

NON-FICTION

The Beginning of Cricket in Dhaka

PART - I

MUNTASIR MAMUN
(translated by Asrar Chowdhury)

In the context of cricket, the words "back stop," "batter," "*baji*," "*dour*," et cetera, may sound unusually uncommon to present-day readers. But the "Bangal" journalists of the nineteenth century would use these very terms when they discussed cricket. The wicketkeeper was known as "back stop" in those days, "innings" was known as "*baji*," and a "run" was a "*dour*." "Batter" was batsman, but this word was in currency in the English newspapers. It can be said that in the context of journalism, the Bengali journalists wanted to use Bangla words as much as possible.

When did cricket start in Dhaka? It hasn't been possible to find out. However, this much has been possible to know: That cricket was enormously popular in Dhaka. And what about football? What was the state of football then? I've gone through published newspapers and books of the nineteenth century, but have failed to notice any information on football. This is an astonishing matter. Can we then conclude that football was either not popular or not in vogue? The topic is debatable, but it could be said that football was also in vogue, but not that much; it was not popular.

Cricket was popular. There's news about cricket in newspapers and periodicals, i.e., the game was played regularly, even in rural areas and villages. Dinesh Chandra Sen wrote in his autobiography that "We used to play cricket in the open grounds near the market." The period then was the decade of the seventies of the nineteenth century. The venue was a village in Manikganj.

I couldn't find any precise information on when cricket first started in Dhaka. It would be possible to find this out if one could collect all the newspapers published in Dhaka during the nineteenth century, but they are now a rarity. The current essay has been written based on the news published in selected newspapers of Dhaka of that period. It should be mentioned that no complete file of any newspaper could be retrieved. Therefore, many aspects have to be implicitly assumed.

The oldest recorded news of Dhaka's cricket is from the year 1858. According to the news in an English weekly, a cricket match was played between "Dhaka Station" and "Her Majesty's 54th Regiment" on 20th January. "Dhaka Station" comprised of the English civilian officials of the government. Maybe other Englishmen from other professions living in Dhaka were also included in the team. The "Regiment" team included English soldiers who had been drafted into service during or after the Dhaka revolt (1857). "Dhaka Station" did not have eleven players, and a few members of the "Regiment" played on behalf of the Station. "Dhaka Station" scored 48 and 92 in the first and second innings respectively. "Regiment" scored 108 and 80 in the first and second innings respectively.

It's worth mentioning that Dhaka in those days was covered by jungles. Two years prior to the match (1856) a newspaper reported that a tiger had been killed in the lands to the west of the Race Course. In that same year, we find news of a match in Sylhet. Following is the original English report: "Perhaps the most interesting event ever recorded in the cricketing annals of Eastern Bengal

was the grand single wicket match between 'Service' and 'non-Service' on the 24th instant on the parade ground of the humdly picturesque station of Sylhet."

In Charles Stuart's memoirs, we find indications that the practice of cricket was uninterrupted in Dhaka. Charles Stuart was the Joint Magistrate of Dhaka in 1866-67. He noted that there was a cricket field in Dhaka, and that New Year's Day would be celebrated by playing cricket on that field. The English employees played polo on that field for a few days, but they did not play again for fear of the field being ruined.

We receive news about cricket after the lapse of a full decade. A single match was played between Eastern Bengal and Calcutta (Kolkata). Most probably, the Eastern Bengal, or East Bengal, team was comprised of whites from Dhaka and other places. There could have been one or two non-whites in this team. The Calcutta team was composed of residents from Calcutta. East Bengal was defeated comprehensively by Calcutta. Calcutta scored 317 against East Bengal's 170.

At the same time, we find news of another match between 'Station' and 'Outsiders.' The Station team comprised of Dhaka players; most probably players outside Dhaka comprised the 'Outsiders.' Station won the match. A notable part of the match was a feast. The original words of the paper ran thus. "At about 2 p.m. numbers of ladies and gentlemen sat down and did ample justice to a sumptuous tiffin provided by our former commissioner after which the cricket was resumed and continued until sunset."

In another newspaper of 1876 we find the first indication of local players. The playing field was "Old Lines," or what we know today as Purana Paltan. The match was played between the 'Europeans' and the 'Natives.' Eleven players played in the first team and 16 in the second. The match started at 3:00 in the afternoon. The Europeans won the toss, elected to bat and scored 130 runs. The Englishmen took the game seriously. In the words of the newspaper, "England expected every man to do his duty, and nobly did those who had the least pretension to the name of Englishman respond to their country's call." A Mr. Loyal played extraordinarily in that match. I'm reproducing a piece from the commentary of the game to give an idea of sports journalism in those days: a description of how Mr. Loyal had to terminate his innings: "A cautious fieldsman standing almost under his very nose, and who had escaped the batter's observation in the heat of excitement, bided his time, and the best player of the day was destined to fall an easy prey to a miserable catch right onto his opponent's hand."

The 'natives' scored 69 runs in total. Their batsmen failed to cope with the speed of the ball. The paper went on further to comment, "Poor fellows! They were always wrong, expecting the slow for the quick and vice versa." In this match we find a 'native' by the name of Bashanta Kumar.

From these reports, I'm assuming that cricket started in Dhaka in the '50s of the previous century (i.e. 1850s). Most probably the officers and soldiers who came to this city to quell the 1857



artwork by apurba

rebellion, as well as those who came afterwards, started the game of cricket. The game was also played at other stations. However, it was pure entertainment, simply to while away the time. Cricket was an excuse to get together with neighbours, to spend a holiday by having splendid midday feasts and playing. By the 1870s, many of the 'natives' had picked up the game and then 'natives' and the 'English' played between themselves or together in a single team.

Formal cricket started in Dhaka when the Dhaka College Club was formed in Dhaka College. It's not known when this club was formed. I'm assuming that the teachers and the students of the college formed the team in the 1880s. Besides playing cricket regularly in Dhaka, they used to travel to various places to play matches, and the club gained name and fame as a first class cricket team throughout both Bengals.

According to a newspaper from 1883, this club defeated the students of Krishnanagar College. "In that match, his Excellency, Lieutenant-Governor Bahadur was present in the field and not only did he give words of encouragement, but also some financial reward to the winners."

According to a newspaper of 1887 a cricket match was played between Dhaka College and Jagannath College. "In that match,

stage, the author commented, "The views of three of my colleague are totally baseless. On the second day, the players of Presidency started to bat where they left off the previous day. But Row and Wheeler (the captain of Presidency) and a few other players agreed unanimously that no matter how well they played on the second day, it would be impossible for Presidency to overcome the loss of the previous day. At that point Sarda Babu asked Mr. Row, 'Do you then agree that the match between Dhaka College and Presidency College is decided in favour of Dhaka on the basis of the previous day's performance?' Mr Row accepted the argument.

"Sarda Babu restated, 'In that case, we have accomplished what we set out to achieve from Dhaka, and it therefore makes no sense to play.' After that, both teams decided to play a scratch match between themselves."

Translation of 'Dhaka-i Cricket-er Shuru' published in Muntasir Mamoon's *Dhaka-r Tukitaki*; Dhaka: Pearl Publications; April 2000.
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TRAVEL WRITING

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Mrs. Henderson Presents

For me, no holiday is complete without an evening in a movie theater; few things can beat the experience of watching a film in darkness, deluged by a huge screen and inundated by lush film scores.

Soon after we landed in Australia, we found out that Tuesday was the day to go to movies; tickets in theaters all across the country are sold at half price on that day. An opportunity we weren't going to miss--and so we ended up seeing one quite enjoyable and one absolutely delightful film.

The film that we liked quite a bit was *Broken Fingers*, in which Bill Murray begins where he left off in *Lost in Translation* by giving an understated performance in a whimsical and wry take on the mores of contemporary America. But the film that delighted us was *Mrs. Henderson Presents*, not only for the splendid performance by Judith Dench (to hear her enunciate her lines is to me worth the price of admission alone!) but also for the humor, the audaciousness of the plot (the story is about presenting somewhat nude revues in wartime Britain), and the glow left in the heart by a story of an indomitable aristocratic woman and her quirky relationship with the director of these revues (played with characteristic intensity by Bob Hoskins). The magic of movies, the best in English acting, and glimpses of the history of the London stage--all for eight Australian dollars!

However, I was disappointed in not being able to see an Australian film.. Australia's allure for me grew partly out of my exposure to some brilliant Australian films of the nineteen seventies and eighties--*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, *Gallipoli*, for instance--but apparently they are no match commercially as far as Hollywood productions are concerned!

Immigrants

Australia is a land of immigrants. In Sydney, we stayed in an apartment block which seemingly housed the whole world. Next to us were Vietnamese and Chinese shops and a little further away was a Greek neighborhood. Our hosts, drawn to *halal* food, took us to a Lebanese restaurant in the Lebanese part of the city, where business was brisk, the conversation loud and non-stop and the food delicious. In Melbourne, returning late from the city center one day, we found ourselves in a train where most passengers seemed to be Chinese, although we



Photo by author

came to know that the Greeks were a major presence in the city too.

Australia's cities are where educated Bangladeshis are swarming to, taking advantage of the country's relatively relaxed immigration laws, which allow them to settle down fairly quickly to decent jobs and even retrain themselves through generous higher education schemes funded by the government. I heard quite a few success stories but had a glimpse also of the alienation new immigrants experience and the hardships they have to endure. In Melbourne, for instance, a young Bangladeshi student joined our group in the afternoon and would not part from us till late in the evening since he was dying to talk in Bangla. In Brisbane, one night I heard a Bangladeshi's voice fill a midnight street; he was in a phone booth at that time (apparently, the best time to talk to people in Dhaka and the cheapest too!).

The earliest immigrants, as everyone knows, were the Pommies ("Prisoners of mother England"). Theirs, of course, was a life of deprivation, and endless work. Some of their stories are on view in the excellent museums we visited. Life for not a few of the latest immigrants can be tough too; while we were in Australia television news channels kept featuring the story of a bewildered immigrant couple from an African country who had not been able to negotiate the cultural and language barriers that overwhelm new arrivals and had therefore lost a child to some undiagnosed illness!

nature trails, jogging tracks, as well as roads that allow tourists to stop and admire the spectacular scenes created when high mountains envelop a lovely lake. Which made me think: our Kaptai Lake, is much bigger and even more beautiful than Lake Jindabyne, but how limited is our access to the areas in and around the dam and how little of the Kaptai hydro-electric scheme has been utilized to give delight to the people living near it, not to speak of the citizens of the country as a whole!

Kangaroo, Koala, Kookaburra

We had seen wild kangaroos in a Canberra park and even in residential areas of the city; close to the house we lived in Canberra we had watched the white cockatoo, the dappled magpies, and some other birds I couldn't identify, in Philip Bay we had watched a giant pelican stare at us nonchalantly, but where could we see the platypus, the wombat, bandicoot, the wallabies, the dingo, the copperhead snake and the many other mammals, reptiles, and birds that made this continent distinctive? An obvious answer would have been the zoos of the cities we visited but we ended up seeing most of them in an animal park called Wildlife Wonderland a couple of hours away from Melbourne. The park was well designed and you could walk past most of the animals or view them in an environment where they didn't feel disturbed.

The kangaroos are the most endearing of these animals. The

koalas we came across refused to open their eyes and acknowledge our existence while the wombat would not budge from its dark world (we were to see a dead one, knocked down in a highway, a few days later!). The wallabies were cute but the dingoes appear innocuous and the bandicoot nowhere as interesting as its name. My one big disappointment was not meeting a platypus, apparently exceptionally rare nowadays.

Landscape/Lookouts

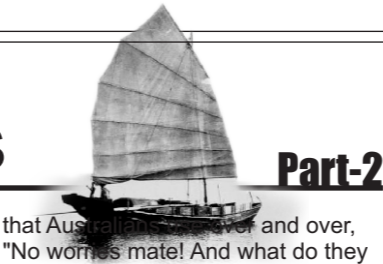
In the three weeks that we spent in Australia, we saw only parts of the East Coast while Canberra was as far inland as we went, but judging by what we encountered, here was a country full of imposing landscapes and breathtaking lookouts. In and around Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane were bays, beaches, creeks, lakes, rivers and inlets that were all eye-catching; on the way to Canberra the parched hillsides and the increasingly sparse vegetation hinted at the stark nature of the landscape in the deserts of Australia that we would not be viewing, while the mountains of the Great Dividing Range bordering New South Wales and Victoria were dark green with lofty trees that canopied nearly everything in sight. Everywhere we went there were dazzling lookouts from which one can take in not only the landscape's immense variety and delight in nature's bounty but also of cityscapes that you could view and then wonder at the way puny human beings staked their place in nature despite its immensity.

Moorandah Reservoir

On a splendid Melbourne day, we went to a corner of Melbourne to see Maroondah Reservoir, built to supply water to the city. Man made dams are no longer fashionable because of what they do to habitats and this must have been created sometime back, but Maroondah reservoir is certainly beautiful. The builders of the reservoir must have taken elaborate steps to prettify it for it is made distinctive by a wonderful terraced garden. Nature trails stretch out here and there and the roof of the dam has been made into a delightful walkway. All in all, it is a perfect place for the people of Melbourne to picnic, hike, and relax.

No worries, Mate!

By the second day I was in Australia, I was able to notice my Sydney host was fond of saying "Somasha nai" again and again. It took me a couple of days to realize that he had internalized the phrase



that Australia was not all over, "No worries mate! And what do they use the phrase for? Here is a gloss provided by "A Dictionary of Australian Slang" that I was able to access courtesy of the Internet:

Frequently used in place of "you're welcome" in response to "thank you," and also used to mean "I'm glad to do it" in response to any request for help. As well...[used] in the place of "sure" or "yes" in response to "may I have...?"

But the real explanation for the frequency with which one hears it in traveling across America is the relaxed, genial attitude of most Australians and their determination to make life as hassle free for themselves and others as possible. My travel agent in Dhaka had told me about the unperturbed nature of Australian life in Dhaka; a frequent visitor to the country, he had noted with admiration how they preferred to work from 9 to 5 and take things easy the rest of the day and use weekends and every holiday to serf, sail, hike, swim, or simply lounge, laze, and loaf around. "No worries, mate", then, is the inevitable outcome of living in lotus land; contrast if you will, your average Aussie of the Land of Oz with his stiff-upper lipped ancestor, the Englishman, or the too temperate, even boring demeanor of his Canadian cousin, or the driven, brashness of his distant relative, the American!

Olympic Park, Sydney

We went to Sydney's Olympic Park twice. The first time we went there I had forgotten to take my camera, and because the Telstra Stadium looked so brilliant at nighttime we decided to go one more time to capture the memory in our photographs. The helpful official guide book to the city that one can pick up in the airport for free says that the Park has inside it parklands, wetlands, picnic areas, trails, etc.; I saw none of that, but what I saw of the Stadium and the installations that front it were enough to make me feel that it must have been one heck of an Olympic that was celebrated here in the 2000 games. At the center of the Park one can still see interactive poles that are part of the Games memories installation, the cauldron that held the Olympic flame, a water curtain that cascades here daily, the names of medal-winners in the event, and overall, a sight not to be missed by anyone interested in sports, urban planning, and architecture.

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Book Review

Review

Tikka Khan's Letter

FARHAD AHMED

Amader Ekattur edited by Mohiuddin Ahmed; Dhaka: CDL; February 2006; Tk. 500; pp. 785.

Amader Ekattur is a collection of first-person narratives of our 1971 war of liberation. The editor's intention in compiling this volume is clearly and simply stated in his introduction: That our war of liberation, since it was experienced by very many people in very many different ways, should be seen in the widest possible perspective. The book, at a whopping 785 pages, thus does attempt to capture this dizzying diversity of experiences. The other professed aim is embedded in the recognition that though our liberation war history has itself been transformed into a rhetorical war zone, a politically-contested site, yet the editor's brief here is not to write, or re-write, history, but rather to provide raw material for historians to use later on. This is an attempt to reclaim the war of liberation on behalf of the ordinary wo/man in the street

In truth, there seems credence to his claim. Though it does contain the requisite factual re-tellings of military engagements and battles (which in truth I never do tire of reading) the book does contain an impressive number of voices telling their stories in a plain, unvarnished style. While some of the pieces do not constitute actual personal history (for example, A. S. M. Abdur Rab gives us a wholly unremarkable, condensed version of events from the 1960s to 25th March, 1971), or somewhat florid ('*Swapanbhongayr Shai Raat ebong taar Porayr Du'deen'* by Syed Anwar Hossain) one has to concede that they too rightfully belong within the 'widest possible perspective.' One welcome feature of the book is that there are a large number of women's narratives (war narratives, among all narrative genres, tend by their very nature to be the most patriarchal and macho), while another is that the book is enlivened by the reproduction of sketches of the 1971 war by schoolchildren, one of which was chosen for the cover illustration.

Some of the pieces have also been written in English. Among them my favourite is the one by Father Timm, who proves to be as capable of spinning a good yarn as the next NGO activist. He was engaged in relief work (in the aftermath of the November 1970 cyclone in Manpura Island near Hatiya) when the Pakistan Army launched its genocide on March 25, 1971. As Father Timm tells it, he went to Dhaka a couple of days later, "to the Governor's House for two purposes..." (one of which) was to get a letter from the Major General in charge of Civil Affairs, asking everyone to help me and cooperate with me in my cyclone rehabilitation work. This he obligingly did. His letter came in hand later on for taking bribe money back from the police on Manpura Island. Though there was long-standing harmony between the Muslims and Hindus (who comprised 30 percent of the population of the island), the police took advantage of the situation to demand 'protection money' from a Hindu who came to our HELP camp near the police quarters. I was living at the north camp but when I got word of the police action I hurried down to the police headquarters and called out the Officer in Charge. I told him I had a letter from a Major General in Dhaka asking everyone to cooperate with me. "But what do I find? I find that you have held a Hindu who came here on business until his family paid a big bribe. Give me that money immediately or I will report you to the Major General in Dhaka." He brought me the money and gave it to me with trembling hands. His final words were: "And when you see Major General Tikka Khan tell him we are doing his duty."

Probably the first and last time the old Butcher of Baluchistan ever did any good!

And there are plenty more. The book is a great buy at only 500 Taka!

Farhad Ahmed is a free-lance writer/translator.