

The chess prodigy Indians do not know

Way back in the '30s, an unlettered villager from the undivided Punjab went to Britain and humbled the likes of Capablanca and Alekhine

By CHAMPAK CHATTERJI

GREAT BRITAIN, 1931. The elite Hastings Chess Tournament is underway. Among the participants is Jose Raul Capablanca, former world chess champion from Cuba, a brilliant player and an extrovert by nature. Seated opposite him across the chess-board is a figure out of the mysterious Orient: dark, impassive and inscrutable.

The game begins, but for once the Cuban wizard is at a loss for moves against the Eastern magic of his adversary. Sixty five moves later the unbelievable happens — the redoubtable Capablanca, faced with inevitable defeat, resigns. The winner is Mir Sultan Khan, an unlettered villager from India. To a generation of Indian chess players reared in the shadow of Bobby Fischer and Anatoly Karpov, Garri Kasparov and Vishwanathan Anand, Sultan Khan is a forgotten figure of the past. Yet it was he who first put India on the chess map of the world, in the early decades of this century.

Of course, Indian chess has now come of age. With two Grandmasters, in Anand and Dibyendu Barua, and a whole crop of Masters and other promising youngsters following in their footsteps, it could be just a question of time before an Indian emerges as the chess champion of the world. But when that hour strikes, Sultan Khan's name will be remembered as the pioneer who started it all. Though Caissa, the Muse of Chess, smiled on him all too briefly, he was her favourite child.

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Chess prodigy Sultan Khan (standing third from left)

Born in 1905 in the village of Mittha Tawana, in the Sargodha district of Punjab, now in Pakistan, Khan was the tenth child of his parents. He learnt chess as

played in the Indian style from his father at the age of nine, and by twenty-one Khan was the best chess player in Punjab. His fame spread such that he was soon

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taken into the household of Sir Umar Hayyat Khan, a patron of the royal game who was later to become ADC to King George V. It was with the Khans that he learned the elements of international chess for the first time. In a space of two years, Khan was to become the Indian chess champion — it was the beginning of a legend.

Along with his benefactor, Sir Umar, Sultan Khan travelled to England, to be exposed to the best chess players of the world. Brushing aside challenges from the likes of Max Euwe, Alekhine, Tartakower and Capablanca, Khan became the British chess champion thrice — in 1929, 1932 and 1933, a record never equalled by any Indian before or since. His victories now seem all the more incredible, given that he was unfamiliar with the English language and hence could not read up books on chess. Compare this with the modern-day chess player, whose armoury includes a thousand books, a hundred magazines, laptop computers and fax machines!

But pitchforked from the sleepy world of rural India to the glittering chess salons of London as he was, Khan suffered from a deep sense of cultural isolation. Besides, he almost continually suffered from cold and malaria.

Nevertheless, he used his prodigious powers of concentration and unparalleled native skills to pull off incredible victories; he made up for his weakness in opening theory by his superb feel for positions in the middle game, while his endgame bordered on alchemy. To the great Khan also goes the credit of having represented Britain at the Hamburg and Prague Chess Olympiads of 1930 and 1931, respectively, doing in chess what Ranjitsinhji, Duleep Singh and Nawab Iftikhar Ali Khan of Pataudi did in cricket.

Sultan Khan's departure from chess was as abrupt as his entry. In 1933, along with the entourage of Sir Umar Hayyat Khan, he returned to India and went back to his village. He surfaced briefly in 1935, trouncing Khadilkar, the reigning Indian chess champion, beating him in nine out of ten games and drawing the remaining one. The last that one heard of Khan was him sitting on a charpoy in his village and smoking away on a hookah. He died of tuberculosis on the April 25, 1966, in his native village from where he sprang.

Mir Sultan Khan may have remained unsung, but his spirit lives on in India's current crop of chess wunderkinds.