

History of the Club

The Royal Connaught Boat Club was established in the year 1868 under the name "Poona Boat Club" on the banks of the river Mula-Mutha. Utilizing the lake waters of a Bund constructed in 1850 for just upstream of the Fitzgerald bridge.



Dr. P. V. Cheriyan (center) and Mr. Gustasp Rashid (left)

Two existing boat clubs named Kirkee Boat Club & R. A. Boat Club assimilated in the years 1883 & 1888 respectively. The Club was renamed as the "Poona Royal Connaught Boat Club" in the year 1889 to honour his Royal highness the Duke of Connaught, the Commander-In Chief of the Bombay Army. He took keen interest in the activities of the Club. Even after he left India, he visited the Club during his subsequent visit to the subcontinent on 25th February 1921. Such was the bond between the Club & its Patrons. For the second time, the Club name was changed to "Royal Connaught Boat Club" in 1928.

The word "Poona" was deleted permanently as by then the Club had become quite popular in the city. The present site of the Club was initially on lease and subsequently in 1876, it was bought by the Club for Rs. 1904 /-. Then commenced the work of construction of various facilities such as the boat shed and dressing room. The Club became operational in the year 1883 after spending Rs. 4000/-.



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In Pune (Erstwhile Poona) the basic infrastructure for a boat club was created with the construction of a bund across the Mula-Mutha River just upstream of the Fitzgerald Bridge in 1850. Thus, created with a view to provide an uninterrupted drinking water supply to the Pune city, the resultant lake offered outstanding facilities for boating and water sports.

The R.A Boat Club and the Kirkee Boat Club were functional even before the bund was constructed. Their activities mainly included rowing. Their locations, river meanders and prevailing wide directions were probably unfavorable for sailing activity.

The 'Poona Boat Club' was established in 1868. It was to assimilate the Kirkee Boat Club in 1883, followed by the R.A. Boat Club in the year 1888. Yet the location of the Kirkee Boat Club continued to be used for rowing activity for over six decades afterwards.

The club was renamed as the "Poona Royal Connaught Boat Club" in 1889 to honor His Royal Highness, the Duke of Connaught; the then Commander-in-chief of the Bombay Army. He had a keen interest in the club activities. Even after he left India, he visited the club in his subsequent visit to the subcontinent on 25th February 1921. Such was the bond between the club and its patrons.

For the second time, the club name was changed to "Royal Connaught Boat Club" in 1928. The word "Poona" was deleted presumably because the club had become quite well known in the city. This name has been carried through the subsequent upheavals the decimation of the British Raj and the birth of an Independent India.

To carry on with the club activity, the club rented "Mulla Lodge" an old bungalow situated in the Rosherville Garden in Kirkee in 1889. M/s. Cursetjee, the club caterers at that time, were the landlords. The Mulla Lodge saw the club through to 1896, but Mula river had different ideas and in a fit of temper it swept the lodge away in a flash flood. The club then purchased the entire Rosherville site with what was left of all the buildings. A new bungalow was constructed through funds, generated by issuing redeemable debentures to the members. In 1918 having redeemed these debentures the club became the absolute owner of the Rosherville.

The present Boat Club site was initially leased out to the club for a short duration. It was subsequently bought by the club in 1876 for Rs.1904/-. Then commenced the work of construction of boat shed and dressing rooms. The Club became operational in the year 1883 after spending Rs. 4000/-.

The club had been carrying out pioneering work in the field of boating, rowing, sailing and water sports in India. The first step to kindle the competitive spirit amongst rowers was taken in 1869 when the club conducted, the first ever Regatta. In this event, the service fours competed for the Challenge Cup. The Civilian Crew won the cup which was presented to them by Sir AD Sassoon, the owner of the Garden Reach Workshops. The Civilian Crew went on to win the cup for two more years successively and this permanently annexed it. They, then presented a new 'Service Fours' cup which was competed for in the subsequent years, right through to 1948.

The principal of Deccan College, Pune, Mr. R. G. Oxenham, I.E.S., also presented two more cups for the winners of the Doubles Sculls race in the year 1894. These were competed for, till the year 1909 when the event was converted to a Pair Oar race.

The club continued to hold the regular and open regattas for outside teams. Besides conducting Scratch regattas, Enthusiastic boatmen from far and distant clubs of Bombay, Madras and Calcutta used to participate with vigour and keen competitive spirit. The club gained stature and matured through the years. It emerged as a major center for water sports activity in the whole country.

The formation of the Amateur Rowing Association of the East in 1933 at the club was a momentous occasion in the history of the club. The association came into being through a resolution passed at the club house. Those present included representatives from the R.C.B.C. Calcutta R.C., Karachi B.C., Bombay Gymkhana Ltd. and the Madras Boat Club. In the same year, all these clubs were to compete in a 'Four Oar' race at Pune. It was also resolved to conduct Annual Regattas by rotation at Madras, Calcutta and Pune.

The club had developed excellent infrastructure for boating and allied sports on a large scale. In its life span of over 75 years, it had acquired over eighty boats and a membership of 89, of which 23 were Indian and also boasted of two lady members.

Dr. B. B. Gokhale now over 84, and perhaps the oldest surviving club member today, recalls – "The club activity was split into two locations, the Kirkee Rowing Club and the main RCBC Sailing Club. At the mail location, wind currents were favorable for sailing. Indian membership was restricted and only those highly

placed individuals, who could assimilate the British etiquette and protocol, were admitted to the club. There also existed a system of House Membership i.e membership with voting rights.

With an overwhelming majority in the club, as the departure of the British from India became imminent, the British Members decided to liquidate the club and its assets and share the bounty. Such a resolution was passed in a meeting on 24th April 1947. There were 24 votes in favor and only 3 votes against the resolution, which read: "In view of the present unsatisfactory financial position of the club, due to decreasing interest in its objects namely Rowing and Sailing, and the club being faced in the near future with heavy expenses of equipment, the committee be authorized to take steps to wind up the club."

The club had withstood the fury of the 1896 floods and emerged stronger than ever before. But now, in 1947 it seemed to be crumbling under the onslaught of machinations, of its own scheming and unscrupulous members who had not lost the love, for an institution, which had served them so well and magnanimously. Overnight the club property, silver and furniture vanished. The British members clandestinely sold off as much as they could, for meager amounts as they left India for the distant motherland. These were extremely grave and provocative actions.

In the face of such ominous situation, the fraternity of Indian members of the club acted swiftly and entrusted the future of the club to the judiciary. Those spearheading this action were Mr. Fram P. Pocha assisted by Messer's Ahmed E. H. Jaffer, Ismail E. H. Jaffer, P. F. Pocha, Z. S. Kothawala and Dr. Gharpure. The plaintiffs in this case were Lt. Col. C. T. Honeyborne, O.B.E. and Lt. Col. G. H. Wotton. This case constituted the Civil Suit No. 776 of 1947 in the court of the Civil Judge Poona. As on 1st August 1947, the club committee included Capt. J. J. Dolan, M.B.E., M.C., as Hon. Secretary and Treasurer and Lt. Gen. E. N. Goddard, C.B., C.I.E. & C.B.E., M.O.V., M.C., the then G.O.C. in C southern Command Poona – as the President.

The 'Battle Royale' had begun. It was not an ordinary battle but a struggle for survival, continuity and dignity. No effort was spared to avoid dissolution and winding up of the club. Aably representing the case in the Civil Court, on behalf of the defendants were Mr. R. H. Bhalunkar, Mr. N. K. Rajguru. They were opposed by Mr. A. B. Sethna on behalf of the plaintiffs. The club was to be saved at all costs. At this juncture, Dr. K. C. Gharpure, one of the defendants, filed an application to raise certain objections and to question the jurisdiction of the court. These were brushed aside by the Civil Judge on 25th November 1947.

Civil Suit No. 776/47 filed by Lt. Cols. C. T. Honeyborne and G. H. Wotton was dismissed by the lower court whereupon they went into appeal, registered as Civil Appeal No. 100/1952. Prolonged litigation was a big drain on the meager club resources. The club coffers were empty.

Eventually a compromise was worked out with Fram Pocha and Col. Moran being appointed as receivers of the properties and assets. They were to act in a manner conducive to continuation of club activity. The name of the club "Royal Connaught Boat Club" remained as it is. The basic activity being specified as Sailing/Rowing or both the club was required to pay \$1000/- as donation to an English Rowing/ Sailing club in the UK. A temporary club committee comprising of Dr. Gharpure, Fram Pocha, N. G. Sura, Dr. Parulekar, Z. S. Kothawala and Col. Moran was formed to tackle the situation. This degree of compromise was granted on 19th September 1953.

However, for various reasons the legal battles continued till 2nd February 1967, when the final landmark judgment was delivered and the custody of the club came into the hands of the Indian members. The club history records with gratefulness, the services rendered by Messer's N. R. Jinwala, R. H. Bhalunkar and C. N. Bhalerao. The untiring efforts of Fram Pocha, Dr. Gharpure and other members have ensured this momentous occasion of the hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary for the club fraternity.

As the fierce legal battle for custody of the club and its assets erupted in 1947, the club activity came to a grinding halt. The club remained unfunctional for almost nine years till 1956. In the meantime, the Kirkee property was disposed off to liquidate the debts. Fram Pocha headed a small committee to revive the club. Gustasp Rashid was made the Hon. Secretary. The committee then decided to conduct a

membership drive. Arrangements were made to borrow furniture, crockery, cutlery from various shops. Engineering College was approached to load 3 punts, one single scull and one canoe.

The club reopened on 1st May 1956, at the hands of Lt. General K. S. Thimayya, D.S.O., G.O.C., In C., Southern Command.

Gustasp Rashid took over as club Hon. Secretary in April 1956. He later continued in the same capacity till 1971 with a small break from April 1961 to July 1963.

In January 1958 it was decided that the Managing Committee, appointed by the Court would continue to function till the financial liabilities as decreed were taken care of. On 24th March 1960, the club approved the construction of Guest Rooms, furniture and some repairs at a cost of RS 80,000. A single scull, a double scull and a sailing boat were also purchased.

The club staff was increased to streamline the services, by engaging stewards and Manager. Capt. MMR Kothawala took over as 'Member Secretary' working under the Hon. Secretary.

The mother earth had something different in mind. In the year 1961 and the club was inundated by the floods caused by Panshet Dam. Considerable damage and loss was caused that had to be made up. As the "Best laid plans of men and mice oft to go awry" all planning and calculations went haywire. The construction of new annexes and five guest rooms stretched over to August 1967, with attendant cost escalation and over runs.

Commander (Retd.) K. B. Godrej took over in September 1966 as the Hon. Secretary co-jointly with Gustasp Rashid. The construction work was completed and the new complex was inaugurated by the Hon, patron of the Club, His Excellence Dr. P.V. Cheria, the Governor of Maharashtra on 13th August 1967.

In the year 1967 the club property and assets were evaluated at RS 10,80,000/- and the club owed RS 1,00,000/- to Sundry Creditors. At a Special GBM of the club held on 12th May 1968, an appeal was made on behalf of the management for donations, interest free loans and advance subscriptions. As a result about RS 35,000/- were raised to pay off the pending contractors bills etc.

The General Body authorized the Managing Committee to decide the Schedule for Annual meetings. Bylaws of the club were printed, approved and circulated.

In 1968, the club offered by way of amenities, five guest Rooms, new dining hall for functions, the boat shed and had as it's programmed a cinema show every month and a club social with attendant lunch or dinner. All the efforts were directed, to ensure adequate interest in boating and sailing, as the primary activity of the club.

The club then started hosting events like conferences and seminars. Many celebrities, dignitaries and members of the 'Corps Diplomatique' have enjoyed the hospitality of the club and recorded their impressions and deep appreciation of the club facilities, as these improved through the last quarter century. A reprint of some select impressions are available elsewhere on this website.

In 1976 the Managing Committee with Mr. Niloobhau Limaye as the President, prepared the Master Plan for the Club. Mr. K. M. Shinde and Huseni Poonawalla along with Messer's Pundlik and Pundlik, Architects, prepared the necessary plans. The plans included Tennis Courts, Recreation Hall, Skating Rink, Swimming Pool, Guest Rooms, Service and Utility Blocks and Servants Quarters at an estimated cost of RS 20.00 Lakhs.

There were some initial hurdles like the ULCA, but these were set-aside. Mr. Niloobhau Limaye, and Mr. Hasmukh Shah under the guidance of Mr. Lalit Doshi, Secretary GID Bombay, got clearance from the competent authorities in November 1977. The PMV approved the Master plans and Building Plan in May 1978 and October 1978. The Bhoomi Puja for the buildings was performed by Mr. Afzalpurkar, Collector in Pune on 23rd November, 1978.

Mr. Kaka, President of Managing Committee and Mr. Sharad Bavadekar were closely associated with the first phase of the work, executed by Messer's Kanetkar & Associates of Pune. This included the Swimming Pool, Bathrooms and the Filtration Plant at a cost of RS 5.20 Lakhs. The Second phase was planned to include the extension of ground floor for a Conference Room, Construction of First and Second Floors and eight additional rooms at an estimated cost of RS 6.0 lakhs. For raising the necessary funds, a membership drive was launched. During this entire period, the club functioning suffered to an extent and members were put to inconvenience, but they took it all in their stride very sportingly.

The Third phase included the construction of the Service Block comprising of the office, Reception Counter and a connecting lobby for the two buildings. The entry to club was thus been regulated.

A number of well-wishers have assisted the club, using their good offices for expeditious and timely completion of the club complex as it stands today, and what more befitting occasion would there be for the club as a whole to record its deep sense of gratitude to these personalities? The club is forever indebted to Mr. Halwe, IAS, Mr. RG Gupte, IAS, Mr. Ajit Nimbalkar, IAS, Mr. Parmanand Sawant, and other Government officials of that time.

Mr. Vijay Atre of M/s. Kanetkar Associates, Mr. Firoz Daruwalla, M/s. Candy Filters, Mr. Amin Chowhan, Mr. Mahajan, representatives of other firms – associated with this work deserve a special mention here and so do the officers and staff of the P.M.C.'s Building Department, Water Works Department and the M.S.E.B.

From the Club side, Mr. Sharad Bavadekar, Mr. Niloobhau Limaye, Mr. Prakash Gogte, Mr. Dharap, Mr. Huseni Poonawalla and the entire Club staff which has smilingly shouldered all the additional responsibilities must also go on record as worthy of all round appreciation and gratitude.

For the club, 1980-81 was the year of repairs, renovations and rejuvenation. The guest rooms and the office block came up and the swimming pool was inaugurated in September 1980, at the hands of Mr. F. P. Pocha. Five members of the club participated in the ARAE Regatta at Calcutta in December 1980. In March 1981 the Junior members won gold medals in the Singles and four events and a silver medal in the Fours event in open class.

The Governor of Maharashtra, Air Chief Marshall O.P Mehra inaugurated the 5th National Championship that was held at RCBC in November 1981.

The club also hosted the 4th State Regatta and won several prizes, The feat was repeated at the 5th State Regatta held in August 1982 at the CME Pune.

The club was numbed with shock at the passing away of Fram Pocha on 22nd January 1982. An era had come to an end. In appreciation of his services it was decided to name the club's main hall as Fram P. Pocha Hall. This was done at the hands of Dr. K. C. Gharpure.

The 7th State and the 7th National Regattas were held in May 1983 at the RCBC. The club bar and boathouse were renovated. New gardens were laid out.

In March 1984, the club hosted the 8th State Regatta. For the first time the club entered a ladies team, which won the gold and the silver medals creating a history.

The year 1986-87 saw renovation in club bar, provision of 2 new tennis courts, card room, AC for four additional residential rooms and floating of a new wharf. Annual State and National Rowing Championships were held at the RCBC in February 1987. Miss Smita Shirole won the 1985-86 'Shiv Chhatrapati' award for outstanding contribution to the sport of rowing.

The club hosted a meeting of all affiliated clubs in the year 1988-89. An extra ordinary General Meeting of the club held on 7th February 1989 that saw several amendments and modifications to the Bye Laws. The club also hosted the XIIIth National Rowing Championships. The club complex was given a complete face lift and the river side sitting space.

The year 1991-92 was significant in that, concrete, comprehensive development in the conducting of the affairs of the club were brought about and there was a sea change in the club culture. The sports facilities

i.e the tennis courts and the swimming pool were repaired. Boating facilities were improved with the addition of a sailboat, and a 15 seater boat and Robry. The Dining Hall and Kitchen were completely renovated in record time. The 'Royal Deck' is a price of Pune today. The catering, the food quality, variety and the cost have been optimized. The services of Bar, water and power supply, old drainage and air conditioning has been improved. Housekeeping system, garden maintenance and garbage disposal are being constantly improved.

Looking back to the past decade & present requirements, one finds that the club has made steady progress. It has streamlined the administration, introduced computerized accounting systems, and created new facilities. As a result we have a new Conference room with a cozy party corner, huge terrace for reception, an additional nonsmoking restaurant, health club, TV room, renovated residential rooms, changing rooms etc. Sitting area by the river side is improved and a permanent stage is erected. Though outside individuals are not inducted since 1992 our strength has gone up internally. These achievements are very significant and we are sure that we will continue to grow up even more and better with times.

The average attendance of the members at the club has gone up to 400 per day and the club finances are healthy. With this background, coupled with sound financial backup and a vibrant Managing Committee ever responsive to the needs of the members the club is full of enthusiasm and is poised for a giant leap.

