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BY

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“The Game of Ball-Bat (Chowgan-gui)
among the Ancient Persians, as
described in the Epic of
Firdousi.”

(Read 26th September 1890. Dr. Atmaram Pandurang in the Chair.)

THE modern Parsees of India have made cricket, the national game of their esteemed rulers, their own. But it appears from the Shâhnâmeh of Firdousi, the great epic poet of Persia, that a game of ball-bat, though not like that of cricket, was known to their ancestors, the ancient Persians. The game was played with great enthusiasm, not only in the later Sassanian period, but also in the earlier times of the Kaiânian dynasty. The young and the old, the rich and the poor, played it as a means of healthy exercise and recreation. Even friendly international matches were arranged under the captainship of the leading men of the rival races. They were played with an accompaniment of music just as we see at the present day. The result of the matches was looked to, with great eagerness and anxiety.

Firdousi calls this game Chowgân-gui. *Chowgân* means a bat, as well as the ground on which the game is played. *Gui* means a ball. The game was played on foot as well as on horseback. Young children generally played it on foot. It is said of the Duke of Wellington, that he used to say that he won his Waterloo on the cricket ground, meaning thereby, that the precision and the discipline under which he played the game, were of great use to determine his future character as a great commander. The following historical anecdote from the Shâhnâmeh illustrates how this game of Chowgân-gui was made use of, to know the character of a child and determine the nobility of its birth. This is one of the four references that I have been able to collect from the Shâhnâmeh on the subject of this game.

Ardeshir Bâbegân, the founder of the Sasanian dynasty of Persia, having defeated Ardwân (Artabanes), the last monarch of the Parthian dynasty, on the classical field of Râm Hormuz, on the banks of the river Kârun, ascended the throne

of Persia, and took a daughter of the deposed sovereign in marriage. She, instigated by her eldest brother, Bahman, who was then in India tried to poison her husband, Ardeshir, with a view to bring about the restoration of the Parthian dynasty to the throne of Iran. Her wicked attempt was discovered by Ardeshir, who ordered one of his ministers to put her to death. The minister, while taking away the queen from the court of the king to put his royal master's order into execution, found that she was *enceinte*. With a view to bring about a reconciliation in future, and to secure an heir to the throne in case the king had no other issue thereafter, the minister protected the queen in his palace. In order to guard against the suspicions of the king in future against himself, as a likely father of the child, that may be born, he got himself castrated. He put the castrated parts in a box, and though pale and weak through the effects of the operation, went in a litter to the king, and requested him to let the box be kept in his treasury until the time he called for it. At the proper time, the queen was delivered of a male child, whom the minister named Shâpur, *i.e.*, the son of the king (*Shah*). This was the Shapur who defeated the Roman Emperor Valerian at the battle of Edessa.

Time rolled on, when, seven years after this event, the minister one day found the king very gloomy. On enquiry he found that the thought of being heirless made the king sad. The king said to him, "A father without a son is like a son without the father. Never will a stranger press him to his heart." The minister took hold of that golden opportunity and divulged the secret to the king. He sent for the box from the treasury of the king, showed him its contents, and said, that he had done so, to be above suspicion as a likely father of the child. The king, in order to further satisfy himself about the legitimacy of the child, ordered the boy to be brought to him in the company of one hundred children of the same age and countenance, and to be made to play the game of Chowgân-gui before him, so that he might determine, by his own paternal affection, which out of the hundred children was his prince. In the words of Firdousi (*Mohl V.*, p. 342) he said:—

کنون صد پسر گیر ہمسال او	∴	بدالا و چہرہ برو یال او
ہمان جامہ پوشیدہ با او بہم	∴	نہاید کہ چیزى بود بيش و کم
ہمہ کودگانرا بچوگان فرست	∴	بیارای گوی و ہمیدان فرست
چو یکدشت کودک بود خوبچہر	∴	بپیچد ز فرزند جانم بہمہر
برآن راستی دل گواہی دہد	∴	مرا با پسر آشنائی دہد

“Now find out a hundred children of the same age, who resemble him in stature, appearance, form, and size, and are dressed like him without the slightest difference. Send all these children to the field, get a ball, and send them to the *maidân*. When all the beautiful children will be on the plain, my soul will be moved by my affection for my child. My own heart will give evidence of the truth of thy words, and will recognize my child.”

The minister followed the instructions of his master, and the king recognized his child out of the hundred children. To make matters more certain, he asked one of his attendants to go in the midst of the children and throw the ball towards him. He said (Mohl V., p. 342):—

از آن کودکان آن که آید دلیر . . . میان سواران بگردار شیر
 ز دیدار من گوی بیرون بود . . . از آن آنچه کس بکس نشهرد
 بود بیگمان پاک فرزندی من . . . ز بزم و برویال و پیوند من

“Whoever, out of these children, advances bravely in the midst of the brave like a lion, and carries away the ball from my presence, without respect for anybody in the assembly, he undoubtedly must be my real child, of my own blood, body, and family.”

The attendant went among the children and threw the ball towards the king. All the children ran after the ball, but when they saw, that it was very close to his Majesty, they dared not go before him. But Shâpur ran after it and threw it back among the children. This convinced Ardeshir, that Shapur was a royal prince, and was therefore not at all afraid to go before his royal father.

Mirkhond¹ differs a little from the version of Firdousi. According to this historian, the ball went close to the king in the usual course of the play, and was not thrown by an attendant. Again, according to the version of Shâhzâdeh Jalâl Kâjar,² when the ball happened to be thrown towards the king, he picked it up and threw it into his palace through an adjoining window. No boy dared to go into the royal palace to fetch it, but Shapur went in as one would go into his own house.

An earlier reference to this game is found in the reign of king Lohrâsp. Gushtâsp, the eldest son of this monarch, through the intelligence displayed by him in this game of Chowgân-gui, and in other athletic sports, won the good favour of the Kaisar of Roum. Gushtâsp, having quarrelled with his father, left his Persian court and went under an assumed name to the country of the Kaisar of Roum.

¹ Mémoires sur la Perse, par S. de Sacy (1793), p. 285.

² Nâmeḥ Khusruân, Persian text of 1298 Hijri, p. 222.

The Kaiser had a very beautiful marriageable daughter, whom he asked to choose her husband from a large assembly of the *élite* of his city. The daughter, Kaitâbun by name, found none in that assembly to meet her wishes. Thereupon the Kaiser called an assembly of the middle class of men in his city. Kaitâbun chose Gushtâsp from the large assembly, having previously seen his features in a dream. The Kaiser did not like the choice, but as he had given his promise to Kaitâbun to let her choose her husband, he could not honourably withdraw it. He permitted the marriage, but asked Kaitâbun to leave the royal palace with her husband. A short time after, when some public sports were held, Gushtâsp went and showed such manliness and intelligence in the sports, and among them, in the game of ball-bat, that the Kaiser was struck with his valour and received him and his daughter into his favour again. It appears from Firdousi that this game was played on horseback. He says (Mohl IV., p. 330):—

بفرمود تا بر نهادند زمین	بر اسپدی که اندر زوردد زمین
بیامد بمیدان قیصر رسید	همی بود تا زخم چوگان بدید
ازیشان یکی گوی و چوگان بخواست	میدان سواران برانداخت راست
بر انگیخت آن بارگی را ز جای	یلانرا همه مسست شد دست و پای
بمیدان یکی تیر گویش ندید	شد از زخم او در جهان ناپدید
سواری کجا گوی او یافتی	اگرچه همی تیز بشناوتی

“He ordered to place a saddle upon his horse which enrolled the earth under his feet. He marched to the *maidân* of the Kaiser, and went up to the place, where he saw the strokes of the bat. He asked from them a ball and a bat, and threw it (the ball) right in the midst of the riders. He then spurred his horse from its place. The hands and the feet of the heroes (players) stopped short of playing. The ball disappeared so fast under his stroke that nobody in the plain could see it. How can a rider see his ball, however fast he rode?”

This reference to the game, reminds us of the modern polo, which, let it be remembered, has been introduced into India in recent years from Kashmir and Afghanistan, countries which were formerly owned by the ancient Persians.

The third reference to this game is in the reign of Kaikâus, the Kavi Usadhan of the Avesta. His eldest son, Siâvash, was sent by him, against the Turanian king Afrasiab, with whom he entered into a treaty of peace. The Persian king, not approving his conduct, Siâvash delivered the command of his Persian army to a Persian

general, and then went over to the country of Afrasiâb and made it his home, rather than draw the anger of his father and submit to the machinations of his step-mother, Soudabeh, who had done her best to bring him into the disfavour of his father. It was in his adopted country, that the Persian prince played a game of "Chowgân-gui" with the Turanian king Afrâsiâb. It is a very interesting match that Firdousi describes. It is an international match between the Irânians and the Turânians. Siâvash, the Persian prince, captains the Irânian team, and Afrâsiâb, the Turânian king, captains the Turânian team. The teams were made up of eight on either side.

According to Firdousi, the Turanian king, having intimated the previous night, his wish to play a game, both parties appeared on the *maidân* the next morning, when Afrasiâb said (Mohl II. p. 314):—

چنین گفت پس شاه ترکان بدوی : که یاران گزینیم در زخم گوی
تو باشی بدان روی وزین روی من : بدو ندم هم زین نشان انجمن

"Let us choose our companions for striking the ball. You place yourself on that side, I will remain here, and this assembly will also divide itself into two parties."

At first Siâvash, who was a guest of the Turânian king, refused to take the opposite side, and to stand as an antagonist to the king. He offered to play on the side of the king. The Turânian king wished him to take the lead of the opposite party, saying, "One day, on the death of the Persian monarch Kâus, as his heir to the throne, you shall be my rival and my antagonist." Then the Turânian king selected his team. It consisted of the most elect of his courtiers,—Gulbad, Kar-sivaz, Jehan, Poulâd, Pirân, Nestihan, and Humân formed his team. Among these, one was his brother, another his prime minister, and the rest his military commanders. Then the king gave to Siavash, Rouin, Schideh, Anderimân, Arjâsp, and three other Turanians to form his team. Siâvash naturally objected. As the king desired Siâvash to show his ability in the game as the future king of Irân, and therefore as his future antagonist, it was fair that he should have his Irânians as his colleagues. He said (Mohl II. p. 314):—

سیاوش بدو گفت که ای نام جوی : ازیشان که یارم شدن پیش گوی
همه یار شاهند تنها منم : نگهدار چوگان یکتا منم
گرایدون که یاری دهد شهریار : بیارم از ایران بدمدان سوار
موا یار باشند در زخم گوی : بدان سان که آئین بود برد و روی

“Oh glorious monarch! Who among these will dare to place himself before the ball? They are all friends of the king, and I am alone. I am the only one to look after the bat. If your Majesty will permit me, I will bring to the *maidân* my team from the Irânians. They will help me in striking the ball according to the rules of both the sides.”

Afrâsiâb complied with this reasonable request, and Siâvash chose his own team of eight from amongst the Irânians, and thus the game became an international match between the Irânians and the Turânians.

The playing of music, as then known, was a sign to commence the game. The music, which was like that of our modern fifes and drums, is thus described by Firdousi (Mohl II. p. 316).

خروش تبیره زمیدان بخاست . . . ز خاک با آسمان گشت راست

از آواز منج و دم کره نای . . . توگفتی بچندید میدان ز جای

“The tambour began to be heard over the *maidân* and the dust raised by the players went up to the sky. With the music of the cymbal and the trumpets, the very *maidân* began, as it were, to dance.”

The description, which follows, shows, that, though the game was played on horseback like the modern polo, it differed from it in an important point. The ball was not let to roll on the ground, but was thrown high in the air. The opposite team went running after it on the horse and threw it back in the air in the opposite direction. The ball was thrown back before it reached the ground. The game was something like the modern tennis on a very large scale and on horseback.

Now, to resume the description of the above international match, Afrasiab, the captain of the Turânian team, first set the ball rolling, or, rather we should say, set the ball flying in the air. The Irânian captain Siâvash spurred his horse and returned the blow before the ball touched the ground. He did so with such great force that none of the Turânian team could run after it and return the blow. The result of this first play then was a triumph for the Irânian team.

Then Afrâsiab sent a new ball to Siâvash to commence the second play. Siavash kissed the ball out of respect for the king. He took a fresh horse and the band played again. Siâvash, tossing the ball a little in the air with his hand, gave such a strong blow with his *chougân* (bat), that the ball disappeared in the distance before any

member of the Turanian team could run after it and return the blow. "The ball went up so high," says the poet, "that it appeared to go as it were to the moon." This second play again, then, was a victory for the Irânian team, brought about chiefly by the good play displayed by its captain. The poet does not proceed with any description of any further play between the royal personages, but says, that as the game was intended by the king to test the power and the ability of the Persian prince, he was quite convinced of his ability. Every spectator in the field acknowledged the excellence of the play of Siâvash, and believed he had no equal in the play.

I will quote here the poet himself to describe the play between the two monarchs in his own words (Mohl II. p. 316) :—

سپهدار گوئی زمیندان بزد . . . به ابر اندر آمد چنان چون سزد
سیاوش بر انگیخت اسپ نبرد . . . چو گوی اندر آمد نهشتش بگرد
بزد همچنان چون بهیدان رسید . . . بدان سان که از چشم شد ناپدید
بفرمود پس شهریار بلند . . . که گوی بنزد سیاوش بوند
سیاوش بدان گوی برداد بوس . . . بر آمد خروشیدن نای و کوس
سیاوش به اسپ دیگر بونشست . . . بیداخت این گوی لختی بدست
پس آنکه بچوگان برو کار کرد . . . چنان شد که باعاه دیدار کرد
ز چوگان او گوی شد ناپدید . . . تو گفتی سپهرش همی بر کشید

"The king threw from the *maidân* a ball high into the air, and it went up to the cloud as it deserved. Siâvash spurred his warlike horse and when the ball came down, he did not allow it to touch the ground. But no sooner did it come down, he gave such a strong blow that it disappeared before the eyes. Then the powerful monarch sent to Siâvash another ball. Siâvash kissed the ball, and there arose the noise of the trumpets and the cymbals. Siâvash rode a fresh horse, threw the ball a little in the air with his hand, and gave a blow so forcibly with the bat, that it appeared to go high up to the moon. The bat made it disappear so high in the air, that you may say, the vault of heaven drew it towards itself."

The royal captains then retired from the field, and took their seats on a throne arranged on one side of the *maidân*. Afrâsiâb then asked the two teams to continue the play. They did so, and in the end the Irânians were victorious.

The next reference to this game of "Chowgân-gui" by Firdousi, is that to the play between Siâvash and Karsivaz, the brother of Afrâsiâb

The passage is important, as it shows that the *chowgân* or bat then used had a *kham*, *i.e.*, a slight hollow like that in the tennis bats. Again, Firdousi's phraseology in describing the play between Siâvash and Afrâsiâb, and that between Siâvash and Karsivaz, is very similar. In one place the poet uses almost the same couplets. Siâvash won the game, and this success, it may be said, cost him his life. His rival, Karsivaz, seeing him victorious in this game and in other manly and military sports, began to entertain from that day, feelings of jealousy towards him. He one day went to his brother, the Turânian king Afrâsiâb, and grossly calumniated Siâvash. This made the Turânian monarch suspicious about the motives of the Irânian prince staying at his court. He suspected him of bringing about an overthrow of his rule, and therefore got him put to death, even against the lamentations of his own daughter Firangiz, whom he had given in marriage to Siâvash.

There are several other less important references to this game in the *Shâhnâmeh*.

(a) Rustam entertains several Irânian officers at a banquet, after releasing Kâus from his prison. Ball-bat is one of the games played at that entertainment (Mohl II. p. 50).

(b) Shapur I. had married a daughter of Meherek Noushzâd, an enemy of his father, Ardeshir, without his father's permission. Hormuz was the offspring of this marriage. Ardeshir recognizes this prince in a game of *Chowgân-gui* and comes to know of the marriage (Mohl V. pp. 76,77).

(c) Shapur II. is referred to by Firdousi, as playing this game well at the tender age of seven (Mohl V. p. 426).

(d) Beharâm Gour (Beharâm V) was placed under the tutelage of Manzar of Arabia. There he learnt this game at the age of 7 under a special tutor (Mohl V. p. 500). Behram Gour took pleasure in this game even in his advanced age (Mohl V. p. 560).

(e) The next reference to this game is in the reign of Khosru Parviz. Beharâm Choubin was on the point of being murdered while playing this game by a player Bendui. This reference further shows, that the players had a special dress for this game (Mohl VII. p. 85).