

Bengal Traditional Games and Sports Culture Around in Twentieth-Century North Bengal

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Abstract:

Games and Sports are an integral part of the culture. Traditional games and sports form the backbone of a community, thus intangible heritage and a symbol of the cultural diversity of our societies. It also reflects different cultural expressions that create a bridge among the cultures. This article aims at exploring how children particularly in rural areas of North Bengal contribute to sports despite the economically poor but culturally rich tradition of the country. They did so to enjoy their leisure with the limited resources available to them like broken bangles, tamarind seeds, and old clothes especially for those who cannot afford to buy expensive goods.

Keywords: *Cultural, Traditional, Games, Sports, North Bengal.*

Introduction:

Games are generally concerned and involve two or more players, and in which each player faces a choice between, at least, two behavioural options and strives to achieve the greatest payoff possible (Michener 2000)³. All games have certain criteria such as a goal, chance, competition, common experiences, equality, freedom, and no impact on reality, and depending on the games and sports, people are engaged in some activities, such as thinking, planning, and decision making, concentrating, timing their minds and gaining knowledge. Thus all the games and sports become sources of moderate exercise, either physical or mental or even both and the exercise is essential for all of us, the benefits of traditional games and sports are twofold. Firstly the health-improving impact, which results from moderate exercise, and secondly, the relation for a few minutes or a few hours enables us to forget the outside world of today completely (Tunis 1944)⁴. Traditionally games, sports, and amusements are usually influenced by culture and which in turn helps to change the culture. As such the games and sports are a physical manifestation of the internal creative impulse.

The pervasiveness of traditional games and sports, the widespread use of the new motive, and the need to create more engaging conventional practices have led to the emergence of traditional games and sports as a new form for healthy and wealthy entertainment. While

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many have begun to see the potential of traditional games and sports to supplement and augment traditional formal customs. The potential of traditional games and sports to offer a paradigm shift exposes historical value delivered since the previous century.⁵ The implications of this transition to a new paradigm of traditional based games and sports will show the metamorphoses of society. The assessment and accreditation towards the peer and personalized attitude of the people and provide an emphasis upon social interaction customs and as well as rituals based matter. This will increase opportunities for synchronizing in the form of feedbacking and feedback loops and mean the integration of multimodal interfaces between the people and society⁶.

North Bengal in rural belt club-culture is rare to patronized sports and games in the modern sense. Thus children playing cricket, tennis or badminton, etc are far crying. Besides, children cannot afford to buy expensive playing implements for being poor. However, guardians are concerned about their children involving in play, obviously traditional games for the healthy growth of their children. So despite such much advance, traditional games are still surviving in North Bengal by the side of the fashionable game. So parents spare the evening hours (4 p.m. to 6 p.m.) scheduled for games and sports for their children⁷. However, the natural physical feats are common to every child as the inherent restless spirit common to the age.

Braving the poverty and lured by the higher culture some rural middle-class children collect money curtailing their other expenses to buy sports implements and try to ape modern games even in the rural areas and the games being a co-operative venture involves others in the fray. In this way how modern games slowly penetrating rural areas⁸. Some games require a group of boys and girls whereas others are played either by girls or boys only. Irrespective of the location was chosen for playing – school or home or elsewhere – games are designed to provide fun and entertainment. Besides, games help to inculcate physical and mental control among the participants⁹. Some traditional games are described one by one that would highlight the content of my article. Information about these games was gathered from field visits and personal childhood experiences. The described games are chosen from those which are most popular among the children. It should be noted that some of these games are also played in other parts of India with minor alterations in the format and a few of these games are played by adults as well.

For the traditional games of North Bengal, a strict classification of the games is difficult to arrive at, as the following quote suggests in the Standard dictionary of folklore mythology and legend says *"the classification of games has been the subject of many studies and there are almost as many ways of considering the subject as there are writers on the matter. Games may be discussed according to the season in which they are played; according to the sex or age of the participants etc."*¹⁰ These games are broadly classified as indoor and outdoor games. For example games like *PaitKhela*, *TsokorTsal*, and

BaghbandiKhela are in the indoor category, while games like *DanguliKhela*, *KithkithKhela*, *Ekka-DokkaKhela*, *PutulKhela*, are in the outdoor games category. Most of these games are unisexual yet some of being uniquely male or female games. *Elating BelatingSailo*, *Ekka-Dokka*, *KithkithKhela* are of female member game. *DanguliKhela*, *Gollachhut*, is of male dominance.

The present article proposed to examine and study the genesis of such traditional games, which were closely associated with the land of North Bengal from a historical perspective. The study will also adopt a sociological aspect, trying to find the role these games played in creating an identity of specific communities of the region.

SOCIO-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE TRADITIONAL GAMES AND SPORTS OF NORTH BENGAL:

Each traditional game of this region is associated with some social or historic context. We find the religious belief, superstitions, and social customs reflected in them. They have symbolic values along with entertainment values. On this note, these games are very important to deeply appreciate the social and historical contexts of this region. For example, the '*Elating Belating*' game symbolically represents the wretched condition of women in medieval Bengal especially focusing on North Bengal in a background of social and economic instability. Slavery and the buying and selling of slaves and women in the slave market were common to that particular period. Women were treated as commodities and tools to satisfy the sexual desire of the rich people.¹¹ In '*PaitKhela*' the continuous fight among the small belligerent groups in the medieval North Bengal is found. How to arrange the army to defend the opposition is reflected in the arrangement of cowries (symbols) in lines. In the game of '*Pait*' who succeeds to align the symbols in line becomes the winner; indicating whose army is more disciplined wins the battle. Earlier North Bengal, geographically positioned in Tarai region, was covered with forest land more in percentage than the present scenario and the attack of the wild animals in the human habitat was very common. In the '*BaghbandiKhela*,' we learn how to tame or capture the wild animals attacking the village.¹² In the game of '*Gollachut*' we find the presence of the feudal lord and customs of slavery. In the social system of that particular period, slaves worked under the feudal lord in the sharp observation of the armed guards. Sometimes the slaves tried to escape dodging the guards. If caught up they were killed. And in rare cases, the slave succeeded to escape. The movement of slaves against the feudal lords was also common.¹³ In ancient societies lands were divided among small groups. And one group could not enter the land of another group. Possession of lands was a cause of continuous tension among the groups. There were some neutral zones like hills, unproductive lands, and grazing lands in which there were equal rights of all the belligerent groups. This social system is beautifully captured in the game of '*DhaiKhela*'.¹⁴

The games have been illustrated in the article in two annexures called (i) and (ii) simultaneously being Outdoor and Indoor games.

ANNEXURE (I)

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 the opposite side facing each other team comes, up to the line holding each other's hands, and continues to recite the lines of rhyme. The first team raises the question and the second one answers. The one team asks the question and the second one answers. For example, the second team wants to know, "what news comes 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 for how much money the girl will be taken away, is decided.¹⁵

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 at a particular age is pictured here- which has an immense historical value. How a tragic story evolutionist into a sporting event – is amazing to note*"¹⁶. 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.¹⁷ Even the owners kept the females as mistresses in hundreds in their 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 for money. Needless to say, the buyers had no sympathy or empathy from the heart – only money mattered. But the pangs of the parents have limited leas. We find a similar motive in the famous traditional sport (Jele Mach).

DANG-GULI KHELA: This game, remarkably similar to cricket, is believed to be more than a thousand years old – dating back to the Mauryan Dynasty. The game is played using a short wooden peg (3 to 6 inches long) with tapered ends, called the Gilli, and a wooden stick (2 to 3 foot long), called the danda. The players are divided into two teams with no restriction on their number in a team. A team can opt either to bat or field by winning the toss. A small circle is drawn on the ground and a little crater is made in its center. The 'batsman' from the batting side stands inside the circle, while the players of the fielding side spread around him in various positions. The 'batsman' places the Gilli just above the crater in the circle, hits it hard with the danda, and as it

rises, strikes it again. The spot where the Gilli falls is marked, and its distance from the circle is measured using the danda. The batsman gets one point for each danda length. The batsman is out if he fails to strike the Gilli in three consecutive attempts or if the Gilli is caught by a fielder. In such a case, the next batsman comes in to bat. This is repeated until all the players in the batting team have batted. The total points of batsmen are added up to get the team's total score. The team batting next will try and chase this target to win the match. The benefits of this game improve hand-eye coordination, Sharpens judgment skills.¹⁸

KITH-KITH KHELA: This game is similar to hopscotch and dates back to the 17th century. An 8-square grid (2 columns and 4 rows) is drawn on the floor using a piece of chalk. The players choose a button, shell, or stone as their markers. The game starts with one player standing in front of the starting line and tossing her marker into the first square. She then hops across all the eight squares, turns around, and hops back to the second block. She picks up her marker from the first square and tosses it to the second block. She then continues the hopping cycle, until the marker reaches the eighth block, and ends her lap. The other girls 'hop' in the same manner. If a girl loses her balance and her folded leg touches the ground mid-way through the game, she is considered to be 'out'. The benefits of this game enhance physical balance and rhythm, strengthens muscles, improves motor skills, and develop spatial awareness. Parental supervision is essential for all the games since they use goods like pebbles, marbles, and wooden logs.¹⁹

MODAN KAM/BAS KHELA: In the month of Baisakh after harvesting of paddy, the Rajbansi young men perform the Bas puja or Bits Dzagao on the MadanChoturdasi day. This is called MadanKam puja'. A few pieces of bamboo poles are wrapped with colored cloth and a Chamor (Chehor-yak's tail) is tied at the top of each bamboo. Seven bamboos are taken. They are named as-(i) Salsiri Maharaja (2) Garam (3) Sannyasi (4) Kali (5) TistaBuri (6) Bisohori (7) MadarPir. The priest is a RajbansiDeosi. He carries an earthen pitcher containing some rice and flowers. The first day of this puja (Khela) is called Bas Jagao day.

Some boys dress as girls and some boys take the fancy dress of various descriptions. The bamboo poles are carried by some members of the party and the persons in fancy dress sing and dance with the music of drum and bell-metal gong. When they arrive at the house of a villager they keep aside the bamboos on a piece of cloth and then begin their song and dance. It is called BirsaniKhela. They move from house to house and collect money, rice, and vegetables. In the afternoon they retire to a field and perform the worship of Kali, 'this is called Bosani puja. Goats even castrated goats, pigeons are sacrificed. The number varies according to the donations raised. Puffed rice (muri), sweet puffed paddy (Murki), milk, ripe plantains are distributed to all present. The worship is finished before the sunsets. It is for the welfare of the village .specially to ward off epidemics. In this area, the goddess of smallpox Sitala is not worshipped. Kali is worshipped to prevent smallpox epidemics.

After the worship, the cloth covering the Liamboos and the yak's tail arc was taken out and then the bamboo poles arc thrown into the water.²⁰

PUTUL-PUTUL KHELA (MARRIAGE OF DOLLS): This is again one of the girls' popular games. The term putuls is a synonym for toy or doll. The discovery of several putuls made of terracotta and metal in the Indus valley proves the antique origin of toys. It is of course a fact that toy playing by no means matches the format of the game suggested in this study. It falls into the category of amusement or play which lacks both rule and result. Nevertheless, considering the extent of its popularity, wide geographical distribution, and ancient origin, it is essential to review its social context. Girls request their mothers or grandmothers to make dolls. Pieces of cloth are used for making them. Toy kitchen goods made of plastic or tin are bought at the market. Toys made up of clay, cloth, and wood are sold during festive periods. Radha-Krishna, elephants, horses, birds, etc., are favorites with children. Girls use these toys to decorate their Doll houses. Sometimes they arrange marriages for their dolls. At first, they divide themselves into two groups. One group acts as the boy's party and the other group as the girl's party. They sing and dance and perform all the rituals of a real marriage. Sometimes boys also join the group when they realize that girls are going to distribute Bhunja (roasted grains) and gur (jaggery) after the wedding ceremony. They spend hours organizing and performing these ceremonies. Playing with Putul or dolls is universal. Apart from treating dolls as babies to be fed and put to sleep, girls learn social rites and rituals through playing with dolls. A favorite game in North Bengal, as in other parts of India, involves doll weddings. PutulerBiye (The Doll's Marriage) by Kajinazrul Islam is a short play that describes a doll wedding.²¹

ANNEXURE (II)

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 is in a futile state. This handy hand has to be kept behind. Serially all the hands of the players have 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 continued. 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 explanations in the social context of the word shala (Kinshipterm). None of them are in the rhyme which is important to be a sad historic event mentioned the historical personality, did not focus on that subject. According to a rhyme of the said game mentioned below:

Ikri Mikri Cham Chikri
Cham Kate Majumder
Dheye Elo Damudar
Damudar Chaturer Poe
Hingul Gache Bedhe Thoe
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. —RabindraSamagra.

Mughal emperor Jahangir remitted Mansingh with his Hindu commander in Bengal to defeat raja Pratapaditya of Jashohar. In this situation, his soldiers made the journey accompanied by 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 BhabanandaSamadder. 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 king’s army in any way. ...Bhabananda tried a lot of boats collecting a lot of tricks. Mansingh easily crossed the Jalangi River.²² 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 were thrown into the water, many elephants and horses were floated, troops and war materials were also destroyed,²³ behind the Jalangi river, the speed of the Damodar river has been mentioned in this rhyme, this is just a 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 soldier. The foodstuffs have been taken by the storm and rain. That is to say that *EkkirMikkir* rhyme should be considered in the context of betraying Bhabananda otherwise the chameleon is likely to suffer from meaninglessness.

PAIT KHELA AND BAGH BANDI KHELA: These are mainly indoor games played in the rainy season. At first, a court is drawn on the soil and two individual players begin to play with different types of cowries (tamarind seeds or gourd seeds). The number of cowries varies depending on the nature of the court ranging from 16 to 3. '*BaghbandiKhela*' is similar. But in this game, one player who is 'Bagh' or tiger plays with a small stick and the opponent with three cowries tries to bounding the 'Bagh'.²⁴

TSOKOR TSAL KHELA: This indoor game is a game of skill played between two sides or individuals with 34 cowries on each side of different sizes and colors. A strategic game like chess requires high thinking capabilities and the mental caliber of the players. Sometimes it takes hours to finish off.²⁵

CONCLUSION:

This article, 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 stands with which it is entangled and enmeshed; this is, I believe, what the article has precisely attempted to do. The different Traditional games included *Gollachut*, *EkkaDokka*, *EkirMikir*, *Chamri*, *Elating BelatingSailo*, *MadanKam/Bas Khela*, *DanguliKhela*, *PutulKhela*, *Bhagbandi*, 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 the 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 destructed or disappear the combined effect of globalization and harmonization of the rich diversity of world sports heritage. In this respect, Dr. Sri Asutosh Bhattacharya argued in his book '*BanglerLoko-Sahitya*' second part (Chora) "*The identity or similarity of children's games through the years and the word testifies to the unity and continuity of culture, despite all the vicissitudes and vagaries of time and change and corrupting oral tradition*".²⁶

It is observed that there are some games associated with lifecycle. It includes all the sports of physical movements. So, the above games can be grouped into these four broad categories: (1) Running games (2) Jumping games (3) skill-demonstrating games (4) Throwing

games: A four category of games appears necessary to be included here. In addition to these games, there are many other traditional games which children play at different stages of their childhood. Games of more recent times that have reached here through urban areas (Carom, Ludo, Snakes and Ladders, Business, computer, and video games), are also played in North Bengal. However, these are played by the children of the urban areas or economically better off strata. Playing games is a common characteristic of children.²⁷ All over the world, children like to run, play, laugh, and enjoy themselves. Games involving much movement and running satisfy younger and older children's need to move and so develop their skills. Moving together, paying attention to one another, and adapting themselves to one another are skills that are developed by playing different types of games (Lazar 2005)²⁸. Children play a variety of indoor and outdoor games. These games have rich cultural and heritage value. They are an important vehicle for passing on some ancestral knowledge to posterity. According to Edgardo Civallero (2006)²⁹, "*a people's intangible heritage is composed by the non-material part of its culture: tales and narratives, games and songs, music and all the knowledge usually transmitted by oral or sound means, in traditional societies as well as in urban westernized ones*".

Thus, we see that games become a source of moderate exercise, either physical or mental, or even both, for children, and are essential for their health and development; on the other hand, they constitute a source that develops group and family sense necessary for their social well-being. Poverty does not deter the children of North Bengal from playing games and enjoying their leisure. Thus traditional games are living models of ancestral social and historical legacy. The responsibility lies with us to learn to appreciate them in their true sense and protect them from disappearing.³⁰

Understanding the traditional games and sports are subject to pre-modern, modern, and postmodern meaning, and it is concluded that their possibilities for survival or revitalization depend on their integration in the postmodern space of meaning. There is a need to assess that many traditional sports and games that already lost and those that have survived are in danger of disappearing, owing to the various tendencies of globalization and convergence in the rich diversity of sports heritage towards a small set of culturally homogenous sports.³¹

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