

## Football, Mohammedan Sporting Club and enthusiasm of Bengali Muslim Society in Colonial Bengal: 1891-1947

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***Abstract:** In colonial Bengal nay in India the history of football is an important episode. The inception of the Mohammedan Sporting Club in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and focusing its enthusiasm, encouragement of the Muslims added a new dimension to the political as well as cultural history of Bengal. If we discuss Indian politics we would find communalism is an important topic in Indian politics. A trace of this communalism was found in Bengal along with other parts of India. From the decade of 1870's various progressive Muslim communities, kept up the rights of the education, health, political approaches to the British govt. on the one way and the other the progressive Muslims searched for a separate identity for the Muslims of Bengal in the sphere of culture. From the concept of this effort in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the progressive Muslims of Bengal formed Mohammedan Sporting Club. Using the establishment of the Mohammedan Sporting Club, the progressive Muslims of Bengal wanted to establish a separate identity of the Muslims of Bengal. With the establishment of this club, the Muslims of Bengal felt a sense of contentment in the playground of Kolkata. Through this research paper, I shall discuss how the Muslim communities express their craze and enthusiasm focusing on Mohammedan Sporting Club.*

**Keywords:** Communalism, Mohammedan Sporting, Identity, Bangalee Muslims.

In colonial Bengal and India as well as an important topic was Muslim politics. Detailed discussion on this topic needs to be done. One important part of Muslim politics in India was communalism. This communalism spread in North India along with the other parts of the country. In the second decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in North India especially in parts of Uttar Pradesh, communalism flared up. Consequently, communal riots broke up in different towns of Uttar Pradesh. Mention may be made of Banaras, Mubarakpur, Gorakhpur etc. Along with Uttar Pradesh communal riots spread in various parts of Bihar. From the 1870s the Muslim politics in North India achieved a unique direction through the Aligarh movement, of which Sir Syed Ahmed

was the chief architect. He was a progressive Muslim and under his patronage, the Muslims of north India were shown a new direction. He took a leading role in the development of Muslims of Bengal too along with those of North India. Here one topic needs to be discussed – the efforts were taken for the development of the Muslims of Bengal even before the Aligarh Movement. In colonial Bengal, the formation of Mohammedan Literary society in Kolkata by Moulavi Abdul Latif in 1863, paved the way for modernism for the Muslims of Bengal.<sup>1</sup> By progressive Muslims those were meant, who took an important role in the education of women removing the superstitions. Abdul Latif, Syed Amir Ali, etc. were such progressive Muslims who wanted the development of the common Muslims using bringing about educational, social, and economic reforms. In this field, many progressive Muslims of Bengal took up a pivotal role. The erstwhile progressive Muslims of then Bengal tried to bring development not only in the social and educational arena but also in the cultural field. Its effect was manifest in the game of football too.

#### **The establishment history of Mohammedan Sporting Club**

In the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the progressive Muslims of Bengal took up a special effort to bring development in cultural fields along with other fields. The progressive Muslims, as a part of the culture, field to ensure Muslim representation in Bengal football. In the preliminary stage, the progressive Muslims felt that towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Bengali Muslims footballers were being deprived of playing football in various clubs of Kolkata. In such a situation they felt the necessity to provide an opportunity for Muslim players. As a result of this effort in 1887 Jubilee club was established in Kolkata with the initiative of Khan Bahadur, Amirul Islam, Moulavi Abdul Ghani and Md. Yasin.<sup>2</sup> For the enthusiasm of some progressive Muslims this club is renamed as Crescent Club. The next year it was again changed into Hamidia Club. Ultimately in 1891 Mohammedan Sporting Club was established.<sup>3</sup> Nawab Syed Amir Hossain and Nawab Nasirul Momaleque Mirza, Sujet Ali Beg were elected President and Vice President of the club respectively, and Abdul Ghani became the secretary of the club.

After the establishment of the Mohammedan Sporting Club, the enthusiasm and emotion of the Muslims were noteworthy. Initially, this club had no ground of its own. The progressive Muslims arranged for their practice on the ground of Calcutta Boys 'School. Besides many progressive Muslims of this side of Bengal assisted Mohammedan Sporting Club with special assistance. The emotion of the Bengali Muslim people on the matter of Mohammedan Sporting Club was ostensible. Anyway, it can be ascertained that from its initial stage Mohammedan Sporting Club did not make it clear its communal character. After the establishment of the Mohammedan Sporting Club, the Muslim players of Bengal got a chance to play but in the maidan of Kolkata, no communal atmosphere was there regarding football. For example, in 1911 the year of winning League by Mohan Bagan for the first time the Muslim

people took part spontaneously. At that time the editor of the journal 'The Comrade', Moulana Muhammed Ali commented: 'We hereby join the chorus of praise and jubilation over the victory of Mohan Bagan'.<sup>4</sup> But in the next few years, the ever-increasing influence of the Muslim League and in the background of degradation in the relationship between the Hindu and Muslim in the 1920s had its reflection in the playground too.

### **The enthusiasm of Bangalee Muslims to depend on Mohammedan Sporting Club**

In the middle of the 1930s when Mohammedan Sporting Club expressed itself as a powerful team in Kolkata and Indian football as well, then the Muslim community started considering it as their true cultural as well as social representative organization. Victory in League for five consecutive terms between 1934 and 1938 after defeating English and indigenous teams heralded an ultimate and permanent upliftment in Bengal football. But, unfortunately, this victory could not make the Hindus too delighted. Rather in one or two cases, the victory of the Mohammedan Sporting Club against other Hindu Bengali teams was not seen by them in good light.<sup>5</sup> Just at that time anti-Congress Muslim League was in power in Bangladesh and the League naturally projected the Mohammedan Sporting Club as an example of the greatness of Muslims. Even the nationalist Muslims also used to hold the flag of congress in one hand and the black and white flag of the Mohammedan Sporting Club in the other. In fact, in the second half of the 1930s Hindu-Muslim competition took the place of competition between the British and the Indians, so much so that communalism touched the field of sports too.

### **The success of Mohammedan Sporting Club**

In 1932 a group of young enthusiastic patriotic Muslim youths established in Kolkata an organization named 'Naba Muslim Majlis'.<sup>6</sup> The person who took the initiative was Khawaja Nazimuddin's near relative, Khwaza Nuruddin, who took an important role in transforming Mohammedan Sporting Club into the main football power. At the nascent stage, its proclaimed purpose was to make it one of the great clubs of the country by occupying the organizational power of the club. By and by the Mohammedan Sporting Club started reaching the acme of its success. In 1933 Mohammedan sporting Club became the victor of the Second Division League by winning the last eight consecutive matches. In 1934 Mohammedan Sporting Club made new history not only at the club level but at the national level. In the League match of that year, the persistent success of Mohammedan evoked unprecedented enthusiasm among the Muslims. This enthush reached mufassil to such an extent that many people used to come to the station walking for miles to wait at stations to have a glance at the newspaper that would reach from Calcutta with a hope to know the sports news of Mohammedan. When the Mohammedan sporting Club won the league for the two consecutive terms

that became a matter of great glory for the Mohammedans. As an immediate reaction to that victory club souvenir observed, 'Tumultuous scenes were witnessed on the Calcutta ground after the match. The joy of the crowd was unbounded and each of the players was carried shoulder high, their bus was escorted in the triumphant procession by thousands of Mohammedans bewildered with joy'.<sup>7</sup> one of the causes of resurrection and success of Mohammedan Sporting Club was the social influence and financial soundness of the patrons, members, and players.

The mixed reaction of the sports society of Bengal was observed in the matter of unprecedented success of winning League for five consecutive terms. This success of the Muslim society was a confidence gathering success, that inspired them to be successful in other socio-cultural fields. Again to the Hindus the victory of Mohammedan was of different significance since the victory well established the greatness and self-confidence of the Muslim community. In 1936 enthusiasm was accumulated in the Muslim mass of Muffosil on the matter of winning I.F.A-League for two consecutive terms. Extra gates for the audience were opened on the day on which Mohammedan Sporting Club came down to the playground to participate in League or Shield. In no other centers of football, so much audience gathered on the day of matches played by Mohammedan Sporting Club of Calcutta, it was true in case of entire India too. For example, it can be said nowhere in India in the match of any other team, at that time, tickets worth Rs- 23000/- were sold in a single day.<sup>8</sup>

On the day of the match of Mohammedan Sporting Club, the Muslim people of the city of Kolkata used to gather since morning. Thousands of Muslims joined them from the interior areas. On the apprehension of not having a seat, they used to carry food in tiffin carriers and remained present in the ground for hours since morning with a hope to see the Muslim players. The Muslims who could not attend the playground of Kolkata from distance villages used to throng at the railway station to wait for trains from Kolkata to know the result of the Muslim team. On the other hand, hundreds of sports lovers from distant towns and cities used to clap after listening to the great achievements of players e.g. members of the then Mohammedan team. Abdus Sattar, on the point of enthusiasm or Bengali or even Indian Muslims about the Mohammedan team, commented, 'The people were perhaps not so interested to know the story of the victory of Belgium by German soldiers led by Hindenburg as the erstwhile Muslims were to watch the Mohammedan play'.<sup>9</sup>

On 22 may, 1936 the Mohammedan team defeated the Black watch team by 7-1 goals. To watch the match about one lakh people were assembled.<sup>10</sup> On 30<sup>th</sup> may, 1936 Mohammedan sporting Club finished their glorious match defeating Mohunbagan by one goal. After the end of the match I.F.A. president, Santosh Maharaja offered the winning team 'Silver Jubilee Cup' and

each of the players a medal. On 17<sup>th</sup> June 1936, a heart-rending scene occurred in Kolkata Maidan. On that day a match was held between Mohammedan and the Attached Section. After the end of the first half a noted player playing in the center-forward section, Hafiz Rashid was injured, his shin bone was broken; the suppressed lamentation of thousands of Muslims made the air heavy. A match was held between Mohammedan and Black Watch on 26<sup>th</sup> June 1936. Through Mohammedan was defeated, to watch the match Samad and Rashid who was seriously ill came to the ground by ambulance along with doctor and nurses.

2<sup>nd</sup> July 1936 was a day of acid test for the Mohammedan team. If they could make a draw against arch-rival Mohunbagan they would achieve success in Indian football. The Mohammedan team bantered, even if the Mohun Bagan team won they would enjoy only clapping, on the contrary, if they could defeat Mohunbagan their Muslim supporters' chest would be inflated.<sup>11</sup> A player of that time, Samad said that Mohunbagan, by defeating Mohammedan from winning League champion tried to smear ink on the face of Mohammedan. Anyway, till the end, Mohanbagan could not score any goal. As the match was drawn Mohammedan Sporting Club emerged as League champion. On the victory of League, the scene which was observed that day was indescribable. Chorus of lakhs of voice welcomed the heroic Muslim players. Thousands of Muslims chanted 'Allah ho Akbar'. Hundreds of Muslims thanked Khuda believing. He retained the honour of the Muslim nay Indian team. To watch the enthusiasm and zeal of the Muslim society at the victory of I.F.A. football League former captain of Mohammedan Sporting club wrote: 'In the playground of Eton the victory of waterloo war was introduced, in the playground of Kolkata the victorious journey of the Muslims in India began'.<sup>12</sup>

When the players of Mohammedan were coming out of the ground on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1936 after scoring level the crazy Muslim mob started running to hug them. The players as it were, seemed to be plunging in the sea of people. In the expression of victory, some among of Muslim audience came closer to each others' throats or joined hands. The heroic player's garland with the bouquet. The face enlightened heroes of Muslim society were carried on their shoulders by the devoted audience and the sound of victory chanted in and around. The players of the Chinese team who came to Calcutta that day too shared the joy of victory. When police removed the crazy fans with much difficulty the audience took them making procession with the sound of band party and congratulating them with slogans and took them on motorbikes. Thus the entire Muslim society was charmed at the glory of five times persistent victory of the League from 1934 to 1938. After each victory apart from the chanting of 'Allah O Akbar' limericks were composed 'Mohammedan Sporting we bid you lakhs of salaam (regards), we have the Badshah (emperor) of the country whereas others have been reduced to mere servants(Ghulam)'.<sup>13</sup>

On the issue of Mohammedan Sporting Club, enthusiasm was there not only among the common Muslims in colonial Bengal. At that time the zeal of dignitaries and political leaders of Muslim society was also evident. When the Mohammedan team, by scoring level against Mohanbagan won the League on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1936 and came back to the club tent, many eminent personalities from mufasil as well as Calcutta were present to congratulate them. Among them, noteworthy persons include Khwaza Nazimuddin, Khan Bahadur Azizul Haque, Adamji Hazi Dawood, H.S Sohrwardi, etc. The players of Mohammedan Sporting Club were lovable to the Muslims after winning League for three consecutive terms. After this victory for many days, the Muslims of Bengal arranged for numerous meetings to honour these players. Following the victory, many mass leaders sent messages to congratulate Hon'ble Nawab Khwaja Habibullah congratulate the heroes wrote, 'By the wonderful glory of Mohammedan Sporting football team not only the Muslims of Bengal but of entire India are glorified. For this everyone can gain the lesson how collective strength can cause wonder under real leadership – that may be in politics or sports. By dint of this strength, the child of yesterday has been transformed into today's giant. For the glorious victory of Mohammedan Sporting convey my congratulations and hope this glory will lead them to greater glory.<sup>14</sup>

On the victory of Mohammedan, the then Prime Minister of Bengal A.K. Fazlul Haque wrote – 'Being one of the founders of Mohammedan Sporting Club, I have special claim to be delighted for creating record among all Indian clubs of Calcutta. we could e a winner amidst perils. Let the flag of Mohammedan Sporting Club never let down. Let us pray the way of its victory and utility to be without any trouble'.<sup>15</sup> Sir Abdul Halim Ghajnabi wrote 'Durham Light infantry won over League in 1931, 1932, and 1933. By winning the League for three consecutive years Mohammedan Sporting Club has also become its equal in glorious contribution. Every Indian Muslim is glorified for the history that the Mohammedan Sporting Club has created for the Muslims. I am conveying my heartfelt greetings to them and I firmly believe in near future more honour and fame await them'.<sup>16</sup>

It has been attempted to show in this article how the enthusiasm of the Muslims of Bengal and India as well was ostensible on the issue of Mohammedan Sporting Club. Not only the common Muslim people of the then Bengal but many Muslim political leaders, various regional Nawabs expressed their outburst of feeling in their victory. It has already been discussed in this article. It may be questioned whether Hindu Mahasava would have been established if the communal character of this club and the special enthusiasm of the Muslim would not be expressed centering this club. In the later years, the difference that was created between the Hindus and the Muslims had its impact on the football ground too. Since the 1930's the Muslims of Bengal tried to feel a sense of contentment in the playground about

Mohammedan Sporting Club. Therefore, various matches of this team became a matter of prestige for the Muslims of Bengal. So far as the topic of football was concerned from that time the Hindu-Muslim Communalism had its origin in the playground of Calcutta. In the post-1940s, specifically in 1946-47, the poison of partition was penetrated in the game of Mohammedan Sporting Club. As a result, communalism was spread even in the playground. After the partition when the founders of Mohammedan Sporting Club departed for Pakistan there was an ebb in the success of Mohammedan and the enthusiasm of the Muslims also had come to a halt.

#### Notes and References

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