

India's Physical Culture and Hidden Contributions  
By Richard "Army" Maguire

India's art and literature almost always describes or displays examples of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses carrying a mace, goad, spear, or trident of some kind. The Mace, also known as the "Gada" was reputedly obtained by Vishnu – an Indian Deity as a reward for defeating Indra – the God of War. Although commonly used as weapons, these are also symbolic instruments of power, honor, self-control and restraint.



Hanuman with his Mace



Mace

The mace or gada was also modified and used daily by athletes to develop the physical attributes of both strength and stamina for wrestling. Interestingly, in India's "Tridosha Medical Doctrine", exercise and its benefits were written about as far back as 1600 B.C. This predates the "Golden Age" of Greece 800–300 B.C. which of course is often cited for their contributions to physical culture. Susruta, a physician from India (600 B.C.) was said to have been the first man to prescribe exercise to prevent or treat disease.

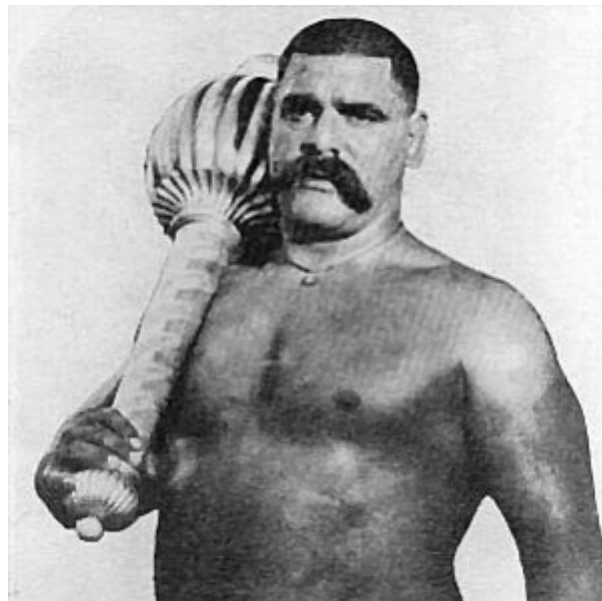


Susruta

For obesity his treatment included dietary changes and participation in an exercise program that included long walks, engaging in sports such as wrestling, and riding on a horse or an elephant. Susruta defined exercise as a "sense of weariness from bodily labor" and it should be "taken" every day. When he described exercise he was referring to movements associated with walking, running, jumping, swimming, diving, or riding and participating in sports such as archery, wrestling, and javelin throws.

In India, physical culture exercise thrived because of its importance. We can also see many of these ancient practices exhibited in the art and practice of wrestling. One world renowned athlete and wrestler was known as "The Lion of the Punjab", or "The Great Gama" Baksh. He was born into a famous family of grapplers from the northwestern part of India. He was large in stature and had a commanding physical presence. It is written that Gama had thirty inch thighs and a fifty–six inch chest. Gama's father died when he was just six years old and some say this was his motivation to excel in wrestling or "Kushti", as it is known in India. Gama's first feat of physicality came at a national wrestling competition held sometime around 1888. Permission was granted for him to compete even though he was just ten years old because the ruling body overseeing the competition learned that he was the son of the great wrestler Aziz Baksh.

Joseph Alter, Ph.D. describes the following story of Gama's abilities: *During a competition, the main contest was to see who could do the highest number of repetitions of free squats called "bethaks". Indian wrestlers regularly do hundreds if not thousands every day, and even at ten years old Gama's daily routine included five hundred. Over four hundred wrestlers from around the country had gathered for the contest. After a number of hours had passed, only fifteen wrestlers were left exercising. At this point another contestant, Jaswant Singh ended the contest saying that the ten year old boy was clearly the winner in such a field of stalwart national champions. Later, upon being asked how many (bethaks) he had done, Gama replied that he could not remember, but probably several thousand. In any event he was bed-ridden for a week. Starting at the age of ten, Gama's daily exercise routine included not only five hundred bethaks, but five hundred "dands" (jack-knifing push-ups) as well. He is said to have regularly done three thousand bethaks and fifteen hundred dands and run one mile every day with a 120 pound stone ring around his neck. In 1908, two years before he went to London to compete for the world championship belt, Gama's regimen was increased to five thousand bethaks and three thousand dands. Every morning he would also work out by wrestling with forty compatriot wrestlers in the royal court. Added to this, he began weight-lifting with a one hundred pound grind stone and a "sumtola" (wooden bar-bell made from a tree trunk). His phenomenal diet and regimen of exercise was meant to develop a kind of pervasive subtle energy rather than just the kinetic power of particular muscle groups. Even at the age of fifty, Gama was still doing 6000 bethaks and 4000 dands every day, and wrestling with eighty compatriots in the royal court.*



Gama Baksh

Taking a closer look at some of the other exercises and types of equipment that were used by the ancient peoples of India, and particularly by wrestlers, you may be surprised to see that many pieces are still being used today. These pieces are just referred to by different names or terminology in modern times.

The three staples of Indian exercise are known as the Namaskar, Dands, and Bethaks. Namaskars are known to us in the West through yoga practice as "The Salute to the Sun". Dands are simply push-ups and are often referred to as "Tiger" push-ups and/or Hindu push-ups which target the upper arms. The word "Dand" translates to "upper arm". Bethaks are the traditional squats and are done freestyle by just swinging the arms as the body is lowered and raised. It is often recommended that Bethaks are done twice as much as the Dands. This exercise is often enhanced by including a heavy stone ring (Gar Nal) around the neck to increase resistance during the exercise.



Gar Nal

Today, you will commonly see sand bags, Bulgarian bags, or Kettlebells being used and supported on our shoulders to increase the difficulty while doing squats. Sand bag training (Bhar-Sharma) was mentioned in the book "Encyclopedia of Indian Physical Culture" published in 1950. This volume demonstrates numerous exercises as well as displays many photos showing exercise equipment and their uses. I believe this to be the most comprehensive book published on the complete practice of India's physical culture.

In addition to the three exercises mentioned above, wrestlers also practiced heavy club swinging (Bahu-Pellanaka-Shrama). This exercise ensured powerful grip and increased strength of the arms, shoulders, back and legs.



Indian clubs – Museum of Science Britain 1870

In addition, heavy stone lifting was also practiced. We commonly see this done today in our popular strong man competitions referred to as lifting atlas stones. Since the barbell was not invented till the 1800's, the Indian athletes used large logs that had areas cut out for hand holds. The heavier logs were pressed above the head and the lighter logs were pressed to the side both vertically and horizontally away from the body. They would also alternate their hand holds and would add twisting motions to enhance the exercise. India's version of the dumbbell had a stone cylinder with wooden handles in the center and they were known as "Nals".



A Stone Set of Nals

The name Sum-tola is derived from two words and means equal weights. These logs were pulled by a thick rope draped over the wrestlers' shoulders and used to level the soil that formed the floor of the wrestling pits or "Akhara". Often a person would stand on the sumtola to add weight. This made the job of pulling the weighted log that much more difficult. This would resemble our athletes today who use weighted sleds for building strong legs and pulling power.



A Sumtola pressed above the head for repetitions.



A group of Sumtolas



Dragging the Sumtola to level the wrestling pit

Incorporated into the various calisthenics and weighted equipment, wrestlers also used the skill of climbing a thick rope. Rope climbing was used to build their grip, upper body and leg strength.

One very unique piece of equipment from India that can be traced back to the 12th century is called the “Mallakhamb”. The word “Mallakhamb” is composed of “Malla”, a wrestler – a man of strength, “Khamb”, a pole used by wrestlers for practicing their skills to learn different styles of Kushti (wrestling). Mallakhamb therefore, can be translated in English as a “Wrestler’s Pillar”. There are three different versions of the Mallakhamb. One is a large wooden wrestler’s pole mounted firmly in the ground. They are usually 8.5 feet tall and about 22 inches in diameter at the base. The wooden Mallakhamb was oiled with castor oil to make it slippery and difficult to seize with the legs and grip. This of course mimicked the perspiration of the body that would be created when wrestling. The second type is a shorter version that is suspended from the ceiling or a pole. The third type of Mallakhamb is simply a suspended cotton rope. In ancient times the practitioners used a piece of hanging rattan vine.



Mallakhamb Mounted to the Ground



Mallakhamb suspended from the ceiling



Mallakhamb suspended from a cotton rope

From this rope the practitioners would hang and make transitions from one pose to another in what looks like aerial ballet. Of course all three styles of Mallakhamb practice are very difficult to master. Wrestlers concentrated on leg as well as arm movements and engaging the muscles they used to perform throws, locks and holds. One of the goals in using the Mallakhamb was to apply the positions as quickly as possible and hold the posture for a period of time to build endurance.

The physical culture contributions of India were as complete as any that we can research from ancient times. It encompasses exercises done strictly with only the body in a



passive non aggressive fashion, much like yoga. It also encompasses competitive and more aggressive pursuits such as stick fighting, boxing and wrestling. All of the present day body weight exercises we see that are popular were known to the people of India centuries ago. Much of this equipment which made the wrestlers ready for competition in the days of the Maharajah's (Great King) seems also to have made a serious comeback lately. Some examples being the Indian clubs, the gada, sand bags, log, stone and dumbbell lifts, sled pulling, rope climbing and suspension training. The people of India had advanced, balanced and relevant exercise practices. These practices served the purpose of creating and preserving health in times of both war and peace.