



Kausik Bandyopadhyay, *Scoring Off The Field: Football Culture in Bengal, 1911–80*

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WHILE AN intense passion for cricket pervades the Indian subcontinent, such passion for football is largely limited to Bengal. I say largely, having been among some sixty thousand spectators attending a Russia versus China international soccer match at a tournament in Kerala in the mid-1980s. There were several small riots—dispersed by police *lathi* charges—among those queuing for tickets, and there were extraordinary temporary stands composed entirely of bamboo and wooden planks that seemed to pose the most extreme fire risk. But the crowd were enthralled, enthusiastic, and clearly knowledgeable about the sport. Quite why that enthusiasm has dissipated and been rechanneled almost entirely into cricket, leaving Indian football languishing in the lowest reaches of the international game, is not the concern of this appealing study, but there is much here that points towards the reasons for that lack of achievement in the world game.

Scoring off the Field is an interdisciplinary study that seeks to locate Bengali football in its sociopolitical context during the years 1911–1980, a period framed by Bengali football’s seminal victory and its greatest tragedy. Few would dispute that sport mirrors society, yet the academic study of sport dates only to the 1970s and 1980s, and in contrast, for example, to art history, its status remains dubious. But elitist approaches to culture are implicitly challenged by works such as this, which provides valuable insights into the formation of communities and nations and the social transformation of Bengal from colony to modernity.

The historical trajectories of Indian football have their roots in British colonialism, with football played there from at least the 1850s under British auspices. But the author is inclined to emphasize indigenization of football in Bengal and “the nationalist appropriation of football and its role as an instrument of reaction, resistance and subversion” (17) even prior to the foundational 1911 victory of the barefoot players of the Mohun Bagan club over the British East York regiment in the final of the Indian Football Association shield competition. In the context of the anti-colonial struggle, this victory became legendary, and Mohan Bagan the focal point of the expression of national sentiment. But as the constant reference to that famous game throughout this and other histories of the sport in India might suggest, the victory became something of a “dead hand of history,” impossible to surpass in its significance, and overshadowing new achievements.

For reasons not satisfactorily examined here, football, rather than becoming a continuing driver of nationalist imperatives, subsequently became a communal tool. The Mohammedan Sporting Club, which won five straight titles in the 1930s before falling out with the Hindu-dominated Indian Football association, became the vehicle for Is-

lamic sporting expression, and Mohan Bagan its Hindu equivalent. Mohun Bagan later represented the communal interests of West Bengal against the East Bengal club and community, and it was this rivalry that culminated in the death of sixteen fans at Eden Gardens in Calcutta in a stampede in 1980 at a match between the two rivals. As the author notes, however, that rivalry continues to shape Indian football, with a world record club-match crowd of 131,000 attending their clash in 1997.

But the author cautions against an entirely communalist reading of this rivalry. He emphasizes the fluid ethnicities and shifting identities of the communities involved (players from one community were liable to turn out for the team of the other), and by the late 1970s the partition-era immigrants from East Bengal had largely assimilated into Calcutta society. What is not discussed here is the way in which coaches and administrators encourage such tribalism as a means of team-building; the English football club Millwall, for example, drew strength from its unofficial motto “No-one likes us and we don’t care.” There is also another element to the sporting contest, the neutral fans support for the underdog and the particular delight of a smaller group in defeating its larger rivals on the sporting field, be it the Scots beating the English, the Mexicans the Americans, or the Bengalis their colonial masters. That wider context is largely absent from the analysis here, which focuses on social history; thus the abandonment of the cup final in 1947 due to crowd violence is a symbol of the disturbed state of the land, and the same violence of the 1970s situated in the context of the Naxalite struggle.

The origins of this work in a doctoral thesis mean that there are several issues touched on, but not developed, such as the claimed distinction between the local character of Calcutta football and that of Bengal in general. There are also impassioned rather than necessarily mature critiques of the works of other scholars. But the author approvingly quotes Swami Vivekananda as stating that “playing football rather than reciting the Gita will take one nearer to God” (42), and his enthusiasm for the topic, his breadth of original research, and a valuable bibliography make this work a worthwhile (and highly readable) study. The numerous quotations from period journalism and a wide range of illustrations and photographs testify to football as representing the cultural identity of the Bengalis and demonstrate how that identity was represented in media, film, theatre, and so on. It is unfortunate that the author is poorly served by his publisher in the reproduction of a number of these in the appendices, which want for printer’s ink.

In that key concepts are clearly explained this work will prove valuable for students, with details situated in the footnotes. Indeed there is sometimes rather too much detail there—the Himalaya, for example, surely do not need defining in a footnote; 78. Ultimately it does not explain why Bengali passion failed to propel football to the status of a truly national game, but it does demonstrate its role in imagining the nation, and is a stimulating contribution to the field.

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