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ORIGINS AND GROWTH OF FOOTBALL CLUB CULTURE IN COLONIAL EAST BENGAL (PRESENT BANGLADESH)

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Summary: Dhaka, Bikrampur was the centre of cultural activities in East Bengal during Mughal period. Calcutta was born much later, during colonial times. In the British rule, Calcutta became the centre of Bengals Socio-economic life. However, the notable cultural differences between the people of East Bengal and West Bengal were prominent by this time. In that time the game of football was more popular among the people of Calcutta than others sports. During that time various public schools were established in East Bengal, specially in Dhaka and Bikrampur, where a considerable progress of western sports could be observed. As a result, football soon took a special place in public sphere of Dhaka. But even though the students of East Bengal gradually mastered the game, it was not easy to pursue their football talents in Calcutta maidans. Meanwhile, several football clubs were born in the Dhaka city. As a result, gradually football club culture spread in to other places of East Bengal such as Chittagong, Tajhat, Mynmensingh etc. Not only football clubs were formed in East Bengal but also important football tournaments and League were constituted.

Index Terms : Ghati-Bangal, Football club, Calcutta Maidan, Club culture, East Bengal community, Football League.

Dhaka had been an important city of Bengal since the Mughal era. Dhaka-Bikrampur was the centre of cultural activities in East Bengal. Although Murshidabad was the capital of Bengal during the Nabob period and before the British rule, Dhaka was a relatively rich city from the cultural point of view. Calcutta was born much later. After the battle of Plassey, Calcutta became the centre of Bengal politics. Although the British chose Calcutta as their capital, Dhaka continued to exist with its traditional cultural milieu. However, during the nineteenth century, Calcutta was far ahead of Dhaka in terms of education, mainly Western education and employment. The so-called 'Bengal Renaissance' took place mostly around Calcutta. Important Western educational institutions - schools, colleges, universities - all developed in Calcutta and adjoining areas. Government offices, even private industrial and commercial establishments, insurance companies were all centred around Calcutta. As a result, Calcutta became the destination of fortune-seekers from all over India.

Despite the fact that Calcutta, the city built by the British, was the heart of Bengal and India, the connection of Calcutta with the Bengal on the banks of Padma-Meghna rivers had never been easy. In the nineteenth century, Dhaka began to witness a series of attempts to promote modern education and culture.¹ Various western educational institutes or English medium schools were also established in Dhaka. The British could not deny the importance of East Bengal. The streets of Dhaka were regularly occupied by two British platoons and several military barracks were formed too. The Nawabs, aristocratic families and zamindars were involved in the process of spreading modern culture in East Bengal.

However, the notable cultural differences between the people of East Bengal and West Bengal were prominent by this time. Despite being part of the same religion, language and tradition, the people of East Bengal and West Bengal differed greatly in dialects, manners, eating habits and customs. The people of East Bengal used to speak in specific Bengali language, which was a matter of satire to the West Bengalis. They mocked the people of East Bengal and called them *Bangal*. Such mentality was found in *Chaitanya Charitamrita* and *Chandimangal* too.² From the beginning of the nineteenth century, the term *Bangal* was used by the locals to describe them who came from East Bengal and began to live in Calcutta for their studies or work. The reflection of that can be found in famous playwright Deenabandhu Mitra's play 'Sadhabar Ekadashi'. One of the characters in the play, Bhola, a resident of Calcutta, satirically said to Ram Manikya, another character from East Bengal:

BANGAL PUNTI MACHER KANGAL.

BANGAL GANGA JALER KANGAL.

BANGAL BHENGA POTHER KANGAL

*BANGAL BHALO KOTHAR KANGAL*³

It is against this backdrop that I situate the main discussion of this article. The spread of a western sport like football in India was associated with the imperialist mentality. The expansion of western sports was one of the results for the elite response to British policy following the Great Revolt of 1857. With this policy, western sports like cricket, football and tennis spread in India. J. A. Mangal described it as a special kind of cultural imperialism.⁴ Even in the public schools and colleges of the districts adjoining Calcutta, the introduction of western sports could be noticed. Students from East Bengal also used to come and study in these institutions, as a result of which they naturally got acquainted with sports like football and cricket. However, the game of football was more popular among the Bengalis than other sports.

During that time various public schools or English medium schools were established in Dhaka, where a considerable progress of Western sports could be observed. As a result, football soon took a special place in the public life of Dhaka. But even though the students of East Bengal gradually mastered the game, it was not easy to pursue their football talents in Calcutta. It has already been said that the people of Calcutta showed an attitude of contempt and hatred towards the East Bengal's *Bangals*. Besides, they had to participate in football matches at Calcutta *maidan* (playground) from distant districts like Dhaka, Bikrampur, and Chittagong in Far East Bengal. Although many talented players proved their ability in East Bengal, they had to come to Calcutta to be recognized as good players. A look at history reveals that eight of the players who won the Mohun Bagan Indian Football Association Shield in 1911 were from East Bengal.⁶ Even, later on, Mohun Bagan's legendary player Gostho Pal was a *Bangal*.⁷ Not only the players, there were a lot of football fans in East Bengal who used to come from East Bengal just to watch the game at Calcutta. The best example of this is the final match of the 1911 Shield. That day, a large number of people from various districts of East Bengal, including Dhaka, came to the Calcutta ground to watch Mohun Bagan play.⁸ Despite all this, in many cases the East Bengali players were the victims of injustice and deprivation in Calcutta football. It was not easy for them to get regular opportunities in the renowned local teams. Despite the opportunities, they were excluded in a lot of important games due to various excuses. Thus, in the Calcutta-centric football world dominated by the West Bengalis, the East Bengalis did not have enough opportunity.

Meanwhile, several football clubs were born centring the Dhaka city. As a result, gradually football club culture spread in to other places of East Bengal such as Chittagong, Mymensingh, Tajhat etc. Wari was the first football club in East Bengal. The club was founded in 1898 by Raybahadur Surendranath Roy, an aristocratic landowner of Dhaka.⁹ The club soon acquired a portion of Dhaka's Paltan Maidan, where a pavilion and sports facilities were created. They sent their teams to distant districts of West Bengal. In 1910, the Wari Club defeated the Maharaja XI of Cooch Behar, a team most of whose footballers were from the Calcutta *maidan*.¹⁰ From 1912-13, they played friendly matches with The Calcutta Football Club and Dalhousie Athletic Club in Calcutta.¹¹ Wari began to participate in the IFA Shield since 1912. They defeated some great teams of Calcutta. However, with the arrival of Wari in Calcutta, East Bengal players became closely associated with Calcutta clubs. In 1917, they defeated the Calcutta League-winner Linclins.¹² They also play the semi-finals but defeated by Mohun Bagan by 2-1 in the IFA Shield in 1919.¹³ This victory made them hugely popular amongst East Bengal football fans. But in the final, they fought and failed. In the 1923 Shield semi-final, they lost to Mohun Bagan. They also played two-day goalless draw against the formidable British team Customs in a Shield match, but lost on the third day after a great fight. Sherwood Forester, who arrived to India in 1925, defeated Wari 2-1 in a fierce battle. This defeat was also a matter of pride, because the opposing team was a tough one. The visiting team had not conceded a single goal in any match during the tour of India except its match against Wari.¹⁴ Not only did they participate in the game of football, the club played an important role in spreading of football in different parts of East Bengal. They organized several notable football tournaments, such as The Football League, Nirmal Memorial Football Shield, etc. Islington Corinthians, who toured India in 1937, almost undefeated, lost only against the Dhaka Sports Association XI. Ten players of that team were from Wari.¹⁵ This proved the football prowess of Wari club.

The Dhaka Sports Association, established in 1917 as an apex body for the control of sports in East Bengal, played an important role in the spread of football culture in East Bengal. It was one of the proposers of the national inter-state football championship in India.¹⁶ A sub-committee was formed to consider the proposal of Dhaka Sports Association at the 4th Annual General Meeting of the All India Football Federation held on 15 April 1940 in Delhi. The football competition was introduced on January 27, 1941 at the Bombay General Assembly. This competition later became famous as the Santosh Trophy. Although the competition started in 1941, communal riots broke out in East Bengal at that time. The players of East Bengal could not take part in the competition due to the riotous situation. They participated in 1944, but lost 2-0 to the West Bengal team. They were defeated 3-0 in 1945 too.¹⁸ After the partition of the country in 1947, they moved to East Pakistan. As a result, the founders of the Santosh Trophy had no chance to participate in the competition further.

Another notable football club of East Bengal was Tajhat Football Club. Raja Gopal Roy of Tajhat formed this club in 1905.¹⁹ The club formed a strong team by gathering players from different teams. They participated in competitive matches at Calcutta *maidan*. In 1915, they won the Cooch Behar Cup. They also won this football tournament in 1918-19. In 1916, they defeated the strong Somerset team. In 1917, another powerful team of East Bengal, Wari was defeated by them.²⁰ They gifted many football talents of East Bengal to Calcutta. Famous East Bengal players Bhola Sen and Prafulla Chatterjee came from Tajhat. However, after the establishment of the East Bengal Club in the 1920s, Tajhat withdrew their name as competitor due to the complexities of Calcutta *maidan* politics. Due to East Bengal's *BangalBangal* sentiments, Nepal Roy withdrew the name of his team in 1921 and gave East Bengal the opportunity to play in the second division league.²¹ Almost all the renowned players of the team joined the East Bengal Club.

The Victoria Sporting Club was formed in 1903 on the initiative of five important zamindar families of Dhaka. The club was named after Queen Victoria of England.²² The club used to practice at the Paltan Maidan in Dhaka. Babu Suresh Chandra Dham was the chief general secretary of the club. Famous footballer Samad played for the club in the 1917 season. Until the 1930s, the club was mainly associated with the game of football. Victoria was Wari's ultimate rival on the playgrounds of East Bengal.

The Mohammedan Sporting Club was established in Calcutta in 1891.²³ The club quickly gained popularity amongst the Muslim community in East Bengal. The continuous success of the club in the 1930s created a huge frenzy among the Muslim masses.²⁴ Muslims from far and wide in East Bengal used to come to Calcutta to watch the game of Mohammedan Sporting Club. Success against British and Hindu groups created a community-based allegiance. The success of the club at the pan-India level created interest in establishing various district and Muslim clubs in Bengal. The Dhaka Mohammedan Sporting Club was formed by the Muslims of Dhaka in 1936.²⁵ The Muslim Sporting Club and the Comilla Mohammedan Club of Comilla were established in Dhaka earlier. The Nawab family of Dhaka had a deep connection with the former club. Under the patronage of the Muslim aristocracy of East Bengal, Dhaka Mohammedan Sporting asserted itself as a strong football club.

The arrival of the famous English team Islington Corinthians in Dhaka in 1937 was a significant event in the history of Dhaka football. The Dhaka team defeated Corinthians. Eight players of the team were students of Dhaka University.²⁶ Corinthians' captain P.B. Clerk praised the East Bengali players and said, "We heard and read of the Royal Bengal Tigers of Bengal till date. Fortunately we get to see and know those tigers on the Sporting field of Bengal now."²⁷

Kausik Bandyopadhyay has shown in his research that East Bengal Club, which was formed in Calcutta in 1920, gained popularity among the football lovers of East Bengal. In fact, the name of the club was associated with the East Bengali sentiment. In the context of the formation of the team, they were vocal in their protest against the deprivation and humiliation of the *Bangal* players at the Calcutta *maidan*.²⁸ In the two decades since the establishment of the East Bengal Club, the *Bangal* players of East Bengal played an important role in their success. East Bengali elites like Suresh Chowdhury, Taritbhusan Roy and others came forward to patronize the club. Maharaja Manmatha Nath Roychowdhury of Santosh was one of the patrons and once president of the club. Although the dominance of East Bengali players in the team began to diminish since the 1930s, the support base among the East Bengali community in the name of the team continued to flourish. Fighting with their arch-rival Mohun Bagan on the *maidan* in Calcutta gained popularity even before independence.

Not only were football clubs formed in colonial East Bengal but also important football tournaments and leagues were constituted. The First Division Football League was started in Dhaka in 1915.²⁹ 'Kumudini Cup' was started in Rajshahi with the aim of spreading football at school level, and became quite successful. Starting from Dhaka-Rajshahi, the game gradually spread to Chittagong, Comilla, Mymensingh, Khulna, Barisal and other areas. During this period many famous teams from Calcutta started participating in the competitions of East Bengal. Two notable teams were Hare Sporting and National Association.³⁰ Besides, many East Bengali players shined in these tournaments and thereby made their entry into the world of Calcutta football. Among them were Syed Abdus Samad and Mozammel Haque of Rajshahi; P. Dasgupta of Chittagong, Sirajuddin; Khulna's Gostho Pal; N. Majumdar of Barisal. etc.³¹

Thus through the process of western cultural penetration under colonial rule, modern sports spread to East Bengal as well as other parts of India. The Bengalis adopted the game of football in the early stages. That may be the reason why the game of football became more popular in East Bengal. However, unlike Calcutta, no popular or supporter-based football club was formed before the twentieth century. The football clubs at Calcutta *maidan* influenced them in many ways. The struggle for self-determination of the *Bangal* footballers in Calcutta football gave birth to the East Bengal Club. Dhaka Mohammedan Sporting, formed in 1936, gained instant popularity in the late 1930s with the success of the Mohammedan Sporting Club of Calcutta. After independence, another struggle could be noticed under the hegemonic rule of West Pakistan for establishing a sporting identity among the Bengalis of East Pakistan.

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