SELF ASSERTION THROUGH PHYSICAL CULTURE MOVEMENT IN BENGAL DURING THE LATER PART OF 19TH CENTURY AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Abstract: The objective of the paper is to highlight one arena of sports that contributed substantially to the emergence of militant Nationalism in Bengal(The then Capital of India). Body building and wrestling was given priority not only to wipe out the stigma hurled at them by their colonial masters but also to prove that the Indians could surpass the Europeans in this sphere. This was the most positive and constructive approach towards National regeneration of India. In several other sphere this spirit of self assertion was very much evident. Victory by some Bengalis in the sphere of wrestling and physical contest substantially strengthened Nationalist consciousness of Bengal and India.

Bengalis had been the object of ridicule by the ruling community for their physical weakness. The stereotype of the physical effeminacy of the Bengali as a ‘race’ found its most blatant expression in Thomas Macaulay’s critique. Macaulay argued that the physical organisation of the Bengali is feeble even to effeminacy. The colonial charge of effeminacy and non-martial against the Bengali continued even in the characterisation of his sporting pursuit in the mid-nineteenth Century. This characterisation as Mrinalini Sinha demonstrates had come to acquire a more specific connotation by late 19th century. If in the past stereotypes of effeminacy were used loosely to describe all Bengalis, by the later half of the century, it was used specifically to depict Indian middle class or a section of this class identified as babus. It has been argued that the Bengalis reacted to this colonial stereotype by way of the pursuit of a neo-traditional Physical culture to efface the self-image of effeminacy. Another scholar has drawn our attention to the response of charge of effeminacy levelled against the Bengalis. He points out that it became imperative on the part of the Bengali middle class to devise an effective strategy to counter this colonial charge of effeminacy. Sports become the arena wherein this heavily politicised, but veiled strategising took place. Another line of argument was that the emergence of nationalism created the need to fashion a new political ethos in which 'spiritual' Indian/Bengali could be posited as men not suffering from any want of physical vigour and courage despite their spirituality. Indira Choudhury has mentioned that the creation of 'martial' and 'non-martial' races consequent upon the Revolt of 1857 had made the Bengalis apprehensive about the employment opportunities and therefore they realised the necessity to transform the effeminate self-image base an absolute necessity. While accepting the partial validity of the above mentioned viewpoints this paper seeks to argue that Bengali initiative has to be seen in the greater perspective of the rejection of the colonial values and an attempt at self-assertion. This twin process made Bengal the storm centre of Nationalist movement. The first section of the paper focuses on 1870s as a turning point in Indian History and try to show how it created opportunities for self-assertion of the Bengalis with the particular emphasis on the activities on the of “Hindu Mela”. The second section concentrates on physical culture movement as a mark of self-assertion of the Bengalis.

(1) Before high lighting the importance of the 1870s in Indian history it would be worthwhile to make a brief review of the revolt of 1857 and its impact on British policies. The initial impact was one of
vengeance and destruction. Much of the architectural design of Red Fort was destroyed. British officials began to think about a thorough change in the structure of the army in India. When the initial danger for revenge had subsided the British authorities in India gave priority to steps for the strengthening the bases of British rule in India. The events of the mutiny had proved beyond doubt that the feudal aristocracies had tremendous influence over the Indian people. Therefore British relationship with the feudal aristocracies had been redefined. To gain legitimacy in the eyes of Indian some of the Mughal rituals were adopted. The British rulers in India also gave emphasis on strengthening the systematically acquiring information about the Indians. In support of the notion of permanent British rule in India the imperialist ideology of Fit James Stephen had been propounded. All these steps had caused much discontent among the Indians. An eminent historian had pointed out that the Indian intelligentsia over the second half of 19th century began to see colonialisation as an obstacle to the way of capitalist development.

It is in this background that we should try to understand the significance of 1870 in Indian history. Uma Dasgupta in her work has shown that 1870s could be seen as a very significant era from the point of view of Indian Journalism. Not only the numbers of newspapers and Journals proliferated but at the same time the concern for journal had shifted from social to that of Political. It is interesting to note that newspapers in Bengal did not wish the Indian National Congress which had come into existence in 1885 to bother with social reforms. Hostility towards the government took the shape of publishing official secrets wherever they could be secured. The passing of the vernacular press act in 1878 under Lord Lytton was in many ways a fitting finale to the decade which has seen a significant growth in Indian Journalism. In injured innocence Bengali papers reminded themselves that no one could take away from them the original universe they had, the discussion of social improvement, the effort at literacy and culture.

Changing perception of the British Raj is perceptible in another area also which is important both from the view point of the emergence of Nationalism as well as also from the view point of the assertion of Indian equality with the European ruling class. This is particularly applicable to the Bengalis during the 2nd half of 19th century. By late 1860s the Hindu Melas attempted to fabricate a “new” and powerful opposition to the colonial power within the traditional frame work. The vehemence with which the colonial categorization of the Bengali as weak and ‘effeminate was denied is evident in newspaper articles which attempted to counter this false categorisation. The weak babu, another article admitted required preparation before he could shoulder the musket. The development of a strong physique was an essential feature of the courageous man for the possessing of strong, robust, healthy constitutions makes men and heroes’. Body building was popularized in the National paper through numerous historical sketches of gymnasiums in ancient Greece and Rome and in Germany and France. Apart from this by 1869 the National Paper was advertising as many as six gymnastic schools in Calcutta itself. At the 1868 Mela a poem emphasising the need for exercise and physical activity amongst Bengalis in Order to restore strength, promote well-being and increase happiness. The Hindu Melas programme of reclaiming valour through, a display of physical exercise etc. included wrestling matches between
representatives of the weak and the strong races. So physical strength and body building was considered to be indispensable quality for contesting the supremacy of the colonizer.  

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During the Swadeshi movement this trend had become more pronounced. Swadeshi movement in many ways had anticipated the main features of Nationalist movement till 1947. But the significance and importance of the Swadeshi movement is beyond the scope of this paper. On the other hand an attempt has been made to high light two aspects of the movement that seem to be relevant in this context. One important aspect was the participation of the Revolutionary terrorists in the movement. From the memoirs of the some of the Revolutionaries we come to know that how they had whole heartedly participated in the movement to make it a broad based movement. The second aspect is that during the movement gymnasia rapidly developed in different parts of Bengal. It would be worthwhile to mention in this connection that Khudiram Bose had been actively engaged in spreading anti British feeling through circulation of Revolutionary pamphlets. In Midnapur he was intercepted by the Police while circulating ‘Sonar angia’ leaflet Khudiram was arrested but he was released due to the fact that he was a minor. Khudiram was very efficient in parallel bar exercises. On one occasion his demonstration of the parallel bar exercises had evoked the admiration of the spectators.

Among the Revolutionaries physical exercises had been made mandatory. Sarala Devis initiative in this field is too widely known to be recounted again. Jatindranath Banerjee who was entrusted with the task of creating a secret Revolutionary Organisation on Calcutta gave special emphasis on physical training. Apart from body building horse riding, sword fighting etc. were made indispensable part of their training. An expert in physical exercises named Mortaza was entrusted with the task of training up the young revolutionaries in the art of sword fighting, horse riding etc. Pulin Behari Das, the main architect of the Anushilan Samity Dacca had contacted Mortaza to train up the Revolutionaries of Dacca. It would not be far-fetched to state that the importance given by the Revolutionaries to the physical exercises and body building created the possibilities of physical exercise becoming a sport in itself. Secondly the physical exercise had been raised almost to the level of spiritual exercises by the Revolutionary terrorists. It is known from the memoirs of Pulin Behari Das that some spiritual personalities had also been involved in imparting training to the young revolutionaries. There are also instances of personalities widely known for their spiritual activities also used to practice physical training and they are also known to have kept secret liaison, with the Revolutionaries. Swami Vivekananda’s message influenced the mind of young Bengali with a spirit of burning patriotism and created in them some tendency for stern political activity. Vivekananda used to say that one could reach God through football rather than through Gita; so football and gymnasium was considered important for acquiring strength and stamina. We also come to know that in every gymnasium i.e. exercise cult of the Revolutionary party of Bengal, Vivekananda’s work entitled ‘From Colombo to Almora’ was read. In many parts of the country groups of men established local akharas (gymnasia) for the propagation of indigenous martial arts, physical fitness programmes and wrestling in particular.

The anti-partition agitation had given a new impetus to the Nationalist movement and the surge of patriotic feelings made the popularity of Bose’s circus to an unparalleled height. The circus used to draw huge crowd and the competitor of the Bose’s circus like Hamstomer had to withdraw from
The huge crowd that thronged to ‘garer math’ was not only to watch gymnastics but it seems that they used to come to watch a novel National fair and to show their respect to motherland. In the interval Professor Priyanath Bose used to address the spectators in his inimitable style which used to generate a lot of Nationalist feeling among the spectators. Many eminent leaders used to come to see the performances of the circus and inspire the players. The activities of the ‘Boses’ circus also got very positive press coverage. The contemporary ‘Arnrita Bazar Patrika’ wrote. “Bengalees are said to be worthless people who can only talk, with no manliness or power of organization and only a race of imitators Boses’ circus gives lie to this statement” Hindoo Patriot wrote. “It makes a Bengalee proud to think that such daring feats are performed by his own class on whom wanton insult has been poured as being weak and Lily livered. The fact that Bengali young men, women and children do such daring acts gives the lie direct to such malicious accusations.

In another article the Arnrita Bazar wrote about the circus that deserves our attention.

“...superfluous to add that among items advertised are many, which excel anything seen in the West and as such are a credit to Asia and particularly to Bengal”

The daring feats of Sushila Sundari drew admiration from European Press and the Englishman wrote, ”.... What impresses the observer most are performances of Miss Sushila with two Royal Bengal Tigers.” So far as physical activities are concerned we must mention about indigenous exercises and wrestling. Shyam Sundar Goswami had become famous for his physical prowess and body building. It is said that he had introduced his own method of body building and exercises. He has been compared with Eugene Sando who is considered to be a pioneer in body building and exercises in Europe.

There is hardly any Bengali who does not feel proud for the valiant deeds of Shyama Kanta: He had earned his fame as wrestler by defeating some renowned Punjabi wrestlers. He also took to circus for demonstrating his physical strength by fighting with tigers. He had also defeated an eminent European wrestler Emlo who was of the level of legendary Eugene Sando. So the activities of Shyamakanta had definitely gone a long way in wiping out the stigma of effeminacy imposed by the colonial rulers. It became a source of encouragement to middle class Bengalis to acquire physical strength and stamina. Another Bengali Jatindra Mohan Guha, popularly known as Gobar Guha had earned worldwide renown in the field of wrestling. He had defeated some of the eminent European wrestlers and had been declared as Great Britain Champion in 1910. In the same year Gama became heavy weight world Champion. In the eyes of growing Indian middle class who were by 1910, subscribing to a plethora of new newspapers which published news of the world Champion, Gama was a national Hero. Not only he had defeated the greatest wrestlers of Europe and America, but he had done so, more significantly, in a distinctly Indian way. In both India and European publications what was regarded as noteworthy about Gama was the nature of training regimen, the bethaks and dands in particular but also his diet and simply the amount of time he was wrestling, digging the pit, running and exercising every day.

The above discussion makes it abundantly clear that the Indian perception of British Raj had undergone a fundamental change since 1870s. A spirit of self-assertion became the dominating feature of this attitude and this became much more pronounced during the Swadeshi movement. Physical culture and physical activities went a long way in the creation of a faith that the British Power could be overthrown.
Notes of Reference


2. Ibid P-24


4. Ibid P 3070

5. Ibid P 3070


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15. Aditya Mukherjee Presidential address of Modern India Section 68th Indian History Gongress held in Delhi.


17. Ibid pp.43

18. Ibid pp.42

19. Ibid pp.43-44


22. Ibid pp.40

23. Ibid pp. 51

24. Indira Choudhury op. cit pp 20-22


26. Eminent Revolutionaries like Bhupendranath Dutta, Satish Chandra Pakrasi, Jadugopal Mukherjee in their memoirs has recorded their views in this respect.

29. Pulin Bihari Das op.cit P.60-68.
30. Ibid pp. 60-65
31. Ibid 66-67
32. Ibid 64-66
33. The memoirs of the Revolutionaries are replete with description of the activities of such spiritual personalities.
34. Sumit Mukherjee op. cit.
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49. Ibid p. 10
50. Ibid p. 10-11