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POLES APART? FROM WRESTLING AND MALLKHĀMB TO POLE YOGA

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Abstract

Mallkhāmb (*malla-khāmba*, “wrestler-pole”) is today popularly referred to as “Pole Yoga” and it is recognised as the so-called “Authentic Indian Sport.” However, its history is confusing to trace. Some speculate that the source of pole yoga is neither the Marathi *mallkhāmb* nor the similar Sanskrit *mallastambha*, or neither *stambha-śrama* (“pole-exercise”). Rather, myths of Śiva’s *stambha* are imagined across dissonant and dislocated biographies, which appear to be poles apart and appear to represent an ever-increasing historical polarity. The aim of this chapter is to provide clarity about, and if possible pin, *mallkhāmb*’s connections to *haṭhayoga*’s suite of *āsanas* (“postures”). This thorough analysis of *mallkhāmb*’s primary textual sources is based on a close reading of the *Mallapurāṇa* and *Mānasollāsa*, through which it is determined that the wrestler’s *āsana* has very little, if anything at all, to do with the contemporaneous concept of *āsana* as stretching. Instead, it serves as an integral part of a wrestler’s path towards defeating his opponent.

KEYWORDS

Mallkhāmb, *Mallastambha*, Pole Yoga, Indian Sport, Haṭhayoga, Yoga.

Priming the Pole: A Prologue

ākḥāḍhasya samīpasthā ye kāryāḥ svarāḥ kila |
tatsarvaṃ kathayiṣyāmi yogakṣemārthasiddhaye ||

Sounds that should be performed traditionally around the gym,
I will tell all of them for the sake of accomplishing the goal of *yogakṣema*.

|| Mallapurāṇa 7.01 ||

Mallkhāmb is a compound comprising the Sanskrit *malla* (“wrestler”) with the Marathi *khāmba/khāmbā/khamb* (“post”), which does not seem to appear before 1750 CE.¹ Historically, this term, and its antecedent, referred to an auxiliary training exercise that wrestlers engaged in to condition their bodies, which required them to climb up and down a pole.²

The intention of this chapter is two-fold. Since very little is known about *mallkhāmb*, a summary of key aspects regarding its own historiography is compared with its more popular narratives. This will combine with an exploration of its possible influence on the pre-modern development of *haṭhayoga*. A key feature of this analysis will be a discussion focusing on disambiguating the context within which *mallkhāmb*’s use of *āsana* (“posture”) and its relation to *sthāna* (“position”) occurred. The results of this preliminary study have implications beyond *mallkhāmb* and wrestling towards broadening our understanding of yoga.

With this in mind, let us first begin with the aforementioned verse from the *Mallapurāṇa* (MP 7.01), which is one of the few texts to mention wrestlers and poles. In this verse, we find a clear context within which the wrestler’s conception of the utility of yoga existed. Importantly, it appears to have very little to do with either the contemporary manifestations of either yoga or *mallkhāmb*. The MP’s wrestlers may wax nostalgic on what they perceive as a cultural binary inherent in the *Ṛgveda*, where the term *yoga-kṣema* occurs (10.166.5) but does not refer to a “spiritual” practice of yoga, as

¹ *Khāmba* derives from the Sanskrit, *stambha* (√*stabh*, support) through the (s) → (k^h) sound change that is observed as early as the *Śuklayajurveda* (Bhat 2001; Southworth 2005). See Pāṇini 2020, 3.1.82.

² Some better-known references to descriptions of wrestling matches are found in the epics, such as the *Mahābhārata* (2.21.10), the *Harivaṃśa* (7.01–24), the *Agnipurāṇa* (12.01–55) (see Mitram 1873), the *Śrīmadbhāgavata* (10.44), and the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* (5.20). While these texts provide insight into several fighting (*niyuddha*) techniques they do not detail the behind-the-scenes training regimes.

understood many centuries later.³ In MP 7.01, the meaning of “yoga” demarcated the period of time within which the military application of martial “action” (*yoga*) occurred. This was contrasted with the interceding period of “rest” (*kṣema*).

The yoga expressed in the MP, therefore, involves a transformative movement towards *jita-śrama* (“the effort of one who is victorious”).

Introduction

Since the inauguration of the World Mallakhāmb Federation in 2016 and the first world championships in 2019, this internationally federated sport is one step closer to inclusion in the modern Olympic games (D’Cunha 2019).⁴ As part of India’s competitive, diplomatic aspiration to brand itself as a wellness tourism hub (McCartney 2021c), *mallakhāmb* is intended to boost Incredible!India’s soft power signal through constructing mystically holistic story worlds.⁵

The contemporary sport of *mallakhāmb* (*mallakhāmb*, “the wrestler’s pole”) requires athletes to climb up and down a pole (or rope) performing choreographed sequences of *yogāsana*-like postures (McCartney 2021d).⁶

Where, how and when wrestlers came to include climbing poles (and ropes) is somewhat unclear. The usual origin story begins with the encyclopaedic, Cālukyan, 12th-century *Mānasollāsa* (MS, “The Delighter/Entertainer of the Mind”), which described wrestlers as learned (*viśārada*) in *malla-vidyā* (“wrestling-science”, MS 6.4.882–883, Shrigondekar 1961). However, this text does not mention *mallakhāmb*, using, instead, *stambha-śrama* (“pole-exercise”). Further information is found in the *Mallapurāṇa* (MP), which is misconstrued as a “5000-year-old text” that is supposedly

³ See Palihawadana 1968.

⁴ *Mallakhāmb* appeared at the 1936 Berlin Olympics and thirteen years later in Stockholm at the international non-competitive gymnastic event, the Lingiad. Then the Indian gymnasts went on a European tour (Life Magazine 1949; Alter 2013; Sen 2015). Archival footage exists of the Indian Yogi Demonstration performing *mallakhāmb* at Bergish-Gladbach, Germany (Pathé 2014). *Mallakhāmb* reappeared at the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics. However, the Covid-19 pandemic meant that only a couple of athletes attended.

⁵ See Alter 1992; Coste 2017; Forum 2017; Geary 2013; India 2017; Kant 2009; Mallakhamb 2016; Tourism 2017; Tewari 2017; McCartney 2021a,b; van Poecke 2018.

⁶ The *malla*’s *khāmb* is made from tropical hard wood (*dṛḍha-kāṣṭha*) species like teak (*Tectona grandis*; *sāgvān*) or rose wood (*Dalbergia sissoo*; *śīśam*, *śāṃśapa*, or *īṇśapā*) (India 2019: 2). See Sengupta 2016 for an overview of both the historical and contemporary issues with wrestling in India.

“older than the Bhagavad-Gītā” (Athlete 2018; Govind 2016; Show 2016). Clearly, this premise is a slippery pole oiled by ethnographic relativism, historical perspectivity and intellectual scepticism (Alter 1994, 2013; Guha 2019; Singleton 2010).

It remains unclear as to when, why, where and by whom the western Cālukyan *stambhaśrama* transformed into the Marathi *mallakhāmb*. It is said to have re-emerged between 1750 and 1800 CE (Bhave 1936), ostensibly as part of *mallkhāmb*’s “revival” under the last Peshwa. However, artwork from the preceding centuries (16th century onwards), from Rajasthan (Miner 2016; Museum 2020) and South India (Dallapiccola 2010), depict many scenes featuring acrobats, wrestlers and outcast street performers dancing on poles and ropes.

Keeping in mind that the origin of such a use of poles could be linked to the sacrificial pillar (*yūpa*) (see Staal 1993: 84–86, and Roşu 1981: 1984), and to the use of posts in Vedic ritual “as a means of ascension, as ladders leading to heaven” (Gerety 2016: 182),⁷ *mallkhāmb*’s origin might lie with the profession of pole dancing acrobats that Mujumdar briefly mentioned as the possible progenitor of *mallkhāmb* (1950: 2). Already, in the Sangam literature (300 BCE to 300 CE), we find tumblers (*kaḷāyar*) and acrobats (*kōrampar*) known as *kaḷaikkūttan*. It is mentioned, for example, that the daughters of a hunter would leap on to clumping bamboo and dance in time with the music (*kaḷaikkūttāṭi*) (see Dakshinamurthy 2001: 191–192; Naṛṇai 95.1–6). The seventh poem of the *Kuṟuntokai* (a Tamil Sangam anthology, circa 200 CE) describes a clump of bamboo along a desert path upon which “rope dancing” or “tightrope walking” occurred (கயிறாடு, *kayirātuḷ*) (see Herbert 2022; Balasubramanian 1991). Similarly, the *Vājasaneyisaṃhitā* (VS 30.21) (600 BCE) and its later commentary, the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* (ŚB 13.6.2.20) (300 BCE) mention professional pole dancing in Caṇḍāla (outcast) villages deep in the Vindhyā mountains.⁸

More than a millennium later, travelling performers roamed across the Deccan (Novetzke 2011 and 2016; Ramakrishnan and Patil 2015). Known as *kīrtankāras*, they formed troupes which included musicians, dancers, wrestlers and acrobats providing both didactic and ecstatic performances, often within a folk theatre (*tamāśā*) context, including bawdier forms of music and dance known as *lavani* (Rege 1995; Kulkarni 2021).

⁷ On the use and presence of poles/posts in Vedic rituals see Roşu 1981; Staal 1993; Brighenti 2012; Chausidisa 2013; Gerety 2016.

⁸ The *Sarvamedha* rite describes a Caṇḍāla (“outcast”) as a professional pole dancer (VS 30.21 *vāyave caṇḍālakarmānam antariṣṭāya vaṃśanartinam vaṃśena nartanaśīlam*). Mahīdhara glosses *vaṃśanartin* as *vaṃśena nartaśīla* (“one who practises dance with a bamboo pole”) and by Sāyaṇa as *vaṃśa-agra-nṛtta-jīvin* (“one who makes a living by dancing on top of a bamboo staff”) (Weber 1852: 847).

Thus, several questions arise: How did the “wrestler’s pole” come to be mentioned, at first, in the MS? From whom did the wrestlers get the idea to climb up and down poles? How does any of this relate to the pre-modern development of *haṭhayoga*?

Germane to these questions is the period between the 10th to 20th centuries CE—from Cālukyan times up to the time of Mysore’s Wodeyars—when wrestling (*malla-yuddha*) was a popular pastime, either as entertainment or as a fitness regime that citizens engaged in at their local *garaḍi-mane* (gymnasium, “juggling house”).⁹

On the one hand, this chapter aims to search for the “initial” practitioners who could have begun the use of poles as a form of performance, and then to acknowledge further developments that saw the practice being appropriated by wrestlers, up to its more modern outcomes. On the other hand, it focuses on the MP and its use of *āsana* to disambiguate its relationship to *sthāna* (“posture/position”). As we will see, neither term refers to the contemporary ideation of *haṭhayoga*’s *āsana*.

Using a methodological approach that combines an ethno-philological/historical-archival investigation of primary and secondary texts across multiple genres composed in several Indic languages, this chapter aims, therefore, to highlight the entanglement of physical culture, royal sovereignty, stage performance, acrobatics, and “tumbling” with the ancient and pre-modern military labour markets and trade routes.¹⁰ This side-step into literature related to stage performance and dance potentiate future exploration of *haṭhayoga*’s relationship to outcast street performing acrobats (see Singleton 2010: 26). This topic has already split the opinions of many scholars: for Eliade there was “no connection” (1958: 228); Basham acknowledged an aesthetic similarity (1959: 326), while Alter presented an open-minded attitude (2004: 22–23).

The chapter is divided in three main sections. In the first section, we will focus on delineating the “births of *mallkhāmb*,” offering an informative social history detailing the prevailing assumptions about *haṭhayoga*, the nation-branding project of Incredible *Mallkhāmb*’s tourism campaign and its origins in the publications of the 1920s to 1940s. This will be followed by scrutinising the main hagiographic narratives and *mallkhāmb*’s place at the Maratha court during the late 18th century. In the second section, we will begin with wrestling’s mention in the MS (2.1), while section 2.2 will summarise the

⁹ Synonyms are *akhārā* or *vyāyāma-sālā* (“wrestling/exercise/gymnastics hall”).

¹⁰ See Cashman 1975; Christopolous 2013; Francis 1907; Hassan 1920; Lutgendorf 2007; Mulally 1892; O’Hanlon 2007; Olivelle 2020; Peabody 2009; Piliavsky 2015; Pinch 2012; Sherring 1872; Thurston and Rangachari 1909b.

pole dancing precedents and professional “street performing” troupes that existed a millennium prior to the MS. Section 2.3 provides a socio-historical perspective on the MP’s wrestlers. The third and final section shifts into a significantly different register to focus on the context and application of *āsana*, *sthāna*, and *śrama* (“exercise”), while conducting a philological assessment to disambiguate constituent categories and contexts from the MP.

The Births of *Mallkhāmb*

A century or so of Mallkhāmb

A potent myth-making kernel describes *mallkhāmb*’s birthplace as a “very peaceful (place) & really ‘Untouched’ by the perversed (*sic*) modernisation” (India 2017). *Mallkhāmb* is promoted as “Pole Yoga,” “yoga on a pole,” “pole wrestling,” Polga™ or Shivastambha Yoga™ and as “India’s oldest indigenous sport” (Athlete 2018; Yogapedia 2019a,b). It is a lesser-known example of somatic/embodied nationalism used to promote Brand India (McDonald 1999; Parameswaran 2014), which has a virtually unknown International Day of Mallkhāmb on June 15.

Growing out of India’s physical bodybuilding and wrestling culture, *mallkhāmb*’s promulgators advocate a physical nationalist ideology infused with a bio-political morality that is linked to modern postural yoga’s “*āsana* revival.”¹¹ *Haṭhayoga*’s 16th- to 18th-century floruit developed from the predominant idea of a “seated posture” as an auxiliary practice into a complete soteriological system (Birch 2020). In contrast, *mallkhāmb*’s own textual development did not occur until the 20th century, with publications peaking around 1940.

Scholarly mentions of *mallkhāmb* are fleeting and often incomplete.¹² Recent additions to the hagiographic corpus are the Marathi monographs by Bathe (2016) and Havaladar (2020). These provide insight into the development of contemporary narratives, which build upon the ten-volume *Vyāyāma-jñāna-kośa* (*Encyclopaedia of Exercise*, Sen 2015). These volumes were edited by D. C. Mujumdar and published between 1936 to 1945 in both Gujarati and Marathi. Of the ten, volumes 1 to 4 are most pertinent, as they contain hundreds of pictures of *malla-vidyā-śāstra* (“wrestler-knowledge-manual”), *malla-khāmba-śāstra* (“wrestler-pole-manual”) and *kuṇḍaka-vartana* (“callisthenics”) (Mujumdar 1937, 1938, 1939a, 1939b). Volume 3 (“*Deśī Kasartī*,” Indian workout)

¹¹ See Alter 2013; Ganneri 2013, 2019; Khasgivale 1929; Mujumdar 1950: xxiv; Singleton 2010; Watt 2016.

¹² See Alter 2013; Bhosle 2012; Burt 2010; Mudaliar 1968; Sharma 2015; Thakare 2015; van Liefferinge 2005.

features *mallkhāmb* alongside all manner of sports and games, like *kho-kho* and *kabaḍḍī*.¹³ It is possible to draw a temporal boundary by noting that earlier sub-national publications such as Deodhar's *Marāṭhī Kheḷāṃceṃ Pustak* (*The Book of Marathi Games*, 1834, 1896, 1905) did not include *mallkhāmb*. Figure 1 shows a postcard in both its sepia and coloured versions featuring *mallkhāmb* (Jewels 2021). This photo was taken in Mumbai around 1910 at the Parsi sporting club (*gymkhana*, *jimkhānā*) on Marine Drive (established in 1888).¹⁴

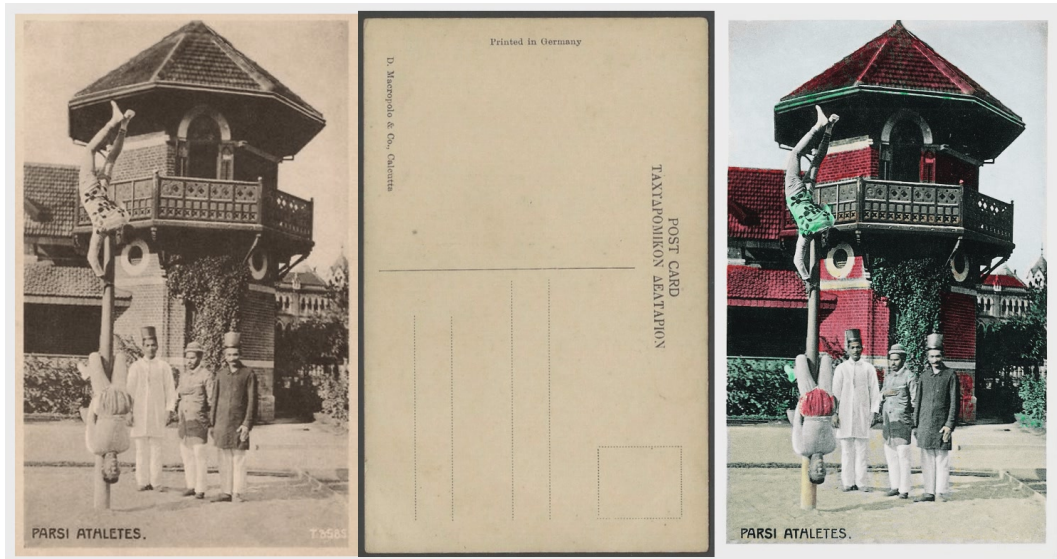


Figure 1: Parsi Athletes circa 1908 (Jewels 2021).

India's general interest in fitness publications increased during the second half of the 19th century. One example from Allahabad is *Svāsthya Śikṣā aur Vyaktigat Vyāyām* (*Health Education and Personal Exercise*), which did not mention *mallkhāmb* and neither did it mention Deodhar's biography¹⁵ in its "Famous Indian and international wrestlers" section (Yadav 1951: 10–77). As well, even though Bhave bundled *mallkhāmb* among a group of exercises (1936: 47), it was not mentioned in *Pañc Vyāyām* (*Five Exercises*) (Patel 1942). However, in the *Deśī Vyāyām* (*Indian Exercise*) section of *Svāsthya aur Vyāyām* (*Health and Exercise*), a brief description of *mallkhāmb* and its benefits were given without mention of origins (Thakur [1932] 1948: 59–60).

¹³ Mujumdar subsequently reduced the ten volumes down to a singular English volume (1950: 301–449).

¹⁴ Palsetia explains that from about 1875, when the first *gymkhana* was established, the Parsis took to various sports, including boxing and wrestling (2001: 153).

¹⁵ Deodhar is considered to be the founder/reviver of *mallkhāmb* (see p. 222).

Sapre, a leading figure in the *gymkhana* movement of the early 20th century (Ganneri 2013 and 2019), wrote a monograph, *Mallkhāmb* (1922), which appears to be the first with such a title. Since then, *mallkhāmb* featured in some publications promoting a bio-moral “yoga nationalist” ideology consisting of recognisable sections on *brahmacarya* (“celibacy”) and *prāṇāyāma* (“breath control”).¹⁶ Sapre’s contribution to Mujumdar’s encyclopaedia manifested with the explanation of different yoga postures and their health benefits, although with the claim that there was no historical connection between *yogāsana* and *mallkhāmb*, even if they appeared complementary (1938: 221–247). Havaladar (2012) considered them to be two sides of the same coin, while Khāsgīvāle’s *Vet āṇī Kustī* (*Cane and Wrestling*) focused on “rope *mallkhāmb*” without including *āsana* (1929: 17). Instead, it offered lifestyle advice about how to become more than just a better wrestler through inspiring individuals to cultivate a pleasing body and mind (*śarīr sukhī, tar man sukhī*).¹⁷ The development of *mallkhāmb*’s canon, therefore, began with Sapre in 1922 and peaked with Mujumdar’s list of forty-eight *āsanas* (1938: 2, 229–249). However, the flow of culture and kings into Maharashtra was said to have come from Karnataka.

18th Century Artwork and Mallkhāmb

Bajirao II was the twelfth and last Peshwa of the Maratha empire (r. 1796 to 1819). He surrendered to the East India Company on 3 June 1818 and was swiftly exiled north to Hindustan. Ultimately, he settled in Bithur, near Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, where he remained until his death in 1851,¹⁸ with the property subsequently destroyed in the violence of 1857. In Bajirao’s archives there was no particular mention of Balambhatt Deodhar (b. 1780 to d. 1852).¹⁹ *Mallkhāmb*’s most prominent hagiographies have presented Bajirao and Deodhar as seemingly inseparable (Sapre 1950: 302). Deodhar was said to have worked as Bajirao’s personal trainer-cum-wrestling coach, after entering the Peshwa’s orbit and “reviving” *mallkhāmb* (Parasnis 1921; Gupta 1944). Yet, this friendship is difficult to trace, as Deodhar is not mentioned in the top-tier list of employees who negotiated for higher salaries at Bithur. Instead, Deodhar was

¹⁶ Sapre listed the following eleven *āsanas*: *vrkṣa* 1–2, *mayūra* 1–4, *kukkuṭa* 1–4, *garuḍa*, *matsya*, *paṭaṃg* (*dhanuṣya*), *patāka*, and *hanumān-dhvaj* and *-pakaḍ*. He mentioned the *Liṅgapurāṇa* (LP 1.8), most of the *Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā* (GS)’s fifth chapter and GS 2.29; 2.30; 2.31ab (1922: 122).

¹⁷ The cane (bamboo) is treated as if turning it into rope (pp. 45–50). It is literally not a *malla*’s *khamb*, which are typically made from tropical hard wood (*dṛḍha-kāṣṭha*) species.

¹⁸ Dongare 1938: 9 claims the journey was only four months.

¹⁹ See Bāṭhe’s 2016 recent Marathi biography of Deodhar. For more information about the book, publisher, author, and *mallkhāmb*, see Samarth Media Center 2019.

considered to be a “common follower” who received a small and irregular salary. The Peshwa’s financial records corroborate that a disgruntled Deodhar relocated to Benares where he established a wrestling school with his sons and continued to promote *mallkhāmb*. Ultimately, Deodhar drowned himself in the Ganges river.²⁰

Fifty years prior to Deodhar’s “revival” of *mallkhāmb*, in a section titled “Mallavidyā va Yuddhakalā” (“The Wrestling science and Fighting art”), Bhavé mentioned in *Peśavekālīn Mahārāṣṭra* (Maharashtra During Peshwa Times, 1936: 47) that the formative physical training of the eighth and ninth Peshwas, both Balajirao Bhat (a.k.a. Nana Saheb; b. 1720 to d. 1761) and Madhavrao Bhat I (b. 1745 to d. 1772), was split between two systems. The first was a physical conditioning (*vyāyāma*) program consisting of *jor* (“non-competitive wrestling”, i.e., “sparring”), *kuṣṭī* (“competitive wrestling”), *joḍī* (“wooden clubs”), *mallakhāmb*, *lejīm*²¹ and *daṇḍ-namaskār* (*daṇḍ-baiṭhak*, i.e., the precursor of *sūryanamaskār*; see Sarbacker in this volume). The second included the martial use of weapons and horse riding (Sardesai 1930a and 1930b). These systems were commonplace during the 18th-century militarisation of Indian society, which saw the Marathas draw their mercenary soldiers from almost every region of India.

Although a popular opinion holds that *mallkhāmb*’s “revival” began in Pune (Maharashtra) during the early part of the 19th century (Burt 2010; Mujumdar 1950: 301), the narratives are erratic. Havaladar claimed it was first presented in 1796 by Deodhar in the Peshwa’s *darbār* (court) (2020: 11). Earlier, however, Havaladar (2012) had claimed that Deodhar was born in 1780, was twenty years old when he “became famous” and that he only began training in wrestling under the guidance of his guru Raghobha Vastad after reaching Pune with his family at the end of 1795. This was before Bajirao II was installed in December 1796, which means he would have been only fifteen years old. Other hagiographic narratives claimed he was aged either sixteen or eighteen years old (Bāṭhe 2016: 17; Bhavé 1936: 3–4; Dongare 1938: 4; Sharma 2015). The general theme is that Deodhar entered the scene when the Peshwa’s wrestlers were: 1) losing to the Afghani brothers Ali and Gulab, or 2) none stepped forwards to accept their challenge, except for Deodhar, who asked for three weeks to prepare.

According to Sardesai (1948: 351), Deodhar overcame the “undefeated Muslim outsiders,” who came to Pune representing the Hyderabad ruler, Nizam Ali Siddiqi (b. 1734 to d. 1803). For this to work, a small historiographical window opens between 1800

²⁰ See Alter 1992: 63; Gupta 1944: 7; Kincaid and Parasnis 1925: 222; Mujumdar 1950: 21; Sardesai 1948.

²¹ A resistance exercise/dance utilising various types/sizes of wooden bows with metal chains that one pulls on to simulate archery and develop upper body strength.

and 1803, which must meet all four criteria: that it happened, 1) during the 19th century; 2) during the life and reign of the Nizam, and 3) when Deodhar was allegedly twenty years old, and 4) when Bajirao II was deposed for the first time. Yet, 1806 is a popular date among current *mallkhāmb* enthusiasts, even though this is a decade out from the original date and after the passing of the Nizam.

How did Deodhar defeat the brothers? Sharma explained that after Deodhar “was challenged to a wrestling match by sinister outsiders,” he watched “Hanuman climb a tree and acquire[s] the monkey-god’s skills, learning to mimic Hanuman’s strength and agility” (2015: 3). However, Atre, Raut and Palsule explain that “Balambhat was inspired by watching monkeys as they leaped and played on trees” (2018: 46).²² Vidvams explains that Deodhar went to his local temple to perform austerities for twenty-one days, where he fasted on peanuts (1938: 36). There, according to Dongare, Saptāśṛṅgī-devī appeared in a dream assuring Deodhar that the god of *mallkhāmb* would appear in the form of a monkey. Hanumān appeared and spent three days instructing Deodhar in the ancient art of *mallkhāmb* (Dongare 1938: 6–7). Vidvams even claimed that Hanumān literally taught Deodhar on an iron pillar (*lokharṇḍī khāmbāvar*) and not a tree or pole (1938: 36).

The mystery deepens if we consider that among the artists from whom diplomats of the East India Company—like Charles Warre Malet—commissioned sketches and paintings of the social life and nature of Maharashtra (Sardesai 1948: 172; Kulkarni 2020), G. C. (Tambat) Navgire produced a series of eleven sketches/watercolours in the 1790s with black ink/graphite, depicting wrestlers training in what is one of the oldest parts of Pune (Shaffer 2011; Kulkarni 2020). While virtually nothing is known of Tambat, Malet retired in 1797 and left India in 1798 (Sardesai 1948: 172). Regrettably, none of “Malet’s Embassy” letters mention the wrestlers or Tambat (Sardesai 1936).

Figure 2 shows the series as represented on the Yale Center for British Art webpage.²³ Several of the sketches were catalogued as “Undated” or “1790s.” Most of the colophons contain dates in Marathi (see Fig. 6), while only two have a clear date in English (January 1792). Analysis of the colophons determines that Tambat sketched these

²² Both Alter 1994 and Lutgendorf 2007 recall wrestlers whom they spoke with using and commenting on their observations of monkeys as inspiration for improving their skills.

²³ See Mujumdar 1939a, b.

images over four days in 1792,²⁴ between 5th to 6th January (2.G–K) and then 27th to 28th February (2.B, E, F, H, I–D).²⁵

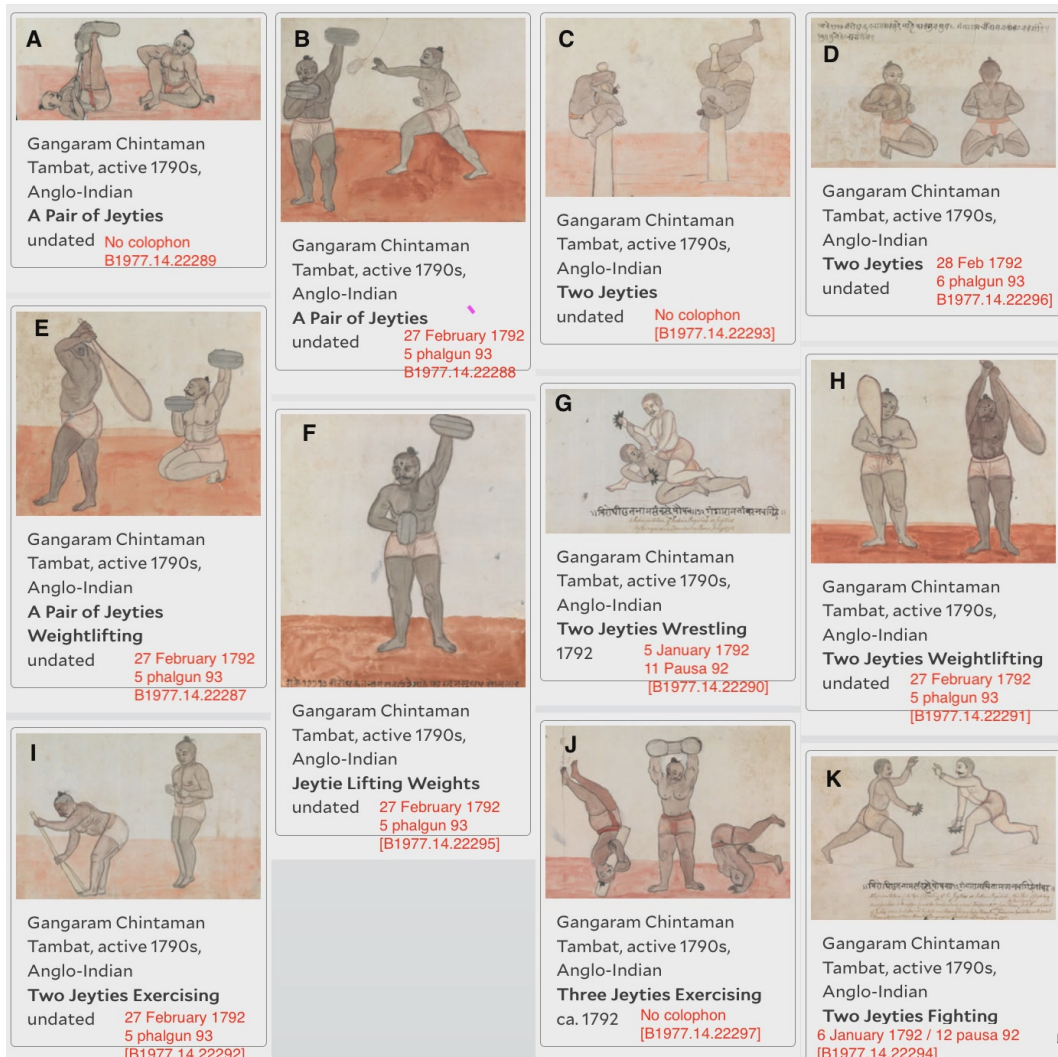


Figure 2: G. C. Tambat's Jeytie Series as represented in the Yale Center for British Art Catalogue.

²⁴ The catalogue is alphabetised from A through K. Included are the Jovian and Gregorian dates, as well as Accession Numbers. The colophon in Figure 6, reads: *sake 1713 vīrodhakrutanām saṁvatsare māhe phālguna sudhi 6 gaṁgārām cīntāman tāmbaṭ navagīre 5 || mu || pune peṭ nārāyan ||*. This can be interpreted as Śaka 1713 Vikrama 1848 | Phālguna Śuklapakṣa 6 ||. The final date is AD 1792, February 28th.

²⁵ The three images without a colophon are A, C, and J. It is assumed that the location of the gymnasium, which mentions Peṭ Nārāyan, is a part of Pune with a long tradition of wrestling (Phadnis 2017; Chatterjee 2018; Parekar 2020). Founded in 1786, it is located in Chinchechi Talim, which is considered Pune's oldest gymnasium (Joshi 2015).

One sketch (Fig. 3, i.e., 2.C)²⁶ clearly demonstrates wrestlers practising on poles. It is, however, difficult to determine if the poles and wrestlers are to scale. The poles could be the 2.74-metre-long “*ūc va bārīk* (‘tall and thin’)” or the *shorter* type (1.83-metre-long). If they are the latter, which is more likely for training purposes, then these are known as “poles that can be planted in the ground and removed; *jaminīnt basavitām va kādhatām yēṇyāsārakhā*” (Mujumdar 1939a: 46, 110, 116).

In Figure 4 (i.e., 2.J), while one (right) wrestler tumbles on the ground and the (middle) other lifts a weight above his head, the (left) wrestler appears to be exercising on a relatively short and unfixed pole. This might be what Mujumdar refers to as “plate *mallakhāmb*” (*pātāvarīl bārīk mallakhāmb*; 1938: 195–200; 1950: 410), of which several varieties exist. The distinguishing mark is that the pole is not fixed to the ground.

While a pole might be depicted in Figure 5 (i.e., 2.I), it would appear, however, that the two wrestlers are preparing the training ground. While one wrestler digs up the earth the other jumps up and down. Preparation of the training ground (*bhūmi-suddhi*) is mentioned between MP 6.14–6.22 (Sandesara and Mehta 1964). This includes the removal of unwanted objects, like stones and other things.



Figure 3: Two Jeyties by G. C. Tambat. Pune, 1792. Yale Center for British Art (B1977.14.22293).

²⁶ See Mujumdar 1939b: 66; image 76/3.

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Figure 4: Three Jeyties Exercising by G. C. Tambat, Pune, 1792. Yale Center for British Art (B1977.14.22297).



Figure 5: Two Jeyties Exercising by G. C. Tambat, Pune, 1792. Yale Center for British Art (B1977.14.222292).



Figure 6: Two Jeyties by G. C. Tambat. Pune, 1792. Yale Center for British Art (B1977.14.22296).

Figure 6 (i.e., 2.D) depicts two wrestlers performing what appears to be seated *āsanas*. While no postural names are mentioned, the left appears similar to *brhaspati-āsana* or *govindāsana* (Gharote 2006: 59, 117) and the right appears similar to a *sukhāsana* variant involving *baddha-hasta* (“bound hands”).

If Deodhar is to be credited with “creating,” “reviving” or “innovating” *mallkhāmb* in the 19th century, how does one explain Tambat’s drawings from Pune dated to 1792?

Poles and Wrestlers mentioned in Primary Texts

Having explored the dynamic threads of these narratives, in this section we will attempt to highlight *mallkhāmb* (*stambha-śrama*) in the MS. This will be a quite brief introduction since the text does not provide much information. However, it will be an important bridge to begin our investigation into who used to perform the *stambha-śrama*. We will introduce, indeed, the presence of nomadic, ancient pole dancing acrobats to connect them with an ethno-historical account of the *mallas* as presented in the MP.

The *Mānasollāsa*

The MS is an encyclopaedic work probably from the 12th century (Arundhati 1994). A brief section, the “Malla-vinoda” (“Wrestler’s Sport,” MS 4.6.879–996) contains one hundred and seventeen verses which describe the wrestlers as “wards of the medieval state” who were “regarded not only as entertainers but also as emblems of power and prestige” (Shrigondekar 1961: 120). It prescribed the lifestyle and training for wrestlers, which the coach (*malla-ādhyakṣa*, 997) oversaw the training of (943–952), splitting the schedule between morning (*prabhāta*) and evening sessions (*sāyaṅkāla*, 949).

The morning regime cultivated general conditioning and cardio fitness, while the evening included *bāhū-pellāṇaka* (the game of clasping hands with a firm grip) and *stambha-śrama*, which is mentioned in only three verses (950–952). This demonstrates *mallkhāmb*’s marginal, perhaps novel, position in the royal stable. The three verses explain how the *stambha* should be firmly secured to the ground and then smeared with sandalwood oil.²⁷ Then, the wrestler jumps onto it and holds with the thighs, arms and chest (950). Squeezing the fixed pole firmly with the feet above, he rests and then ascends, while revolving one way and the other, by using both arms and thighs (951). By performing these exercises in this way, the wrestlers become strong and nourished (MS 4.6.952).

Not much is known about *stambha-śrama*, except that it appears related to the exodus around 1125–1129 CE of approximately 250 *jyeṣṭhī-malla* families from Gujarat. Most were from Modhera, Mahesana District, Gujarat, where the Sun Temple is located. Some settled in the Western Cālukyan capital (see below). Beyond the MS’s mention of *stambha-śrama*, the only other available text that mentions it is the MP. Since it is mentioned in more detail in the MP, it would seem that *stambha-śrama*’s inclusion in the MP occurred after its emergence in the MS. This is likely a result of the southern migration of the wrestlers. However, from where and whom did the MS’s wrestlers get the knowledge and inspiration to incorporate the auxiliary conditioning regime? It appears possible that descendants of the aforementioned Caṇḍāla moved primarily within a corridor equating to between Pune and Bangalore.

²⁷ Gode (1969: 33) notes wrestling’s use of oil in the 8th to 9th centuries under Kṛṣṇadevarāya of Vijayanagara.

The Acrobat's Pole?

While the earliest higher-order category of itinerant performers appears to be the Caṇḍāla, over several centuries the category's label shifted to Naṭs.²⁸ This subsequently splintered across regions and times into a dizzying number of similar groups. Campbell (1884: 186) used Dombaris and Kolhāṭis interchangeably and explained how their origin story begins with a man who was a Naṭ. These two groups are most pertinent for this discussion. The Dombar, from Telugu country, shared identical traits with the Kolhāṭi, from the Deccan, who in turn shared occupational and genealogical characteristics with the Naṭs from further north (Baines 1912: 108).²⁹ Our nomadic performers could have very ancient origins.

Ancient Acrobats

By 150 BCE, in modern-day Afghanistan, the Kuṣāṇas controlled important trade routes into Central Asia. This enabled employment opportunities amongst the merchant caravans as wandering mountebank-style troupes. Under contract with merchant houses, they worked in entertainment, security and as spies (Christopoulos 2005) across a mercantile network that included the northern (*uttarapatha*) and southern (*dakṣiṇāpatha*) routes linking South Asia to Central Asia (Neelis 2010). For example, the conversation of Menander I (the Indo-Greek king, *circa* 150 BCE) with Nāgasena (Miln 1.331) mentioned soldiers and men-born-of-slaves who were devoted to fighting and wrestling (*malla-gaṇa*).³⁰ These were distinguished from the perceptibly despised (*pukkuśa*-) and degraded (*nīcā*-) clans (*kulā*), including the low-status groups and professions such as Caṇḍāla and the *veṇā* ("bamboo worker"), *niśāda* ("hunter"),

²⁸ The Naṭs (from Sanskrit *nāṭaka*, dancer) were also known as "Bādi, Dang-Charha, Karnati, Bāzigar, and Saperā" and were considered to belong to the "Kanjar or Beria gipsy castes, who themselves maybe sprung from the Doms," and who might have all descended from the "Gonds" of Chattisgarh. The Naṭ women were also known as *kabūtārī* ("pigeon"). This is either a result of acrobatic feats that appear similar to the flight of the tumbler/roller pigeon (*Columba gyrastris* L.) or because of the flirting manner with which they attracted their male customers (Russell 1916: 286–87). The *Arthaśāstra*'s list (2.01.34) was invoked to describe a similar group, the Kūttādi, who in the Tanjore Manual appear as vagabond dancers, actors, pantomimists, and marionette exhibitors. They held a very low position in the social scale and always performed in public streets and bazaars. The women worked as prostitutes because the girls were trained from infancy to play on poles. This suggested unsuitability for marriage (Nanjundayya and Iyer 1930: 144). In the Vizagapatam District of the Madras Presidency they were known as *ṭevallu*, who Sherring (1881: 141, 198) similarly listed among the itinerant performing castes (1881: 141).

²⁹ The Telugu Dombaras were also known as Reddi Dombaras. They were either "settled" (*ūru dombars*) or "nomadic" (*kādu dombars*) (Nanjundayya and Iyer 1930: 142).

³⁰ Miln 1.331 *yodhino dāsaputtā bhāṭṭiputtā* (Trenckner 2014 [1890]: 330–331).

naṭaka (“dancer”), *naccaka* (“actor”), *laṅghaka* (“acrobat”), *indrajālīka* (“ juggler/ conjurer”), *vetālīka* (“bard”) and *malla* (“wrestler”) (Trenckner [1890]2014: 330–331; SIBA 2006: 216–218).³¹ By the 3rd century BCE, the Caṇḍālas were mentioned in multiple Buddhist texts and were generally considered by Brahmanic society to be, amongst many things, vile (*duṭṭha-caṇḍāla*), wandering acrobats.³² They formed their own professional entertainment troupes (*karmasaṃgraha*) and guilds (*śreṇī*)³³ more than a millennium before the MS vaguely mentions *stambha-śrama*, which had become famous as “climbing bamboo poles” (*caṇḍāla-vaṃśa-dhopanaṃ nāma*) (Cowell and Chalmers 1895: 245).³⁴ This is best represented in the popular children’s comic book series by Anant Pai (1984). *The Acrobat* (no. 314) is a rendering of the story of merchant/ banker’s son Ugrasena/Uggasena who falls in love with a pole dancer.

The *Mahābuddhavaṃsa* (*Great Chronicle of Buddhas*), a Theravada text from the 1st or 2nd centuries BCE, mentions “the acrobats” on poles among its stories. Pole-dancing acrobats who performed “acts of awe” were considered to possess superhuman strength and skill. Roṣu claims that “*lutteurs et acrobats*” engaged in “*jeux de force*” and are mentioned in Buddhist inscriptions at Cetiya in Kanaganahalli (1981: 434),³⁵ which was a central place of Buddhist worship and mercantile activity during the Śātavāhana reign (3rd century BCE to 3rd century CE). Inscription 4.6 describes Caṇḍāla acrobatic performances on bamboo poles (*caṇḍāla-vaṃśa*), where they erected (*ussāpetvā*) the poles, and climbed up (*abhiruhitvā*) and then down them (*orohati*). A female acrobat,

³¹ See Chalmers (2015 [1896]: 152). Even though these groups were despised, in the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* 3.117 these groups were allocated special places at the annual royal procession and festival at which they were fed and received gifts (Shah 1958: 355).

³² See Fick 1920; Fausböll 2015a [1877], 2015b [1879], 2015c [1887]; Sarao 2017.

³³ See MDŚ 8.218–223, which suggested kings should punish rule-breakers who transgress a guild’s moral code (*śreṇī-dharma*) (Yano and Ikari 1996).

³⁴ The Yavana and Kuṣāṇa presence in the south-western regions of the Deccan and Konkan, particularly through Buddhist trade routes up to Taxila through Mathura, connected the sub-continent by land to Central Asia and beyond, where performers at public spectacles were considered people best avoided (Davids 1894). The *Mulaippāṭṭu* (66.61) mentions Indo-Greek Yavanās engaged in different occupations in South Asia, including as bodyguards (Ray 1988). This related to the Kuṣāṇa control of trade routes and the transport of goods, which created prosperous urban centres, some of which emerged under the Kuṣāṇa king, Kaniṣka, approximately two thousands years ago. These wandering troupes are mentioned in various sources as having roamed as far as the south of India and across to modern-day Istanbul (Shay 2014).

³⁵ Chitapur Taluk, Gulbarga District, Karnataka.

Medakathalika (*lakhako medakathālīkā*),³⁶ is described as standing on her teacher's shoulders (*mama uparikhandhe tiṭṭhāhī*). It appears that people from many classes of society engaged in “acrobatics” or “tumbling” (*mokkhacikāya kīlantassa*),³⁷ as suggested by the anecdote of the son of a merchant from Benares who twisted his bowel while doing acrobatics (Project 2022).

Mediaeval Acrobats

These anecdotes could not be clearer examples of the development of professional (bamboo) pole dancing acrobats between Central Asia and South India.³⁸ As it were, wrestlers-dancers-acrobats intermingled for centuries prior to *stambha-śrama*'s 12th-century appearance, and, by the time of the 12th-century MS, a distinction had already been made between a wandering performer (*cāraṇa*) and the king's performer (*uddhata*). As such, performers (*anukarṭṭṛ*, *praṇetṛ*) worked either as members of nomadic troupes or were retained by wealthy merchants and kings.³⁹

Following the Cālukyans, epigraphic evidence from the Vijayanagara empire (14th to 17th centuries CE) demonstrates the prominence of wrestlers and acrobat-tumblers (Sinopoli and Morrison 1995). It seems that the Dombar/Dommara were a Telugu caste which originated in Kurnool and Nellore districts, Andhra Pradesh.⁴⁰ These groups often performed in public areas and sometimes for kings. These wandering bands of

³⁶ Von Hinüber (2016: 18–19) translated *lakhako* (“acrobat”) as a Dravidian-influenced Prakrit to *laṃghako* (“acrobat”). The *Samyuttanikāya* (SN 5.168.17–169.3 and 3.226.7–32) mentions the teacher holding the pole while watching the tip (*vaṃsagga*) where the pupil jumped from (*pakkhannapakkhannadisam gacchanto* (Spk 3.226.26)).

³⁷ *Tipiṭṭaka*, *Vinaya-piṭṭaka* 4, *Māhavagga* 8.8.21.

³⁸ SN 5.47.19 *caṇḍālavaṃsiko caṇḍālavaṃsam ussāpetvā medakathālīkam antevāsim āmantesi* (*Samyuttanikāyo*, *Mahāvagga*, 3. *Satipatṭhānasamyyutta*, 9. *Sedakasutta*) (Feer [1898] 2015).

³⁹ The MS's dance-related section mentions six types of dance (959–967b), including *cāraṇa* and *kollāṭika* (acrobatic) (*Nṛtya-vinoda*, MS 4.16.4.949–1406, Srigondekar 1959; Bose 1991).

⁴⁰ The Dommara/Dombar were “dependent communities” reliant on others for patronage. Multiple 16th-century epigraphs mention this, such as that at the Tiruvengalanatha temple in Mutukuru (Kadapa [Cuddapah] District, Andhra Pradesh), which refers to the “acrobat tax” as *dommari[a]pannu*. This was paid to the Dommara by the villagers whom they performed for, which they then paid as *dāna* (in exchange for *punya*) to various temples, of which records exist (Reddy 1978; Varalakshmi 2005). The VDhPu (3.23.117) explained how at important religious festivals, the *naṭa-nartaka*, *nartakī*, *malla*, and *aindraṇḍīkās* (players, dancers, courtesans, wrestlers and magicians) should be arranged, fed and given money (Kramrisch 1928; Shah 1958).

Dombars and Vipravinodis (a similar Brahmanic troupe), would “set up poles and ropes for dancing and walking” attracting people by beating a drum (Ramanayya 1935: 416).

Further evidence acknowledges Dombars who were employed as court acrobats and peripatetic performers and who were retained to entertain the court, the public, bored soldiers and to conduct espionage (Ray 1988). As a result of royal favour, these groups retain *inams* (gifts of land) in Jammalmadugu, Tadipatri, Poddutur and Gudamacherla. After the fall of the Vijayanagara empire, they spread into Mysore territory. The Dombars were similar to the Korachas, working as tumblers, acrobats and snake charmers. While the men worked doing rope-dancing, wrestling, and acrobatics, the women were particularly skilled at ascending high poles and rope walking (Nanjundayya and Iyer 1930: 139–172).

Early Modern and Colonial Era Acrobats

A sub-section of Dombars, the Nattukattāda Nāyanmars, was famous for worshipping Kamāṭchiamma by swinging a child tied to a rope from atop a pole (Nanjundayya and Iyer 1930: 143). At the performative peak, the child would be released, falling to be caught before tragedy ensued. Sometime in the 17th century, a young woman, known to us as Yellakka, fell from atop a pole and died. Yellakka’s fate is etched onto one memorial stone located on the southern bank of the Jayamangali river near the town of Korāṭagere, Karnataka, which is allegedly the spot where this incident occurred. The inscription reads:

*ekā laṅghikadhītā vaṃsaṃ abhiruyha tassa upari
parivattitvā ākāse caṅkamānā naccati c’eva gāyati*

A certain female tumbler climbed a pole, turned somersaults thereon,
and balanced herself on the tip of the pole, danced and sang.

(Mysore Archaeological Department 1940: 222.)

In the 1901 Madras census the Dombars were identified as speaking Telugu, Marathi, and Hindustani, but not generally Tamil and were regarded as nomadic performers who earned a precarious living as skilful jugglers, snake charmers, pig farmers, tumblers, tight-rope dancers and pole dancers. A seemingly innumerable number of ethno-synonyms denote subtle variants amongst the groups (Francis 1902).

In Tamil, similar groups were known as *kaḷaikkūttu* and *āriyakkūttu*, which refer to “pole dancing.” Similarly, the “Reddi Domara” spoke Telugu and the “Āray Domara” spoke

Marathi (Mullaly 1892: 72), while the Dombars and Korachas worked as snake charmers, wrestlers and tumbler/acrobats who danced atop high poles and ropes (Nanjundayya and Iyer 1930: 139–172). It is possible that the Marathi- and Telugu-speaking acrobats were the source of *mallkhāmb*'s entry into the Deccan.

Russell (1916: 149) explains that the Pahlvān Gopāls were an itinerant group of wrestlers and gymnasts who belonged mainly to Hyderabad and that a similar group lived in small tents and travelled about carrying their belongings on buffaloes. They were different to a similar group of wrestlers and gymnasts known as the Khām Gopāls, who were so named because of their use of a long pole (*khām*) during their acrobatic feats, which were accompanied by tom-tom drums (Gunthorpe 1882: 91). As well, Thurston and Rangachari describe the occupation of the “Pailmān/Pailvān” as wrestler-acrobats who wandered across the Maratha-Telugu region conjuring, juggling, contorting and climbing up tall bamboo poles and ropes (1909a: 459–460). As witnessed by Thurston and Rangachari (1909a: 459), the Marathi group performed:

acrobatic and contortionist feats, and balancing feats on a bamboo pole supported in the kamerband (belly-band) of a veteran member of the troupe. The performance wound up with gymnastics on a lofty pole kept erect by means of ropes tied to casual trees and tent-pegs, and surmounted by a pliant bamboo performer swung and balanced himself.⁴¹

These groups travelled the same routes as the aforementioned *kīrtankāras*. Correspondence occurs through the anecdotal description of villagers thronging to “witness the tamāsha (spectacle)” at Tarikēri, Mysore, where a “wandering troupe of Ārē (Marātha) Dommaras performed before me. [...] in the open air amid the beating of drums, whistling, singing, and dialogue” (Thurston and Rangachari 1909b: 190). “The entertainment,”:

in which both men and women took part, consisted of various acrobatic feats, turning summer-saults and Catherine wheels, stilt-walking, and clever feats on the tight rope. Finally a man, climbing up a lofty bamboo pole, spun himself rapidly round and round on the top of it by means of a socket in an iron plate tied to his loin cloth, into which a spike in the pole fitted (*ibid*).

⁴¹ See archival footage of “Indian Acrobatics” (Pathé 1929).

Stuart mentions that these acrobats professed to be Vaiṣṇava and that those from the Vizagapatam District of the Madras Presidency were known as Iṭevallu (1893: 381). In addition, Sherring lists the Iṭevallu among thirty-six tribes said to have been actors, wrestlers, jugglers, conjurers, rope dancers, snake charmers, musicians and thimble riggers, all of which were synonymous with the Dombar wandering “about in gangs, performing athletic feats, and thieving” (1881: 141, 316, 198).⁴²

Clearly the situation is complicated, but what is certain is that to properly understand the link between *mallkhāmb*, wrestling and yoga it is fundamental to keep in mind the influences and connections that nomadic dancer-acrobat-wrestlers had not only around them, but also within the very royal courts where such entanglements of state-sponsored athletes and entertainers occurred (see Suebsantiwongse in this volume). Moreover, a direct line of cultural continuity can be traced not only across centuries, but millennia.

To clarify the extent of this connection, the forty-four per cent (approximately two hundred pages) of *Vyāyāma Jñānaśāstra* (Vol. 3) demonstrates various “indigenous acrobatics” (*deśī kasartī*), which are considered “miraculous works” (*camatkṛtijanya kāme*) performed “at ceremonial times” (*samārambhācē vēlīm*). These are said to have a “good effect on the minds of the audience” (*prēkṣakāñcē manāvara mātra*). Included in the repertoire is the shooting of rifles and moving with swords atop a pole, as well as making “trees” (*jhādēm*) by having several people hold onto one another to make the shape of a “Christmas tree” (Mujumdar 1939a: 249, 281). One example is the well-known acrobatic display, the “Catherine wheel,” which is, today, as it has been for centuries, a standard acro-yoga sequence.⁴³

Let us now turn our attention to the better-known story of the *mallas* as narrated in the *Mallapurāṇa*.

The *Mallas* of the *Mallapurāṇa*

The extant copies of the MP were produced in Gujarat sometime between the 15th and 16th centuries. They are not the original iterations. This assessment is based on internal linguistic evidence that: 1) verses 3.12–13 mention a *laukika-bhāṣā* or Sanskrit-Prakrit hybrid, such as *apabhraṃśa*, which was spoken by both the wrestlers and Kṛṣṇa; 2) most of the Purāṇas of Gujarat were not composed prior to the 10th century; 3) particular mediaeval Gujarati words were used, dating it after the 13th century, and 4) its authors

⁴² See Ganser and Cuneo 2012.

⁴³ See Mujumdar 1939a: 423 and Flanders 2016.

had a bias towards Kṛṣṇa and the devotional, “pure non-dualist” *śuddhādvaitavāda* as propounded by Vallabhācārya (b. 1479 to d. 1531 CE) and his *puṣṭi-mārga* (way of well-being or literally “grace-path”) movement (Jindel 1976; Goel 2016). It is possible, however, that the original MP was composed during the 12th century and that the inclusion of *stambha-śrama* occurred as a result of the migration south of the Gujarati wrestlers (Sandesara and Mehta 1964: 6–7; and Das 1968: 142).

The MP accounts for the mythical origin of *mallavidyā* and is considered a *kula-purāṇa* (family-story) written by Kṛṣṇa-worshipping *jyeṣṭhī-mallas*. This apologetic treatise justified the caste-based lifestyle of Brahmans and their attempt to uphold *dharma* (Alter 1992).⁴⁴ The sectarian leanings of the MP resonate with Pinch’s suggestion that the early modern era witnessed Brahmanic Vaiṣṇava reformism between mobile and military cultures of the kind which wrestling communities were aligned with (Pinch 2012).

The text acts as a means towards martial preparation and healthy living (O’Hanlon 2007), which provided various sub-classifications “based on a range of criteria including age, weight, body type, diet, specialised technical skill, and caste” that sought to justify this Brahmanic group’s transition into a martial lifestyle (Sandesara and Mehta 1964: 12–13). Sandesara (1948) and Das (1987) associate the MP with the Mōḍha Brahmans, since they were a caste of professional wrestlers from northern Gujarat in Modhera. As already mentioned, around 1125 to 1129 CE, many (approximately two hundred and fifty) families of *jyeṣṭhī-malla* (“best-wrestlers”) left Gujarat, due to the repeated Turkic incursions from Central Asia.

This helps to explain why the MP is partly a rallying cry to attend to *yoga-kṣema* (MP 7.01). Roṣu suggested that “*la caste des lutteurs professionnels Jetti*” travelled south through the “*région de Delhi ou de Mathurā*” (1981: 437). Since an original MP manuscript is not available, it is unclear whether the Mōḍha Brahmans brought *stambha-śrama* with them or came across it after relocating. The data, however, appears to suggest that the latter is what in fact occurred, which relates to the *jyeṣṭhī-mallas* establishing a subcontinent-wide network of patronage and employment, which included working as symbols of royal legitimacy, performers, bodyguards, sparring partners, masseurs and “shampooers” in local gymnasia, as well as para-medical experts in bone setting and

⁴⁴ See Bhattacharya 2020 and Lutgendorf 1994 for discussions of how the self is defined through the other. This is a particular feature of the Puranic literature pertinent to the contexts within which the *mallas* composed the MP.

healing.⁴⁵ Epigraphic evidence from the 12th century describes a colony of Gujarati pugilists in Mysore whose fame reached even to Ceylon.⁴⁶ We could suggest that the MP's wrestlers might have incorporated *stambha-śrama* into the MP after travelling to Karnataka, having got to know the MS's wrestlers who had already incorporated it into their routine. While some of the Gujarati wrestlers settled further south in Undiganalu (Hasan District, Karnataka) and Mysore (Mysore District, Karnataka), others settled in Hyderabad (Hyderabad District, Andhra Pradesh) and Kalyan (Bidar District, Karnataka). Kalyan was the western Cālukyan capital where the king Someśvara III composed the MS.⁴⁷

The MP contains a dialogue between a Brahman, who is coincidentally named Someśvara, and the gods Brahmā, Kṛṣṇa, Nārada and Balarāma.⁴⁸ In the mythical realm, the MP begins in the first chapter by reporting a conversation between Nārada and Brahmā. Here, Nārada says that Brahmā has formerly taught him about dharmic and adharmic precepts, various sciences and types of *varṇas* (classes of people). Having heard Brahmā mention *mallavidyā* briefly in the past, Nārada is now interested in an extensive explanation.⁴⁹

The scene is set in the town (*nagara*) that may have been known for its young peacocks (*mayūra-bāla*, MP 1.07c). The location is the “forest of *dharma*” (*dharma-āraṇya*) (MP 1.20) that Kṛṣṇa and Balabhadra passed through on their journey home to Dwarka,

⁴⁵ See Flatt 2020: 290; Jetty 1959; O'Hanlon 2007: 498; Sandesara 1948; Sen 2015: 22.

⁴⁶ “Une colonie de pugilistes gujaratis est attestée épigraphiquement au Mysore du XIII^e s. et leur rayonnement médiéval atteint même Ceylan” (Roşu 1981: 437). Nanjundayya and Iyer 1930 provide invaluable historical and ethnographic details of these groups during the colonial period in their multi-volume, *The Mysore Tribes and Castes*.

⁴⁷ The site of the former capital known today as Basavakalyana. It is located in Bidar District, Karnataka.

⁴⁸ The New Catalogus Catalogorum (Library 2021) mentions multiple manuscript copies at Pune (BORI 369 of 1892–95), Jodhpur (RORI 136-1992-25-169) and the Stein collection (3741-10-29) at the Raghunatha Temple Library of the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir. The *Mallaśāstra* (dated 1674) is said to be written by the 17th-century Bundela prince Devīsiṃha, who is said to have authored the *Siṃhasudhānidhi* “Collected Nectar of the Lion” (Meulenbeld, *History of Indian Medical Literature*, v. IIA: 299). The *Mallaśāstra* is said to be located in Bikaner (RORI 3850). Kulkarni mentioned this text, though I have not seen his 1959 publication and have only sourced the abstract for the 1974 publication. It is possible that the *Mallaśāstra* is a synonym for the *Mallapurāṇa*. Apparently, the author of the *Haṭhasaṅketacandrikā*, Sundaradeva, mentions the MP in the *Bhūpālavalabha*.

⁴⁹ MP 1.3-4 *dharmādharmavidhiḥ prokto brahman samyak śruto mayā, vidyāś ca vividhāḥ svāmin varṇabhedās tv anekadhā, mallavidyā tvayā proktā mama saṃkṣepataḥ purā, vistareṇa mama brūhi tasyāṃ kautūhalaṃ hi me* (Sandesara and Mehta 1964).

having defeated and killed king Kaṁsa and his wrestlers at Mathura (MP 1.06–07).⁵⁰ The MP discloses the name of the wrestlers' town as "Devālaya," which has been identified with the current-day town of Delmāl (Canasma Sub-district, Patan District, Gujarat), which is about twenty kilometres from Modhera (Sandesara and Mehta 1964: 8; Das 1968: 151). In the MP, it is at Devālaya that the residents received personal instruction in wrestling from the brothers (MP 1.41), even though Balabhadra was annoyed at the delay (MP 18.19–20).

The first two chapters include details from the famous wrestling match in which Kṛṣṇa killed king Kaṁsa (BhPu 10.44; Stein 2020). After expressing his satisfaction with Someśvara, Kṛṣṇa explained to him that, when the age of *Kaliyuga* has returned, "barbarians" (*mleccha*) will destroy the king's culture and torment the caste of mercantile, cow-herding Brahmins (*godvija*). To counter this incursion, Kṛṣṇa offered his pure knowledge of *mallavidyā* (MP 2.9cd–11).

The MP's Vaiṣṇava leanings and Brahmanic understandings of the wrestling practice—as a physico-spiritual discipline—recommended well-formed (*samyak*) repeated practice (*abhyāsa*) and, as suggested by the *phalaśruti* (the consequent "fruits of hearing"), the text should be taught repeatedly by one belonging to a wrestling lineage (*malla-vaṁśa*, MP 18.85). While recollecting the power of yoga (*yogamāyā*), Kṛṣṇa explained that it would always give strength to the bodies of wrestlers and victory (MP 18.17). Therefore, the soteriological goal of *mokṣa* (liberation) was paired through a typically Puranic schema to narratives reinforcing the normative ideal of *varnāśramadharma* as an ideal structure under the protection of an ideal Hindu king (Kumar 2021). By conflating in a mythical trope the image of the Brahmanic warrior, the Kṣatriya warrior, and the ascetic warrior's (*tapasvin*) attention on *tapasyā* ("religious austerity") the MP presented an ideal reformulation of the martial and moral character, which had the practical aspiration of upholding and protecting the dharma during the *Kaliyuga* (Pinch 2012; Lorenzen 1978).

For example, Kṛṣṇa explained that *mokṣa* is obtained through repeated practice since he himself had formerly practised the science of wrestling, and that wrestlers would preserve on earth this science, which is contained within his body (MP 2.16).⁵¹ While this soteriological aspect of the MP connected to physical practices may resemble a

⁵⁰ Mathura was an important trade nexus between the *uttara-* and *dakṣiṇa-pathas* linking south and central Asia (Neelis 2010; Ollett 2017).

⁵¹ MP 2.16 *mokṣo 'pi prāpyate 'bhyāsāt madabhyastā purā yataḥ, mamāṅgasamsthītām vidyām dhārayiṣyanti bhūtale*. The compound *madabhyastā* refers back to *vidyā*, which is the subject in the previous verses.

similar approach as presented in *haṭhayoga* texts, in which different physical techniques were used to lead to *rājayoga* and eventually to *mokṣa* (see Birch in this volume), the *malla*'s idea of *mokṣa* is martialised. This becomes evident through a closer look at the text, which discloses a different understanding of homonymous techniques.

The *Mallapurāṇa* and Its Contents

This section aims to disambiguate *āsana*, *sthāna* and *śrama* from *mallavidyā* and *haṭhayoga*. Deep into the final chapter of the MP, Kṛṣṇa says, “affection (*priya*) should always be shown to both an enemy and friend. It disappears because of over-exertion but also in the abandonment of exertion. Because of practice, one obtains success. On account of this, one should practise correctly. For one who hears this secret promulgated by me, the branches [of the science] increase just like one who dwells at Prayāg” (MP 18.69–71ab).⁵²

Building on this quote, this section provides an in-depth analysis of the MP's content. This is cross-referenced with content from the MS and aligned texts on dance, aesthetics and performance.⁵³

The first section provides relevant background information from the MP. Building on the discourse found in performance texts, the second section explores the heuristic idea of *vyākaraṇa-āsana*, which considers the “ontological grammar” of the *malla* and how the ambition is centred upon transforming the individual from a *prathama*- (“first”) to an *uttama-puruṣa* (“highest person”). The third section focuses on *stambhādhirohaṇa* (“climbing the pole”). The fourth section takes a detailed look at the *śramas* (“efforts”) as they apply to *āsana*.

The *Mallapurāṇa*

The editors of the MP's critical edition, Sandesara and Mehta, explain that the MP “does not serve as a good handbook” (1967: 19). This is due to the fact that its exercises

⁵² MP 18.69-71ab *priyam eva vidhātavyaṃ ripau mitre ca sarvadā, atīśramād vinaśyati śramatyāge tathā punaḥ. abhyāsāt siddhim āpnoti tena samyak samabhyaset, yaḥ śṛṇoti tv idaṃ guhyaṃ mayā ca pratipāditam. tasya śākhāḥ pravardhante prayāgavāsako yathā* (18.69c *vināśyati*] conjecture, *vināśyanti* edition).

⁵³ Even though some of the following texts are not quoted or mentioned in more detail, they have been consulted, forming a bibliographic reference: the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (NŚ), *Saṅgītātarnakara* (SR), *Nartananirṇaya* (NN), *Nṛttaratnāvalī* (NR), *Pampasthānavarṇana* (PSV), and *Abhinayadarpaṇa* (AbhD) (see Ghosh 1957).

(śrama) are only mentioned by name and the text contains many grammatical errors, incomplete sections and chapters.⁵⁴

The first two chapters establish the ideological parameters of the mythological framework. Chapters 3 to 5 classify the different types of wrestlers. Chapter 6 classifies some of the positions, actions and strengths of different wrestlers, the preparation of the gymnasium and the performance of daily rituals prior to training. Once the training arena was prepared, MP 6.33c–37d provides the protective (āvaraṇa) mantra for happiness and victory to Sudarśana.⁵⁵ The types of people to be excluded and avoided are listed. Chapter 7 begins by explaining which inauspicious noises should not be uttered and the relevant mantras capable of dissolving their inauspicious potency. It describes the various *sthānas* (“positions/postures”), *ghātas* (“strikes”) and *vighātas* (“blocks”) recommended for each wrestler type.⁵⁶ Chapter 8 explains more wrestling theory, focusing on *tāla* (“slaps”), *dr̥ṣṭi* (“intention”), *dhāraṇa* (“controlling”), the seventeen *āsanas* and sixteen *śramas* (“efforts”), as well as intensity levels for wrestler type and age. Chapter 9 explains the social and physical advantages of the training regime, focusing on lifestyle matters like seasonal changes to diet. Chapters 10 and 11 explain *stambha-śrama* and other exercises. Chapter 12 returns to a focus on health and disease. Chapter 13 details the preparation of the wrestling arena and the protocol leading up to an event. Chapter 14 explains what happens during a wrestling tournament, including seating arrangements, celebration of the athletes, the twelve ways to victory and the difference between cowardice and courage. Chapters 15 to 17 detail fighting styles between different and/or similar types and classes of wrestlers. Chapter 16 provides more information on movements, focusing on strategising (*ūhāpoha*, see MP 11.13–15). The last (18th) chapter summarises the main techniques and explains the metaphysical creation of the relevant *śaktis* (“goddesses”) (MP 18.22), the creation of the wrestling *gotras* (“exogamous lineages”) and the moral code. This brief summary demonstrates the complexity of the work, as well as the close interconnection between different forms of practices and attitudes to produce the perfect wrestler, which was considered a requirement to be victorious in combat, uphold *dharma*, and attend to *yoga-kṣema*.

⁵⁴ The critical edition is based on one manuscript (BORI # 369 of 1892-95) dated to Saṃvat 1731 (1674 to 75 CE) and a paper edition dated to Śaka 1833 (1911 CE) that was published in Baroda. Various notes refer to the BORI manuscript as “P” [Pune] and the [Baroda] publication as “B.”

⁵⁵ MP 6.32–33ab instruct the visualisation of the *sudarśana-cakra* and Kṛṣṇa, as the bestower of all desires. MP 6.33c–37d defined the contents of the *āvaraṇa* mantra.

⁵⁶ MP 18.12 mentions thirty-six *ghātas*, while MP18.24 makes a the distinction between *ghātas* (strikes that either injure or kill) and *upaghātas* (secondary strikes).

Four categories of wrestlers are mentioned at MP 3.11: *jyeṣṭhī* (“best”),⁵⁷ *antarjyeṣṭhī* (“almost best”), *gopakula* (“cowherd family”)⁵⁸ and *bhaviṣya* (“future”). Chapters 4 and 5 provide further classifications, and give eight categories: *yuvā* (“youth”), *prāṇavat* (“strong”), *jyeṣṭhī*, *antarjyeṣṭhī*, *gopakula*, *bhaviṣya*, *bālā* (“child”) and *vṛddha* (“mature”) (MP 5.01–02). The main differences for classifying wrestlers, therefore, are age (*bālā*, *yūva*, *vṛddha*) and experience (*bhaviṣya*, *antarjyeṣṭhī* and *jyeṣṭhī*), which predetermine the level of training intensity (MP 8.21cd, 23–24 and 9.18cd–19) (Tab. 1). Complicating things further, MP 6.45 refers to five body types, which are: *gaja* (“elephant”), *siṃha* (“lion”), *vṛṣa* (“bull”), *mṛga* (“deer”) and *bhaviṣya* (junior, literally “future”).

Between MP 6.01–08, Kṛṣṇa mentions thirty-seven qualities required of a wrestler. While parallel, there is little correspondence with *haṭhayoga* texts, some of which similarly describe the qualities of practitioners (e.g., *Śivasamhitā* 5.13–28). As such, of the thirty-seven, the top seven skills a wrestler should have are: 1) *sthānaka* (“stances”); 2) *ghāta* (“strikes”); 3) *pāta* (“throws”); 4) *tāla* (“slaps”); 5) *lāga* (“holds”); 6) *bhāra-śrama* (“exercise with weights”); and 7) *bahu iṣṭāsana* (“the many desired āsanās”).⁵⁹ Since *sthānaka* is first, and therefore implied as more important, the next section will focus on this category.

Sthānas

It is worth beginning with a brief intertextual comparison of *sthāna* in the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* (HYP) with that of the MP. At a base level, both mention five primary *sthānas*. However, in the HYP, the term *sthāna* is used in its general sense of “place” in referring to the locations of metaphysical concepts, such as *mūla-sthāna* (3.74), *brahma-sthāna* (3.106), *yoni-sthāna* (1.37), *uttama sthāna* (2.12), and *śiva-sthāna* (4.48). Whereas the MP (6.11) clearly explains the five body-part positions (*pañca-sthāna*) in relation to “actions of war” (*yuddha-karman*), which are to be praised by the wrestlers (*malla*). In the *aṅga-vibhāga* section (MP 6.01–13) the five *sthānas* are defined as: 1) *skandha* (“shoulder”), 2) *bhuja* (“arm”), *uras* (“chest”), 4) *kaṭi* (“hips”), and 5) *jānu* (“knee”).

⁵⁷ See MS 6.4.882–6.4.884 (Shrigondekar 1961).

⁵⁸ See MS 6.4.879–880, 885 and Kamat 1980: xix, 70.

⁵⁹ In MP 6.1c, *tālah* has been read instead of the edition’s *lātaḥ*. The former is somewhat suggested by the variant reading of P (*tvāla*). There is a whole section of the text devoted to explaining a slap (*tāla*) whereas the term *lāta* is not mentioned elsewhere in the text. It is also worth noting the variant reading of *duḥkhāsana* (“unpleasant posture”) for *iṣṭāsana* (Sandhesara and Mehta 1964: 24).

Gangadharrao Patwardhan II (b. 1866 to d. 1939) was a ruler of the Miraj state and an accomplished wrestler. He explained in *The Science of Wrestling* that the Marathi term, *pavitrā*, referred to a wrestling attitude of readiness aiming “to secure firm footing on the ground” (Patwardhan 1927: 19). This is related to standing with the feet wide apart and the right leg advanced, forming the principal leverage through which maintaining balance was achieved.⁶⁰ Well before him, the MP 16.01–02 and 42–45 had elaborated these techniques, while MP 17.45cd and 46ab had explained how the choice of footwork (*calapāda*) was primary, then the arms and then the movement of the palms of the hands (*karatalayoś cālana*).

Graceful, coordinated movement (*aṅgaḥāra*) begins with basics such as mastering the transition between being “stationary” (*sthāna*) and “moving” (*cāra*). This was considered equally important for wrestlers, dancers and acrobats (see the *Samgītaratnākara* 4.7.1017–18) (Sastri 1946: 318; Raja and Burnier 1976: 158; see NŚ 21.220). Bharata, the author of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (NŚ 4.61), explained that movement begins with *sthānas* and builds up to complicated *karaṇas* (actions, NŚ 4.56).⁶¹ Each layer of movement aggregates combinations from the preceding layer of potential combinations of movements (see Ganser in this volume).

However, NŚ chapters 11–13 provide innumerable combinations of movements related to “extending” the body (*cārī-vyāyāma*) on the ground and through the air, as well as the release of performative “weapons.” For this reason, and the fact the movements refer beyond those of martial pursuits, it is challenging to compare the texts. As well, while MP 6.01–13 mentions the five aforementioned body-part *sthānas*, the MP (8.10ab–16ab) lists twelve more positions of body in three fourfold sets. The first set is called “positions of victory” (*jaya-sthānaka*),⁶² the second, “squared off positions” (*samasthānaka*) and the third, “secondary positions” (*upasthāna*). The four *jaya-sthānakas* are positions involving the head, palms of the hands, abdomen and back. The four *samasthānakas* are holds performed with the feet, head and shanks, as well as

⁶⁰ The terms above relate to key components of wrestling, which Patwardhan 1927: 21–23 explains as holds, feints, counters, parries, blocks, breaks, and chains.

⁶¹ NŚ 4.56 *nṛtye yuddhe niyuddhe ca tatha gatiparikrame, gatipracāre vakṣyāmi yuddhacārīvīkalpanam* (Kavi 1934; Bharata 2020; Muni 2020).

⁶² MP 8.10a refers to the first set as *jayasthānaka* but 8.12a refers to the same set as *samasthānaka*.

holding the feet with the hands and vice-versa. And the *upasthānas* are holds performed by both hands, the flanks,⁶³ one half of the body and both knees.

While *sthāna* typically refers to the corporeal exigencies of “being in a particular state” or “standing firmly,” including positions taken to discharge weapons and to “sustain a charge (*yuddha*),” *sthānaka* appears synonymous with *āsana*, but in a wrestling context.⁶⁴

Four *sthānakas* are also described in the *Mānasollāsa*.⁶⁵ Although their names are not listed, the descriptions appear to refer to them as the “half-bodied” (*ardhāṅgaka*), “hand-power” (*karavala*), “abdominal” (*jaṭhara*) and “back” (*prṣṭha*) positions. The second requires the wrestler to assume tortoise pose (*kūrmāsana*) on the head of an opponent who is supine. The wrestler then takes hold of one of the opponent’s legs and restrains both feet. This position is said to be situated above the opponent’s stomach.⁶⁶

To continue with our MP investigation, the context of the twelve *sthānakas* reveals their role within the wrestlers’ training and broader repertoire of techniques. This information is consolidated in Table 1, which considers especially MP 8.01–56 and gathers three themes: Techniques, Types of Wrestler and Lifestyle. The table is best understood by beginning on the far left and moving across to the right. The final column provides the verse numbers of each topic. If read from top to bottom, the table runs through the sequence of verses listed in the chapter. Therefore, the top half relates

⁶³ *Kakṣa* can mean the “side of the body” and “vulnerable spots,” like the armpit or groin. Extending this idea to vital points in general, the concept of *marma* points relates to martial and healing traditions of India, particularly as it relates to wrestlers and gymnasts (De Marco 2020; Roṣu and Jobard 1987).

⁶⁴ Roṣu (1982: 40–42) discusses the “posture du héros” (*vīra-sthāna*), based on MBh 3.122.2a *sthānubhūto mahātejā vīrasthānena pāṇḍava* (transliteration from Tokunaga and Smith 1999); van Buitenen (1975: 458) considered *sthāna* to mean “attitude” instead of “posture,” while Nīlakaṇṭha glossed *sthāna* as *āsana* (Tokunaga and Smith 1999) and classical iconography distinguishes *āsana* (“seated”) from both *sāyana* (“laying down”) and *sthānaka* (“standing”) (Kalidos 1993).

⁶⁵ MS 4.6.893ab *saṁsthānāni ca catvāri kalpayeyuḥ dṛḍhāni ca*. The NŚ (11.50) and the *Viṣṇudharmottara-purāṇa* (circa 2nd to 7th centuries CE) mention six *sthānas* and foot placement (VDhPu 3.23.1–17). For example, the primary unit of distance is one *tāla* (= twelve *āṅgulas*, or the breadth of twelve fingers). *Sama-pāda-sthāna* requires the feet to be evenly separated by one *tāla*. A *maṇḍala* requires three *tālas* between the feet with the waist and knees aligned. From *maṇḍala*, the performer could move into *ālīḍha* or *pratyālīḍha* (respectively, having the right or left legs stretched out by five *tālas* with the opposite leg curved). Importantly, it is in *ālīḍha* that weapons (fists) would be raised and released in *pratyālīḍha* (Kramrisch 1928; Shah 1958).

⁶⁶ MS 4.6.896–97ab *mūrdhni kūrmāsanaṁ baddhvā bhajed vāpy ekapādakam | uttānapratimallasya nivārya caraṇadvayam || udarasyoparisthānaṁ sthānaṁ karavalaṁ smṛtam |*.

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Chapter Eight			Number of	Verse #
TECHNIQUE	1a–21b			
	<i>Tāla</i> (Slaps)	oneself (<i>ātman</i>), another (<i>para</i>), practice (<i>kriyā</i>), even (<i>sama</i>), empty (<i>śūnya</i>)	5	1a–2d
	<i>Dr̥ṣṭi</i> (Requires Attention)	thoughts (<i>citta</i>), vision (<i>cakṣus</i>), speech (<i>vākya</i>), listening (<i>śruti</i>), arena (<i>raṅga</i>)	5	3a–4d
	<i>Lāga</i> (Holds)	hair, shoulder, with one hand, with both hands, with armpit, with hand and arm, from behind, back bone, hip, abdomen from front, abdomen from behind, control of hand, from controlling feet, supportless	14	5a–9d
	<i>Sthāna</i> (Positions)		12	10a–16b
	<i>Jaya-sthānakas</i> (Victory stances)	head, palms of the hands, abdomen, back	4	8.10b–12b
	<i>Sama-sthānakas</i> (Squared off)	holding with feet, head, shanks, hands on feet	4	8.12c–14b
	<i>Upasthānas</i> (Secondary)	holding with hands, flanks, half body and both knees	4	8.14c–15d
	<i>Āsana</i>		17	16c–21b
21c–52b				
EFFORT-CONSEQUENCE	Effort-Quality-link	<i>Malla</i> types defined	4	21c–22d
		<i>Śrama</i>	4	23a–24b
		<i>Niṣiddhamalla</i> (prohibited wrestler)		24c–27b
		Level of Effort/Exercise	Suitability	
		<i>Alpa</i> (Light)	Everyone	27c–34d
		<i>Ardha</i> (Medium)		35a–39d
		<i>Pūrṇa</i> (Full)	<i>Jyeṣṭhin</i> , <i>antarajyeṣṭhin</i> , <i>gopakula</i>	40a–52b
		52c–56f		
		<i>Sukha</i>	Wellness	52c–53b
		<i>Snāna</i>	Hygiene/Self Care	53c–55c
LIFE STYLE	<i>Puṣṭi</i>	<i>Bhojana</i>	Diet	55d–56f

Table 1: Constituent elements of Chapter Eight.

to the first twenty-one verses in the chapter. It contains the *sthānakas* and other techniques, including the five slaps (*tāla*), five gazes (*dr̥ṣṭi*), fourteen holds (*lāga*) and seventeen postures (*āsana*). Then follows the four types of wrestlers, the type of wrestler that should be avoided, the allotted levels of exercise for the four types, and

the consequences of these levels. In the bottom row, lifestyle is split between wellness, hygiene and diet.

Table 2 expands the *sthānaka* section of Table 1 by summarising MP 8.10a to 8.16b. The table conveys an important point: each *sthāna* links to a specific body part and restraint (*dhāraṇa*).

<i>Jaya-sthānakas</i>	<i>Sama-sthānakas</i>	<i>Upasthānas</i>
8.11	8.12–13	8.14–15
<i>śīras</i> the head	<i>caraṇena dhāraṇa</i> controlling with the feet	<i>karābhyāṃ dhāraṇa</i> controlling with both hands
<i>karatala</i> the palm of the hand	<i>śīrodhāraṇa</i> controlling the neck/head	<i>kaṣṭhādhāraṇa</i> controlling with the flanks
<i>udara</i> the abdomen	<i>jaṅghābhyāṃ dhāraṇa</i> controlling with both shanks	<i>ardhāṅgadhāraṇa</i> controlling with half the body
<i>prṣṭha</i> the back	<i>karapādābhyāṃ dhāraṇa</i> control with the feet and hands	<i>jānūdvayavidhāraṇa</i> controlling with the knees

Table 2: *Sthānas* as listed in Chapter Eight.

Directly following the *sthānaka* section is the first mention of *āsana* in the MP (8.16cd). In light of the fact that the text lists the names of seventeen *āsanas*, the meaning of MP 8.16cd is not entirely clear. On the one hand, it could be understood that, according to a text called the *Aṣṭādaśaparakāra*, the head pose is the first *āsana*.⁶⁷ The point of such a statement would be to indicate the different hierarchy of *āsanas* in the MP, where *agrāsana* in the first posture and the head posture (*śīrāsana*) is the ninth. On the other hand, if the compound *aṣṭādaśaparakāra* is not referring to a text but has the more general meaning of “eighteen methods,” then 8.16cd would mean that *āsana* is the

⁶⁷ MP 8.16cd *aṣṭādaśaparakāreṇa śīraḥ pūrvakam āsanam*.

foremost of those eighteen methods.⁶⁸ The two interpretation also depend on whether one reads the words *śiraḥ* and *pūrvakam* separately or as a compound.

Āsanas in the MP

In the context of wrestling, *āsanas* are a modulation of the body prior to and during contact with an opponent. Without any explanation of what is meant by *āsana* or how to accomplish it, MP 13.28 mentioned it within a list of twenty-three things requiring restraint (*saṃyama*). Restraint in *āsana* is mentioned together with *śrama* (“exercise”), *śvāsa* (“breath”), and *śayana* (“sleep”) (MP 13.28).

We also find the *mallas* assuming seated positions (*āsanair upaviśanti*, MP 6.46) after they first perform *praṇāms* (“reverential displays”) at the edge of the training arena, which includes smearing earth (*mṛttikā*) all over their bodies (MP 6.44). This might imply some form of meditation before starting the practice, but it is unclear.

Gharote and colleagues (2006) categorised some of the *āsanas* from the MP as either “undescribed” or on the basis of a different sub-set of body types first mentioned at MP 5.3–5, which is similar to the *Kāmasāstra* phenotypes (KS 2.1.1).⁶⁹ As we have already mentioned, the five body types essentially relate to weight classes and include *gaja* (“elephant”), *vṛṣa* (“bull”), *siṃha* (“lion”), *mṛga* (“deer”) and *bhaviṣya* (future, i.e., “young”). The remainder of the fifth chapter describes the phenotypes in relation to the age limits for fighting and training and what their physical characteristics and advantages are. For instance, a “heavyweight” wrestler (*gaja*) would typically be broad-chested, tall, generally endomorphic, but slow-moving and quick to tire.

Gharote’s categories can be clarified by considering the weight classes, which are mentioned at MP 6.45 and placed into clear nominative-accusative case relations with specific *āsanas* at MP 6.46–48. Each class is paired with a particular *āsana*. For example, the heavyweight wrestler should do *padmāsana*, the middleweight wrestler, *garuḍāsana*, the lightweight wrestler, *phaṇāsana* and the bantamweight wrestler, *kukūṭṭāsana*. As for the young future wrestler (*bhaviṣya*), the text explains that they should do an *āsana* on the buttocks.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ MP 8.16cd *aṣṭādaśaparakāreṇa śiraḥpūrvakam āsanam*.

⁶⁹ See Vatsyāyan [1900] 2020.

⁷⁰ MP 6.46cd–48ab *āsanair upaviśanti svaiḥ svaiḥ sarve 'pi sādārāḥ || gajaḥ padmāsanaṃ kuryāt siṃho 'pi garuḍāsanaṃ | phaṇāsanaṃ mṛgaḥ kuryāt vṛṣo 'pi kukūṭṭāsanaṃ || bhaviṣyo 'pi tathā kuryād āsanam jaghanopari |*. What this section also appears to show is that the categories mentioned at MP 3.11: *jyeṣṭhī* (“best”), *antarjyeṣṭhī* (“almost best”), *gopakula* (“cowherd family”) and *bhaviṣya* (“future”) each nest the five weight

The MP (8.16c–21b) lists the following names of *āsanas*: *agrāsana* 17a, *paścādāsana* 17b, *madhyāsana* 17c, *siṃhāsana* 17d, *kūrmāsana* 18a, *dārdurāsana* 18b, *gajāsana* 18c, *ardhāsana* 18d, *śirāsana* 8.19a, *kakṣāsana* 19b, *grīvāsana* 19c,⁷¹ *bhujāsana* 19d, *dvibhujāsana* 20a, *kukkuṭāsana* 20b,⁷² *phaṇaguptāsana* 20c, *garuḍāsana* 20d and *udarāsana* 21a. These *āsanas* appear to be quite different to their contemporary “classical” expressions, which accounts for the homonymy at play.

What, indeed, might one deduce from the four *āsanas* mentioned in MP 8.17?

agrāsanaṃ ca prathamam paścādāsanaṃ apy atha |
madhyāsanaṃ tathaivānyat siṃhāsanaṃ apīkṣate ||

And [a wrestler] considers the first to be *agrāsana*, then *paścādāsana* and *madhyāsana* is another and also *siṃhāsana*.

If one considers the meaning of the names of the first three postures and the proximal-distal relationship of *agra* (“forward”), *madhya* (“middle”) and *paścāt* (“behind”), then the same verse can be interpreted as follows:

[A wrestler] considers the first to be the forward (attacking) position (*agrāsana*), then the rear (retreating) position (*paścādāsana*), then the middle (holding ground) position (*madhyāsana*) and also *siṃhāsana*.

Verse 8.18 of the MP mentions *kūrmāsana*, which is probably the same posture specified for the practice of the *sthānaka* called *karavala* in MS (4.6.896), as discussed above. In light of the postures allocated to different weight classes (also noted above), *gajāsana* might refer to the pose for heavyweights.

In MP 8.19–20a, the names of the *āsanas* refer to specific body parts, those being the head (*śiras*), flanks (*kakṣa*), neck (*grīva*), arm (*bhuja*) and both arms (*dvibhuja*). Given the binary of the opponent wrestler (*pratimalla*) in descriptions of the *sthānakas*, these postures could refer to the body parts of the opponent. In MP 8.20, the list ends with

classes within them. Therefore, there would be within the *jyeṣṭhī* category, as for the others, “heavyweights” (*gaja*), “middleweights” (*siṃha*), “lightweights” (*mṛga*) and “bantamweights” (*vṛṣa*).

⁷¹ Sandesara and Mehta (1964: 34, ff 12) reports *śrīvāsana* as an alternative reading in witness P for *grīvāsana*.

⁷² In MP 6.48, the *bhaviṣya* was instructed to perform *āsana* in the same way on the buttocks. This might mean sitting on the buttocks or something comparable to *kukkuṭāsana*. See MP 6.48ab *bhaviṣyo 'pi tathā kuryāt āsanaṃ jaghanopari*. Van Liefferinge 2005: 118 explained that the *bhaviṣya* wrestler ignores the training by sitting at the back and performing it alone.

three *āsana* names that refer to animals: *kukkuṭa* (cockerel), *phaṇagupta* (concealed by the snake's hood) and *garuḍa* (eagle).

We can now attempt to map out the *sthānakas* and *āsanas* on the body. In addition to the body parts that have been mentioned in relation to the *āsanas* (i.e., *śīras*, *kakṣa*, *grīva*, *bhuja* and *dvibhuja*), perhaps the terms *agra*, *madhya*, and *paścāt* refer to dimensions of the body that would otherwise be considered “anterior, middle and posterior” body shots. This remains highly speculative but within the context of wrestling, the names of these *āsanas* could be interpreted as I have suggested.

What does *āsana*, however, signify in wrestling? Is it a familiar category? Perhaps in contexts of fighting *āsana* has nothing to do with *haṭhayogāsana*. After all, *āsana* is attested to mean “maintaining a post against an enemy” and *daṇḍāsana* is a kind of bamboo arrow. The MS's *Śāstra-Vinoda* (Weapons Amusements, 4.1) relates the king's performance in the arena of various skills. This includes *dārdurāsana* [*maṇḍuka*] (205), *padmāsana* (205), *garuḍāsana* (206), *mṛgāsana* (207), *śayanāsana* (208), and *śarasana* (209). This, however, does not appear to be some display of flexibility or soteriological ambition, but instead, a performance of martial ability and a bio-political legitimation of power (Gonda 1969). To understand their role, one might remember the *malla*'s aim, which was to be victorious in contest (*niyuddhavijayin*, MP 8.2d), uphold *dharma* (2.15), and to secure property and prosperity (*yogakṣema*, 7.01).

The link between “yoga” and *malla-yuddha* is, indeed, best defined in MP 7.01 and 13.34, which idealises the profession of wrestling through the binary of *yoga* (periods of martial action) and *kṣema* (periods of non-martial rest). The wrestler's intention, therefore, was fixated on becoming victorious across the three realms (*trailokya-vijayī*), in ways similar to the mediaeval concept of warrior ascetics (Lorenzen 1978; Pinch 2012) or the *Ṛgveda*'s earliest attested meaning of *yoga*(-*kṣema*), referred to in the Prologue.⁷³

Therefore, even though the names of the postures appear similar, these wrestling *āsanas* are best categorised as “fighting postures” or “modes of fighting” as clearly seen in the MS where *kūrmāsana* was used in a fighting stance to pin an opponent's head.

⁷³ *Ṛgveda* (RV 10.166) contains one of the earliest attestations of both *yoga* and the compound *yoga-kṣema* (Pontillo and Neri 2019; Ferrara 2020). Jamison and Brereton (2014: 55, 1647) explain this “extremely aggressive” first-person speaker hymn as one which “proclaims his triumph over his rivals and their utter humiliation. Using the well-nigh universal tropes of high and low, he repeatedly emphasises the spatial (and thus conceptual) position of his defeated enemies, who are literally beneath his feet.” See RV 10.166.05 *yogakṣemaṃ va ādāyāhaṃ bhūyāsam uttama ā vo mūrdhānam akramīm. adhaspadān ma ud vadata maṇḍūkā ivodakān maṇḍūkā udakād iva* (Aufrecht [1877] 2019).

Stambhādhirohaṇa: Pole Position

The beginning of the MP's tenth chapter states that by practising sixteen *śramas* in this world, the wrestler becomes victorious across the three realms (*trailokyavijayī*, MP 10.01). After *raṅga-śrama* ("wrestling"), the second *śrama* mentioned is *stambha-śrama* (MP 10.02a), which refers to exercise done on a pole, as depicted in Figure 7. It is important to note that both *mallakhāmb* and *mallastambha* do not appear in either the



Figure 7: *Udyā*—*Urusandhidhārana* (Mujumdar 1938: 107. Picture Numbers 187 to 192).

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Translation	Sandesara (1948:37)	Sandesara & Mehta (1964:14)	Sjoman (1996:56)
1) Wrestling	<i>raṅgaśrama</i>	<i>raṅgaśrama</i>	<i>raṅgaśrama</i>
2) *Mallkhāmb	<i>stambhaśrama</i>	<i>stambhaśrama</i>	<i>stambhaśrama</i>
3) Running	<i>abhramaṇikā- śrama</i>	<i>bhramaṇikāśrama</i>	<i>bhāramaṇikaśrama</i>
4) Cardio	<i>śvāsa- preraṇikābhyāsa</i>	<i>śvāsa- preraṇikābhyāsa</i>	<i>śvāsapreṇaikaśrama</i>
5) Standing	<i>sthāpitaśrama</i>	<i>sthāpitaśrama</i>	<i>sthāpitaśrama</i>
6) Tactics	<i>ūhāpohaśrama</i>	<i>uhāpohaśrama</i>	<i>uhāpohaśrama</i>
7) Heavy stone weight	<i>gocintaka</i>	<i>gurugoṇitaka</i>	<i>gurugoṇitakaśrama</i>
8) Light stone weight	<i>laghugoṇitaka</i>	<i>laghugoṇitaka</i>	<i>laghugoṇitakaśrama</i>
9) Weighted clubs	<i>pramadāśrama</i>	<i>pramadāśrama</i>	<i>pramada</i>
10) Massage	<i>āmardakīśrama</i>	<i>āmardakīśrama</i>	<i>āmardankīśrama</i>
11) *Plank	<i>sthādanaka</i>	<i>āsthānaka</i>	<i>asthadānaka</i>
12) Tumbling/ Calisthenics	<i>kuṇḍakarṣaṇakā- bhyāsa</i>	<i>kuṇḍakarṣaṇaka</i>	<i>kuṇḍakarṣaṇaka</i>
13) Paired exercises	<i>anyakṛtkarā- śrama</i>	<i>anyakṛtkaraśrama</i>	<i>anyakṛtkaraśrama</i>
14) Water exercises	<i>jalaśrama</i>	<i>jalaśrama</i>	<i>jalaśrama</i>
15) Climbing	<i>parānārohaṇa</i>	<i>parānārohaṇa</i>	<i>sopānārohaṇa</i>
16) * walking/eating?	<i>bhojanordhva- bhramaṇikā</i>	<i>bhojanordha- bhramaṇikā</i>	<i>bhojanordhava- brahmaṇika</i>

Table 3: Comparison of three *śrama* lists from the MP.

MS or MP. The sixteen *śramas* in the MP have been listed in Table 3 from three sources; Sandesara (1948: 37); Sandesara and Mehta (1964: 10–11) and Sjoman (1996: 56).

The more popular notion of *śrama* explains the noun as built from the verbal root *√śram*, connoting weariness and fatigue but also the ability to overcome obstacles or subdue something, like one's desires or fears. In *āśrama*, the *ā* prefixing *śrama* implies a

locus where this might be possible (Olivelle 1993; Bodewitz 2007).⁷⁴ The meaning of *śrama* in the MP connotes effort pertaining to exercise and pugilism.

Throughout the MP several exercises (*śrama*) are categorised based on form/type and intensity (see Table 1). For example, verses 8.23–24ab explain four levels of effort, from light to excessive (*alpa*, *ardha*, *pūrṇa* and *ati*). Beginning at MP 10.06, the sixteen *śramas* are split into three levels: *uttama* (“upper”), *madhyama* (“middle”) and *adhama* (“low”), followed by a grouping of the *śramas* from 10.07 to 10.12b, accordingly. Pole exercise (*stambha-śramanikā*) is mentioned among the *madhyama* exercises, which are said to build strength (*bala*) and power (*ojas*). The *adhama* exercises focus on auxiliary conditioning through swimming and jogging, while the *raṅga-śrama* (arena exercises) focus on *jor* (“sparring”) and *kuṣṭī* (“competition”), which are considered the best (*śreṣṭha*) (10.03) and ultimate (*uttama*) (10.07).

Further on in chapter ten of the MP (10.17cd), it is said that a wrestler should know ten types of pole for this exercise, and then fifteen benefits are listed, including innate strength (*prāṇa*) of the body, and strength in the shoulders, hands, spine, palms, arms, shanks, hips, and joints of the feet. Also, pole exercise makes the body firm, brings victory over an opponent, increases digestive fire and makes the body dextrous (*laghutva*). The last two are sometimes mentioned as benefits of *āsana* in yoga texts.⁷⁵ The chapter concludes by saying that one who has regularly practised it becomes victorious in battle (MP 10.21).⁷⁶

Conclusion

Mallkhāmb is a slippery topic to try and catch hold of, just like a *malla* writhing around in clay mixed with turmeric or a pole lubricated with oil. This chapter has provided a glimpse into the roles of poles and those who climbed them. Furthermore it has shown

⁷⁴ *Śrama* is mentioned in Vāgbhaṭa’s *Aṣṭāṅgahṛdaya Saṃhitā* (Sūtrasthāna 2.12 and 5.15, 22). Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra* (7.47) mentions *śrama* as one of the thirty-three transitory states (*vyabhicāribhāva*) (Kavi 1934; Bharata 2020).

⁷⁵ For example, *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* 1.17 (*aṅgalāghava*) and 1.28 (*jaṭharapradīpti*), 1.33 (*jaṭharāgni*), etc.

⁷⁶ MP 17cd–21 *vijñeyo daśadhā caiva stambhaḥ śramasamudbhavaḥ || aṅgasya sahajaṃ prāṇaṃ skandhaprāṇaṃ tathaiva ca | karaprāṇaṃ †suvi†prāṇaṃ daṇḍaprāṇaṃ api dhruvam || talahastabhavaṃ prāṇaṃ bāhuprāṇaṃ tathaiva ca | jaṅghāprāṇaṃ kaṭiprāṇaṃ pādasamdhībhavaṃ tathā || jāyate kaṭhināṅgatvaṃ anyasya ca jayas tathā | agnīvrddhiḥ śramo jñeyo laghutvaṃ api drśyate || ityevaṃ pañcadaśadhā prāṇastambhaśramas tathā | abhyastena sadā yukto niyuddhavijayī bhavet ||*.

that the MP is a text replete with defects such as incomplete chapters, poor editorial oversight and transcription, and vaguely terse explanations.

It undermines the hagiographical claims regarding Balambhatt Deodhar's role at the Peshwa's court. Instead, *mallkhāmb*'s origins appear to be located in the exchange and adaptation of practices among various typologies of performers, be they nomadic acrobats or wrestlers. In fact, the categories of wrestlers, dancers, acrobats, and tumblers arrived at a point of conflation where it becomes difficult to parse, thus rendering them meaningless. As discussed, these categories appear to not exactly describe the complex and dynamic realities within which people were sometimes wrestlers and sometimes acrobats and sometimes pole dancers.

It has, indeed, also shown that the production of *deśī* pole dancing knowledge and the flow of culture clearly moved uptown along the hegemonic wrestling *mārga* ("path"). This, in contemporary times, (purposely?) forgets other possible origins through a narrative such as that of Incredible Mallkhāmb. In the soft power performance of *mallkhāmb*, at Indian diplomatic missions abroad or on popular talent quest television shows, underneath the façade of the imagined hyper-masculine wrestling is the haptic logic of the original pole dancing aesthetic. Indeed, during these staged events there is no wrestling, only what can be described as "pole dancing" or "acts of awe." Regrettably, the essentialised mood has removed the outcast feminine "dancer" protagonist and replaced it with a hypermasculine upper caste "wrestler."

But as this chapter has demonstrated, the link between the so called "pole yoga" and yoga/*haṭhayoga* are pale, too. As we have seen in our discussion on the MS and especially on the MP, *āsanas*, *prāṇas*, *dhāraṇas*, but, also, *śrama* have different interpretations in this wrestling contexts. It appears clear that the *vinīyoga* ("application") of *mallavidyā* (MS 4.6.882d; MP 1.4a, 10.1a; Srigondekar 1959; Sandhesara and Mehta 1964) was antithetical to any notion of ascetic renunciation or a contemporary, affective mood of what and who a yogi was, is, ought to be, or is otherwise imagined (McCartney 2021a).

As we have seen, the *āsanas* listed in the MS and MP did not involve the wrestler off to the side of the gymnasium engaged in a New Age attempt to "come to centre." *Āsana* is obviously part of the fighting context related to a position to defend against or advance upon one's attacker, and *sthāna/sthānakas* are best thought of as primary, but not

stationary postures/positions, which might have the basic distinction of *ālīḍha*- (“defensive”?) and *pratyālīḍha*- (“offensive”?) positions.⁷⁷

Therefore, the *sthāna-āsana* (*ni*)*yuddha* binary appears to have been an important analytical fulcrum, although incongruent with Patañjali’s (PYS 2.46) classically interpreted definition of a “steady and comfortable posture,” which is better categorised as *tapas* (“ascetic practice”). Similarly, it is difficult to find correspondence with later *haṭha* texts, like the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* or the *Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā*.

While we can suppose a sharing of vocabulary, concepts and perhaps the adoption of some practices, thanks to the presence of various performers (even ascetics, see Suebsantiwongse, Powell and Ganser in this volume) in shared areas both in temples and in festivals, the way these were adapted became highly differentiated. And surely different were the aims of the practices.

Acrobats have for a long time been employed for various roles beyond entertainment at banquets, festivals, or symposia. They have, much like their wrestler counterparts, been symbols of royal power and other-worldliness. The MP glorifies its performers on different levels, which is, even to some degree, spiritual (see Rochard in this volume). However, the professions of acrobats and wrestlers are attested in the ancient Near East in Nagar, which was a mid-3rd millennium BCE city famous for producing and exporting acrobat (*ḪÚB/ḫuppû*) specialists (Webbermann 2021). Still, the wrestler’s paramount aspiration is to become an *uttamapuruṣa*, victorious in contest, securing property and prosperity (MP 7.01 *yogakṣema*), fighting to destroy one’s enemy (MP 5.5), but upholding *dharma* (MP 2.15). As we have already mentioned, the MP’s Vaiṣṇava leanings and Brahmanic understandings of wrestling practice as a physico-spiritual discipline—recommending *samyakabhyāsa* (“well-formed repeated practice”)—is located in the *phalaśruti* (“fruits of hearing”) intention aimed at the wrestling community, who should have repeatedly learned from this text. Indeed, Kṛṣṇa explained that his *yoga-māyā* (“yogic power”) would lead to the bestowal of wrestling power (*balada*) and the granting of victory (*jayaprada*, MP 18.17).

Having pulled together disparate sources, which, too often, include essentialised narratives, this humble attempt at a thorough analysis has, I hope, contributed to clarifying some of the complex pixels of premodern South Asia’s physical culture related to poles, wrestling and tumbling. It has demonstrated that interdisciplinary

⁷⁷ Compare *pratyālīḍha*, a particular attitude in shooting (the left foot advanced and right drawn back) and *ālīḍha* “a particular attitude in shooting (the right knee advanced, the left leg drawn back)” (MW). Compare “driving away (*niṣkāsa*) a seditious army (*kaṇḍuka*)” in MS 4.5.703 (Shrigondekar 1925).

efforts are well-positioned to shed light on particular aspects that fall between the analytical cracks.

However, even though this lengthy chapter is filled with information, it only scratches the surface. More data was left out than included. Having begun this research on a whim, back in 2018, what has been accumulated is enough for three monographs. Future research will focus on further disambiguation of the ancient wrestler's ontological praxis, a deeper and broader inspection of the social and economic trade networks across South Asia and up into Central Asia, a thorough analysis of more artwork related to poles, wrestlers, acrobats and dancers, and a trans-Asian study of the movement of "street performers."

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Abbreviations

Abhinayadarpaṇa	AbhD
Agnipurāṇa	APu
Atharvaveda	AV
Aṣṭāṅgahṛdayasūtra (Sūtrasthāna)	
Aṣṭāṅgasāṅgraha	AS
Bhāgavatāpurāṇa	BhPu
Bhūpālavallabha	
Chāndogyopaniṣad	ChUp
Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā	GS
Harivaṃśa	HV
Haṭhayogapradīpikā	HYP
Haṭhasaṅketacandrikā	
Liṅgapurāṇa	LPu
Mahābhārata	MBh

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Mahāvagga	MV
Mallapurāṇa	MP
Mallaśāstra	MŚ
Mānasollāsa	MS
Mānavadharmasāstra	MDŚ
Milindapañha	Mil
Narṛiṇai	
Nartananirṇaya	NN
Nāṭyaśāstra	NŚ
Nṛttaratnāvali	NR
Pampasthanavarṇanam	PSV
Samgītaratnākara	SR
Saṃyuttanikāya	SN
Sāratthappakāsinī	Spk
Śatapathabrāhmaṇa	ŚBr
Ṛgveda	ṚV
Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā	VS
Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa	VDhPu
Viṣṇupurāṇa	VPu

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