

# HERITAGE GOLF CLUBS *of a* HERITAGE CITY

By Sravasti Ghosh Dastidar

**DESPITE A  
PROFUSION OF NEW  
AGE GOLF CLUBS,  
CALCUTTA'S GRAND  
OLD ONES THRIVE  
ON CHARACTER  
ALONE**

In the Indian sub continent golf is still the aspirational pursuit it used to be, when the rich and the upper middle classes established their private clubs by buying land that was cheap. More than a century later golf in the subcontinent retains its charm as an elite sport played by middle-aged men in spite of the pressures of modern lifestyles that make it difficult for them to disappear for most of the Saturday, leaving household chores unattended.

Club house of Calcutta's  
Royal Calcutta Golf Club

Due to their British legacy the sub-continent hosts a number of old golf courses where, mostly upper middle-class men have for over a century sliced in to the bushes or landed in the water. The Indian city of Calcutta - where the British based their administration until moving it inland to New Delhi later - is home to some spectacular and historical courses. India teed off at the Royal Calcutta Golf Club (RCGC) course during the British Raj, in the year 1829. Reputed to be the oldest golf club outside the British Isles, the club has an enviable history. It became the cradle of professional and amateur Indian golfers, like Arjun Atwal, Nonita Lal, Vandana Agarwal, S S P Chowrasia, Viraj Mandappa, and the

like, who have honed their skills on the greens of the Royal and the Tollygunge Club of Calcutta. In many ways, it is said in the Indian golf circuit that RCGC is the Mecca of Indian Golf.

Originally named Calcutta Golf Club, the gentlemen's club was located near the Calcutta airport in Dum-dum, and then shifted to the Maidan (the largest urban park in Calcutta). It is a vast stretch of field and home to numerous playgrounds, including the famous cricketing venue Eden

**Vandana Agarwal**, one of India's top lady golfers, who has played in Sri Lanka, is seen teeing off from Tolly's feared 17<sup>th</sup> Dog Leg, which is beside the stables.



Gardens, several football stadia, and the Calcutta Race Course). It was finally moved to its current location at Tollygunge in 1910. Those were the days when the club was 'handicapped' as ladies and dogs were considered 'hazards' and not allowed to enter the hallowed premises. Ladies were reluctantly admitted to the club in 1886. In 1911, King George V and Queen Mary conferred it the title of 'Royal' to commemorate their visit. The original thatched roof of the clubhouse at the Royal Calcutta was destroyed in a fire and has since been replaced by the existing brick structure.

The Royal has played a pivotal part in developing Indian Golf, helping it reach its current status. It is home to the world's second oldest running golf tournament after the British Open - The All-India Amateur Championship. RCGC has also played an important role in the formation of the Indian Golf Union (IGU) in 1955 - the governing body of golf in India. In fact, the Royal was THE governing body for quite some time.

The Indian Open used to be held here but with the growth of players in the Indian golfing fraternity, the tournament is held in the various new age courses all over the country. The club presently lacks related infrastructure to host so many players.

The championship golf course started as a 9-hole course and by 1925, had 36 holes. In 1972, the B-course was given back to the government for a residential project. It is currently an 18-hole, 6978-yard, Par 72 course with a 73.6 /136 rating and hosts a multitude of tournaments. The course is noted for its water hazards and very long Par 4s. The British created the golf course using the existing tough and demanding natural layout of the land, which included numerous water hazards. Famous professional golfers like Greg Norman, Jack Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer's concepts are now being used in designing the new age golf course.

Aveek Sarkar, the Captain of the



Royal Calcutta Golf Club and the Chief Editor and proprietor of the Anandabazar Group of Publications, holds very practical views on the club's current and future prospects. He feels that even though Royal does not host the Indian Open currently, it has been able to preserve the 'wow' factor, which no other course in India has. It is clearly a true championship course with the best layout for professional golf.

On being asked if one can draw a parallel with both RCGCs in Kolkata and Colombo, he opined that both continue to be steeped in history and tradition. There is a clear lack of aspiration with a clear vision, strategy and aim to put these two historical clubs truly in the international golf circuit like the Augusta, St. Andrews and other world famous historical courses. This is often a characteristic lacuna with most historical golf clubs being content with their history, which has now, however, been addressed by both clubs in the right direction.

Royal Calcutta's signature moment clearly was their hosting the 61 "Royals" present worldwide, along with their key members, over a golf tournament and the celebration at RCGC several years back that included a representation from the famous Royal St

Andrews. There are several anecdotes associated with RCGC, one being the naming of a hole after Peter Thompson, the 5-time winner of the British Open and the winner of the first edition of the Indian Open played at the RCGC explained Sarkar.

Vandana Agarwal, one of the foremost lady golfers of the country, has a soft corner for the two golf clubs of Calcutta. Vandana has played in Sri Lanka a few times and had won the Sri Lankan Ladies Amateur in 1997, beating Shayanika De Silva of Sri Lanka. She takes pride in the fact that both of these are heritage clubs with historical importance. To her, Royal is one of the most stimulating courses of India. Serious golfers prefer playing at Royal than at Tolly. There are many similarities between the only two Royals in the sub-continent - the RCGC Calcutta and RCGC Colombo. They share the common features of water hazards, the doglegs, history and traditions.

Directly across the road from Royal, lies the lush green all-season course of the Tollygunge Club. India's first and best country clubs it has almost 5-star facilities with an 18-hole, 100 acre, Par 72 executive golf course and indoor and outdoor swimming pools, squash and tennis courts and horse

**Tollygunge Club of Calcutta** - India's best clubs have almost 5-star facilities including indoor swimming pools and guest accommodations and restaurants on par with top hotels.

riding. It also offers a state-of-the-art floodlit double decker driving range, an illuminated putting and chipping green and a simulator for members to improve their skills. The guest accommodations and restaurants can be considered on par with any top rank hotel.

William Dixon Cruickshank, a Scottish banker, founded the Tollygunge Club in 1895, with the vision of providing sporting and pastimes facilities to its members within the vicinity of Calcutta. It has the facilities of a residential and Gymkhana Club. Cruickshank partially leased and partially bought some of the property surrounding an 18th century Palladian garden house once used by its owner, Richard Johnson, an employee of the East India Company and subsequently by Prince Gholam Mohammed Shah, the 11th son of the Ruler of Mysore, Tipu Sultan. The Clubhouse is now over 220 years old.

A Club deeply rooted in tradition, Tolly is the only institution of its kind in India, where a committee is formed

through an induction by invitation and not by an election. Created in an age when large parts of South Calcutta consisted of mangroves adapted to tropical tidal estuaries, the Europeans planted exotic plants from around the world in Bengal (now the Indian

state of West Bengal). Many of these and other indigenous plants were methodically planted in the Club and

**A cup gifted to the RCGC** by the Director General of the Border Security Force and its ranks in 2006.



hence, there is an abundance of trees and plants at Tolly. In a city where land sharks have grabbed most of the green lungs to build a concrete jungle, Tolly and the Royal provide relief to the tired eyes of the members. The open expanses of the fairways are home to a variety of birds and mammals, reptiles and amphibians. There are almost 50 omnivorous jackals living in the haven that is Tolly.

Tolly's most famous personality has, and probably will always, be a famous British National resident in Calcutta, Roger Wright, popularly known as Bob Wright under whose stewardship the club acquired a high standard, maintained till date. In fact, Mr. Wright was given the OBE for serving British Citizens visiting this part of India.

C.S Bedi, past President of Tollygunge Club and Shyamal Ranjan Ghosh Dastidar, ex-Golf Captain of the same, fondly remember the days in the 1970's, when Tolly was also known for its notorious horse races as the club had a race track. It saw its own share of 'fixed' races that led to a riot from visiting race-goers. Eventually, the racecourse within the club premises was closed down. Both gentlemen have also played in RCGC Colombo and were high in praise of the course and the friendly Sri Lankan players.

To corporates who have played in Tolly for a larger part of their lives, Tolly or Royal are synonymous with Calcutta. For Anirvan Ghosh Dastidar (CEO Standard Chartered Bank, Sri

Lanka), a holiday at home means playing golf and squash at Tolly. Having frequented Tolly since his childhood, he drove down the career and golfing fairways in 1992. After he plays his career's 18th hole and retires in Calcutta, one of the most important considerations will be life around Tolly!

To him, Calcutta without 'Tolly' is something unthinkable for those who have grown up in the City of Joy as members of the Tollygunge Club and have played active and competitive sports within the Calcutta Club circles. Tolly means the finest Club in the world, the best club sandwiches, sports, an oasis in the city where one could relax, be with friends, and most importantly, play golf in one of the most beautiful and oldest golf courses in India, besides swimming, squash, tennis and horse riding. Tolly has, thus, been in his DNA. It means much more than just a Club which has been represented in many inter-Club sports competitions.

He talked about the healthy rivalry between these two premium clubs. The pride factor comes up in the constant arguments around the Tolly vs RCGC debate. Much as most Tolly members would defend their Club's Golf course, RCGC was and continues to be the most challenging, historical and the finest golf course in India and definitely the crib of Indian Golf. RCGC is across the road from Tolly but RCGC offers only Golf and Tolly offers much more than that.

Keeping aside the rivalry between



Treacherous Tolly Bunkers

these two clubs, they are truly two of the best features that Calcutta has to offer. Both the clubs have gone through hard times. While Tolly has been able to replicate a financially viable model, Royal continues to be bogged down by financial issues.

While the gentlemen were trying to keep the hazardous ladies out of their way, in the 19th century, the fairer sex decided to take to the fairways by instituting the Calcutta Ladies' Golf Club on May 7, 1891. It is the oldest ladies' golf club in the world and was/is entirely founded, controlled and managed by women. It has a regulation 9-hole golf course. In 1867, the Ladies' Golf Club of St. Andrews was founded for the ladies and not by them.

The CLGC clubhouse was originally a canvas tent, which was sponsored by Lady Curzon, the wife of the ruling Viceroy of India, Lady Frazer and the

other club members. Calcutta Golf Club or RCGC, also contributed towards the erection of the tent. In 1931, the club acquired the unique distinction of being a 'club on wheels'. The Maidan falls under the jurisdiction of the Indian Army and hence, permanent structures are not permitted. So, a wooden structure was built on wheels and rails in accordance with the rules. And, every year the clubhouse is shifted a few yards and then returned to its original position to prove that it is temporary! It has since been refurbished periodically and is now facilitated with washrooms, dressing rooms, catering wing with bar and is well equipped for parties and get-togethers. Beautiful plants and trees now surround the quaint cottage. The 9/18-hole, Par 68 golf course is as tight and tough as a shooting gallery, with holes crisscrossing each other.

The first All India Ladies Amateur Golf Championship was organized by CLGC, at Calcutta in 1905. Mr. Walker himself presented a silver trophy called the Walker Trophy. Ms. Anjali Desai was the first Indian woman to win this coveted prize in 1970.

The CLGC leads in nurturing women's golfing talent in India, mainly in Calcutta. It encourages young talent by enrolling girls as junior members and training them. Recognized golfers like Simi Mehra and Vandana Agarwal have been regulars at this unique club.

**The Royal Calcutta Golf Club** in Calcutta is reckoned to be the oldest golf course in the world outside of the British Isles. It was established in 1829.

**The Madras Gymkhana Club** in Chennai and **Air Force Golf Club** in New Delhi, are among the handful of courses, which are situated inside a horse racing track.

**The Delhi Golf Club**, situated in the heart of the National Capital has ancient Lodhi Dynasty tombs and these monuments are protected and looked after by the Archaeological Survey of India and the Delhi Golf Club.



**At the Patna Golf Club**, in Bihar, the golf course is built right next to a zoo and the first fairway is next to the tiger's enclosure.



**The Gulmarg Golf Club** course in Gulmarg, Jammu & Kashmir, is generally said to be the highest golf course in the world.

**The All-India Amateur Championship**, first held in 1952, is said to be the second oldest running tournament in the world after the British Open.



**The Digboi Golf Links in Assam**, the only 18-hole facility in the state, has both an abandoned airstrip, which was used in World War II and an oil well, which is more than 100 years old.



The only public golf course in India, the **Qutub Golf Course** in Lado Sarai, New Delhi, has the famous Qutub Minar as the backdrop and is hence known by that name.

**The Bhatinda Golf Course** in Punjab features a protected deer enclosure inside the golf course.