

## **The Role of the Progressive Muslims in the establishment of Mohammedan Sporting Club in Colonial Bengal: 1891-1947**

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### **Abstract**

In colonial Bengal and India as well communalism is an important topic and it needs to be discussed. Like other parts of India communalism spread throughout northern part of India in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After 1870 under the leadership of progressive Sir Syed Ahmed through Aligarh Movement, by means of dissemination of western education, communalism took a special mould. In colonial Bengal, however, the character of communalism was somewhat different. With the foundation of Mohammedan Literary Society by Abdul Latif in 1863 the door of the modernism was opened for the Bengali Muslims of Bengal. In colonial Bengal the progressive Muslims not only established many educational institutes for common but also recommended in favour of more budgetary allocation for education of the Muslims. On the other hand, being inspired by cultural nationalism the progressive Muslims of Bengal endeavoured to establish self-identity of the Muslims by means of playing football. It resulted in the establishment of Mohammedan Sporting Club in 1891 with the united effort of the progressive Muslims.

**KEYWORDS:-** Communalism, Progressive Muslims, Mohammedan Sporting Club, Western Education, Colonial Bengal.

### **Introduction:-**

Communalism is an important factor in Indian politics. Communalism spread throughout North India like the other parts of the century since the first decade of 19<sup>th</sup> century. During this period communalism broke out in different cities and towns in Uttar Pradesh. The Hindus protested against the cow slaughter in place like Banaras, Gorakhpur, Mubarakpur etc., so much so that communal riot took place in those places. As for example following the report of the district administration of Uttar Pradesh the colonial govt. took drastic action. Communal riot had its occurrences not only in U.P but also in various places of Bihar, like Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga etc.<sup>1</sup> The impact of this communal politics was found at least to some extent in Bengal too though the political scenario of Bengal was somewhat different from that of North India. Even in the second decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Hindu-Muslim communalism was prevalent on one side and on the other the Muslims lagged far behind the Hindus in education, government jobs etc. In this circumstance Sir Syed Ahmed took the initiative towards cultivation of western education for the development of the Muslims of North India. Since 1870's Syed Ahmed tried his utmost for the upliftment of the Muslims through the Aligarh movement.

### **Role of Progressive Muslim to Development of Bengalee Muslims:-**

In spite of the difference in character of communal politics of Bengal, the special role of progressive Muslims was prominent in the development of common Muslims. Even before the Aligarh movement Moulavi Abdul Latif opened up the door of modernism for the Muslims of Bengal by establishing Mohammedan Literary Society in Kolkata in 1863.<sup>2</sup> By progressive Muslims the social reformers are meant. As in Hindu religion we have found social reformers like Vidyasagar, Rammohan Roy etc. , in the same way in colonial era the role of progressive Muslims was noteworthy for the development of common Muslims of Bengal. Among them Moulavi Abdu Latif, Syed Amir Ali, Fajlul Haque etc. were the pioneers. To have access to the modern education of the Muslims of Bengal was perhaps historically unavoidable and that too before the Aligarh Movement. It may be attributed to the location of Calcutta which was a metropolitan city and Aligarh, on the other hand was a moffossil town far away from Calcutta and it was backward in socio-economic aspects. Besides it had the affinity with Mughal culture. In such a circumstance the entry of the Muslims of North India was delayed to some extent. On the other hand the Muslims belonging to the upper strata, especially those whose attitude was progressive were aware of the special role of western education in the reawakening of the Bengalee Hindus. Naturally, representatives like Moulavi Abdul Latif and his colleagues took the initiative of introducing English Education among their own people (belonging to their own religion). For this cause when the question of reorganization of Calcutta Madrassah came up Abdul Latif emphasized on the need of using English as medium of instruction besides Persian.<sup>3</sup> In the 1870's after the construction of new buildings in Presidency College Muslims students availed the opportunity of getting educated in that college.

After Abdul Latif the person who tried hard for dissemination of English education among Bengali Muslims was justice Syed Amir Ali. In order to remove their backwardness and to present their views before the Colonial government he established Central Mohammedan Association in 1877. His aim was to ameliorate the condition of the Muslims of Bengal and India as well through lawful and constitutional way. The target of Amir Ali was to seek moral and intellectual development of the Muslims. He tried to establish Degree colleges for the Muslims students only after the abolition of the Madrassahs in Hooghly, Dacca, Chitagong, Rajshahi etc. Responding to this appeal the British Govt. permitted the admission of Muslims students at comparatively lower fees. In the colonial era the Progressive Muslims took up important role for the development of common Muslims in undivided Bengal. In 1883 Dacca Muslims Friend Sammilani was established mainly under the leadership of professor Abdul Kayum. According to prof. Kayum, on the basis of that institution a few Bengali Muslim youths, being self conscious, dedicated themselves to the service of own community, specially for social service, maintaining communal harmony and spreading education.

### **Quest for Bengalee Muslim Identity and Progressive Muslims :-**

We can observe there were diverse aspect of Muslim politics towards the last decade of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The progressive Muslims continued to appeal the colonial government for the development of the Muslims with various demands like establishment of educational institutions providing English education for Muslims, more allotment for

education of Muslims etc. Along with this cultural nationalism was another aspect of Muslim politics of Bengal. Being inspired by this, the progressive Muslims of Bengal played a special role in establishing an identity of their own by means of playing football as part of their culture. In the last decade of 19<sup>th</sup> century dissemination of nationalism was observed in the field of football in colonial Bengal having its epicenter in Calcutta. In the primary level the matter of nationalism was limited within Colonial government and the Bengalees. In colonial India and Bengal as well the officers of British govt. deemed football playing as a symbol of physical fitness. On the other hand, they projected the Bengalees to be weak. In such a situation under the leadership of Nagendra Prasad Sarabadhikari this type of mentality of the British govt. proved false. Throughout 19<sup>th</sup> century the Bangalee people were criticized in the writings and notions of the English for their physical infirmity and indolence. To protest against this in the second half of that century an inspired movement on physical culture was spread.<sup>4</sup>

Since the sports entity of Bengali culture built up with football was affected by colonial rule it took new shape nourished by nationalism. Until the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century the character of this unique nationalism was limited within the British govt. and the Bangalees. But during this period owing to various social causes there was rift in this nationalism. In the decade of 1870-80 in colonial Bengal club football came into being in Calcutta and its neighbouring districts. At the outset the Hindu and the Muslim players used to show their skill together in these clubs. But through various social episodes the communal politics was introduced in Bengal politics and its reflection was found in the football ground of Calcutta. Owing to communal politics the chance of entry of Muslim footballers started lessening in various clubs. Besides the dominance of Hindus in Indian Football Association gave birth to grievance among the Muslim players. In this situation some progressive Muslims of the then society in order to provide opportunity for the Muslim football players and to establish their separate identity in the playground as part of cultural nationalism. We know that in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 19<sup>th</sup> century the Muslims of Bengal and India as well were backward than the Hindus in respect of western education and government jobs. Therefore, the Progressive Muslims of Bengal tried to get contented in cultural sphere by means of establishing an organization in the playground ; its fulfillment was with the establishment of Mohammedan Sporting Club in 1891. On the one hand, the progressive Muslims with the formation of a club tried to offer opportunity to play for the Muslim players, on the other hand they tried to establish a cultural identity of the Bengali Muslims through football.

### **The Establishment History of Mohammedan Sporting Club:-**

With the establishment of Mohammedan Sporting Club in Calcutta towards the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a beginning of Muslim representation in Indian football. Under the leadership of Aminul Islam Jubili club was formed in 1887.<sup>5</sup> Later this club was renamed as Crescent Club Hamidia Club. Ultimately Mohammedan Sporting Club was established in 1891. For its establishment the progressive Muslims had important role . In this time Syed Amir Hossain and Nawab Nasirul Momaleque Mirja Sujat Ali Beg were elected president and vice president respectively. Abdul Ghani was the secretary of the club.<sup>6</sup> At the time of establishment of the club the club had no playground of its own. However, under the initiative of Amir Hossain Mohammedan Sporting got the permission to play

in the playground of Calcutta Boys' school on alternate days. The eminent progressive Muslim gentlemen on whose initiative Mohammedan Sporting Club was established on its strong foundation were Abdul Ghani, Noor Md. Ismail, Khan Bhadur, Md. Rashid of Berelli, Md. Yasin, Syed Aminuddin Ahmed, S.M Jakaria, Syed Azaruddin, Mozaffar Hossain, Md. Ali, Md. Ishaq, Golam Ahmed of Kolkata etc.

For the development of Mohammedan Sporting Club progressive Muslims from all section came up. On behalf of Samsujoha Begum of Murshidabad Nawab Sujat Ali donated Rs-300/- to the club.<sup>7</sup> To honour the president Nawab Amir Hossain, Amir Hossain cup was initiated. As Moulavi Enaet Karim s/o Moulavi Delwar Hossain donated Rs-150/- as subscription 'Enaet Karim Tennis Cup' was started in his name. From various documents of the club it is known the first Annual Meeting of the club was held in 1894 under the president ship of justice Sir Syed Amir Ali. Among the members present the name of Nawab Hossain and Khan Bahadur Nawab Abdul Jabbar deserve mention.<sup>8</sup> Moulavi Abdus Salam advised on the physical exercise of the Muslim youths. The second Annual general Meeting was held in the club ground of Kolkata. The Chief Justice, Sir Francis Mekalin presided over this meeting. Mr. Abdul Ghani was the secretary then. Mr. Zahid Sohrawardi lectured on physical exercise.<sup>9</sup>

At first there was no playground of Mohammedan Sporting Club with the endeavour of Nawab Amir Hossain the players were permitted to play in the ground of Calcutta Boys' club on alternate days. Later when the number of members increased other games were also played. During this period with the co-operation of the police Commissioner of Calcutta, Mr. Lambart Mohammedan sporting Club got the permission to play in the playground of Calcutta Boys' club school daily. A few years after the inception of the club the secretary of the club Noor Md. Ismil, Mr. S.M Zakaria, and Mr. S. Azhar Yusuf appeared before His Highness with a deputation and requested him to be the patron of the club. His Highness agreed and the club had started developing gradually. At the initial stage of the club all Muslim players used to play without boot. They were known as fearless players.

Towards the last decade of 19<sup>th</sup> century the lessening of opportunities of Muslim players to exhibit the talent and the dominance of Hindus in Indian Football association led the progressive Muslims to establish a separate organization and thereby they tried to feel contentment. Its ultimate result was formation of Mohammedan Sporting Club. It cannot be said that at the beginning it had a communal character. But keeping pace with time, establishment of Hindu Mahasabha in 1915, and advent of communal politics in 1920-30's there was gradual degradation of relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims and its influence was reflected in the playground too. Its absolute expression was effusion of communalism in the football ground of Calcutta.

The sports lovers of Bengal were first acquainted with the strength of Mohammedan Sporting Club in 1909. The victory of Coochbehar Cup under the leadership of Syed Ali Ahmed in the same year invited the attention of everyone. The team that won the Coochbehar Cup comprised five players of the Yusuf family. They were Amir, Azhar, Anichh, Afjal and Anwar. The performance of the secretaries for two years was very much satisfactory; with their efforts the economic condition of the club became sound and in every game the players of the club achieved perfection. During this

period with the assistance of club officials and people of the society the club developed gradually. In 1930 a few interested players took over the charge of the football section. They arranged for forming new team collecting players. From 1931 Mr. A.K. Aziz and Mr. Habibullah were appointed secretary and captain respectively. Hooda and Sirajuddin of Bengal, Mostafa Rajak and Wahab of Mysore and Noor Mohammad of Faizabad joined this team.

In 1932 a group of enthusiastic patriotic progressive Muslim youths established an organization named 'New Muslim Majlis' in Calcutta. The person who took the leading role was a close relative of Khwaja Najimuddin -- Khwaja Nooruddin. He played active part in making Mohammedan Sporting Club a great strong hold in Indian football. From its very inception the main objective of Mjlis was to make Mohammedan Sporting Club one of the greatest clubs.<sup>10</sup> To review the modern history of the club we observe what Mr. A.K. Aziz the then secretary of the club noted in his Annual Report of 1932-33 --- "In every aspect our sports session has become successful this year became in the history of the club for the first time, by acquiring the competence to play in the first division of Calcutta Football League, it has fulfilled long cherished desire".<sup>11</sup>

The victory in League in 1935 by Mohammedan sporting Club proved that they could write the sports history newly. By this time the victory in League for the second time emerged to be a matter of glory to the Mohammedan society. One of the important causes of resurrection and success of Mohammedan Sporting Club was the social influence and financial soundness of the patrons, players and members. The noteworthy patrons of this time were Khwaja Nazimuddin, Syed Sadullah, Subid Ali, Syed Ahmed Rashid, Syed Ahmed Faizal, Ishanul Haque, K. Habibullah chowdhury, S.S yakub and K. Nooruddin .<sup>12</sup> Within 45years of the formation of the club, we observed, by wrestling victory for three consecutive terms it not only created history for itself but for Indian history too.

### **Impetus of Progressive Muslim Politicians:-**

Championship of Mohammedan Sporting club in League for five consecutive terms inspired the Muslim society of Bengal as well as India. People from all sections of Muslim society considered this victory as a topic of their success in the sphere of culture. The then hon'ble Nawab Khwaja Habibullah, in order to congratulate them wrote : "The wonderful glory of the Mohammedan Football Team not only glorified the Muslims but also the Indians. From this everyone can learn the lesson that unified force, under true leadership, can accomplish unachievable – that may be in the field of politics or in the playground. With this strength the child of yesterday Mohammedan Sporting Club has become giant of today."<sup>13</sup> Eminent progressive Muslim A.K. Fazlul Haque wrote: "As I am one of the first of its founders, I have special claim to be elated for the creation of records by this club among all other clubs of Calcutta. There are ample causes to remain grateful to the Almighty(Khoda) as we have been successful before the impending danger. Let the flag of victory of Mohammedan Sporting club never hang down, it is our players that they should march forward on the way to victory and success."<sup>14</sup>

### **Conclusion :-**

It can be summed up that towards the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century the Progressive Muslims had significant role in the forming of Mohammedan Sporting Club. By means of establishment of a club they endeavoured to formulate of separate identity of the Muslims. The enthusiasm and encouragement for politics was evident among the Muslims of Bengal as it was found as regards football playing of Mohammedan Sporting Club. In fact towards the last decade of 19<sup>th</sup> century the Muslims lagged behind the Hindus in respect of western education and government jobs. However, in the playground they not only felt satisfaction but also tried to establish their own identity. At that time it was an inseparable part of the nation --- otherwise known as Niche.

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