

Bengal's Physical Culture in Retrospect: Body Builders of Colonial Days

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Abstract: Physical culture and bodybuilding in Bengal evolved in colonial period and thrives into a height even after few decades of independence. Achieving a strong body along with a sound mind were not just a hype in Urban community in those days but practiced as a part of resistance to colonial atrocities and national identity too which shows Bengalis were strong both in intellect and physic. Personas like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda propagated the idea of physical strength as integral to national pride. Various *Akhadas* and Samitis were established to facilitate the training of young Bengalis in wrestling, stick fighting, and other physical disciplines, nurturing a culture that combined physical expertise with revolutionary ideals. The journey which started with prominent figures like Ambika Charan Guha, Khetra Charan Guha, Bhabendra Mohan Saha, Major Phanindra Krishna Gupta, Bishnucharan Ghosh, Nilmoni Das or even freedom fighters and leaders like Upendranath Bandyopadhyay or Jyotindra Mohon Sengupta crested with Gobar Guha, Manohar Aich or Monotosh Roy who emerged as icons of their field, achieving national and international acclaims. This is how a culture flourished with the concept of militant nationalism blended with the political ethos embarked its own glory in sports like Body Building or Wrestling all over the world. Illustrating on the one hand the life and achievements of these heroes from Bengal, this paper also addresses the decay of traditional physical culture in contemporary Bengal, overshadowed by modern fitness trends and why it is important to acknowledge and honour the legacies of these pioneers who endorsed the cultivation of a strong mind and body as a foundation for nation-building on the other hand. Through a study of historical narratives and personal stories, this research highlights the importance of reconnecting with Bengal's rich heritage of physical culture amidst the evolving fitness landscape all over the world.

Keywords - Physical Culture, Bodybuilding, History, Bengal, Colonial Period.

The very idea of possessing a healthy body and sound mind is today's buzz of that being cherished by the urban population in India as well as in Bengal. Multi gym culture is gaining popularity therefore in metro cities and the Mufassil. Building a jacked body with accurate proportions and chiseled muscle, staying super fit and having six or eight pack abs have become dream of most of the young boys and girls now following the images of Bollywood celebrities. Supplements and drugs are being used in many cases. Still Bengal is far from reaching the point in building physical strength it used to have few decades earlier.

The culture of nurturing physical strength and body building art in colonial Bengal started at the onset of the 20th centuries to challenge the notion created by the British colonial regime about the "physical weakness" of the Bengalis. While the Sikhs and Gurkhas were tagged as the martial race of the country, Bengalis with their indomitable wit and intelligence were tagged as somewhat feminine due to their petit body structures. To defy this view and with the budding nationalist movements against colonial rule Bengalis started blending physical training with revolutionary ideals. The idea of preparing themselves as 'Bira' was supported and inspired through the writings of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh and the preachings of Swami Vivekananda. The clear indication of nurturing physical strength to use against the enemy by Bankim Chandra in his "Anandamth", famous preaching of Swami Vivekananda that one may be nearer to heaven by playing football than through the study of religious books like Gita, introduction of various programs of physical activity as part of total development of personality in the curriculum of Shantiniketan Ashram by Rabindra Nath Tagore and Sarala Devi Ghosal's introduction of the celebration of 'Birashtami Brata Utsab' and 'Pratapaditya Utsab' where the main emphasis was on rejoicing a strong and powerful body of the Bengali youths through sword fighting or stick fighting; inspired young minds of the time to participate in such physical cultures. Soon many Samitis, Clubs and Akhadas began to form in the province. These Akhadas were a network in disguise for the young Bengalis to organize themselves against the British for a militant resistance. With this purpose in mind to build their physical strength through the training of wrestling, horse riding, stick fighting and sword fighting Samitis like *Anusilan Samiti* of Calcutta (established by Satish Ch. Basu & Aurobindo Ghosh in 1902), *Anusilan Samiti* of Dacca, East Bengal (established by Pulin Behari Das in 1905), *Razabazar Akhra* (established by Jatindranath Banerjee in 1902) *Atmonnoti Samiti* (popular under the leadership of Bipin Bihari Ganguly and Anukul Mukherjee, around 1902) began to flourish.

The culture of physical training therefore gained its own impetus from the very first half of 20th centuries and continued to flourish outside the political arena from where many individual Bengali body builders rose prominence. They even competed in national and international championships and brought glories to the race. Body building and physical training got more popular when world-renowned German bodybuilder, strongman and physical culture pioneer Eugen Sandow came to India on an eight-month tour between 1904–1905. However, the first known reputed Akhara in Bengal was established by Ambika Charan Guha, aka Ambu Babu or Raja Babu (1843-1900), a wrestler himself and pioneer of Akhara culture in Bengal. As a grandson of wrestler Shiv Charan Guha, who patronized 'Pehlwani' and is credited with popularizing the sport in Bengal, Ambika took his lessons in the sport later from Kalicharan Chaubey of Mathura and learned horse riding as well. In 1857, at the age of sixteen only he established the first Akhara of Bengal. Some of the renowned personalities who got training in this akhara from Ambu Babu were his own son Khetra Charan Guha or Khetu Babu, Khetu Babu's nephew, Jatindra Charan Guha; later known as Gobar Guha who became the first Asian to win the World Light Heavyweight Championship in the United States in 1921, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Brahmananda, Jatindranath Mukherjee or Bagha Jatin; whose prowess became a myth as he was credited with the story of defeating a tiger bear handed in a face to face fight and Major Phanindra Krishna Gupta. Another such wrestling club of the contemporary

period was Panchanan Bayam Samity which is also known as one of the oldest Wrestling clubs in India. It was established in 1881 by social Reformer Nihar Chandra Saha. Nandalal Saha son of Nihar Chandra Saha and a famous wrestler of his time, was the first President of Panchanan Bayam Samity. During his time, he coached and mentored a lot of National Champions such as Sushil Saha, Jadunandan Singh, Sudhir Saha, Gupteswar Misra, and Beni Dutta. Sudhir Saha competed in various state and national level championships winning the state championship several times and getting the silver medal in the nationals. Sudhir Saha was India's first International Judge/Referee. Sudhir's elder brothers Subol and Sushil were reputed wrestlers too. Sushil became National Champion and coached several wrestlers during his time. Panchanan Bayam Samity has produced 3 Olympians, 34 National Champions, and 3 International Judges/Referees during the second half of the 20th century. The Olympic training camp for 1948 and 1952 Olympic Games was held at the Panchanan Bayam Samity under the guidance of Sudhir Saha, Sushil Saha, and G Misra.

At this same period, i.e. during 1904/1905 Khudi Babu's gymnasium became famous one too. Bhabendra Mohan Saha, popularly known as 'Bheem Bhavani' remained one of the notable figures who learned wrestling there.

The most famous and still vibrantly breathing *Akhada* among all these early 20th century organizations were *Hatkhola Byayam Samiti* and *Simla Byayam Samiti*. *Hatkhola Byayam Samiti* was established around 1910 by the freedom fighters like Upendranath Bandyopadhyay, who were closely connected to the *Anushilan Samity*. The land on which this *Akhada* was founded was donated by the Mitra family to foster patriotic feelings among the young minds through the practice of physical training and preaching of nationalist ideals. With the same ardor in mind *Simla Byayam Samity* was founded by Atindra Nath Bosu single handedly in 1926. In the initial days training for wrestling, exercise and training of fighting with Sticks and later training of football, volleyball and various other sports were imparted here. Atindra Nath Bosu's eldest son Amarendra Bosu and his other sons participated in wrestling and stick fighting exhibitions of the Indian National Congress meetings in different parts of the country during the days of the organization's prominence. The female members of *Simla Byayam Samity* were equally proficient in stick fighting and knife fighting. Members of this Samity participated in Non-Cooperation movement of 1920s and other patriotic movements as well. Political leaders like 'Deshpriyo' Jyotindra Mohon Sengupta, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bosu, Sarat Chandra Bosu, Suresh Chandra Majumdar, Makhan Lal Sen, Dr. Bhupendra Dutta, Bankim Mukherjee, Rajen Deb, Hemanta Bosu, Radha Raman Mitra, Dr. Bidhan Chandra Ray, Kiran Shankar Ray, Madan Mohan Burman and many others regularly visited *Simla Byayam Samity*. Urmila Devi, Mohini Devi, Jyotirmayi Ganguly, Ila Sen, Shanti Das, Ashalata Das, Indira Devi, Bina Das, Kalpana Dutta (Joshi) and many others were the female members of the *samiti* and actively participated in the freedom struggle of the nation. This *Akhada* was closed down in 1932 by the then British Government of India due to its political connections. It was declared illegal and all the furniture along with the sports equipment were confiscated. However, it reopened in 1934 when British Government withdrew the former order in due course.

Transcending the initial phase of physical training culture which was an outcome of formation of militant nationalism and blended with the political ethos of the time, individual efforts to build physical strength and showcase the expertise of Bengalis continued throughout the 20th century. It was the 1920s and 1930s when the body building culture got more enthusiastic response from the Bengali youths. Major Phanindra Krishna Gupta (1882 - 1952) was one of the exceptional aficionados in this field in those early days. Besides pursuing a regular course in medicines from Calcutta Medical College, he trained himself in wrestling for seven years in the *Akhada* of famous Ambu Babu. He used to practice wrestling in the early morning and trained his body with dumbbells in the evening every day. 2500 sit-ups and 1500 squats everyday was included in his routine. Gupta served the Indian Army as a medical officer from 1915-1923. After his retirement at the age of 41 he devoted his time to train the young boys in his own well-equipped gymnasium and a wrestling arena which was situated in he had founded within his residence. He came to be known as the "Indian Sandow", after Eugene Sandow, the famous European strongman who is considered the father of modern bodybuilding. Even at the age of 41 Major Gupta had a body measurement with 44 inches chest size, biceps 16.25 inches, forearms 12.50 inches and Thighs 23.50 inches in size. Even with this body measurement and rigorous exercise routine he relied on the simple Bengali diet of Rice, *Roti*, Fish, Chicken, Mutton, Milk, *Dahi*, fresh fruits and vegetables. In contrast to modern dietary practice of the body builders, regular consumption of Almond Milk with Sugar was also included in his routine. During his private practicing days in his house after retirement he used to prescribe specially planned physical exercises, mostly free hand and massages, similar to what is now known as physiotherapy, to treat his patients, who had various obstinate ailments like hypertension, diabetes, cardiac disorders etc. In 1927, his first book *My System of Physical Culture* and in 1936, second book *My System of Physical Culture Treatment* were published which dealt with physical exercises dietetics for men and women. Among his prominent students Bijoy Krishna Pathak, who was an all-around athlete, very good sportsman, wrestler, an excellent muscle-poser and revolutionary Upendra Nath Banerjee who was a fine weight lifter and muscle-poser, and won the first prize for the finest muscular body in the All-India Weight Lifting Championship in 1925 were noteworthy.

The annals of Bengal's history have forgotten the name of Bhabendra Mohan Saha (1890-1922) he however, left his mark and inspired a generation of Bengali youths to take up outdoor physical activities, essential for building a strong nation. Saha was trained in wrestling in Khetu Guha's *Akhada* at Darzipara in his early teenage and joined the Circus group of famous Indian bodybuilder and wrestler Kodi Rammurthy Naidu at the age of nineteen only. Later on, returning to Bengal he joined Professor K. Basak's Hippodrome Circus and embarked on a tour of Asia. He used to perform extraordinary Herculean feats such as holding two running automobiles at bay with both hands, shifting large cement barrel on which half a dozen people were seated solely by the strength of his teeth, placing a huge stone weighing 40 Maunds with 20 people sitting over it upon his chest, taking untamed elephant on his chest etc. His extraordinary prowess earns him the name 'Bheem Bhavani'. Unfortunately, his name has been lost due to his untimely death due to pneumonia at the age of 33 only, a time when weightlifters usually come to their peak.

A contemporary of Major P. K. Gupta and forgotten hero of undivided Bengal Shri Nirod Sarkar from Dacca also contributed in popularizing the culture physical training by practical implementation of making terminally ill teenagers, young men and elderly people healthy through the regular training of exercise and yoga. In 1936, Dr. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, the Vice-Chancellor of Dacca University, awarded Nirod Babu a gold medal and the title of 'Ironman'. Later he worked as a physical education Director and Teacher in many institutions, schools, and colleges. He effortlessly demonstrates lifting weights while upside down (this is his Indian record); tearing playing cards with his hands; breaking chains; bending iron plates with his teeth and hands; playing with iron balls; bending thick iron rods with his teeth, shoulders, head, and neck; driving a loaded bullock cart over his chest, stomach, and throat; lifting weights and hanging people with his hair, and driving a loaded bullock cart with his hair; stopping a moving car; bending a beam with his neck; placing only his head and feet on benches, leaving a gap under his back, and having 14-15 Maunds

of stone placed on his chest and then breaking it with a ten-seer hammer; ring bar exercises; stick fighting, fencing, Jujutsu, sword fighting, spear fighting, muscle dance, etc. He established the "Bablu Smriti Exercise and Yoga College" in Salkia (Howrah) and taught exercise and Yoga to many boys. He enhanced the glory of Bengal by showcasing his compound physical exercises at the Colombo World Exhibition. Sarkar wrote many Bengali books like "Shorir O Shokti", "Sarol Jog Byayam", "Nirog Dehe Dirgho Jibon", "Jog Byayame Meyeder Swasthyo O Soundorjyo", "Chhatroder Swasthyo, Byayam O Ason", "Jjoujik Niyom O Byayame Rog Nibarone" in a simple language to explain *Asanas* and exercise for common people to follow.

Following the legacy of P. K. Gupta and Nirod Sarkar 1930s Bengal saw the rise of Stars like Nilmoni Das, Bishnu Charan Ghosh, Gobor Guho, Bheem Bhavani and many others who accredited international fame as well.

Nilmoni Das later acknowledged as "Ironman" or "Louho-manob" received his physical training from Subal Biswas, the physical education teacher at Calcutta Academy and later he was mentored by Dr. Narayan Chandra Das, the physical education instructor of the Shimla Gymnasium Association. Eventually he learned stick fighting from Pulin Behari Das, the founder of the Bengal Gymnasium Association, and Amal Basu of the Shimla Gymnasium Association. He received training in boxing and swimming from Jagatkanta Shil; the pioneer of boxing competition in Indian schools and the founder of the School of Physical Culture, which was situated at Raja Subhodh Mallick Square in Kolkata. As a physical education teacher at Calcutta Academy and the Calcutta University Institute during his college days he used to participate often in various inter-collegiate boxing competitions giving bodybuilding and exercise demonstrations in different districts of Bengal. In 1935, at the cultural program of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha conference in Malda, he astonished the organizers with his physical feats, iron bending, and beam balancing, and therefore they bestow the title of 'Ironman' upon him. Along with a few friends, he established a physical training institution called 'Shakti Samiti' at a friend's house on Parsibagan Lane of Calcutta. He endorsed the culture of ancient Yoga and wrote many articles and books to spread message. Nilmoni wrote books named "Exercise and Health", "Illustrated Yoga Exercises", "Dumbbell-Barbell Exercises", "Ways to Increase Height", "Ways to Achieve Peace" etc. to guide students of physical education which are still relevant today. On the other hand, he was the one who endorsed the necessity of physical training for women and wrote articles on this in a leading publication of the age. In an article which Nilmoni wrote for "Bharatborsho" in 1934, at his age of twenty-three only, he emphasized upon his belief that women needed to be physically fit in order to adequately defend and empower themselves. Nilmoni's article was embroidered with images of various women in exercising poses, such as the one of Mira Banerjee twisting an iron bar! In another article, he had prepared a diet chart for women and included the image of Reba Das, a married woman performing freehand exercises in a saree. Nilmoni pointed out in this article that physical exercise was particularly important for married women, since it apparently mitigated the pain of childbirth. Among hundreds of pupils, he had trained, Nandakishore Chakraborty, Sudhir Ghatak, Sunil Das, Sachchidananda Seth, Robin Ghosh were distinguished ones.

Almost at the same period, student of same 'Guru' Major P. K. Gupta, Bishnu Charan Ghosh or Bishtu Ghosh (1903-1970) created much stir and is still pertinent while there is any discussion on the Bengali 'Pehlwan'. He is remembered in the poem "Palowan" (The Wrestler) of renowned Bengali writer Sukumar Ray as Shasthicharan. Here Sukumar Ray wrote, "When Shasthicharan playfully lifts elephants, his body weighs nineteen Maunds, and he is built as strong as iron"; which gives the idea of awestruck strengths of Bishtu Ghosh. At the age of 21, Bishnu Charan created a new style of physical training by combining Yoga and bodybuilding, which became known as the "Ghosh Technique". Using this technique, he would perform feats such as having a moving car driven over his chest, having a person fall onto his stomach from a height of 12 feet, and bending thick iron rods. He founded the "Ghosh College of Yoga and Physical Culture" near his residence at *Gurpar* in Calcutta. In the book titled "Muscle Control and Barbell Exercise"; authored by himself and K. C. Sengupta muscle building exercises and weight lifting techniques were discussed in detail. In this book a group of young body builders' athletes like Shushil Kumar Chakraborty, Mr. S. Natu, Mr. S. Bose, Subodh Mukherjee, and Began Raj were featured who were trained by him. These bodybuilders not only developed remarkable physiques but also possess a harmonious balance of strength, flexibility, and control. Their photographs demonstrated a balance of aesthetics and functional fitness too. Ghosh is credited with the invention of 84 *Hatha Yoga* postures, and imparted Yoga trainings in Japan, America. Later on, his students, Monotosh Roy (the first Indian Mr. Universe), Bikram Choudhury, and Buddha Ghosh became pioneers in the world of yoga and bodybuilding.

In the field of wrestling and body building Bishtu Ghosh's one and only match during this period was Jatindra Charan Guha, popularly known as Gobar Guha (1892-1972), who became a figure of prominence in the international frame as well. Being the grandson of Ambika Charan Guha and the nephew of Khetra Charan Guha or Khetu-babu he belonged to a family of wrestlers for three generations. Starting his wrestling career at the age of 18, Guha smashed all previous records in wrestling and aced several championships. He won the title of 'British Empire Heavyweight Wrestling Champion' after defeating Scottish champion Jimmy Campbell in 1913. Guha's wrestling career was characterized by international competition and a shift towards modern training methods. He primarily fought in the US and Europe, with limited bouts in India. However, despite his outstanding achievements he was denied the jewel-studded 'John Bull' belt due to his Indian nationality. In 1921, Gobar Guha became the first Asian to win the World Light Heavyweight Championship in America. Gobar Guho championed his own style of wrestling which took Indian wrestling into newer heights. His style included wrestling holds like 'Dhonka', 'Tibbi', 'Gadhanet', 'Dhak', 'Tang', 'Pat', 'Dhobiya pat' and 'Kulla' which later became a part and parcel of Indian wrestling. He was famous for his dangerous move known as 'Radda'. This hugely built, enormously strong man was 6 ft 1 inch tall, with 48-50 inches chest, 42 inches waist, 18 inches biceps, 13.5 inches forearms, 30 inches Thighs and weighed 290 lbs almost. His intense training, included 2,500 push-ups daily and running and walking ups and downs the stairs wearing a 160 lbs stone collar around his neck. His diet comprises fowls and plenty of butter along with normal Bengali cuisines, and he was very fond of almonds crushed and cooked with sugar and water. In his later days he established a gymnasium in Calcutta near his house. The particular road has been named after his name i.e. Gobor Goho Sarani to celebrate his fabulous achievements.

Bengal's physical culture reached its culmination with two extremely reputed and celebrated body builders of modern era, viz. Manohar Aich (1912-2016), adorably known as "Pocket Hercules" and "Bishwashree" Sri Monotosh Roy (1916-2004). Aich although began his work outs from a very young age, he took up body building and weight lifting seriously after joining the Royal Air Force in 1942. During his confinement days in jail followed by a protest he made against the British rule in India, he devoted himself fully to rigorous body weight training. After the independence of the country, in the year 1950 at the age of 38, Aich won the Mr. Hercules contest. His fame reached to the top when he secured first position in the Pro-Short division of the NABBA Mr. Universe contest organised by the National Amateur Body Builders Association. At the time, with 4 feet 11 inches height his biceps

were 46 cm, chest 1.2 m and forearms were 6 cm, He became only the second Indian to win the prestigious title of Mr. Universe. Aich's diet included milk, fruits and vegetables along with rice, lentils and fish kept him healthy. He believed in a simple lifestyle and stress-free living for a healthy mind and body to achieve. In the later days of his life, he trained many body builders and continued to inspire his countrymen until his death at the age of 104.

Monotosh Roy on the other hand started his physical exercise at the very tender age of twelve. After a few times he got the opportunity to train for both body building and Yoga under the guidance of Bishnu Charan Ghosh whom he used to idolized from the very beginning. In 1939, Monotosh won the East Indian Bodybuilding Championship and in 1947 became the winner of the All-India Bodybuilding Championship. In 1951, Roy bagged first position in the Mr. Universe competition in the Group 3 amateur category as the first person from all of Asia and first Indian to win the "Mr. Universe" title. AT his best physique with 5 feet 5 inches Height and 70 kilo weight Roy carried 16.5 inches neck, 45 inches chest, 16.5 inches biceps, 23 inches thighs and 15.5 inches calf size. In 1958, he founded the Indian Bodybuilding Federation. He was also involved in the establishment of the Asian Bodybuilding Federation. He taught in the physical education department at Calcutta University and Law College for some time. Many of his articles on health were published in various well-known and lesser-known magazines and newspapers. He wrote several books on Yoga and various articles on health written by him were published in many newspapers and magazines. His Yoga programs were widespread broadcast on Doordarshan (Indian national television).

Today's high-end fitness centers and boutique studios are adorned with sophisticated interiors, equipped with advanced machines, and air conditioning, prioritizing comfort and a premium experience and the country and Bengalis almost are on the verge of forgetting these legends and their robust achievements that they acquired through winning over many adversities. Multi-gym and Fitness Studio culture in the whole country has transformed from a pursuit of strength and discipline to a mainstream, consumer-oriented lifestyle choice; based on holistic well-being, aesthetics, and community engagement these days. However, it is the high time when we need to pay our tribute towards these stalwarts and pay attention to the message of building nation through building sound mind and body which they wanted to upheld through their living and attainments.

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