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Social and Historical Context of the Folk Games in North Bengal

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ABSTRACT

The natural diversity of North Bengal has been perfected by the combination of rivers, mountains, and valleys. This natural abundance has been combined with cultural abundance to give birth to a new form. We see this rich natural beauty reflected regionally through traditional folk games. On the one hand, this game reflects society and acts as a mirror of culture, values, and traditions. Regional unique traditions are also expressed through games. Since these games are limited to a geographical area, they are spread and practiced within a homogeneous ethnic community. They also promote cultural integrity and a sense of unity among the residents. However, these important games are almost extinct today due to globalization and its resulting rat race of civilization.

KEYWORDS: Folk games; Social Context of Games and Sports; History of North Bengal

1 INTRODUCTION

North Bengal has several Folk games played mainly by kids but are still cherished by other people of any age since they remind them of their childhood (Roy, 2023a). These are fun to play. With the advent of computer/video games and late mobile games, kids prefer to spend their time indoors; these games are still trendy. The stunning difference between the games played in the previous generation shows that we still need to remember most of our valuable Folk games. Accordingly, the present study was conducted to find out the Folk Games and sports of rural areas in North Bengal to archive these in this globalization era.

2. METHODOLOGY

For this study, data has been collected from the rural areas of North Bengal, in West Bengal. Furthermore, for collecting records, the textual data from the printed materials like Books, Magazines, Newspapers, Internet-sources, etc., have also been utilized.

3. FOLK GAMES IN NORTH BENGAL

This essay aims to highlight the sports techniques and social and historical context of these games on the way to becoming historical memories in the abyss of time (Bandhopadhaya, 2006). The important games among these folk games are *Elating Belating Say Lo*, *Gollachut*, *Baghbandi*, *Golkadham*, *Bauchhi*, *Chamri*, *Pait*, *Tikalal*, *Chi Chattar*, *Gainath*, *Pakhi*, *Tistaburi*, *Langcha*, *Dashavatarer Tas*, etc.

Elating Belating Say Lo Game: Each folk game of this region is associated with its social and historical context. These games are significant for realizing the symbolic value as well as the entertainment value. For example, '*Elating Belating Say L*' (Chakraborty, 2001). The folk game symbolically represents the miserable condition of women in medieval Bengal, mainly centred in North Bengal, against the backdrop of social and economic instability, slavery and buying and selling were the order of the day at that particular time. Women were considered commodities and tools to satisfy the sexual desires of the rich.

Pait Game: The game of '*Pait*' depicts the constant fighting between small rebel groups in medieval North Bengal (Das, 1991). The arrangement of the

symbols (symbols) in lines reflects how to arrange these armies, protecting the opponent. In this game, whoever succeeds in aligning the letters of the lines wins, which indicates whose army is more disciplined in winning the battle.

Gollachutt Game: In the game of 'Gollachutt' we see the presence of feudal lords and the slave system (Das, 1991). At a specific time, in the social system, enslaved people worked under the feudal lord under the close supervision of armed guards. Sometimes, people who were enslaved tried to escape by tricking the guards; if caught, they were killed, and in rare cases, the slave person succeeded in escaping.

Chamari Game: The Folk game of 'Chamari' in North Bengal is clearly divided into two categories (Roy and Lama, 2020). The first one can be seen in the connection between the categories. In this game, when a brave young man tries to block the pond with a stick (in this game, a pond is first made by making marks), other players who are also holding sticks come to prevent it. Eventually, a mock war is organized. Be it a pond, arable land or a kingdom, wars have been fought over the right to hold these things since ancient times. In the game of *Chamri*, we can see its shadow.

ChhiChhattar Game: Similarly, in the game of 'ChhiChhatta' a fight scene between a 'rooster' and a 'Cheel' is seen (Roy & Lama, 2020). In the middle of the circle formed by the players, there is a thief, he is a Cheel, and the others are roosters. The Cheel tries to distract the roosters by reciting various rhymes, and when he gets a chance to break the circle and escape, the roosters try to touch the Cheel. The rhymes that the roosters recite at this time reveal their heroism. Notably, he would turn into a Cheel if he touched him. Perhaps there was a human group with the totem 'Cheel' and 'chicken'. Cheel is enslaved here; sometimes, enslaved people would run away. If the people of the ruling group could catch them, they would kill them. Sometimes, enslaved people would escape and gather strength to rebel against the ruling group. There is much evidence of this in history.

Golokdham and Dashavatar's cards Game: Two special games of religious significance in Hindu society are 'Golokdham' (Roy, 2023b), 'Dashavatar's cards' (Roy, 2023b) and 'Golokdham' has Vaishnavism embedded in the game. The word 'Golokdham' acquired special significance during the era of prosperity of Vaishnavism. *Golokdham* is much higher than Vishnulok or Shivalok. Like

chess, this game also has sixty-four rooms. There are pieces like the king and minister of chess, Thakur, etc. This game is played with a dice, each room is marked with the name of a pilgrimage site, and there are also some bad places. If a player does something bad, he has to be punished. So, if a player goes to a bad place, he has to come down as punishment. In the game of 'Sapludu' If the number of dice falling on the six of Ludo falls on the snake's face, he has to come down, and if he falls on the ladder's face, he goes up (Sanyal, 1965). In this way, the one who can reach the destination first wins. In the game of 'Golokdham', the one who can reach *Golokdham* first will win. According to the values of Hinduism, the distinction between sin and virtue and its inevitable consequences is in play. Another game is 'Dashavatar's card game. This almost extinct game has pictures of the ten avatars of Hinduism. For each avatar, there are ten cards under a vizier. There are 120 cards in total. It has traces of history along with the concept of Hindu avatarism.

Teestaburi Game: In Rajbangshi society, 'Teestaburi' The game is now part of *Teestaburi* (Sanyal, 1965). The Teesta River is the goddess of water. The girls of the Rajbangshi community play this game in the month of Baishakh. The game continues throughout the month, and a special puja is held on the last day. The leader, Marwani, with her team, walks around the village with an umbrella, singing and dancing. The purpose of the game is to pray for rain and crops.

Kanamachi and Bastadaur Game: Along with the game of 'Kanamachi' another game that can be mentioned is 'Kanamachi' (Paul, 2014). In this game, the 'thief' tries to touch the other players by jumping on one leg. In English, this game is called 'Lemmon', meaning this game is also popular in the West. There are references in history to punishing criminals or enslaved people by cutting off their hands and feet. Similarly, the games of 'Bastadaur' and 'Bang Daur' for children are also imitations of the punitive actions of ancient society. Physical pain is more than pleasure in these games, so its spontaneity has been lost. As a result, they are not held spontaneously, but are often held in annual sports competitions in schools. In these games, the legs or hands of the players are tied; sometimes, the legs of two players are tied together. In that situation, the players have to touch the target. The punitive system of amputating the limbs of enslaved people or criminals, or releasing them by chaining their hands and feet, was prevalent, and there are precedents for this in history.

Tikalal Game: Even if we discuss the game of 'Tikalal' this punitive process can be traced back to the players (Dey, 2007). The players would come out of their houses and slap the buttocks of the thief. In this situation, if they could touch the 'thief', the player would become a 'thief'. For the Rajbangshis of North Bengal, 'Tika' means buttocks. Therefore, the practice of slapping the buttocks was not uncommon in ancient society, and the incident of the mass beating of criminals was not uncommon. Similarly, the 'Gutumhari' or 'Utabaji' game also seems punitive for criminals.

Gainath Game: The game is also a game of the Rajbanshi society of North Bengal. This game is mainly played on the day of the waning moon in the month of Bhadra. The word 'Gainath' it is actually a regional corruption of the word Gorakshanath (Bhattacharya, 1963). Young people mainly participate in this game in groups, which is played at night. Each player has a thick bamboo or wooden stick in their hand. In a group, they will go to the householders at night, wake them up and sing songs in unison by tapping the sticks. Finally, they will take rice or money from the householders. If the householder does not wake up, they will steal or destroy the fruits or any other items of the tree, and even if the householder finds out the next day, they will not be able to say anything. The players have a feast with the collected rice or money. Nowadays, this game is almost extinct. Rural poets compose songs about it based on recent events.

Pakati or Pakhi Game: This game is very popular mainly in North Bengal, Jalpaiguri, and Cooch Behar districts. The game is played by cutting out houses in an empty field. The house or square in the game is a square playing board. Although the board is the same, the game is entirely different. A 'horse' is the player standing in the middle of a rectangular field with a divider. The other players stay in the diagonally cut spots. There is no one in the middle squares. When the game starts, the 'horse' will try to touch the other players and make them turn. Moreover, the other players will try to move from one diagonally cut spot to the next. While moving, he cannot put two feet in any square; he can only take one foot at a time. If he puts on two feet, he will become a horse and play as a horse. While moving in this way, the horse will try to touch the others. This is how the game goes: if the players can reach the last spot, then a 'patti' is scored, meaning the horse is defeated (Sanyal, 1965).

Baghbandi Game: It is almost a daily occurrence in the villages adjacent to the forests of North Bengal that people lose their lives to tigers, the great beast of the forest. This accident often happens when people enter the forest for a need. However, tigers also sometimes enter the villages in search of food, that is, calves, chickens, and even sleeping, careless people. These terrible experiences are not rare even today. These people, who are extremely poor and unable to protect themselves, would learn mantras to scare away the tiger, which were known to the rural people. The picture of the unequal struggle between nature and man is reflected in the game of 'Baghbandi' (Paul, 2014) This game is played sitting indoors. *Baghbandi* is played with pieces cut on the ground and pieces. Another name for this game is 'Bagh Bakri Khel'. The tiger hunts goats; the tiger's path is blocked by the pieces representing the goats. It has a hint of tiger hunting. The specific rhyme is -

বাঘবন্দী খেলিয়ে
বাঘ মারে তেলিয়ে
বাঘের তলে প্রদীপ জ্বলে!
জ্বলছে প্রদীপ উঠছে ধোঁয়া
ডাকাত আয়রে ছুঁচে মুয়া ॥

(Playing with a tiger, killing a tiger, the lamp burns under the tiger, The lamp is burning, smoke rises, the robber is stabbed in the air.)

At any time in the forested area, wildlife interference and nuisance would endanger the lives of people and domestic animals. So, how to prepare for a wild animal attack or capture can be seen in the symbolic tiger captive game 'Baghbandi'. 'Shologuti' is also known as 'Mughal-Pathan' in some areas, including the district of Coochbehar. The poetic composition of Bipradas named 'Manasa Vijay' mentions the names of games like 'Baghchagal' or 'Baghbandi' and 'Mughal-Pathan'. Experts believe that this game contains historical memories of the Mughal Pathan conflict. Harendranarayan Chaudhury, in his book 'Cooch Behar State and its Land Revenue Settlement', has written about this game. Sir Khan Chaudhury Amantulla spoke about the game's origin: "At that time, King Naranarayana was called the booster of the Pathan people in the kingdom of Koch. He passed away in 1587 BC. In 1576 BC, when the Pathan king Dawood Khan fell, the kingdom of Bengal was conquered by the Mughals, but the Bhuiyan kings and the Pathan chiefs did not

readily agree to accept submission to the Mughals. Until 1600 BC, the Orissa and Ghoraghat provinces were almost devastated by the Mughal Pathan conflicts. It is well known in Coochbehar that the Mughal-Pathan game was created based on this dispute (Das, 1991).

4. VALUES OF FOLK GAMES

The values we achieve by playing these games are more than the games we play nowadays. Some of the values we gain are that they are environment friendly; we get a chance to learn about our culture and history, and the critical thing suitable for all ages, increasing the interaction between generations. Folk Games sharpened one's observational and math skills. Folk Games were not just games; they were designed in such a way that one could develop many skills like logical thinking, building strategy, concentration, basic mathematics, aiming, and a lot more. Folk Games act as learning aids. They teach many things while playing, like learning to win and lose, developing sensory skills, counting, adding, improving motor skills, identifying colour, improving hand-eye coordination, and finally, having fun. Naturally, one plays or watches a game to have fun.

5. CONCLUSION

The folk games of North Bengal develop integration, cultural diversity, peace, physical and mental activity, social and spiritual beliefs as a vehicle for world unity and also are an important for passing on some ancestral knowledge to posterity. In addition, the hunting of primitive people, animal husbandry, plundering-kidnapping, agricultural work, household, marriage, slavery, warfare, in short, the entire life and society of rural folk games have enriched them.

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