

Football and the Big Fight in Kolkata

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Abstract

Football is one great passion that Bengalis are proud about accepting from the British rulers. Calcutta pioneered indigenous adoption of the sport and a 'native' first kicked a football here as early as in 1877. This has led many to claim that Bengalis were the first in the world to play football (soccer) outside the British Isles. Despite this longevity, the present situation is dismal, with the sport lost in the wilderness of apathy and abuse. Surprisingly enough, however, there remains a deep-seated obsession and craze for the game. In Calcutta, which has one of the biggest stadiums in the world, with a capacity of over a hundred thousand, the obsession hinges on the clash between the traditional rivals Mohun Bagan and East Bengal. This article is an effort to trace the roots of the great rivalry and the socio-economic factors that have driven it for almost a century.

Contrary to the common notion that sport is a great instrument of camaraderie and unity, there are times when this activity instead incites conflict and division. Football is perhaps the greatest case in point.¹ This sport has helped the world speak one language with its immense popularity but at the same time it has divided people on issues of ethnicity and, at times, religion. Calcutta (rechristened Kolkata in 2000) presents a unique case study on this subject allowing one to see the best and the worst of football fanaticism.

The city, one of the oldest metropolises in the world, flourished under the developmental work carried out by the erstwhile British rulers,² has a strange heterogeneity in its population. Being a part of Bengal it has a predominantly Bengali speaking population but despite this sharing of language, there are separate undercurrents of ethnicity, culture and religion that create and symbolise social differences. While various social prohibitions and a general deference to the law of the land, which regulates against regionalism and religious bias, keep it dormant inside the urban psyche, conflict erupts with excesses of bitterness and spite in a football match.

The two city giants, Mohun Bagan and East Bengal, and the third force in the firmament, Mohammedan Sporting, are the names that symbolise the differences marking the social structure of the city. These clubs represent the disharmony that underlines the seemingly unified façade of the city's social fabric. Time and again people have made efforts to explain the phenomenon by culling different episodes from history in support of their explanations.³

I had the fortune of watching this from close quarters as a sports reporter with two national publications - the daily newspaper *The Hindu* and its related sports magazine *The Sportstar* - and have been trying to form my own theories about the city's obsession with football and the ways this game generates

passion and disharmony. As my experience alone is not enough to make me absolutely authoritative, I have taken the liberty of drawing evidence from various books and compilations - which surprisingly are few in number mainly owing to the lack of research on this theme by my senior colleagues in the profession or indeed in academic institutions.⁴

The history of Calcutta football has been shaped by the trauma that was the partition of India. The 1947 incident, which saw the division of two Indian states Punjab and Bengal on religious lines by the departing British rulers, created a new social order forcing differing cultures and customs to coexist in a vastly reduced geographical area. Though East Pakistan became a place exclusively for Muslims, the secular framework of the Indian constitution did not recognise religion as the factor deciding the population in West Bengal - the part that India retained and which had Calcutta as its capital. West Bengal saw a great influx of Hindus who abandoned their hearths in the newly formed East Pakistan.⁵ While the secular constitution encouraged many Muslims to stay back in West Bengal, immigration from across the border created pressure on space and resources. The origins of today's conflicts in the city and its football can be traced to this moment.

Calcutta can be taken as a microcosm of the whole issue of the post-partition exodus and the resultant conflict arising from the inter-mixing of ethnic communities. As the capital, of both undivided Bengal and the post-partition Indian state of West Bengal, Calcutta continued to be the nerve-centre of social, political and sporting happenings. Football assumed the position as the chief mirror of the Bengali psyche. Though centuries of repression had greatly rattled the confidence and ingenuity of the Bengali people, the new-found independence spurred them to dream anew and the best impression of that was to be found in the rise in football's popularity.

The pre-eminence of football in the public imagination meant that it came to project the sentiments of the different ethnic groupings. Bengal's affinity with football, however, has a lengthier history that should inform this analysis. The biggest watershed in this regard was the triumph of Mohun Bagan Athletic Club, which won the Indian Football Association Challenge Shield beating the British East Yorkshire Regiment in 1911.⁶ The victory over a team of the British rulers was an accomplishment that became synonymous with the ongoing struggle for freedom. The event reverberated in all corners of the country and gave a new resolve to the freedom struggle in which Bengal played a predominant role. The popularity of the game rose rapidly and spread quickly, bringing a surge of enthusiasm for football.

As useful guide to how the game found its roots in Bengal can be found in a literal *magnum opus* on Calcutta Football (named *Kolkata Football* in Bengali, and first published in 1955) by Rakhai Bhattacharya⁷ - the first 'native' sports journalist with the English-language daily *The Statesman* and the founder-secretary of the West Bengal Sports Journalists' Club (now the

Calcutta Sports Journalists' Club). Bhattacharya's book is the first real effort to write a history of the game. In it he refers to Nagendra Prasad Sarvadhikari as the pioneer that introduced Bengalis to the game. Sarvadhikari, as a young boy of eight, has been credited with organising some of his fellow Bengali students for their first football match at Hare School in 1877. This is widely recognised as the first sign of Indians themselves taking up the sport.

Beyond this tale of local initiative, however, lay a colonial sporting culture beset by its own problems. One of my senior colleagues at the English-language newspaper *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, Kumar Mukherjee has exposed the latent class conflict amongst the English that surfaced over football and affected the game's development in the city:

When the [British] Calcutta Football Club was brought into existence in 1872, membership was restricted to people belonging to the upper strata of the British middle class. There was no entry for the tradesman of Calcutta amongst whom were many brilliant exponents of the game of association football. Two members Towfett and Love pooled their resources and formed the Trades Club in 1874. Six years later the name was changed to Dalhousie Athletic Club. It was largely through the initiation of Dalhousie AC that the meeting at which the Indian Football Association was formed was convened and it was through the generosity of some Dalhousie members, J. Sutherland, A.R. Brown, the first honorary secretary of IFA, and M.B. Lindsay that the cost of the splendid IFA Shield was defrayed.⁸

Without a doubt it was the English who set the organisation in place for football in Calcutta, and in turn for the rest of India. Nevertheless, Indian historians have been inclined to focus their attention on the Indian clubs themselves that grew up alongside British ones, eventually to beat them and to take ownership of the game's governance. Inspired by his namesake, Ashok Bhattacharya sought to develop Rakhal Bhattacharya's work and so in his 1973 book,⁹ traced the history of the three main clubs of Calcutta - Mohun Bagan, East Bengal and Mohammedan Sporting. Apart from Rakhal Bhattacharya's book, Ashok Bhattacharya also refers to players and contemporary newspapers for his information and in this way does well to capture the development of the game and the sentiments surrounding it. He justifiably focused much of his narrative on the oldest of the three clubs, Mohun Bagan.

Mohun Bagan was established in 1889, 58 years before Independence, but (by accident of fate) the club's genesis shared the same day with the birth of free India: 15 August. Bhattacharya draws a parallel between the two episodes saying Mohun Bagan's origin inspired Bengalis into a new sense of uprising against the British rulers.¹⁰ At the end of the nineteenth century there

was a general atmosphere of inequality where the 'natives' were not allowed to participate in the sports played by the 'whites'.¹¹ But a section of the Bengali elite, who sought to associate themselves with the rulers by adopting English 'virtues', were highly influential in introducing football to Bengal. From its initial presence among the elites, a process of dissemination soon followed and the game found its place in the heart of the 'commoner' owing to its simplicity and competitive appeal. The result was quickly seen, in 1885 four Bengali clubs were invited to play alongside English clubs on the city's *maidan*.

Ashok Bhattacharya goes on to record the central role played by Dhukhiram Mazumdar in the early life of Mohun Bagan.¹² Mazumdar helped a group of students establish the Students Union, which then arranged its practice games in the premises of 'Mohun Bagan Villa'. Within a short time, and for some inexplicable reason, Mazumdar left the students and who got together in an emergency meeting in the Mohun Bagan Villa in North Calcutta and decided to form a new club. Thus under the presidentship of Upendranath Basu, Mohun Bagan Sporting Club was established, its office being located in the Mohun Bagan Villa and the practice ground adjoining the Mohun Bagan Lane. The club also had the fortune of gaining a few wealthy patrons, who showed lot of enthusiasm for the club's activities. Club secretary Jatindranath Basu was a strict disciplinarian towards the trainees and in a short time built up a good football team ready to enter the competitive arena. After its first annual general meeting in 1890, the club changed its name slightly becoming Mohun Bagan Athletic Club as during that time the word 'sporting' included game sports such as hunting and angling. Mohun Bagan has since then retained the name.¹³

It took a little over ten years for the club to learn the intricacies of the sport, and success started coming its way by the turn of the century. Under the new secretary, Subedar Major Sailendranath Basu, it won the Coach Behar Cup in 1904 and 1905 and this proved to be the first in a long history of successes that continues today. The team then entered the Gladstone Cup and won the title, beating IFA Shield holders Dalhousie Club 6-1. This win rang through all corners and profoundly signalled the arrival of the Bengali clubs. Mohun Bagan continued to develop its profile in lesser tournaments and by 1908 the club shelves were adorned with a rich haul of trophies. By this time the club also gained a piece of ground in the Army-dominated *maidan* on which it held its practice sessions. The club's growing stature attracted good players and the team's success in tournaments spurred the club to higher ambitions. With almost twenty years of preparations behind them, secretary Sailendranath Basu decided to make a foray into the white dominated IFA Shield tournament. Prior to this point, there had been a few Indian participants like Sovabazar Club, Town Club, Hare Sporting and the team from Dutch-ruled Chinsurah. These teams had failed to make any impression, so Mohun Bagan not only faced a real challenge, but took responsibility for Indian hopes of defeating the English.

The team could not do much in the first two years, 1909 and 1910, losing in the initial rounds. This invited ridicule from other Indian clubs and sarcastic remarks from even the vernacular newspapers, which dubbed the effort like that of a 'dwarf reaching for the moon'.¹⁴ Sailendranath Basu remained unperturbed and decided to go ahead with the team's participation regardless. His steely resolve bore fruit as his team of eleven bare-footed Bengalis won the most prestigious football title of the country, the IFA Challenge Shield.

As Ashok Bhattacharya writes, Mohun Bagan's triumph helped engender a feeling of virtue in a repressed 'race' and also shattered the image of the *Sahib's* apparent invincibility.¹⁵ In doing so it added to the growing and quite vociferous calls for '*poorna swaraj*' (complete self rule). As was reported in the 29 July 1911 edition of the English Daily, *The Englishman*, on the day of the final, Mohun Bagan had beaten four teams, St. Xaviers' College, Calcutta Rangers, Rifle Brigade and 1st Middlesex, before the 2-1 victory over East Yorks to win the IFA Shield. Its captain Shibdas Bhaduri, who first scored the equaliser and set up Abhilash Ghosh to score the winner with just two minutes of the match remaining, was a huge influence in the final. The hopes of winning the title had been kindled by the 1-0 win against the formidable Rifle Brigade in the third round. The semi-final saw 1st Middlesex and Mohun Bagan draw 1-1 in regulation time forcing the match to be replayed the following day. Mohun Bagan did not miss the opportunity and won the replay 3-0 to progress to the final.

The final day brought in a sea of humanity to the *maidan*. People from all over the state streamed in towards the Eden Gardens ground. Rakhil Bhattacharya recounts that apart from the two stands, one for the members and other for the Army, the rest of the open sides held the masses who occupied all the space creating make-shift stands by arranging barrels, cycles and carts. People climbed trees and rooftops to have a glimpse of the great contest. The soldiers contributed in their own way by bringing in paper replicas of the IFA Shield and effigies of their regimental emblem. For their part, the Mohun Bagan officials sported vermilion *tilaks* (a mark drawn on the forehead with vermilion as a Hindu belief of divine blessing).¹⁶

In describing the victory, Ashok Bhattacharya notes that the news of Mohun Bagan's achievement spread far and wide throughout India.¹⁷ Not only did it take the subcontinent by storm, but the news was also greatly reported in England. He quotes the cablegram from Reuters to English newspapers describing how a Bengali team became the first Indian side to defeat a famous English outfit for the IFA Shield: 'For the first time in the history of Indian football an Indian team, the Mohun Bagan, consisting purely of Bengalees, has won the Indian Football Association Shield beating crack teams of English regiments'.¹⁸ The report further dwelt on the celebrations saying that most of the people, who came from various corners of the state, missed the match due to overcrowding. But many of those who had the fortune of witnessing the

match flew kites with messages inscribed on them that conveyed the progress of the match. After Mohun Bagan won the match, the celebrations reached such madness that people tore off their shirts and flung the pieces in air.

Similar reports were also carried in newspapers in England by the likes of *The Daily Mail*, *Manchester Guardian*, and *The Daily Telegraph*. Meanwhile, the news reverberated throughout Asia, as this *Singapore Free Press* report testifies:

Never in the annals of Indian football has there been such a crowd as gathered this afternoon to watch the final match in the Indian Football Association Challenge Shield. At a modest computation it is believed that the crowd numbered 100,000. There was seating accommodation for only a few hundred. Men and women, boys and girls watched from their carriages or thought they did. Periscopes were in great demand, and fetched high prices. The vast assembly was kept informed of the result of the match by flying kites.¹⁹

Describing why the Indians preferred to play barefoot, Rakhal Bhattacharya says that the Bengali, and generally the Indian, custom did not allow much use of footwear. Though some people wore shoes while working outdoors, most of the time Bengalis kept their feet uncovered and felt comfortable in that state. That can be the reason chiefly why the Indians shunned boots; it was felt that one could be much more skilful and crafty without them being able to make use of the 'fingers on the feet'.²⁰ Boots were introduced as late as in 1935 when the Mohun Bagan half-back Abdul Hamid started using them and also encouraged his team-mates to do so.²¹ Emotion then gave way to pragmatism and the transformation from barefoot to boots added a new dimension to the team's performance, helping them to win the League title in 1939.

Mohun Bagan could not match its 1911 glory in following years. Several of the teams' stalwarts like Bhaduri retired, allowing new talent into the team. Yet, progress was being made in other ways and 1914 stands out as yet another important year in the history of Calcutta football. This was the year Mohun Bagan gained entry to the Calcutta Football League. The League, which started in 1898, only ten years after the English League had begun, had been the preserve of the European teams until this time.²² The decision to allow Mohun Bagan to play in the second division was definitely prompted by the Shield triumph and the team's success in various other tournaments. The Aryans Club was also given entry as the next best team. Fortune helped Mohun Bagan in the very first year of its participation. Despite finishing third, it progressed to the first division for the next season as one of the teams in the first division opted out of the tournament. This was the time Gostha Paul, later to become a legend for his contribution to the club's glory, joined Mohun Bagan. Mohun Bagan did

well taking the fourth position in its first season of first division football. This started the team's success in the league, even though it had to wait until 1939 to win the title. Nonetheless during the intervening period the club was usually among the top performers in the division.

The history of football to this point was characterised by a sincere and concerted effort on the part of every Indian involved to develop the game and outdo the masters in the process. Beating the whites became the principle aim as it gave a sense of excellence over the foreign rulers. The Bengali, browbeaten for his supposedly frail frame and cultural softness,²³ thus revelled in emphasising his physical capabilities through success in football. The sport became the means by which Bengalis vented their frustration at being dominated and each win over English opponents added to their dream of attaining political independence. Football spoke the language of high ideals as Bengalis sought salvation through it. There was no scope for class, creed or religion to infect the game and thus football was worshipped in Bengali society.

The situation did not remain for long. The seeds of division lay hidden somewhere in the means by which Indian football stepped out of infancy. There was a growing restlessness as the game spread its roots in Bengal. The game that seemed to unite people suddenly appeared to divide local society as the cultures that it had once brought together were being slowly driven apart.

A review of football's history shows that the enterprise, administration and organisation were the prerogative of the residents of Calcutta but such successful teams as Mohun Bagan were composed mainly of players who came from across river Padma, the river that was later to divide the two Bengals, and form the boundary between Bangladesh and India. While the comfort and sophistry of the city helped make good administrators, the extremities of nature in the rural areas across the river appeared to supply physically strong men who made better players. Though a straight generalisation of this theory would sound spurious, it was an influential idea in that period as people started taking partisan views about region and culture. While the inhabitants of Calcutta started claiming the game was their preserve, the people from across Padma replied that the sport developed mainly because of the players they supplied.

The year 1920 saw the biggest outcome of this growing fissure between the two cultures. The grander cause of the nation gradually took back seat and parochial politics took centre stage, as sport came to mirror political history. The growing distrust between the two cultures was at the heart of the establishment of the East Bengal club in 1920, thus beginning the great *maidan* rivalry that has continued almost with the same keenness until the present day.

As Kumar Mukherjee has explained,

The rivalry between Mohun Bagan and East Bengal in its simplest analysis stemmed from the rivalry between the people of two parts of Bengal - West and East - and when it came to Mohammedan

Sporting's clash with the other two, the spark was provided by the one community's desire to upstage the other.²⁴

Football quickly became the yardstick of measuring the superiority of one culture or community over the other. Moti Nandi, a celebrated sports writer and the former sports editor of the most popular Bengali-language daily newspaper, *the Ananda Bazar Patrika*, wrote in a recent article prior to the 2002 World Cup that Bengalis saw playing and beating the British regimental teams during the struggle for independence as something of a crusade.²⁵ But the situation changed quickly once the British regimental teams left the country to fight in the Second World War. With the apparent absence of a proper contest there was a lull in the frenzy surrounding the game. East Bengal's rise to prominence and the conflict that soon emerged against Mohun Bagan brought back spectators and the phenomenon seems to have endured time and has remained the chief force inspiring the football fanaticism in the city to the present day.

While Mukherjee's book offers much valuable information about Indian football, the specific issue of the ethnic conflict between Mohun Bagan and East Bengal is not given extensive consideration. Indeed the writer stops short of being too detailed about the problem. This is where Rupak Saha has done pioneering work writing about East Bengal in his recent book called *Itihase East Bengal (East Bengal in History)*.²⁶ Saha has an intimate association with the *maidan* and football both as the son of renowned East Bengal player and an early founder of the club, Haran (Haradhan) Saha, and as the sports editor of *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. He offers a convincing account of the legendary conflict between Mohun Bagan and East Bengal. This, I feel, is the most recent and powerful contribution to the literature on the great *maidan* conflict.

In his introduction, Saha explains that he took up the challenge of writing a history of East Bengal during one of his trips to London. While visiting a bookstore there he found a wide assortment of books on the premier English club Manchester United and was overawed by the range of literature on the sport. He says it never occurred to him before that a football club could inspire so much writing. This was when he decided to research the history of the club and enlighten the club's many fans about its past struggles and the glories.

In assessing the conditions surrounding the formative years of the club, Saha quotes his father, one of its first players, in saying that East Bengal club emerged as a reaction to the prevalent prejudice towards the people hailing from across the Padma from the original inhabitants of the city.²⁷ This is to suggest that football served as the precursor to the impending problem of ethnicity that was made more pressing by the partition of 1947. This intolerance, verging on xenophobia, was exposed through football as the people of Western Bengal made the visitors from the Eastern part the point of their derision, not least by calling them *Bangals*. Hence, to counter the scornful treatment from the 'locals' there was the compelling urge to form a new club

for the people of East Bengal, despite the presence of the famed clubs like Mohun Bagan, Aryans, Kumortuli and others.

At the beginning of his book Saha refers to the great Indian seer and saint, Swami Vivekananda who once famously said, 'it is easier to reach God by playing football than reading scriptures'. Despite being unable to trace the context of the saying,²⁸ Saha makes the observation that the great leader of Indian minds preferred vitality and dynamism to pedagogy. Vivekananda's remark, however, clearly suggests the sort of impact the sport had on the Bengali intelligentsia. This was a turbulent time for India, and football had a powerful affect upon Bengal in particular and its political self-confidence. While cricket crept into the Indian psyche as the middle-class settled down to a sedentary lifestyle following independence, football had a wider following among all sections and society. Therefore it was this sport rather than cricket that initially focused nationalist aspirations.

Coming back to the clash between East Bengal and Mohun Bagan, Saha traces the origins of this rivalry to the late nineteenth century which saw a great number of students coming from the eastern part of the Bengal to study in Calcutta, which being the capital of British India then hosted the most prestigious educational institutions. The people of the East were generally simple and fell short of the sophistication of an urbane *babu* (the Bengali word for gentleman) of Calcutta. This usually made them an object of ridicule for the local students, who called an Easterner *Bangal*. Saha traces the philological roots of the word to the twelfth century, and found that the old Bengali scriptures use it in a sardonic tone. He further refers to the situations when, driven by their vocations, men from the western part - called *Gour* - travelled across to the East and even got married there. This resulted in a culture clash as the people returning back to *Gour*, after having married eastern women, faced social ostracism. Despite having similar religion, language and traditions the reason behind the intolerance running so deep in the peoples separated only by a river, remains a difficult conjecture.²⁹

Saha reasons that the difference was possibly related to the diverse food habits of the people from the two parts of the state.³⁰ The eastern part, having a larger share of the coastline, saw its people relishing various delicacies made out of dried sea fish. This put off the western people who, enjoying the fresh water stuff more, could not stand the smell of the dried fish. Food and the differing habits and palates of the two groups of people have been issues that have cropped up each time the popular teams met. Though having diminished a bit in its intensity, primarily because of the gradual community intermixing over time, parodying each other's food habits had been one funny part of the contest. If East Bengal lost its match, Mohun Bagan supporters hung rotten *hilsa* (an easterner's favourite fish found primarily in the Padma) in prominent places and in turn the East Bengal supporters did the same, making fun of a westerner's passion for lobster.³¹

Saha also finds demeaning allusions to an easterner in modern texts. The popular Bengali dictionary, called the *Shabdakosh* (store of words), gives a derogatory meaning to the word *Bangal* as someone 'illiterate' or a 'rustic idiot'. As the East Bengal club was founded by and for the people of the East, it was justifiably called the haunt of the *Bangals*. Similarly a Mohun Bagan supporter was referred to as a *Ghoti*. In his inquiries on the origin of this word, Saha found that the students travelling from East used it as a retort to the derisory term *Bangal*. The word *Ghoti* means a metal pot that was commonly used for household chores in the West. And the over-dependence of westerners on this domestic article meant that the banter resonated with the word's original meaning. Thus *Bangal* and *Ghoti* came to symbolise the clash between the people of East and West, the supporters of East Bengal and Mohun Bagan.

Saha further suggests that envy was the catalyst for western prejudice, since those from the east had outscored them in all spheres of life, including sports. Football being a case in point, he says that Mohun Bagan's triumph in 1911 depended on *Bangals*. Eight out of the playing XI in the team, including the captain Shibdas Bhaduri and the winning goal scorer Abhilash Ghosh, hailed from East. Even the legendary Mohun Bagan loyalist Gostha Paul came from across the Padma.³²

Saha also points to later event, in 1919, that further stoked the flames of dispute between the two cultures.³³ At the centre of this incident was Sailesh Basu. Working for the Metropolitan College as a games teacher and simultaneously playing for the Sporting Union club, Basu was the first to react against the unfair treatment he received in his workplace based on his East Bengal origins. He resigned from his job with the college and went to meet a wealthy businessman from East, Suresh Chowdhury, in the hope for finding a new job. Chowdhury turned out to be a football aficionado and offered Basu a post and in turn asked him to join the nascent Jorabagan Club, where the former was a vice-president. Jorabagan incidentally had many influential members who were also associated with Mohun Bagan. Basu, despite his proficiency as a player, became the target of bullying and discrimination from the 'overbearing' majority from North Calcutta. With trouble brewing over team selection, it reached a flashpoint as Jorabagan lost to Mohun Bagan in the final of the Coach Behar Cup after playing two *Bangals*, Basu and Nasha (Ramesh) Sen. The resultant humiliation and criticism at the team losing after playing the two *Bangals*, on the insistence of Suresh Chowdhury, forced the three players to quit the club immediately and soon they began discussing how to form a club of their own.³⁴

Finance was not a problem as there was a good number of affluent *Bangals* in the city. The name that was conceived seemed radical at the time. Basu had suggested that the club be called 'East Bengal', much to Sen's discomfort who predicted such a move would invite regionalist social conflict. Sen's mild protestations, however, did not prevent Basu finding support from

Chowdhury and getting his own way on the issue. Thus the *Bangals* had countered the *Ghotis* by establishing East Bengal to take on the might of Mohun Bagan. The choice of the club colours, red and gold, seemed to reflect ambition and a mission while in the flames of the 'torch that was chosen as the emblem there was the burning desire to soar to the top beating all odds. And the conflict has remained fresh all these years as the *Bangals* continued with their mission to upstage the *Ghotis*, who in turn have continued to perceive the former as 'usurping aliens'.³⁵

Saha dwells on the suspicion and insecurity that characterised relations between the clubs off the field. This is exemplified by the fact that Mohun Bagan did not wholeheartedly accept East Bengal gaining a place in the first division of the Calcutta Football League in 1924. Having played in the second division for four seasons, East Bengal topped the league table jointly with the Cameroons' B team. With the Cameroons' A team already in the first division, the League laws barred the entry of the 'B' team. This left East Bengal as the clear contender for a place in the first division. There came yet another hurdle as the League rules had provision for only two Indian or 'native' teams in the top tier. Mohun Bagan and Aryans were the two Indian teams in the first division and neither of them faced relegation. Having a good number of influential names in its membership, East Bengal started lobbying with the other European clubs hoping to become the third Indian team in the first division. This effort bore fruit and most of the 'white' clubs agreed to amend the law to allow East Bengal entry in the top tier of the League. The amendments were suitably done and East Bengal was allowed to play in the first division in 1925 without any more restrictions, breaking down the barriers for full Indian participation.³⁶

The latent anger felt by *Bangals* at this perceived *Ghoti* insult was vented in full force in 1925, when East Bengal beat Mohun Bagan 1-0 in the first ever meeting of the two teams. Mohun Bagan avenged the defeat in the return-leg match thus starting the contest that has ever since dominated Bengali life. When the two teams took to the field the supporters inside and outside the stadium often decided to settle the score in a violent manner resulting in skirmishes between the rival sets of fans.

Though Partition forced the two cultures to gradually dilute through inter-cultural mixing and form a new cosmopolitan order, football kept alive the clash of the regional egos. The topic of East Bengal and Mohun Bagan became a preoccupation for Bengal society and it took myriad forms of expression. The conflict permeated into customs, literature, music and cinema and this acted as a counterweight to reduce the extent of physical clashes. Despite all these checks and balances, there were regular incidents when the 'rowdies' clashed to defend their affiliations. Things took a turn for the worst on 16 August 1980 when the famed Eden Gardens Stadium saw sixteen deaths resulting from a stampede during a routine Calcutta Football League match

between the two clubs. The spirit of the game was sacrificed in the altar of fanaticism as a brawl between the players on the pitch spread into the packed stands. Supporters grew violent and there was fusillade of missiles and fighting on the galleries. The local police, symbolising apathy and almost always making the most of the follies, played a demoniacal role trying to force thousands of spectators on the stand through narrow exits. With the policemen chasing them with batons the crowd panicked, resulting in the stampede.³⁷

Analysing the incident in its immediate aftermath, Arijit Sen wrote:

The reasons are many - but first the subjective or the latent causes. Prior to the large-scale influx of refugees from what was East Pakistan, Calcutta's population was modest and the general atmosphere on the *maidan* peaceful. But the increasing numbers, the consequent pressure on space and the gradually deteriorating economic condition of the middle class led to a paranoiac psyche - where the film hero and the football star were sought to be placed on the same pedestal of invincibility. It was the lower middle class mind's attempt to escape reality - and imbibe as it were, the success of its favourite player or club as its personal triumph over the failure in everyday life. And what better way could an emigrant find to perpetuate the memory of a largely unseen motherland than to follow the fortunes of club with the same name?³⁸

He continued,

With the increase in the number of East Bengal fans - and their proverbially aggressive nature - a counter force grew among Calcutta's 'original' sons, whereby Mohun Bagan became the symbol of the hopes and aspirations of the local populace. And somewhere along the line Mohammedan Sporting had already become the minority community's (Muslim's) rallying point.³⁹

This assertion stirred some public controversy as Sen's statements sought to exonerate the 'original' sons and blame the 'immigrants'. This seemed to hint at the social fallacy that has always perpetuated the hatred, namely the refusal of western Bengalis to accept people of their own religion and creed while at the same time raising accusatory questions about who is 'original' and who is 'foreign'. Hundreds of lives were lost as riots tore apart the state in 1947 on the issue of a separate land for the Muslims. The Hindus in East Bengal fled from their homes as a new nation for Muslims came into being and cross over to the part - West Bengal - meant for them. Here they faced the 'original' inhabitants who raised the regional issue to compound the agony of being 'immigrants'.

My experience of that 1980 tragedy has been restricted to the remembrance of my mother's anxiety when my father, who was an officer with the Indian Air Force and a staunch East Bengal fan, was late in returning home from the match that evening. As a boy of eight I could make little of the incident and my immediate worries revolved around my mother whom I saw growing restless as the radio blared the latest details of the incident and my father delayed his return. As the trouble was restricted mainly to the general stands, my father could see much of the horror since he was seated in the VIP galleries. He later recounted seeing trouble in parts of the stadium and even saw bodies ferried out on the stretchers to waiting ambulances outside the stadium.

Despite my parents being so-called 'immigrants' from the East, I developed a liking for Mohun Bagan. This was chiefly due to the influence of one of my maternal uncles. He was very good sportsman and a great Mohun Bagan fan (he must have derived the affiliation from peer pressure or maybe from liking a particular player). My father used to subscribe to *The Sportstar* and I would fill the walls of my room with pictures from the magazine of the Mohun Bagan stars like Subroto Bhattacharya, Bidesh Bose, Mihir Bose, Manas Bhattacharya, Xavier Pius among others. I even had collection of East Bengal players among whom I admired Mohammad Habib a lot. During my childhood I never knew how well or badly India was placed in the international scene but kept track of the happenings in Mohun Bagan and East Bengal. Despite staying with my parents in a protected atmosphere of the different Air Force Stations, I still found football infiltrating everywhere and the debates on whether Mohun Bagan or East Bengal will win the next match immediately divided friends on the issue. Though cricket was gaining rapid popularity after India's World Cup triumph in 1983, football, especially the East Bengal-Mohun Bagan conflict, remained high in the priorities for the people of Bengal.

The changing economic scenario during the 1970s and the rising living standards of the Bengali middle class brought in new fads. Bengalis had more time for leisure and the militancy that once endowed it with the vitality to achieve freedom from the seemingly indestructible British Empire disappeared as the people of the region gradually settled down to a sedentary and indolent lifestyle. One may associate it with the fatigue following a long struggle. While the outside world, especially Latin American countries, made remarkable progress in football, India, led by Bengal, appeared to be left by the wayside.

Rakhal Bhattacharya presupposes that Bengal was first outside Britain to adopt and endear the sport.⁴⁰ He argues that the FA Cup and the English League were established respectively in 1871 and 1888 while Calcutta saw the first competitive tournament in 1889 while the League started in 1898. Bengalis were quick to develop a passion for this game and a Bengali club *Sovabazar* became the first to be invited in the inaugural edition of the IFA Shield in 1893. With so many firsts to its credit, Bengal and football became synonymous and the country did find itself on the international map in the early and middle parts

of the last century. But then began the slide and the game slipped into a protracted period of regression. There have been various efforts to define this decadence and writers at different occasions took turns to make to identify the various crises that have plagued the sport for so long.

The rise of cricket and the conviction that this newly endeared sport is the best way to earn international acclaim (though only nine countries play it seriously) gradually eroded the middle class' interest in football. But it has remained an intriguing phenomenon that despite India's failure in football in the international arena, local Bengali fans have strangely found recourse to their fancies in the insular happenings on the *maidan*. Not going by the excellence in European or Latin American football, Mohun Bagan and East Bengal have made their own standards and have enkindled the passion of Bengalis, who had once dreamt of treading the world scene. Thus one can still see a gathering of a hundred thousand at the giant Salt Lake Stadium when East Bengal takes on Mohun Bagan in the perpetual battle for supremacy. Even a Calcutta League match attracts packed galleries when the big two play against other opponents in their respective 'home' grounds, which have stands hosting over ten thousand spectators. This is perhaps where Bengalis have drawn the line. Domestic football remains the favourite, drawing young and old in great numbers while cricket at the same level (first class matches) has barely managed to draw more than five hundred people for a match. International cricketing contests, the Tests and one-day internationals, draw large crowds and this goes on to support the postulation that a Bengali seeks to satiate his desire for international accomplishment through cricket.

My quest for the answers regarding the *maidan* phenomenon introduced me to Kushal Chakraborty, a true Bengali sporting enthusiast. Chakraborty, an employee with the Sate Bank of India and a freelance columnist, has been visiting the *maidan* for the last 26 years and has an admirable documentation on the sport, including an impressive collection of books, magazines and newspapers meticulously gathered over time. Chakraborty feels that the shifting loyalty by the middle classes towards cricket has done the greatest damage to the sport. He says that football used to be the prerogative of the working-class during the 1950s and 1960s a period of notable success. But with the intelligentsia being seduced by the indolent charm of cricket, football received little time and attention from the elite and the game lost the required financial and organisational patronage. The administration became shabby and the sport's governance veered like a rudderless boat in the absence of competent leadership. With corporate sponsorship coming in to resuscitate the sagging economics and spirit of the *maidan* by extending financial support to major clubs like Mohun Bagan, East Bengal (both getting patronage from United Breweries)⁴¹ and the national governing body, the All India Football Federation, putting some effort in to tidy the degenerating system, the fortunes of the sport looks to be rising. The National Football League was introduced in

1996 as the voices supporting a proper professional structure gained over the so-called conservatives. This saw an influx of fairly talented foreign professionals who were drafted by the big clubs. Their presence inspired the likes of Bhaichung Bhutia to brave the uncharted waters of professionalism. Bhutia, giving a great display of his talents while playing for East Bengal, became the first Indian footballer travelling to Europe and spent three seasons in England playing with a second division club Bury FC. Things are looking brighter for the sport. One can hope Bhutia becomes the role model for the younger generations and Indian football revives its glorious days once again.

NOTES:

1. For further discussion and examples of football's role in both bringing communities together and establishing social rivalries see G. Armstrong and R. Giulianotti, eds., *Fear and Loathing in World Football* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).
2. See J.M. Brown, *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); G. Moorhouse, *Calcutta* (London: Phoenix, 1998); S. Bose and A. Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
3. Among these are: P. Dimeo, "Team Loyalty Splits the City into Two": Football, Ethnicity and Rivalry in Calcutta' in Armstrong and Giulianotti, *Fear and Loathing in World Football*, pp. 105-18; N. Kapadia. 'Triumphs and Disasters: the Story of Indian Football, 1889-2000' in P. Dimeo and J. Mills, eds., *Soccer in South Asia: Empire, Nation, Diaspora* (London: Frank Cass, 2001). pp. 17-40.
4. Writing on football in India one is often confronted by the problem of sources (B. Majumdar, 'Sport in Asia: *Soccer in South Asia* - Review Essay', *Soccer & Society*, 19, 4, 2002, pp. 205-10). By examining a number of vernacular texts I hope to overcome some of the problems faced by researchers who depend on English-language books, newspapers, periodicals, memoirs, and so on. Unfortunately, the act of translation causes difficulty in citing page numbers accurately in references.
5. R. Samaddar, *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal* (New Delhi: Sage, 1999).
6. There have been a number of previous accounts of this game. See T. Mason, 'Football on the Maidan: Cultural Imperialism in Calcutta', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 7, 1, 1990, pp. 85-96; P. Dimeo, 'Football and Politics in Bengal: Colonialism, Nationalism, Communalism', in Dimeo and Mills, *Soccer in South Asia*, pp. 57-74; G. Armstrong and C. Bates, 'Selves and Others: Reflections on Sport in South Asia', in *Contemporary South Asia*, 10, 2, 2001, pp. 191-206; A. Nandy, *The Tao of Cricket: On Games of Destiny and the Destiny of Games* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).
7. R. Bhattacharya, *Aarbi Rachita Kolkatar Football*, revised edited by S. Kumar (Calcutta: Prabhabati Prakashani, 2002).

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8. K. Mukherjee, *The Story of Football* (New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 2002).
9. A. Bhattacharya, *Footballer Tin Pradhan* (Three Giants of Football) (Calcutta: Gyantirtha, 1973).
10. Bhattacharya, *Footballer Tin Pradhan*.
11. Dimeo, 'Football and Politics in Bengal'.
12. Bhattacharya, *Footballer Tin Pradhan*.
13. Bhattacharya, *Footballer Tin Pradhan*.
14. S. Mookerjee. 'Early Decades of Calcutta Football', *Economic Times: Calcutta 300*, September, 1989, p. 149.
15. Bhattacharya, *Footballer Tin Pradhan*.
16. Bhattacharya, *Aarbi Rachita Kolkatar Football*.
17. Bhattacharya, *Footballer Tin Pradhan*.
18. Bhattacharya, *Footballer Tin Pradhan*.
19. cited in Mukherjee, *The Story of Football*.
20. Bhattacharya, *Aarbi Rachita Kolkatar Football*.
21. Bhattacharya, *Footballer Tin Pradhan*.
22. See Dimeo and Mills, *Soccer in South Asia*.
23. See J. Rosselli, 'The self-image effeteness: physical education nationalism in nineteenth century Bengal', *Past and Present*, 86, pp. 121-48; and M. Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).
24. Mukherjee, *The Story of Football*.
25. *Desh* (Anandu Bazar Patrika group's literary magazine in Bengali). 4 June 2002.
26. R. Saha, *Itihase East Bengal* (Calcutta: Deep Prakashan, 2000).
27. Saha, *Itihase East Bengal*.
28. The reader will find more of Vivekananda's thoughts on sport in the following edition: Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. vol. III. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1991).

29. See Samaddar, *The Marginal Nation*.
30. Saha, *Itihase East Bengal*.
31. Saha, *Itihase East Bengal*.
32. Saha, *Itihase East Bengal*.
33. Saha, *Itihase East Bengal*.
34. Saha, *Itihase East Bengal*.
35. Saha, *Itihase East Bengal*; Dimeo, 'Team Loyalty'; Kapadia, 'Triumphs and Disasters'.
36. Saha, *Itihase East Bengal*.
37. See also Dimeo, 'Team Loyalty', as well as newspaper coverage of the tragedy.
38. *Sports World*, 27 August 1980.
39. *Sports World*, 27 August 1980.
40. Bhattacharya, *Aarbi Rachita Kolkatar Football*.
41. See M. Rodrigues, 'The Corporates and the Game: Football in India and the Conflicts of the 1990s', in Dimeo and Mills, *Soccer in South Asia*, pp. 105-27.