

Mohun Bagan Played Back: from Local Inference to National Transference: 1911 IFA. Shield Final in Perspective

Ankur Konar

Burdwan Raj College, Burdwan, India

Abstract

The victory lap at the 1911 IFA Shield final by the fighting unit of Mohun Bagan was not an aftermath of a just another win but it was rather a socio-historic incident (or, accident?) that not only defied the monolithic British rule but also challenged the concept of 'Standard Football'. The barefooted eleven players of Mohun Bagan virtually dragged the white men of the East Yorkshire Club under their legs. The so long suppressed and oppressed natives (Bengalis) had always the latent longing to assert a virtual triumph over the imperialists. As far as the contemporary reports were concerned, the result of 2-1 in favour of Mohun Bagan made them the microcosmic representation of the macrocosmic India. The historic happening not only materialized the dream to resist the growth of the colonizers but also produced forth a nationalistic zeal all over India that British arrogance could be challenged. Such victory had definitely been a premonition of the Indian Independence that finally occurred after thirty seven years of this local 'playful' resistance.

[**Keywords:** Identity, Assertion, Subjugation, Game, Colonialism, Domination, Liberation]

"In a corresponding articulation of the triangulation between colony, nation, and culture... Franz Fanon insisted that anti-colonial liberation movements must not be merely national but must retain an inter-national consciousness ..."

(Trivedi xiii)

The glorious triumph at the 1911 IFA Shield Final achieved by the fighting unit of Mohun Bagan was not a mere win but it was rather a socio-historic incident (or, accident?) that not only defied the monolithic and airtight British rule but also challenged the concept of Standard Football. The barefooted eleven players of Mohun Bagan virtually dragged the white men of the East Yorkshire Club under their legs. The so long suppressed and oppressed natives of Bengal had always the latent longing to assert a virtual triumph over the imperialists. The result of 2-1 in favour of Mohun Bagan made them the microcosmic representation of the macrocosmic India. My article will discuss how the historic happening not only materialized the dream to resist the growth of the colonizers but also produced forth a nationalistic zeal all over India that British arrogance could be challenged. Though the victory of Mohun Bagan has remained unsung in the pages of history,¹

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it was in fact a major attempt to question the basis of British supremacy at least in Bengal, though not in India.² Allied with the implication that what Mohun Bagan today is India tomorrow, the crystallization of national identity was troped through the ideological aggressivity of the Green-Maroons.

People irrespective of class, caste or community became very much attracted by the dream of defeating the ruling British at their own game. Tinged with unputdownable spirit and allied with the recognition of local culture, the spirit of Mohun Bagan, both as a team (local identity) as well as a representative of a particular nation (national identity) offer and proffer an immortal victory against the immoral domination. Identity formation of Mohun Bagan and the formation of national consciousness necessitate a parallel interplay of differentiation and legitimization because -

The playing has not been easy. One has to play (resist) in a game that is not one's own the spirit (resistance) that is one's own. One has to play the various barefooted passes and kicks of a certain game-movement that looks maltreated in an alien game-strategy ... Football is the game of our intellectual make-up – like Cricket was before – but not of our emotional make-up.³

By nationalizing the local, Mohun Bagan by degrees defeated Rangers (2-1), Rifle Brigade (1-0), St. Xavier's (3-0) and Middlesex Regiment (1-1, 3-0). Gradually, football became the spirit of the place that could reshape the dominant meaning in the contradictory acculturation. By Indianizing the standard concept of football, which is definitely not a British way of playing, the glorious triumph of Mohun Bagan proliferates with the corresponding amount of space where the natives are rehumanized through the inscription of the dramatic self-apprehension. Similar to the (Post)Colonial issues, the mode of football starts in the centre and finally culminates in the periphery. The criss-cross zones of playing the politics as well as playing the game produced the sense of a replacement map that aimed to subvert the colonial policy of subordination. Thus the 'tempo' of Indian spirit had been incorporated on 29th July, 1911 in the historic resistance against the British; and the result of this direct physical confrontation was 2-1 in favour of the natives, the first goal by the captain Shibdas Bhaduri and the second goal by Abhilash Ghosh. The result acknowledged the oppositional voices from the marginal location; it also acknowledged the presence of the 'Other'. The game interestingly enough strengthened the legacy of revolution that resisted the ongoing invasion of the West.⁴

In the cartography of game, the stereotypical formation of the concepts like 'we'/'they' and mass/class are blurred. The apparent borderless game promotes a metaphorical battlefield where anxiety and influence are constructed, contested and constated. Negating any possibility of rapprochement, the ongoing reiteration of the native-selfhood resists the representational circularity of one-sided dominant discourse.⁵ In the dialectical play between dependence and

independence, Mohun Bagan successfully offers an oppositional position of power in the field that contains the shadows of identity in search of identification. The victory was a colourful mosaic of social, political and historical elements. In a way, it can be described as an awareness campaign of national consciousness that radically resists the historical block of the powerful groups. Through the identification of India with Mohun Bagan, what is ultimately displayed is the undaunted determination of the natives that outdoes as well as undoes the disruptive power of the imperialists. Through the accountability of the local colour and the grassroots, the ground becomes a site of aporia – an incompatible geopolitical space⁶ - where mistrust is radically intensified:

If there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism, it is the primacy of the geographical in it. (Said 77)

The 1911 IFA Shield Final offered an open resistance not only by the eleven players but by the shadow of a total heterogeneous civilization that cabined, cribbed and confined the maverick greed of the Westerns. In the lens of Postcolonial studies, the corresponding amount of game probes the limits of representations that disrupt the received notion of ‘inferior’ natives through the iconic representation of the spatial fabrication. Thus through ‘adaptation’ and ‘appropriation’, the stereotypical fixity and positionality of the natives have been challenged by reworking the standard norms of existence on a playground:

Freedom from the oppressive legacies of empire ... necessitates recognition of how one is constituted by the historical forces that shape subjectivity and the nation in tandem and of the imagination’s power to heal the wounds those forces inflict. (Schultheis 02)

Thus Green-Maroons, by mapping the fault line through the epochal ideology of social positionality, not only dismantled the monopoly of the Englishmen over the land of India but also set an iconic socio-political identity of the Indian civilization. Interestingly enough, Mohun Bagan won the Shield for the second time in 1947, the year of Indian Independence.

Allied with the national/local slash, the process of reshaping the natives’ identities according to a particular cultural heritage endorses the ideological standpoint of a desire through a local game that additionally promotes a desire in national frame. The reformation of game indicates that the monopoly of football no longer belongs to the elites; it is no longer reserved for the white men. Such endorsement of alternative football from the native-periphery to defy the football of British centre reflects the notion of an agenda setting cognition (and at certain times recognition) to heal and reveal a strategic justification:

We cannot play like the English. We should not. We cannot play only as Mohun Bagan. We have grown to look at the large India as part of us. Our method of play therefore has to be a strategy which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish. Time alone will justify it. ⁷

Though prophecy is always dangerous, Mohun Bagan's organizing imbrications of the political and cultural resistance promote a postcolonial remit because the surrounding atmosphere regarding the game of football reflects the typical Indian collective consciousness. The futuristic foray of the game strategy, in spite of the presentricentric predicament of playing without boots, has been proved to be already justified. Let focus on what happened in Ireland in the parameters of locality, globality and identity -

Irish nationalists were perhaps the anti-colonialist activists to identify sport as an arena for political struggle, a strategy defined and developed by the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), founded in 1884. The GAA had two main objectives: to resist what its founder Michael Cusack termed 'the tyranny of imported and enforced customs and manners', and to organize and promote 'indigenous' Irish sports, particularly Gaelic football and hurling. (Featherstone 88)

Conceded with what Boehmer terms 'nationalist mobilization' (96) and Fanon phrases 'national consciousness' (199) British rulers were paid back by their own coins. On a tentative level Mohun Bagan could make a variation of the famous statement by Caliban:

You Taught me game; and our profit on it
Is, We know how to kick!

Containing the seeds of a decolonizing device as well as a great mass awakening, the play was not a mere game but a sheer struggle to strike back and fight back in the political philosophy that underpins an imbalance vis-à-vis the available power equation. Through the circulation of local to national, Mohun Bagan's defence not only defends the East Yorkshire attack but also defends the colonizers' on-going advancement. Through the game in search of a nation, Mohun Bagan formed an interventionist shape to resist what McCloskey terms "old hegemonic control of the leading Western powers" (01). Assuring the powerful hold of religion Mohun Bagan went to Kalighat to pray and to satisfy the local gods and goddesses. Gurucharan Das rightly marked that the "persistence of God will be its strongest defence" (355). Mohun Bagan's advertising manner of game reveals the action and interaction of and against the reactionary force that formulates a 'Passage to India' which ultimately culminates in an outright symbolization of the geographical 'Heat and Dust' which are the cultural codes of multiplicity and plurality against the backdrop of single-voiced authority of the colonizers.

Cultural domination is doubtless a major aspect of imperialist domination as such, and 'culture' is always, therefore, a major site for resistance, but cultural contradictions within the imperialized formations tend to be so very numerous – sometimes along class lines but also in cross-class configurations, as in the case of patriarchal cultural forms or the religious modes of social authorization – that the totality of indigenous culture can

hardly be posited as a unified, transparent site of anti-imperialist resistance. (Ahmad 08)

The assertion of the own culture signifies the desire to have roots in the treatise of the socio-political fabrication. It was reported that due to this shameful defeat Britain was bound to transfer its capital from Calcutta to Delhi in 1911. British rulers introduced football in India with their strategical intention to divert the attention of the native youths from the burning nationalism to the light hearted game so that the grip of Indian nationalism been loosed. Liberation from the oppressive or suppressive legacies of empire necessitated a dramatic display of emotional prowess and the eleven barefooted players of Mohun Bagan through a calculated assertion and resistance dismantled the canonical sense of football. Every passes, kicks and goals established the race, nation, narration and identity of Indian territory.⁸ The indigenous codes of liability and loyalty, as configured by Mohun Bagan, provided the experiential trajectories which vitiate the monocentrism of the colonizers.

The victory came at a time when the unified constitution of a national identity seemed to be problematic. Preceded with the Karzon's decision to divide Bengal in 1905 and the hanging of Kshudiram for killing Kingsford in 1908, the year 1911 is significant because it had the radical germs of resisting and restricting the gradual dismemberment of the natives. The popular perception that revolution will bring evolution was established through the endorsement of alternative football by the eleven barefooted, young⁹ Mohun Bagan players with the subsidiary support from the natives. The recent cinematic text regarding the historical triumph is Arun Roy's *Egaro (The Eleven)*. The film, more like Ashutosh Gowadikar's *Lagan* in design and Shimit Amin's *Chak De! India* in spirit, projects the sense of what Jodhka terms as 'identitarian mobilization' (27) that worked as a frightening reminder to the British because the inescapable intractability and the resultant relegation disfigured the ongoing predilection of the white men's possession of other's space:

Bengali emotion rose high at the sight of Bengalis being repressed, humiliated and branded as inferiors in all spheres of life. Defeating the best European civil and military teams in their game of soccer placed Mohun Bagan like a colossal nationalist Himalaya on the sporting horizon. Mohun Bagan had almost synonymous with the national battle cry of Vande Mataram ('worshipping the mother'). Thus Bengali nationalist instincts in the wake of a perceived Indian national victory converged with the broader stream of Indian nationalism.¹⁰

As the game is over, the particular sign of British flag descending and Indian flag rising at the very end of that cinema evokes the issues like redirection, reclaim and relocation of a cultural heritage. Vis-à-vis the mass awakening, Bengal Sahitya Parisad postponed their scheduled programme on 29th July, 1911. Next day (30th July) *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* hailed the team as 'Immortal XI'. In spite of having an

ethnographic political policy to divide Bengal, British was forced to cancel the strategical Partition of Bengal on 12th December, 1911. Such victory was definitely a premonition of Indian Independence that finally occurred after thirty seven years of this local 'playful' resistance.

Colonizers physical disappearance has not assured the absolute independence of India. In spite of celebrating Independence Day of India on 15th August or Mohun Bagan Day on 29th July, the nation and the club – both are still strongly hold by the Western powers. Standing in the centenary year of that massive blow, it would be relevant to think in the dialectic of authenticity that how much 'Indian' is Mohun Bagan in 2011! Along with the advancement of time, the transformation of Mohun Bagan from the 'National Club' to 'McDowell Mohun Bagan' has been shaped following the patterns of marketable commodity and its additional consumer signs of 'money' and 'buying power'.¹¹ The leading players are now hired from foreign countries. Tinged with the cultural dynamics – from national integration in 1911 to cultural fragmentation in 2011, the strikers like Odafa Okolie and Jose Barreto (Captain) and the key players like Simon Storey (Forward) and the coaches and the supporting staff like Stephen David Darby (Chief Coach), Bernard Oparanozie (Assistant Coach) and Jonathan Corner (Physio Cum Rehab Specialist) are all not at all Indian. One feels sorry to say that the Indianness along with the greenness and the freshness of the Bagan has been vanished. In spite of providing a mythical 1911 team, the Centenary bears a strong sense of 'intellectual imperialism' and the present situation definitely maps that imperial objectification along with the epistemic dominance is still going on and on.

Notes

1. *The Statesman* (Kolkata: 5th Sept., 2011, South Bengal Plus) reported about a 'Belated Recognition' thus: "Cut-outs of Habul Sarkar, one of the squad members of Mohun Bagan that defeated the Eastern Yorkshires to win the IFA Shield in 1911 have been put up on the walls of Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) headquarters on S N Banerjee Road ... Laudable effort by KMC to remember a great footballer and a hero of the 1911 squad." (15)
2. "The dusk after 1857 Sipoy Mutiny reappeared as the golden new dawn in 1911." See the official website of Mohun Bagan (www.mohunbaganclub.com/).
3. "The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word 'alien', yet English is not really an alien language to us. It

- is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make-up.” (Rao 05)
4. “As a state of mind, colonialism is an indigenous process released by external forces. Its sources lie deep in the minds of the rulers and the ruled. Perhaps that which begins in the minds of men must also end in the minds of men.” (Nandy 03)
 5. “Colonialism ... is a formation of discourse, and as an operation of discourse it interpellates colonial subjects by incorporating them in a system of representation” (Tiffin and Lawson 03)
 6. “Location is of significance; it is this location which determines our geography, and it is this location which is connected with power.” (Jain 44)
 7. “We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.” (Rao 05)
 8. “Postcolonialism therefore refers to those theories, texts, political strategies, and modes of activism that engage in such questioning, that aim to challenge structural inequalities and bring about social justice. (Boehmer, Elleke. “Postcolonialism.” Waugh, Patricia (ed). *Literary Theory and Criticism*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2006. Print. pp 340-61, p 341-2)
 9. “Young people are growing up in a world in which local and national identities are being reaffirmed, fiercely guarded and shaped.” (Wyn and White 02)
“Young people are important because they reflect the results of political struggles over the priority given to the public over the private.” (Wyn and White 05)
 10. See the CD endorsement of Roy, Arun, Dir. *Egaro (The Eleven)*. Prod. Magic Hour Entertainment, Shemaroo, 2010. Film.
 11. “Contemporary culture in all its variety rests on ‘money’ on ‘buying power’, and the apparently borderless postmodern world is so only for the Western elites who have the wealth and power to travel, consume and freely choose their lifestyles. In stark contrast to them stand the disposed peoples of those parts of the planet for which globalization seems often to mean a loss of security and self-determination rather than an expansion of opportunity.” (Malpas 2)

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Ankur Konar is a Gold Medalist in English Literature of Burdwan University. Presently, he teaches at Burdwan Raj College, Burdwan. He has a critical book entitled *On Drama in Dattani* (2010) to his credit. He has presented papers in National and International seminars.