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Indian wrestling

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Summary

The article is the result of the quest in Indian libraries done in 2005. Invited by Indian Council for Cultural Relations as a visiting scholar, the author had also possibility to meet the Indian wrestlers and stay in the best sport centres in India. He also has some practical experience of the matter derived mainly from judo (5th Dan). He describes the traditional background of Indian wrestling, its links with yoga anatomy, the mythic accounts of legendary wrestler encounters, and ritual connections with sacred festivals. He also analyses the modern Indian wrestling as an ancient sport in transition.

Key words: bujutsu • judo • Kalari Payatt • kung fu • martial arts • wrestling

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„Although India may have been the cradle of the spiritual martial arts – wrote Peter Payne in his book *Martial Arts, Spiritual Dimension* more than a quarter of century ago – contemporary Indian systems are not widespread, and much knowledge has died out, or it is taught only secretly” [1]. That particular phrase may be misleading. He probably thought about the martial art skill of stick fighting and Indian boxing called *Kalari Payatt*, trained mainly in Kerala in the South-west of India. In many other regions of India we can find another forms of self-defence based on yoga anatomy. For many centuries they have been taught the traditional way, in close connection with religious festivals and Hindu or Muslim rituals. Modern forms have been widely promoted by the Indian monthly *Bharatiya Kushti*.

Professor R.C. Kulreshtra in his introduction to *Dhanur Veda* [2] made more precisely comment about the studies on martial art philosophical theory. “To some, the ancient art of warfare – he wrote – is just for decoration and therefore incorrect. However, the elements of warfare are immutable. The mechanism may change but the thoughts remain the same. It is painful to note that though, the *Art of War* in ancient India was in its Zenith, no integrated and conscious efforts have ever been made to study this art in India. Military history has been ignored. Consequently, we look to Western masters and draw inspiration from them while our own heritage, culture and literature on this matter is given a safe burial, stamped with the seal «unauthentic» Even much before Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, Moltke and Napoleon, India has produced military thinkers like the unknown craftsman of «Dhanur Veda» and the renowned philosopher of war – Kautilya”.

Indian wrestlers have often been vegans – they do not eat meat. The origin of this diet leads to most ancient Indian healing, massage and herbs of *Ayurveda*. The roots of this ancient tradition have been often identified with *Dhanur Veda* texts based on Arjuna’s art of arrow and bow, the mythic hero of great epic *Mahabharata*. The secrets of *Dhanur Veda* have been attributed to particular Indian gods. Described in many legends of the great Indian epics they are an important part of the contemporary ethos and etnos of the Indian wrestling.

The secret aura built around some styles of Indian wrestling has been a part of Indian heritage. In old days the transmission of sacred knowledge has been a part of mystery. Teaching has been done by guru, beginning from sacred verses of Holy *Vedas* to end on mysteries of astrology, mathematics or logic. There were other reasons. Some wayward sects like *Thugs*, the killers in the name of Goddess Kali made the learning of self-defence a part of their initiation system. The secret of the most effective strangulation has been a part of the initiation in their religions society. The performing arts evoke that historical episode in many films and folkloric dances.

In feudal times wrestling matches were sometimes fought to death. The most dangerous among them have been different styles of *vajra mushti*, a kind of wrestling combined with Indian boxing and kicking based on the knowledge of vital points of the body (*marman*) and not rarely on the usage iron punching gloves to strengthen the deadly fist blows, such as knuckle dusters (*vajra*). The medieval form

of Indian professional wrestling was known as *malla-yuddha*, described in the 13th century treatise *Malla Purana*, was a precursor to modern Pehlwani

Traditional Indian wrestling (*kushti*) has been widely known and widespread in Northern India much earlier. Beginning from Vedic times, it has been introduced to Indian peninsula by Aria invaders coming to India through the Khyber Pass since 1500 BC or earlier and widespread among the vernacular Dravida tribes. Since ages, the heroes of ancient Indian epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, have been recognized as legendary gurus of Indian wrestlers (*pahlavans*). Their skill has been considered as the gift of attributed to such gods like Indra, Siva, Vishnu, Krishna. There is a memorable wrestling contest between Bhima and Jarasandha narrated in the *Mahabharata*, and there is a duel between Rustam and Sohrab mentioned in the Persian epic *Shahnameh (Book of Kings)*. The brother of Lord Krishna, Balarama, was a wrestler described in these religious texts. In the chapter of *Ramayana*, there is mention of King Vali, having won against the mighty asura Ravana, the king of Lanka, in a wrestling contest. According to *Ramayana*, Hanuman, the chieftain of some tribes from the South and the great ally of king Rama, has built a bridge of monkey life bodies toward the residence of mighty demon.

That dimension of ‘holiness’ has always been the Indian particularity in the field of self-defense. Hindi word ‘*yuddha*’ has been derived from ancient holy sanskrit root ‘*yuddh*’ which means ‘to fight’. It has been the root of such Japanese words as ‘*judo*’ and ‘*jujutsu*’ brought to this country by the Indian Buddhist monks. Among the Indian martial arts experts traveling to China more than thousand years ago was famous Bodhidharma, legendary founder of Shaolin kung fu style. For these reasons some scholars believe that *kushti* is the earliest form of wrestling in the world.

“Kung fu – wrote Marylin D. Mintz in her Book *The Martial Arts Films* – has its philosophical roots in Taoism, relating to nature; Buddhism, relating to self; and Confucianism, relating to society. Taoism, attributed to Lao Tzu, a name meaning the Old One or the Old Philosopher, is described in the *Tao Te Ching* from the six century B.C, which literary means *Book of the Way and Its Virtue*. Preference is given to a simple harmonious existence, Buddhism, prescribing self denial and compassion, was a result of China first century A.D. contact with Indian Buddhism and gave rise to in the sixth century to the concept of Zen derived from Indian monk Bodhidharma [3].

The most spectacular evidence of sacred roots of *kushti* has been Hanuman wrestling taught nowadays by some priests of Hanuman temples nearby Ganga river. The wrestling is a part of Hanuman cult there. The style is called ‘*Hanumanti*’ being distinguished from Jarasandh and Bheemasemi styles. In fact. Legendary hero Bhima was a coach of martial arts in ancient *Mahabharata*. Monkey god or hero Hanuman known for his fighting skill in old epic *Ramayana* has been considered the founder of Hanuman wrestling style, and ‘*hanumanti*’ literally means to be tricky’, or ‘to be trickster, clown and magician at the same time’.

The ancient roots of the Indian wrestling have been strongly grounded not only in Muslim and Hinduism. We can



trace the elements of Indian wrestling in ancient practices of Buddhism. It is proved that Indian wrestling has been known to Buddhist monks. As the eminent member of the noble *kshatriya* clans. Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, must have been acquainted with the secrets of warrior training in his youth, as well as with the anatomy of yoga. The knowledge of *cakra* has been combined with learning the *marmans*, the vital points being the aim for dangerous blows [4]. The word '*marmān*' rooted in *mṛityu*; (death) has been found already in the sacred text of ancient *Rigveda*. The experience in this matter of Buddhist monks are evident to some scholars studying the Buddhist performing arts, especially Tibetan ritual dances.

We cannot deny that Buddha has been trained for the experienced warrior in his youth, as he has been designed for the head of Śākya clan. One episode in his life proves that he has been every efficient in the battle. There are many accounts of his first meeting with the notorious robber Angulimala (his very name comes from *anguli* – finger, and *mala* – rosary). The Chinese pilgrim coming to India to evoke the sacred memories of Buddhism reminds in his account that, the robber has been converted to the monk: „Angulimala – writes Henri Grosset in his work *In the Footsteps of the Buddha* – was a fanatical bandit, probably connected with the homicidal sect, like the Thugs in more recent history, who used people and sever their fingers to make a 'holy garland. His dreadful trophy was complete but for two fingers he was about to kill his own mother to obtain them when the Buddha, seized with compassion, subsided himself. According to Chinese pilgrim Huan Tsang, the bandit rushed upon the Blessed One, brandishing his sword. The Blessed One slowly retreated backwards and Angulimala, pursuing him, was unable to catch him up. In spite of the extreme blackness of his soul, the Buddha consented to convert him, and the former head hunter finished his days in the habit of a devout and faithful monk. His *stupa*, situated near the tower of the convent founded by Prajapati, Buddha's adoptive mother, refers to one of numerous conversions of evil-doers, which were such frequent occurrences in the life of the Blessed One" [5].

A distinguished Buddhist monk famous for his skill in martial arts including Indian wrestling was Bodhidharma. „A substantial number of students of Japanese *bujutsu*, obviously impressed by the strong influence exercised upon all the ancient martial arts and Buddhism in general and the Zen sect in particular – writes Oscar Ratti in his book *Secrets of Samurays* – trace the art of striking and throwing to the founder of the Zen sect, Bodhidharma (P'u Ti, Ta-Mo in Chinese, or Daruma in Japanese). The first patriarch of *Zen* (Indian *Dhyana*) had originally emigrated from India to China" [6].

Contemporary practice of wrestling in India has many names, *pehlwani*, *kushti*, or modern Indian wrestling. It is a synthesis of an indigenous form of wrestling that dates back at least to the 5th century BC and a Persian form of wrestling brought into South Asia by the Mughals. A practitioner of this sport is referred to as a *pehlwan* (also spelled *pahlwan* in Persian, champion, literally a Parthian). Generally speaking, Hindu teachers of wrestling are known as *gurus* and Muslim teachers as *ustads*,

Long before the times of the British Raj this kind of wrestling has been a part of *kshatriya jati dharma* [7], the duty of

the warrior caste. They were the core of the Indian armed forces since the times of great emperor Asoka and became a case during the period of British rules. In his account of British Raj, the book entitled *Indian Army, Its Contribution for Development of a Nation* Stephen Cohen even mentioned about "the martial races and castes in army" [8]. That was a result of renaissance of war performing arts brought to India by descendants of Genghis Khan. The prestige of wrestling was enormous from the very beginning of their invasion. Its popularity has been great even at the ages of decline of Mughal rules. Wrestling was an important part of the performing arts uniting Muslim and Hindu champions especially when great emperor Akbar tried to create a synthesis of Islam and Hinduism as a religion for All-Indian Empire. The rulers of Mughal dynasty have been the experienced wrestlers themselves. Babur, the founder of Indian line of Genghis Khan, has been famous for winning the sprint races of Mogul style, carrying two slaves under his shoulders for more than a hundred yards. They adored Indian wrestling.

Today *kusti* is very popular. The general knowledge of the background of its divergent styles can be found in such fundamental work like *Encyclopedia of Indian Physical Culture* [9] edited by D.C. Majumdar. This is a national sport of the Indian subcontinent, loved in India and Pakistan. For several centuries it has been practised in modern surroundings, as self-defence, sport, and a part of physical culture often present in Indian films.

Its modern practice is not so dangerous as it used to be. Over the centuries techniques have been modified to change *kushti* into sport event. Dangerous rules have been eliminated, the rules evolved. It is no more the violent ritual of the final battle.

With the change of the rules the new different styles evolved with their names derived from particular gods or founding heroes. For many centuries the traditional training has taken place at the courtyard of the temple in the milked sand wrestling pits (20×20). Deep stone holes are filled with clay and water or milk. They served as the traditional arena for both training and competitions. They are now giving way to wrestling mats and rings, as popular professional wrestling promotions have pushed *Pehlwan* to the brink of obscurity.

The *pahlavans* learnt different techniques of grappling, thrusting, throwing, twisting, and sometimes perfect the knowledge about powerful kicking and punching. They also use the equipment of very ancient origin to develop agility and endurance. Among them is *māl kham*, a wooden pillar of different shapes. It could be used for divergent purposes. Two wrestler pillars grounded in the earth have often been used for climbing up. The *pahlavans* demonstrate front and rear leg grips, jumps, hanging with head down, armpit grips, yogic postures and acrobatics on them. Sometimes sharp swords have been attached to the pillar. The art of dancing among them has been derived from the festivals performed at the beginning of the twelve century. Sometimes *pahlavans* dance between them with the candle placed on their forehead, sometimes they

build the pyramids. These exercises prove their professional standard. The training is so rigorous that it places them among the strongest men in the world.

Traditionally, pahlavans wrestled half a day, several hours every day they practice club swinging, lifting water filled buckets, do thousand *baithaks* and *dands* (bending legs and push ups). The battlefield is usually a square earthen pit. After the tournament the champion called *rastam* is given the huge mace, also used in the training. Physical training of Indian wrestler (*vyayam*) was very hard, It is meant to build strength and develop muscle bulk and flexibility. Exercises that employ the wrestler's own bodyweight include the sun salutation, *shirshasan*, and the *dand*, which are also found in *hatha yoga*, as well as the *bethak*. *Sawari* (the passenger) is the practice of using another person's bodyweight to add resistance to such exercises. Wrestlers may also employ the following weight training devices: the *nal* is a hollow stone cylinder with a handle inside, the *gar nals* (literally „neck weights“) is a circular stone ring worn around the neck to add resistance to *dands* and *bethaks*, the *gada* is a mace, as associated with Hanuman. An exercise *gada* is a heavy round stone attached to the end of a meter-long bamboo stick; *pahlavani* trophies take the form of *gadas* made of silver and gold.

Among the other exercises are also *dhakulis*, which involve twisting rotations; rope climbing; log pulling; and running. Massage is regarded an integral part of a pahlavan's exercise regimen. diet of Hindu wrestler is very rigorous nad original. Most champions have been vegans. According to the old Samkhya school of philosophy, everything in the universe – including people, activities, and foods – can be sorted into three *gunas*: *sattva* (calm/good), *rajas* (passionate/active), and *tamas* (dull/lethargic). As a vigorous activity, wrestling has an inherently *rajasic* nature, which *pahlawan* counteract through the consumption of *sattvic* foods. Milk, honey and ghee are regarded as the most *sattvic* of foods and, along with almonds, comprise the holy trinity of the *pahalwan's khurak*, or diet. A common snack of *pahlavans* is chickpeas that have been sprouted overnight in water and seasoned with salt, pepper, and lemon; the water in which the chickpeas were sprouted is also regarded as nutritious. Various articles in the Indian wrestling monthly *Bharatiya Kushti* have recommended the consumption of the following fruits: apples, woodapples, bananas, figs, pomegranates, gooseberries, lemons, and watermelons. Orange juice and green vegetables are also recommended for their *sattvic* nature. Some *pahlavans* eat meat in spite of its *rajasic* nature. Ideally, wrestlers are supposed to avoid sour and excessively spiced foods. Mild seasoning with garlic, cumin, coriander, and turmeric is acceptable. The consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and chewing pan is strongly discouraged.

The high standards of Indian wrestling have been also derived from the practice neglected in modern forms of training, Not so long ago, at the beginning of the 20th century, the the pahlavans have often been acquainted with three other kinds of wrestling which have been very special. In *masti* style sometimes reminding rugby dangerous techniques have been banned, and the group of wrestlers tries to subdue one wrestler. In *binot* an unarmed wrestler defends himself against attacking armed person. In *vajra-mushti* pahlavans learn dangerous blows of hand armed with iron *vajra*.

The Indian wrestling form has undergone several changes in both the nomenclature and training methodologies through the ages. The more prominent influences include the in-

roduction of Persian nomenclature and Western training methods. Wrestling competitions, known as *Dangals*, held at village levels, have their own rules which vary from place to place. Usually, a win is awarded by decision from the panel of judges, knockout, stoppage or submission. The sport is popular in both India and Pakistan.

At the dawn of de-colonisation the Indian wrestlers won some international recognition. One of them was Gama (1878–1960). During his tour in Europe he won all bouts with the champions of several styles of Western wrestling. Then the Maharaja of Patiala invited the American champion to travel to India and train with Gama for two months. The author of American *Encyclopedia of Martial Arts* claim that in 1926 this Polish born heavyweight world champion of greco-roman and American Catch-as-Can styles, Zbyszko Cyganiewicz, lost to Gama in 90 seconds [10]. In 1928 the famous Pole travelled to Lahore and lost again. It has been reported in world journals as a victory of India over Europe. The undefeated champion of India hold the title *Rustum-i-Hind*.

Second legendary Indian wrestler was Gulam, who accompanied the late Indian prime minister Pandit Motilal Nehru to Paris in 1900 and defeated Cour-Derelli of Turkey there. In a quarter of century the Indians sang songs about another great victory again: Gobar Goho defeated the legendary hook wrestler Ad Santel in San Francisco in 1922 and became the world champion.

Among the Western legendary wrestlers of the dawn of modern era was Karl Gotch He travelled to India to learn the art of Pehlmani. He brought back a pair of traditional *mudgals*, gift of some Indian wrestlers. With it the set of conditioning exercises of Pehlmani have been incorporated into catch wrestling training. This system also borrows several throws, submissions and takedowns from *Pehlmani*.

With the Independence Indian wrestling comes back to its previous position as an important part of Indian identity. Its popularity can be compared in some regions to cricket, called 'the new Indian religion'. In the recent past India had great wrestlers of the class of Great Gama and Gobar Goho. Modern Indian wrestling reached its peak of glory in the IV Asian Games taking place in Jakarta in 1962: all the seven wrestlers were placed on the medal list and in between them they bagged 12 medals in Freestyle wrestling and Greco-Roman wrestling. A repetition of this performance was witnessed again when all the 8 wrestlers sent to the Commonwealth Games held at Kingston (Jamaica) had the distinction of getting medals for the country. During the 60's, India was ranked among the top ten wrestling nations of the world. In 1967 the world wrestling championships were held in New Delhi in 1967. The undefeated champions of India hold the title *Rustum-i-Hind* title.

The first wrestler to get into world headlines, when he defeated Tom Canon of England in 1892 was Karim Bux. Among the others were Kartar Singh – twice Asian Champion, Palwinder Singh Cheema – twice Asian Superheavyweight Bronze Medalist, Bisamber Singh Silver Medalist of World Wrestling Championships, Uday Chand – Bronze Medalist of World Wrestling championship, Sushil Kumar – 4th in World Wrestling Championships in 2003. Widely known were Ramesh Kumar, Sudesh Kumar, Leela Ram. Laxmikant



Pandey, Prem Nath, and the best Hindu heavyweight wrestler Bharat-Kesri. Recent winners include Rajeew Tomar (Railways) and Palwinder Singh Cheema (Punjab police). Mama Moti Singh, trainer of Kikkar Singh and Kalloo whom he trained in the unique dog method of wrestling.

Nowadays Indian wrestling tournament becomes a part of the Indian Independence Day. In many districts of India the new schools of wrestling have been founded. The traditional ones can also be found in many Yogic schools (ashrams). The most famous are a part of Hindu ritual at the Hanuman temples of Ganga river. Some of them I have visited during my Indian tour as a visiting scholar organized in 2005 by the Indian Council for Cultural Relation. The ritual wrestling has been the important part of Indian *Kumbha-Mela*, the All India Festival of Hinduism held every eight years, with the battle of ascetic clans at the holy ground. This kind of activity is also important for traditional theatre of *Mahabharata* held on the field of Kurukshetra as the remembrance of Holy Battle between Kuru and Pandava Clans.

In the realm of sport the fame and recognition won Kikkar Singh – Dev-e-Hind, known for his phenomenal chest and body. The distinction of being awarded Bharat Kesari the maximum number of times holds Rajeew Tomar. Anuj Chaudhary followed his way as the winner of Arjuna Indian Wrestler Award. The Indian wrestling legend, the former Rustam-I-Hind as well as the winner of several strength contests in India was Imam Baksh Pehlwan. Among the others were Viddo – (Sitara-I-Hind), Bular. Goonga Baliwala, Mhani Reniwala, Gutta Singh Khakhanwala, Hamida Pehlwan – former Rustam-I-Hind and the trainer of the Bholu Brothers, Ganda Singh Johal, Haider Amritsaria. Bholu Brothers – illustrious Pehlwan Brothers (Bholu, Aslam, Goga, Azami, and Akram). The youngest brother Akram Pehlwan – the son of the wrestling legend Imam Baksh Pahalwan, became famous for his mixed martial arts match against Antonio Inoki. We also cannot forget about Banta Singh Waltaha and Santokh Singh Bahadurnagar, and Mehardin – three Bharat Kesari award winners and Salwinder Singh Shinda-Rustam-e-Hind

and Indian national wrestling champion. He is also a four time Chandigarh Kesari award winner and a president of district wrestling association Tarn-Taran.

During my journey to India in 2005 as a visiting scholar (the grant of Indian Council for Foreign Relations) I had a rare chance to take part in some kushti events, modern and traditional. I also have learnt that India becomes the ground for a dialogue with nonIndian martial arts. In Bangalore Olympic Centre I have seen a training of taekwondo. I also have the full account of Professor Roman M. Kalina visiting twice the military school near Hyderabad within the framework of preparation to international judo competitions. The idea of introducing judo into the university program in India has got the eminent sponsor. The pioneer in this field was the first in world history Asian Nobel prizier (1913) Rabindranath Tagore. In his school Siantiniketan near Calcutta transformed into the International University Viśva-Bharati, judo has been cordially welcomed as a part of the program of building cultural bridges – India and the World.

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