

# Cricket and the Rise of Nationalism in Colonial Bengal: A Study in the Context of Saradaranjan Roy

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## Abstract :

Cricket was one of the new sports cultures that emerged in Bengal as an integral part of the neo-colonial cultural framework in the second half of the nineteenth century during the colonial period. In its initial phase, cricket was confined exclusively to European gentlemen. Gradually, however, with the patronage of several Bengali elites and royal families, the game began to gain popularity among the local population. Saradaranjan Roy played a pivotal role in the development of cricket in Bengal. Through his initiatives, cricket culture flourished in various colleges and clubs. He was deeply committed to forming local teams and promoting the game through indigenous efforts. This research article aims to historically evaluate the contribution of Saradaranjan Roy to the spread and development of cricket in colonial Bengal. It also seeks to examine the role he played in linking cricket with the broader nationalist movement of the period.

**Keywords:** Colonial Bengal, Natore, Cricket, Popular Culture, Nationalism.

‘Bankim is the Scot of Bengal, Saradaranjan is the Grace  
Yet the Bengali press is making cricket a waste.  
This game is only for foreigners  
I want only the natives  
Who knew that Sourav would remove this trouble?’<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction:

After the Battle of Plassey, the British gained political power from the commercial sector in undivided Bengal. In addition to administrative and political dominance, their cultural and intellectual influence along with linguistic contact left a profound impression on the minds of Indians. Similarly, popular British games such as football, cricket, and hockey were introduced from the West and have since become an integral part of contemporary society. Western sports spread primarily through British public schools. The bhadralok, products of the public-school system that the English had introduced in India, though openly advocating the ‘games ethic,’

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often employed sport as a tool of subversion. Along with this, in the wake of the elite reaction

to British policy following the Great Rebellion of 1857, the native royals also extended their patronage to sports particularly cricket which, however, remained largely restricted to the elite. By the early twentieth century, cricket had become an integral part of popular culture among the major sports in India. Gradually, the influence of Western games expanded across all social strata. Cricket, once an elite pursuit, was popularized among the common people by Saradaranjan Ray of East Bengal, who played a significant role in shaping and spreading the popular identity of cricket culture in the minds of Bengalis both in East Bengal and across the whole of Bengal.<sup>4</sup> Due to Saradaranjan's efforts, cricket culture was introduced in various colleges and clubs. For this reason, he is often regarded as the 'Father of Bengali Cricket'. It would not be an exaggeration to call him the father of cricket in the Indian subcontinent as well. The present article seeks to examine how nationalism became intertwined with cricket in colonial Bengal through the initiatives of Saradaranjan Roy. It also aims to provide a historical evaluation of his contributions to the spread and development of the game. His influence extended beyond the playing field, inspiring a generation of cricketers who viewed the sport as a medium of cultural expression and national pride. By fostering a sense of community and identity through cricket, Saradaranjan Roy not only elevated the game but also played a pivotal role in shaping the narrative of resistance against colonial rule.

#### **Saradaranjan Roy's role in the development of cricket in colonial Bengal:**

Saradaranjan Roy (1858–1924 AD) made an unforgettable contribution to the expansion of cricket in Bengal. He was born into the famous Roy family in the village of Katiyadi in Kishoreganj. At that time, Kishoreganj was a part of Mymensingh. Greater Mymensingh was later divided into regions such as Kishoreganj, Tangail, and Netrokona. Saradaranjan Roy had four brothers Upendrakishore, Kuldaranjan, and Pramdaranjan who gained fame as writers. All five brothers were ardent cricket enthusiasts. Saradaranjan's hands were familiar with bat and ball from the age of eight, when he studied at Kishoreganj Minor School. He later became a student of Dhaka College, where he stood first in the B.A. examination. It may seem surprising that school cricket was played in Kishoreganj as early as 1866 AD. In the early 18th century, cricket was primarily played by the Sahibs in their clubs, while Bengalis or Indians had no role or access to these European clubs.<sup>5</sup>

Saradaranjan Roy was a scholar of mathematics in Bangladesh and was equally proficient in Sanskrit and English. In 1879, he joined Aligarh College as a mathematics teacher, leaving his own studies unfinished. There, he began his career as a professor. Cricket was introduced at the college through the efforts of Saradaranjan, who also excelled in physical education and sports. Notable among the cricketers of Aligarh College during that time were Ali Hossain, Amanul Haque, Sawkat, and the renowned Sawkat Ali, who later gained distinction in politics. Their remarkable performance in cricket earned them such popularity that Lord Curzon, the Viceroy and representative of the Emperor of India, welcomed them warmly. Moreover, he openly declared that their sportsmanship was in no way inferior to that of the first-class players of England. The way in which the students of Aligarh College gained a reputation for their unmatched cricketing culture was made possible through the guidance and influence of Saradaranjan Roy. Later, he was transferred from Aligarh and returned to Bengal to join Dhaka

College as a professor of mathematics. While serving at Dhaka College, he introduced cricket in Dhaka in collaboration with Booth Sahib.

In 1880 AD, the Dhaka College Club was formed by the students and teachers of Dhaka College under the leadership of Saradaranjan Roy. In 1898, Sakha newspaper wrote about cricket at Dhaka College:

“The gentlemen of Dhaka used to play with the Bengalis, and the gentlemen and professors of Dhaka College were very enthusiastic about it and taught the boys. Even now, most of the Bengali boys who have gained appreciation in this game are from Dhaka. It has been eleven years since the boys of East Bengal first opened a club in Presidency College in Calcutta and started playing the game, and we are now seeing the result of their enthusiasm and efforts: the game has started in every school and college.”

In this context, it is important to note that during the early period of the introduction of cricket among Bengalis in Calcutta, a truly competitive form of the game had already emerged in East Bengal. In 1891 AD, a knockout competition was held among Senhati, Bagerhat, Khulna, and Daulatpur, in which Senhati emerged as the winner. This clearly indicates that by the end of the nineteenth century, cricket was being played competitively in various colleges and schools across East Bengal. Saradaranjan began practicing gymnastics and playing cricket regularly at Dhaka College. He also brought his brothers to the akhara of the famous wrestler Adhir Goala. He was as energetic and fearless as he was articulate. A brief account of one such incident, published in Sandesh, is as follows:

In 1880, he led a team from Dhaka College to play several matches against the staff and students of Presidency College. Saradaranjan was assisted by Professor Topper and Principal Booth Sahib, while Professor Row Sahib represented the Presidency team. Although Dhaka College was defeated in the first match, the Presidency College authorities proposed that the second match should be “only for students.” Principal Booth agreed but insisted that Saradaranjan should participate. Saradaranjan, however, disagreed, and this dispute ultimately led to his resignation in 1887.<sup>9</sup>

This incident revealed Saradaranjan Roy’s independent nature, which did not allow him to submit to British authority or accept defeat easily. The fact that Dhaka College attained the highest position in Bengal in the field of cricket was entirely the result of Saradaranjan’s dedicated and concerted efforts.

After leaving government service in 1888 AD, he joined the Metropolitan College of Calcutta (now Vidyasagar College). There, too, he devoted himself to the promotion and development of cricket. He even participated in matches organized by E. B. R. Manson, scoring 12 runs for Vidyasagar College. However, Saradaranjan’s contribution to the world of cricket cannot be measured merely through his performance with bat and ball. According to the writings of Durgasaran Chakraborty, a former professor of Vidyasagar College, Saradaranjan founded the Vidyasagar College Athletic Club in 1909 AD with students from various schools and colleges. Chakraborty noted that in 1911, this college team participated in the first Lansdowne Shield

tournament and reached the final the following year. In that match, players such as Shailjaranjan, Govinda Banerjee, and Jitu Basu caught everyone's attention through their excellent performances.

Following this success, Saradaranjan declared that the doors of Metropolitan College would be open not only to meritorious students but also to those who excelled in sports. As a result of this decision, Bengal later produced talented cricketers such as Shailen Bose, Nitaichandra Ghosh, Kangali Pal, Hemang Bose, Neeraj Roy, Habul Mitra, and Jitendra Banerjee.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it can be said that Saradaranjan Roy played a significant role in nurturing and shaping the careers of many renowned cricketers, including Shailjaranjan, Jitu Bose, Govinda Banerjee, Manmathanath Bose, and Sudhanyakumar Bose. Another remarkable achievement of Saradaranjan was his organization of a cricket tour in 1919 to Benares, Allahabad, and Agra with both former and current students of the college. He also led a team to Uttar Pradesh on behalf of the college.<sup>11</sup> Even the legendary footballer of Mohun Bagan Club, Goshta Pal famously known as the "Wall of China" of Indian football and the then Principal of Vidyasagar College were influenced by Saradaranjan Roy's enthusiasm for sports and were drawn toward cricket under his inspiration. Saradaranjan himself also participated in several important cricket matches for Mohun Bagan.<sup>12</sup>

The Vidyasagar College Magazine of September 1926 records that during the academic year 1916–17, the students of the college actively participated in cricket, football, hockey, and tennis. They played 28 cricket matches, out of which they won 25.<sup>13</sup> The college team also won the Hardinge Shield, the Lansdowne Shield, and the Harrison Shield tournaments. The Principal of the college, Saradaranjan Roy, was himself an accomplished cricketer and played a pivotal role in promoting cricket among the students. In this regard, an issue of the Sakha newspaper noted:

"In this connection, we cannot but thank our esteemed friends, Mr. Saradaranjan Roy, Professor of Mathematics of the Metropolitan Institution, and Mr. Mahomed, Professor of Mathematics of Presidency College. They are grateful to everyone for the enthusiasm with which they are teaching and encouraging their young friends in this regard, and for the remarkable results achieved within these three years due to their dedication."

Through the combined efforts of Saradaranjan Roy and his brothers Muktidaranjan, Kuldaranjan and with the support of the Maharaja of Natore, the Town Club was established in Kolkata, modeled after the English cricket clubs. Under the supervision of Saradaranjan Roy, systematic efforts were made to discover new cricket talent and provide proper training. By the early twentieth century, the popularity of Bengali cricket began to rise rapidly. Saradaranjan was popularly known on the field as "W. G.", a nickname that alluded to the famous English cricketer W. G. Grace. His tireless efforts were further inspired and supported by the then Zamindar, Roy Bahadur Professor Bipin Bihari Gupta, who indirectly contributed to the growth of both the Town Club and the Sporting Union. The prominent Bengali cricketers of that period included Hiten Bose, Kartik Bose, Ganesh Bose, Bapi Bose, Umesh Majumdar (popularly known as Dukhiram), Bidhu Mukherjee, and Sute Banerjee. Among them, Bidhu Mukherjee was widely regarded as the finest Bengali batsman of that era. At the initiative of

Saradaranjan Roy and his brothers, several exhibition matches of the Calcutta Cricket Club were held at the Town Club grounds. The most significant among them was the 1905 match,<sup>15</sup> in which the Ariens a team composed entirely of Bengali players competed against the Ballygunge Cricket Club. The Statesman newspaper wrote about Saradaranjan Roy: “Calcutta won by 45 runs... their [Town Club’s] batting was weak, and they should learn to play with a straight bat, but their bowling, especially that of the brothers M. & J. Roy, was very fair, and their fielding all round was excellent. The improvement in their cricket during the past year or two must be a source of great satisfaction to their coach, Professor S. Roy.”<sup>16</sup>

A report published in the Sandesh newspaper described Saradaranjan Roy as an accomplished player respected by both domestic and foreign cricketers in Bengal and Bangladesh. He was recognized as the principal pioneer in introducing cricket among the Bengali community. Under his initiative, both Aligarh College and the Metropolitan Institute (now Vidyasagar College) developed as important centers for cricketing activity. For this reason, he is often referred to as the “Father of Bengali Cricket.” His tireless efforts also led to the establishment of major cricket tournaments in Bengal, such as the Lansdowne Shield and the Harrison Shield.<sup>17</sup> After leaving the Town Club, Saradaranjan decided to form a new cricket team called Natore XII, in collaboration with the Maharaja of Natore. Saradaranjan took full responsibility for player recruitment, training, practice, and overall team management. The Natore XII participated in several historic matches under his guidance.<sup>18</sup>

### **Cricket Culture and Sardaranjan Roy:**

Saradaranjan Roy’s role in the spread of cricket culture in Bengal, both as a player and as a patron during the colonial period, was truly unparalleled. At the end of the nineteenth century, he organized the first formal cricket coaching sessions in Bengal. Moreover, to cultivate an interest in cricket among Bengali youth and to help them understand the rules of the game accurately, he discussed the subject in detail in an article titled “Cricket Khela” published in Mukul magazine. To further popularize cricket in Bengal, Saradaranjan compared the game with another well-known traditional Bengali pastime, Danda Gulli, in an issue of Mukul. He wrote:

“There is hardly a Bengali boy who has not played Danda Gulli or seen that game. You can roughly call cricket a kind of Danda Gulli. However, there is as much difference between a Bengali’s fish feeder and a Saheb’s fish feeder as there is between a Bengali’s Danda Gulli and a Saheb’s Danda Gulli. While the playing of Danda Gulli is a very trivial pursuit for the Bengali, for the Saheb, cricket is a national treasure. The respect accorded to a good cricket player by the Sahibs finds no parallel.”<sup>19</sup>

Saradaranjan Roy’s contribution was not confined merely to spreading the culture of cricket he was also a successful entrepreneur. After the death of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the Metropolitan College (now Vidyasagar College) faced a severe financial crisis. To overcome this situation, Saradaranjan took two significant initiatives: he established a book printing company and another enterprise for manufacturing and selling sports equipment. Both were named S. Roy and Company. In 1895, he opened the first cricket equipment shop in Kolkata,

initially located on Bowbazar Street and later shifted to 11-1 Esplanade East. Advertisements from that time indicate that his intention was not merely to import and sell foreign bats and balls; rather, he aimed to make affordable cricket equipment for school and college students.<sup>20</sup> In doing so, Saradaranjan helped introduce cricket to Bengal's middle-class families in the early twentieth century. It is known that he imported willow wood from Sialkot to manufacture bats locally in Kolkata. He also established a factory on Jessore Road for producing various types of sports equipment. In 1906, the Balanced Bat produced by S. Roy & Company won a special award at the Industrial Exhibition in Kolkata.<sup>21</sup> As Boria Majumdar has shown, it was through Saradaranjan Roy's pioneering efforts that cricket gradually became accessible beyond the elite class reaching the middle class and the common people of Bengal, cutting across divisions of race, religion, and caste.<sup>22</sup>

### **Nationalism and Sardaranjan Roy:**

The significance of sports in the modern world is immense, as it finds reflection in politics, society, the economy, culture, spirituality, and even aesthetics. Although there are many means to awaken a sense of nationalism, in modern times the sports field has become a major stage through which a nation can project itself as a claimant to the highest position in the world. The playground became a platform where Bengalis irrespective of race, religion, or caste could gather and unite. The Bengalis, long exploited, oppressed, and persecuted under British colonial rule, gradually began to find strength through their social, political, cultural, and religious consciousness. Lord Macaulay once dismissed Indian culture as being filled with accumulated prejudices. The reflection of such an arrogant colonial mentality was also evident on the playground. It was beyond the imagination of the British that the white-skinned rulers, who had introduced games such as football and cricket to the world, could ever be challenged or even defeated by the so-called natives on the field. However, during the era of the Swadeshi and Boycott Movements, the playground emerged as yet another site of nationalist protest for Bengalis.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the spirit of protest had begun to take shape long before the Swadeshi Movement formally started. The idea of nationalism had already begun to germinate in the minds of Indians from the 1860s onward. The influence of nationalism also extended to the cricket field. The conscious awareness and expression of nationalist sentiment, which help us understand nationalism in the modern world, were largely spread and reflected in the public mind through various cultural elements such as sports, songs, films, and festivals. This tradition originated during the development of sports culture in colonial Bengal, particularly through the practice and popularization of modern games like cricket. According to Boria Majumdar, "The desire to attain recognition in British eyes, together with the longing to defeat the British on their own turf, were at the root of this initiative. To that extent, Bengali cricket was a nationalist enterprise."<sup>24</sup> Maharaja Jagadindranath Roy of Natore was one of the most notable patrons of sports in East Bengal in the early twentieth century. He shed detailed light on the introduction and spread of cricket in colonial Bengal and explained how the passion for cricket shared by the Maharaja of Natore and Saradaranjan Roy took on a distinctly nationalist character. Kaushik Bandopadhyay observes that the struggle and success of the barefoot Bengali youth in physical sports like football against the booted British army added a new dimension to anti-British national consciousness.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the tendency of Bengali players to play cricket

wearing dhoti and panjabi on the cricket field and their struggle to uphold this practice helped to spread nationalist ideology within the sphere of sports. In this regard, Professor Saradaranjan Roy became a symbol of protest against colonial norms by directly supporting this cause. Supporting him, the famous footballer Gostha Pal also played cricket wearing a dhoti, and this unique use of indigenous clothing undoubtedly contributed to maintaining a distinct Bengali nationalist identity.<sup>26</sup> Two significant teams that emerged under royal patronage during this period were the Cooch Behar team and the Natore team, which competed with each other for the advancement of cricket. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan Bhup of Cooch Behar once spent a considerable amount of money to bring skilled cricketers from abroad to train local youth. Saradaranjan Roy also took several initiatives to develop cricket teams. Jagadindranath Roy wrote in Manasi and Marmavani, “Saradaranjan of that day was not sitting still. Since the Maharaja had foreigners in his team, the achievements of the Indians were not much appreciated. Therefore, he, along with another athletic and skilled young man from Bengal, created a team that remained undefeated in cricket competitions against both Indians and Europeans.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

A sports lover like Saradaranjan Roy holds a memorable place in the history of India and Bengal. Even today, it is difficult to find a person with such a selfless and noble spirit. As Jagadindranath Roy rightly mentioned in his memoirs in Manasi and Marmabani, “There is great doubt whether another Sarada like Sardar Ranjan will be found, not only in Bengal but also in our unfortunate country today, even after extensive research.” His contribution to the establishment of a cricket team through domestic initiatives is undeniable, and the benefits of his efforts are still being enjoyed today. The death of this great man in 1925 caused an irreparable loss to the cricketing world. It cannot be denied that Saradaranjan Roy played a significant role in establishing cricket as an integral part of the sporting culture of East Bengal, that is, undivided Bengal.

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