




THE COMMON ROOM

The Limits of the History of Western Sport in Colonial India

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Abstract

This historiographical review considers a corpus of literature which examines the spread of modern Western sport within and beyond the locus of public schools, princely playgrounds and club greens in colonial India. While locating the old historiographical problems and new social historical interpretations, a great deal of attention has been paid to foregrounding significant research areas that are less catered to in existing scholarships. As well, this review contends that the eagerness to examine colonial interventions in the sports field without tracing the conflict and negotiation between two different – pre-colonial and colonial – ideas of leisure and body cultural movements expounds an incomplete history of Western sport in modern India. While doing so, it urges a rectification of the methodology of current academic studies in which vernacular literary sources are treated as a ‘passive mediator’ merely reflecting the popular enthusiasm for sport. It concludes that this ‘reflectionist’ approach is a hindrance to research work on the diffusion of Western sports in colonial India, which recognises the emergence and development of a new sporting culture as the discursive formation that surrounded the ideological meanings and images of the literary construction of sport.

Keywords: Western sports; Indian historiography; revisionist interpretation; literary construction of sport; colonial India

Serious studies of the introduction of modern Western sports and their associated ideologies into colonial India are comparatively recent in origin, dating back mainly to the 1980s, though research in this field had begun much earlier. Just like in other arenas of Indian historiography, since the introduction of post-colonial studies in the early 1980s the sport historian’s craft has witnessed substantial epistemological and methodological changes. Post-coloniality has prompted a number of eminent social historians to

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move their focus specifically on to power relationships, cultural socialisation and informal resistance in the colonial play field. They have begun to investigate how modern sporting interventions were driven by a profound conviction of European racial, physical and moral superiority. While positioning themselves at the top of the hierarchy of the human race, laying claim to the appropriate physical strength and sporting spirit, the European colonisers often portrayed the colonial subjects as the effeminate, non-sporting 'Other', moral and racial inferiors who needed to be reformed, improved and civilised through novel sport. It has thus become crucial to understand the ways in which modern Western sport was introduced as an instrument of social control to bring order, discipline and virility to disorderly, undisciplined and feeble 'Orientals'. But, in the context of an anti-colonial nationalist stance, the colonised were not always fascinated to 'mimic' the manly gestures and leisure pursuits of their white masters. Then, it has also become essential to know the ways in which indigenous people adopted and adapted 'new' sporting techniques and practices. Recent scholarly enquiries have also found it appropriate to ponder sport as an arena in which the colonised inhabitants confronted and challenged the hyper-masculinity of imperial ideology, cultivated their own physical strength and prowess and gradually developed a self-image of confidence and pride as keys to achieve freedom and popular sovereignty. Their acts of subversion instead of simple imitation are therefore considered as the central loci of analysis in recent studies, specifically in revisionist historiography. Moreover, precise engagement with indigenous emotions and reactions often leads these social historical interpretations to look beyond an adult male-oriented narrative of colonial sport and, in a passing manner, consider the presence of women and children in sporting space as a relatively significant theme of history writing. In essence, sport is now viewed not merely as a site of imperialist hegemony and command, but also as a site of wider social, political and cultural contestations – those which were instrumental in shaping distinctive and varying identities in a non-Western hemisphere.

This historiographical review seeks to identify some of these most important views on sport's colonial past and trace out the changes that link them, with a specific focus on their limitations. In this review, an attempt is made to look beyond the overarching impact-response framework to mark the sharper reverse of pre-existing historical trends. The inference entails that without taking note of a rich pre-colonial matrix, in which diffused sporting ideals and idioms were drafted and grafted, no effort to understand the sporting scenario of colonial India can be comprehensive and complete. Last but not least, while appreciating the recent scholarly engagement with vernacular literary sources, this study questions the long-drawn 'reflectionist' method in which vernacular materials are used as a 'passive mediator', simply reflecting the indigenous consciousness of Western sport. Therefore, this review avers a genuine need to consider the diffusion of Western sport in colonial India as a discursive formation that encompassed the ideological meanings and images of the literary construction of recreational pastime.

Early historical (and sociological) studies of subcontinental sport during the colonial era often engaged with one of the most popular team games, cricket.

These early accounts usually tell the stories of gymkhanas, tournaments, associations and activities of the leading cricket personalities within a colonial sociocultural setting.¹ Perhaps the first meaningful attempt to analyse the importation and adaptation of an 'Anglo-Saxon' sport to a colonial society comes through the writings of Richard Cashman. He has provided detailed discussion of the social background of early patrons and players of cricket, the segregation of clubs on racial lines, crowd behaviour and resistance and the edifying and unifying forces of the game. According to him, the stark identification of cricket as a peculiarly alien game – which required manliness, stamina and doggedness for success on the pitch – somehow intensified a desire among the 'native' princes and others to come to terms with this 'gentlemanly' pastime and its ruling cultural characteristics. To these local people, cricket became an identifier of social status and a means of access to the politico-cultural edifice of the Raj.² It is interesting to note that there was no direct cultural critique of this foreign sport during the heyday of nationalist movements. Thus, as it seems, through the conscious use of modern sport as a social safety valve, the colonial authority was often able to reduce tensions which could have been detrimental to the consolidation and perpetuation of empire. One scholar goes a step further to say that it was the elaboration of cultural power through sport – a crucial practice of the colonial 'informal authority system' – which ultimately enabled Britain to sustain its vast imperial preserve for so long in India.³

A different way of looking at sport as a social, didactic and ecclesiastical phenomenon in British India comes from the works of J. A. Mangan. He has analysed the relationship between athleticism and public school ideals in the broader context of physical culture and imperialism. According to him, the introduction of organised sports into various parts of the subcontinent was integrated with the colonial civilisation and conversion mission, or more specifically with the ethos and tradition of 'muscular Christianity'. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, sport was considered by the colonisers as an instrument for training and disciplining 'unruly' male students. In consequence, the colonial authority began to deploy various modern sports among the colonised people in such a way that they could learn them (along with their associated virtues) and mould themselves into loyal supporters of the empire. The so-called 'games ethic' held pride of place in the pedagogical priorities of the public schools and mission colleges in India. The Anglo-Saxon educators and missionaries, who administered these institutions, involved themselves in integrating the games ethic with their educational programmes in order to inculcate moral order, *esprit de corps* and manly attributes

¹ Mihir Bose, *The Magic of Indian Cricket: Cricket and Society in India* (London and New York, 2006 [1986]); Edward Docker, *History of Indian Cricket* (Delhi, 1976); Alan Ross, *Ranji: Prince of Cricketers* (1983).

² Richard Cashman, *Patrons, Players and the Crowd: The Phenomenon of Indian Cricket* (New Delhi, 1980).

³ Brian Stoddart, 'Sport, Cultural Imperialism, and Colonial Response in the British Empire', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30 (1988), 649–73.

into 'native' pupils.⁴ A good many studies of modern Indian sporting pursuits have reinforced this interpretation, with minor differences and shades of emphasis.⁵ Looking outside the narrow confines of schools or similar institutions, Cashman has revealed that there are many contested areas where the ideology of sport could be inculcated effectively. According to him, 'games and the games ethic were significantly adapted when they were taken out of the closed environment of the school to wider society with its different values and demands'.⁶

During the last few decades, another popular game that has been attracting substantial attention from the practitioners of social history is soccer, or 'association football'. For example, a collection of essays has pointed out the crucial role played by imperialism, nationalism and communalism in the introduction, organisation and popularisation of this game in colonial South Asia.⁷ Many of the contributions in that particular volume dealt with the history of football from above, or from the perspective that concentrates comprehensively on the role of proselytisers. The event that has grabbed most serious attention is the defeat of the East Yorkshire Regiment (a British military team) by the Mohan Bagan Athletic Club (a Calcutta-based Bengali team) in the decisive match of the Indian Football Association Shield of 1911. Tony Mason and Paul Dimeo are among the earliest to have noticed the nationalist, racist and political significance of this indigenous triumph against the British on the sport field. They have depicted the celebration of this indigenous sporting prowess as a mode of acceptance of the English moral system introduced through the Anglo-Indian schools and colleges and submission to the cultural imperialism of the British.⁸ This vision regarding the participation of indigenous communities in modern Western sport and their success on the ground offers a provocative, but Eurocentric view. In this interpretation, sporting dynamism belongs solely to the imperial metropole, leaving the colonial periphery to participate submissively in the process of diffusion, unable to make any original contribution of its own.⁹ But, in the past two decades,

⁴ See J. A. Mangan, *The Games Ethic and Imperialism: Aspects of the Diffusion of an Ideal* (2003 [1986]), 122–41; *idem*, 'Manufactured' Masculinity: Making Imperial Manliness, Morality and Militarism (2012); *idem*, 'Soccer as Moral Training: Missionary Intentions and Imperial Legacies', in *Soccer in South Asia: Empire, Nation, Diaspora*, ed. Paul Dimeo and James Mills (2013), 41–56.

⁵ For instance, see Allen Guttman, *Games and Empires: Modern Sports and Cultural Imperialism* (New York, 1994), 32–40; Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: A Modern History* (Oxford, 1992 [1989]), 203–79.

⁶ Richard Cashman, 'Cricket and Colonialism: Colonial Hegemony and Indigenous Subversion?', in *Pleasure, Profit, Proselytism: British Culture and Sport at Home and Abroad, 1700–1914*, ed. J. A. Mangan (London and Totowa, NJ, 1988), 258–71, at 263–64.

⁷ See chapters in *Soccer in South Asia*, ed. Dimeo and Mills.

⁸ Paul Dimeo, 'Football and Politics in Bengal: Colonialism, Nationalism, Communalism', *ibid.*, 57–74; Tony Mason, 'Football on the Maidan: Cultural Imperialism in Calcutta', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 7 (1990), 85–96.

⁹ Luise Elsaesser has recently shown that British imperialism not only created cultural space for the diffusion and absorption of Western sport (such as cricket, rugby and horse racing) in the colonial peripheries, but also made room for the transmission and appropriation of non-Western sport (such as polo) in the imperial metropole. The British uptake of the Indian game of polo (in India

despite differences between their respective thematic perspectives, Indian scholars have gone beyond this Eurocentric argument.

Modern sport appears in an entirely different hue in the writings of Indian scholars. In his essays on the social history of cricket in colonial Bombay, Ramachandra Guha has treated sport as a 'relational idiom', a sphere of activity that articulates, in concentrated form, the values, prejudices, divisions and unifying symbols of a society. In doing so, he elaborates how the fissures and tensions of a deeply divided society shaped the varying characters, patterns and forms of cricket.¹⁰ In his book, Guha has extensively engaged with the politics of race, caste and religion that infiltrated the sporting space. He has charted the multifaceted roles of these constituent elements in the process of indigenisation of cricket.¹¹ The many dimensions of the indigenisation of an English summer game are also seriously considered by Arjun Appadurai. For him, indigenisation of cricket 'is often a product of collective and spectacular experiments with modernity, and not necessarily of the subsurface affinity of new cultural forms with existing patterns in the cultural repertoire'.¹²

Ashis Nandy has engaged with the cultural and psychological manifestations of cricket and foregrounded the discursive functions of the game which reveal 'more about the players, the consumers and the interpreters of the game than about the intrinsic nature of the game'.¹³ He has reckoned that the underlying rhythms and mythic structure of the game aided indigenous people to come to terms with colonial modernity. During the process of modernisation, the game not only was appropriated by locals, but also allowed them to critique their alien rulers and find the ruling elites wanting.¹⁴ Satadru Sen focuses on the career of Kumar Shri Ranjitsinhji (1872–1933), a ruling prince and a celebrity athlete, as an imperial subject, and reveals through his life and career certain unavoidable tensions within the British–Indian encounter during the late colonial era – tensions that made Ranjitsinhji a marginal man, a 'creature of indeterminate identity'.¹⁵ The latest addition to this burgeoning literature on cricket has sought to understand the ways in which the idea of 'India' took shape through a momentous sporting journey of the first 'national' cricket team to the heart of empire. It strikingly contends that the nation on the cricket field was originally constituted by, and not against, the forces of empire long before India became independent.¹⁶

and Great Britain) during the colonial period demonstrates how the meaning of sport changed across cultures and within cultures across time. The global transfer of sporting culture was never a one-way traffic. Luise Elsaesser, "'Dashing about with the Greatest Gallantry": Polo in India and the British Metropole, 1862–1914', *Sport in History*, 40 (2020), 1–27.

¹⁰ Ramachandra Guha, 'Cricket and Politics in Colonial India', *Past & Present*, 161 (1998), 155–90.

¹¹ Ramachandra Guha, *A Corner of a Foreign Field: The Indian History of a British Sport* (Gurgaon, 2014 [2002]).

¹² Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (2005 [1996]), 90.

¹³ Ashis Nandy, *The Tao of Cricket: On Games of Destiny and Destiny of Games* (New Delhi, 2000 [1989]), 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁵ Satadru Sen, *Migrant Races: Empire, Identity and K. S. Ranjitsinhji* (Manchester, 2004).

¹⁶ Prashant Kidambi, *Cricket Country: An Indian Odyssey in the Age of Empire* (Oxford, 2019).

There is no doubt that these academic attentions devoted to cricket have broadened our understanding of a so-called 'colonial' game, its intricate relationship with wider social spectra and its contribution to the formation of unique national identities. But most of these studies considered the game, in its early years on the subcontinent, as mainly an elite preoccupation that only slowly entered the mass domain.¹⁷ Appadurai, on the other hand, has pointed to the social paradox cricket represented in its early history in colonial India: 'It was honed as an instrument of elite formation, but like all complex and powerful forms of play, it both confirmed and created sporting sodalities that transcended class.'¹⁸ Certainly, sport in colonial India invites multiple subalternities in many ways.¹⁹ From the outset, there were several real-life versions of Bhuvan and Kachra of the blockbuster Hindi movie *Lagaan: Once upon a Time in India* (2001) – versions that articulate an active, non-elite engagement with modern sporting pursuits throughout the colonial period.²⁰

The revisionist construction of a colonial sport history from below has gone far beyond the Eurocentric limit and recognised the importance of sport as an arena for articulation of an 'indigenous brand of nationalism'. Boria Majumdar has looked at sport and nationalism from the perspective of the recipients of sporting ideology.²¹ He has shown that with the brutal suppression of the 1857 Uprising, 'political action against the might of the colonial state was doomed to failure. As the Raj grew more secured than ever, it was time to devise new ways to challenge colonial superiority.'²² In the absence of an armed uprising, sport emerged as an arena where imperial supremacy was challenged and subverted. In a piece on football in colonial Bengal, Majumdar has coined the term 'Brown ethic' to signify 'a secularized, de-Christianized version of the muscular Christian ethos promoted by devoutly religious upper caste/class Hindus thousands of miles away from the British metropole for purposes of resistance against the very "muscular Christian" colonial masters'.²³ In doing so, he has discarded the monolithic understanding of the games ethic (and associated principles of muscular Christianity) found in Western scholarship, which is central to the perspective that concentrates exclusively on the proselytisers. Elsewhere, Majumdar, with his co-author, is more forthright: 'Ultimately, the impact of the public school games-playing ethos seemed of limited significance in promoting the game among the Indian masses. In fact, the process by which

¹⁷ Projit B. Mukharji, 'The Early Cricketing Tours: Imperial Provenance and Radical Potential', in *Sport in South Asian Society: Past and Present*, ed. Boria Majumdar and J. A. Mangan (2005), 15–26, at 24.

¹⁸ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 92.

¹⁹ See chapters in *Subaltern Sports: Politics and Sport in South Asia*, ed. James H. Mills (2005).

²⁰ Boria Majumdar, 'Politics of Leisure in Colonial India, "Lagaan": Invocation of a Lost History?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 36 (2001), 3399–404.

²¹ Boria Majumdar, *Twenty-two Yards to Freedom: A Social History of Indian Cricket* (New Delhi, 2004); *idem*, *Lost Histories of Indian Cricket: Battles off the Pitch* (2006).

²² Boria Majumdar, 'Imperial Tool "for" Nationalist Resistance: The "Games Ethic" in Indian History', in *Sport in South Asian Society*, ed. Majumdar and Mangan, 48–65, at 50.

²³ Boria Majumdar, 'Tom Brown Goes Global: The "Brown" Ethic in Colonial and Post-colonial India', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 23 (2006), 805–20, at 805–6.

the game was appropriated and assimilated by various Indian groups at various places is a much more complex story.²⁴ Majumdar's endeavour to discover the 'lost' history of cricket, against the broader sociocultural life of a sprawling nation, reveals that colonial subjects often played for reasons more multifarious than simply trying to emulate their white masters.²⁵

As far as the social history of Bengal is concerned, Mrinalini Sinha has shown that the colonial discourse characterised Western-educated Bengali middle-class men as an artificial and unnatural class of person: in short, effeminate, non-sporting and non-martial Bengali *babus*.²⁶ Kausik Bandyopadhyay has indicated that the urban and suburban middle-class Bengalis, who mostly served the British as officials, clerks or professionals and could not show their anti-British resentment in public, always looked for opportunities to return the compliment. The football ground was considered a non-violent space to hit back at the alien masters. Bandyopadhyay has also demonstrated that the colonial games ethic itself, like the cultural-racist superiority of the West, was surpassed and nullified by its so-called inferiors at its own standard.²⁷ Thus, while discarding the assumption that in having recourse to modern Western sport the colonised actually followed a 'route of mimicry',²⁸ Bandyopadhyay has visualised a growing number of sporting Bengalis who played, watched and read about football as the makers of their own cultural politics rather than as passive clients of the cultural politics of ruling whites.

In this regard, Bandyopadhyay's latest contribution is noteworthy as it narates a different indigenous response to modern Western sport. Drawing on the writings of Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), he has divulged an aversive individual reaction which questioned the 'civilising' values of Western sports and their relevant functioning in the overall development of the Indian population.²⁹ However, while analysing the interplay between Gandhi and cricket, Bandyopadhyay does not pay heed to the underlying decisive criteria that determined Gandhi's labelling of Western sport as an insignificant and barbaric practice. A closer look at Gandhi's statements on popular Western sport reveals that he evaluated the acceptability of a game on the basis of spirituality and its connection with the everyday practices of ordinary people. To him, modern Western sport was nothing but a separate competitive arena for displaying physical strength and vigour. He marked this virility without mental excellence and spiritual connection as brutal. On the other hand, alongside some indigenous sports, he advocated for the laborious daily chores of

²⁴ Boria Majumdar and Kausik Bandyopadhyay, *Goalless: The Story of a Unique Footballing Nation* (New Delhi, 2006), 18.

²⁵ See, particularly, Majumdar, *Twenty-two Yards to Freedom*; *idem*, *Lost Histories of Indian Cricket*.

²⁶ Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, 1995).

²⁷ Kausik Bandyopadhyay, *Playing for Freedom: A Historic Sports Victory* (New Delhi, 2008); *idem*, *Scoring off the Field: Football Culture in Bengal, 1911–80* (2011), 1–107.

²⁸ For such Eurocentric comment, see Paul Dimeo, 'Colonial Bodies, Colonial Sport: "Martial" Punjabis, "Effeminate" Bengalis and the Development of Indian Football', *The International Journal of the History of Sports*, 19 (2002), 72–90, at 84.

²⁹ Kausik Bandyopadhyay, *Mahatma on the Pitch: Gandhi and Cricket in India* (New Delhi, 2017).

common people, such as agriculture and walking, as suitable alternatives to modern English games. He considered these exercises as the source of innocent pleasure as well as beneficial for the appropriate physical and mental development of the Indians.³⁰ This consideration signals a different, alternative perspective of sport, which was essentially conjoined with pre-existing cultural elements of traditional indigenous society. The connotation of spirituality, innocent pleasure and demotic connection can be found in the pre-colonial literary representations of play. Gandhi's ideological and political standpoints drove him to select several pre-colonial concepts as the decisive criteria for appropriate sport. In this process, Gandhi was not exceptional. During the high noon of nationalist programmes, many Western-educated Indian intelligentsias' aversive attitude to Western sport was based on the pre-colonial values and ideas of play. By concentrating mainly on the nationalist act of the adoption of Western sports, revisionist scholarship has developed an essential but partial narrative of sporting nationalism. This academic tendency created a lacuna that hides the multilayered and fluid nature of sport existing in Indian national consciousness.

It should be borne in mind that almost all the above attempts to look beyond the sport field have largely failed to consider the complex gendered matrix underlying the various projects of sporting nationalism – a matrix that often influenced and transformed through the involvement of women in sport. In other words, the nationalist construction and prescription of play activities for cultivating feminine virtues allotted for women remains unexplored in these narratives of 'manly' colonial sport. There is one major exception to this trend. Suparna Ghosh Bhattacharya has sought to examine the colonial condition within which sporting opportunities for Indian women were facilitated. She also draws attention to an inescapable contrariety of nationalist patrifocal opinion regarding the participation of women in sporting activities in colonial Bengal.³¹

In the above discourses, sport is also considered as a participatory and rivalrous area for adults. But should one consider an adult-oriented history of sport to be the history of colonial India's entire population comprising a huge number of boys and girls? It is the historians of colonial childhood who have noticed the imperialist and nationalist insistence on the pedagogic role of sport in ensuring the development of a child's body in a disciplined and predictable way. Satadru Sen has focused on the introduction of physical education in colonial boarding schools and established a connection between two contested sites in the empire: the school on the one hand and the body of

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 48–51.

³¹ Suparna Ghosh Bhattacharya, 'Physical Education in the Curriculum: The Case Study of Bethune College', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 26 (2009), 1852–73; *idem*, 'Women and Sports in Colonial Bengal: A Process of Emotional and Cultural Integration?', in *Asia Annual 2008: Understanding Popular Culture*, ed. Kausik Bandyopadhyay (New Delhi, 2010), 257–71; *idem*, 'Sport, Gender and Socialization: The Experience of Jewish and Parsee Women in Colonial and Post-colonial Bengal', in *The Baghdadi Jews in India: Maintaining Communities, Negotiating Identities and Creating Super-diversity*, ed. Shalve Weil (London and New York, 2019), 125–41.

the students on the other.³² Sudipa Topdar has placed weight on diverse pedagogical concerns and experiences in order to accentuate the implication of the use of physical education in colonial schools as a non-coercive cultural means of governance and reform.³³ Anindita Mukhopadhyay has observed how the playground of modern, urban educational institutions carried with it a new logic of pedagogy and training, which emphasised rule-bound action, strong self-identity with team and organised sense of competition. She has evidently identified a physicality of space ‘reserved specifically for “games”, akin to, yet not quite synonymous with, “play”’ – one which became ‘a marker of a colonial structuring and remoulding of space which had entered India via colonialism, and which became intrinsic to all the educational institutions that have put down roots in urban India’.³⁴ It was this new regime of field sports which began to orient the ‘native’ male body towards a modern space – a value-neutral space where young bodies lost their cultural symbols and became equal.

The history of subcontinental sport has mainly limited its complex study to the significance of organised, orderly and competitive activity that conforms to the modern Western criteria and values of ‘real’ sport. Considerable efforts are made to show how rationalised, achievement-oriented and rule-bound sport was implemented in India in order to elucidate the grand project of imperialism as well as anti-colonial nationalism. Although such studies highlight the social, political and cultural contexts of this implementation, they do not give adequate attention to the process through which modern Western sporting culture was introduced and utilised for colonising or nationalising the ‘native’ mind and body. This process deserves thorough scholarly engagement as there was no readily available empty space for the seamless and dominant application of the modern, specialised and structured concept of sport in an indigenous society which already had some distinct views of sport.³⁵ Addressing the traditional indigenous views and their complex encounters with the modern Western understanding of sport is necessary to comprehend the complexities of reception and rejection of modern Western competitive sport. It is undeniable that sport played an eclectic role in modern Indian society. But the question which also needs to be explored is how modern sport mingled with the significant issues of pre-modern society. While

³² Satadru Sen, ‘Schools, Athletes and Confrontation: The Student Body in Colonial India’, in *Confronting the Body: The Politics of Physicality in Colonial and Post-colonial India*, ed. James Mill and Satadru Sen (2004), 58–79.

³³ Sudipa Topdar, ‘The Corporeal Empire: Physical Education and Politicising Children’s Bodies in Late Colonial Bengal’, *Gender and History*, 29 (2016), 176–97.

³⁴ Anindita Mukhopadhyay, *Children’s Games, Adults’ Gambits: From Vidyasagar to Satyajit Ray* (Hyderabad, 2019), 361.

³⁵ In contrast to the historiography of modern Western sport in colonial India, few studies on the traditional indigenous manner of recreational activities and their changing colonial forms undeniably make the mentionable exceptions in this direction. For example, see Joseph S. Alter, *The Wrestler’s Body: Identity and Ideology in North India* (Oxford, 1992); *idem*, ‘Kabaddi, a National Sport of India: The Internationalism of Nationalism and the Foreignness of Indianness’, in *Games, Sports and Cultures*, ed. Noel Dyck (Oxford, 2000), 83–115.

recent histories of the introduction of modern sporting culture remain silent when they come across such an issue, their unstated identification of indigenous tradition as an empty vessel – which did not allot any effective, important and noticeable place for sport – somehow implies a quick, seamless and unquestionable penetration of modern Western sport into Indian society.

Slowly but steadily, a few scholars of subcontinental sport have recognised this inherent paradox of colonial sport studies. Ronojoy Sen's monograph is exceptional among recent studies of the Indian approach to modern Western sport, as it traces the roots of serious indigenous engagement with sporting activity in the pre-British era. Using two great Indian epics (the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*) and other literary sources, Sen has shown how various ancient and medieval sports like wrestling, archery, polo and hunting were intertwined with the contemporary hegemonic issues of caste-based hierarchy, royal diplomacy and the culture of nobility. He highlights the fact that the idea of sport as entertainment had gradually emerged in pre-colonial Indian society and stimulated the associated cultural advancement of performance and spectatorship. After the establishment of British rule in India, this sporting culture encountered the forces of colonialism, nationalism and race-, caste- and gender-based identity politics. Sen narrates this complex encounter and its resultant influence in shaping the modern Indian involvement in sport.³⁶ However, it would not be wrong to say that Sen's study renders an important but one-dimensional narrative of Indian sport. His endeavour to trace pre-colonial Indian sporting pursuits and their ideological underpinnings has been influenced by the dominant modern Western definition of sport. He has concentrated only on those activities of pre-colonial India which almost abide by the rules and structure of modern competitive sport. His narrow focus on finding instances of specific identical sporting practices impels him to overlook the multiple literary ways through which sports were defined in the traditional indigenous texts. Thus, he reveals a slightly superficial narrative of the sporting culture in India that ultimately indicates a unilinear method of diffusion for the modern Western model of sport in a non-Western landscape.

The traditional Indian notion of sport was never confined to any particular definition. There were a number of vernacular terms (that are very much in use today) which conveyed how people spent their spare time in India. For example, apart from denoting specific achievement-driven, competitive amusements or actions, the multipurpose and contradictory application of the words *krira* and *khela* (sport) in Bengali literature indicates an indigenous existence of a miscellaneous and diverse sporting culture.³⁷ In the colonial condition, modern Western notions and practices of sport encountered these varied indigenous understandings of sport rather than any one traditional approach to recreational pastime. Therefore, addressing the vernacular linguistic application of the word sport is crucial to comprehend the complex and

³⁶ Ronojoy Sen, *Nation at Play: A History of Sport in India* (New York, 2015).

³⁷ See, specifically, Manjita Mukharji, 'Metaphors of Sport in Baul Songs: Towards an Alternate Definition of Sports', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 26 (2009), 1874–88.

multivalent local responses to Western games and the resultant development of the modern Indian definition of sport. It is against this context that the use of vernacular literary sources is felt essential to write an expressive history of Western sport in colonial India, as such materials mediate a changing indigenous attitude to body cultural movements. This is where the importance of the revisionist scholarship lies. While emphasising the distinct objectives of local people in the diffusion of modern Western sport in colonial India, the revisionist scholars recognise the significance of vernacular literary sources. Their analyses have found vernacular source materials significant as they bring out the attitude and role of the colonised in the process of appropriation of modern Western sport.

However, it should also be pointed out that the revisionist historians are chiefly concerned about why the indigenous attitude towards modern Western sport appeared in the vernacular texts. But they have neither investigated how modern Indian consideration of Western games functioned in public life through literary mediums nor tried to locate how vernacular literature tended to shape the indigenous perception of sport. Thus, it can be said that the revisionist interpretation of vernacular literature largely follows what Jeffrey Hill has termed 'reflectionist theory', which implies that 'the textual source being studied only reflects an already existing reality'.³⁸ Over the past few decades, some eminent scholars working outside the subcontinent have put a big question mark over this reflectionist method of history writing.³⁹ Their pioneering works have moved from the interpretation of textual source as merely the passive mediator of the broader issues towards the notion of 'active text' or seeing the literary text as a 'cultural artefact that is itself capable of producing "reality" in the same way as other historical evidence'.⁴⁰ Their analyses of literary texts make us aware of the complex meanings of the messages inherent in the linguistic construction of creative writing, which essentially tends to determine knowledge and understandings of sporting activities. Such an analytical approach to literary sources holds minimal sway over studies of modern sport in colonial India. Since recent academic studies try to capture the significance of literary evidence only on the basis of tracing the mere reflection of the popular indigenous enthusiasm for serious sporting programmes, they hardly recognise the active agential role of the vernacular literary texts that not only illustrated the contemporary popular approach to sport but also in diverse and strategic ways shaped and influenced the cult of modern sport in India. The revisionist engagement with literary sources effectively explores the crucial question, why did vernacular writings

³⁸ Jeffrey Hill, *Sport and the Literary Imagination: Essays in History, Literature, and Sport* (Oxford and Bern, 2006), 21–2.

³⁹ See John Bale, *Anti-sport Sentiments in Literature: Batting for the Opposition* (London and New York, 2008); Anthony Batman, *Cricket, Literature and Culture: Symbolising the Nation, Destabilising Empire* (London and New York, 2016 [2009]); Hill, *Sport and the Literary Imagination*; Jeffrey Hill and Jean Williams, 'Introduction', *Sport in History*, 29 (2009), 127–31; Michael Oriard, *Dreaming of Heroes: American Sports Fiction, 1868–1980* (Chicago, 1982); *idem*, *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle* (Chapel Hill, 1993).

⁴⁰ Hill, *Sport and the Literary Imagination*, 27.

on sport emerge as a popular trend in a colonial context? But the existing works do not extend their exploration to scrutinise how the very urge for creating and expressing specific knowledge of sport was manoeuvred through such writings. Raising and exploring this question is crucial as, along with knowing the distinct causes of the popular adoption and adaption of Western sports in a local society, it is also important to grasp the unique indigenous ways through which the complex process of local development of the global model of sport worked. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to say that there is a definite need to break away from the prevalent academic habit and extend the scope of understanding of the sporting past of colonial India.

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