

## A Historical Study of the Origin and Features of Some Selected Folk Games in North Bengal

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### **Abstract:**

*Play, games and sports are integral aspect of any human culture. Traditional games and sports can form the backbone of a community which are the part of intangible heritage and a symbol of the cultural diversity of our societies. They are also an efficient means to convey values of solidarity, diversity, inclusiveness and culture which form an integral part of society. Moreover, they reflect on different cultural expressions, and create a bridge between cultures for a better mutual comprehension. Most of the traditional games and sports, expressions of indigenous cultures and ways of life contributing to the common identity of humanity, have already disappeared and those that are surviving are threatened of imminent disappearance and extinction under the combined effect of globalization and harmonization of the rich diversity of world sport heritage. Thus in this context the present study has made an attempt to examine the origin and features of Gollachut, Ekka -dokka, Ekir -Mikir, hamri, Agdum bagdum, Elating Belating Sailo, etc folk games in historical context.*

**Key Words:** Folk games, historicity, gollachut, Ekka -dokka, Ekir -Mikir, Chamri, Agdum bagdum, Elating Belating Sailoj.

Characteristically, games are mimetic. Not only are they reflective of contemporary social life, but they have also faithfully mirrored the lives of the people in ancient times. In a good many local games it is not altogether difficult to observe the presence of customs, manners of relatively past times. Even when an age ends to give way to new, the traces of the past continue to remain in the manners and practices of people, sometimes implicating them in poignant events of the human race, while at other times taking the form of heroic narratives worthy to be cherished down the ages<sup>1</sup>.

### **GOLLACHUT GAME:**

About four thousand years ago the Indus Valley Civilisation developed on the banks of the river Indus. The foundation of this civilisation, as we know, was based on slave-labour. In fact all we have of this civilisation- building, well-planned drainage system, the great bath etc. testifies to the immense contribution of slave-labour on which the civilisation had so heavily relied upon<sup>2</sup>.

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Archaeological surveys reveal, among many other things, the presence of a number of huge farmhouses. Following this a question inadvertently arises as to who were the people responsible for the task of procuring and storing crops in the farmhouses. Taking cue from the historians the answer is not hard to find: the slaves. A number of discoveries claim that several small settlements dotting the overall urban texture of Mohenjodaro and Harappa have convincing signs of a parallel slave society and which existed, according to historians, as a crucial determinant of the civilisation concerned<sup>3</sup>.

In the perspective of the role of labour in the history of urban civilisations, the local Rajbanshi game of North Bengal, *Gollachhut* demands special attention. The game precisely records the condition of the lives of the slave-labour hitherto unrecorded in history. Taking place in a wide open field, *Gollachhut* basically requires two teams in opposition to each other, with eight to ten members in each team. A big circle is drawn, a hole is dug in its middle, and in the hole is planted a stick or rod or some structure of a similar shape. The boundary lies at a distance of about 20-22 yards away from the circle. A member of a team stands holding or touching the stick positioned within the circle. The remaining players, while holding the hand of the exclusive member touching the stick, form a sort of fence, and then all the members start revolving around the circle. The member whose hand gets slipped from the chain during the process of revolution, or to put it differently, the member who gets separated from the group in the act of the specified ritual attempts to run towards the prescribed boundary to touch it; and the moment s/he succeeds in it, a point is scored immediately in his/her name. This is, however, not a simple business. The detached member, if touched by any other member of the opposition, before s/he reaches the prescribed limit is deemed disqualified. Normally when the player runs to touch the boundary to secure a point s/he, as part of the decorum of the game, chants a rhyme or simply goes on making intermittent hum<sup>4</sup>.

There is no doubt that the game *Gollachut* has significant parallels to the method of grinding crops precisely in the times of the civilisation of the Indus Valley. Archaeological sources reveal that the huge farmhouses of the time were but circular and bricks were used in its construction. The diameter of the circular farmhouse was about ten feet. A pit used to feature in the middle of the circle and in it was placed a big Haman. It was by the Haman that the crops were grinded to make flour. In many ways the Haman, with its great dimensions, refers to the stick/rod in *Gollachhut* planted in the middle of the circle. The circular premise made up of bricks is reminiscent of the etched circle of the game. The members of the game who make a human fence around the circle ostensibly share their identity with the guards of the big farmhouse. That the slaves had to continue performing their task ceaselessly and that without respite is somewhat clear in the way an exiled member in the game is brought back to form part of the human fence constituted by the members themselves<sup>5</sup>. The boundary, the touching of which ensures

the victory of the member corresponds to the same line which had existed beyond the local administration of the time. Since the local power held no sway in that particular region, that region, therefore, came to be associated with hopes of freedom and liberation for the slave-labourers. On a different note Wheeler observes that the purpose of deploying guards at the outward limit of the city was to forcibly hinder any movement of the slaves' escape<sup>6</sup>.

Now a question arises: to what extent is the above-mentioned logic of continuity or direct reproduction of the practices in a different spatio-temporal form possible and consequently tenable? How safe is it to conclude that the historic rituals of grinding in the huge farmhouse find their formal equivalent in the game? The answer to this has to be found along logical lines since no written documents are available<sup>7</sup>. It is true that in the past times the task of grinding was carried out with instruments like Haman or Shil-Nora, but to argue that *Gollachhut* is directly imitative of this practice is but to miss the truth in its entirety. Even today the same practice is prevalent in parts of Kashmir and Bengal, but what is conspicuously missing in such practices is the presence and acknowledgement of slave-labour. Since we no longer live in a slave society it is difficult to account for such practices in terms of slave labour, and following the same logic if slaves do not exist today then the question of guards that seems to inevitably follow from the condition of labour is rendered inconsequential and meaningless. Thus to conceive of an immediate relation between actual historical practices and its uncritical extension in a game is but a naive gesture, deficient of rigorous historical examination. Controversies and debates concerning the question, therefore, abound<sup>8</sup>.

However, in the meantime, another question erupts: is it not at all possible to account for the existence of labour following the times of the Indus Valley Civilisation? If that is possible would it be too far-fetched to understand the presence of the system of grinding in that case? If the explanation of labour is possible isn't it rational to conclude that *Gollachhut* is a direct imitation of the phenomena? Long after the example of the Indus valley civilisation the system of slavery did exist, but in any case it is difficult to conclude decisively that crops were grinded in the same way, given the scant evidence. Again even if it is assumed that the same method of grinding prevailed in post-Indus Valley times, it is not entirely logical to deduce that *Gollachhut* is its direct and continuous manifestation. In certain regions *Gollachhut* is alternatively known as *Gangachhut*, for in such places the outward limit/boundary of the game is called Ganga. However, in this case the only difference is that the outward limit or Ganga is rectangular in shape, instead of being circular as in previous cases.

Stuart Pigot, A.L. Basham, Kundagovinda Goswami, H. More and a host of other experts in the field have pointed out the event of migration of the Indus people towards the East and the South after the decline of the civilisation. Both of these regions was

located outside the Aryan circle. It is now considered that perhaps the slaves of the time had a tendency to move outside the urban civilisation to the East and to the South as mentioned above. It is also probable that the labourers might have at some time escaped to settle on the banks of the Ganges in the hope of being free, and especially because the Aryans could not exercise their power in such places. Thus what can, by means of this, be possibly concluded is that over the ages the game underwent serious spatio-temporal transformation until it came to be known and associated with the lives of the people (living on the banks of the ganges) as *Gangachhut*.

It has previously been stated that as part of the decorum of the game the members are obliged to hold their breath for some time while uttering certain words as is done in the game Hadudu; or else the ritual of chanting a rhyme is followed. Let us take an example of rhyme from Faridpur:

*Gol gol bonye*

*Khedu aano*

There is a definite implication of forcing the labour back to his work in the phrase *Khedu aano tanye*. In many places *Gollachhut* has lost many of its rhythmic variations and what is, therefore, done today is merely the mechanical repetition of some words<sup>9</sup>:

*Golla golla chhote*

*Sonar golla chhote.*

The slaves' desperation of escape does not stand clear in the dull repetitions and mumblings that have come to be related with the game in the present day. This is, however, not unnatural, for the more a game moves far away from its socio-political background, the more the possibility of its erasure from local public memory. The game in the present day connotes nothing more than an exercise in pleasure for children. With the passage of time, new elements- social, political etc. -will be added to it until the original element is so much relegated to the background as to become almost culturally unintelligible. For instance, in many places nowadays the ritual of planting a stick/rod in the centre of the circle has evaporated, and this has been substituted by a practice where the head of the members marks his presence by attaching his ankle to the hole/pit. This signifies that the grinding Haman has already departed from local imagination; and the more time advances, the more the game will find itself stripped off from its originality, given only to contingency and random adaptability.

### **EKIR MIKIR/ EKRI MIKRI GAME:**

This is a very familiar indoor game. The children participating in this play settled roundly. Each of them put two hands on the ground. Some older people acted as the leader of the game with rhymes reciting. As soon as the rhyme and every word are pronounced, one finger touches the head. The last word in the rhythm is that the finger of the baby's finger is forward. Thus when the fingers die, the hand are in a futile state. This handy hand has to be kept behind. Serially all the hands of the players are grasped then everybody comes to the hands or the donkey. The head wants to know what's in the hand of the hand. The answer and questioning continues. The Sarder then attempted to cut two hands. The scandal the players open their hands by pronouncing a false word. Wakil Ahmed is the stance to cut the thief's hand in this game; it saw a social rule of Muslim society being followed. That rule is the punishment of the thief by cutting the hand. Asutosh Bhattacharya narrated the alleged Mujumder's practice and his misdeeds. At the same time, he concentrated on explanation in the social context of the word shala (Kinshipterm). None of them are in the rhyme which is important to be sad historic event mentioned the historical personality, did not focused on that subject. According to a rhyme of the said game mentioned bellow:

*Ikri mikri cham chikri  
Cham kate majumder  
Dheye elo damudar  
Damudar chaturer poe  
Hingul gache bedhe thoë  
Hingul kore karmor  
Dada dile jagannath  
Jaganath er hadikuri  
Duore bosi chal kari  
Chal karte holo bela  
Bhat khaose dupur bela  
Bhate porlo machi  
Kodal diye chaci  
Kodal holo bhota  
Kha chutrer matha. --Rabindra sangra.*

Mughal emperor Jahangir remitted Mansingh with his Hindu commander in Bengal to defeat raja Pratapaditya of Jashohar. On this situation his soldiers made the journey accompanied with troops, but he was faced with many problems while crossing the Jalangi River. Rescued him from this problem one muhuri employed in the kanungo department of hughli named Bhabananda Samadder. After the historical role of Bhabananda, then said: ‘...when the Jaminder did not come to meet him the Bhabananda come boldly and Mansingh was pleased to help the kings army in any way. Bhabananda tried a lot of boat collecting a lot of tricks. Mansingh easily crossed the jalangi river.<sup>10</sup> It was the month of Chaitra. There started a terrible storm in which the armies were unable to cross the river. This disaster remained for seven days. According to the historians, many boats thrown into the water, many elephants and horses were floated, troops and war materials were also destroyed,<sup>11</sup> behind the Jalangi river, the speed of the Damodar river has been mentioned in this rhyme, this is just change. The difficulties faced by the predominantly imperial army are the major problems that arise. Bhabananda Samadder extended extra help in this regard to the sufferers; he collected enough food to celebrate the worship but he gave all the food to the solder. The foodstuffs have been taken within the storm and rain. That is to say that *ekkir mikkir* rhyme should be considered in the context of betraying Bhabananda otherwise the chameleon is likely to suffer from meaningless.

#### **ELATING BELATING SAI LO GAME:**

This traditional rhyming game is basically for the female. Two teams participate in the game and they make conversations within themselves. A line is drawn upon and two teams remain on opposite side facing each other team come, upto the line holding each other's hands and continue to recite the lines of rhyme. The first team raises the question and second one gives answer. The one team asks the question and the second one gives answer. For example second team wants' to know, “what news come about?” ; the first one answers “A girl is wanted by the king” second team again wants to know; which girl does the king want; the first one gives the name of a particular girl, thereafter the information like- what attire the girl should wear, how she will go- are shared. Thereafter, in exchange of how much money the girl will be taken away, is decided.

The opinion of Asutosh Bhattacharya regarding this game is noteworthy- “it is based on a real tragic story full of pathos. The questioning and its answers are testimony of that pathos. The uncertainty of life a particular age is picturised here- which has an immense historical value. How a tragic story evolutionist into a sport event – is amazing to note<sup>12</sup>. The social history of Bengal suggests that in the Middle Ages social dignity was measured through the possession of golden utensils and ornaments as well as numbers of slaves. They did manual works from cultivating land to cleaning utensils.<sup>13</sup> Even the owners kept the females as mistresses in hundreds in their personal harem.

Normally they were bought from markets. That means women were treated as commodities and they were sold and bought in markets. This naked truth is expressed through this game women were consumer goods for the landlords and aristocrats. Dire poverty compelled the poor parents to sell their daughters in exchange of money. Needless to say the buyers had no sympathy or empathy from heart -- only money mattered. But the pangs of the parents were limit less. We find similar motive in the famous traditional sport (Jele mach).

### **AGDUM BAGDUM GAME:**

It is a very familiar game the rhyme related with this game is –

*Agdum bagdum gharadum sajhe  
Dhak mridang jhajhar baje  
Bajte bajte challo duli  
Duli gelo sei kamlafulli  
Kamlafulir tiyeta  
Surjimamar biyeta  
Aie ranga hatee jai  
Ekk khili pan kine khai  
Paner bhitor phopra  
Maye jhiye jhogra  
Halud phule kalud phul  
Mamar name tagar phul. –Rabindra Sangraha*

In this game the participant boys and girls sit in a circular round. One leader recites one word of the rhyme and touches the knees of a player gradually one after another. He even touches his own knee in the same way. The player whose knee is touched when the last word of the rhyme is pronounced is out of the game for the next round of recitation and he sits on the knees. In this way when knees of all players are touched by the leader, the game comes to the end.

Rabindra Nath Tagore commented on this game in the following fashion – “I do not know whether the lines ‘*Agdum bagdum gharadum sajhe*’ bears any clear meaning or not; or if this is perversion of any other lines of a literary piece, the source is ambiguous.

But it is clear that a marriage procession is described the second line indicates some musical instrument and it is per versed generously in different texts<sup>14</sup>

The inner meaning of the rhyme is ambiguous for Rabindra Nath but he understood it is about a marriage procession. In this regard analysis of late Asutosh Bhattacharya is noteworthy- “until recently the marriage procession of rural aristocrats was the degenerated from of war procession”. Because there was no difference between war and marriage procession when marriage by abduction was in vogue. To the first part of the rhyme describes a modern form war procession in a different mode. Basically it was the description of dome-quadruple. For example, Agdum means advance guard dome army, Bagdum means side guard Dome army, and Gharadum means the cavalry.

Once this dom army guarded the western front of Bengal. The feudal king of Bengal like Bishnupur kingdom was in the safe hands of dome army. The medieval folk literature of Bengal is full of their bravery. Now they have lost their social value and function as well, so they are extinct in the memories of people. This is the reason why people fail to understand the meaningful lines and the rhyme is per versed so many times<sup>15</sup>.

#### **CHAMRI GAME:**

The sport that played in north Bengal clearly has two sections. Historical relation with the first division can be seen. In the game when a brave young man stops the stick with stick (the first thing to play is to create a pond like a puddle, the prevent other players who came in the stick the come from. Eventually artificial war held, whether the pond should be a land for agriculture land or the state – the fight against these rights has come from early times, we can see his galaxies in playing leather<sup>16</sup>.

#### **EKKA DOKKA GAME:**

If ‘kit kit’ popular game is played between girls. Then ekka-dokka also a very popular game. It will be very difficult to found the girls in village area who did not participate in this game. In this game a line has to draw on the ground for game court then the game starts with broken discs. The participant threw a disc by targeting a particular house. Then the disc that goes into which court it considered her of buying it, according to the rules of the game, the line should be crossed with jumping in one leg. After crossing all the lines, the player thrown a shingle over the several chambers where this shingle dropped may be occupied by the said player. The player has right to kept his two legs only in the occupied chamber. The game came to an end when the player able to occupy all the chamber. In several occasions the shingle carried for the chambers with the push of one leg. The players now recited some rhymes without breathing. Before the completion of breathing the player has to put the shingle in any chamber; failing which the chances passed to the next players. The opposition has no right to kept their leg to the

occupied chamber of others. This game may be played between two players but more than two players could also be participated. Abdul Hai who was a foremost among the folk game studies commented on this game, ‘The interest of the game [Ekka-Dokka] centres round wining of rooms. The game hints at the eternal craving of a woman to build up a house of her own and felling of satisfaction from the fulfilment of her desire as a mother- a craving hardly the characteristic of a man’<sup>17</sup>. In the history of human civilization, men were always motivated by the women to build houses. The role of women in the house and the domination in the house is still active in the society<sup>18</sup>.

But another researcher however raised a different view in the feature of this game and observed the form of land system in it. According to him, ‘the Eka Doka game consciously reflected the principal form of Bengal land system as this Bengal was fully a agrarian country. The land of cultivation is the main instrument of production, when the population of the country was low; there were less conflict of ownership over land quantities. As the population increased the demand for cultivable land continued to increase. At that time, their land boundaries were set off very courteously. The line demarcation of Ekka-dokkar houses finely indicate that there were the fine division and demarcation in the land.<sup>19</sup> This view of the said researcher further provoked that, for land related problems, nobody would have been allowed to acquire land without permission from owners. If it was necessary to enter the land of others alone, it would have to be very cautious. This is for that in Ekka Dokka one cannot enter the acquired land of other and if anybody wanted to enter the others land, he had jumped on the foot on the floor in one hand. This proved to be the ones hesitation to enter the others area. If the land is purchased, it can stand on both sides as the right to enter the land.<sup>20</sup>

For the sake of argument, if the assumption that in ekka-dokka Bengal land system had reflected in the limit awareness. In that case there will be a question of fertility in the context of women. As we know the assimilation of power and women so there was a tradition to accumulate the women fertility in case of agrarian production. similarly, the purchased land also comparable at that time with fertility women. If there was a question of physical coercion or matter of properties, naturally, there emerged a paternal demand in comparison to matriarchal. But basically the ekka-dokka game is about girls. In the case we face contradiction. Rather, the argument of Abdul hai and Wakil Ahmed is more acceptable- dreaming of women’s house, reflections of the eternal entity happened in this game. But with that one other context than we would add.

The article, therefore, highlights those major areas wherein both the game and the practices carried out in the big farmhouses during the period of the Indus- Valley period seem to resemble the most, leading us to knowledge of the point the game had supposedly taken its origin from. It is true that on the face of the lack of concrete historical evidence it is difficult to establish the point but attending to the facts laid down

by certain historians like Piggott, Basham directs us to question the naivete and simplistic interpretation that the game so far received. To do justice to what has circulated as knowledge in the name of the game, one needs, therefore, to recover its actual historicity, the social and political strands with which it is entangled and enmeshed; this is, I believe, what the article has precisely attempted to do. The different folk games included Gollachut, Ekka dokka, Ekir Mikir, Chamri, Agdum bagdum, Elating Belating Sailo, etc however highlighted the social and cultural traditions of rural north Bengal. These games proved to be performed as team games more or less, so practically it helped to maintenance of the social relation in the several villages of North Bengal. These games were liberally practiced between several communities of North Bengal and proved to be raised as a sign of communal harmony. Though these games have now been destracted or disappeared the combined effect of globalization and harmonization of the rich diversity of world sport heritage. In this respect Dr. Sri Asutosh Bhattacharya argued in his book ‘Banglar Loko-sahitya’ second part (chora) “The identity or similarly of children’s games through the years and the word testifies to the unity and continuity of culture, in spite of all the vicissitudes and vagaries of time and change and corrupting oral tradition.<sup>21</sup>,

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