cricket has ever produced.

Diego Maradona was the captain of the 1986 World Cup Football champions Argentina. Maradona, for his sheer footballing talent, can be compared only to the legendary Brazilian footballer Pele.

Socio-historical research on aspects of popular culture in India commonly tends to generalise the regional thrust of particular cultural elements into a national pattern. The history of sport to date in India, too, suffers from such sweeping generalisations. For instance, a history of Indian football is often identified with that of Bengali football and the latter with Calcutta football.²⁴ Cricket in colonial India, in the same way, until recently, was understood to be primarily a Bombay-based phenomenon.²⁵ But both these approaches are mistaken. Without prior consideration of a sport's local origins, developments and specificities, construction of its wider national history can be a flawed exercise.

Finally, the study of sport in India from the perspective of social history needs to put a strong emphasis on vernacular sources. This has not been true of the past. Furthermore, I work on the assumption that 'historians are made for history and the reverse can not be true' and that a social historian has certain social responsibilities.²⁶ As S. N. Mukherjee has aptly remarked: 'We should not only concern ourselves with the problems which the man in the street faced in the past, but make them entertaining and instructive for the man in the street today . . . the questions we ask about our past must be related to our present day problems.'²⁷ Historians of sport, in short, also have a duty to make people aware of the problems, realities and potentials of sport in the country today, and inform and impress the authorities so as to keep them on the right track towards progress and excellence.²⁸ E. H. Carr once made a splendid comment:

²⁴ Both Soumen Mitra and Paul Dimeo considered Calcutta football to be synonymous with Bengali football and, hence, missed its local character completely. Soumen Mitra, *In Search of an Identity: History of Football in Colonial Calcutta*, Kolkata: Das Gupta & Co., 2006; Paul Dimeo, 'Football and Politics in Bengal', in Paul Dimeo and James Mills (eds), *Soccer in South Asia: Empire, Nation, Diaspora*, London: Frank Cass, 2001, pp. 57–74.

²⁵ Even Ramachandra Guha, one of the most celebrated cricket writers of India, suffers from this flawed understanding in his work. For clarification, see Guha, *A Corner of a Foreign Field*. For a different view, see Majumdar, *Twenty-Two Yards to Freedom*.

²⁶ S. N. Mukherjee, *Citizen Historian: Explorations in Historiography*, Delhi: Manohar, 1996, p. 8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ This statement, relating to the moral duty of the historian of sport, however, should not be mistaken as typically reflective of the early stage of the development of the history of sport in India. It is applicable to historians of sport in countries which might already have achieved a developed or developing stage of research.