

Beyond the capital: Rajshahi

Rabeed Imam

Sports in Bangladesh has long been a victim of centralisation, and the divisions and districts outside Dhaka have many tales of negligence, non-co-operation, intimidation and deprivation to tell. Despite all the problems, Rajshahi stands out as one of the powerhouses of local sports. Sheer dedication and unconditional love for sports has been the hallmark of organisers and sportsmen/women there, and they have managed to lift the image of this often-neglected region by the river Padma to a respected force.

RAJSHAHI DISTRICT SPORTS ASSOCIATION

Over the years Rajshahi District Sports Association has successfully promoted sports activities in the district despite its limitations. The DSA conducts leagues and competitions in as many as 17 disciplines.

CRICKET

Cricket is the most popular game in Rajshahi and it has been the case for several years largely due to the fact that India is just across the border. People of Rajshahi have always been able to watch matches telecast on Indian Doordarshan even before the days of satellite television and that had a profound influence on the youngsters. The First Division and Second Division cricket leagues have a wide following. There are 18 teams in the First Division and 10 in the Second. Diganta Prasari Sangha, Balkali Sangha, Provti Sangha and Reliance Club are the leading forces in Rajshahi Cricket.

The DSA also organises the Nirman School cricket tournament.

Other competitions: Apart from the leagues, cricket crazy Rajshahi also enjoys several tournaments every year such as: The Mithu-Ainul Memorial, Zia Memorial, Shaheed Bir Srestha Jahangir, Ali Imam Pintu Memorial and the Metropolitan Siraj Smriti (under-14) tournaments.

FOOTBALL

With the popularity of the game on the wane throughout the country, Rajshahi DSA still manages to conduct the Division one and two leagues each year.

Diganta Prasari have won the First Division title nine times since 1975, a local record. However Rajshahi Abahani have been making big strides recently and are the defending First Division champions.

HOCKEY

There is only the First Division league in Hockey, where eight teams participate. Balkali Sangha are the undisputed kings of local hockey. Balkali have won the league championship every year since 1987.

OTHER GAMES

The DSA organises basketball, volleyball, handball, kabaddi, swimming, chess, squash, athletics, karate, boxing, weightlifting, bodybuilding, table tennis and badminton leagues, and tournaments regularly.

The Manibazar crisis

Shortage of playgrounds has never been a problem for Rajshahi. Almost all the schools and colleges have own grounds, where youngsters can partake in the game of their liking.

But in the beginning of this decade a problem started developing regarding the use of the ground at Manibazar.

Documents suggest that the ground is the property of the Rajshahi Central Jail authorities. However, it has been long used as a popular venue for sporting activities, most notably for the

Mithu-Ainul Memorial Cricket Tournament. Balkali Sangha, a prominent local club 'unofficially' looked after the ground and, each year since 1987, it organised the Mithu-Ainul tournament.

In the early 90's the jail management began to stamp its authority and wanted to use the ground for their purpose. They started building structures inside the ground and the jail police had their drill there.

Balkali Sangha initiated a protest, which was supported by people from all walks of life. There was even an unprecedented case of a one-day hartal called by sports lovers in Rajshahi for the ground. After in-

vention from high-ranking government officials and following legal measures from both sides, the situation has now improved but is far from being solved.

Officials and players want to play on the field which is officially known as the 'Jail Ground', but the Central Jail authorities feel they should have the say in how that particular ground should be used.

General secretary of the District Sports Association Zafar Imam says, 'There has been too much chaos and confusion regarding the Jail Ground. The legal owner of that ground is the Jail authority. There should be no doubts about that. The relevant documents, which now lie with the home ministry, clearly say that the ground is the property of the Rajshahi Jail.

'But, as this ground has traditionally been a popular place for all the sports loving people in Rajshahi, I feel whoever wants to use the ground should first come to an amicable settlement with the jail authorities.'

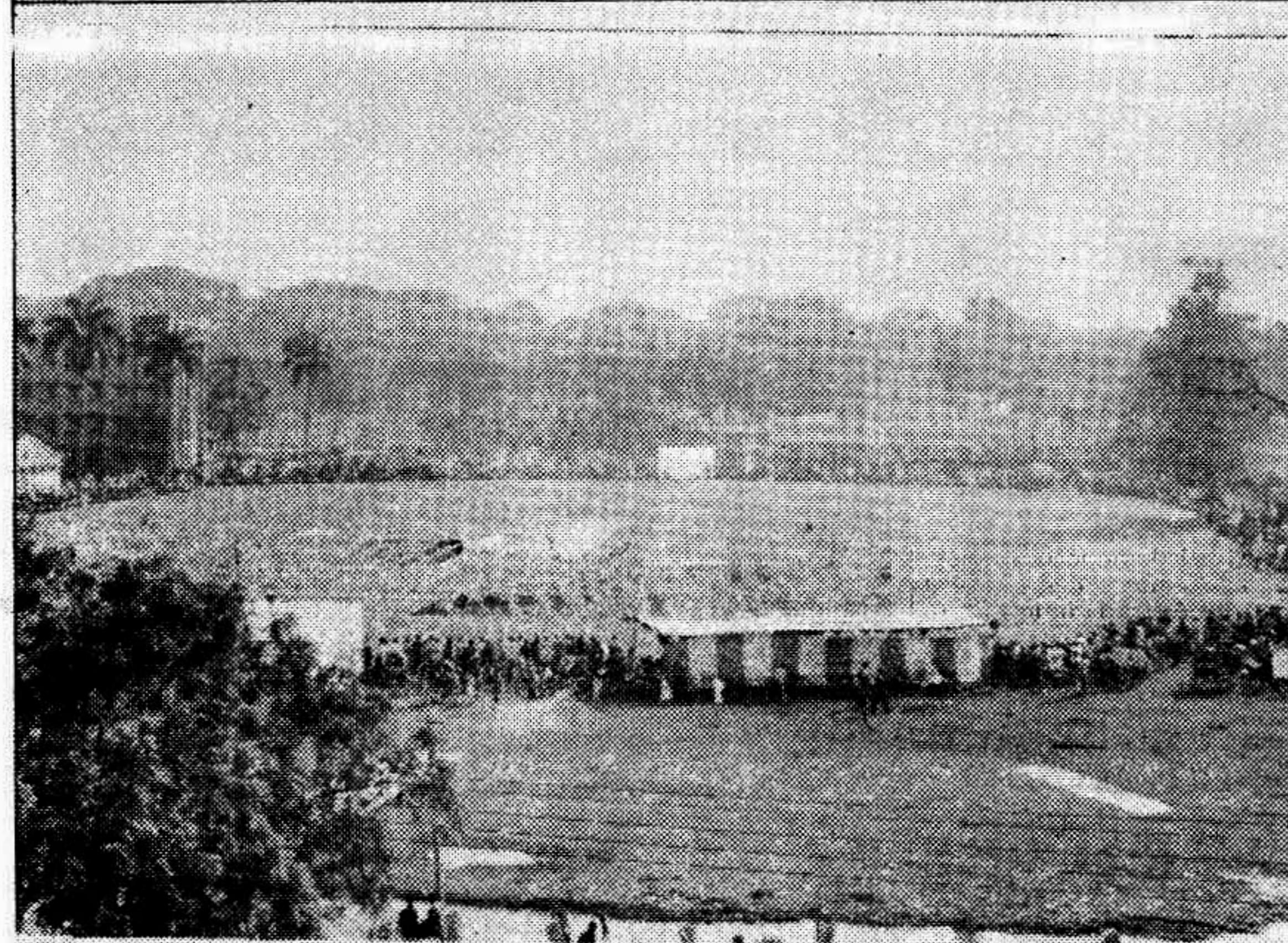
The ground is now available for sports but permission has to be sought from the jail authorities. Unfortunately some people are reluctant to do that. It seems only ego is holding back the possibility of the ground returning to its glory days.

— Photo taken by the writer



NOW AND THEN: The historic Central Jail ground at Manibazar is now being used by the jail police for parade and drills (top). This ground was an extremely popular venue for cricket until the dispute broke out. The picture at the bottom shows a cricket match in progress during the Mithu-Ainul memorial tournament in 1995.

— Photo taken by the writer



Zafar Imam: The 'revered' organiser

Bangladesh Olympic Council (BOC) secretary-general Zafar Imam is also the general secretary of the Rajshahi Divisional and the District Sports associations.

Zafar, who is a reputed and respected sports organiser both at home and abroad, has used his influence at the centre to uplift the image of Rajshahi's sports scene. Whatever development the district has seen over the years has largely been due to his outstanding dedication and efforts.

Now based in Dhaka because of his obvious commitment to the Olympic Council, Zafar manages to keep touch with his hometown at every possible opportunity.

DSS: What about local sponsorship?

ZI: Economically Rajshahi is not a prosperous region. Therefore, there is hardly any local sponsorship.

DSS: Then how do you plan to overcome this problem in future?

ZI: Unless the government and the National Sports Council start co-operating, this cri-

sis will continue. This is the case in other districts also.

DSS: What is the main source of money then?

ZI: Apart from the NSC's allotment, some of the local businessmen and industrialists sometimes come forward but I should say that 'housie' is the main source of income for the district sports association. It is illegal in some parts of the country but here we simply can not run games and sports without 'housie' money.

DSS: You were largely instrumental in bringing floodlights to Rajshahi. But some say that it has been a total wastage and that Rajshahi cannot afford to supply the electricity required for it to function. Has the floodlights been a 'white elephant'?

DSS: Does that mean you are planning to retire?

ZI: In a sense, yes! I have been the general secretary of the divisional and the district sports associations for God knows how long. I've almost made up my mind that I shall not run for the post in the upcoming elections and let somebody else take up the challenge. It will not be easy. As a matter of fact, the (new) general secretary will find it extremely difficult and face adversities; but he will learn. I shall be there to guide and help him, but away from the limelight.

DSS: What problems does

the DSA have to face?

ZI: The financial aspect is the main stumbling block. The National Sports Council provides a sum, which is highly inadequate to run the leagues and the competitions. We get around take three lakhs for the divisional sports association and two lakhs for the district sports association every year. Now you tell me, is it possible to conduct sporting activities throughout the district and division with that amount?

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ZI: I totally disagree with

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