



GAMA THE WORLD CHAMPION: WRESTLING AND PHYSICAL CULTURE IN COLONIAL INDIA



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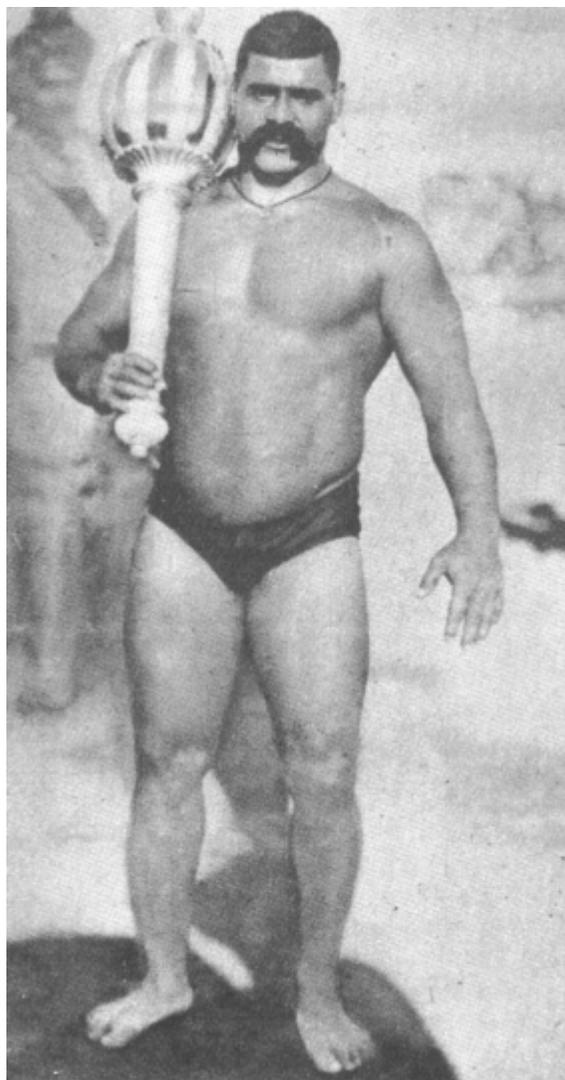
Around the turn of the century in colonial India there was a loosely formulated, but nevertheless dramatic, concern among India's growing middle-class with the articulation of an ideal of indigenous masculinity, and with the embodiment of that ideal in the population at large. In many parts of the country groups of men established local *akharas* (gymnasiums) for the propagation of indigenous martial arts, physical fitness programs, and wrestling in particular. In this paper I will examine some of the features of this "modern tradition" through a study of Gama, the early twentieth-century world champion, and a number of his nationally ranked compatriots.

Although the art of wrestling and physical culture in Indian civilization dates back thousands of years, the history of most contemporary gymnasiums dates back less than a century. Even so, these gymnasiums were built on a so-called ancient traditional model. The key elements of this model are still found in many contemporary gymnasiums: a large square or rectangular raised earthen wrestling pit, a flat hard-packed floor for doing exercises, a collection of *mugdals* (Indian clubs), *gadas* (*maces*) and *nals* (stone weights) for weight lifting, and often a rope for climbing and a *mallakhamb* (wrestler's pillar) for strength and technique training. The revival of interest in indigenous physical culture late in the nineteenth century focused on wrestling in the earth (loose dirt) and doing distinctly Indian exercises at these gymnasiums.

Measured in terms of demographic statistics, it is doubtful that this predominantly urban physical fitness

movement was ever a main-stream socio-political phenomenon, but what does seem clear from the scant evidence available is that a significant number of middle-class men saw physical culture as a means by which to redefine Indian national character in the face of British imperialism and in light of the perceived hegemony of western ideas about fitness, health and strength.

Parallel to the largely urban middle-class movement was the development of a much more pervasive tradition of wrestling and physical culture among the semi-urban lowerclass in general, and the rural North Indian peasantry in particular. Most certainly before, but also, significantly, after the middle-class revival, the majority of Indian wrestlers had been peasants or first generation working class migrants to urban areas who started training in their village or neighborhood gymnasium. Although a majority of these wrestlers trained on their own and competed in small regional tournaments, a small percentage of highly skilled, talented young men were successful enough to earn the patronage of rajahs and maharajahs. As patrons, the rajahs and maharajahs provided their lower-class, often relatively poor, court wrestlers with training facilities, housing, and, above all, high-fat, energy producing food. In turn, wrestlers competed for their patrons against other court wrestlers in large, well organized tournaments. Champion wrestlers quickly became famous in the context of inter-princely state competition and gained national recognition when more lavish tournaments were staged.



TAKEN THE DAY AFTER HIS VICTORIOUS RE-MATCH WITH THE POLISH CHAMPION ZYBYSKO IN 1928, THIS PHOTO SHOWS THE POWERFUL GAMA HOLDING THE GOLDEN CLUB PRESENTED TO HIM BY THE MAHARAJAH OF PATIALA.

--TODD-MCLEAN COLLECTION

Although the tradition of royal patronage for wrestling dates back to antiquity, there seems to have been a significant increase in the scale of royal wrestling in the early part of this century. Certainly in rhetoric and contemporary memory at least, royal patrons from Indor, Kolhapur, Rampur, Patiyala and elsewhere are lionized for the personal care they gave to training, feeding, and looking after as many as two hundred wrestlers in their royal gymnasiums. Whatever its empirical dimensions were in fact, the increase in royal patronage corresponds directly to the middle-class revival of interest in physical culture. Most likely it was the elite Indian princes who played a key role in the convergence of middle-class interest in physical culture on the one hand, and the strategic creation of powerful, lower-class heroes on the other. In other words, the Indian princes provided the ways and means by which it was possible for upper and middle-class urban Indian men to see themselves — or an image of what they wanted themselves to be — in the hard, down-to-earth training of young peasants.

The dramatic life of Gama Baksh [Ed note: According to David P. Willoughby's *The Super Athletes*, Gama was born Gulam Mohammed], a lower-class, illiterate Muslim from northwest India, who was a champion wrestler from 1910 until his retirement in the early 1940s provides a dramatic case in point. Gama's national and international success, however, only makes sense within the context of a particular, historically situated tradition of wrestling in which there were numerous other local, regional, and state champions who were trained in the same way. Having written elsewhere about Gama's unique biography, I will restrict myself in this discussion to an analysis of that class of wrestlers to which Gama belonged, and reflect briefly on how this class of wrestlers came to embody — through exercise, diet and training — middle-class ideals regarding masculinity in modern India. In doing this I have drawn heavily on Barkat Ali's *Pahalwano ki Duniya* (1984), a spectacular photo anthology of Indian wrestling; Ratan Patodi's *Bharatiya Kusti*, an excellent journal devoted to Indian wrestling; and Govardan Das Malhotra's in depth research on the history of wrestling and the biographies of numerous North Indian champions.

Gama was born into a family of famous wrestlers from the Punjab in northwestern India. His father, Aziz Baksh, himself a court wrestler, started taking Gama to the gymnasium of Rajah Bhawani Singh of Datiya from an early age. However, when Gama was only six years old, his father suddenly died. In recognition of Aziz Baksh's status as a court wrestler, Barkat Ali reports that all of the gymnasiums in the Datiya were closed for a week and a half, and the court itself was shut down for a few days. For some time Gama was taken care of by his maternal grandfather, Nun Pahalwan, who continued to take him to the gymnasium. Unfortunately, his grandfather also died leaving Gama in the care of his eldest maternal uncle, Ida Pahalwan, who vowed that he would see to it that Gama became the cham-

pion wrestler his father had wanted him to be. Ida Pahalwan devoted himself to looking after Gama. Intent on impressing upon him the desire to be a great wrestler, he constantly pointed out to the young boy that this is what his father wanted above all else. As Barkat Ali makes clear in his short biography of Gama, Aziz Baksh's death left a deep impression on his young son. Gama was, in fact, not told of his father's death for almost a year, during which time he is said to have gone searching for him through the neighborhood lanes where he and his extended family lived, following the routes he had travelled while being carried on his father's shoulders in hopes of meeting him along the way or finding him at a friend or relative's house. Being told that his father wanted him to become the world's greatest wrestler, and that "he could keep his father alive through disciplined training," gave Gama a deeply rooted, driving ambition to be the best.'

Gama's first great accomplishment came at a national exercise competition held by the Rajah of Jodhpur, Jaswant Singh, around 1888. Although only ten years old, Gama persuaded another maternal uncle, Buta Pahalwan, to take him along, and then managed to convince his skeptical uncle to introduce him to the Rajah so as to get permission to compete. After hearing that Gama was the son of the great Aziz Baksh, permission was granted.

The main contest in the competition was to see who could do the most *bethaks* (deep knee-bends), one of the most common exercises in a wrestler's regimen. Indian wrestlers regularly do hundreds if not thousands every day, and even at ten years old Gama's daily routine included five hundred. Over four hundred wrestlers from around the country had gathered in Jodhpur for the contest, and at the Rajah's signal the competition began. As wrestlers became tired they left the field until only one hundred or so remained. As more and more retired, all eyes turned on Gama, until, after a number of hours had passed, only fifteen wrestlers were left exercising. At this point Jaswant Singh ended the contest saying that the ten year old boy was clearly the winner in such a field of stalwart national champions. Later, upon being asked how many (*bethaks*) he had done, Gama replied that he could not remember, but probably several thousand. In any event he was bed-ridden for a week.

Starting at the age of ten, Gama's daily exercise routine included not only five hundred *bethaks*, but five hundred *dands* (jack-knifing push-ups) as well. Most importantly, according to Barkat Ali, Gama regularly engaged in the hard exercise of pit digging, wherein the hardpacked earth of the wrestling arena is dug up and "turned" with a heavy hoe-like implement called a *pharsa* which can weigh as much as twenty or thirty kilograms. Digging is done between spread legs with back and legs bent. Starting in one corner of the pit, wrestlers dig from side to side in curving arcs moving as quickly as possible. Often the pit is dug twice or three times, starting each time from a different corner. In addition to building stamina, this

exercise develops hand and wrist strength in particular, but also lower back, buttock and thigh muscles. While still ten years old, Gama's special diet consisted of milk, almonds and fruit, three primary ingredients in any wrestler's diet. He did not start eating meat, butter, and clarified butter until he turned fifteen, around 1893.

After his success at the exercise competition, Gama's fame spread throughout the princely states of India, but he did not start wrestling competitively until he was fifteen years old. Very quickly, however, he proved to be virtually unbeatable and formally became a wrestler in the court of Datiya soon thereafter. At this time Gama's exercise routine increased significantly. He is said to have regularly done three thousand *bethaks* and fifteen hundred *dands* and run one mile every day with a 120 pound stone ring around his neck.² With this increase in workload, Gama's paternal uncle Mohammed Baksh, along with Ida Pahalwan and his guru Madho Singh, added meat and butter to Gama's diet. He was also given *yakhni*, the boiled down gelatinous extract of bones, joints, and tendons which is regarded by many Muslim wrestlers as being a source of great strength, and being particularly good for the development of knees, ankles, and other joints. According to Rajindersingh Munna, at this time Gama was consuming twenty liters of milk, half a liter of clarified butter, 3/4 of a kilogram of butter, and four kilograms of fruit per day.³

In 1904 Gama won a number of spectacular bouts held in a tournament organized by the Maharajah of Rewa, and subsequently accepted a position in the Rewa court. Then in 1906 Gama wrestled in a tournament organized by Maharajah Pratap Singh of Orcha, and upon winning the title bout accepted a silver mace, a five hundred rupee award, and a permanent position in the royal court. Out of Orcha, Gama wrestled with the champions of Indor, Amritsar and Lahore, finally meeting with the famous Rahim Sultaniwalla in Datiya sometime in 1907. In this tournament, Gama and Rahim Sultaniwalla wrestled for twenty minutes in what is described by Ratan Patodi as a perfect match in which there was a counter grip for every grip applied, a counter move for every move made and a counter twist for every twist employed.⁴ With no one being clearly the winner, the contest was declared a draw. Rahim and Gama met twice again prior to 1910, once in Lahore where they wrestled for three hours, and once in Indor where the contest lasted for two hours and twenty minutes, but again no clear winner was determined in either bout.

In 1908, two years before he went to London to compete for the world championship belt, Gama's regimen was increased to five thousand *bethaks* and three thousand *dands*. Every morning he would also work out by wrestling with forty compatriot wrestlers in the royal court. Added to this, he began weight-lifting with a one hundred pound grind stone and a *santola* (wooden bar-bell made from a tree trunk). At this time Barkat Ali claims that he regularly consumed either six chickens or the extract of five kilograms of mutton mixed with a quarter pound of clarified butter, ten liters of milk

along with half a liter more of clarified butter, about 3/4 of a kilogram of crushed almond paste made into a tonic drink, along with fruit juice and other things to promote good digestion.⁵

As one of India's preeminent wrestlers, Gama was chosen by R. B. Benjamin, a physical culture enthusiast, to go to London in 1910 along with Gamu Jalandariwalla, Ahmed Baksh and Imam Baksh, to compete in the John Bull Society world wrestling championship. Coming at a time of increasing national consciousness and pride in Indian identity, the trip to London was sponsored by Sharat Kumar Mishra, a Bengali millionaire, and was billed as an opportunity for India to demonstrate its strength on the world stage.

The four wrestlers and their entourage travelled through Europe to London to discover, according to Barkat Ali, that only heavyweight wrestlers were allowed to compete. Being only 5 feet 8 inches tall and 14 stone (196 pounds), Gama was disqualified. Whether or not this is true in fact since Robert W. Smith expresses some doubt on the question, it is significant that the whole issue of weight, height, and size classification proved to be a critical issue for the young Gama, who could not understand the rationale for measuring the skill and subtle power of a fine art in terms of gross mass.⁶

Aside from being simply disappointed, Gama was thoroughly confused. Although his own regimen would appear to have as a final goal simply the production of a massive, powerful physique, this physique — neck girth, chest expanse, and the dimensions of thigh and upper arm —was, to his way of thinking, simply the empirical measure of relative stature and had very little to do with skill. In fact, in Gama's view strength also had less to do with size than one might expect. His phenomenal diet and regimen of exercise was meant to develop a kind of pervasive subtle energy rather than just the kinetic power of particular muscle groups.

In any event, as the story goes, in order to demonstrate in England the Indian's natural talent, his manager arranged with a local theater for Gama to stage a dramatic challenge, promising pounds sterling to any wrestler who could throw him down. On the first day three wrestlers were dispatched by him in short order, and on the second day he is said to have defeated ten local English champions one after the other. According to Ratan Patodi, another of the world champion's biographers, Gama also distinguished himself by defeating the American champion, Roller, in three minutes, and by throwing down all thirty of the Japanese heavyweight wrestlers in one hour.⁷ All of the popular Indian press accounts claim that it was on the basis of these feats that Gama was able to circumvent the tournament rules and persuade the officials to allow him to fight with the reigning world champion, Stanislaus Zbyszko.

Although lighter and shorter than Zbyszko, by about fifty pounds and several inches, accounts of the match held on 10 December 1910, clearly prove Gama's superiority. Apparently taken aback by Gama's speed, strength, and stamina, Zbyszko quickly assumed

a prone position on the mat. Since Gama's forte was foot work and standing take-downs, he was unable to flip his heavier, European opponent onto his back and finally the match was called at dusk. The match was scheduled to resume the following day, but Zbyszko did not show up. Gama was declared world champion by default.

Although I have written elsewhere in some detail on the nationalistic implications of Gama's triumph in relation to colonial power, it is important to note also the extent to which Gama came to represent indigenous masculine ideals.⁸ In the eyes of the 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 had he defeated the greatest wrestlers of Europe and America, but he had done so, more significantly, in a distinctly Indian way. In both Indian and European publications what was regarded as noteworthy about Gama was the nature of his training regimen: the *bethaks* and *dands* in particular, but also his diet and simply the amount of time he spent wrestling, digging the pit, running, and exercising every day. For many middle-class Indian men, themselves working in sedentary office jobs, and bearing the psychological burden of Eurocentric prejudice regarding their so-called effete proclivities, Gama proved, without a doubt, that strength clearly had an Indian form. Needless to say, the mass of middle-class men who idealized Gama did not immediately enter gymnasiums and start vigorously exercising. But what did happen, I think, is that many of them began to appreciate the virtues of Indian physical culture and stopped measuring themselves strictly against a Victorian, colonial standard of prowess.

Gama returned to India as a national hero and was recruited into the court of the Maharajah of Patiala, a princely state in the Punjab region of northwest India. He received 250 rupees per month as a stipend. Although acclaimed as the world champion, Gama had never really become the national champion by defeating the only other legitimate contender, his old rival Rahim Sultaniwalla. In what is probably one of the most famous bouts in the annals of Indian wrestling, Gama met with Rahim in the north Indian city of Allahabad in 1912. Ratan Patodi gives the following account of the contest. Rahim had put out a challenge to meet with any wrestler in the country at Allahabad, and Gama immediately accepted. More than fifty thousand spectators from around the country and overseas had gathered to watch, and many kings and princes from throughout the country had come to witness the rematch. When Rahim entered the pit, his body anointed with red ochre paste, shouting out the name of god, he looked like a rogue elephant on a rampage. When Gama quietly entered the arena wearing a pair of red wrestling briefs the audience was simply awe struck:

As soon as the match started both wrestlers attacked one another, looking to settle the contest quickly. As they grappled, the ochre paste from Rahim's body spread onto Gama

and soon they were both besmeared with red. As the match progressed, Gama became more and more aggressive, but with perceptive skill Rahim was able to counter every move he made. This match proved that there is a counter move, grip and twist for every move applied, even when that move is applied by a world champion. Once Gama lifted Rahim off the ground, but he managed to escape and rallied with the applause of the assembled crowd. Then again Gama lifted Rahim off the ground, but he scissored his legs, flipped over, and landed in front of the world champion still raging like a wild elephant.

Finally, however, the older man began to tire in the face of such a ferocious onslaught. Responding to this, Gama attacked even more aggressively applying one move after another with lightning speed. Rahim defended himself against Gama's every effort until finally he was exhausted. Rather than be pinned, he bowed to defeat and left the pit.

It is simply ill fate that Rahim, who fought so well with Gama three times, never achieved the same recognition as the world champion. Although an acclaimed master of the art, Rahim is now remembered as one of those unfortunate wrestlers who never quite made it. But he had no regrets about leaving the pit in Allahabad, for he knew that move for move he had matched himself with the very best.⁹

In 1928, when he was fifty years old, Gama met Zbyszko again, this time in Patiala at Maharajah Bhupindar Singh's behest. Set for January 28, the match-up was an epic event, coming as it did at a time of strident Indian nationalism. Zbyszko's arrival in Bombay was something of a media event. Among other things the Indian papers published the Polish champion's massive [**Ed. note:** and exaggerated] credentials — three hundred pounds, fifty-eight inch chest, thirty-five inch waist, twenty-three inch calves and a somewhat unbelievable twenty-three inch neck.¹⁰

While in Bombay, Zbyszko apparently put on a demonstration of his physical prowess by lifting, bending and breaking steel bars and chains, claiming, for dramatic effect no doubt, that he would do much the same to Gama.¹¹

In Patiala the Maharajah had gone to great lengths to prepare a stadium to accommodate fifty thousand spectators. Ratan Patodi reports, probably with some exaggeration, that on the appointed day over one hundred thousand people had arrived to watch the epic rematch. Hardly had the match gotten under way, however, when Gama let go of Zbyszko's neck, grabbed his left ankle, pulled his leg into the air, and applied his favorite move, an *anti* by kicking the former world champion's right leg out from under him and sending him, flat on his back, down in the dirt in only forty-two seconds. As Patodi explains, "Gama then jumped forward, pressed his own chest down on Zbyszko's, and thus showed him the sky."¹²

Needless to say —but as I have nevertheless discussed at

some length elsewhere — Gama's triumph was seen as India's triumph, a point brought home by the fact that the Viceroy himself is said to have come down out of the royal pavilion to congratulate the unseated world champion.¹³ In India at least — for I have not seen it printed elsewhere — the scope of Gama's title was upgraded from that of "world champion" to "champion of where ever." Gama kept wrestling after his victory in 1923 until he effectively retired sometime in the early 1940s bequeathing his title to his younger brother, Imam Baksh. Even at the age of fifty, however, Gama was still doing 6000 *bethaks* and 4000 *dands* every day, wrestling with eighty compatriots in the royal gymnasium, and eating essentially the same diet as when he was twenty.¹⁴

Writing exclusively on Gama's training program, Dr. S. P. Atreya is somewhat more reserved in his estimation of the world champion's regimen, claiming, simply, that there was no way of knowing how many *bethaks* or *dands* were done on a daily basis by Gama since no one ever saw him start a routine or stayed long enough in the gymnasium to watch him finish.¹⁵ In any event, Atreya points out that regardless of how many he did, what is most significant is that he always did them properly.

His attention was fully focused inward on the regimen to such an extent that he literally saw nothing but what he was doing. As a rule, he recited the name of god with every breath taken during his set of bethaks, twice for every repetition, and so you could say that his exercise routine was



THIS EARLY PHOTOGRAPH, FROM THE PERSONAL COLLECTION OF GEORGE HACKENSCHMIDT, SHOWS GAMA AND STANISLAUS ZYBYSKO SHAKING HANDS PRIOR TO THEIR HISTORIC BOUT IN INDIA.

one long prayer. Throughout he remained absolutely absorbed in the task at hand.

Unlike most wrestlers, who jump forward and back only about a hand's width while doing bethaks, Gama would jump back and forth as much as a foot. He also did his bethaks much faster than most wrestlers, in sets of one hundred at a time.¹⁶

Clearly Gama's epic heroism is exceptional, and despite whatever hyperbole may now be employed to describe his great achievements, as a powerful athlete he was certainly not alone. He was simply the best of a large number of hard working lower class wrestlers who — projected onto the national

and international stage by wealthy merchants, kings and princes — came to embody certain national ideals about Indian character. In order to contextualize Gama's achievements I would like to work toward a conclusion of this discussion by examining the careers of a few of his compatriots: the "real men" of the soil in whose image the middle-class was trying to reshape itself.

One might take, for example, Sadik Pahalwan, a disciple of the great Jwala Ustad from Lucknow in central Uttar Pradesh. Born in 1894, the son of Sultan Pahalwan, Sadik began training at age five. At the age of twenty he began to make a name for himself as a wrestler and soon came to the attention of Professor Ram Murti Naidu, the

nationalist advocate of indigenous physical culture who took Sadik, along with a number of other wrestlers, on a demonstration tour of Ceylon and Burma. For a number of years Sadik was in the central Uttar Pradesh region of Audh, and from this venue he wrestled against and defeated all of the regional champions before he was thirty years old.

Govardan Das Malhotra reports that in his prime Sadik's regimen included fifteen hundred *dands*, three thousand *bethaks*, wrestling practice with twenty compatriots, three miles of running, three hundred lifting repetitions of a heavy *santola*, digging the wrestling pit twice with a heavy *pharsa*, and a number of *dhekulis* (headstand twists in the wrestling pit which develop neck strength and agility).¹⁷ As in the case of Gama, however, what is noteworthy is the particular way in which Sadik becomes, in his middle-class biographer's eye, a heroic representation of Indian male identity. For example, Malhotra paints the following picture.

Following the adage that truth is greater than prayer, Sadik overcame all of life's difficulties with laughter and joy, never letting even the shadow of pride and conceit fall anywhere near him. He lived the life of a sage, and always putting others before himself, spent his life in the service of the gymnasium . . .

He made no distinction between Hindu and Muslim and loved everyone equally. He was a man of great character: honest, forthright and wise

*Whenever the 240 pound Sadik would go out in public on his bicycle, wearing a dhoti (loin cloth) and kurta (long split-sided north Indian shirt) with a light-weight scarf over his shoulder, fancy hat on his head, umbrella under his arm, and, in the hot weather, a fan in his hand, while chewing on his favorite pan (a lime paste, betel nut and betel leaf concoction), a veritable parade of people would come out of their homes and shops in the Lucknow bazaar to watch him go by.*¹⁸

By way of prosaic rhetoric one clearly gets the impression here of a middle-class vision of fitness and fashion as well as clearly articulated correlations between ideal character, discipline, and physical stature.

Born in 1895, Ram Sevak, a native of Banaras in eastern Uttar Pradesh, became one of the best wrestlers in the country by the time he was 20 years old. Defeating many of the local champions in north central India, he left school after 10th grade in order to devote himself to training. Soon thereafter he came to the attention of the Rajah of Nagpur. However Ram Sevak's elder brother kept him from joining the royal court, finding, instead, local sponsors in the city. Most significantly, Ram Sevak came to the attention of Mahamna Madan Mohan Malviya, the founder of Banaras Hindu University, nationalist advocate of education reform, President of the Hindu Mahasabha and, along with Ram Murti Naidu and Manikrao, a vocal

advocate of indigenous physical culture. Malviya persuaded Ram Sevak to establish a gymnasium on the grounds of Banaras Hindu University — named Shivaji Hall after the great Hindu military leader of the seventeenth century — and train students in the art of Indian wrestling. Through Malviya, Ram Sevak also came to the attention of one of India's industrial giants, Ghaneshyamdass Birla, a nationalist advocate who regarded the young wrestler's work very highly. After turning forty, Ram Sevak devoted himself to the task of training students at BHU, but also established a gymnasium of his own in the city where he encouraged peasant youth from the nearby district area to come and train.¹⁹

Like Sadik, Gama, and countless others, Ram Sevak's regimen is regarded as emblematic of his good character, and is recounted by his biographer as a kind of testimonial of stature.

*Everyday he did two thousand dands, two thousand bethaks, 1/2 an hour of headstand twists and flips, and conducted wrestling practice with between twenty and twenty-eight compatriots . . . He drank a quarter litre of clarified butter, three liters of milk and ate half a kilogram of almonds every day along with a purely vegetarian diet. Never once did he touch alcohol, tobacco or cigarettes, nor have any of his disciples.*²⁰

Sukhdev, whose name means divine bliss, was born into a peasant family of dairy farmers in a village near the city of Azamghar in eastern Uttar Pradesh not far from Banaras in 1915. Sukhdev's elder brother, himself a well known local champion, wanted to turn his younger brother into a national champion, and therefore started taking him to the village gymnasium from a young age. Mulli Ustad, the local village master, lavished attention on Sukhdev until the young wrestler left to join a city gymnasium at the age of twelve. Soon he became the best wrestler in Azamghar and quickly began beating all the local champions of Uttar Pradesh. He also competed successfully in tournaments held in Bombay and Calcutta, and defeated Gama's nephew, Aslam Pahalwan, in a short and definitive three minute match. After noting, in characteristic detail, the components of Sukhdev's daily regimen — five thousand *bethaks*, three thousand *dands*, two liters of milk, a kilogram of almonds and half a liter of clarified butter — Malhotra points out that he was not simply a powerful man possessing great skill, but also very religious. Not only was he a vegetarian, but as a young boy he vowed never to eat onions, turmeric or garlic. This is taken by Malhotra to be exemplary behavior, and he goes on to say that even though Sukhdev was unable to pursue an education on account of his devotion to the art of wrestling, he lived the life of a saint on account of his devotion to Lord Siva and Lord Hanuman.²¹

In other words, Sukhdev exemplified all that was good in Indian character despite the fact—or one might say, because of the

fact—that he was a poor illiterate peasant. The significance of this comes out in Malhotra’s eulogy: “Upon his death at the age of 69 this man, with the chest of a lion, a voice of great power, and raised up by his devotion to the nation, stands alone as a great example to the youth of today.”²²

Any number of other examples could be cited of wrestlers much like Sukhdev. In conclusion, however, one may consider what Gama’s biographers have to say about his exemplary national character.

In all of the accounts of Gama’s life which I have read, the world champion is characterized as being not only strong and skilful, but also supremely honest, hard working, pious and forthright. In many ways — and despite the fact that he was, in fact, probably a man of good character — Gama was made to embody not only the virtues which middle-class men nostalgically associated with their own peasant ancestry, but also a romantically anachronistic aesthetic of masculine self-representation. Describing what Gama looked like on parade after beating Zbyszko in 1928, Brijbhushan Dube points out that he refused to ride in the Maharajah’s car, preferring to simply walk. Wearing a black embroidered *tahmad* (long coat), a very fine, soft light-weight *kurta* (long shirt) on his upper body, a light green turban set off at an angle on his head, and over his shoulder the *dushala* (shawl) given to him by the Maharajah, Gama, with Imam Baksh at his side and other royal wrestlers behind, walked at the front of a parade of fans which stretched back for miles. On the one hand this parade was historic, while on the other it was simply an indication of the world champion’s *garima* (dignity), *saralta* (simplicity), and *sadaai* (pure faultlessness).²³

To illustrate the depth of these virtues in Gama’s national character, Dube gives a number of examples. Once, sometime in the mid 1920s, during the height of nationalist action, Gama was put in prison with his younger brother for reasons which are unclear, but probably on suspicion of anti-government activities. After a few days’ incarceration, the warden tried to persuade Gama to divulge the names of his enemies in exchange for his own freedom. At this Gama is reported to have said, “I have no enemies in this world. If you think that I would bring down someone else in order to save myself, you are wrong. I am your prisoner, do with me what you will.”²⁴ What we learn from this, Dube points out, is that Gama was a perfect, selfless gentleman.

The image of an extremely powerful, well dressed, perfectly selfless gentleman, committed to hard work and simple, traditional, rural values, evoked in many urban middle-class men, an aesthetic ideal for modern Indian masculinity. In the eyes of men like Shanti Prakash Atreya, himself a disciple of Ram Sevak, as well as other men such as Barkat Ali, Govardan Das Malhotra, Brijbhushan Dube, and Ratan Patodi, who have all written extensively about the history

of wrestling, Gama and others like him were in a class by themselves, a fact which enabled middle-class men, nervous about the direction of political, economic, and cultural change, to appropriate the down-to-earth personae of two very strong, poor illiterate Muslim men, a peasant dairy farmer, and a pious Banarsi Hindu, among others, for the purposes of their own heroic nationalism.

Notes

- ¹ Barkat Ali, *Pahalwano ki Duniya* (New Delhi: Barkat Ali, 1984), 99.
- ² Ratan Patodi, “Akhare ka Hira, Gama,” *Bharatiya Kushti* 29(1984): 24.
- ³ Munna, Rajindarsingh, “Datiya me Gama ka Smarak Ho,” *Bharatiya Kushti* 29(1984): 53.
- ⁴ Patodi, “Akhare,” 26.
- ⁵ Ali, *Pahalwano*, 108.
- ⁶ Robert W. Smith, “Gama the Lion: Master of the Arts,” *Black Belt* (n.v; n.d) Gama clipping file, The David P. Willoughby Papers, The Todd-McLean Collection, The University of Texas at Austin. In *The Super Athletes*, David P. Willoughby claimed Gama was 57” inches tall and weighed between 220 and 250 during his adult years. (South Brunswick, N.J.: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1970), 369.0
- ⁷ Patodi, “Akhare,” 26.
- ⁸ Joseph Alter, “Gama the Great and the Decolonized Indian Body: Wrestling with Consumption and the History in Digestion,” unpublished manuscript, author’s collection.
- ⁹ Patodi “Akhare,” 31-33.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Alter, “Gama the Great.”
- ¹⁴ Ali, *Pahalwano*, 108.
- ¹⁵ Shanti Prakash Atreya “Gama ki Kushti Sadhan,” *Bharatiya Kushti*, 29(1984): 41.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 41-42.
- ¹⁷ Govardan Das Malhorta, “Uttar Pradesh ke Pahalwan, *Bharatiya Kushti* 18(7.8 & 9) 1981: 36.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 35-37.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 85.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ Brijbhushan Dube, “Esa Tha Vishva Vijeta Gama,” *Bharatiya Kushti* 29(1984): 49.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.