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### **ZURKHĀNEH, AKHĀRĀ, PAHLAVĀN, AND JYEṢṬHĪ-MALLAS: CROSS CULTURAL INTERACTION AND SOCIAL LEGITIMISATION AT THE TURN OF THE 17TH CENTURY**

Philippe Rochard and Oliver Bast

#### **Abstract**

The tradition of Turco-Persian wrestling, including its programme of physical education based at dedicated gyms known as *zurkhāneh* (literally “houses of strength”), contains elements that would appear to merge Turkish, Iranian, Central-Asian, and Indian influences within a mystical (Sufi) Islamic framework potentially affected to a certain degree by Buddhism. The chapter discusses the relations and interaction between the Turco-Persian athletic tradition and the one existing in India on the basis of a parallel reading of four key textual sources, two from each tradition. On the Indian side we will draw on the analysis of the *Mallapurāṇa* and of the *Mānasollāsa*, while the Persian documents that inform our discussion are the *Tumār-e afsāneh-ye Puryā-ye Vali* and the *Gol-e koshti* of Mir-Nejāt Qomi known as Esfahāni. The chapter will first survey the evolution of the tradition of Turco-Persian wrestling from the middle of the 13th through to the end of the 16th century, and then make a comparative analysis of the connections between Turco-Persian wrestling and the Indian tradition of the *jyeṣṭhī-mallas* of Gujarat. Based on these observations it will then proceed to ask how one might explain the commonalities between the two traditions. Attention will be brought to the consideration that certain physical practices gain recognition thanks to being performed at royal courts, and, in India, also at temples, due to the intellectualisation, and hence legitimisation, of these borrowed practices by learned representatives of the dominant schools of thought present at the seats of political and/or spiritual power.

#### **KEYWORDS**

*Zurkhāneh*, *Akhārā*, *Pahlavān*, *Jyeṣṭhī-mallas*, Sufism, Historical Anthropology, Social Legitimacy.



## Introduction

Historians of yoga in the Indian subcontinent have noted that posture-based exercises intending to develop and strengthen the body (*āsana*) had begun to proliferate and develop in textual sources from the 17th century onwards (Birch 2018: 104). Any explanation of this phenomenon would have to consider the fundamental political and administrative changes that the region underwent during this period as a result of the Mughal conquest. Given this context, one might be tempted to think that the new dynamic practices that were entering the realm of yoga at this point could be influenced by the Turco-Persian sphere of the Northern invaders, either in the context of Muslim military customs or via the vehicle of Sufism.

However, at that time, the new military skills coming from the Muslim World that really mattered were of a tactical nature and had to do with technology: it was the mastery of fast moving heavy and light cavalry equipped with bows, the use of firearms, and the deployment of artillery against static infantry and elephant lines that proved crucial for the success of the Muslim invaders, the Battle of Panipat (21 April 1526) being a case in point.<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to Sufism, the direction of influence was, in fact, the other way round. It has been shown that from its first appearance Sufism was influenced by Buddhism and by Indian ascetic groups.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, influences coming from yoga and Buddhism, even in its Tibetan form, contributed to the shaping of the religious practices of the Sufi orders of Central Asia and, in turn, of the regions where their influence made itself felt. The following quote from a seminal article written by Thierry Zarcone (1996: 328) summarises this state of affairs succinctly:

[I]t can be noted that, among the ascetic practices in use [...] several exercises [of the Sufis] resembled those of Indian Yoga. This is the case, for example, in the repetitive and silent invocations of the names of God (*dhikr-i khafī*) which are similar to the *japa* of Yoga and of the contemplation of the subtle points of the human body (*latā'if*), an exercise which reminds one of the meditation on the *chakras* of Kundalini-Yoga, or of the exercises of control of the phenomenon of death which have much in common with Tibetan Buddhism.

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<sup>1</sup> See Chaliand 1990: 576–583 whose discussion is based on Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont's translation of the *Bāburnāma* into French published as *Le livre de Babur* (1980).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Ernst 2003: 173–195, Zarcone 1996: 325–344, and Garcin 1995: 453–455.

This adoption by Sufism of these extra-Islamic tendencies occurred during its formative period, which was characterised by a greater degree of religious diversity, pluralism, and, hence, interaction and “cross-influencing.” Indeed, Sufism had absorbed these non-Islamic elements prior to the late 14th-century emergence of the very orthodox Sunni Hanafi order of the Naqshbandis, with their hostility towards other creeds and violent proselytising.

As Zarcone (1996) points out, after the Naqshbandiyya had begun to hold sway, this permeability between religious traditions began to diminish. Even though the Naqshbandiyya shared certain mystical practices with Tibetan Lamaism and “Indian” yoga, it allowed next to no cultural exchange of any form with non-believers. Thus, at that point in time in the history of Eastern Turkestan, if there were any exchanges between Central Asian Sufis and Buddhists, they would have occurred thanks to minor orders, such as the Qalandaris or the Yasāvis (Zarcone 1996: 338). The Qalandariyya reached out into North India where it interacted with other Sufi brotherhoods like the Chishtiyya, the structure of which was highly permeable allowing relatively easy integration of people from different confessional backgrounds (Green 2006: 93).

In short, neither the arrival on the subcontinent of Muslim military practices, nor a presumed major influx of Sufi practices into India due to the Mughal conquest can suitably account for the 17th-century phenomenon of a widespread aggregation of dynamic movements into the corpus of yoga postures.

Yet it might well have been another aspect of the Muslim culture arriving forcefully on the sub-continent from the North in the 16th century that proved crucial for this aggregation. This paper contends that the administrative practices engaged in by the new Muslim ruling elites, which resulted in the upsetting of long established social stratifications, created the socio-legal context for specific legitimisation processes through which posture-based dynamic physical practices were now able to acquire the cultural capital that was necessary for recognition as being worthy of the yoga tradition.

The paper develops its argument in three distinct parts. The first part presents an analytical comparison of the physical exercises of the Muslim Turco-Persian *zurkhāneh* with those that were practised at its Indian counterpart, the *akhārā* that had been harbouring amongst many other activities a boxing/wrestling tradition that was practised by Hindus in Gujarat known as *jyeshthī-mallas*. The aim of this comparative discussion based on secondary literature is to test (and ultimately dismiss) the

hypothesis that posture-based dynamic physical exercises might have been introduced into India in the wake of the Mughal conquest.

The second part of the paper discusses how the Muslim exercise and wrestling traditions that flourished in the Persian/Central Asian context have been socially legitimised through religious practices and associations. Finally, an analysis of the extraordinarily similar legitimisation processes that were to be witnessed in the 16th century on the side of the Indian wrestling traditions forms the third part of this paper.

The analyses developed in the two latter parts draws on four primary sources. On the Indian side, our analysis is based mainly on the *Mallapurāṇa*,<sup>3</sup> a treatise that passes itself off as being from the 15th century but seems to be in actual fact somewhat more recent. To a much lesser degree, we also refer to the 12th-century *Mānasollāsa* composed by the Kalyāṇī Cālukya king Someśvara III.<sup>4</sup> The Persian language primary sources that inform our discussion are first and foremost the *Tumār-e afsāneh-ye Puryā-ye Vali*, a late-Safavid-period professional treatise (*fotovvat-nāmeḥ*) henceforth referred to as *Tumār* in the body of the text,<sup>5</sup> and, to a much lesser degree, the *Gol-e koshti* of Mir-Nejāt Qomi known as Esfahāni, another famous treatise from the late Safavid period written around 1700.<sup>6</sup>

Before the proposed three-part discussion can begin, however, it is necessary first to provide a number of terminological and conceptual clarifications.

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<sup>3</sup> We use here the *Mallapurāṇa* edition by Bhogilal Jayachandbhai Sandesara and Ramanlal Nagarji Mehta (1964).

<sup>4</sup> We use here the *Mānasollāsa* edition by Gajanan K. Shrigondekar (1925–1961).

<sup>5</sup> See Hoseyn Partow-Beyzā'i Kāshāni 1958 or 1959: 350–364 who quotes from a now impossible-to-find manuscript that had been discovered by and was in the possession of Mehdi Zarkeshān-Kāshāni, which contained an account written by an anonymous author entitled *Tumār-e afsāneh-ye Puryā-ye Vali*, which will henceforth be cited as *Tumār-e afsāneh* in Partow-Beyzā'i Kāshāni.

<sup>6</sup> Mir-Nejāt Qomi (known as Esfahāni), *Gol-e koshti*, discovered by Adib ol-Mamālek Farāhāni and first published by the latter in *Armaghān* (1312 h.sh./1933). This chapter is based on the reproduction of the text to be found in Hoseyn Partow-Beyzā'i Kāshāni 1958 or 1959: 379–419. It will be henceforth referred to as *Gol-e koshti* in Partow-Beyzā'i Kāshāni. The title of this treatise, meaning “the floret of wrestling” is a contraction of the longer *gol-e sar sabad-e koshti*, literally “the crown of the flower basket of wrestling.”

## Prolegomena

### Introducing the Turco-Persian Tradition of Wrestling and the *Zurkhāneh*

The Persian equivalent of the Indian *akhārā* is the *zurkhāneh* (literally “houses of strength”). They host a wrestling tradition where fighters wear breeches, do not use any weapons and hitting is forbidden, but gripping one’s opponent either by their belt, by their breeches’ ends or by their lower legs, namely from behind their knees, is allowed. The Persian term for these fighters is *pahlavān*, the etymology of which goes back to Pre-Islamic Middle Persian.

It must be noted here that throughout its history, the *zurkhāneh*, other than being a designated training space for professional wrestlers and other performers, also had a different dimension within the fabric of Persian towns. Indeed, alongside *zurkhānehs* that were merely “wrestling schools,” there were also *zurkhānehs* that were frequented heavily by the members of the local underworld (*jāhel/luti*), who did not only come there to exercise but for whom the *zurkhāneh* became a useful space of dubious sociability. They tended to be organised in mafia-like structures, forming armed gangs that were then often put into service by outwardly respectable local strongmen who, often in defiance of the authorities put in place by the government, used them to establish their control of a particular quarter or even of the entire town, paying particular attention to the bazaars.<sup>7</sup>

This meant that the local urban populations had a rather ambiguous attitude towards the institution of the *zurkhāneh*. Consequently, they might be reluctant to send their children there to receive instruction. In fact, the *zurkhāneh*’s reputation of being a space characterised by sexual asceticism tinted with homoeroticism,<sup>8</sup> but also its social, professional, and spiritual dimensions meant that it was very rarely frequented by children but rather nearly exclusively by male adults and young adults. Thus, other than the wrestlers’ own children, the only young persons, the only “pupils,” that were admitted to the *zurkhāneh* were apprentices destined for a career in professional wrestling. Those who, during that era, chose a career linked to the *zurkhāneh* (wrestling, acrobatics, games of skill, etc.) embarked on a professional path within the domain of spectacle and entertainment; although most enjoyed it, they tended to be socially

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<sup>7</sup> On *lutis* see H. G. Migeod 1959: 82–91, Reza Arasteh 1961: 47–52, Willem M. Floor 1971: 103–120, Willem M. Floor 1981: 83–95, and Ja’far Shahri 1989 or 1990: 410–411.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed discussion see Houchang E. Chehabi 2019: 395–421.

marginalised.<sup>9</sup> All these specific modalities of sociability and sexual restrictions were not dissimilar to those imposed on Hindu wrestlers.<sup>10</sup> In a way, most of the professional wrestlers were very often wanderers, forced to travel from town to town since they were not supposed to stay anywhere for more than a year because of the need to renew their customer base.<sup>11</sup>

It must be further noted that the traditional wrestling practices of Northern India, in the form that they have persisted into contemporary times, seem to have undergone far less change over time than their Iranian counterpart. Thus there are for instance a number of specific tools that are still found in India that had once also existed in Iran (like the *sang-e na'l*, made for neck and upper chest exercises and the *sang-e zur* which was made of real stone, not wood), yet have long since changed or disappeared in the context of transformation processes that seem to have started as far back as the 17th century, for reasons that have not yet been satisfactorily elucidated.

Furthermore, there has also been a transformation of the architectural features of the *zurkhāneh* in the Iranian realm that needs highlighting in this context. It concerns the hexagonal pit in the centre where the athletes carry out their physical exercises. The particular shape of this pit is often considered as having ancient roots going back to Pre-Islamic times, which gives rise to elaborate symbolic interpretations, while, in actual fact, the shape of the pit as it can be observed at the present time represents a relatively recent (i.e., less than one hundred twenty years) adaptation of a well-known and established architectural form that lends itself perfectly to the purpose of accommodating body-building exercises, namely that of the traditional bathhouse, or *hammam*.

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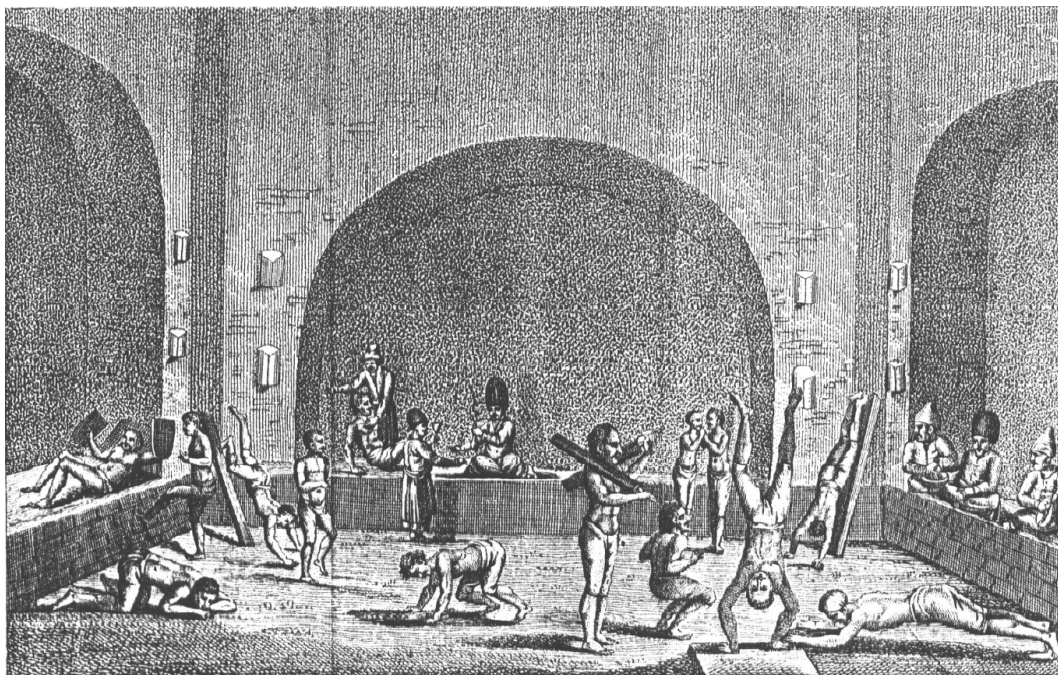
<sup>9</sup> Incidentally, in the public imagination, the milieu of the wrestler was often associated with that of the colombophile, given that pigeon-fancying was also a leisure activity that was very wide-spread yet socially stigmatised for moral and religious reasons; see Goushegir 1997 and Frembgen and Rollier 2014. It should be noted that today the situation is different and the absence of children can no longer be observed: since the middle of the 1990s, young boys have been freely admitted to the *zurkhāneh* where, from the age of six onward (classified by age and weight), they engage in specially designed exercises following dedicated programmes and using training tools that have been adapted accordingly.

<sup>10</sup> This type of asceticism, which is still widespread in India, was practised by the wrestlers present at the royal court during the Ilkhanid period (13th/14th centuries), which transpires from the chronicles that Piemontese discusses in 1964: 453–473.

<sup>11</sup> See *Tumār-e afsāneh in Partow-Beyzā'i Kāshāni*.



Pits fitted with clay surfaces (Fig. 1) providing the stage for fights and exercises, as they were still described in detail in a Persian manuscript from the late 19th century,<sup>12</sup> disappeared gradually from Iran during the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>13</sup> Hence, it would be quite impossible to organise a wrestling match in the exercise pits of the *zurkhāneh*s as they exist in present-day Iran (Fig. 2). The only surviving old-style *zurkhāneh* can be found in the city of Bam situated in the South-Eastern province of Kermān. Bam's old town, which has been transformed into a large-scale, open-air museum, contains a *zurkhāneh* that goes back to the Safavid era. Its rectangular pit, which takes up nearly the whole of the room, is two-to-three times as large as those of the *zurkhāneh*s that are currently in use, and it perfectly matches the descriptions that can be found in many sources from the 18th and 19th centuries.



**Figure 1:** *Zurkhāneh* of Shiraz in the 1760s (illustration provided by Carsten Niehbur who travelled to Iran in 1765). To note the large rectangular shape of the pit (Jourdain 1814: 240).

<sup>12</sup> This manuscript, *Ganjineh-ye koshti*, the title of which can be translated as *Treasure of Gymnastic and Athletic Wrestling*, contains a treatise written in 1292 h.q. (1875 or early 1876) by one 'Ali Akbar ebn-e Mahdi al-Kāshāni under the auspices of the Ministry of Public Instruction, Commerce and Mining, which describes in detail the institution of the *zurkhāneh* and the activities taking place therein. See also Blochet 1912: 139.

<sup>13</sup> See in particular Gusheh 1947: 47–55, and Schayegh 2002: 341–69.



**Figure 2:** Zurkhāneh *Honar*, Tehran. Photograph by Rochard (1995).

The particular physical exercises that have traditionally been performed in the *zurkhāneh*, and which incorporate both workouts and acrobatic movements, have certain characteristics (tools, names, gestures, and exercises ) suggesting the result of a gradual convergence of Turco-Iranian cultural influences from Central Asia, north-eastern Iran and Afghanistan. This convergence occurred within an Islamic context marked by Sufism yet integrating a significant number of elements stemming not only from the Buddhist but also from the Central Asian Shamanic tradition still present in the Turco-Persian culture (see Mélikoff 1995: 65–68).

As far as the pre-Islamic period is concerned, Di Castro's (2003: 257–265; 2007: 367–376; 2005: 1–18) studies of various body-building tools involved in wrestlers' training in the ancient region of Gandhara provide a certain number of insights. They highlight the importance of connections and exchanges between the Greco-Bactrian culture of the Seleucid era (and the apparently well-established evocation of the legendary figure Heracles) and the cultures present within the Persian Empire under the Arsacid and Sassanid dynasties (over a period running from the 4th century BCE to the 7th century CE). Di Castro's work shows that is in fact impossible to consider any of these practices as being either exclusively "Greek," "Persian," "Turkish," or "Indian," which amounts to trying to comprehend them through notions that have only arisen comparatively recently with the advent of the modern nation-state. There is a world of



nuances to be explored and, in following Di Castro, we raise the hypothesis that there existed a multicultural athletic tradition even in the most ancient eras, which included a wrestling practice that we might want to describe as Greco-Persian but that was already back then in contact with northern Indian practices and central Asian populations and cultures. For the moment we are, however, unable to refine this hypothesis further.

What we *do* know is that, in India, the Turco-Persian tradition of wrestling can be traced back to at least the Bahmanid period (14th to 17th centuries). Thus, during that time in the city of Bidar, where each quarter of the town had its own designated exercise space, Turco-Persian wrestling styles (which, during the 16th century, were also labelled “Khorasani”) overlapped seamlessly with *yekung*, an Indian martial art based on swordsmanship.<sup>14</sup>

#### Physical Practices with an Entertainment Component and Their Need for Social Legitimation

The (public) fights that were laid on by professional wrestlers in both India and Iran chiefly during the 16th and 17th centuries, but also beyond, were an integral part of the culture of spectacle that characterised these times. Indeed, we very much doubt that these practices have any real military origins and purpose. In any case, Turco-Persian wrestling cannot be characterised as a martial art: it is impossible to kill anybody using its techniques. Similarly, the Indian *jyeṣṭhīs*, who were appreciated by all sectors of society, were professionals who made a living from their wrestling/boxing practices. They were in a sense service providers who hailed, without exception, from non-aristocratic backgrounds; yet they were—and this will be considered in more detail further on in this chapter—continually striving to improve their social status.<sup>15</sup>

This situation entails two major trends. Firstly, the public performance of these physical practices for entertainment purposes must have been considered socially legitimate in order to be present at a place as exalted as the Court—and this social legitimacy had to

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<sup>14</sup> For the Bahmanid period see Flatt 2010: 153–173. One notes, however, that her interpretation of the notion of *Javanmardi* tends to perpetuate a number of outdated Orientalist clichés. For the Mughal era see O’Hanlon 2007: 490–523; 2007: 889–923; 1999: 47–93.

<sup>15</sup> As far as members of the aristocracy are concerned, they might engage in wrestling amongst themselves, in private, and this is particularly true of the Perso-Turkish tradition, but in the public realm it is the task of the members of the lower orders to entertain them by fighting for them.

derive necessarily from religious legitimacy.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, those who engaged in these practices in a professional capacity were forced to try and continually improve their levels of social and religious recognition so as to strengthen the perception of their own position by society and, by extension, also by their employers. This occurred even at the price of having to modify ancient traditions if it was to their advantage.

This in turn begets the question of whether or not the effort of inscribing practices such as open-handed wrestling and corporal activities in a mystical and religious dimension should not be conceived as being aimed at obtaining and securing society's respect and recognition. Indeed, this is the central question of both the second, and the third parts of this paper.

## The Hindu *Jyeṣṭhī-malla* (*jeṭhī-malla*) of India and How Their Practices Compare to Those of the Muslim Turco-Persian Tradition

### Introducing the *Jyeṣṭhī-malla* (*jeṭhī-malla*)

India has been home to many physical and martial traditions. The form of wrestling that resembles the Persian one the most is the northern tradition of the *Bhāratiya kuṣṭī*, which has been described in great detail by Joseph Alter (1992). But what is the situation when it comes to practices where such an obvious connection does not exist?

One such practice is the type of wrestling/boxing engaged in by the *jyeṣṭhī-malla*, also known as *jeṭhī-malla*, and to which we will henceforth simply refer as *jeṭhī* or *jeṭhī-malla*. Not having carried out first-hand research into this practice, we are basing our analysis on an edition of the *Mallapurāṇa* by Bhogilal Jayachandbhai Sandesara and Ramanlal Nagarji Mehta in the 1960s, on the sociologist Veena Das' critical review of that edition (1968: 141–164), as well as on an inquiry carried out by the Romanian scholar Arion Roșu (1981: 417–451) who collaborated with the renowned French Indologist Jean Filliozat. It is important to note here that Roșu's work was not limited to the *jeṭhī-malla* but also focused on the *marmans*, that is the vital, or crucial, points, of the body according to the principles of traditional Indian medicine.

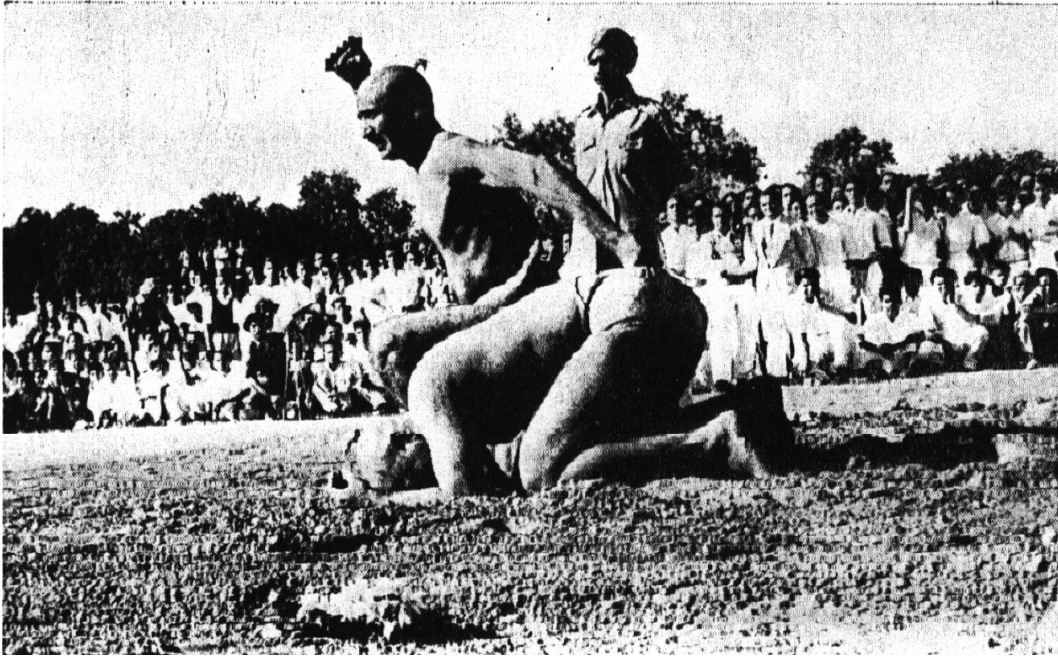
The rules of engagement in *jeṭhī* wrestling characteristically allow the fighter to get hold of their adversary and also to hit them with their legs and with their two fists, on one of which fighters carry a tool that resembles a knuckle-duster, the *muṣṭi* or

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<sup>16</sup> To note, acrobats and entertainers couldn't claim the same level of legitimacy, since their profession was always considered as belonging to the lowest social condition and notoriously frowned upon by the religious authority as being frivolous.

*vajramuṣṭi* (Fig. 3). The more “serious” version of *muṣṭi* also has spikes and can be fitted with cutting blades (Fig. 4). The term *muṣṭi* signifies “fist” but is also used to designate all types of fist-held weapons, of which there are many varieties, the most famous and potentially also the most ancient being the *mādu* (in Gujarati) or *mādhū* (in Marathi). It can be found in the provinces of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Mysore.

The technique of hitting on adversary with a clenched, but also armed, fist is based on having precise knowledge of the sensitive points of the body, known as *marmans* (literally “points of death,” also sometimes called “sensitive” or “vulnerable” points) (Fig. 5). The systematic exploration and categorisation of these points goes back a very long way in time. According to Roṣu, it was warriors and priests (*kṣatriyas* and Brahmins) who engaged in the establishment of this knowledge, spreading it in the society of their time. He concludes by stating that it was in particular the wrestlers/boxers, i.e. the *jeṭhīs*, who were invested in the *mallavidyā* (“the science of wrestling”), one of the most popular forms of sport in India, which had had a major role in spreading this knowledge.

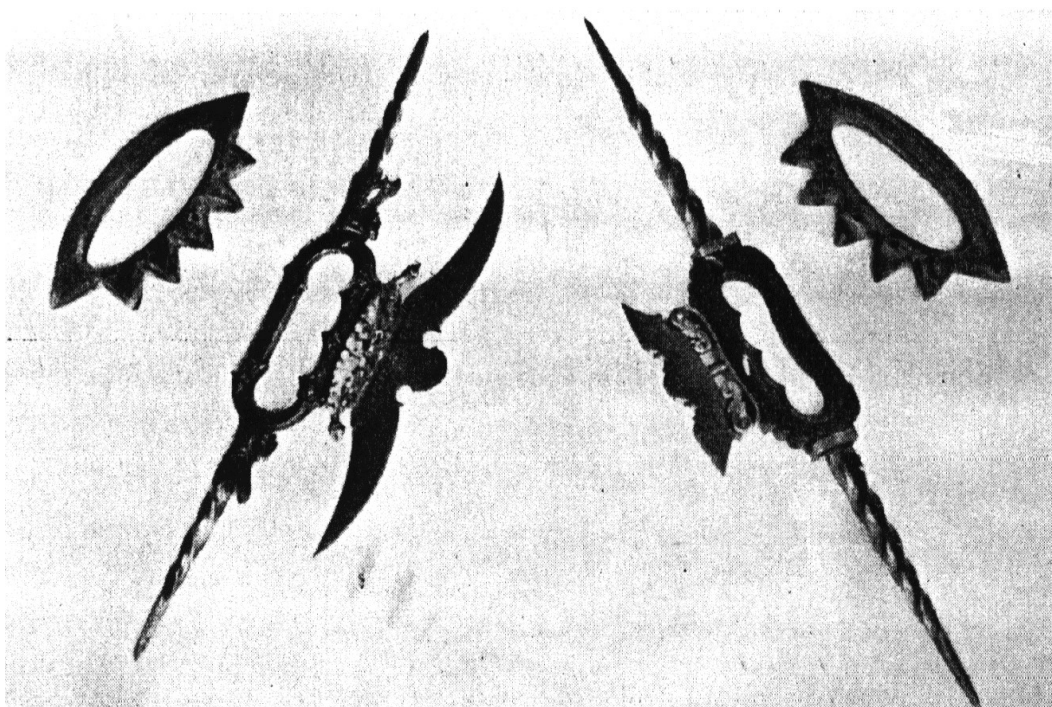


**Figure 3:** *Jeṭhī* wrestler/boxer, armed with *vajra muṣṭi*, in *Mallapurāna* (1964: 24).

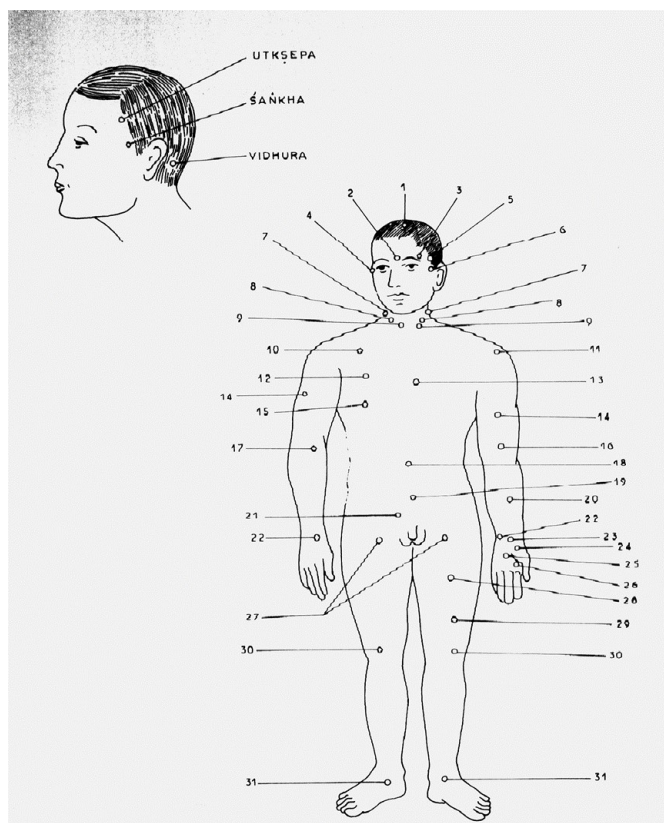


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**Figure 4:** *Vajramuṣṭi*, © Museum of Madras, in *Mallapurāṇa* (1964: 24).



**Figure 5:** A plate illustrating the *marmans*, the body's vulnerable points (Roṣu 1981).

According to the author of the *Mallapurāṇa*, the existence of *jeṭhīs* can be traced back to as far as the 13th century since their style of wrestling is mentioned in yet another, older treatise, namely the above-mentioned *Mānasollāsa*, an encyclopaedic work from that period composed by the Kalyāṇī Cālukya king Someśvara III and dedicated to the arts of the court.<sup>17</sup> This treatise provides a lengthy list of the styles of fighting, the public performances of which are considered worthy of being attended by the sovereign, or even of taking place at the royal court itself. Thus the treatise mentions a number of rather gruesome sports like cock-, partridge- and ram-fighting, and elephant-running<sup>18</sup> (*Mānasollāsa* 1.32). Yet, the *Mānasollāsa* also contains the description of a style of wrestling called *mallavinoda* (1. 36–37), the types of exercises and classification of fighters of which are also present in the *Mallapurāṇa* three hundred years or so later, albeit under slightly modified designations. According to these descriptions, when performances of these types of fights were organised at the court, the fighters would be selected by their trainer and presented to the king on the eve of the fight. On the day of the fight they would be led to where the fighting was to take place perched on female elephants. Breaking a limb of one's adversary was considered the definitive sign of victory in this style of fighting, which reminds us of the already mentioned fighting techniques of the *jeṭhīs*. Once the fight had ended, the victor would be rewarded by the king who offered him clothes, jewellery, a cart or even horses. All this bears an astonishing resemblance to the institution of gladiator fighting in ancient Rome. According to the *Mānasollāsa*, these fighting techniques were typical of southern India, a region where none of the northern styles of fighting were practised at non-Muslim courts at that time, i.e., the 13th century.

From all of this, it can be assumed safely that the *jeṭhī* tradition of fighting that grew out of these earlier forms, and which is described in the *Mallapurāṇa*, had established itself firmly in India by the 16th century. Thus *jeṭhīs*, being always on the look-out for generous sponsorship and protection, began to make their appearance at the court of Akbar, especially following the annexation of Gujarat by the Mughals at the end of the 16th century. Incidentally, *jeṭhī*-style fighting was not the only form of wrestling to make it to the court of Akbar, as he was trying to attract to his capital the best representatives of all the different arts and spectacles. Akbar's court also witnessed the presence of Persian and Turco-Afghan wrestlers and of all the other Indian martial arts

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<sup>17</sup> We used here the edition in three volumes, edited by Gajanan K. Shrigondekar 1925–1961.

<sup>18</sup> The elephant-running consisted of a competition where elephants that had been deliberately goaded into a state of wild rage beforehand were then let loose on groups of men who would literally run for their lives. Amongst the runners, there were often men who had been sentenced to death but would have their sentences quashed if they managed to survive the spectacle.



traditions, as we can see in certain passages of the *A'in Akbari*, an early 17th-century treatise dedicated to the organisation and regulations of the Emperor's palace, extracted from the *Akbarnāmā*, the voluminous official chronicle of the third Mughal Emperor's reign.<sup>19</sup>

The *A'in Akbari* allows us to relativise the importance of this imperial "recognition," at least in India. Despite the clear improvement in their status between the 13th and the 16th centuries, it is important to remember that the wrestlers, the *pahlavāns*, the boxers and the *jeṭhī-mallas*, were members of staff responsible for court entertainment, and particularly fighting (with other men or between animals). These fights were the objects of bets that were so large that very specific legislation was introduced to oversee them, as well as the maximum amounts involved, in order to avoid sudden ruin and the risk of conflict between the "Grand" courtiers. It is also important to note that outside of private donations or gifts received during the fights, the size of which were probably correlated to the winnings of their protectors, wrestlers and *jeṭhīs* were among the lowest paid fighters' organisations (between seventy and four hundred and fifty silver pieces). But they were better paid than all the simple service staff. Payment increased proportionally to the degree of virtuosity displayed in combat techniques. In this respect, fighters with swords who fell within genuine martial arts traditions were paid higher wages than *pahlavāns* or *jeṭhīs*.

The recognition of wrestling, therefore, reached a peak, but a peak that in the eyes of the Indo-Muslim courts scarcely exceeded the affectionate paternalism with which owners generally regard their "stables," whether of animals or humans. Only the princes and kings who were passionate about wrestling themselves, and the most important wrestlers (those who had things to say and teach), raised these practices up to a higher standard (the court of the last ruler of the Timurid dynasty in Herat is a case in point). Only the most resistant, or the most inspired, could rise above the others and transform their destiny. In this respect, religious legitimacy could only be a very welcome support for these athletes whose future was persistently precarious, and dependent on a physical health that was constantly exposed to the violence inherent in their profession.

The *A'in Akbari* describes the *jeṭhī-malla* as "clever": thanks to their technique combining wrestling and boxing, they were stronger than the *pahlavān*. Fights generally took place

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<sup>19</sup> We used here the edition of the *Ain-i-Akbari of Abul Fazl-i-Allāmī*, translated by H. S. Jarrett and further annotated by Sir J. Sarkar and *The Akbarnāma of Abu-l-Fazl*, translated from the Persian by H. Beveridge 1897–1904.

between practitioners of the same sport. However, legend has it that Akbar, having been made aware of their existence, had them brought to his court so that he could stage a fight in which he had them battle it out with his Persian *pahlavān* wrestlers. He set his champion *pahlavān* against a *jeṭhī* called Lākhājī who dispatched the former with ease. While obviously a legend, these types of tests would seem highly plausible since they were perfectly within the spirit of the times, which is also testified in the pages of the *Bāburnāma* going back to Akbar's grandfather Bābur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty, who on seeing a rhinoceros for the first time had the immediate reflex of wishing to test this animal's fighting power by setting it to fight against an elephant.<sup>20</sup>

While it seems obvious that *pahlavān* and *jeṭhīs* belong to two quite separate traditions, they were well aware of each other's existence and techniques. How did they compare?

#### Comparing the *Jyeṣṭhī-malla's* Exercise Tools and Movements with Those of the Turco-Persian Tradition

The following table (Tab. 1)<sup>21</sup> provides a comparison of the practices of Turco-Persian wrestling<sup>22</sup> with both those of the *jyeṣṭhī-malla*<sup>23</sup> and those of the form of wrestling known as *Bhāratiya kuṣṭī*, which was still practised until recently (Alter 1992).

Turco-Persian wrestling	India: <i>Jyeṣṭhī-malla/Bhāratiya kuṣṭī</i>
<i>Shenā</i> : similar to the Indian <i>daṇḍ</i> with or without the small plank. Today the use of a plank is the rule (see Fig. 7).	<i>Āhuśrama</i> / <i>daṇḍ</i> (see Fig. 6).
<i>Narmesh</i> : warm up (formerly called <i>khamgiri</i> : softening) and <i>pā-zadan</i> (stamping).	<i>Asthādanaka</i> / <i>baiṭhak</i>

<sup>20</sup> We used here *The Baburnama. Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*, edited by Wheeler M. Thackston (1996).

<sup>21</sup> For item Mil "Indian clubs" in Table 1 column 1, refer to Partow-Beyzā'i, *Varzesh-e bāstāni-e Irān (zurkhāneh)*, 448.

<sup>22</sup> See *Tumār-e afsāneh in Partow-Beyzā'i Kāshāni*, 349–378.

<sup>23</sup> See the descriptions provided in the *Mallapurāṇa*.

Turco-Persian wrestling	India: <i>Jyeṣṭhī-malla/Bhāratīya kuṣṭī</i>
<i>Shelang</i> : great striding and <i>takht-e shelang</i> : long board of stride. These moves disappear in the course of the first half of the 20th century along with dive movements and others that were the equivalent of the <i>śīrśāsan</i> .	<i>Sthāpitaśrama / dhakuli</i> and <i>śīrśāsan</i>
<i>Mil</i> : “Indian clubs,” Partow Beyzā’i points out that “mekdar” and “megdar” are names that are still being remembered within Iranian wrestling circles. Sizes vary considerably, reaching from five hundred grams up to twenty kilos (see Fig. 9).	<i>Pramadā-mudgara-kārelā/joḍī</i> (see Fig. 8).
<i>Sang-e zur</i> : stone of strength. They are used lying down on the back and are made exclusively of heavy wood rather than stone after the 17th century (see Fig. 11).	<i>Guru gonithaka/nāl</i> (see Fig. 10a and 10b).
<i>Sang-e na’l</i> : the horseshoe stone. This seems to have fallen out of use after the appearance of modern tools of training made of two cast-iron weights linked by short solid ropes. Yet, even the latter have been falling from use in the <i>zurkhāneh</i> since the 1930s.	<i>Laghu gonithaka /gar nāl</i>
Some form of massage still exists in the <i>zurkhāneh</i> (e.g., for the arms, after gyratory movements). Full massages are provided in the hammam.	Full massages seem to be provided in the <i>akhārā</i> .

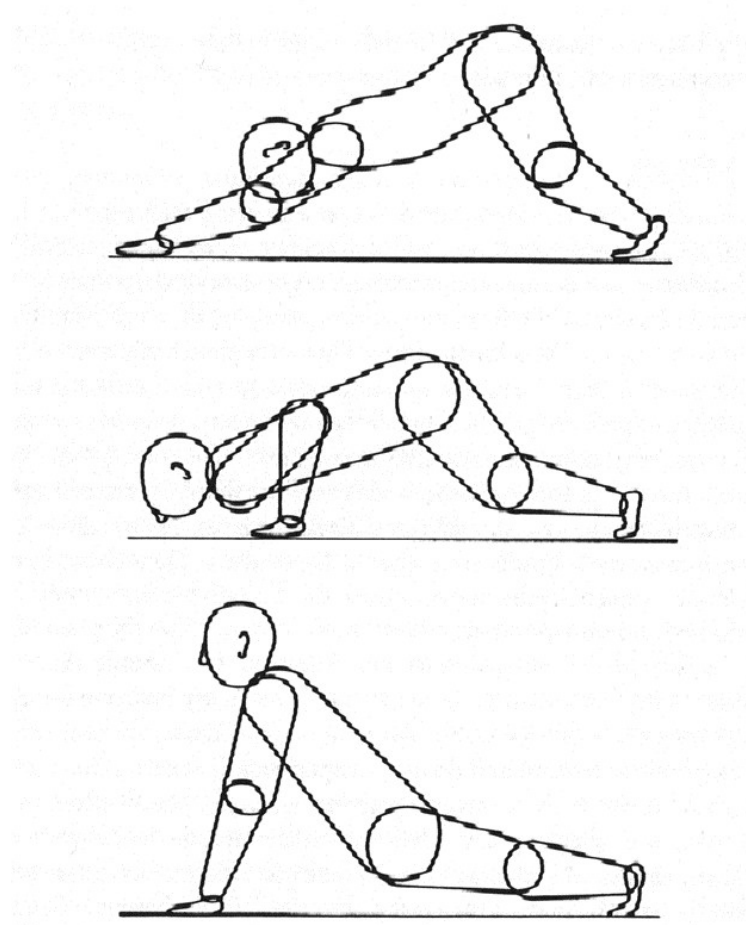
Table 2 shows tools, movements, and practices with *no correspondence* in the other tradition.

Turco-Persian	Hindu
<i>Kabbādeh</i> and <i>kabbādeh bāzi</i> : iron bow.	<i>Gaḍā</i> : large training mace.
<i>Mil bazi</i> : acrobatics with light and heavy <i>mil</i> .	<i>Mallasthamba</i> : pole acrobatics.

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Turco-Persian	Hindu
<i>Charkhidan</i> : gyratory movement, slow, medium and quick.	<i>Akhārā</i> wrestling schools still have pits made of earth, while in Iran earth pits have totally disappeared since the 1950s.
The whole training programme is supervised by a music master ( <i>morshed</i> ) singing along to the rhythm of his <i>zarb</i> , a big goblet drum also known as <i>tombak</i> .	No music is played during the training programme nowadays. However, as can be seen from Fig. 10b, musical accompaniment to exercising had existed in the past.



**Figure 6:** Indian *danḍ*, in Alter (1992: 104).

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**Figure 7:** Iranian *shenā*; first rank: *shenā-ye pich* (twisted *shenā*), second rank: *shenā-ye bāz* (open *shenā*), *Zurkhāneh-ye Soleymāniye*, Tehran. Photograph by Rochard, 1996.



**Figure 8:** *Joḍī* in India, in Alter (1992: 176).

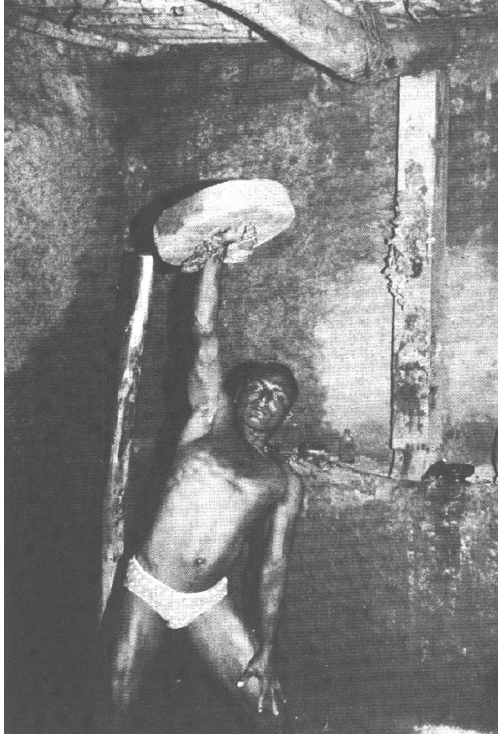


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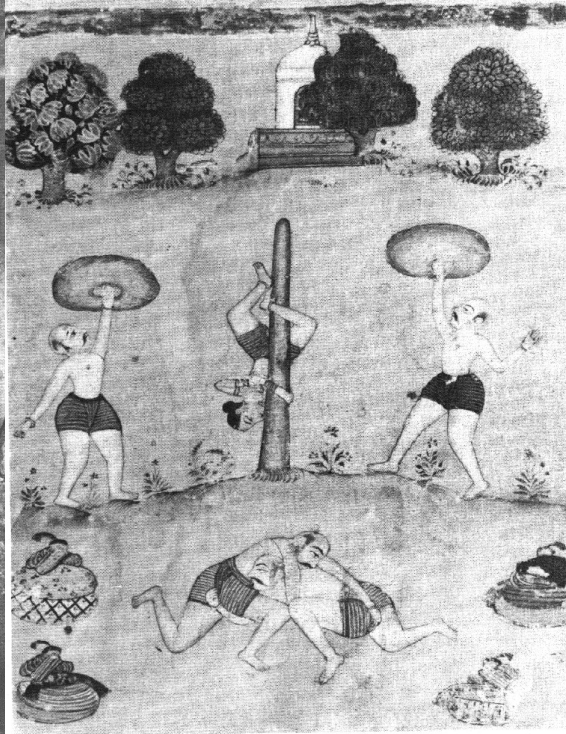
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**Figure 9:** *Mil gereftan*, *Zurkhāneh-ye Kāshefi*, Tehran. Photograph by Rochard, 1996.



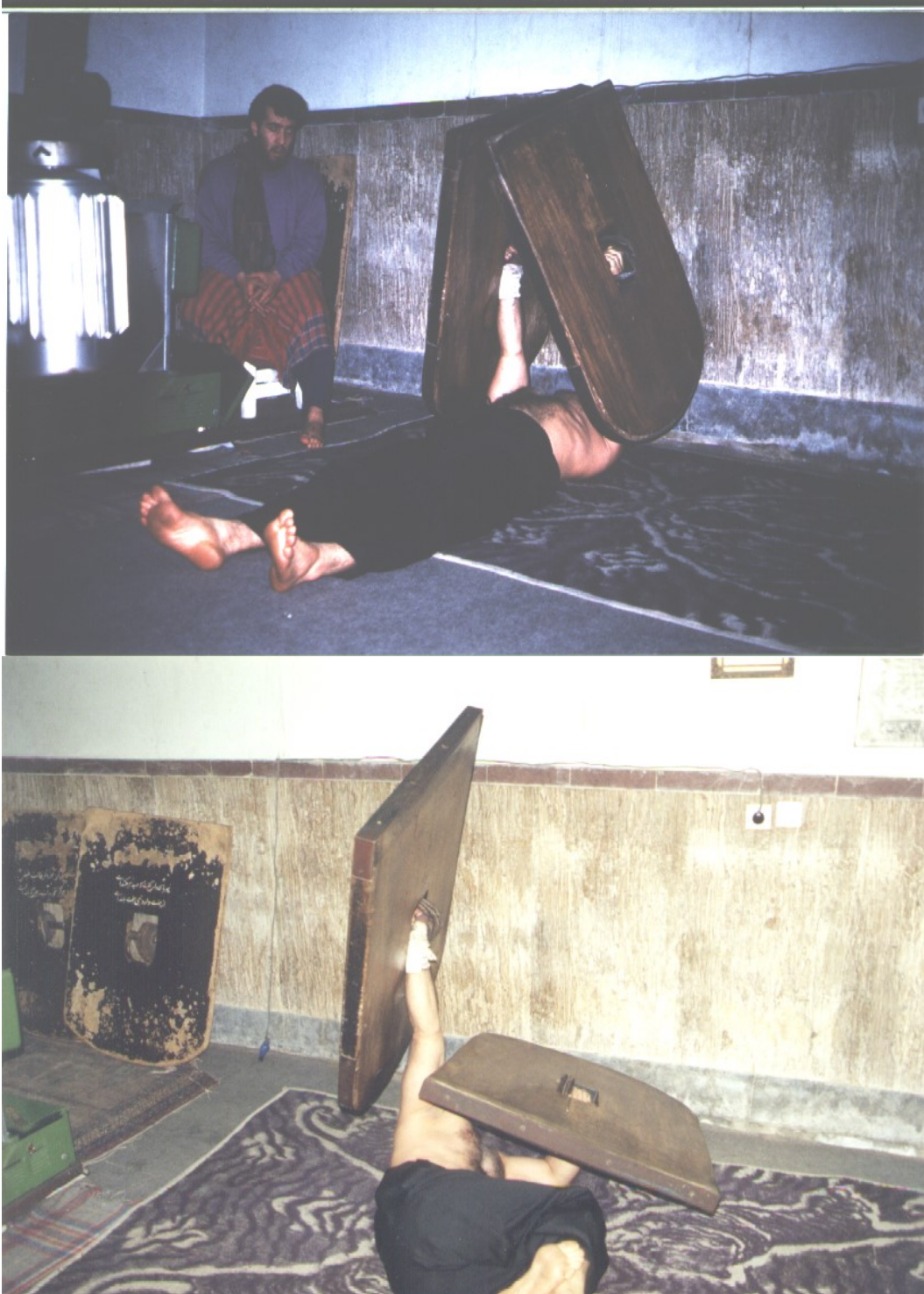
**Figure 10a:** Indian Wrestler with *pindanaka*. A real “stone of strength” that might be the *guru gonithaka* mentioned in the *Mallapurāṇa*, in Roṣu (1981: 440).



**Figure 10b:** Miniature illustrating the practice of musical inspiration, *Deśakhyā Rāginī*, Central Indian School, 18th century.  
© Musée Guimet, Paris, M.A. 3376, in Roṣu (1981: 433).

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**Figure 11:** Iranian *Sang-e zur* exercise: the “stone” has been replaced by wood, *Zurkhāneh-ye Tāleshi*, Tehran. Photograph by Rochard, 1995.



As transpires from Table 1, the similarities between practices across the board are numerous and they are more or less self-evident. Hence, let us dwell on the differences. It is clear that some exercise tools, such as the *gadā* and the *mallasthamba*, had nothing to do with the Muslim sphere of culture or physical tradition, being absent from the Turco-Persian side of the equation. There, however, we witness the presence of gyratory movements that are linked to Islam, namely, to be more precise, to Sufism, the whirling practices of which were in turn inspired by older Shamanistic techniques aiming at modifying the state of consciousness (Mélikoff 1995: 65–68). Yet, these movements were not practised, as far as we know, in the *akhārā*. Beyond the obvious Sufi dimension of these spinning exercises, Persian sources such as the *Tumār* also refer to Galenic principles as underlying these practices. Thus, it was said that they contribute to strengthening of the arms by helping to project the flow of blood towards the parts of the arm that are the farthest removed from the core of the body, somewhat in the same way as in a tree where “the sap must flow from the stem to smallest branches.”<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, in the Turco-Iranian case, the physical exercises are rhythmic and based on the sound of the drum that is played by a dedicated Master of Music.

Let us also dwell on two of the body-building tools. Firstly, there is the *kabbādeh*, which is a massive metal arch weighing in at fifteen kilos that is used to build up the upper body. It is likely that the roots of this tool can be found in the strongly developed tradition of archery that existed in Turco-Persian Central Asia.<sup>25</sup>

The second tool that merits attention is the *mil*, a type of Indian club, known as *joḍī* in India. It would appear that the roots of this tool in the *zurkhāneh* programme might lie in Central Asia, and more specifically in the Buddhist presence therein. This link can be established by analysing a term of Mongolian origin that up and until the 19th century was used in connection with a particular form of exercise carried out with the *mil*, where the *mil* is moved very rapidly from back to front. This exercise still exists today but it is merely referred to as “rapid *mil*.” Textual sources from the 19th century, however, show that back then this particular movement used to be referred to as *mil-e*

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<sup>24</sup> *Tumār-e afsāneh in Partow-Beyzā'i Kāshāni*, 363.

<sup>25</sup> Up and until the 17th century, the exercise carried out with this tool used to be done with alternating fist-against-breast movements, but a shift occurred during the 18th and 19th centuries, with the movement migrating to above the athlete's head. It is surprising to note that the current *kabbādeh* exercises and the *kabbādi* game that is played in Eastern Iran, Afghanistan and all over the Indian Subcontinent, are similar in two respects although totally different in appearance. In both cases we have a chain (metal in the former and human in the second), and a situation in which success relies on a calculated management of breathing.

*gavorgeh*, with the term *gavorgeh* having evolved from the word *gaborgeh*, which means “drum” and as such is linked to, we believe, Central Asian/Tibetan percussion practices. Indeed, the rapid movement of the *mil* resembles a beating of vertically-arranged drums. It’s worth noting here that the word *gavorgeh* as it appears in the sources from the 19th century has been misread sometimes as *gorgeh* (a reading that is theoretically possible given the absence of short vowels in the Arabic script), which resembles the Persian word for wolf (*gorg*).

In conclusion, it can be said with certainty that in total six bodybuilding and warming-up exercises and two major bodybuilding tools are shared by the two traditions of the *jethīs* and the *pahlavāns*. Yet there is no trace of the specific *jethī* boxing practices in Iran or Central Asia. As far as a comparison of the bodybuilding exercises of the *zurkhāneh* with those of the north Indian fighting schools are concerned there is quite a high number of common elements. Indeed, the *zurkhāneh* of Iran and the *akhārā* of North India are well and truly “cousins,” regardless of the diverging discourses that have evolved about them since the advent of modern nation-states and their respective ideologies in India and in Iran.

The question, however, that, for the time being, remains unanswered is how to account for the unexpected connections/parallels between the techniques of the *jethīs* and those of the *pahlavāns*. How far back must we go to understand the striking resemblances between many of the body-building techniques, even though the two fighting styles are not at all the same?

We need to leave this problem to the efforts of further research and therefore turn our attention to the question of the processes through which these two different Turco-Persian and Indian fighting practices acquired and developed social legitimacy.

### Forging Legitimacy—Enhancing One’s Social Status: The Quest for Recognition in the Case of the Turco-Persian Tradition

In 13th-century sources concerning the Muslim tradition, wrestlers and other professional fighters are listed as belonging to the lowest strata of society. By the 16th century, however, they have reached the climax of social recognition: they are widely praised even by the most orthodox of Islamic legal scholars, and the tomb of Puryā-ye Vali, the Saint of the wrestlers and fighters, which is located in Khiva, has become a major pilgrimage centre, as the saint is believed to make miracles happen (Piemontese 1965: 167–213). How did this come about?

### The Spiritual and Institutional Context of Professional Wrestling in the Muslim Realm (Central Asia, Afghanistan, North India)

The Islamic character of the milieu in which Turco-Persian wrestling was (and is) situated, expressed itself in the form of Sufism: Turco-Persian wrestlers, indeed, claimed an allegiance to Sufi brotherhoods that kept rising in both strength and degree of organisation from the 14th through the 18th centuries. Sufism corresponds to the mystic dimension of Islam. Ridgeon (2015: 126) notes in this regard that there was “[t]he belief among some Sufis that experience of some form of intimacy with God was possible in their own lifetimes (whether it was an apprehension of ontological unity or else a vision of ultimate reality) which went beyond the piety of many Muslims who engaged in ‘normative’ Islamic ritual activity and who accepted ‘orthodox’ forms of belief.” Sufism can also entail rituals that aim at altering the state of one’s mind (*zehr, samāʿ*).

Furthermore, they were the producers of talismans, the healers and even the spiritual advisers to the politically or economically powerful, thereby often enjoying well-remunerated, hereditary positions. Profound religious beliefs benefitted certain Sufi families materially in an equally profound manner, sometimes making them major landowners. Sufi practices also, and very importantly, include the cult of saints to whom the ability of producing miracles is attributed and whose tombs become sites of pilgrimage. In the case of India, these sites were also often places where Muslims and Hindus mixed freely.<sup>26</sup>

The strands of Sufism that concern us here have their origins in Central Asia, i.e. the areas of Khiva, Bukhara, the Ferghana Valley as well as the link that connects those places to North India via Herat and Afghanistan. Other strands of Sufism did of course also exist but, as far as the Northern and Eastern parts of Iran are concerned, these Central Asian influences had been enjoying a dominant position within the *zurkhāneh* all the way up to the 1920s when the borders between the newly created Soviet Union and its southern neighbours hardened and lost much of the permeability that had existed there previously.

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<sup>26</sup> See the stimulating comments made by Green 2008: 1044–1061, and especially pages 1056–1057 where we read: “There is, however, much evidence to suggest that the more common Indian use of the term *Musulman* in place of *Muslim* actually referred to something more like a kinship or caste-like identity, so that it was quite possible to be a *Musulman* and a Yogi without experiencing the kind of clash of categories that would present itself to the modern observer [...] By the same token, until the nineteenth century Hindu Yogi masters were widely addressed with the Persian ‘Sufi’ title *pir*.”



Let us now go into somewhat more detail on the specific Central Asian Sufi saint with whom the Turco-Persian wrestlers chiefly identify, for which we are drawing in particular on the related works published by Piemontese in the 1960s.<sup>27</sup>

#### The Saint Mahmud Khwarezmi, known as “Puryā-ye Vali”

This saint can be traced back to 16th-century sources but there are also references to him from the early 18th century and he is mentioned in professional treatises on the arts of wrestling and bodybuilding. There used to be a veritable cult of Puryā-ye Vali and we find his name still being invoked in the *zēkrs* that were pronounced in the *zurkhāneh*’s of Isfahan during the 18th century,<sup>28</sup> i.e., at a time when the veneration of saints and the related practices were strongly condemned by Shiite orthodoxy, which had become the dominant, if not the official, religious doctrine of Iran by that time. Also, the *Tumār*, the late Safavid treatise already mentioned, which was composed in Tabriz, lays claim to the legacy of Puryā-ye Vali even though it recognises explicitly the influence of the Bektashi Order and its Whirling Dervishes.<sup>29</sup> Having said that, we are unable to say whether Puryā-ye Vali was equally, or even at all, venerated in India as a saint, as he was in Greater Khorasan and in Central Asia.

But who was this Puryā-ye Vali? He was born in Urgentch and died in Khiva in 1322. It seems that he held the post of leader of the troupe stable of wrestlers at the court of the governor of Khiva, which at that time came under the authority of the khaganate of the Golden Horde, making the city a multi-religious space with the presence of Islam, Shamanism, and Buddhism, and allowing all manner of influencing, borrowing, and adapting across the different traditions (Rochard 2002: 332–337). According to the legend, he became a Sufi after a spiritual revelation he obtained while fighting against a young Indian wrestler who he let win—against all the odds—because of the tears of his opponent’s mother. Having proved to his king that he had lost on purpose, he justified himself with some verses that till now represent the core of his preaching (see below), went into the desert and started to profess, although we do not have any written source about his teaching prior to the 16th century.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Piemontese 1966: 207–220; 1964; 1965a; 1965b: 787–801; 1967: 557–563.

<sup>28</sup> See *Gol-e koshti in Partow-Beyzā’i Kāshāni*, 399.

<sup>29</sup> See *Tumār-e afsāneh in Partow-Beyzā’i Kāshāni*, 353.

<sup>30</sup> See Rochard 2002 for a comprehensive presentation on the legend of Puryā-ye Vali based on the works of Piemontese 1965a and 1966.

In fact, at that time this saint was literally “appropriated”—in a similar fashion to how other saints and spiritual lineages were sometimes reclaimed by various groups—by the Naqshbandi order. The establishment of the Naqshbandi Sufi order was the result of a reform effort that occurred towards the end of the 14th century, which aimed at reinforcing Sunni orthodoxy against the proliferation of various deviant Sufi practices. Hence the Naqshbandis refrained from engaging in overly ostentatious spiritual/mystical practices, advocating a “sober” approach and dedicating much effort to the conversion of non-Muslims, by force if need be (Zarcone 1996: 328). The order became increasingly powerful in the region because monarchs began to grant the Naqshbandiyya special protection and patronage in order to use them as a tool to exercise control over the vast, and spaces often difficult to access, which formed their territories, and which were furthermore largely inhabited by a nomadic population that resented, and indeed often resisted, all forms of centralised authority.<sup>31</sup>

It is in this context that we witness the appearance of the legend of Puryā-ye vali on the pages of a number of works that (also) covered the art of wrestling/fighting and were composed at the court of Husayn Bāyqarā, the early 16th-century Timurid ruler of Herat, a great patron of the arts and letters. He evidently also enjoyed attending wrestling matches, as he had poems composed in honour of his favourite *pahlavān*, Dervish Mohammad (Piemontese 1966). Furthermore, it is at the court of this ruler that the scholar Va’ez Kāshefi composed the *Fotovvat-nāmeḥ-ye soltāni* in which the art of wrestling is depicted as a most virtuous and highly important activity (Piemontese 1967).

Clearly, since the Naqshbandis were the biggest religious authority at that time in the Timurid court of Afghanistan and, since the court was fond of wrestling, they had to pronounce on the subject. It is likely that they adopted and supported the legend of Puryā-ye Vali to please the ruler of their time, the powerful and very generous king Husayn Bāyqarā.

A hundred years later, in the 17th century, Puryā-ye Vali was once more re-appropriated; this time by the rulers of Khiva, who were now the ones trying to find favour with the Naqshbandis. They made the saint’s tomb a site of pilgrimage and specifically added to its significance by making it the place where their war flag was stored.

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<sup>31</sup> This was particularly the case in Kazakhstan, see Zarcone 2000 and 1999: 225–241.

As far as India is concerned, the Naqshbandiyya became equally powerful during the reign of the Mughals, with the latter going as far as declaring themselves disciples of the order (Foltz 1996: 229–239). In the Indian context, one can simply not overlook the detail, perhaps not so small, that Puryā-ye Vali himself had attained sainthood by deliberately losing a fight against an Indian wrestler. In that circumstance, when his unhappy ruler asked about his defeat and how a man who had achieved such physical prowess could be beaten by a young Indian wrestler, Puryā-ye Vali is said to have pronounced a famous quatrain that sums up his spiritual awakening and future lessons. It goes as follows (Rochard 2002: 333; English translation by Houchang Chehabi):

If you can dominate your own self, you're a man,  
If you don't find fault with others, you're a man,  
It is not manly to kick one who's down,  
If you take the hand of the one who is down, you're a man.

Puryā-ye Vali, therefore, preached a path of pure altruism, benevolence, kindness and destruction of the ego as a gate to illumination and highest spiritual achievement, a path that, from a theoretical point of view, was quite the opposite of what was required for a wrestler. A philosophy of life that is adapted to what is known in India, but also in the Middle Eastern cultural sphere through the ethics of life, is professed under the name of *javānmardi* (Ridgeon 2018). According to Piemontese (1965a), the authors (probably Naqshbandi themselves or, at least, under their spiritual influence) of this quatrain were aware of an already existing oral tradition when they adopted and adapted it in their own treatise according to their religious ethos.

All of this means that during the 15th and 16th centuries, the spectacle of wrestling was not only legitimised by patronage and protection at the highest social level, i.e., that of the ruling courts, but also by the approval bestowed on it by one of the most demanding religious institutions, the Naqshbandiyya, by successfully appropriating the legacy of the venerated Puryā-ye Vali.

However, what we do *not* know for sure is what the *actual* Puryā-ye Vali who lived and worked during the 14th century had to say on the art of the fight. We only know what had been attributed to him two centuries later when he is referred to in the writings produced at the Timurid court of Herat at a moment where Naqshbandi influence is at its peak.

Yet there *must* have been an original and somewhat detailed pronouncement on his part because the Naqshbandiyya, having claimed the legacy of this particular saint, had

after all been unable to stop the milieu of the professional fighters from engaging in rituals that the Naqshbandis firmly disapproved of. Indeed, the musically enhanced sessions, rhythmic incantations aimed at reaching a higher state of consciousness—*samāʿ* and *zehr*—as well as the noisy and demonstrative public performances continued in the Sufi-inspired milieu of the professional wrestlers on a daily basis. Thus, the gyrating exercises that have their roots in Sufi swirling rituals were formally integrated into the programme of the athletes. At any rate, it is easy to imagine that in real life, rather than feeling a particular affinity with the austere Naqshbandiyya, the milieu of wrestling felt much closer to brotherhoods that encouraged the “path of intoxication,” i.e. the Qalandariyya<sup>32</sup> or the Heydariyya.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, throughout time, professional wrestlers had always wandered in search of patrons and clients and, at the same time perhaps, of spiritual enlightenment. In this regard, they could count on the involvement of Sufi dervishes who were of a far more mystical persuasion than the rather sober Naqshbandis. Thus, on the occasion of religious holidays, when important showcases of wrestling were taking place, great numbers of dervishes would show up for the event: some would sit near the water cisterns, while others would be present at the *zurkhāneh* itself during training sessions. They would sell talismans and spells, engage in healing and in blessing people, and also participate in the rituals associated with the induction of new athletes into the *zurkhāneh* (Soudavar 1992: 325).

However, they remained loyal to Puryā-ye Vali as their protector also for pragmatic reasons. When a master-wrestler wanted to open his own *zurkhāneh*, as for all the “men of craft and trade” in the Middle-East, he had to get an authorisation given by a religious judge who was in charge of verifying a document produced for the occasion and which belonged to the judicial literary tradition of the *fotovvat-nāmeḥ*, a written paper describing, among other things, the tradition of the profession and its protective saint. Clearly, the possibility of referring to Puryā-ye Vali and his social and moral rules provided wrestlers with an excellent and well-known saint to legitimise their profession before religious authority (Rochard and Jallat 2018).

In conclusion, it must be noted that the legacy of the 13th-/14th-century wrestler saint Puryā-ye Vali impacts on the milieu of Turco-Persian professional wrestling in not just one way, but rather two interconnected ways. On the one hand, given the appropriation

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<sup>32</sup> Qalandariyya has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention but the following two studies are, in our opinion, particularly noteworthy: Boivin 2012 and Papas 2016.

<sup>33</sup> See *Ganjineh-ye koshti*; it transpires from this manuscript that at the end of the 19th century, Tehran’s professional wrestlers laid claim to the legacy of the Sufi Master Qotb od-din Heydar (d. 618 h.q.), the founder of the Heydariyya. See also Rochard and Jallat 2018: 257.

of this saint by the increasingly powerful Naqshbandi order during the Timurid and post-Timurid eras, professional wrestling, which was already a perfect metaphor for self-control and self-restraint (values that rhyme perfectly with the Naqshbandi ethos), became, by association, linked to the orthodox and austere values of the Naqshbandiyya.

This put them, or at least some of them, above the role of mere entertainers, such as acrobats, transforming them into a source of moral lessons and inspiration to such an extent that the most spiritually inspired wrestlers had the right to become a *pīr*, a spiritual guide.

This seems to have bestowed on the milieu of professional wrestling in Central Asia, Iran, and North India a religious legitimacy that is respected in scholarly circles, considered highly honourable and exists, above all, in a *written*, codified, and therefore normative form.

On the other hand, since the saint also remained popular among common people, it also allowed—through the medium of manifold forms of popular piety—to associate the practices of the *zurkhāneh* with those of more mystical, “wandering,” Sufi orders, such as the Qalandaris or the Heydaris. And this represents the *orally* transmitted and actually “practised-in-reality” (as opposed to normative) form of legitimacy that derives from the legacy of Puryā-ye Vali.

Having established the above, let us now take the spotlight away from the Turco-Persian realms of Iran and Central Asia in order to focus on comparable processes of legitimisation as they played out on the Indian subcontinent.

### **The Interplay of Internal and External Social Hierarchies and the Improvement of Status in Indian Wrestling: Lessons from the *Mallapurāṇa***

By way of introduction to this part, we would like to emphasise that the Hindu and Muslim communities of India were not as mutually impermeable as is often suggested. Indeed, it has been shown that Muslims could be followers of yoga masters, Hindus could pray at the tombs of Muslim saints (Green 2008), and certain apprentices of professional wrestling belonging to one faith could very well study with masters of another faith (Alter 1992: 11–12, 52). The famous Indian Muslim fighter known as the



Great Gama who was active in the early 20th century was the disciple of a Hindu guru (ibid.: 225).<sup>34</sup>

Yet it's not so much the issue of interaction and cross-influence between different religious traditions in the milieu of professional fighting in India that we would like to address in this third part of our paper but rather the question of the continuous efforts of the members of this milieu to use actual or invented religious legitimacies in order to enhance their social status, or, to consolidate it at times when the latter was in a somewhat precarious state. Studying the Indian case, which will be done below based on an analysis of the *Mallapurāṇa* carried out by Veena Das (1968), seems particularly pertinent to understanding the principles of social *enhancement*, as opposed to the *consolidation* and *shoring up* of an endangered status that typified the Turco-Persian case discussed in the second part.

### The *Mallapurāṇa*

The *Mallapurāṇa*<sup>35</sup> (literally “Treatise on Wrestling”) is a treatise dedicated to a professional sub-cast from Gujarat. It is divided into eighteen chapters that relate how Kṛṣṇa and Bhīma taught the art of wrestling to the very first *jeṭhī-malla*. On the basis of this, the treatise also explains how to practice the discipline and how to prepare one's body to do so. Written in the 16th century, at the same time in which the story of Puryā-ye Vali was codified, the text demonstrates how this was an important period for social organisation and administrative/judicial development. Similarly to the Persian texts mentioned in the previous parts, the *Mallapurāṇa* also indicates the financial obligations of the sovereign, who is depicted as the ideal sponsor of the fighter. He is supposed to reward the winner with twice the sum that is paid to the loser, while an equal amount is to be paid to both in the case of a draw. It also provides social legitimization through religious claims.

This treatise, which begins with the opening *śloka* of the *Mahābhārata* (the prayer of Viṣṇu), has many sections written carefully in a style that gives the impression that it was written in the 15th century. However, the sociologist Veena Das (1968: 142) has demonstrated that the text must have been produced much later than its author tries to make his readers believe: the occasional Gujarati expressions that crept into the work give away the game of the author. It would appear that the text was in actual fact from

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<sup>34</sup> On Gama's extraordinary life story see Sen 2015: 165–174.

<sup>35</sup> See the analytical introduction provided by the editors Bhogilal Jayachandbhai Sandesara and Ramanlal Nagarji Mehta, in *Mallapurana* 1964: 1–32.

the 16th century and that its Gujarati author, perhaps a paid public writer, had been trying to get the sub-caste of the *jeṭhī-malla* recognised as belonging to the caste of the Brahmans of the town of Modhera, located near Ahmedabad, the capital of Gujarat. This claimed membership had been contested by the Brahmans of Modhera who invoked another original account as proof. The Brahmans declared that the *jeṭhīs*, in so far as they were in actual fact “former Brahmans who had lapsed,” could not pretend to be recognised as real Brahmans and thus could not benefit from the privileges that this status brought (Das 1968: 143). The dispute is anchored within the system of the *varṇas* and the castes, which form the frame of reference for both adversaries.

Veena Das demonstrates how the author of the *Mallapurāṇa*, apart from his reference to the rules of the corporation, tries to prove his thesis that the *jeṭhīs* originated from a higher status than the one that they currently held. Veena Das explains how the text tries to overcome this problem:

- *firstly*, the author tries to prove that the *Purāṇa* is, in fact, authentic;
- *secondly*, the author attempts to furnish a valid explanation as to why the blatant incongruity between the lifestyle of the *jeṭhī-malla* and the status that is being claimed by them does not matter and hence how their claim to Brahman status is after all justified.

How does the author go about it?

### Legitimisation Processes

As far as the issue of *authenticity* is concerned, the author was trying to pass off his treatise as being from the 15th century by imbuing it with the existing and well-established legitimacy of the great Sanskrit literary tradition of the *Purāṇas*. Similar legitimisation strategies have been described in the case of Persian works. To quote the great scholar of Persian literature Charles-Henri de Fouchécour, for this type of legitimisation strategy to work it is necessary, on the one hand, “qu’une cohérence soit gardée avec le sens antérieurement admis,” and on the other hand, “que la découverte de sens soit investie d’une autorité sans rupture avec l’autorité antérieure de la tradition.”<sup>36</sup> A similar point is made by Balandier (1984: 202) in his analysis of the dynamic aspects of traditional societies. He notes that any innovation, if it is to succeed, needs to find ways of attaching itself to existing systems and established values. Yet, in

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<sup>36</sup> “That coherence be maintained with the previously accepted meaning” and “that the discovery of meaning be invested with an authority without breaking with the previous authority of the tradition,” Fouchécour 1991: 57 cited by During 1994: 238–239.

so doing, the innovation modifies the tradition, and this despite the fact that innovations often claim to be doing the opposite, namely, to uphold tradition or return to it in its purest and most original form. Indeed, innovative or disruptive discourses are always claiming that they were in fact the real tradition.

In the case of the *jethīs*, since they wanted to associate themselves with Brahmins, it is possible to see in their claim a significant degree of what the anthropologist M. N. Srinivas (1966: 6) has called “Sanskritization,” considering Sanskritization as the process whereby groups modify their beliefs, rituals, and practices in order to be closer to those who are dominant in the religious landscape.

In fact, as for the second task of the author, namely, to find a convincing argument as to why *jethīs* must be considered as Brahmins, the text insists on the difference between the essential and non-essential qualities of a Brahmin. What counts, and what makes a Brahmin, is the *dharma*; lifestyle and occupation are entirely secondary. Thus, in order to justify the physical exercises of the wrestlers in these terms, the author refers to the *dharma* and the necessity of its protection. In order to make his point, the author goes as far as invoking Kṛṣṇa, who is said to have engaged in the practice of wrestling himself. Indeed, the text provides a narrative that takes the form of a veritable historical count-down that describes all the different practices of the period but links them to supposed mythical origins, bestowing on them a legitimacy originating directly from Kṛṣṇa who is, of course, perfectly entitled to create new practices. The argument boils down to the following syllogism presented by Veena Das (1968: 151), whom we quote here in full:

All Brahmins must have a particular lifestyle.  
The *jethimalla* have a particular lifestyle.  
Hence, the *jethimalla* are Brahmins.

The author then elaborates on this in the following manner:

- A particular form of lifestyle is dependent on political support.
- This support is, however, waning or indeed collapsing in the *kaliyuga* (the present time, being black and corrupted).
- This in turn obliges the *jethimalla* to engage in wrestling in order to protect their *dharma* during *kaliyuga*.
- Wrestling does not correspond with the lifestyle of the Brahmins.
- Hence the *jethimalla* are not Brahmins.

- **However**, the *jethimalla* practise wrestling as a means of protecting their *dharma* and it's the *dharma* that is the essential ingredient of Brahmanic status and *not* lifestyle.
- **Thus** the *jethimalla* are Brahmins.

Veena Das concludes that the author's case has a degree of internal coherence that makes it quite convincing. What's more, the fieldwork done in the region during the 1960s and 1970s by Mehta and Sandesara on the one hand, and by Roşu on the other hand, shows that, in the long-term at least, the case of the author of the *Mallapurāṇa* carried the day: the *jethīs* encountered by the researchers were indeed considered to be Brahmins!

In conclusion to this part let us note that if Veena Das is to be believed—and we are fully prepared to do so based on the strength of her analysis—the *Mallapurāṇa* expresses the hope of a professional caste, which has succeeded in acquiring a sufficiently comfortable economic situation to elevate itself to a higher stratum within the social hierarchy of the *varṇa* and castes. This desire to climb the social ladder is characteristic of all professional communities; they are prepared to do whatever it takes to achieve this goal. The difficulty lies in finding ways of getting these ambitions recognised by society, especially by those who are already benefiting from the status that is being sought. All possible means to get there are fair: attainment of royal patronage, acquisition of religious legitimacy from above or below via co-optation, and, as we have witnessed in this case, legal procedures.

## Conclusion

There is no need to reiterate all the different points made above. However, we would like to emphasise the following. While there does not seem to have existed a wholly shared, common, tradition, as is proven by the differences in terms of exercise tools and certain practices, it has been demonstrated that there was fruitful interaction between the Indian and the Turco-Persian tradition of wrestling, the roots of each of which probably go back to ancient periods.

It has also become clear that conceptualisations of the body that have their origins in the Indian subcontinent have had an influence on the Muslim world and especially on Sufism. Indeed, there is a general openness to influences from religious legacies that are different from one's own amongst the populations of the territories that we are dealing with.



Following on from there, the ways in which the communities of wrestlers in both the cultural zones that concern us worked in order to consolidate or, indeed, enhance their social status has also become clear. Turco-Persian wrestling is situated within two quite different levels of discourse at the same time: one aristocratic, the other religious. The corporations of professional wrestlers in the Muslim regions managed to procure for themselves legitimacy at the highest level by obtaining royal patronage and, in addition to that, religious legitimacy by successfully associating their professional activity with Sufi brotherhoods, which in turn allowed them to maintain their embeddedness within society at large.

In the Indian case, this seems to have been done by successfully obtaining Brahman status for professional *jeṭhī* wrestlers/boxers. It is particularly interesting to note that the *Mallapurāṇa* was organised in almost the same way as a *fotovvat-nāmeḥ* judiciary document. Basically, we can witness the production of similar documents from two very different contexts. This process occurred at a time of political, administrative, and legal reorganisation in India under the Mughal dynasty, and more precisely during the reign of Akbar. This is illustrated by the two maps showing the expansion of the Mughal empire into Gujarat on the one hand and the methods for the identification of land ownership on the other, and by the organisational chart depicted below (see Fig. 12, 13, and 14). This period of change was favourable to a certain upward social mobility of professional groups from lower socio-economic backgrounds. We can suggest that this was favoured by the new judiciary system linked to the Mughal. According to this system, indeed, religion was the framework to conceptualise social legitimacy: what was considered legitimate from a religious perspective was also legitimate from a sociological perspective, since society was an attempt to represent on earth higher realms. For this reason, the judiciary system was in the hands of religious people.

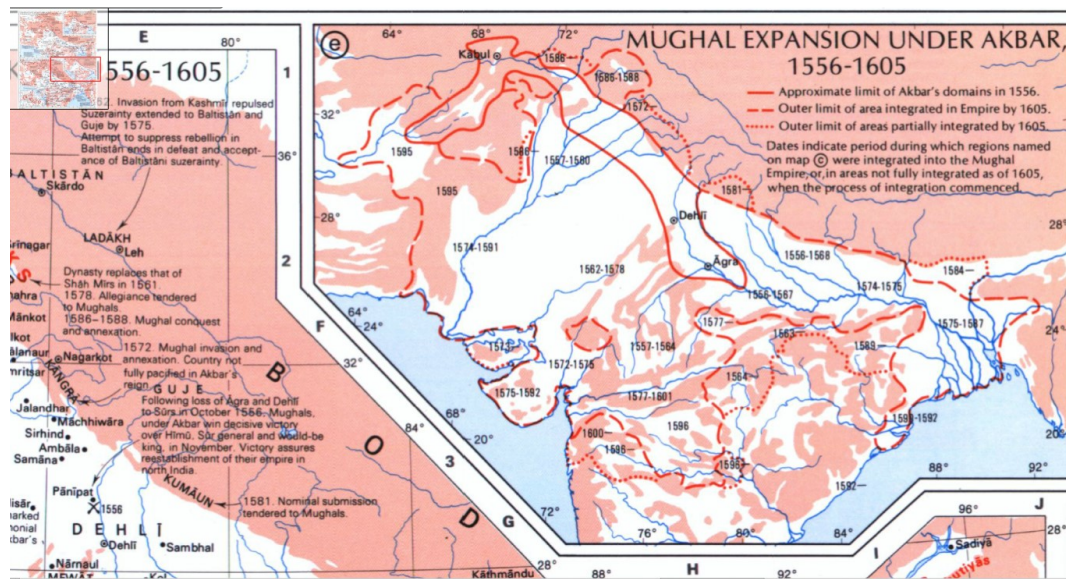
We can conclude that for the world of professional wrestling, as regards both the Turco-Persian tradition and the Indian tradition, whatever appropriation of socio-cultural belonging that was deemed necessary to enhance one's own social status was fair. It was fair even when it meant making important modifications to one's own long-established and cherished teachings and practices, but only as long as one was able to present these modifications as restorations and not as innovations.

How then does the above relate to the overarching question of this chapter, namely the question why yoga exercises in India began to increasingly incorporate more complex *āsanas* in the 17th century? We can hypothesise that the legitimisation processes engaged in the *jyeṣṭhī-mallas* indirectly legitimise even their practices, and this, in turn,

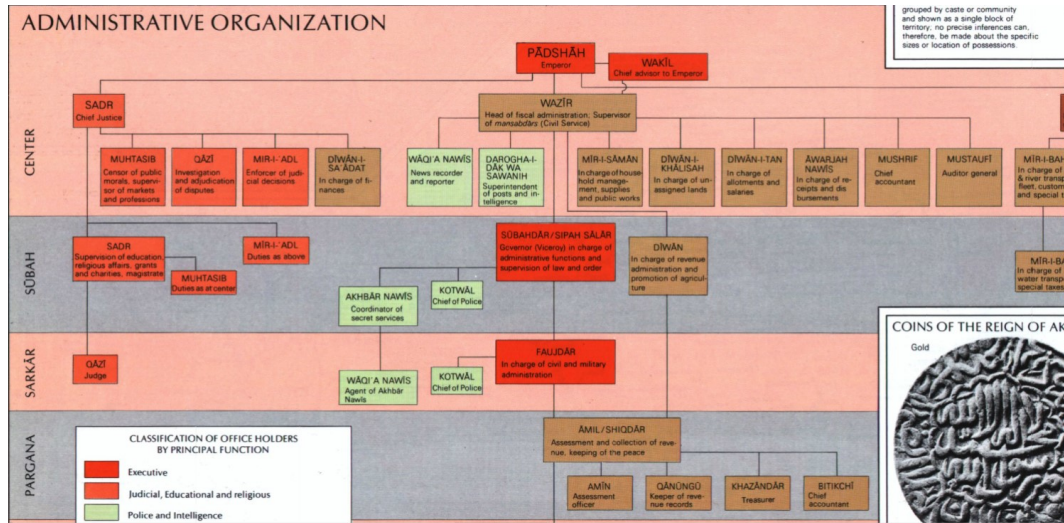
might have opened the door for the introduction of more dynamic exercises, especially into late-mediaeval yoga texts (Birch 2018).

While it is difficult to find a correspondence between *jethī*'s practices and those described in the yoga texts (see McCartney in this volume), it is not impossible, however, to suppose that the practice of the *jyeṣṭhī-mallas*, once legitimised, could have, indirectly or even afterwards, influenced the practice of some groups of ascetics/yogis, especially those involved with court performances (see Suebsantiwongse in this volume), or with martial training (see Pinch 2006). Unfortunately, these are fundamental topics that still need a proper investigation.

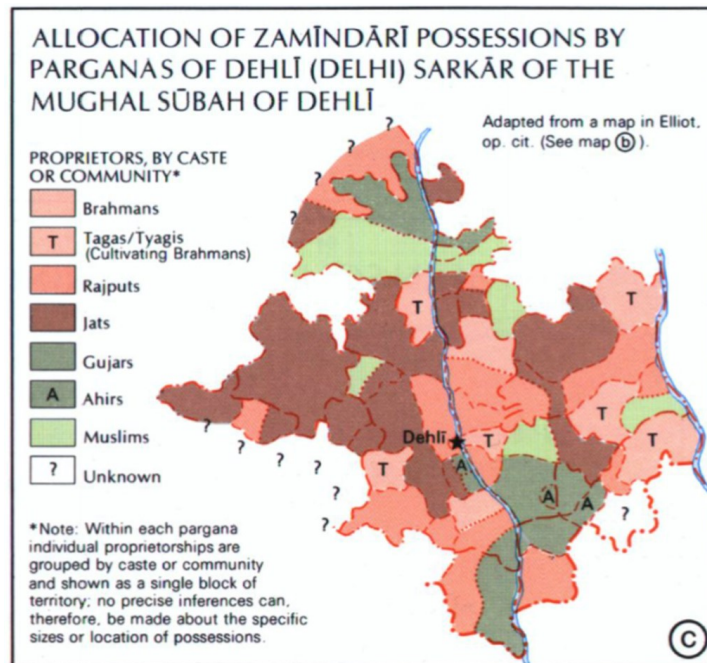
Surely, adding dynamic corporal movements to the established postures did not prevent internal reflection and evolution within yogic philosophy and practice. Thus, over time, since these practices had become perfectly integrated into the texts, the mixing of physical exercises with more meditative practices allowed yoga to reach a broader public, to such an extent that this form of yoga gradually became the norm.



**Figure 12:** Map showing the Mughal expansion 1556–1605, which illustrates the capture of the province of Gujarat between 1575 and 1592 (to be integrated fully into the Empire by 1605) as well the overall extent of the empire: the northern half of India is under the direct military, administrative and judicial control of the Mughals. Schwartzberg, Joseph E. 1978. *A Historical Atlas of South Asia*, second impression. Retrieved from: <https://dsal.uchicago.edu/reference/schwartzberg/pager.html?object=081>. Accessed on: 26 October 2022.



**Figure 13:** Moghul State Organisation at the turn of the 17th century (based on the *‘Ain-i-Ākbari* of Abul Fazl-i-‘Allāmī). Proposal: The Mughal justice system gives people of lower caste an opportunity to improve their social situation (recognition of *jeṭhī* wrestlers as Brahmins). Schwartzberg, Joseph E. 1978. *A Historical Atlas of South Asia*, second impression. Retrieved from: <https://dsal.uchicago.edu/reference/schwartzberg/fullscreen.html?object=082>. Accessed on: 26 October 2022.



**Figure 14:** Map illustrating the spatial distribution of land-owning communities in the Dehli region circa 1605. Schwartzberg, Joseph E. 1978. *A Historical Atlas of South Asia*, second impression. Retrieved from: <https://dsal.uchicago.edu/reference/schwartzberg/pager.html?object=082>. Accessed on: 26 October 2022.

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