
This is the postprint version.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Soccer and society in 2006, available at:
http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14660970600907725

©2006, Taylor & Francis

Reproduced by Deakin University with the kind permission of the copyright owner.

Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30015958
By Roy Hay

One result of the boom in sports history is the appearance of a number of country studies of the development of football which, in time, should allow a much better understanding of the spread of the game and the way it has been adopted and adapted around the world. When Bill Murray wrote his pioneering treatments of the world game in the early 1990s he had to rely on magazines like *World Soccer* for much of his information, particularly of countries outside Europe.¹ Now there are substantial monographs covering many countries, though these vary enormously in quality, sophistication and perspective.² Some are empirical, ground-clearing works which add a little gloss to the work of the football statisticians, while others are theoretically orientated studies which use football as a vehicle for exploring a range of historical issues.³ Perhaps the most challenging of recent books is Adrian Harvey’s *Football: The First Hundred Years* whose thesis is that rule-bounded, time-limited and well structured games flourished in various regions in England and Scotland long before the Football Association drew up its set of rules in 1863.⁴ Harvey argues that the top down model for the dissemination of the game in the United Kingdom needs to be reconsidered.⁵ If that turns out to be so, then the implications for the wider spread of the game around the world, should also be ripe for examination. Many of the recently published country studies are predicated on the older model.

It is in this context that a first class new history of football in India is now available. It addresses the question that has been crying out for an answer for generations. Why has Indian football not had the impact on the world stage that its long history, passionate support and huge number of participants deserve? One fourth place at the Melbourne Olympics in 1956, a couple of wins in the football tournament at the Asian Games and second place in the Asian Cup in 1964 and a few more recent regional victories are a meagre return for the country in which millions play and watch the game. India qualified
for the World Cup in 1950 but did not take part. Whether this was the result of a FIFA directive that the team should not play in bare feet or a shortage of resources available to the Indian Football Association has never been absolutely clear. This pioneering book by two innovative and thoughtful historians goes some way to explaining the convoluted story of Indian football at international level, while giving, for the first time, a clear and convincing account of the development of the domestic game, particularly in the heartland of Bengal. Readers will get a much better appreciation of Indian achievements and the obstacles which have never been quite overcome by the code as well as some interesting suggestions about the new challenges in an era of global sport. There is a huge amount to absorb and ponder in this account.

*Striving to Score* adopts a layered approach to its subject matter, through a series of essays, as David Washbrook points out in his foreword, rather than a single sustained and comprehensive approach, which would probably be impossible to mount given the undeveloped state of football historiography in India. This book will make you weep and be amazed at the same time. It is an account of a country which has a huge appetite for football, even if that is regionally concentrated, but which has been unable to establish stable administration and sustained on-field success at national or international levels. It is very tempting to say, after reading this account, that India provides many examples of how not to organise the game, but that would be unfair to generations of its people who have contributed to football at all levels over a very long period.

The links to the world game are well done in some passages, but other opportunities might be taken to contextualise events in India as the explanation is sought in largely domestic terms. For example, the discussions of violence at matches in the 1980s would benefit from an appreciation of the focus on hooliganism at football around the world, particularly in England, and the research on the suggested reasons for this efflorescence, some of which are beginning to appear very partial and dated in 2006. By the 1980s the media had begun to transmit stories and images of hooliganism around the world and India, like Australia, was not immune to copycat behaviour.
Some of the early references to football in Bengal need very careful handling for the games being played were often very inchoate. Perhaps they had their rules, but these were often very fluid and ad hoc and it is very difficult sometimes to determine whether the game being played was closer to association football or rugby or even the gaelic version. That early iconic figure in Indian football history, Nagendra Prasad is said to have bought a rugby rather than a soccer ball in 1877, because he and his companions could not distinguish between the two. (Striving to Score, p. 20.) When he took it to Hare School he attracted the attention of one of the teachers in the nearby Presidency College, Professor G. A. Stack, who offered to instruct the boys in the rules of the game. But was this soccer or rugby? It seems obvious it must have been soccer, given the later developments but one still has a slight suspicion that things might not have been absolutely clear-cut in those very early days.

Prasad went on to be hugely influential in the founding years of Indian football. His attempt to introduce a low-caste potter’s son into the Wellington club led to the demise of that organisation and eventually to the emergence of the Sovabazar club again under Prasad’s auspices. Sovabazar recorded the first significant victory over an English military team when it defeated the East Surrey Regiment by two goals to one in the Trades Cup in 1892. The following year the Indian employees of Fort William in Calcutta, playing as Fort William Arsenal, won the Coochbehar Cup, while the Trades Cup was won by National Association in 1900 and 1902.

Prasad is a fascinating figure. Though he was obviously highly competent and had a great vision for the future of the game in India and its social and political role, he seems to have been personally unambitious to the point of being self-effacing. This may have limited his effectiveness and hence the achievement of his vision. He was influential in the setting up of the Indian Football Association but seems not have been able to prevent it becoming totally non-Indian. When offered the chance to become the only non-Indian member he instead nominated Kali Mitter. Strangely there is no index entry for Nagendra Prasad in the book.
Though it was by no means the first victory by an Indian team against an imperial British side, the celebrated Mohun Bagan victory of 1911 over the cream of the East Yorkshire Regiment en route to victory in the Indian Football Association Shield is given a separate chapter. This allows the authors to examine the interpretations of Tony Mason and Paul Dimeo which emphasise the subtle ways the indigenous triumph may have reinforced ideologies of imperial control via the absorption of protest movements through the playing of games. As Mason and Dimeo’s work is based largely on English language sources, these arguments are criticised for being very partial. Vernacular material, on the other hand, is seen to underpin interpretations in terms of effective ideological protest as part of a proto-nationalist resistance movement. Certainly the subsequent use of the famous victory to support resistance by a Bengali movement which also sought to overthrow imperial images of the ‘effete babu’ is very clear, but whether that was the driving force at the time remains problematical. Finally the authors quote a neat passage from S. N. Bose, secretary of the Mohun Bagan club, which puts the victory down simply to better technique and careful study of the opponents rather than any broader nationalist surge. There is also an important piece of environmental determinism, which suggests that an unusually dry period allowed the Mohun Bagan players to exercise their barefooted skills more effectively than in the wetter conditions which often occurred during the football season.

All this is carefully and thoughtfully presented so that a more nuanced account of the episode can be understood. Yet it might have been taken even further by reference, for example, to Mason’s study of the origins of association football in England and by his careful delineations of local identities in the north-east of the country, ‘the hotbed of soccer’. Mason is clear that the games-playing ethic of the English upper classes, participation for its own sake, was undermined by a good, earthy win-at-all-costs mentality among the working classes who appropriated the game—much to the annoyance of those middle class controllers of the sport at the Football Association. Awareness of the ways in which a common game could be subverted and transformed by the participants is a key feature of many modern analyses of Brazilian and Argentinian football. While the authors do touch on the ways in which Indians, in Bengal in
particular, used and developed the sport as an element of their struggle against the imperial overlords for a key early period in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the international impact of this pioneering study could have been reinforced by incorporating a somewhat broader conceptualisation of the events surrounding the Mohun Bagan triumph and its aftermath.

Similarly the excellent account of the experiences of East Bengali migrants, the derisively nicknamed ‘Bangali’, and their assimilation into Bengal and particularly Calcutta society through football, with all its ups and downs, reminded this reviewer of the Australian cases argued by Philip Mosely, John Hughson, John Kallinikios and myself from different perspectives in relation to the post-war European migrants from south and east Europe in particular and their attempts to come to terms with the strange and sometimes hostile society in which they found themselves.7 So much of this occurred below the ideological level in the practical struggles to establish functioning clubs and see them reach the level the quality of their play deserved. It is too easy to concentrate on the ideological issues to the exclusion of the mundane and practical realities of becoming part of a society which devalues you and your contribution as ‘the other’. The authors treat these matters sensitively, but again the wider implications could have been developed to broaden the appeal of the analysis at this point. Their own self-identification on either side of the historical ‘Bangali-Ghati’ divide is neatly used to demonstrate how ancient enmities have subsided into competitive rivalry, though the broader question of why this can happen in some cases, whereas in others it is used to keep open the wounds, needs further exploration.

This section will be of particular interest to historians of other countries where football encountered similar issues to those teased out here. Poverty, regional and local particularism, and clashes of ethnicity and ideology are not unique to India. Some of these countries have gone on to triumph over the divisions to compete effectively at the highest level, though not always on a sustained basis, as for example Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon from Africa have done in recent years. Other Asian countries have bypassed
India in the struggle for international success and it would be fascinating to use this book as the basis for effective comparison with them.

Nevertheless, one of the great strengths of this book is its insistence that many developments were historically and regionally contingent and specific. For example, they show that British influence on the game was challenged and in decline long before independence and that the driving forces had become domestic and often localised. Similarly class and nationalist influences changed significantly over time so that any attempt to schematise them has to be extraordinarily careful. In the early part of the twentieth century the upper and middle classes in Bengal united behind football. As noted earlier this was in part a reaction to imperial criticisms of effete natives, but that did not last. Football was also part of a resistance movement in its early days, but subsequently the momentum for the development of the game lay elsewhere.

It remains a huge puzzle why the Bengali influence on Indian football has been so strong historically, though this book goes a long way to explaining the phenomenon. It is not until chapter seven that the developments in other parts of the sub-continent are fully outlined and one wonders whether Bombay, Goanese or Uttar Pradesh perspectives would be more critical of Bengali hegemony. But the ball is firmly in the courts of those who would argue those cases.

There is some very perceptive use of extended quotations from contemporary vernacular and other sources which throws light on the understanding of Indian football by the newspaper readership. The reporting of the Presidency versus Medicals game in 1914 is fully attuned to the English football writing of the day. It is routine and direct and assumes a full knowledge of the game on the part of its readership. There is not a hint of exotica in the description, which would be unlike a contemporary Melbourne or Adelaide match report as the writer outlined the foibles of the imported code to an uncomprehending audience.
Some Indian football heroes are rescued from the condescension of posterity, including Mohammed Salim who had two reserve games with Celtic during a brief, mid-season visit to Glasgow. The career of Nagendra Prasad is analysed both as part of a founding legend and as a series of specific later contributions, including his attempts at establishing and maintaining inclusive clubs, when race and caste were overwhelming influences.

If there is a criticism it is that the material presented is sometimes too sketchy and fragmented to carry the weight of argument the authors would like to impart. A couple of examples may be representative of a much larger sample, but they could be nearly all we have. You want to trust the authors’ judgments, for much of the time they are securely based, but it is permissible to seek a little more corroboration, for example, over issues of discrimination broadly over Indians by the British and then, within the sport, over certain teams and groups. The impact of globalisation is interpreted negatively with easy access to the top European leagues through television and the internet having the effect of devaluing the local game and its players. But the increasing strength of the Indian economy in a global world surely provides resources, which, if properly managed, could be the basis for a football resurgence. The appearance of Indian stars on the world football stage, even if few in number, could also be influential on younger generations.

It is unfair perhaps to mention some minor errors, typos and infelicities in such wide ranging material, but there were no red cards available to referees in 1937 (p. 94.), the world record attendance for a first class club match was not the 131,000 present at Mohun Bagan against East Bengal in 1997 (p. 121.) since 146,433 attended the Celtic versus Aberdeen Cup Final in 1937; the Brazilian club is Fluminense, not Flumenitz (p. 121.), while the rivalry between Manchester United and Arsenal is a relatively recent development and does not compare with Arsenal versus Tottenham, Liverpool versus Everton or Celtic against Rangers. The Dutch club is PSV Eindhoven, not Aindhoven (p. 121.) ‘Imperative’ not ‘imperitive’ (p. 133.)

This is a book which makes you want to demand more, such is the richness of its fare, even as one is overawed by what the authors have already done to put Indian football
history, if not yet the game, on the world map at last. Since this is a ground-breaking book, its greatest influence will be if it leads a new generation of Indian historians to carry out a thorough analysis of its many stimulating arguments and provocative hypotheses. The process has already begun with Dwaipayan Sen’s critique of the rival interpretations of the Mohun Bagan victory of 1911 in his thesis and an article in the previous issue of this journal which seeks to tease out the contradictory meanings attached to the result according largely to the ideological predispositions of the various groups involved. As with Majumdar and Bandyopadhyay, Sen is very sensitive to the contingent and fluid nature of these responses and to the variety of streams of consciousness which underlay the different interpretations. This makes life very uncomfortable for those historians who wish to neatly pigeonhole the event as fitting within nationalist or imperialist frameworks, but here we have an indication of the maturity of the emerging historiography of Indian football which will be sustained as the next generation comes to terms with this book and the responses to it.

References


Striving to Score 26/2/09 8


**Endnotes**


3 Tomlinson and Young, *German Football*; Markowitz and Hellerman, *Offside*.

4 Harvey, *Football*.

5 For an extended discussion of Harvey’s approach see Hay, ‘Approaches to Sports History’.


7 Hay, ‘Croatia’ and Hay, ‘Oral History, Migration and Soccer in Australia’.

8 Sen, ‘Wiping the Stain off the Field of Plassey’.