

***Bayam, Male Body and Masculinity:***  
**An Exploration of the *Bayam Samitis* and *Akharas* of Kolkata**

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by

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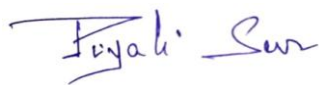
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**Bayam, Male Body and Masculinity: An Exploration of the Bayam Samitis and Akharas of Kolkata** submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the supervision of **Prof. Piyali Sur**. And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In the narrow lanes and corners of Kolkata, amidst the growing craze for fitness and health which manifests in the increasing spread of multigyms across the city, lies the forgotten *bayam samitis*<sup>i</sup>, *vyayamaghars*<sup>ii</sup> and *akharas*<sup>iii</sup>. They are occasionally remembered once a year when these *bayam samitis* host their *Durga* and *Kali pujas*<sup>iv</sup> and people queue up to witness these historical *puja* idols<sup>v</sup> and *pandals*<sup>vi</sup> yet remaining oblivious of the tradition of *bayam*<sup>vii</sup> that remains entwined in these places with *Durga Puja*<sup>viii</sup> and *shakti* worship<sup>ix</sup>. A history of *bayam* and physical cultures in Bengal, will remain intertwined at a political conjuncture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with the colonial rule, rise of (Hindu) nationalism, communal tensions, *bayam samitis*, *shakti* worship and tied to questions of effeminacy and masculinity. This thesis is an ethnographic attempt to explore these historically significant *akharas* in Kolkata in contemporary times. Engaging with the discourse on masculinity and *bayam* culture, this thesis seeks to understand the male body in *bayam* with its emphasis on embodiment, sensory perceptions and experiential understandings.

*Bayam* is a common Bengali terminology that subsumes under itself different forms of bodily practices and exercise regimes towards the cultivation of one's body. Other than the political history of *bayam* in Bengal in context of colonial nationalist period, *bayam* also remains tied to questions of health, masculinity and religion/spirituality and corporeality. The body in *bayam* has historically been understood through the male body and *bayam* remains quintessentially a masculine endeavor yet remaining tied to the feminine through a necessary separation<sup>x</sup>. This thesis is an ethnographic study in the *bayam samitis*, *vyayamaghars* and *akharas* of Kolkata to intricately understand masculinity and the male body within the *bayam* tradition and physical cultures practiced in these places.

A turn towards the study of the body in the social sciences and humanities has opened up several possibilities in understanding the body as an “analytical tool” (Sen, Mills, 2004, p. 1). From Mary Douglas’s purity and pollution (1996) to Bourdieu’s habitus (1984), Norbert Elias’s civilizing body (2000) to Foucault’s governmentality (1979), Merleau-Ponty’s body-subject (1962) to Butler’s post structuralist body (1996), from Satadru Sen and James Mills’s body (2004) in colonialism to Joseph Alter’s study on post-colonial bodies (1992, 2011). Western capitalism has placed the body at the center of consumption, thus giving way to the desires of the body and its liberation (Sen, Mills, 2004). The body was at the heart of modernity, either as a means of civilization (Elias, 2000) or to shape and mould the modern individual body (Shilling, 2003) or as a center of regulation and governmentality through institutions of state and medicine (Shilling, 2003) (Zola, 1991) (Turner, 1984) (Foucault, 1979) or to reform the body in context of Indian (Hindu) nationalism (Bose, 2005) (Sinha, 1995) or to resist modernity altogether in context of Gandhi (Alter, 2000). In all these, the body nonetheless, remained tied to modernity. Sociological scholarship has turned to the study of the body in questioning the biological determinism that has eclipsed the study of the body (Turner, 1984). Since then, the body has been understood in sociological works through metaphors (Strathern, 1996), habitus and embodiment (Bourdieu, 1984), body images (Weinken, 1998), body projects (Shilling, 2003), consumer culture (Featherstone, 1982), new health consciousness (Crawford, 1987) regulations, discipline and control (Foucault, 1973, 1979) (Turner, 1984) and through the questions of power and difference (Turner, 1984) (Foucault, 1973, 1979). The male body gained prominence through the increased representation of the body and significance of physical cultures or physical education through which the ‘docile body’ was disciplined within the normative framework of the society (Kirk, 1994) (Turner, 1984) (Foucault, 1973, 1979). Sociological works thereby focused increasingly on the relation between body and selfhood, leading to an emphasis on the outer or external (appearance) as representing the inner body

(self) and an increased focus on individualized fit looking healthy body (Finkelstein, 1991) (Shilling, 2003) (Featherstone, 1982).

While sociological scholarship has increasingly focused on the representation of the male body (Bordo, 1999), body project and body image (Shilling, 2003, 2005), consumerism and body (Featherstone, 1982), fitness, body building, and gym culture (Monaghan, 2001, 2014) (Dutton, 1995), there is a dearth of work in understanding the distinctive place of the male body in Indian context of physical cultures. Several historical scholarships have looked into the historical developments the male body and masculinity in the late 19th and early 20th century in colonial India (Sinha, 1995) (Chowdhury, 1995) (Chakraborty, 2011) (Banerjee, 2005, 2012) (Bose, 2005) (Chatterji, 2002) (Alter, 1992). Mark Singleton (2010) Goldberg (2016) and James Mallison's (2017) work has focused on the history of yoga and physical cultures while Joseph Alter (1992, 2004) has focused on the study of wrestling, yoga, masculinity and body in post-colonial India. Yet there has been little or no work in the context of *bayam* tradition and *bayam samitis*, *vyayamaghars* of Kolkata. This thesis is therefore an attempt to provide an ethnography of the *bayam Samitis* and *akharas* and delve into the *bayam* culture of Bengal and understand its significance in the realm of both the historical anti-colonial struggle and the present discourse of health and fitness. How do we understand the *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars* as both places of political and historical significance and places for the cultivation of the body? What sorts of exclusions and separations define the contours of *bayam* and thereby the *bayam samitis*? How does the history of colonialism and nationalism on one hand and the ascetic disciplines on the other, constitute what we understand as *bayam* today? How do we understand the contradictory place of *bayam* in the discourse of health and fitness on one hand and in a regime of pain on the other? I, argue that in order to understand *bayam* practices and its relation to masculinity and body it becomes a necessity to understand the history that gave rise to the questions of masculinity, the rise of the significance of the male

body and the politicized understanding of *bayam* and *brahmacharya*<sup>xi</sup> with which we entered into the postcolonial world.

“The British stereotype of the effete Hindu had left an impression especially on the Bengali elite who sought ways to redress this humiliation by supporting martial arts and physical culture” (Van de veer, 2000, p. 98). Indira Chowdhury Sengupta argues how attempts were made to “reclaim a glorious past- a past where the Bengali could claim virility and manhood, qualities he allegedly lacked” making them fall into a “self-descriptive discourse on race” (Chowdhury-Sengupta, 1995). Sayan Chattopadhyay argues how the creation of a “national masculine” was an exclusionary process that gave rise to “internal cultural imperialism” (Chattopadhyay, 2011, p. 267). The “quest for masculinity” became a defining feature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal (Basu, Banerjee, 2006, p. 477). Van de veer discusses how the introduction of British physical culture in the colonial government’s curriculum led to a “transformation of religious martiality into sports in the service of an emerging nationalist masculinity” (Van de veer, 2001, p. 98-99). However, this nationalist masculinity that was on the rise was specifically *Hindu* which also remains significant for understanding the *bayam samitis* as *Hindu* domains. The focus on physical education during the colonial-nationalist period and its relation to the emergence of “nationalist masculinity” (Van de veer, 2001, p. 98) saw the emergence of RSS *shakhas* whose emphasis was on inculcating masculinity through both “physical” and “ideological training” that was “designed to protect the feminized nation from the imagined assault of hyper-masculine Muslims” (Alter, 2007). Thus, alongside the anti-colonial struggle was also another form of struggle that gained prominence during the period and that was communal (McDermott, 2011). Although most literatures and scholarships speak of the rise of *bayam samitis* and physical cultures as an effort to negate the British stereotype and rise against the colonial power, the local histories of the

*bayam samitis* reveal how communal tensions and riots characterized the formation of several *bayam samitis* (Bagchi, 2018).

Rachel Fell McDermott argues how the late nineteenth century and most significantly the early twentieth century saw the sudden “recourse to politicized Sakta imagery” where religion and politics came to intermingle through the *shakti* worship of Goddess *Durga* and *Kali* with a “new emphasis on strength and manliness, associated now with the Goddess (McDermott, 2011, p. 53- 53, 58). According to her, 1920s “were momentous not only for the symbolic resonances of the Goddess but also for her pujas” (McDermott, 2011, p. 65). For, the 1920s saw the coming up of *Sarbojonin* (universal) *puja*, one that is to be celebrated by all “regardless of birth or residence” (McDermott, 2011, p. 65). Although this meant a call for solidarity among people, on the contrary, McDermott notes how it was accompanied by communal tensions and ultimately failed to take within it the inclusiveness that it so highly aimed at. This can be understood when one looks into the politics of *Sarbojonin*<sup>xii</sup> *puja* that never included the Muslims but was mainly a response to Gandhi’s protest against untouchability and thus restricted to class and caste discriminations (McDermott, 2011). Hindu revivalism and masculine revivalism took place simultaneously and found its expression in the “preoccupation of physical cultures” (Chatterji, 2002, p. 163). The *bayam samitis* became according to Jaya Chatterji, the “earliest form of nationalist mobilization”. It was believed that through “traditional forms of exercise” in the form of sword play, wrestling and others, it will be possible to “awaken the dormant strength and vigour of the Bengali nation” (Chatterji, 2002, p. 163). This Bengali was always a *Hindu* Bengali.

*Bayam samitis* were not just nationalist or revolutionary hubs but also places of worship of *shakti* that continues even today as most *bayam samitis* are also *puja* clubs organizing *Durga* and *Kali* *puja* every year. Imma Ramos argues how the debate on *murti puja* gave rise to the political significance of idol worship, especially *Shakta* deities, *Kali* and *Durga*, during the

nineteenth century colonial Bengal. The British looked down upon idol worship with special “distaste” towards *Kali*, who was viewed as “the embodiment of India’s bloodied depths and most degenerate impulses” (Ramos, 2017, p. 95). This gave rise to a movement against the colonizers. Ramos discusses the “politicisation of *murti puja*” that emerged in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s novel *Anandamath* where “*Durga* and *Kali* became symbols of resistance to the coloniser’s authority to intervene and initiate reform” (Ramos, 2017, p. 95). Thus, the worship of Shakta Goddess became intertwined with colonial struggle as we saw above. However, the relation between *bayam samitis* and *shakti* worship do not merely end here. *shakti* worship, I argue, forms a relation that was essential to the very context and nature of *bayam*, which was aimed at embodying *shakti* or power.

My first visit to *Kiddirepore Bayam Samity* happened one morning in the month of December. As I looked for the *bayam samity* after reaching the location, the local people aided me in finding it. They called the *bayam samity* “*akra mandir*” which itself became very significant to understand the history of the *bayam samity* as well as the basis of most *bayam samitis* in Kolkata, Bengal that are marked by temples within their courtyards. *Akra mandir* as the name given by the locals suggests, this *bayam samity* is known for the *mandir* and the *akhara*. The history of *bayam samitis* and *bayam* culture in India has been always seen in relation to religion and every *bayam samity* would have a temple beside or inside it as Gobor Goho has once proclaimed (Bandhopadhyay, 2018). However, in this *bayam samity* there was a difference. While most *bayam samitis* have kept temples or temple room within it after their formation, *Kidderpore Bayam Samity* was formed inside a pre-existing temple area.



### 1. Dakshina Kali temple in Kidderpore Mahabir Bayam Samity

This temple or *Dakshina Kali mandir*<sup>xiii</sup> was part of a crematorium as the secretary of the *bayam samity* told me. It is believed by some that this temple was established by dacoits and human and animal sacrifices were a part of the temple culture. The relation between *shakti* worship, *shakti* (power), nationalistic uprising and *bayam* became a significant feature of this place. Brimming with *shakti*, the worship of *shakti* deity Kali made this place an ideal for the establishment of the *bayam samity* in order to cultivate *shakti* in men and rise against the colonizers. This brought in nationalism, religion, *shakti* worship, masculinity and *bayam* together. The secretary emphasized how the *samity* is said to be a part of *anushilan samity*<sup>xiv</sup> formed during the nationalist period in order to train men for forming a rebellion against the colonizers.

*Bayam*, although a masculine endeavor, was essentially tied to *shakti* worship which remains entwined with the feminine. *shakti* is conceived as the feminine power or energy or a form of

potentiality (Alter, 1993) (Vande veer, 2000). Alter argues how the wrestlers often distinguish between *bal* and *shakti*, where the former stands for “mundane” strength while the later, stands for divine power or energy, a form of potentiality (Alter, 1992, p. 168) (Wadley, 1975). According to Bhikhu Parekh, the Hindu concept of *Shakti* gained political significance during the late nineteenth century and a new “action oriented political vocabulary” came up with the concept of *shakti* which became associated with “power”, “energy”, “will”, “will power”, “vigour”. “strength”, “karmayoga”, rajas” etc (Parekh, 1989, p. 172). Gandhi redefined *Shakti* to understand it as a form of power and energy where energy needs to be conserved and mobilized to transform into power. (Parekh, 1989). Through detachment and *bayam*, following *brahmacharya*, men would seek to cultivate not only their bodies but an embodied strength, *shakti* or power. According to Van de veer, *shakti* is considered to be the feminine power that men seek to acquire through celibacy (Van de veer, 2000). This was also true for Gandhi whose “search for *shakti*” was based on his ideas concerning sexuality and *brahmacharya* that formed the crux of his politics (Parekh, 1989, p. 177). The men in the *bayam samitis* today often refer to this as “*shakti sonchoi kora*” or cultivation and preservation of *shakti* which was not only of prime importance to the anti-colonial struggle but also at present times when they have to resist many forms of daily evils. In this process they relate to Hanuman<sup>xv</sup>, the quintessential deity of the *akharas*. Alter argues how the everyday “exercise”, “dietary prescriptions”, “hygiene”, “sartorial concerns”, “elimination of bodily wastes”, together constitutes political somatic since in the “logic of wrestling”, “to be strong, healthy and moral wrestlers is to be strong, healthy and moral citizen of the modern state” (Alter, 1993, p. 51). Mike Featherstone argues about *The Body in Consumer Culture* (1982) which is increasingly shaped by the consumerist economy of desire which came up with modernity (Featherstone, 1982). The corruption around and the consumerist culture is resisted through a form of somatic “disciplined resistance” (Alter, 1993, p. 51) in the *akhara* and *bayam samitis*. Although *bayam* has changed over the

years from a need to develop one's physical body and self for the anti-colonial struggle, today *bayam* is also as much about physical as much it is about the moral and spiritual in cultivating one's body and subjectivity in these *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars*.

The convergence of ascetic tradition, *brahmacharya*, religion and nationalism happened at a moment of the formation of the *bayam samitis* and thus *bayam* in these places became enmeshed with these ideas. *Bayam* and physical culture's history is then intertwined with a political history of colonialism and communalism on one hand and also associated with ascetic cultures of *yogis* and hatha yoga, and *brahmacharis* on the other. James Mallinson argues how the initial practices of yoga were mostly self-mortification of the body which later led to the development of the cultivation of the body (Mallinson, 2021). *Bayam* and exercise regimes then also remain in relation to rituals, spirituality and ascetic principles. It is at this conjecture that I wish to understand the practices of *bayam* keeping in mind these historical developments in relation to body cultivation. The history of body cultivation in India can be noted in the practice of hatha yoga whose history remains entwined with semen and breath control (Mallinson, 2020). Thus, the initial physical methods in relation to the body were based on semen retention and breath control that were tied to religious contexts and ascetic practices. However, during that time bodily cultivation and practices were mainly oriented towards somatic soteriology, and only later on it slowly developed and got enmeshed with the *bayam* and physical cultures. Although somatic soteriology is no longer an immediate concern of *bayam* practices, yet it still carries within it the significance of breath and semen within a newer discourse of health and fitness.

My thesis takes up a methodology that combines ethnography and history together. The places I have conducted my fieldwork includes Ghosh College of Physical Education, *Bajrang Vyayamaghar*, *Triangular Park Bayam Samity*, *Kalighat Bayam Samity*, *Panchanan Bayam Samity*, *Simla Bayam Samity*, *Hathkhola Bayam Samity*, *Kidderpore Mahavir Bayam Samity*,

*Bagbazar Sarbojanin Puja Committee, Siyaram Akhara, Yoganath Puri Math akhara, Kapil Deo Bayam Sangha, Arjun Vyayamshala, Monohar Aich gymnasium* and last but not the least Gobor Goho's *akhara*. These places are not just gymnasiums but those having a historical significance. These were formed in the early twentieth century in order to cultivate men's bodies and form a rebellion against the colonial rule and they continue to exist today carrying on with their long tradition of *shorir chorchha* or cultivating the body. The places alongside their structures continue to embody its past legacy of the colonial rule and anti-colonial struggle. Ethnography in these *bayam samitis* entailed an immersion in these places that can be understood as embodiments of the past. Through narratives of the members of these places and by inhabiting the places in themselves, I tried to learn about the spatial cultures of the *bayam samitis* and *akharas* and also simultaneously the specificity of these places and their local histories. Alongside this, by witnessing the men in their everyday exercise regime, by interacting and interviewing them and experiencing the field through my sensory perceptions, the thesis made an effort to understand the practice of *bayam* and its relation masculinity and male body. Thus, there is an intimate relation between the places and spaces of *bayam samitis* and *akharas* as well as the *bayam* or exercise regime that is followed in these places, that this thesis tries to put forward. Such that any effort to understand the practice of *bayam* would remain intertwined with the places and spaces of *bayam* i.e, the *bayam samitis* and *akharas* and their history.

Each of the chapters in this thesis have attempted to understand *bayam* and *bayam samitis* and *akharas* in relation to the male body and masculinity. The second and third chapters focus on the theoretical and methodological premise of the research. By delving into the rich theoretical background of this research and by bringing out the intricacies of fieldwork the chapters initiate the ground on which the thesis will be build. Following this, the remaining five chapters including the conclusion focuses on various aspects of *bayam*, from the history of the early

twentieth century to the spaces and places of the *bayam samitis*, from the questions of health and fitness through the notions of *brahmacharya* and breathing, to the contradictory place of pain in this regime of the cultivation of the body.

The fourth chapter traces the history of the early twentieth century that witnessed the rise of the “national body” (Sreenivas, 2010) and the simultaneous rise of *bayam samitis* and *akharas* in Kolkata, Bengal. The chapter argues that there was an increased focus on reviving masculinity through bodily reform to negate the supposed effeminacy of Bengali men (Sinha, 1995) in order to counter colonial masculinity and modernity. The chapter combines history and ethnography in *bayam samitis* to bring out the connecting links between *Durga puja* (*shakti worship*), *desh prem* (love for one’s nation/nationalism), masculinity and *bayam* in context of the colonial-nationalist period. Through narratives of the members of these *samitis*, their story-telling, photos, and local books, I discuss the local histories of these *bayam samitis* to argue how religion, politics, body disciplines became enmeshed within a larger discourse of masculinity that pervaded different domains during the period. The second part of the chapter argues how the ‘national body’ that was upheld by the nationalist was not entirely opposed to but a product of colonialism. In doing so I argue how Gandhi’s weak and fragile body became a critique to both the idea of colonial masculinity and the ‘national body’ by comparing Vivekananda and Gandhi’s take on body politics, masculinity and nationalism. Gandhi’s understanding of *kapurusatva*, *tapas*<sup>xvi</sup> (suffering), courage, that he embodied through his body and everyday life, I argue provided an alternative to the notions of masculinity and body that the nationalists were trying to revive at that point of time.

The fifth chapter of the thesis deals with the spaces and places of the *bayam samitis*, *vyayamaghars* and *akharas* in an effort to understand the relation between these and *bayam* or exercise regimes that takes place in these domains. The chapter tries to emphasize on a distinction between space and place where *bayam samitis* and *akharas* are read as masculine

ascetic spaces on one hand, and the specificity of each of the *bayam samitis* is also understood through the concept of place, having a more rooted understanding and specific history and meaning attached to it. In doing so, it deals both with a broader understanding of the spaces and the specificity of the places through their local histories to argue how they are masculine, ascetic, Hindu, home-social domains which are constituted through the different forms of exclusions including the exclusion of women and the feminine. The *bayam samitis* and *akharas* are understood through various forms of contradictions and tensions which instead of being seen as a current anomaly, are understood as features of these places. The contradictions and tensions that erupt oscillate between masculinity and vulnerability, and it is in these tensions I argue, that the places could be understood. The very practices of man-making, the vulnerabilities, the tenets of *bayam* and exercise regimes together constitutes these spaces and places and the men.

Understanding the spaces and places of *bayam samitis* and *akharas* through notions of purity, ascetism and masculinity, I move into understanding the notion of health, power and masculinity in context of *bayam* through the everyday bodily practices in the sixth chapter. Reflecting on the ascetic practices of *brahmacharya*, control of sexuality through control of night emissions and masturbation, avoiding late night, controlling smoking and drinking, I bring out the continued significance of *birjo* (semen) and *songjom* (self-restraint) in the cultivation of body and health. In a world that is increasingly moving towards the fitness discourse and emergent gym culture, I, by employing ontological turn, seek to understand the *difference* of *bayam* as based on notions of pain and hard efforts as opposed to the present exercise regimes based on automation and supposed ‘scientific’ regimes in the cultivation of the body and fitness. Contrary to the popular view that a transition from *bayam* to gym entails a linear movement from ‘past’ to ‘present’ or ‘traditional’ to ‘contemporary’ or ‘modern’ or ‘unscientific’ to ‘scientific’, I instead argue against such a dichotomous understanding. This

chapter argues how both the cultivation of the body in *bayam* and gym stem from the same modern discourse of health yet are based on two different logics, two different scientific regimes, based on multiple modernities. Finally, I come to discuss the inner strength or power that my interlocutors emphasize upon as the basis of their *bayam* regime through the works of Sundar Sarukkai (2002) and Arindam Chakraborty (2008). The inner strength and cultivation they point towards as being an essential feature of *bayam* gives a possibility of understanding an ‘inner body’. This inner body, I argue, is constituted through the cultivation of *dom* (breath/stamina) or embodied strength / power through the bodily and breathing practices of *bayam*.

The seventh chapter argues that *bayam* is based on the notion of pain, best understood through the Hindu philosophy of *tapas* (self-inflicted pain/efforts). The chapter argues for two distinct understandings of pain that emerges from my ethnography, one pain as injury and the other, the everyday pain. I focus on the latter, everydayness of pain in *bayam* and physical cultures as playing a significant role in the cultivation of body and masculine subjectivity. In understanding everyday pain, I distinguish between physical pain which has a location in the body while the other, bodily pain, which is non-physical yet bodily. Bodily pain, as I use the term, best described through the Bengali terminology of ‘*kosto*’, I argue, is pain and suffering that is entailed through the bodily practices of *brahmacharya*, fasting, *songjom* or self-restraints, which are bodily felt, experienced and embodied yet do not have any location from which it stems. I employ Arindam Chakraborty’s concept of the ‘*antarmukh dehobodh*’ (2008) or the inward-looking bodily sensation and Gandhi’s idea of *brahmachari*’s pain (CW, 32, p. 214), to make sense of this abstract yet bodily grounded notion of pain in the practice of *bayam*. Thus, as opposed to the notion that *bayam* entails a cultivation of the body that cures pain and improves health, I argue that *bayam* is not opposed to pain but based on it.

I finally conclude my thesis by discussing the male body in *bayam* that resembles the ascetic masculinity of Hanuman, the quintessential deity of *bayam samitis*, *vyayamaghars* and *akharas*. I discuss how *bayam* bases itself in certain principles of detachment, *songjom* and a masculine ethos that defines the *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars*, *akharas*. *Bayam*, I argue is a regime in itself as well as an initial regime in different forms of physical cultures like wrestling or body building. My ethnography brings out how *bayam* is essentially tied to the notion of pain and breathing and seeks to bring out the possibility of an embodied inner body through the cultivation of *dom* (breath) and embodying bodily pain. *Bayam* is a masculine regime that seeks to uphold itself through a very necessary separation from the feminine and which conceives female sexuality as antithetical to truth where truth is internalized as semen through the practice of *brahmacharya* (Alter, 2001). Yet it is only through the relation of separation from the feminine that holds the masculine and it is through the worshipping and embodying of feminine energy or power as *shakti* that the masculine body is believed to be cultivated in *bayam*.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical Reflections

This chapter focuses on a detailed theoretical and academic premise of my research that is grounded on sociological, historical, theoretical, philosophical scholarships. My initial focus has been in drawing the theoretical understanding of the body and masculinity in the field of sociology and social sciences through the works of Foucault (1979), Turner (1984), Shilling (2003), Bourdieu (1984), Merleau-Ponty (1962), Judith Butler (, M. Kimmel (2011), Connell (2001), Alter (1992) (Mahmood, 2005) and others. Considering that my work grounds itself on a historical background of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal and India, the political period of colonialism, nationalism has been a significant part of my research endeavor. The historical works of Mrinalini Sinha (1995), Revathi Krishnaswamy (1999), James Mills and Satadru Sen (2004), Chandrima Chakraborty (2011), Indira Chowdhury (1998), Sikata Banerjee (2005) in the field of colonialism, nationalism, masculinity and body in context of India has been significant. Although these have initially provided a ground to understand body and masculinity in context of India, my research grounds itself on varied works in the field of physical cultures, bodybuilding and fitness (Monaghan, 2001) (Featherstone, 1982) (Spatz, 2015), the male body in pain and the discourse on health. David Arnold's work on *Colonizing the body* (1993), Norbert Elias's work on the *civilized body* (2000), Pradip Bose's work in the field of nineteenth century Bengal and health (2005), T. Engelhardt on masturbation and health (1974), Singleton's (2010) works in the field of physical cultures, Sundar Sarukkai (2002) work on yoga and inner body, Arindam Chakraborty's concept of '*antarmukh dehobodh*' (2008), Joseph Alter's ethnographic work on body, masculinity and wrestling (2004), and Elain Scarry's (1983) work on pain, have provided rich ground to my research. These sociological, ethnographic, theoretical and historical works have been significant in giving shape to the ideas and thoughts.

## **Theoretical Reflections on the Body**

The body has been central to different periods of history whether in the middle-ages or the enlightenment era or the period of British colonialism in India. Turner discuss how the body was absent from sociology since “legitimate rejection of biological determinism in favour of sociological determinism entailed, however, the exclusion of the body from the sociological imagination” (Turner, 2008, p. 34). According to Turner, Sociology considered the external world and the human body as a given rather than understanding it as historical, mediated by culture, thereby leading to an exclusion of the body in the sociological works (Turner, 2008). Sociology thus, emphasized more on the notion of the self than the body. According to Harris and Robb, body cannot be understood through a very universal unchanging biological definition but instead as emerging through history. They thus argue that the “body is in history; indeed, the body *is* history” (Harris, Robbb, 2013, p. 4). Thus, the “history of the body” according to Turner has contributed immensely to the studies on “sexuality”, “culture” and the “representation of the human body” (Turner, 2012, p. 2). However, it is not just the historical study but also studies in the field of sociology, anthropology, and the entire social sciences that has gained prominence (Mauss, 1934) (Foucault, 1979), (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), (Mary Douglas, 1966), (Alter 1993), (Turner, 1984), (Shilling, 1993) (Mahmood, 2005).

## **Sociological Scholarship on the Body**

Sociological scholarship has brought out the ‘social body’ by detaching it from biological determinism of a natural given body and has thereby mostly focused on the representation of the body in consumer culture (Featherstone, 1982), body as a project or body image (Shilling, 2003) and on disciplining of the ‘docile body’ from Foucault’s (1973, 1979) scholarship and the concept of embodiment that has emerged from Bourdieu’s work (1984). Chris Shilling speaks about the “rise of the body” and the “social significance of the body” that has enriched

newer perspectives in the field of social, cultural realms as well as interrogating the cartesian bias (Shilling, 2016, p. 1). According to Arthur Frank, it was “modernity”, “feminism”, and “Foucault” who have contributed to the sociology of the body or thinking about the social theorizing of the body (Frank, 1990, p. 131). However, Frank concludes by drawing our attention to the fact that there is no need to create another new theoretical perspective or discipline to study the body but instead he emphasizes on rethinking the traditional concepts in theorizing (Frank, 1990). Broekhoff discuss the rationalization of the body through different processes of disciplining in gymnastics (Broekhoff, 1972). In context of this rationalization of the body, Turner speaks about the “loss” of the “theological aura” of disease and the secularization of the body where the distinction between “disease” and “sin” suggests the secularization of the body under the state (Turner, 2008, p. 183, 190). Strathern ‘s (1996) has tried to understand the body as something “good to think with” where his emphasis is not body in itself but the relation it forms with concepts of power and difference.

Bourdieu’s theorizing of the body through the concept of physical capital has contributed to the development of the concept of embodiment. For Bourdieu the body can be understood as a physical capital that is shaped and moulded by the social position and location suggesting the concept of habitus that constitutes the body through the embodiment of class (Bourdieu, 1984) (Shilling, 2003, p. 122). Habitus is conceived as a “socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures” which according to Shilling “provide individuals with class-dependent, pre-disposed ways of relating to and categorizing both familiar and novel situations” (Brubaker, 1985, p. 758) (Shilling, 2003, p. 113). Thus, according to Bourdieu, it is the habitus that shapes the embodiment of human body, where every bodily gesture according to him “reveals the deepest dispositions of the habitus” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 190).

Foucault’s scholarship on *Discipline and Punish* (1975), *The History of Sexuality* (1976), *Technologies of the Self* (1988), and his concept of power has contributed to the domain of the

studies related to the body, especially in sociology. Foucault's scholarship brought the body in the context of power. According to Foucault, "the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (Foucault, 1995, p. 25). According to Turner, the distinction between individual body and bio-politics of regulation and control in Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976) has increasingly brought the concept of governmentality in the sphere of sociological theorizing and research. (Foucault, 1979) (Turner, 2012). This brings Foucault's conceptualization of the body which has to be both productive and subjected at the same time but this subjection might not involve violence and can instead be "subtle" (Foucault, 1995, p. 26). Foucault's work in the field of medicine, asylums and prisons, all constitutes bodies in relation to power and power relations.

### **Body, Subjectivity and Embodiment**

Body and subjectivity brings the questions of the formation of a subject through one's body and embodiment. In Foucault's *Technologies of the self* (1988), we see this relation between self/subjectivity and the corporeal where he argues that knowing oneself is not about finding an inner already present self but a process of formation of a 'self' or becoming a subject through certain technologies and practices implemented on one's body that he refers to as "modes of subjectivation" (Foucault, 1990, p. 29). This subjectivation or formation of the subject happens through "... set of practices by which one can acquire, assimilate, and transform truth into a permanent principle of action" (Foucault, 1988, p. 35). According to Saba Mahmood, these practices instead of being symbolic are significant in the constitution of individuals, such that the body becomes a "necessary tool" for the formation of the "embodied subject" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 29). While these various modes of subjectivation is looked through the concept of the docility or docile bodies which only complies to the "norms" or "moral codes", Mahmood

argues instead for one's capacities for learning through the "struggles" and "efforts" which is not passive (Mahmood, 2005, p. 29).

Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* has contributed to the scholarship on body and embodiment, in sociology, philosophy and humanities, especially his statement "I am my body" (1962) takes us into the question of subjectivity and embodiment that is grounded on his concepts of *body-subject* and *being in the world*. For him, the subject of experience cannot just experience the world as a collection of objects but only in relation to the objects that it perceives, a relationship that is based on what meaning the object has for the subject. Thereby, the world becomes *my world*. On the other hand, this contemplating subject is not contemplating the world only through his thoughts, as Descartes will argue through his famous lines, *I think therefore I am*, an abstract, transcendental idea of existence detached from the body. For Merleau-Ponty to be a subject is not just about consciousness or thought neither is it an independent work of the body in terms of the biological functions of the organs but our ways of living, inhabiting with actions and emotions, with one's body. Thus, it is for him not possible to detach the mind from the body, thought from materiality, because it is in the entirety that one becomes a subject. He therefore uses the term *body-subject* or *embodied subject* to emphasize on the embodied idea of subjectivity. His theorizing of body and subjectivity through embodiment challenges the cartesian divide. His concept of *being in the world* tries to understand an experiencing subject not as someone who is detached from the world and contemplates it as an objective reality from the outside but rather as experiencing it from being a part of it, inhabiting it. According to Matthews, one can understand the popular concept of "view from everywhere" only because one is aware of what it means to have a view by being situated in a place (Matthews, 2014, p. 49). For Merleau-Ponty a body subject cannot perceive without its body but only with or through its body, in a situation and space. Thereby the *body-subject* is both constituted by the world as well as constituting the world.

“The body does not belong to itself” (Butler, 2009, p. 53) is a statement by Judith Butler who extends the questions of body and subjectivity outside oneself. For Butler the body is not only demarcated or bounded but also unbounded since it is not limited to itself but is outside itself in conditions that are unknown to it. Butler is pointing to the interdependency of the bodies that cannot exist onto itself but needs the ‘other’ in terms of the space, time, people, norms that exists outside of itself. As Moya Lloyd says in explaining Butler, “the body is never simply one’s own. It is always impinged upon from outside: by others, known and unknown, distant and proximate; by social norms; by historically specific conditions of embodiment; by social and political organizations; and by environmental factors” (Lloyd, 2015, p. 170). Butler argues, my body, and thereby who I am is always in relation to the different conditions in which I am located, that constitutes me. This relationality is important to Butler as she argues that, “*it not only exists in the vector of these relations, but as this very vector.*” (Butler, 2011, p. 385). It means that *it* (corporeal self) exists not in relation to these conditions but as that very relation i.e, “being constituted in and by these relations” (Lloyd, 2015, p. 171).

### **Body and Corporeality**

Kathleen Canning in, *The Body as Method? Reflections on the Place of the Body in Gender History* (1999) discusses how academic works on body have to some extent replaced or interchanged researches on body to that of gender, sexuality or reproduction rather than catering to body in itself. According to her, the histories of body have tended to understand the body only as a signifier and thereby understood the body as a ground of inscribing the law or power (Canning, 1999). Rather than reducing body to a ‘stable’ concept, Canning tries to understand the different methods through which body can be read or understood either as a symbol or by understanding the processes of its embodiments. In doing so she brings in the distinction of material and discursive body to discuss bodies rather than only conceiving body

through the lens of discursive formation. Canning brings in Leslie Adelson's (1996) *Making Bodies, Making History* to argue how even though Foucault's work on discourse has been dominated in body studies, yet it has not completely taken over the body's materiality or corporeality. Citing scholars like Elizabeth Grosz (1993), Moira Gatens (1996), Canning seeks to argue how the body retains its corporeality, materiality by resisting to the forces that imposes on itself.

Although there has been a turn in sociology and in other social sciences to the study of the body yet it is often read in context of South Asia as a form of establishing dominance of the west (Sen, Mill, 2004). Satadru Sen and James Mills argues how in turn the body was always central to South Asia even before the colonial rule, where the body was a central figure in "differentiation" in context of caste, "purity", "untouchability", "gender" (Sen, Mills, 2004, p. 4). "The ways in which the body was fed, formed and carried, even the extent to which it was indulged sexually, were all key means of cultivating and demonstrating difference" (Sen, Mills, 2004, p. 4). For example, they argue how female bodies were differentiated through their bodily functions of menstruation and childbirth, that were "culturally constructed as "polluting" and "unclean" so that the body was represented as the site and source of female inferiority" (Sen, Mills, 2004, p. 4). Thus, in the Indian context the study of the corporeality of the body gains significance in works of Sundar Sarukkai (2002), Arindam Chakraborty (2008), whose works on inner body in context of yoga, breathing, pain brings in the corporeal. Unlike the philosophical or symbolic understandings of the body, the material or corporeal significance becomes crucial in their works and also in the realm of *bayam* and physical cultures. Sarukkai (2002) while remaining within Merleau-Ponty's work seeks to speak about an inner body in context of Yoga and breathing through Merleau-Ponty's concept of dimensionality. According to him an inner body is possible through a phenomenological experience of dimensionality, of how one experiences an inner body through activities like breathing. In a similar line of thought

Arindam Chakraborty's *Deho, Geho, Bondhutwo* (2008) brings in an inner body through a form of sensing of an inner body which he terms as "*antarmukh dehobodh*" meaning an inward-looking bodily sense. This sensation makes us experience an inside through breathing, pain or hunger that makes us feel an inner domain which is neither mental or related to heart nor inner in the sense of a physical inside consisting of organs. It is a third kind of inner domain that is 'felt' and 'sensed'. With these diverse ideas of body, the centrality of understanding masculinity in relation to body and pain as a bodily sensation becomes significant in context of masculinity.

### **Masculinity and the Male Body**

Masculinity has been understood precisely as what it means to be a *man* (Kimmel, 2011). According to Reeser, "The expression of masculinity ranges from being rational, strong, physical and muscular strength, "being brave", "in-control", active and not emotional or sentimental, weak or soft (Reeser, 2010, p. 1). According to Kimmel, masculinity and femininity, meaning gender is an organizing principle (Kimmel, 2004, p. xv). John Powers in discussing gender through Judith Butler's notion of performativity argues that gender cannot be seen as natural but something that one does, meaning a set of bodily practices or actions that are unconsciously repeated making one give an impression of being natural but is actually a learnt set of behavior (Powers, 2009). Masculinity in its simplest definition is about what it means to be a man basing itself on gender identity, but being a man has varied possibilities. Connell argues that there cannot be a single pattern of masculinity but instead masculinity varies across different cultures and time periods (Connell, 2001). Connell's argument remains crucial to understanding masculinity that was shaped during the colonial rule and the repercussions it had in post-colonial times. However, understanding masculinity only in relation to men presupposes a ground from which masculinity emerges, this ground is always

the male subject. In order to do away with such an understanding, Mrinalini Sinha suggests a delinking of masculinity from the male subject. She questions the predetermination of a 'subject' of masculinity to instead open it to masculinity's "rhetorical" and "ideological" possibilities (Sinha, 1999).

"True masculinity" according to Connell has always been thought in and through men's bodies as if masculinity is "inherent" in men's bodies (Connell, 2005, p. 45). According to Connell such a view of masculinity in relation to men's bodies stems from the understanding of thinking about body as a metaphor to machines (Connell, 2005, p. 48). However, it is not limited to a metaphor but such an idea is embodied I argue through the muscularity of the body. Masculinity's relation to the male body has been understood and valorized through the notion of muscularity. Joan Tumblety argues that the ideal of muscularity was intricately woven into the expression of "normative masculinity" in French national strength (Tumblety, 2012, p. 1). According to Lee Monaghan, the "muscular body" which fits into the normative framework of the "athletically fit-looking body valorized in consumer culture" displays "power" and "self-control" (Monaghan, 2001, p. 8). Muscles are conceived as the "sign of masculinity" (Glassner 1989, p. 311) and thus, muscularity became symbolic of masculinity.

Dutton's *The Perfectible Body: The Western Ideal of Physical Development* (1995) discusses origins of muscularity (Jefferson, 1998) in western societies through two principles, one of "the muscular body as power-symbol" and as "pleasure-symbol" which means the "aesthetic or erotic pleasure" (Dutton, 1995, p. 16). Susan Bordo argues how it is always the feminine or the female who is on display whereas "men's bodies are supposed to symbolize activity and strength" (Bordo, 1999, p. 173) (Richardson, 2004, p. 57). Yet with the coming up of modernity and consumerist culture, the aesthetic male body too becomes something to be gazed at (Featherstone, 1982). Chris Wienke argues that the body image gained its significance such that the "muscular body" has become the "dominant cultural ideal" (Wienke, 1998, p. 255).

This, Wienke notes, is in the increasing resurgence of the image of the male body in media (Wienke, 1998, p. 256). The male body image gained prominence during the physical culture movement in the west which also came down to India. According to Singleton, photography gave rise to the significance of the “imaged body” leading to the cultivation of the body and its photography. Indian body image became “powerful documents” to counter the colonial claim of effeminacy and thereby display the “national strength” (Singleton, 2010, p. 165).

The male body was also understood through a notion of “wholeness” where the “complete body” became a significant aspect of modernity (Armengol, 2013, p. 16). “The body itself became the prominent signifier of manliness, with its corresponding moral attributes of strong willpower, moral fortitude, and martial nobility” (Armengol, 2013, p. 17). This accordingly led to the coming up of “physiognomy in the nineteenth century and its systematization of the linkage between body and soul, morality and bodily structure” (Armengol, 2013, p. 17). In Indian context however, the male body was re-sacralized through “ritualized techniques of physical cultures” that was brought in by the popular bodybuilder Eugene Sandow through his “notions of exercise as religious practice” (Singleton, 2010, p. 89). Although the term bodybuilding was coined by Robert J. Roberts, it was Sandow who made bodybuilding and physical culture a “household phrase” in India (Singleton, 2010, p. 89).

Masculinity’s relation to male body is also intimately tied to the questions of sexuality. Sue Morgan discusses the male body in context of sexual purity and masculinity during 1884-94. According to Morgan, the rising crisis of masculinity during the 19th century in Europe resulted in a consolidation of masculinity through sexual purity. Male chastity, sexual continence became central and were based on the divine body of Christ (Morgan, 2000, p. 181). The male body thereby became central to the politics of masculinity and sexual purity. However interestingly, Morgan argues how this concept of sexual purity was never about the individual but the nation as sexual politics became all about the “national strength” (Morgan, 2000, p.

186). “Western culture and philosophers, from classical Greece to Descartes, have long established a clear-cut dichotomy between masculinity and reason, on the one hand, and femininity and the body, on the other”. (Armengol, 2013, p. 1). Jose. M. Armengol in his book *embodying masculinity* discusses how this dichotomy has continued to see men only through “rationality” and “mind” and women through their bodies and “emotion” (Armengol, 2013, p. 1). He therefore, argues for the significance of understanding the sexual politics in context of the male bodies (Armengol, 2013).

Joseph Alter in his book *Moral Materialism: Sex and Masculinity in Modern India* (2011) discusses the coming of sexuality and masculinity in context of the emerging identity of Indian men in modern India. He argues how “sexual meanings are encoded in substances rather than in acts, ideas or conceptions” such that “regulation”, containment” becomes a way of embodying the substances and thereby embodying one’s identity as a man (Alter, 20011, p. 1). This substance is semen and the containment that he speaks of is in context of *brahmacharya* (Celibacy). This comes in contrast to the western and European understanding of the body. Alter thereby bases masculinity on the male body and how it embodies masculinity through semen control. Joseph Alter and Singleton both argues how the male material body was transformed into a medium to reach one’s ‘spiritual self’ (Singleton, 2010) (Alter, 2011). The ‘spiritual male body’ became a focal site for the discourse of nationalism (Alter, 2011, p. 24).

### **Physical Cultures, Masculinity and the Body**

Physical culture is often considered as an “umbrella term” to include different activities like “dieting”, “muscle building”, “aerobic exercise”, that are used to shape and improve one’s body and simultaneously one’s health (Addison, 2003, p. 1). Thus, physical cultures take into account a relationship between body and health, between restructuring the body and thereby modifying or improving health. According to Ben Spatz physical culture would include,

“sports, exercise, fitness, gymnastics, martial arts, and the movement of technique of circus and dance” (Spatz, 2015, p. 75). David Kirks argues how physical education and sports have constructed and constituted “the body in modernity”, where he recognizes a shift following Shilling, “from external and mass practices to internal and individual practices (Kirk, 1994, p. 166) (Shilling, 1993). Thus, sociological scholarship has looked into the “construction of the docile body within modernity” that was disciplined through physical education and medical practices which not only was with an effort to make it economically productive but also became a way of asserting one’s “social and self-identity” (Kirks, 1994, p. 167).

However, there was a ‘turn’ that physical culture took in the nineteenth century and I argue it was a political turn. There was a rise of physical culture in Europe with the hope of “regenerating the moral and physical mettle of the nation” (Singleton, 2010, p. 82). Health and morality came together in context of physical cultures and the body. According to Ross, this new emergent idea was based on “improving their own bodies and were often equally obsessed with the vision of improving the collective national or racial body” (Ross, 2005, p. 5). Singleton discusses how this “nationalist physical culture” (Singleton, 2010, p. 82) also influenced India and its physical cultures. Thus, a relation developed between physical cultures, body (male) and the nation.

Central to physical culture is the “embodied technique” which brings in the “physicality of the body” as significant (Spatz, 2015, p. 75). In India, although physical cultures do not necessarily include yoga, the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a coming together of yoga and physical culture in context of *Hatha Yoga* in India (Singleton, 2010.). *Hatha Yoga* is considered to be physiological yoga. According to Singleton, “It was not until the 1920s that gymnastics and physical culture really began to establish themselves as a contemporary expression of the Hatha tradition and to significantly influence the semantic and practical plurality of modern yoga itself—the genre of popular, self-help yoga books reflect this shifting tendency” (Singleton, 2010, p. 113). This saw

the rise of postural yoga based on asanas. According to Joseph Alter, “Yoga in India has a long association with nationalism. The particular form with which I am concerned is a yoga society, the Bharatiya Yog Sansthan (BYS), that advocates the public performance of secularized mass-drill yoga as a regimen of fitness designed to counteract the harmful effects of modernity on public health” (Alter, 2004, p. 17). Thus, yoga was associated with a means of countering the modern influences and thereby countering the colonizers.

Ben Spatz takes into account the research of Krishnamacharya and his role in transforming *hatha yoga*. According to him *hatha yoga* was getting transformed during the time and was being “reframed and rehabilitated, secularized and nationalized” (Spatz, 2015, p. 76). Yoga’s interaction with other forms of physical cultures can be noted in the coming together of bodybuilding and yoga for K.V. Iyer from Bangalore and Bishnu Charan Ghosh from Kolkata. According to Alter, body building was a form of muscle control and it is at this juncture that yoga and bodybuilding came together as a specific form of practice of muscle control. (Alter, 2012). For Iyer, as Singleton argues, the external physical development and strength from bodybuilding was coupled with inner idea of developing health and immunity from the *Hatha Yoga* tradition (Singleton 2010). The body in physical cultures therefore, no longer related itself to the external but also to an internal understanding of body and health. Iyer’s “reconciliation” of “muscle cult” and “hatha yoga cult” became a significant practice where bodily beauty through proper symmetry and proper health and fitness was essential to his practice as Elliot Goldberg discusses in his book, *The Path of Modern Yoga: The History of an Embodied Spiritual Practice* (Goldberg, 2016, p. 179).

Physical culture in India has a deep connection to religion. On asked what differentiates Indian physical cultures from the rest of the world, Gobor Goho, the prominent wrestler from Bengal, said that one will always find a temple next to an *akhara* or a *vyayamaghar* (Bandhapadhyay, 2018). However, this religious notion attached to it was not solely an Indian idea completely,

but definitely influenced from Sandow's notions of "exercise as religious practice" (Singleton, 2010, p. 89). Bodybuilding or rather bodybuilder Sandow influenced the Indian Physical Culture movement when he came to India to deliver lectures. Sandow's notions became acceptable amidst the Indian nationalist because it brought together religion and bodybuilding (Singleton, 2010, p. 89). According to Budd, the initial focus on "moral strictures of religion" and "mortification of the flesh" gave way to a newer understanding exercise regimes and "body's liberation" (Budd, 1997, p. 67). Bryan Turner discusses how Max Weber's work on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1976) focused on the reformation that was undergoing during the time where "ascetic denial of desire" became a significant part of the secular world inspite of being only a monastic or ascetic principle (Turner 2008). "Abstinence, the control of passions, fasting and regularity were thus held up as ideal norms for the whole society, since salvation could no longer be achieved vicariously by the labours of monks" (Turner, 22, p. 2008). The religious and spiritual practices became enmeshed with the bodily practices. The body in context of physical culture was not only tied to the religious and spiritual notions on one hand and health and morality on the other, it was also deeply political and national.

Sikata Banerjee argues about a relation between the ideas of manhood and that of the nation where the cultural ideals of masculinity, femininity, male and female bodies were increasingly becoming "potent metaphors" for nationhood (Banerjee, 2005, p. 2). According to Chandrima Chakraborty, the nineteenth century marked a period when there was a growing interest in physical cultures since the body was becoming central to the reformation of Indian (Hindu) men such that the male body was considered to "rejuvenate the national body politic" (Chakraborty, 2007, p. 1175). Charu Gupta argues how the Hindu male body was stripped of its martial prowess and was seen as a "visible site of surrender" and therefore an overcoming of such a position was emphasized. (Gupta, 1998, p. 729). Thus, physical cultures and the

notion of health or fitness became a concern for the nation and a medium of putting forward its cultural politics leading to the formation of *akharas* and *bayam samitis* (Singleton, 2010, p. 96). Although the need for rejuvenating physical cultures emerged from the need to counter the colonizers, it was none the less based on western influence (Singleton, 2010). The akhara and Hindu mela that were formed during the period were influenced by the colonial reforms and although the physical culture movement in India was indigenous, it was appreciative of the “nationalistic gymnastic movement” of the west (Singleton, 2010, p. 97).

The *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) is an organization which was formed for the restructuring of *Hindu* masculinity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and it has carried forth its tasks through the various *shakhas* across the nation (Chakraborty, 2007). An image of a feminized nation was created and based on a spiritual devotion towards “Bharat Mata” which the Hindu nationalist revered and protected by creating a “masculinized Hindu culture” (Hansen, 1999, p. 112) (Chakraborty, 2007, p. 1167). Central to the body disciplining and reshaping centered around *bayam*, exercise, physical cultures and modern postural yoga, and their relation to the political period of the nineteenth century, was the notion of masculinity.

### **Historical Reflections on Colonialism, Nationalism and Masculinity**

Understanding masculinity and body in *bayam* tradition meant a focus on understanding a historical moment when the body, *bayam*, masculinity came together. This moment was of colonial period. In India the colonial period marked the emergence of the significance of the body and which I argue also shaped the post-colonial understanding of body. “The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the emergence of ethnographic, taxonomic states, where minute distinctions of race and status were elaborately encoded into forms of rule that ranged from the use of extreme bodily violence to the more overtly benign “rule of law” (Rao, Pierce, 2006, p. 4). This period saw the rise of bodies in difference, the colonial and colonized

bodies. Davis Arnold's pioneering work on *Colonizing the Body: State, Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth Century* (1993) points towards the "corporality of colonialism in India" as opposed to only understanding colonialism as a "psychological state" (Arnold, 1993, p. 7). He argues for an emphasis on, "the importance of the body as a site of colonizing power and of contestation between the colonized and the colonizers" (Arnold, 1993, p. 7).

Satadur Sen and James Mills in their discussion on colonial body argues that the colonized bodies were "vaccinated, dissected, drugged and carefully gendered by Western medical institutions. They were drilled and disciplined in colonial factories, armies and schools. The body was at the heart of the colonial encounter" (Sen, Mills, 2004, p. 2). This centrality of the body can also be understood in Turner's concept of "somatic society". In his book on *Regulating bodies* (1992) Turner discusses "somatic society" where the body become the centre of "social, political and cultural issues" (Turner, 1992, p. 162) (Turner, 2012, p. 5). According to Chandrima Chakraborty, differences were inscribed on the bodies of the colonized in order to establish the power and authority of the colonizers (Chakraborty, 2011, p. 25). This as such resulted in a countering of the notions of the body and masculinity grounded in indigenous understandings. A redefinition of the body was also taking place with a redefinition of masculinity. A history of masculinity in India also takes us into the colonial period whose gender underpinnings shaped and reshaped the ideas of masculinity. Mrinalini Sinha's pioneering work of, *The Manly English and the effeminate Bengali Babu* brings in the historical study of the politics of masculinity in the colonial period in context of India. According to Sinha, it was the figures of "manly Englishman" and "effeminate Bengali babu" that were created to shape the politics of colonialism (Sinha, 1995, p. 3). Sinha's work, alongside Indira Chowdhury's (1998), highlighted the gendered underpinnings of colonial rule. This gendered underpinning was also revealed by Ashish Nandy in his celebrated work on *Intimate Enemy: The Loss and recovery of Self under Colonialism* (1989) which discussed the

coming together of the sexual and the political during the colonial rule. Nandy argues how the social, political, and economic dominance became symbolic of the dominance of men over women or masculinity over femininity (Nandy, 1989, p. 4). Greg Thomas also argues in a similar line of thought about the “carnal violence of colonialism” (Thomas, 2007, p. 104) in context of Africa. According to him, a “sexual analysis of colonial and neo-colonial power complex of white racist imperialism” (Thomas, 2007, p. x) is necessary which he does through his book *The Sexual Demon of Colonial Power* (2007).

The supposed *lack* of manliness was translated into a *loss* by the nationalist and an effort on part of the colonized was to regain masculinity alongside countering the colonial masculinity of the colonizers. According to Sinha, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, the novelist and nationalist, have made an effort to erase the stigma of effeminacy of Bengalis by redefining the figure of Krishna (Hindu God) from sensual and soft natured to that of a masculine ideal based on rationality and self-control” (Sinha, 1999, p. 448). Thus, Chandrima Chakraborty’s book, *Masculinity, Asceticism, Hinduism: Past and Present imaginings of India* (2011) focuses on this “entanglement of the political and the corporeal in the works of the national ideologues” like Gandhi, Bankim Chandra, Tagore and others. She attempts to show the “impossibility” of a “pre-discursive” or “authentic” masculine identity and that this masculine identity emerging during nationalism was grounded on the male ascetic body (Chakraborty, 2011, p. 25). Sikata Banerjee’s book ‘s title *Make me a man: Masculinity, Hinduism and Nationalism in India* depicts the call for regaining manhood or reclaiming manhood during the nationalist period. The work focuses on the rise of “armed masculinity” that was embodied by the figure of “warrior monk” giving rise to a Hindu masculine nationalism in India (Banerjee, 2005). This figure of “warrior monk” is highlighted by Indira Chowdhury’s celebrated work on *Frail hero Virile History* where she argues how Vivekananda brought the figure of an ascetic monk and a warrior together in the image of a “warrior monk” (Chowdhury, 1998). These various efforts

on part of the nationalists were in order to counter the supposed “effeminacy” of the Indians, especially the Bengalis that the British claimed them to be.

### **Health, Fitness and the (Male) Body**

Health, or “the pursuit of health”, according to Crawford has become a significant part of contemporary times leading to expansion of institutions, social resources, knowledge, goods and services all catering to this growing field of health (Crawford, 2006, p. 404). Crawford argues for a “new health consciousness” that has engulfed people today similar to how bodies are shaped as “projects” according to Shilling (Shilling, 1993, p. 5). Lee Monaghan in *Looking good, feeling good: The embodied pleasures of vibrant physicality* (2001) argues that the concerns for health and fitness has risen out of an effort to “embody” and “display a sense of empowerment and self-mastery” (Monaghan, 2001, p. 334)

However, health’s significance has been crucial even during the colonial period in context of India especially in relation to physical cultures and *bayam* (Bose, 2005). Health cannot be studied in itself as a condition of wellbeing but in relation to various concepts of morality, sexuality, medicines, race. Foucault’s works in the field of medicine opened us to the distinction between classical medicines and the “new medical consciousness” which further opened us to ideas about “man’s ideal physical state” and positive norms that would now dominate the sphere of medicine and health (Foucault, 1973) (Gutting, 1989). Sociologist Irving Zola argues that medicine has become the “new repository of truth, the place where absolute and often final judgements are made” in the name of health (Zola, 1972, p. 487). This happens according to her through “medicalizing” daily lives of people (Zola, 1972, p. 487). Related to the concept of health is the idea of disease because what disrupts the health of a person is the concept of disease. T. Engelhardt ‘s suggests that there is no possible way to consider disease as an “objective entity” nor through a single universal definition since disease or concept of

disease depends upon a “purpose” “depending on values and hopes concerning the world” (Engelhardt, 1974, p. 234). Engelhardt goes ahead to discuss the connection between morality and health. According to him, “vice” “virtue” are not directly about disease and health but they define what is considered as “normal” and “deviant”. He argues, “Insofar as a vice is taken from an ideal of human perfection, or “well-being,” it can be translated into disease language” (Engelhardt, 1974, p. 247). Turner discusses how “disease” and “sin” were initially equated together but came to be separated at the time of secularization under the state (Turner, 2008, p. 183, 190). Thus, the concept of health and disease are also shaped by an ideas of normalcy and a deviation from it is conceived or defined as disease. This is reflected in the notion of health understood by Gandhi. According to Arnold, Gandhi saw disease as a “result of indulgence, of overeating and “vice”. (Arnold, 1993, p. 287) (Gandhi, 1910). Thereby for Gandhi medicine led to the “loss of control of mind and body” where health would mean the “control of bodily desires” (Arnold, 1993, p. 287) (Gandhi 1910). Lee Monaghan argues how medical sociology has increasingly focused on “sickness”, “disability” and “death” while keeping asides “vibrant physicality” and “embodied pleasures” in their theorizing of the body (Monaghan, 2001, p. 331). Health it is argued “is a state of being” which is “experienced only in negation of disease and injury” (van Hooft, 1997, p. 245). Thus, moving away from sickness and disease-oriented idea of health, Monaghan focuses on the “fit, healthy-looking bodies” (Monaghan, 2001, p. 332) (Glassner, 1990).

This sole focus on health, not in a mere negation of disease, also comes up in Indian context when K.V. Iyer, a bodybuilder and Yoga practitioner argued for a ‘classed’ idea of health. According to him even in the absence of disease one cannot expect complete wellbeing or health, because for him wellbeing or health itself is classified into degrees of wellbeing (Goldberg, 2016, p. 179). This was possible by bringing in bodybuilding alongside *hatha yoga* which he believed had “health-building aspects” (Goldberg, 2016, p. 179) According to Iyer

then, yogic asanas were a necessary means to develop the body both outwardly, symmetrically as well as developing the internal muscular organs through *yogic asanas*<sup>xvii</sup>, which will help one in building a healthy body (Goldberg, 2016). This makes the idea of health an idealized concept to aspire for. These relations of morality, values, ideals that define and redefine health makes it a concept that defies a fixed meaning. Health apart from being moral and spiritual in context of yoga, can also be considered to be political.

David Arnold (1993) discusses how health was also understood in relation to race and nation such that the colonizers used medical science and the discourse of health to establish the dichotomy between healthy and unhealthy races. Health therefore was no longer about an individual state of being but became a political tool, one that defined the health of a race or nation. Arnold discusses how the colonial doctors and their medical knowledge attacked the Indian social institutions like child marriage citing them as a cause for the “enfeeblement and degeneracy of Indian people” (Arnold, 1993, p. 280-281). Thus, the emphasis on martial races, or the physical deterioration of physical health, the effeminacy of Bengali men, were all linked to the notions of health and race. Arnold cites John Smyth, according to whom child marriage was not only affecting health but also the entire race (Arnold, 1993, p. 281). These ideas of health and race were taken in and accepted by the Indians who went out to reform their society with the notions given by the colonizers. (Arnold, 1993) (Bose, 2005).

Alter speaks of a concern in modern India regarding the relationship between “health”, “identity” and “moral integrity” of nations as well as individuals in the context of body discipline (Alter, 2004, p. 16-17). According to him these various forms of disciplining of the body were not only the means but also sometimes the ends in themselves (Alter, 2004, p. 17). Mark Harrison and Biswamoy Pati argue through Foucault’s work, that “public health” was a method of knowing and controlling the colonized. Thus, they argue how the “reformist governance was part and parcel of British imperialism (Harrison, Pati, 2009, p. 1-2).

Interestingly Bengal, and in it, Calcutta<sup>xviii</sup> was an important realm in context of public health and medicine in India (Harrison, Pati, 2009). Thus, a rise of nationalism was also concerning the rise of body, health and discipline.

Pradip Bose's book on *Health and Society in Bengal: A Selection from Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengali Periodicals* (Bose, 2005) provides an interesting look at the history of health, medicine and society in colonial Bengal. The emerging concept of western science that was redefining health remains crucial for an understanding of health in present society. Similar to masculinity, health too did not have a pre-discursive understanding but one that emerged during colonial period in interaction between the indigenous and the western medical discourses. Bose draws a distinction or analytical separation between *social body* and *natural body* to show how the health of the natural body ultimately depended upon the social body during the nationalist period. By social body he means the various social practices and customs which constitute the social body of the society in which one lives. The illness in the social body leads to the illness of the natural body or personal body of the person concerned. Thereby, in the discourse of health and medical science, the social and natural body brought within it the social customs and practices as well during the colonial nationalist period. Through this Bose tried to emphasize on how the discourse of health was tied to the social, religious and the moral ideas (Bose, 2005, p. 28).

Swami Vivekananda too tried to emphasize on a distinction between cleanliness and purity as the distinction between medical/material health of the westerners and spiritual health of the Indians (Arnold, 1993, p. 285). Social evils of child marriage, masturbation on one hand and western medicines on the other were considered the causes for the deterioration of health among Bengalis and both were centered around the generation of heat which suggested sexual energy and thereby lack of control. Pradip Bose discusses a Bengali periodical Bibidhartha Sangraha, where unhealthy was equated with impotency (Bose, 2005, p. 27) which I argue

links health and masculinity together as both is conceived as deterioration, a negative connotation such that good health became synonymous with potency. According to Arnold, the colonial “medical intervention” in context of India also takes into account the ways the colonized reacted to it, in terms of “resistance”, “accomodation”, “participation” and “appropriation”. It was not only about colonial dominance over the colonized but also the simultaneous “internal differentiation within Indian society”. (Arnold, 1993, p. 10) Thus it was not simply an “intervention” but an interaction between the western and the indigenous. “Medicine was too powerful, too authoritative, a species of discourse and praxis to be left to the colonizers alone” (Arnold, 1993, p. 10).

The idea of health has given way to a notion of fitness today. It is argued that today the “looking glass self” has transformed into a “looking glass body” where “looking good” is equated with “feeling good” which sees a shift from “heath as physical appearance” to “health as wellbeing” (Waskul, Vannini, 2006) (Monaghan, Atkinson, 2014, p. 16) (Watson, 2000) (Monaghan, 2001, p. 334). Mike Featherstone (1982) discusses how health becomes increasingly linked to consumer culture making it more about bodily appearance and look that gains priority. According to him, the outer body gains prominence where the “enhancement” of “appearance” of the outer body leads to the maintenance of health or the inner body (Featherstone, 1982, p. 18). Goffman’s understanding of presentation of self and impression management becomes important to understand how bodies are shaped through notions of appearance (Goffman, 1972). Glassner argues for a “nullification of fundamental polarity” between “self” and “body”, where fitness increasing means a certain form of “presentation of the self” (Glassner, 1989, p. 183) (Mead, 1934) (Goffman, 1956). “Physical fitness and health are not coterminous (an elite athlete, for instance, may have cancer), but in Western society numerous overlapping, conflated and complementary meanings are typically ascribed to exercised and dieted fe/male bodies,

such as: health, youth, social status and sexual attractiveness” (Monaghan, Atkinson, 2014, p. 17).

Interestingly, with the passage of time “health” and “fitness” became one and the same (Glassner, 1989). Spatz argues that the distinction between athleticism and well-being is fast diminishing today where health and fitness are equated together (Spatz, 2015, p. 85). In the context of sports, the question of health and fitness emerges. Nancy Theberge in her work on, *It's not about health, it's about performance: Sports medicine, Health and the Culture of Risk in Canadian Sports*, discusses the “medicalization of the athletic body” where the role of sports and medicines are not concerning health per say but are about performances (Theberge, 2007, p. 178). As she notes, the medicines are directed not towards improving health but for healing from injuries and “increase performance” (Theberge, 2007, p. 183). She discusses how the sportsperson undergoes various injuries, sickness which shows that its not about health but performance. (Theberge, 2007). According to Spatz while the earlier generations have understood health through morality and ethics, today it is more about body shape and athleticism. Spatz defines this obsession with the concept of “hegemonic healthism”. In such a discourse of health, the idea of fitness is based on rigorous exercise that often ignores the negative effects on the physical well-being of a person. For example, weight loss and health are almost equated together which according to Spatz is a contested idea (Spatz, 2015, p. 85). Spatz’s argument is significant to understand how the current gym culture and present yoga classes promote health as a consumerist product (Featherstone, 1991). What remains significant is to understand how certain easy correlations are made in terms of weight loss and health, number or kinds of workout methods, norms and their relation to health. This relation needs interrogation instead of an easy acceptance. Spatz interrogates it by differentiating how yoga asanas is understood as an achievement by athleticism while consumerism will look into it as “consumable products” (Spatz, 2015, p. 86). He instead suggests that if each posture or asanas

can be seen as “research projects” then it will be possible to go into discovering possibilities of embodiments (Spatz, 2015, p. 86). *Bayam* or asanas or exercises can then be understood not as achievements, or products but as a realm of possibilities.

### **Pain and (Male) Body**

“Despite being so obvious, so intimately bound in our bodies as a noxious feeling, pain remains conceptually elusive” (Glucklich, 2001, p. 11). Pain is characterized by a contradiction, between its felt experience and its simultaneous unsharability. One of the pioneering works on pain is Eliane Scarry’s *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* which is grounded on pain’s “unsharability through it’s resistance to language” (Scarry, 1983, p. 4). She argues, to “have pain” is to have “certainty” yet to hear about others pain is to have a “doubt” (Scarry, 1983, p. 4). Thus, physical pain becomes a reality for those in pain yet it can never be established by the others. Pain for her not only resists language but “actively destroys it” making one reach a state prior to language itself (Scarry, 1983, p. 4-5). In the field of medicine too, the physician according to Scarry never “trusts” the patient’s narrative making it an unreliable source and in turn seeking to “interpret it” himself/herself. This also brings in the context of power, in terms of how the pain is “represented” by the other (even in context of torture) such that there is a “political consequence of pain’s inexpressibility” (Scarry, 1983, p. 12). Thus, pain’s relation to power brings in the political. Joanna Bourke on the other hand argues about understanding pain-as-event as opposed to pain-as sensation. She understands “being-in-pain” as an event in “interaction with other bodies and social environments” rather than pain as an entity independently impinging from an outside (Bourke, 2014, p. 15-16). She denies any “private pain-event” and argues for pain-event placed in culture thereby moving away from “The Body in Pain” to “The Body of pain” (Bourke, 2014, p. 17, 19).

Moving away from the inexpressibility of pain, pain also becomes a domain of understanding the civilized and uncivilized body. Norbert Elias (2000) in discussing the civilizing process speaks of a transformation in context of the body. Moving away from a uncivilized body in context of the middle ages that is marked by lack of self-restraint and defined by physical violence and infliction of pain, he goes on to talk about the “civilized body” which is more controlled, “trained” and “educated” through “stringent behaviour codes over time, or habitus, and attitudes towards bodily functions” (Elias,2000) (Pincikowski, 2002, p. xviii-xix). Self-infliction of pain through asceticism or pain through unrestrained violence was conceived as central to the middle-ages which was considered by Elias as a marker of uncivilized body (Elias, 2000, p. 373). Contrary to such an understanding, Scott. E. Pincikowski seeks to read the medieval body within its context. He relates it to Foucault’s concept of discourse to argue how the medieval society had its own understanding of civilization which recognized the “corporeal reality of pain” (Pincikowski, 2002, p. xxi). Thus, the corporeal pain and the body in medieval society cannot be conceived as uncivilized or lesser form of living. It becomes a way of understanding the body, corporeality and pain in the middle-ages.

Central to understanding pain is the debate between the medical and biological understandings of pain on one hand and the socio-cultural and political ideas of pain. Bendelow and Williams argue about pain as an everyday experience (Bendelow, Williams, 1995). Bendelow and Williams *Transcending the dualism: Towards a Sociology of Pain* focuses upon a critique of the medical discourse of pain which attempts to reduce pain to an objective sensation and thereby focuses on “its “treatment” and “management” and in “measuring it” (Bendelow, Williams, 1995, p. 160). Discussing various scientific, psychological theories on pain, Bendelow and Williams move towards understanding sociological, cultural and phenomenological perspectives on pain that forms a departure from the limitations of scientific theories. Their main attempt is to emphasize upon the emotional aspect of pain, the embodied

idea of pain rather than perceiving it only as a sensation which the medical discourse invariably reduces pain to. By citing Merleau-Ponty's concept of a "lived body", they argue how the analytical distinction between Lieb "body for itself" (subjective) and Körper "Body in itself" (objective) can be overcome through the idea of embodiment.

The debate on pain's meaningfulness in context of torture becomes a concern in Lisa Silverman's *Tortured Subjects: Pain, Truth and the Body in Early Modern France* (2001). Discussing the early modern times on the need for torture and the use of pain as a way of bringing out truth or confession from prisoners gave rise to a whole new debate on the purpose of pain. Dijkhuizen argues that suffering was seen as empowering in early Christian understandings (Dijkhuizen, 2009, p. 191). On one hand people emphasized on the "ritualized meaningfulness of pain" (Silverman, 2001, p. 176) following the Roman Catholic Church and Penitential Conferment. "The Roman Catholic tradition thereby glorified suffering, transforming it from a mundane and earthly reality to a sublime and transcendent element of spiritual redemption." (Silverman, 2001, p. 112) On the other hand, in the medical realm, pain was conceived as something negative (Silverman, 2001) There was a third idea to pain, that of the philosophers who understood pain as a form of punishment who argued "truth and not the human being" as the "primary victim of torture" (Silverman, 2001, p. 164). For them when a person becomes subjected to torture, in the painful context, one ends up compromising the truth, whether an innocent or a clever criminal, both end up lying in order to prevent further torture and thereby further pain. Thus, as Montaigne argues, "The invention of tortures is a dangerous invention; they seem to be a test of endurance rather than of truth" (Montaigne, "On Conscience," in *Essays*, 2, p. 34-35), (Silverman, 2001, p. 164). Thus, torture is about the body and its endurance, located in the body and therefore outside of the realm where truth needs to be located. Secondly, for the philosophers the truth cannot be located in the body. For truth to come out, it needs a calm condition and contemplation rather than a spontaneous moment

where out of bodily pain one reveals the truth. Thereby, they situated truth in the mind, not in the body and in pain. This also resonates with the idea of medicines which sees pain only as a form of punishment that needs to be relieved rather than endured for redemptive or other purposes. In doing so, the philosophers deny “the epistemology of pain” (Silverman, 2001, p. 168). They seem not only to deny the religious discourse of pain but also to deny an embodied idea of truth because for them truth can only be a metaphysical creation, an abstract thought that needs rational contemplation rather than spontaneous, emotional, sensitive moments of bodily pain. David Morgan argues through Max Weber’s concept of the “problem of theodicy” (Weber, 1976) about the absence of “moral and social embodiments”, “ethical and political contexts” and the “quest for meaning” in understanding pain in modernity and with the coming up of modern medicine which according to him has “medicalized” and “privatized” pain (Morgan, 2002, p. 307, 314) (Allen, 2013, p. 3). Suffering in modernity is perceived as a “failure” and pain is considered as an “emergent contingency” which needs “extraordinary interventions” (Illich, 1976, p. 135-136).

“Pain and pleasure have coincided throughout history, from the ecstasies of martyred saints and religious flagellants to the writings of de Sade and Sacher-Masoch. Pain’s positiveness or redemptive aspects come in the context of religious understandings” (Allen, 2013, p. 3). Patricia Lawrence’s scholarly work, *Kali in a Context of Terror: The Tasks of a Goddess in Sri Lanka’s Civil War* (2003) discusses both pain from torture and also pain from religious rituals. In context of both these pains, a form of submission to a higher authority is required. One pain is inscribed on the body as a form of torture and the other happens through self-infliction. However, the pain differs also in context of how the body *takes in* the pain. Her research is based on Sri Lanka where people’s life and livelihood are caught between extreme situations of military intrusion, detention camps and ongoing civil war which is countered through their local religious rituals (Lawrence, 2003, p. 102). This takes place by taking vows for Goddess

*Kali*, where the men after returning from detention camps would go through painful religious rituals directed at their own bodies. This act I argue is not just for fulfilling the vows they took for their safe return to their homes from detention camps but also as a way of countering the bodily pain they have encountered in the form of torture in the camps. Thus, religious pain here is not seen as negative but as a way of resisting, retaliating and erasing the pain that was inscribed on their bodies through torture. As Lawrence's argues, the pain from religion or rituals marks a "relationship" and pain from torture demarcates "boundary" (Lawrence, 2003, p. 109). "Torture is used to control "punishable" people, to force them into submissiveness and obedience, but through ritual ceremonies that dignify the violated body-self, Cittiraveṭ's body is resignified" (Lawrence, 2003, p. 114). Here Scarry's idea becomes significant when she argues that the power that inscribes the pain becomes total, "this kind of power claims pain's attributes as its own and disclaims the pain itself" (Scarry, 1985, p. 56-57).

A similar idea of pain comes up in the context of asceticism in Peter Van Der Veer *Pain and Power: Reflections on Ascetic Agency* where he discusses how one's submission or giving into pain in the form of self-infliction or going through a process of self dis-empowerment in asceticism allows one to not only become a "sufferer" but also an "agent;" "the pain itself transforms one from one kind of person to another" (Van der veer, 2009, p.207). This can be understood through Foucault technologies of the self where he discusses the various techniques through which one transforms oneself and this transformation can also involve disempowerments and pain but which ultimately transforms an individual (Foucault, 1988).

Pain's relation to pleasure or positive connotations has been attached to pain in context of the present century as well. Steven Allen discusses the rise of "aestheticized suffering" that characterize the twenty-first century cinematic portrayals which brings pain and pleasure in context of what he defines as the "controlled body" which is "viscerally dominated", "marked" and 'suffering" (Allen, 2013, p. 2). He speaks of a "tendency", "in our late-industrial,

consumerist society: one that sees the body as a site for asserting self-determined identity via controlled pain, wounds and domination” (Allen, 2013, p. 2).

Pain, therefore, has several social, cultural and embodied understandings. The above context also invariably brings the male body in pain, pointing to a gendered understanding of pain. Pincikowski’s argues that the male body in pain is seen as a struggle, an attempt to win over pain while the female body in pain is seen as embracing pain. Literature suggests that pain has been usually related to femininity and the female body, perhaps because it is seen as existing outside the realm of reason. “...in the sense of passion, pain is associated with religious subjectivity and often regarded as inimical to reason.” (Asad, 2003, p. 67). Marla Carlson brings in artworks like *The Martyrdom of Saint Apollonia* and body artist Marina Abramovic’s performances to discuss the medieval female bodies in pain and argue how women found a way to express themselves through pain and suffering which were often considered outside the “rational discourses” (Carlson, 2010, p. 79-80). The regimes that were considered to be outside reason, or rational discourse like that of the body in pain, became a ground for women to create a new language when they were denied speech (Carlson, 2010, p. 79). On the other hand, we find, masculinity, with all its relation with the mind and reason, does not leave any space for the discussion of pain as a bodily experience.

Kent Brintnall in his book on *Ecce Homo: The Male Body in Pain As Redemptive Figure* (2011), argues that the “spectacle of the male body” is juxtaposed with ‘spectacular violence’ shown in action films where the male suffering body is exposed as vulnerable and at the same time it seeks to uphold the cultural ideal of an impenetrable masculine body (Brintnall, 2011, p. 30). Brintnell argues, how the action hero’s bodily sufferance is never conceived through a sign of weakness but “as the mark of invulnerability” (Brintnall, 2011, p. 30). This invulnerability is significant to the male body in pain which takes in pain only to overcome it. The pain therefore is situated in an absence, in a denial which establishes the masculine. This

denial and overcoming is brought under question in the film *Kippur*, as Raz Yosef argues in *Spectacles of Pain: War, Masculinity, and the Masochistic Fantasy in Amos Gitai's "Kippur"* where the film opens us to the vulnerable side to war and the male material body of the soldier (Yosef, 2005). A soldier's body much like Brintnall argues, is created as impenetrable and invulnerable in the masculine field of a war. Apart from violence what remains crucial to war is the place of pain and the body of the soldier who bears the marks of the violence on his body. But this body is never really exposed to us in its vulnerability and pain which the film *Kippur* does (Yosef, 2005, p. 53). In doing so the film opens us to the vulnerable male body in pain where the soldier is reduced to his corporeality, the masculine transcendental figure is reduced to the destroyed, perishable body. The male body in pain thus is a realm of contradiction much similar to the notion of pain itself, which is absent and present at the same time.

### Chapter 3: Places, Experiences and Emotions: The Intricacies of Fieldwork

*As I walked into Arjum Vyayamashala one fine morning, I could see and feel the gazes of men inside looking at me with utmost surprise and curiosity. It was early morning near Ganesh talkies, when I, accompanied by an interlocutor, entered this vyayamshala to find 3-4 young men and an elderly wrestler inside. I could find they were surprised to see a young woman come into a heavily male domain in such an odd hour. The elderly man, being a wrestler himself, started a quick conversation with my interlocutor who was also a wrestler. I saw how he made a gesture through his eyes and face to ask why I was here. It did not matter to him that my interlocutor was also there with me, and the question could have very well been directed towards both of us as we were unknown to the vyayamshala. But the question came and was directed at my identity and my presence in a male masculine domain of the akhara. I informed my interlocutor about the reason behind my visit. The young men got excited to see someone visiting them and were eager to participate in whatever they thought was about to happen. They began working on their bodies, one young man picked up a dumbbell and quickly posed for me to click. He told me how he was here to build his body and not here as a wrestler. The elderly man complained how young men today only come to build muscles and how wrestling tradition is no longer surviving.*

My field note from August 2018 elaborates on my visit to this vyayamashala near Tara Sundari Park. This field note is part of my ethnography in vyayamaghars and bayam samitis in Kolkata and by bringing in a snippet of my field note I seek to bring back the experience of the moment or place through the writing. Fieldnote has occupied a significant yet a liminal position in ethnography. I argue for its liminality because it is neither in the field nor out of it. James Clifford describes it as “a turning away from dialogue and observation toward a separate place of writing, a place of reflection, analysis, and interpretation” (Clifford, 1990, p. 52). According

to Clifford, there is no such concrete way to define a fieldnote. According to him field note as an “institution does exist which is understood as a “textual corpus” that is “produced by fieldwork and constituting a raw, or partly cooked, descriptive database for later generalization, synthesis, and theoretical elaboration” (Clifford, 1990, p. 52). In spite of that field note does not have a fixed definitive method or way, but encompasses a wide range of experiences that ethnographers bring into their ethnographic endeavors.

My presence in the *vyayamshala* was not only raising eyebrows for the men, it also made me feel uncomfortable in a setting I felt I was not supposed to be in. The space and the place became distanced from me (my identity) making me feel ‘out of place’ while being ‘within it’. This feeling has been a constant since I have started my ethnography. This placed me in the position of an outsider yet at the same time I was an insider in various contexts. My identity as a woman researcher in the masculine spaces of *bayam samitis*, *vyayamshalas*, *akharas* and gyms became if not an obstacle but a matter of unease. This uneasiness or uncomfortableness is a feeling that would creep up now and then even when I have become well settled in these masculine spaces as a young researcher working on men and masculinity in *bayam* culture. Instead of considering this ‘unease’ as a deterrent to my ethnographic study, I have in turn turned it into a methodological tool to understand the places and spaces of the *vyayamaghars* and *akharas* through these embodied emotions.

Ethnography has been a method to understand the ‘other’, a place, a community, a group in its natural setting. James Clifford argues how initially ethnography was about looking at pre-defined ‘others’ who were understood as either primitive or non-western or tribal, while now ethnography has become all about encountering others in relation to oneself and even to an extent to see oneself as other (Clifford, 1986, p. 23). This transition in ethnography with the cultural turn has been crucial and also marks the reflexive turn that it took. With the coming up of the ontological turn ethnography has taken a further turn into not only studying different

cultures but in studying difference in itself and to also reflect back on that difference not through interpretations and explanation but through conceptualization (Castro, 2015) (Holbraad, 2008).

When we do ethnography, we do ‘fieldwork’ which is central to what ethnographers do. Fieldwork is considered often to be a method that makes “understanding of others” possible (Maanen, 2011, p. 2). “The method reflects a bedrock assumption held historically by fieldworkers that “experience” underlies all understanding of social life” (Maanen, 2011, p. 3). According to Maanen then fieldwork is then a “means to an end” (Maanen, 2011, p. 3). However, this idea of fieldwork is essentially tied to culture or rather a method which seeks to represent the culture of the other (Maanen, 2011, p. 1).

The ‘fieldwork’ then consequently brings in the question of the ‘field’. While earlier the notion of the field was more or less fixed, in a specific location away from the ethnographer’s place, the notion of the ‘field’ has undergone vast changes. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson argue how earlier the ‘field’ was conceptualized as a “taken for granted space in which an “Other” culture or society lies waiting to be observed and written?” (Gupta, Ferguson, p. 1997, p. 2). The location of this “mysterious space” according to Gupta and Ferguson, has been “left to common sense” (Gupta, Ferguson, p. 1997, p. 2). They, therefore, emphasize on the significance of the selection of a place as a field and not any other (Gupta, Ferguson, p. 1997). This field in ethnography has earlier been only a distant far away land of exotic location. However today, “the field” has been extended and broadened to include all forms of human groups and every possible context has become “an actual or potential research site” (Sluka, Robben, 2007).

The field might also become a place of historical significance such that the field might be divided into two time periods. My field sites, the *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars* were

formed during the colonial period with a certain political goal in mind and their current persistence required a looking back into their history and past. My ethnography entailed an ethnography of the past, thereby engaging into a historical ethnography. One of the initial chapters looks into the past of these *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars* not only through existing literature and secondary materials but also through the ethnography in these places of the *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars*. Story-telling, narrations of the past from the members, especially senior members of the *bayam samitis* helped understand the history of the places and their continued significance.

### **Ontological Turn**

One of the major aspects that emerged from my ethnography and which has been quite taken for granted in the field of *bayam* culture or physical cultures today is the notion of *difference* in the method of *bayam* or exercise practiced in the *bayam samitis*, *vyayamaghars* and *akharas* as opposed to those practiced in gyms. This difference has various connotations ranging from a debate between “traditional” vs “new age”, “older” vs “newer”, *bayam* tradition vs gym culture. It essentially also takes for granted a difference that is laden with judgement, where the earlier, older, is conceived as inferior to the present, new age gym tradition. The difference also comes up not only in methods of *bayam* or exercise but also places where a distinction between *vyayamaghars*, *bayam samitis* and gyms are made. I entered my ethnographic field only to encounter this difference and the alterity of *bayam* tradition located in ideas of *brahmacharya*, inner body, “*dom*”, thousands of *dands* and *baithaks*, simplicity of diet, and pain (*kosto*) in the way *bayam* is practiced in *bayam samitis*. Thus, my fieldwork became more than just a study of *bayam* tradition but the *difference* that *bayam* was about. My study therefore, I argue, took an ontological turn, it became a methodology into understanding or studying *difference* or *alterity*. My study did not only become based on ontology because of

the study of difference but also because I did not seek to interpret what my fieldwork generated but instead tried to understand and conceptualize it in itself. (Holbraad, 2008, 2006). It is here that I come to discuss the significance of the ontological turn and thereby bring out the significance of my work which took that *turn*, quite unknowingly.

Ontology has been understood as the ‘study of being’, concerned with the question of “what is”, and in understanding the nature of reality as it exists (Crotty, 1998, p. 10). Social science researches have always kept questions of ontology at bay or have turned the ontological questions of “What I can know about the world” into questions of epistemology “How I can know the World?” (Bertelsen, Bendixsen, 2016, p. 3). The methods of interpretivism, social constructionism, and the notion of culture has taken precedence over questions of ontology in sociology, anthropology and other related disciplines. In anthropology, ethnography too, which has been a study of the “other” or for that matter a study of *difference* or *alterity*, the culturalist approach based on explanation and interpretation of the world of the “other” has been the fundamental approach keeping aside any ontological questions (Holbraad, 2008). In such an approach the social constructivists, interpretivists, relativists, has understood the differences or alterity in context of different worldviews, different representations of the world, where the world/reality remains singular. Viveiros de Castros asks if it is ever possible to know the other or the “object” of our work. “Do we really know it or do we only see ourself in the mirror?” (Viveiros De Castros, 1998, p. 92). He argues, “Modernity started with it: with the massive conversion of ontological into epistemological questions – that is, questions of representation- a conversion prompted by the fact that every mode of being not assimilable to obdurate “matter” had to be swallowed by “thought” (Viveros De Castros, 1998, p. 92).

In the field of social sciences, meanings have gained prominence over things from which meanings are extracted by the researchers. According to Tim Ingold, “Understood as a realm of discourse, meaning, and value, culture is conceived to hover over the material world but not

to permeate it (Ingold, 2000, p. 340). In this sense then meanings seems to be distant from things themselves (Henare, Holbraad, Wastell, 2006, p. 3). Instead of a separation between things and meanings, discourse and reality, what is being proposed by an ontological turn, is to explore the possibility “that things might be treated as sui generis meanings” (Henare, Holbraad, Wastell, 2006, p. 3). Henare discusses how this methodology can allow the production of concepts and “make worlds” and in doing so abolish the “distinction between concept and things” (Henare, 2006) (Bertelsen, Bendixsen, 2016, p. 3).

In doing so, ontological approach opens us to our ethnographies, the things we encounter in our fieldworks, to act back on us. What is advocated is, rather than taking our concepts and theories as a way of explaining and interpreting our ethnography, ontological turn asks us to instead “rethink our analytical concepts” (Holbraad, 2008, p. 184). For example, Holbraad gives an example in the context of Nuer who thinks that twins are birds. In such a context, one would try to make sense of “twins are birds” by asking, why they think what they think instead of asking what is it that they think. For Holbraad, “The anthropological task, then, is not to account for why ethnographic data are as they are, but rather to understand what they are – instead of explanation or interpretation, what is called for is conceptualization... in order to arrive at a position from which the claim that twins are birds no longer registers as an absurdity. What must twins be, what must birds be, etc.?” (Holbraad, 2008, p. 184). Therefore, instead of thinking of ontology as an essence, I argue, ontology becomes a possibility from “how things are”, “how things should be” to finally coming to “how things could be” (Holbraad, Pedersen, Viveiros de Castros, 2014).

In my ethnographic fieldworks in *bayam samitis*, *vyayamaghars* and *akharas*, I came across different ideas that called for a *difference* from the usual common understanding in the sphere of gyms and workout regimes that currently permeates the city, Kolkata. In the present capitalist world overpowered by technological advancement, an idea of comfort and ease

permeates the exercise regimes. The coming up of multigyms has made exercise and “workout” comfortable with air conditioning setups, machine-based workout as opposed to mechanical, the new methods do not emphasize on thousands of *dand baithaks* but devises scientific regimes, the methods are flexible, there is no notion of *brahmacharya* or celibacy, the emphasis is on an idea of “fitness” with more emphasis on performance and the structure of the body that should be looking good. *Bayam* in the *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars* on the other hand speaks of a different world altogether. The notion of *bayam* as I encountered and understood was based on quite different ideas of *dom*, inner body, pain, that characterized the sphere of *bayam*. Rather than being machine-based, *bayam* emphasizes on the mechanical means of exercise regimes that focuses on *dands*, *baithaks*, ploughing of wrestling pit in *akharas*, and various other mechanical methods, the emphasis on *brahmacharya* or control of semen, absence of air conditioning, sometimes even fans, wooden benches as opposed to comfortable cushion benches that are found in gyms today. The emphasis is on pain, or *kosto kora*<sup>xix</sup> or *mehnat* (hardwork) as thousands of *baithaks* are significant as opposed to only limited numbers that are currently recommended as scientific in gyms or by gym goers. In the first glance it appeared as a distinct form because of it belonging to a past era and this idea of *bayam* has been categorized as either “traditional” or “backdated” as opposed to the current exercise regimes. However, instead of studying it or interpreting *bayam* or explaining it in relation to the present, I emphasized on understanding the *bayam* culture in itself as it is in the *bayam samitis*. “With purposeful naïveté, the aim of this method is to take “things” encountered in the field as they present themselves, rather than immediately assuming that they signify, represent, or stand for something else” (Henare, Holbraad, Wastell, 2006, p. 2). For example, rather than interpreting or explaining away why men practice thousands of *dand baithaks*<sup>xx</sup>, I began to ask what the thousands of *dand baithaks* do in *bayam*. I refrained from categorizing it as a culture of a past time or explaining it as “traditional” or trying to understand the *bayams* as a means

towards something else (health/fitness) in an effort to put it into our current framework in the production of meaning and thereby putting it into an epistemological approach. I instead began to understand the emphasis on these extensive *bayam* as ends in themselves, that thousands of *dands baithaks* is what *bayam* is about. I tried to conceptualize the notion of pain or *kosto kota* and *mehnat* that came up from my fieldwork as the basis of *bayam* and the cultivation of the body. In a similar way, the emphasis on “*bayam* from within” hinted at an inner body. Any idea of an essential ontological inner body is always avoided in social science research. Although my initial attempts were similar, I then began to conceptualize what their “inner body” does in *bayam*. What is this inner body or *bayam* from within? Is it possible to understand their emphasis on the inside? This helped me further conceptualize the notion of *dom* or breathing which once again came up from my fieldworks. I used it to conceptualize a possibility of an embodied ontology of an inner body that is produced through the exercise regimes and the embodiment of breath thereby trying to understand what the inner body is in the sphere of *bayam* and what *dom* is or does in *bayam*.

These notions of *dom*, inner body, and pain did not reduce my research into essentialism but instead opened me into understanding their *bayam* and helped me bring a change in my own understanding of how we should think of pain, body or breathing. The body in *bayam* then is not about the ontological essence but a realm of possibilities that open us into new understandings of *bayam*, body, masculinity. Although I don’t deny that my approach did not have a touch of epistemological approach but as I entered more and more into the fieldworks, I discovered my work to be taking on the ontological approach as it took on the ideas and things that emerged from the fieldworks.

## The Fieldwork

I have conducted my fieldwork over a span of three years in different *bayam samitis*, *vyayamaghars* and *akharas* in Kolkata before the pandemic pushed us into our homes. These places included Ghosh College of Physical Education, *Bajrang vyayamaghar*, *Triangular Park Bayam Samity*, *Kalighat Bayam Samity*, *Panchanam Bayam Samity*, *Simla Bayam Samity*, *Hathkhola Bayam Samity*, *Kiddirpore Mahabir Bayam Samity*, *Bagbazar Sarbojanin Puja Committee in the North Kolkata*, *Siyaram Akhara near Mallick Ghat flower market*, *Yoganath Puri Math akhara in Cotton Street*, *Kapil Deo Bayam Sangha*, *Arjun Vyayamshala*, *Monohar Aich gymnasium* and last but not the least *Gobor Goho's Akhara*. Each of these places have been existing since the early twentieth century and each have their own history and story to tell. My focus in these specific spaces and places as my 'field' have been for specific reasons. Firstly, I was interested in understanding the history of *bayam* culture in Bengal that began and gained prominence during the early twentieth century in these very places. My attempt was not only to understand its history but also its relation to the present amidst the growing gym culture. A history of masculinity in the context of India, I argue, was shaped by a history of *bayam* culture which I was interested in exploring and understanding. My attempt was not to merely do a comparison between two periods or document the change that has come over but to instead understand *bayam* and its relation to body, masculinity, health and pain, these aspects that have enriched my understanding during my fieldwork. Secondly, the places in itself were a significant aspect of my study. My focus was not only on *bayam* culture but also the culture that permeates the *bayam samitis* and *akharas* as particular places and spaces. I have tried to understand the relation between the culture of *bayam* and the places and spaces of *bayam*.

My interlocutors were men. The reason behind it is, firstly, that my emphasis has been to understand the relation between masculinity and men's body in the masculine spheres of *bayam*

practices and the construction of masculine subjectivity. It was aimed at interrogating the taken for granted nature of the relation between men and masculinity. My work was thereby also geared towards men as masculine or gendered beings<sup>xxi</sup> in the field of physical cultures. Secondly, my field of study were the *bayam samitis*, *vyayamaghars* and *akharas*, which are not only masculine spaces and places but also men's domain. *Bayam* and wrestling was initially for men and these places also continue to maintain it exclusively for men. Although there are women who were also part of places like *Hathkhola* and *Simla Bayam Samity*, they were only there for yoga classes while the gym, wrestling and *bayam* continues to be reserved for men. There were several places where women's entry was strictly prohibited making it evident how these were *male domains*.

My fieldwork consisted of visiting these places and spending time in them, observing the men in their regular everyday regimes and interacting with them. Sometimes I have conversed with one person and have heard about their life and their experiences, and sometimes it has been as a group interacting while they exercised. I also spent time in the gym rooms while the men worked out, hoping to catch up with the conversation that happens inside, sometimes participating in it and sometimes only being a listener. More than face to face interview, I have preferred conversations, talks and narratives as methods to know from my interlocutors. Michael Moerman discusses how *talks* are not merely what the natives say but he emphasizes upon the "organizational specificity of talks" (Moerman, 1988). According to Moerman, ". Whether observing a meeting, conducting an interview, or just sitting and chatting around the campfire, our primary data are things said as part of socially organized scenes. We collect the droppings of talk" (Moerman, 1988, p. 7-8). For an ethnographer then the data are the conversations and interactions that happens in the field, precisely what the native "talks" which forms the primary data. I used to mostly visit these places in the morning but there were some places I used to visit in the evening. For example, *Bajrang vyayamaghar* has been a place that

I have spent most of my time in alongside *Simla Bayam Samity*. While I visited *Simla Bayam Samity* in the morning, *Bajrang vyayamaghar*'s timing was mostly in the evenings and often in the afternoons. I have interviewed and spoken to around 62 people among which two were women. Apart from the *bayam samitis* I have visited Prem Sundar Das and Dibya Sundar Das<sup>xxii</sup> in order to learn about Yoga. It is not possible to pinpoint the number of men since there were many instances where I have interacted in a group or just observed and listened to men who weren't necessarily talking to me but talking among themselves while they performed their daily regimes. Thus, it was not necessarily the men who spoke to me directly that formed my data but instead entailed experiencing the "talks" that goes about in the *Samitis* and *akharas*. Apart from the narratives of men and their spoken words, what remained important is the immersion in the field, and my engagement with the place. This happened not only through my sense of sight or observation but also through listening and feeling the place. My research therefore also focuses on a method that takes in listening and emotions as significant methodological tools.

## Places of the *Akharas* and *Bayam Samitis*



### 2. *Gobor Goho's Akhara*

Wrestling in Bengal, in Kolkata cannot be understood without understanding one of the pioneering wrestlers from India and Bengal, Gobor Goho. However, when I began my fieldwork, Gobor Goho's wrestling *akhara* has already been closed and a multigym is only

operative in its place. In spite of it, Gobor Goho's presence in the wrestling and *bayam* tradition remains significant and thus I interacted with two of his direct disciples Biswanath Ghosh and Ramesh Gupta and further from them to their own disciples who practiced some year back. This was in effort to understand through their experience, story-telling and narratives Gobor Goho's *akhara* as lived by them. The current generation also spoke about the continuation of the tradition. Even though I didn't spend my time in the *akhara* itself, their narratives very well deported me to the *akhara* making me feel the place, the *akhara* and the mud. I also got one opportunity to visit the place. It is very evident from the picture above how the *akhara* has not been in use. The mud pit has dried up and has become hard unlike the wrestling mud pits which are powdery and smooth.



### 3. Siyaram Akhara

This picture is from my visits to *Siyaram Akhara*. The *akhara* is defined by the area, which brings together water (river Ganga), an open space, trees and temple, the quintessential features of a traditional *akhara*. One of the most popular places in Kolkata, this *akhara* is run by popular wrestler, Jwala Tiwari who is the *guru* here. Located near Mallick ghat<sup>xxiii</sup> and bara bazar area, most men are migrants from UP and Bihar. The young men here are mostly students and some are also into jobs. They spend their morning engaging into wrestling.



#### **4. Kapil Deo Bayam Sangha**

Just located on the other end of Howrah Bridge, on Strand bank road, this *akhara* known as *Kapil Deo Bayam Samity* was established in 1951. As opposed to *Siyaram akhara*'s open space, this is located inside a house structure making the place quite cramped and dark. Yet it has an open area just outside the *akhara* and ganga just beside it.



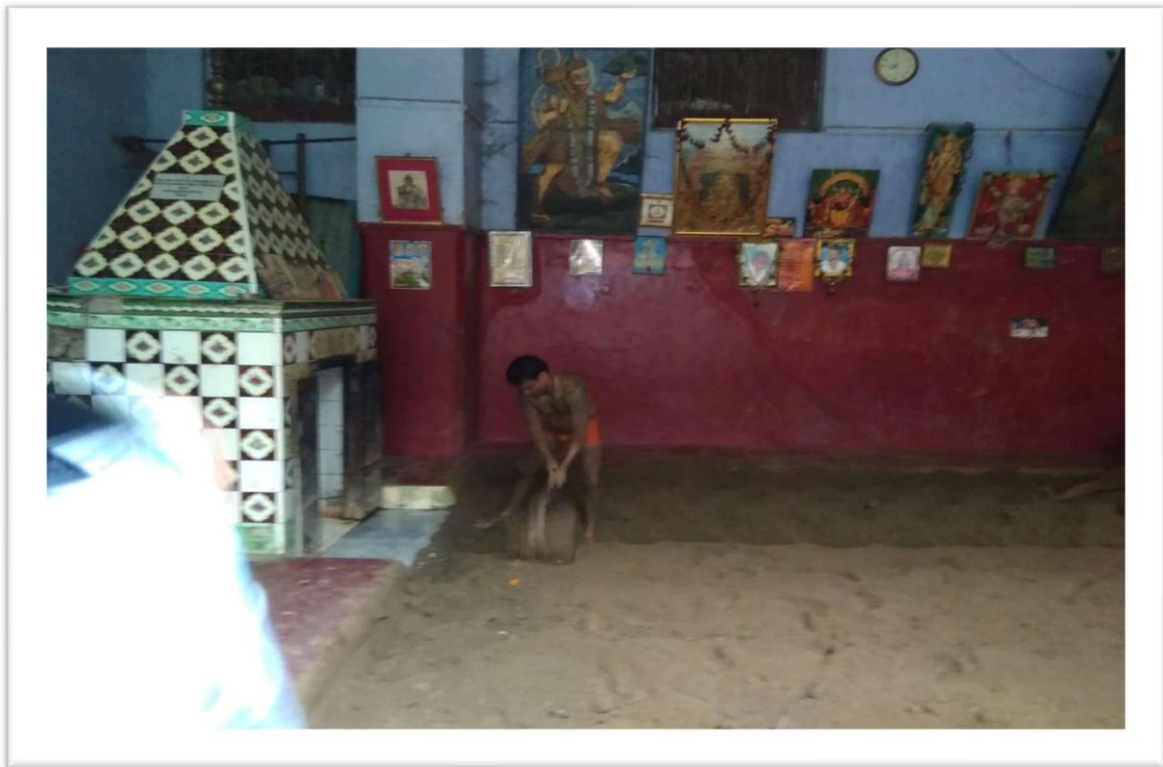
### 5. *Arjun Vyayamashala*

Located in a relatively small area, near *Tara Sundari park*<sup>xxiv</sup>, is *Arjun Vyayamashala*. Named after Arjun Singh a wrestler and Freedom Fighter, this *vyayamashala* or *akhara* was established in 1924. Wrestling happens in the evening and young boys, men and kids are trained by Hanuman Pehalwan who is the *guru* of the *akhara*. In the morning however, one can spot a wrestler lying in the mud pit while young men carry on exercise with weights for bodybuilding.



#### 6. Yoganath Puri Math Akhara, Cotton Street

*Yoganath Puri Math*<sup>xxv</sup> located at cotton street<sup>xxvi</sup> is the oldest *akhara* in Kolkata existing for over hundred years and is now run by a trust after which it is named now. Its sign of being the oldest one amidst the others is the presence of a well as one of my interlocutors told me. The picture captures the inner courtyard of *Yoganath puri math akhara*. Opposite to the well is the elevated area which consists of weight training and other equipment of *bayam*. The inner area towards the other end of the *akhara* as visible from the picture is where the *akhara* mud pit is surrounded by a wall full of pictures of Hindu Gods and Goddess and a small temple on the left side of the *akhara* mud pit.

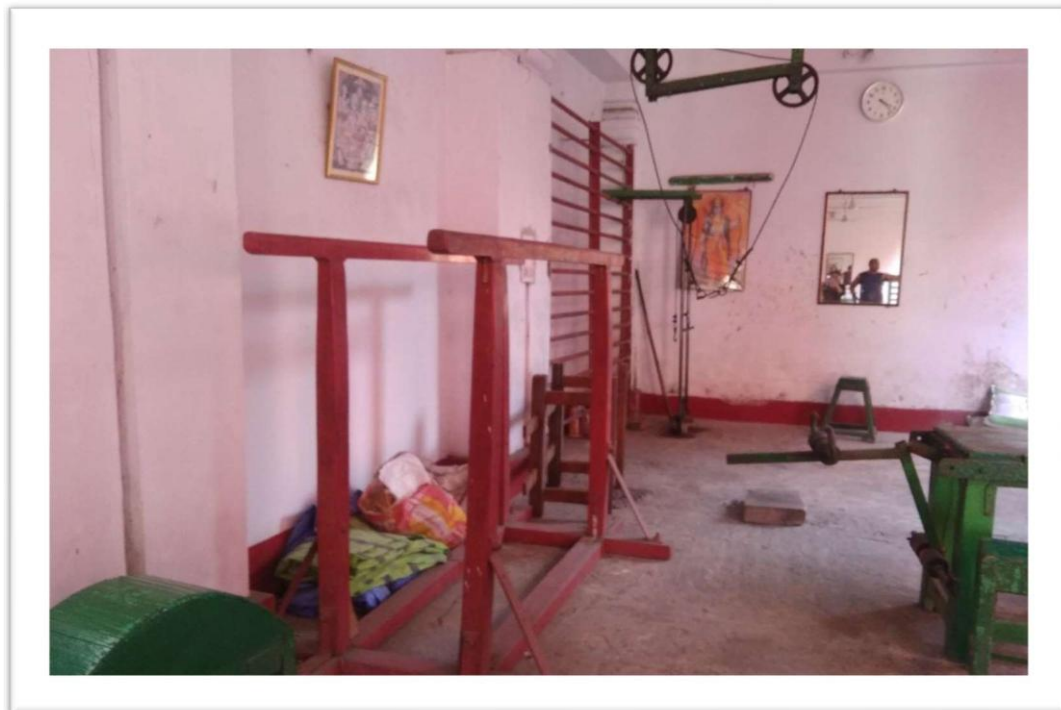


#### 7. Akhara Mud Pit at Cotton Street Akhara

Coming now to the *bayam samitis*, the picture below is of *Bajrang vyayamaghar*. The *vyayamaghar* was established in 1926. Located in a posh area of South Kolkata<sup>xxvii</sup> *Bajrang vyayamaghar* stands quietly amidst the growing gym culture in South Kolkata's neighborhoods. Formed in order to garner back manliness among Hindu men, it traces its history back to the colonial period. The colour of the *akhara* is also significant. It is dark red and it took me back to my very first ethnographic site, the Ghosh college of Physical education which also had a similar red structure. Housed in an old red brick structure, its one end has now become an ayurvedic centre and the other end houses a Hanuman Temple. Entering the *vyayamaghar* one finds oneself in the open courtyard which is mostly used for warm up exercises. It also had a wrestling mud pit back in the early twentieth Century. The structure of the building resembled the structure of old *akharas* having an open courtyard in between and surrounded by balcony and *uthon* (elevated space in a courtyard) and the building structure all

around that forms an important architectural design of old houses in Bengal. The *uthon* area which lies opposite to the gym room and entrance had different equipment from the colonial period which were used for *bayam*, for example benches of different shapes to carry out *bayams*. The gym room also includes instruments like dumbbells, barbells, pulleys that were almost years old passed on from the time the *vyayamaghar* was opened. The gym room also has the latest equipment from the multigym culture and thus became a strange amalgamation of the past and the present.

The picture below shows the *uthon* area with old equipment of *bayam* and the gym aroom or iron room.



**8. Bajrang Vyayamaghar Bayam Equipment**



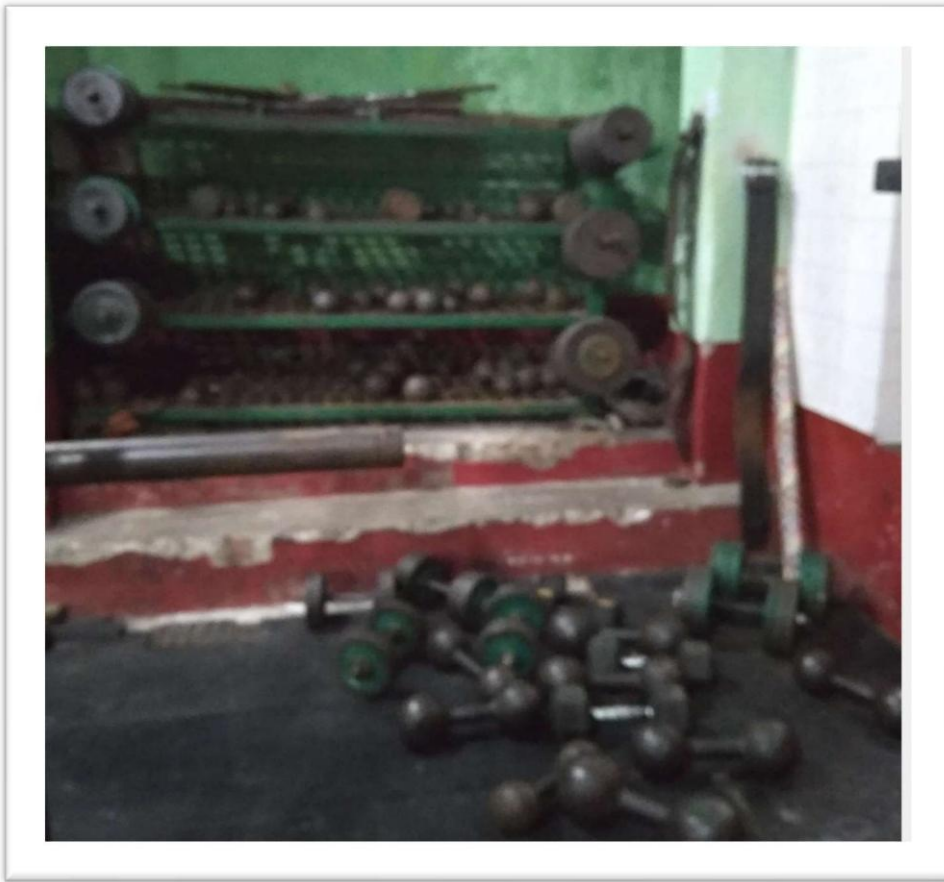
### **9. Bajrang Vyayamaghar Gym Room**

Similar to this *vyayamaghar* is *Hathkhola Bayam Samity* located in a narrow lane in Shovabazar<sup>xxviii</sup> it was established in 1910 and also houses some of the oldest equipment of the colonial period.



#### 10. Hathkhola Bayam Samity Entrance

The entrance of the *bayam* samity through these wall arts makes it very interesting. The wall art depicts *bayams*, yoga and other postures in *bayam* tradition. The *bayam* samity has mostly young members who not only practice *bayam* and weight training but also participates in state level competitions. The members here mostly come from the neighborhood around. There are several members who are coming here for fitness and some who are engaging in competitions. There are men who are professional bouncers. The *gurus* of the *akharas* give honorary services. They are dedicated and strict as they never do this as a profession. The *bayam* samity also has a small courtyard that leads to the gym room. One can already sense the place through the sounds of irons clinging to one another as men practice weight training. This *bayam samity* houses several equipment dating back to colonial period. The picture below shows a shelf containing these.



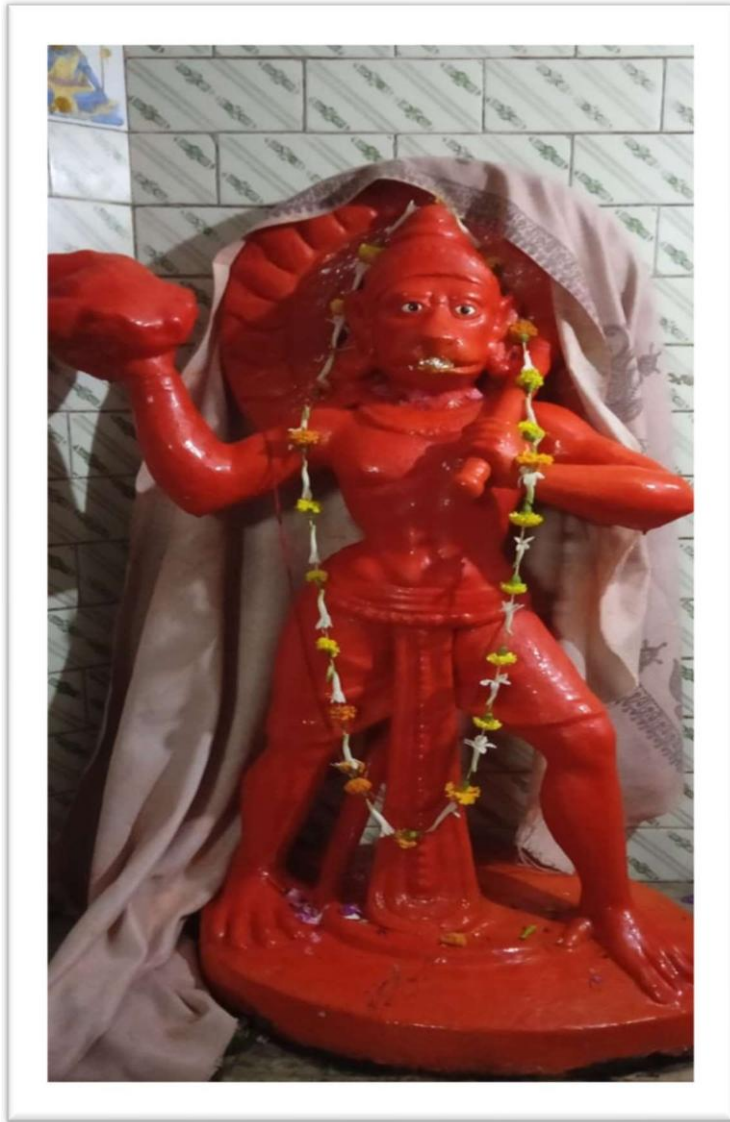
**11. Hathkhola Bayam Samity's bayam equipment from colonial period**

*Simla Bayam Samity* is located in north Kolkata, near Girish Park Metro station<sup>xxix</sup>. Established as early as 1924, its main emphasis for formation was to fight against the colonizer and therefore became a ground to train youths into different forms of physical cultures to garner strength. Now it exists carrying forth its tradition yet the *akhara* and other structures are no longer present. The *samity* now has a gym room containing both old and new equipment of *bayam*.



#### ***12. Simla Bayam Samity Bayam Room***

The members are mostly from the neighborhood. What is significant is the continued presence of the Hanuman idol that was established during the establishment of the place back in 1924. The Hanuman idol is regularly worshiped but mainly a puja is organized during Ram Navami which marks the establishment of the place.



### **13. Hanuman Idol of Simla Bayam Samity**

*Kidderpore Mahabir Bayam Samity* is located near Andaman dock of Khidderpore. Known popularly as *Akra mandir*, this *bayam samity* is one of the oldest in Kolkata established inside the temple premise of *Dakshina Kali* on 1900 in order to train men for the fight for independence. Apart from the *Dakshina Kali* temple, the place houses a Hanuman temple, *Shiva* and *Shitala* temple. One end of the *bayam samity* has an unused *akhara* mudpit that has been kept protected as a heritage site and the other end has a *bayam* room having the old colonial period set up.



**14. Kidderpore Mahavir Bayam Samity Bayam Room**



Kalighat *Bayam* Samity, established on 1931 also have a similar structure of *bayam* room.



#### 15. Kalighat *Bayam* Samity

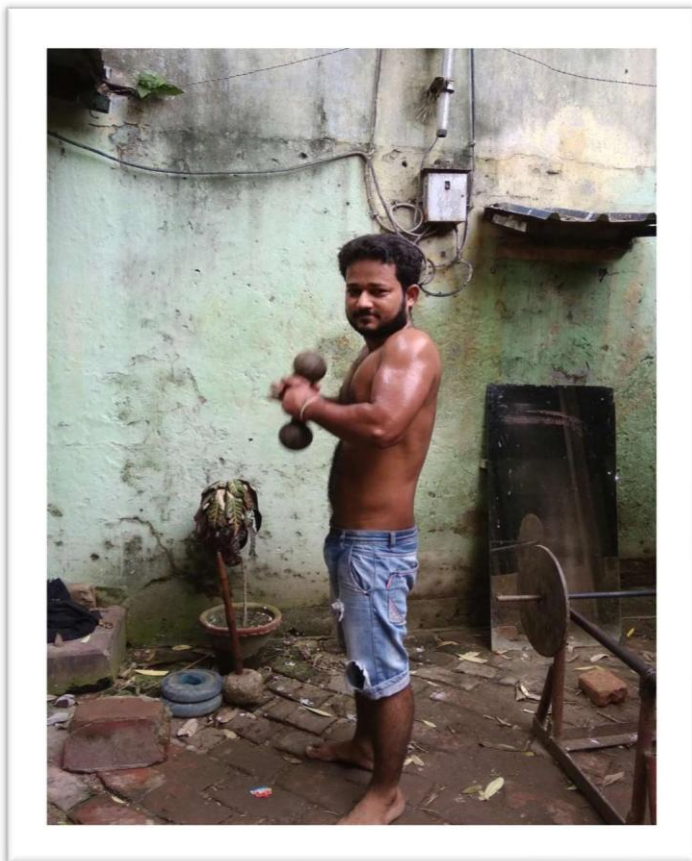
Apart from these, I have also visited *Triangular Park Bayam Samity* which is located in South Kolkata and date back to a long time. My visit to Bagbazar<sup>xxx</sup> also happened but not in the *bayam* samity, instead in the puja community in order to explore about its history in *bayam* culture, *Durga Puja* and *Birasthami*<sup>xxxi</sup>. *Panchanan Bayam Samity*, located near Shobha Bazar, is another popular wrestling *akhara* and the one which has moved into a mat based *akhara*. I have also visited Manohar Aich's<sup>xxxii</sup> gym located near *Baguihati*<sup>xxxiii</sup>, Kolkata. Ghosh College of Physical Education is one of the oldest places which is known for Bishnu Charan Ghosh<sup>xxxiv</sup> who was not only a bodybuilder but one who often combined bodybuilding, yoga through breath control. Although now bodybuilding is no longer practiced, his daughter, Muktamala Mitra has continued the tradition of physical culture by turning the place into a Yoga institute.

## **The Men of the *Bayam Samitis* and *Akharas***

In these *bayam samitis*, *akharas* and *vyayamaghars*, the members were men who belonged to different age groups ranging from young kids, young men to middle aged men and elderly seventy years old. There are the senior members who are in the age group of sixty or above. They are those who have been associated with the *vyayamaghar* and *akharas* since a very long time. There comes those who are between thirty to fifty years. They are those who have been able to sustain themselves in this *bayam* culture. At the end comes the young ones in teens and 20s, who are newly joined. It is this young lot that worries the senior members as they are unable to carry forth for a long time and have to be disciplined strictly into the *bayam* tradition. The generation gap between the young men and the older generation is evident from the discussions and conversations I had with them. There has been a fundamental distinction between how the old generation understands *bayam* and how the young one does. This makes the *bayam samitis* and *akharas* witness a lot of conflicts of thoughts happening between the experienced elderly men in opposition to the young and vibrant ones. It is this distinction that also forms a distinguishing feature of *bayam samitis* from the gym culture.

Complaining about the lesser involvement of the young men in the *vyayamaghar* these days the chairperson of *Bajrang vyayamaghar* says, “Yes they (young men) would just come and do exercise for a few minutes. I know that this club might get closed in the future. You know why? Because see this is not a gym. This is an *akhara*. Now everyone is going to a gym. They will go to a gym, pull something huge and they will develop the body. This concept itself is wrong... You have to go ahead step by step”. This step by step method is central to understanding *bayam* and its places, that of *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars* and has been emphasized by most seniors here. *Bayam* in this *vyayamaghar* and several others has been about persistence and discipline. A similar point comes up in *Arjun Vyayamahala* when the

elderly wrestler says, “Pehle wala baat abhi nahin reh gaya hain. Abhi sab ladka log body shody banata hain” (The old charm is lost. Now young men only focus on body structure) pointing to the young men who were lifting dumbbells, barbells and exercising. The young men who were present there were building their body. Sreeram Kumar, who posed for a photo given below, told me he has been here for 6 months. He does a *naukri* (job) and comes here in the morning to build his body. Several men in the *bayam samitis* disclosed their interest in body cultivation or *bayam* by referring to their past experiences of being weak, meek and submissive. Lee Monaghan argues how bodybuilding has provided men with an avenue to redress their feelings of “powerlessness through the pursuit of a culturally valorised mesomorphic image satisfying hegemonic masculinity” (Monaghan, 2001, p. 8).



This also comes up in *Simla Bayam Samity* while having conversation with a young man who does a job in marketing and finance and also comes to the gym for “fitness”. According to one

young man in his 20s, “We have to go ahead with time. If you now keep a *mugur* and some iron dumbbells no one will turn up. If we only keep a mud *akhara* here and say only kusti will happen, you will find only 10 people are coming. But since we have a gym, 250-300 people come”. According to another man in his 30s, the meaning of *bayam* has also changed today as according to him “Fitness er byapar er cheye akhon gothon er byapar chole esheche (More than fitness, it is about the body structure now)”. Earlier for him, people were concerned about health but now it’s about looking good mirroring what Lee Monaghan has argued (Monaghan, 2001).

The men in these *bayam samitis*, *akharas* and *vyayamaghars* come from mostly middle class, and lower middle-class families and also belong to different caste groups. However, none of these places have I ever come across people from other religions, especially Muslims. These are mostly Hindu places that continue with the tradition of being a place for the revival of masculinity among Hindu men. The mud pit *akharas* mostly see men from UP and Bihar. These *akharas* were also established by men who migrated from UP and Bihar regions, who have settled and have opened these *akharas*. The *bayam samitis* on the other hand have Hindu Bengali members mostly. Speaking to one member of the *vyayamaghar* who is part of the admission committee, he narrates about their choice of admission.

“I take people who are studying, who are educated, or are into jobs. Apart from these I do not want to take admissions. The rest of them are senior members. You may ask about the poor people who are not getting educated, but they will spoil the environment here. If four such people join here, I have seen how they have started drinking alcohol during *Kali Puja*. Now here we have a temple (Hanuman Temple) and many people come here. You know the environment will be spoiled”.

It is significant how he gives reason for the exclusion of “poor” boys. It is unclear who are meant by “poor” boys and if it also extends to caste and religious identity. Poor here can be subsumed under the minority category. It also reflects upon how the minorities are associated with activities like drinking that will spoil the purity of the *akhara* and the temple beside. The notion of purity associated with a temple and also the figure of Hanuman and the disciplinary purity of *bayam* tradition as means to create ‘pure’ and healthy bodies together creates this environment from which the supposed ‘impurities’ or ‘pollutions’ can be sidelined like women and poor people. In another *bayam* samity, the exclusion of Muslim men becomes significant. Carrying forth the tradition of the *bayam samitis* which were precisely formed for Hindu men, they continue to strictly maintain it for the Hindus. Although it is not overtly expressed, a careful manner of selecting and thereby excluding people takes place in them. As a gym instructor of a *bayam* samity in North Kolkata said, “Muslims are still not allowed today”. He emphasized how the selection procedure excludes people who are identified as Muslims where the identity markers are usually the places they come from or from their appearances. *Akharas* and *bayam samitis* are also exclusively a space for men where women are not allowed and thus my place in them was often called into question.

### **Uncomfortableness and Unease as a Methodological Tool**

“Fieldworkers, it seems, learn to move among strangers-while holding themselves in readiness for episodes of embarrassment, affection, misfortune, partial or vague revelation, deceit, confusion, isolation, warmth, adventure, fear, concealment, pleasure, surprise, insult, and always possible deportation” (Maanen, 2011, p. 1). Fieldwork then comprises all these various feelings, emotions, and experiences that together constitute fieldwork. However, Maanen argues that this is how fieldwork is done, not necessarily how it is “reported” (Maanen, 2011, p. 2). This distinction is crucial because it takes into account how the experiences of fieldwork

do not come up in our writings. My thesis argues for a bringing in of these “emotions in the field” (Davies, 2010) into our writing, into our understanding of the other and also ourselves.

In the *akhara* in cotton street, women are strictly prohibited, although there wasn't any board that mentions it. I and my interlocutor, who accompanied me, were welcomed warmly but the *guru* also made it clear that we need to leave the premises as soon as possible. He denied any interview and instead asked us to refer to a paper cutting in the wall which had a previous interview. While the wrestlers inside were excited to be able to show their stunts and wrestling, the *guru* made sure I leave the *akhara* soon. Later I came to know how even though we were welcomed, women were strictly prohibited in the place.

One of my methodological hurdles was my identity as a woman researcher in the field of men, masculinity and *bayam*. I was an ‘outsider’ to the field yet not completely as other aspects of my identity also made me an ‘insider’ in different contexts. No one can be ever regarded as a complete ‘insider’ neither can one be understood as a complete ‘outsider’. Kirin Narayan argues, how the basis on which we either become an insider or an outside are always multiple and contextual, never fixed. Thereby the different factors that shape our identities may at different contexts “outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider or outsider status” (Narayan, 1993, p. 671-672)

I therefore began this chapter on my experience in the *vyayamashala* and *akharas*. Similar to my experience in *Arjun Vyayamashala*, my position in these places were always in tension. I was sometimes not allowed inside, like my experience in *Triangular Park Bayam Samity*, and sometimes I was literally admonished in a *vyayamaghar* for coming in during the *bayam* hours to disturb men engaging peacefully into *bayam*. However, although these became a hurdle and a difficulty for me, it also gave way to newer understandings. My position of discomfort I felt

could become a tool in itself into understanding these spaces and places of the *akharas* and *vyayamaghars*.

What does one's feeling of unease tell us about the spaces one is inhabiting? Why do we feel comfortable in certain spaces while uncomfortable in others? In research what place does these feelings of unease have in understanding one's place in one's ethnographic field or setting? Ruth Behar argues how throughout the twentieth century in every field of knowledge and research, "distance, objectivity and abstractions" have been emphasized. "The worst sin was to be "too personal"" (Behar, 1997, p. 12-13).

Feelings and emotions have been sidelined as subjective in order to uphold objectivity in research. So far in the history of research, there has been a "neglect of subjectivity", where the 'scientific' method of objectivity has been prioritized as opposed to a holistic understanding stemming from one's subjectivity, intuitions and emotions (Davies, 2010) (Spencer, 2010). Shore discusses the collective 'silence' around ethnographer's fieldwork experience when fieldwork according to her is an "emotional encounter" (Shore, 1999, p. 28). This has now come under heavy criticisms because rationality and notions of objectivity has downplayed the significance of emotions and feelings, the 'subjective' in research. Saraswati Haider discusses, how a forced emphasis has been given on objectivity in order to emulate natural sciences, in order to value "reason and rationality" over "emotion and affectivity". However, this forced attempt to create objectivity is none the less a subjective decision. According to her a researcher ends up creating "objectivity subjectively." (Haider, 1998, p. 220). This celebration and emphasis of objectivity and reason makes a masculine approach to research. Judy Wajcman discusses the over emphasis of reason and objectivity in natural sciences over the subjectivity and what she calls the feminine intuition (Wajcman, 1991). In presenting a critique to science and technology, she points towards the masculine underpinning of scientific method and knowledge that emerged out of the scientific revolution which were based on the "masculine

projects of reason and objectivity” (Wajcman, 1991, p. 5). This masculine approach has also entered social science research through its taking up of the natural science method as its own.

Initially while objectivity was highly emphasized, scholars like Srinivas brought in subjectivity but not in a welcoming manner but as a condition that cannot be avoided. In the context of anthropology he considered subjectivity as not something that has to be “deplored” but to “accept” it as a “condition of work” (Srinivas, 1989, p. 170). This stance of “acceptance” saw subjectivity as a presence that could not be avoided and so accepted merely as a condition and not actively as a method in itself. In a similar line of thought Geertz understands anthropology as “person-specific” yet not “personal” as Ruth Behar notes (Behar, 1997, p. 8). This separation of person-specific acknowledges how fieldworks differ across ethnographers but also this acceptance of some specificity of the ethnographer is not conflated with being “personal”. This detachment speaks of Geertz’s hesitance in accepting the personal or subjective dimension of fieldwork even though he speaks about specificity of ethnographers and their practices. As Ruth Behar notes, “Geertz insists it is inappropriate to interiorize too much “what is in fact an intensely public activity”” (Behar, 1997, p. 8) (Geertz, 1989, p. 5-6). As opposed to such an understanding today, subjectivity, emotions and feelings are not just accepted but are actively engaged into.

Ruth Behar brings in the “vulnerability” of the observer and argues through Devereux (1967), “What happens within the observer must be made known, Devereux insisted, if the nature of what has been observed is to be understood” (Behar, 1997, p. 6). This emphasis on subjectivity and vulnerability of the ethnographer brings in the “personal” in the method of the ethnographer. James Davies in *The Emotions in the field: The Psychology and Anthropological of Fieldwork* (2010) discusses the reflexive turn and how it has brought in the significance of the ethnographer’s position in terms of her identity, ethnicity and gender and how that influences and affects how one understands and writes about the field (Davies, 2010, p. 1).

However, according to Davies it did not take into account the “state of being” of the researcher and how these may “enable or inhibit the understanding that fieldwork aims to generate” (Davies, 2010, p. 1). By “state of being” Davies emphasizes on emotions and feelings that one experiences in fieldwork and what would it mean to be included in our understanding of the field. He writes, “Our objective is to show how certain emotions, reactions, and experiences that are consistently evoked in fieldworkers, when treated with the same intellectual vigour as our empirical work demands, can more assist than impede our understanding of the lifeworlds in which we set ourselves down” (Davies, 2010, p. 1). Spencer argues how there has been now efforts among anthropologists and ethnographers to “produce systematic analyses of how our behaviours, thoughts, being, feelings, memories, fantasies and imaginations or states of being, may affect the collection, analysis, writing up and sharing of anthropological data” (Spencer, 2010, p.7-8) (Luhmann, 2010) (Jackson, 2010). Spencer discusses how our “live relationships” whether in our personal spheres or our field site, all together shapes how we understand our fields (Spencer, 2010, p. 10). Fieldwork is about an immersion in the field and this immersion calls for understanding the lived experience of fieldwork. But what does this “lived” relationship and also experience consist of? Is it only what one observes or what goes on in the field? When we use the term experience, we not only mean the observations we make and the happenings in the field that is witnessed by us but also what it makes us think, feel and understand. Davies argues how emotions can be regarded as only one aspect of our experience in the field and each time we make a distinction between what we experience emotionally and what we experience rationally, what we think and what we feel and how we act, we do wrong to our lived experience which is more complex than these easy separations (Davies, 2010, p. 25). Experience or rather lived experience then is not only about thinking and observing but is inclusive of the emotions and senses, the ‘personal’. Louise Braddock, argues, “experiencing an emotion does more than orient the subject to the way the social world bears on his interests;

it also orients him to the experience of other persons in that world and to their own sense of self as a subject” (Braddock, 2010, p. 209). Spencer thus says, “we explore emotions in terms of how we might develop an understanding, a sense of the people and the field and learn through them” (Spencer, 2010, p. 16).

My emotions and feelings made it evident that the space and place of these *vyayamaghars*, *bayam samitis*, and *akharas* are masculine *domains*. Their strength lies in their detachment from women or anything feminine. My place in these spaces therefore did not become a hurdle but in turned helped me to understand the tension and vulnerability of the spaces that are construed through feminine exclusion to uphold the masculine.

### **Soundscape and the Powers of Listening**

Listening has been an important part of my methodology alongside observation which has always been significant and dominant in ethnography. As I listened to one of my audio recordings of an *akhara* visit, I could hear long minutes of silence. This silence I argue is not really silent but speaks of many ongoing things that the audio captures yet which is often sidelined as no conversations arise. The audio became an ethnographic tool like my eyes in case of observation and I realized observation was not so much about what the eyes could see but how we experience a setting with all our senses. Observations, interviews have always been a part of the ethnographic tools where through conversations and observations one would delve into the realms. To start with, using the sound of a space and place as an ethnographic tool to understand about the place or space was intriguing.

Listening has remained sidelined or least important when it comes to ethnography whose dominant understanding is made through participant observation. (Forsey, 2010). Fabian points towards a cultural bias that one has towards upholding sense of sight as opposed to sense of sound or smell or taste and how the very basis of understanding a culture was equated in

terms of visualizing it (Fabian, 1983). Michael Bull and Les Back in their work on *The Auditory Culture Reader* (2003) discusses this dominance of visual sense over other senses of touch, smell, listening and others (Bull, Back, 2003) (Forsey, 2010, p. 562). Following Fabian, Forsey argues how in ethnography listening is more significant than observing and thus she emphasizes on the ethnographer being “more participant listener than observer” (Forsey, 2010, p. 561). Forsey therefore, emphasizes on “engaged listening” in ethnography (Forsey, 2010, p. 569). However, I argue we do not just listen to people but listen to various sounds that envelop our field. Thus, listening should not only focus on what is being spoken off but also what is left unsaid, murmured, as well as what silence could say. Listening should also encompass the wide range of noises, sounds that together constitute, as I argue, the soundscape of a place.

Charles Hirschkind in his book on *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette, Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* discusses the relation between listening, modernity and enlightenment. According to him, modernity produces a shift from the “dominance of ears to dominance of eyes” which calls for a “superiority of vision over hearing” (Hirschkind, 2006, p. 13). According to him, listening means an immersion in the sound, a form of “engulfment” that was seen as threatening to the “masculine independence” that was demanded (Hirschkind, 2006, p. 13). This submission or immersion into the field through listening brings it into the domain of subjective and thus the objective distance between the observer and the observed that the upholders of objectivity emphasize upon is collapsed. This undermines “masculine spectatorial consciousness” where Hirschkind reads this dominance of one sense, that of eyes/sight as the “masculine” dominance over the “feminine” or subjective notion of listening or immersion into the field (Hirschkind 2006). Hirschkind further discusses how listening was reduced to an act of “passivity” which was only perceived through the notion of “receptivity”, “an act of self-subordination to the other kind” (Hirschkind, 2006, p. 13). In a similar line of thought Veit Erlmann questions modernity’s relation or importance to the sense of sight and brings in the

significance of an “ethnographic ear” and senses in the domain of ethnography (Erlmann, 2004). According to Erlmann, a focus on sense might help us into opening up possibilities in the methodological realms and issues (Erlmann, 2004, p. 2). A return of the significance of the ‘ear’ or listening and sound as against the hegemony of vision or eyes is to open us into newer forms of understanding. According to Erlmann, *Hearing culture* suggests that it is possible to conceptualize new ways of knowing a culture and of gaining a deepened understanding of how the members of a society know each other (Erlmann, 2004, p. 3).

When I embarked on my ethnography, like all ethnographers my recorder played a significant role. Jessica Chandra argues, “If ethnography is both a method anthropologists use and the product of our work, then sound/noise is an important element of giving any audience a sense of the places we write about. Yet, while we experience sounds profoundly while collecting data, audio records are often secondary or absent entirely from the products of our research” (Chandras, June 18, 2018). Recorders I realized not only recorded the conversations one had in their field visits but one that also captures the non-essential sounds, conversations and environment through its sounds. It basically captures the soundscape of a place. For example, while having a conversation with one of my interlocutors, in between our talk, I could hear the background sounds that would envelop the place. Earlier this would have meant for me background noises, sometimes relegated as disturbances, which needed to be curbed in order to focus solely on the voice of the speaker/interlocutor. Speech becomes important, what is said by the interlocutor becomes important from the usual everyday noises that the place generates. However, departing from this understanding, the background noises I argue can become a means to understand the places in their totality, in their soundscapes.

One of the sounds that could be found in different *bayam samitis* and *akharas* was that of the temple bell<sup>xxxv</sup>. The ringing of these bells or the sounds of these bells resonated throughout the *bayam samitis* and *akharas* and gave a religious and devotional feel to the places. It also made

me and anyone aware of the temples when one would hear the conversations of the wrestlers or body builders. An immediate connection to the relation between *bayam*, wrestling, devotion and worship stems up from the mere background sounds of the places.

In my field visits, a recorder was used to also capture the moments in the *bayam samitis* when no conversations were taking place. If not through recorder, through my ethnographic ear as well, I tried to immerse myself and understand the places through the sounds that were generated. Just like nothing surpasses the observer's eyes, nothing surpasses my ears. I pick up one snippet of my field notes and my recollection through a recording of a visit to a *vyayamaghar* one evening.

*I reached Bajrang Vyayamaghar one evening and as I entered the sounds of transportation faded away and I could feel the serenity of quietness that has engulfed the place. It was a winter evening and as such there were very few people in the vyayamaghar making the place ever so quiet and peaceful. I took my place in one of the benches I used to sit, in the uthon (elevated) area of the vyayamaghar. The gym room perhaps had one or two men. I waited for one of my interlocutors to arrive and observed and felt the place in its serenity. I could hear the Hanuman temple adjacent to the vyayamaghar play a Ram bhakti song, and the frequent ringing of the temple bell as new devotees came into the temple. Getting close to the gym room, I got to hear the sound of men's heavy breathing alongside the clinging and thumping sounds of iron as men picked them, exercised and kept them back.*

Silence and quietness are an important part of *vyayamaghars* and *bayam samitis*. According to interlocutors, *bayam* or exercise, demands a quiet environment. Yet the scenario in the *akharas*, *bayam samitis* have not been the same. The sound that envelops Simla Bayam Samity's gym room are songs of current Hindi films with heavy music while the men engage into *bayam*. According to the instructor, the men get energy from the songs to perform in the gyms and this

has now become a feature of gyms all across. However, this is not just a feature of gyms but a feature I also came across in the traditional mud pit *akharas* as well. As I listened to my recording from my visit to *Siyaram akhara* I could hear songs being played, songs that sounded close to Bihari or Bhojpuri. These songs also came up in *Arjun Vyayamashala* in which young men were engaging into *bayam*. An elderly wrestler told us, “Abhi sab body banate hain” [Now young men only build body (body structure)] with disappointment looking at the men while the men continued picking up weights and building their bodies alongside the rhythms of the songs.

Yet silence remains integral to *bayam* as Manik da explains. One evening while I was witnessing him doing yoga, I heard a few men near the gym room laughing and talking amongst each other. Manik da, unable to bear the disturbances, shouted at them to stop talking loudly. He turned towards me and then said, “*bayam* needed calm and quietness but men won’t understand this”. *Bajrang vyayamaghar* has been the quietest place amidst all others owing to less members and also the strictness of the *gurus* perhaps.

This silence is often broken through the cries of men while they are picking heavy weights. The *bayam samitis* and *akhara*’s soundscape is defined by the sounds of men and their masculine cries and heavy breathing creating a masculine environment through their masculine grunts. I argue that these two things, the loud grunts of the men while picking the weights and the heavy breathing, are not just mere sounds but are defining features of the *bayam samitis* and *akharas*. The heavy breathing and the painful grunts of men bring both the question of breath and pain together in the context of *bayam* which also remains two integral aspects of my research that I elaborate in my subsequent chapters. The reason why sounds remain integral than the acts of lifting weights or exercising that causes these sounds which are observable is significant.

Pain cannot be seen or observed and neither can pain be communicated easily to the other through the narratives of men. This became increasingly clear as I started working on pain in *bayam* and the difficulty it generated in ‘ethnography-ing’ pain. However, it was one evening in one *vyayamaghar* that a painful cry jolted me. A man lifting a weight kept emitting heavy, masculine and powerful grunts. The inherent difficulty in understanding the place of pain in research was mediated through these sounds and expressions that brought the painful regime in front of me, through the sounds. The intensity of one’s efforts, the expression of pain and the significance of breath comes up through the sounds. Similar to pain, breathing has an absent presence. Although breathing is what we do all the time, especially in *bayam* breathing gains its increased significance. However, even in *bayam* breathing cannot be observed as such but breathing came up in my research through the sounds of breath that envelops the places. It is this working through the sounds that is understood as the “ethnographic ear” or the “hearing cultures” (Erlmann, 2004). Listening and understanding sound was also about understanding the cultures of the *bayam samitis* and *akharas*. Listening here is not a passive act nor a mere act of self-immersion. It becomes an ethnographic tool, the ear, which undermines the dominance of the “eye” and the act of observation in ethnographic works. Although it is not possible to separate and categorize our senses one from the other (Bull and Back, 2003), it is also equally important to distinguish them in order to understand how each of these senses are understood and how they impact research (Forsey, 2010, p. 563).

The knowledge we gather in the field from our fieldwork is not detached from the fieldwork method that we follow. What the ‘field’ generates or gives us is essentially tied to how we make sense of the field. Opening oneself to the field, opening one’s senses and emotions, thoughts and reflections together constitutes our experience which further translates into knowledge or ‘data’ about the field. Thus, my ethnographic endeavor has tried to bring in observations, narratives, listening, feeling and experiencing the field in order to understand

*bayam*, body (men) and masculinity. These various ways of looking into the ‘field’, I argue, has opened me to deeper understanding.

## Chapter 4: The Rhetoric of Effeminacy: *Bayam Samitis* and Embodied Nationalism

This chapter seeks to understand the place of the male body within the discourse of colonialism and nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal, India. The gendered dimensions of effeminacy and masculinity, I argue, were crucial to the politics of colonialism as well as nationalism. It was a period when different forms of reformations were directed towards traditions, social customs and towards the reformation of native men and women. During this period bodies became the site where ideologies and notions of purity, pollution, nation, health, discipline came together to redefine the body. Both men and women's bodies were undergoing control. While the female body became the carrier of the nation's culture, the male body was disciplined to embody "national integrity and strength" (Alter, 2011, p. 22). This idea of reformation to some extent was shaped by an idea of a 'revival' of masculinity through various forms of physical cultures amidst Indians, especially the supposedly "effeminate" Bengali men as a way of negating their supposed effeminacy that the colonizers defined the men to be (Sinha, 1995). According to Ashish Nandy, "*klivatva*" or "femininity-in-masculinity" became "a pathology more dangerous than femininity itself" (Nandy 1989, p. 8). Effeminacy and masculinity became rhetoric of the time leading to the emergence of the "effeminate Bengali" and the "manly Englishman" (Sinha, 1995). There was a simultaneous rise in a significant section of the people engaging into *shorir charcha*<sup>xxxvi</sup> or *bayam charcha* (cultivation of the body through physical exercise) during the colonial period.

Thus, this chapter is an attempt to understand this historical period with its centrality on body and masculinity. It will use both historical scholarship and ethnography in *bayam Samitis*, *vyayamaghars*, and *akharas* of Kolkata, formed during the colonial period, to bring in historical accounts from the narratives, memories, story-telling, pictures and the places in themselves.

The focus on ethnography of the *bayam samitis* and *akharas* is in effort to explore their histories through their present in terms of how they are remembered, how the past informs their present and how the past is made sense of from the present. This coming together of the historical scholarship on one hand and a method of the present, ethnography, on the other, I argue will be crucial in bringing in an enriching method of understanding the *past* and the *present*. This chapter will further engage into understanding how the narratives of masculinity and gender were reflected in the domains of religion and festivals. The worship of *Durga* or *Kali*, as part of *shakti* worship, continues to be part of these *bayam samitis* since their inception. In delving into the past and present of these festivals, a relation to *bayam*, nationalism, *shakti* and masculinity will be made.

The first half of the chapter will engage in understanding the *bayam samitis* and their histories, the other half will focus on engaging on the questions of masculinity and the emergence of the ‘national’ (Hindu-Male) body. In order to understand the notion of masculinity that became central to the time, an understanding of effeminacy I will argue will remain significant. The question of effeminacy as a negative aspect or a ‘failure’ in masculinity was a narrative used not only to describe but also de-legitimize the natives (colonized) and their power (Krishnaswamy, 1998). Thus, effeminacy was not merely a description or a way of being but a politicized tool used by the colonizers against the colonized. In the same light I argue *brahmacharya* and *bayam* became political (Abbott, 2001) through which the colonized countered the colonizer’s narrative of effeminacy in an attempt to bring back its ‘lost’ masculinity. This battle was entirely grounded on the *body* especially the male body. In reforming and redefining the male body, the colonized, I argue, did not necessarily move away from the colonizer’s definition but in turn reinforced it. However, I would argue how an alternative idea of body did emerge countering the colonizers, and this body was embodied by Gandhi.

## **History of Masculinity and Bengal's Effeminacy**

Dudink and Hagemann's book on *Masculinities in Politics and War* reflects upon gender's non-historical perspective where notions of masculinity and femininity are conceived as outside history and therefore outside any idea of change (Dudink, Hagemann, 2004, p.78). This denial of a historical perspective to gender seemed to be a politics to keep gender outside of history in order to keep it outside of change, to give it a certain fixity, naturalness and stability. However, as Connell have argued that no one "pattern" of masculinity can be said to be present everywhere but that it differs across time, culture and history (Connell, 2001, p. 16). According to Mrinalini Sinha, the current scholarships have tended to "denaturalize the history of men and masculinities" (Sinha, 1999, p. 446). She emphasizes upon the "potential" such an approach can have in "contextualizing masculinities" and thereby rendering masculinity as "constituted by" and "constitutive of" "social relations". Sinha looks into masculinity as crucial to historical analysis and argues how the relative focus on women in understanding the gendered dimensions of colonialism and nationalism has also rendered visible a history of masculinity in colonial India (Sinha, 1999, p. 446). This question of visibility and thereby invisibility has been the focus of Michael Kimmel's scholarly work on the 'invisibility of masculinity' (Kimmel, 2005). This invisibility that Kimmel speaks about is crucial to understand the power of invisibility, and thereby the power of masculinity, which I argue, is an act of power. Invisibility is not the absence of something, rather the hidden presence of it. It is this hidden presence, of being present yet absent from view, that holds and upholds power. Thus, from the familiar understanding of invisibility as marginalized in cases of women, masculinity's invisibility can be seen through the lens of power. Analyzing American history, Kimmel argues, that one cannot understand masculinity without understanding the history of America, its social, political and the economic realms that are crucial in shaping the idea of

manhood. (Kimmel, 2005, p. 3). In the same manner, to understand masculinity in India a looking back at the past is crucial, which takes us into the notion of effeminacy.

Mrinalini Sinha's pioneering work on *Colonial Masculinity: The Manly Englishman and the Effeminate Bengali babu* (Sinha, 1995) has laid the ground for understanding the questions of masculinity and effeminacy during colonial period. Revathy Krishnaswamy's work grounds itself in questions of effeminacy and yet departs from Sinha's work to focus on bringing in the concept of *effeminization* (Krishnaswamy, 1998). Rather than understanding effeminacy only as a tool used by the colonizers to negate the colonized, Krishnaswamy (Krishnaswamy, 1998) looks into *effeminization* as a site of possibilities. While these works have focused on and explored the politics of identity in context of the close associations between masculinity and effeminacy, gendered nationalism (Banerjee, 2012, 2005) (Chowdhury, 1998), other scholarships in the field of colonial studies and gender, reflects the growing gendered ideas of nation (Mayer, 2001). While many scholarships have focused increasingly on the question of women and their bodies in colonial times, the significance of men as 'men', i.e., men as gendered beings and men's bodies has escaped serious engagements. This chapter is thereby an attempt to not only understand the question of masculinity in the colonial period but also to engage into an understanding of men's bodies. To engage with the question of the male body in colonial times, I seek to look into the domain of *bayam* (exercise) in the context of Bengal. While Joseph Alter (2011) have significantly contributed into the scholarship of physical cultures to understand body, masculinity and celibacy in post-colonial times by reflecting upon colonial and nationalist period, Chandrima Chakraborty's work leads us into the field of masculinity and asceticism during colonial period alongside Wakankar's *Geneology of Hindu Nationalist Ascetics* (Chakraborty, 2011) (Wakankar, 1995). These studies form a necessary background to my study by bringing in colonialism, masculinity, asceticism in context of the

male body and the politics of nationalism. In doing so it provides an essential backdrop to the post-colonial understanding of the body.

Physical culture has been defined as an umbrella term (Addison, 2003) that includes activities garnered towards the cultivation of the body. In Bengal this cultivation of the body has been popularly known as *shorir chorcha* or *bayam chorcha*. Though it might be debated whether *shorir chorcha* was already existing in Bengal before the colonial period or not, what cannot be denied is the rise of *bayam samitis* across Kolkata during the colonial period making it a significant aspect. It also saw an increased attention to the male body and its care, disciplining, and control leading to the emergence of gymnasiums, wrestling clubs and *akharas* (place of wrestling) in Bengal. This specifically emerged as a counter-discourse to the idea of colonial masculinity. As Chandrima Chakraborty argues, “Colonized Bengali subjects such as Bankim responded to the colonial encounter with Britain through literary representations and imaginings that established the colonial or anti-colonial subject as different. Their perception of cultural decline and of the security of “traditional” identities resulted in efforts to create a “national” culture” (Chakraborty, 2006, p. 4). This creation of a national culture included a reformation of men’s bodies and newer ideals of masculinity which were based on Indian notions of *brahmacharya* (celibacy), where masculinity was based on the idea of self-control. The control of “bodily desires” to build a “purified healthy body” through “austere lifestyle, exercise and celibacy” became the norm (Abbott, 2001, p. 220). Deepa Sreenivas argues, how Bankim, in order to counter the notion of effeminacy attached to the Bengali (Hindu) identity, brought in *anushilan* which emphasized upon the cultivation of “physical and mental faculties” (Sreenivas, 2010, p. 115). The body emerged as a site of both reformation and ridicule in the context of both men and women. From being considered as effeminate there was an “obsessive search on the part of Indian males for properly masculine bodies, and this search led them to the gymnasium, the wrestling *akhara*, the playing field and the military recruitment office”

(Sen, 2004, p. 70). The male material body was being reshaped. (Singleton, 2010) (Alter, 2011). The body, I argue, was intimately related to masculinity in the Indian context.

### **The Gendered Male Body in Colonial Bengal**

This chapter seeks to understand bodies as removed from a natural and biological understanding to focus on the social and cultural meanings and possibilities it opens up to. Sue Scott and David Morgan in their edited book on *Bodies Matter: Essays on the Sociology of Body* argues that any emphasis upon any aspect of the bodies are a way to control the body whether through gendered norms or health (Scott, Morgan, 1993, p. vii). Both the notions of health and gender remained important tropes under which the body of the colonized was perceived. While most of the literature has focused on how women's bodies underwent control and led to the emergence of the *new woman* who carried the nation's culture in and through her body (Chatterjee, 1989), men's bodies, I argue, were also not free of control. The only distinction that could be seen was while control over women's bodies were imposed from outside by men, control over men's bodies were self – imposed. Several scholarships have focused attention on how the bodies of women became an important aspect of national interest where the women's body became representative of the nation and its body. According to Tamar Mayer and Deepa Mistri, there has been an increased focus on studying women's marginality in context of the nation but that has resulted in a negligence to understand men also as a “equally constructed category” and gendered beings (Mayer, 2000, p. 5) (Mistri, 2014). This brings me to argue how men's bodies too were becoming signifiers of nation and territory in a similar manner as women's bodies were becoming markers of the nation. The nation can often be seen to be compared to the celibate body as the male celibate body was considered to be “supremely fit”, as Alter argues, which would further embody the integrity of the nation (Alter, 2011, p. 46). Shukla Sanyal argues that a somatic ideology became central to the “national

regeneration” that was taking place in Bengal in the nineteenth century such that the individual body, which was “virile” and “healthy”, became representative of the “geo-body” of the nation (Sanyal, 2014, p.162). This coming together of health and gender was with an effort to redefine the male body and simultaneously make it symbolic of the health of the nation and thereby the individual male body could also be read as reflecting the body of the nation. Sara Suleri’s celebrated work on *The Rhetoric of English India* speaks about the feminized colonized men and the intruding masculine colonizers (Suleri, 1992). This necessarily makes the encounter between colonizer and colonized, an encounter between men, where the colonized. i.e, the men in this context, represent the nation and the colonizers as intruders. This suggests how men’s bodies were also crucial in defining the nation and not just being its protectors. While most scholarly works have spoken of women’s bodies becoming metaphors for the nation, men’s bodies too, I argue, became metaphors to represent the nation.

### ***Bayam Samity and Colonial Bengal***

The *bayam samitis* formed during the colonial period exists today carrying forth the culture it began with. Even though the present scenarios have changed, where *bayam* (exercise) has been increasingly replaced by gym culture, looking back entails an understanding of the past through the very spaces that lived the past. My conversations with the members of these *samitis* and *vyayamaghar* brought enriching accounts that were passed on from generation to generation. My initial visit to *Simla Bayam Samity* happened one late afternoon. I had little difficulty in locating it since it was a popular destination now for its *Durga Puja* (the festival of Hindu Goddess *Durga*). On reaching my destination I encountered a large gate overlooking which was the ground where I found the *Durga Puja* pandal (structure) in the making. The multigym and the place of the once existing *akhara* on one side and the *Durga puja* pandal on the other brought in a distinctive feature. It took me back to a period of the formation of the *samity* in

the early twentieth century and made me realize the significance of this ground which holds on to a long history. My visits just a few months prior to *Durga Puja* made it even more enriching to engage not only with the present but also more with the past of this *samity* (association). The interrelationship between *Durga puja*, *desh prem* (love for one's nation), physical culture or *shorir chorha* and masculinity also became evident. At a first glance, these aspects seem to be separate realms, distinct from one another yet I argue that these three aspects came together in a particular context, that of colonial Bengal.

### ***Shakti Worship and Bayam***

In South Kolkata, close to *Kalighat*, lies ninety years old *Kalighat Bayam Samity*, established on 1931. Overlooking a large gate is an open ground whose one corner houses a room. The *samity* not only continues with its *bayam* tradition but also its *Durga Puja*, celebrated every year by its members. *Simla Bayam Samity*, located in North Kolkata, is also well known for its *Durga Puja* which has its historical relevance being considered one of the oldest *Durga pujas* in Kolkata continuing since 1926. On speaking with the members of this *bayam samity*, I was informed that *Durga puja* was significant for the *samity* since its inception. On asking why it was so, one of the members said, “For *desh prem*, for worshipping the mother”. This aspect of *desh prem* along with worshipping the mother goddess was a significant aspect of colonial Bengal during the nationalist period (McDermott, 2011) (Ramos, 2017). We find its relevance too in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's<sup>xxxvii</sup> *Anandamath*<sup>xxxviii</sup>. Sarala Debi, a nationalist, used Hindu festivals like *Birashtami* and the figure of the “divine feminine” *Durga* who stood for the “militant anger” that helped her represent “martial power” during the nationalist period (Babu, Banerjee, 2006, p. 489). With the country being conceived of as a mother, songs of *vande mataram*<sup>xxxix</sup> becoming an anthem at that point of time, goddess worship gained immense prominence among nationalists in Bengal. But it was not just the worship of goddess or mother

that was of significance, but also the worship of *shakti* (strength or power) in the form of a Goddess. *Shakti* was also the basis for the formation of the *bayam samitis*. In need of physical strength and prowess, the Bengali men immersed themselves into physical culture in order to “reclaim” their “lost masculinity” because of which the *bayam samitis* were formed. This, I argue, formed a connecting link between *desh prem*, *Durga puja* and physical culture during the colonial period.

*Simla Bayam Samity*’s idol’s history is of significance here in order to understand the colonial time. One of my interlocutors talked about the history of a transition of the structure of their idol. Initially as it is well known, in earlier times, there were *ek chalar thakur* or idols in one canvas. However, a transition in the structure of the idol was initiated to construct separate canvas for each God and Goddess including *Durga*, *Saraswati*<sup>xi</sup>, *Kartika*<sup>xli</sup>, *Ganesha*<sup>xlii</sup>, and *Lakshmi*<sup>xliii</sup>. Thus, the transition from *ek chalar thakur* (one canvas) to separate canvas was an important transition in their history as narrated with emphasis by the members. This transition interestingly brought in several questions about its necessity at a time period when different forms of restructuring, reformations and redefinition were taking place. Why was the idol structure changed? What could be its significance during the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial Bengal? Did it have any relations to the then political environment of Bengal? According to one of my interlocutors, “*Ma ke chele meye der theke alada korte hobe*” (the mother needs to be separated from her children) was an explanation that was given. This explanation makes this change in the idol structure quite significant and I argue why.

A similar account emerged while conversing with a veteran member of the *samity* who narrated the structural change in the idol and its possible reasons.

Interlocutor: *I have heard that at that time it was difficult to carry one chala with all the idols in it. So they made it separate which became easy to carry the idols. The opinion was that the*

*kids are all self-sufficient and do not require their mother. Why will they go in their mother's lap?* (laughs)

The words and narration of both the interlocutors are significant. While my second interlocutor shares the supposedly technical reason for a shift from one canvas to five separate canvases for the heaviness of the structure, his later explanation resembles that of the first. An emphasis is paid by both on the separation of mother and children rather than on the technical aspects of the shift. Why were the terminologies of mother and children used and emphasized upon rather than just describing the separation of every idol? I argue, at a time when the rhetoric of masculinity and nationalism was rising, it touched upon every aspect of lives of the people whether it was the everyday life of *bayams* or the religious festivals, beliefs and practices. Every aspect was becoming symbols to express a rising nationalist fervor among the masses and the change in the structure of the idol was no less. The reason for separate canvas for the *Durga* Idol, I argue, may not merely be about the structural aesthetics of the idol and neither about the technical issues concerning heaviness of the structure. Instead, it could be read as a way of redefining the Goddess. In Bengal there have been two distinct and contradictory ways *Durga* has been worshipped. Seen only through the *Durga* idol, *Durga* represents along with *Mahishasura*<sup>xliv</sup>, the image of a warrior, the martial *Durga* who in the battleground kills *Mahishasura*. She represents *shakti*, power, and also the masculine. Yet when seen alongside *Ganesh*, *Kartick*, *Saraswati* and *Lakhmi*, she becomes the mother, a benevolent feminine figure of a daughter coming to her maternal home in Bengal<sup>xlv</sup>. The decision to form separate canvas, separating the children from the mother as both my informants said, was an effort perhaps to sideline this aspect of *Durga* as a mother such that *Durga's* image as a warrior, as a symbol of *shakti* is highlighted more. McDermott argues how with the advent of *Sarbojonin* pujas in the 1920, the *Durga* idols were being reshaped to become more humanized and in relation to the *Devi Mahatyama* and other texts, that highlighted *Durga's* war with *Mahishasura* leading to

the minimizing or sometimes complete erasure of the “children” from the canvas (McDermott, 2011, p. 111). There has always been a tussle as to which image of the Goddess should be emphasized upon. In this case too, this was evident.

On the other hand, the supposed mockery of the children going in their mother’s lap could be read as a way of questioning their self-sufficiency. At a time when the people of this nation were trying to gain independence, the Gods and Goddess were also a means of reflecting the same thought and ideas. It is pertinent to draw Sikata Banerjee’s work on *Muscular Nationalism: Gender, Violence and Empire in India and Ireland, 1914-2004* (2012). Here she argues, “Mother India captured the nurturing aspects of a heroic mother who would remain the moral compass for her children, while *Durga* and *Kali* in many instances represented the warrior, avenging themselves on the enemies of the nation.” (Banerjee, 2012, p. 97). These lines show that there were two distinct ways women were seen, one from the perspective of Mother India and the other as a warrior like *Durga* and *Kali*. *Durga* and *Kali* representing the warrior women were significant as they were worshipped and celebrated as *shakti*. ‘*Shakti aradhona*’<sup>xlvi</sup> or the worship of *shakti* was of prime importance at that point of time and thus *bayam samitis* were also a place of worship of the Goddess. It is also evident how the masculine aspect of *Durga* seen as a warrior would be highlighted more than her motherly figure of visiting her parental home with her children. The separation of the *Durga* idol can be thought of from this perspective.

### ***Bayam Samitis as Places of Resistance***

The formation of *bayam samitis* are narrated mostly through the narratives of resistance. The everyday struggle against the colonizers is noteworthy as it became a part of the storytelling through which one of my interlocutors from the *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars* narrated their history. A narrative by one of my interlocutors situated the British’s capture and torture of

natives as a significant backdrop to the creation and establishment of a *bayam samity* in North Kolkata. The narrative not only spoke of the pain and torment one experienced which was both bodily (describing the torture through vivid words like “beaten by a hunter”) and emotional (when he spoke of the native’s mother’s pain), but also of a retaliation of it through acts of courage and forbearance. For him this story was significant for it somewhere laid the foundation of the *samity*. The ruthlessness of the colonizers and the struggle of the colonized through pain, humiliation, heroicness of men and women, sons and mothers led to the formation of a resistance on which the *bayam samitis* were founded. Although the *bayam samitis* are said to have formed in context of the nationalist movement against the colonizers, the local histories tell us how communal riots also characterized the rise of these *samitis*, including *Simla Bayam Samity* (Bagchi, 2018). The narrative of resistance thus, was also shaped by communalism. The feminization of the nation and the subsequent masculinization of Hindu men through *bayam* were aimed at protecting the nation, symbolized as Mother India, from both the colonizers and the Muslims (McDermott, 2011) (Alter, 2007) (Chakraborty, 2007).

These narratives of the past are significant as they throw light into understanding the gendered underpinnings of the time and how every sphere was going through certain reconstructions and reshaping. Similarly, the present structures embodying the past, the narratives of the present in connection to the past, open us ways to understand the interrelations between the two. I argue that these narratives and events are not singular and independent ones but could be read together and understood in terms of the changes that were taking place during the colonial period.

### ***Birashtami: The Intermingling of the Religious and the Political***

The emerging notions of effeminacy, frailty and weakness among Indian (Hindu), especially Bengali men brought questions of health and thereby the male body in the forefront of the

nationalist discourse. Cultivation of the body in *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars* became a central aspect of the period. It is also pertinent to refer to *Birashtami* which brought the political and the religious together in context of body and masculinity. *Birashtami* is a festival which celebrated the physical prowess of men and was supposed to have been started by Sarala Devi (Banerjee, 2012). My field visit to *Baghbazar* revealed how *Birashtami* was detached from its religious underpinnings. My interlocutor, who was a veteran in *Baghbazar puja* community, narrated how *Birashtami* was not a religious festival as many would conclude. Rather its only relation to religion was based on the symbolism of *Durga's* war with *Mahiashasura*. This symbol was supposed to act as a source of inspiration and motivation for the people who would be engaging into the struggle with the colonizers. This emphasis on detaching of the religious from the political sphere of nationalism while speaking about the festival, I argue, can be seen as a deliberate effort that emphasized on keeping the religious and political apart. Yet this separation could be called into question more so during this period. The coming out of the *Durga puja* from the inner realms of the zamindari households into the outer realms of the *para* and politics has been a significant aspect of the period. *Sarbojonin puja* was in an effort to make *Durga puja* a festival to be celebrated by all (Mcdermott, 2011) but in doing so the religious festival became intertwined with the political life. A member from the *Baghbazar Puja* community narrated how *Durga puja* became the occasion during which political meetings would take place. *Durga Puja* thereby as my informants would narrate, became a 'cover up' to continue political engagements during the colonial rule. This discussion and narration of the historical time by my interlocutors were also in effort to see the religious and political as distinct and coming together only at a strategically moment. I argue that a clear separation of the religious aspect of *Durga Puja* and the political culture of the time is not possible and would entail a failure to grasp the significance of the period.

On conversing about *Birashtami* with a veteran member of *Simla Bayam Samity*, I was informed how it was discontinued long back in the *samity*. According to him, “From *Bir pujo* comes *Birashtami*” which was held on the eighth day of *Durga Puja* where *bir* meant courage or valor. For him it was based on “worship of *shakti*” where men would engage in a display of their physical valor through different forms of physical cultures like *lathi khela* (stick play), sword play, wrestling, etc. These different forms of physical cultures were the basis of the festival and which ultimately revolved around the cultivation of physical strength. My visits in the narrow lanes of *Shobhabzar* made me come across one of the oldest *bayam samity* of Kolkata, *Hathkhola Bayam Samity*. Claiming themselves to be the oldest, having established in 1910, this *bayam samity* even dates back before *Simla Byama Samity* or *Baghbazar*. *Hathkhola Bayam Samity*’s history is connected to the names of several important figures in the *bayam* tradition and freedom fighters who have been a part of this *bayam samity*. My visits to the Samity also made me come across the *bayam* equipment from the British era as they would prefer to call them. Even though the *bayam samity* has undergone changes, it still retains its old structure and the equipment that continue to embody the past.

My interactions and visits to this *bayam samity* opened me into its historical past similar to but also quite distinct from *Simla Bayam Samity*. *Hathkhola* departs from *Simla bayam* and others in that it does not celebrate *Durga Puja* which is almost a quintessential part of most *bayam Samitis* in Kolkata. However, it does not remain completely detached from *Durga Puja* as *Birashtami* is an essential festival for this *bayam samity* that takes place on the very eighth day of *Durga Puja* like *Simla Bayam Samity* and others. On speaking with one of the members of the Samity, I was informed that the puja however, is not of *Durga*, but *Hanuman* who is the quintessential deity of this *bayam samity*. He then drew a relation between *Hanuman* and themselves on the basis of *shakti* similar to how narratives about *shaktir aradhona* came out from *Baghbazar* and *Simla Bayam Samity*. According to him, “We preserve power/*shakti*

(*shakti sonchoi kori*) and he is the God of *shakti*/power”. This relation is interesting as it brings in once again *bayam* and *shakti* worship together, although in this case *shakti* worship happens through a male deity Hanuman. *shakti sonchoi kora* or preservation of power becomes a central aspect of *bayam*, where through preservation and storing of semen, cultivation of the body, masculinity is embodied. This cultivation of strength through various forms of physical cultures was also a form of cultivating the ‘lost’ masculinity of Indian men, especially Bengali men. This somatic understanding of nationalism spoke about an emerging form of “embodied nationalism” and embodied identities (Dinkar, 2010, p.172).

### **Embodying Nationalism**

*“Let Bengalis be courageous. Let them be powerful. Let Bengalis be healthy. Let the pure fire of rituals be in their soul and let Mahavir’s (Hanuman) blessings remain in their hearts. Let this saying that Bengalis are weak gets eliminated. This wish was always there in Atindranath Bose”* (Bagchi, 2018, p. 32).

These words resonate the vision of Atindranath Bose, the founder of *Simla Bayam Samity*, who was devoted to *shorir charcha* as my interlocutors have narrated. One of his aims was to bring in *shorir charcha* among Bengali men in the hope of reclaiming courage, physical strength, and health, thereby bringing back the *manliness*. Amidst the nationwide search for reclaiming the ‘national body’ and identity, I argue there was also a reclaiming of the local or cultural body and identity as in the case of the Hindu Bengalis. The aim of establishing *Simla Bayam Samity* was based on two ideals; one to rise against any injustice and secondly to engage into *shorir charcha* or exercise with honesty and dedication (Bagchi, 2018). The question of national injustice and its relation to one’s personal body is significant here. Pradip Bose in his book, *Health and Society in nineteenth century Bengal* discusses the close relation of the ‘social body’ and the “personal body” in context of the emergence of “national health” (Bose, 2005,

p. 28) It was in context of this relation that the personal health deficits were looked in through the lens of the social evils that existed in the society. It was believed that once the social evils were eliminated, the personal body will also develop. Bose thereby argues, “the body and the discourse on health were directly related to religious, social and moral discourses” (Bose, 2005, p. 28). These elements of courage, physical strength, and health to counter Bengali’s identities as weak spoke of how identities were being shaped through the notions of masculinity and effeminacy. This emphasis and coming together of the cultivation of the body and the fight for injustice brought in an idea of embodied nationalism.

In this embodied nationalism, the individual body was related to the broader social body or the nation’s body (Bose, 2005). I would argue how this relation was sought in two different ways. Pradip Bose discusses how the nationalists saw the social evils of traditions like child marriage, polygamy and others as the reasons for the deterioration of physical fitness and health among Bengali men. Nicolas Dirks seeks to argue in his book *on Caste of Minds: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* that the language of overthrowing colonialism often took up the same language of the oppressors, looking at themselves and traditions from the very lens of the colonizers (Dirks, 2001, p. 6). This self-perception or the ‘self-image of effeteness” (Rosselli, 1980) i.e. identifying with the image created by the colonizers formed the ground on which the colonized countered the colonizers and also made efforts to revive masculinity. By doing away with such social evils, it was assumed that one would be able to restore one’s health as it was previously. This relationship sought to understand the external (social) as influencing the internal or the personal (individual) body, thus a changing of these external factors will directly lead to a change in the internal or the individual. This perspective necessarily then assumes that a ‘deterioration’ has taken place, a loss has taken place which further necessitates a revival. If this was one way of understanding the relation between the external social world and the internal, individual body, there was another view that saw that the changes in the personal that

would influence and change the external socio-political world outside. In this context, Gandhi's ideas come up. For Gandhi, very intimate practices in everyday life like that of *brahmacharya*, cleanliness, hygiene, were conceived as not only affecting and transforming one's body but also one that would initiate a transformation of the country. The focus thereby was on one's own self and practices which would eventually lead to a change and transformation in the country. This is how one's own body is related to the nation's body. In both the above cases, the body remained an important ground on which resistance and reformations were sought.

My fieldwork in *Bajrang Vyayamaghar* in South Kolkata also revolves around the similar idea of *shorir chorchha*. On conversing one evening with the *guru* or instructor of the *vyayamaghar* who was in his early 70s, I was told about the history of this place. Established around the early twentieth century, this *vyayamaghar* was also formed because of the need to "create *pahalwans*"<sup>xlvi</sup> in the form of wrestlers and bodybuilders in order to engage in a rebellion against the British.

He narrated,

*"Our economic condition was not so good at that point of time. We then realized if we can create pahalwans, then something could be done. The use of irons for bayams (exercise) began. Our main goal was to fight with the British".*

This understanding of a lack of economic capital to an emphasis on creation of *pahalwans* or bodybuilders and wrestlers spoke about, I argue, the rendering of the body as a form of capital, to emphasize on its cultivation through which strength will be developed. This emphasis on the body can be read through Bourdieu's understanding of physical capital. Bourdieu emphasized on the body as a capital that is cultivated, preserved and shaped by the values prevalent in a society. In the absence of economic and other capitals as we see above, physical capital becomes a means to compensate the lack of economic capital (Bourdieu, 1978). As Shilling

argues, “the body has become a more comprehensive form of physical capital; a possessor of power, status, and distinctive symbolic forms which is integral to the accumulation of various resources” (Shilling, 1993, p. 111). Here too the male body was made symbolic of embodied power and potency through which the nation was represented. This focus on a very physical and masculine idea of strength was cultivated not merely against the British but to also revive their own masculinity that they believed have faded. “Physically fit, healthy citizens of good character dedicating themselves to the betterment of Mother India thereby became “important symbols of a strong and vibrant nation in an age when Hindus felt that they lacked “manliness,” were “weak,” “lacking in courage,” were a “lethargic race”” (Singleton 2010, p. 97, Watt, 1997, p. 367). It is pertinent to bring in Revathy Krishnaswamy’s argument on effeminization. For her, “the real goal of feminization is effeminization- a process in which colonizing men use women/womanhood to delegitimize, discredit and disempower colonized men (Krishnaswamy, 1998, p. 3). Now this distinction between feminization and effeminization is crucial to understand the politics of the period. Feminization does not render men “feminized” or reduced to women. Rather feminization aims to effeminize men, rendering them, I argue, in an ambivalence of liminality. According to Ashish Nandy effeminacy is always regarded as more problematic than femininity (Nandy, 1989). For Victor Turner, “*liminality* represents the midpoint of transition in a status-sequence between two positions” (Turner, 1974, p. 237). Turner describes the people in the position of liminality as “neither here nor there; they are between and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremony” (Turner, 1969, p. 95). I seek to read effeminacy through Turner’s concept of liminality to understand the ambiguousness of the position that creates a rupture in one’s self-conception of a coherent identity that happened in case of the Indians. I argue, it is not simply the feminization of men that led to the revival of masculinity, but also the loss of a coherent masculine identity of men through a process of effeminization that needed a revival. Ambiguity

in the form of effeminacy had to be overcome and a search for the lost coherence had to be made. However, it is in this ambiguity that Turner also finds “a realm of pure possibility” (Turner, 1967, p. 97). Thus, even though effeminacy was taken in negatively and was accepted only to be negated in order to bring back masculinity in men during the late colonial period, effeminacy could have also opened us to several possibilities.

### ***Brahmacharya: Embodying Masculinity***

*Brahmacharya*, although of spiritual significance, became political during the colonial period. From being a means to reach a state of “nothingness” (Abbott, 2001, p. 219), *brahmacharya* became a ground on which Hindu men resisted the modern influences of the British and made efforts to garner back their ‘lost’ masculinity and strength. Abbott argues how a “new *brahmacharya*” emerged in modern India, which was “anti-western” and was geared towards curbing “Indian Modernization” and “western influences” (Abbott, 2001, p. 227). Several works highlight the growing culture to bring in *brahmacharya* among young men, through posters, literature and other means (Bose, 2005) (Abbott, 2001) (Alter, 2011). This ‘new *brahmacharya*’ focused not only on the acts of abstinence and self-control but also on the material aspect of semen preservation in itself. Among the Hindu beliefs the loss of semen, also known as *biryapat*, was considered to weaken men, unless it was used to impregnate women. Semen preservation was conceived as producing strength and virility (Chowdhury, 1998, p. 130).

My conversation one evening with the *guru*/trainer of a *vyayamaghar* opened me to an understanding of *bayam* whose core idea was based on *birjo*/semen. For the *guru*, the central idea of *bayam* was in an effort to create and preserve strength, ‘*shakti sonchoi kora*’ in the form of semen control. Here semen translates itself into strength or *shakti*/power. The *bayam samitis* that opened during the colonial times were conceived as grounds of rebellion where the

ultimate aim was to bring men together to rise against the colonizers. However, I argue even though *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars* were conceived in such a manner, *bayam* in itself was significant in this struggle against the colonizers because its significance laid in its basis of cultivating strength and power that was of importance. However, men not only cultivated strength through *brahmacharya* and *bayam* but also cultivated their identity. Thus, a relation between *bayam*, *brahmacharya* and identity is crucial and significant in shaping the post-colonial identity of Indian men. Abbott argues how *brahmacharya* became “post-colonial” in North India (Abbott, 2001, p. 227) as it became political in becoming a basis of foregrounding identity, of reclaiming the lost masculinity and identity.

### **Nationalizing the Colonized Male Body**

The history of the *bayam* culture/ physical culture in Bengal during the colonial-nationalist period and the significance and rise of the *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars* brought the question of the ‘national male body’ to the forefront as I argued above. This national male body was also quintessentially Hindu and upper caste, where the ‘national’ became homogenized and subsumed under Hindu identity. In this context a homogenized understanding of a male masculinized body emerged that was propagated by the nationalists in opposition to the British’s understanding of masculinity. However, this masculine male body I argue did not deviate completely from the British’s notion and thus a redefining of the body in the nationalist period picked the very language of colonizers to situate their politics in a development of a national body (Male, Hindu). The national body, in the words of Ashish Nandy (1989), was ‘intimately’ connected to the colonial body, which was constituted through its very idea based on the failure among Hindu/Bengali men to live up to the ideals of colonial manliness and their supposed effeminacy. While the colonizers defined the body through the concept of colonial masculinity, I argue, an alternative idea of masculinity and body emerged from the perspective

of the colonized who couched their notions of manliness in the counter discourse to the idea of colonial masculinity. However, I wish to argue how both these ideas of masculinity and body, although seen as opposed to one another, were grounded in a similar notion of effeminacy. Contrary to these notions, I bring in Gandhi's body to talk about a distinct alternative body, 'the otherness' of which remained a significant critique to the colonial body.

### **Vivekananda's Martial Spirituality: The National Male Body**

There were two significant ways the male body was to be cultivated. On one hand there was a need for a martial race which would be physically stronger, there was on the other hand a growing focus on *brahmacharya* and 'traditional' Hindu ways to reclaim masculinity. Nandy in his popular work on *Intimate Enemy* (1989) lays down the distinction between the thoughts and lives of Gandhi and Vivekananda in context of nationalism. While he doesn't elaborate on Vivekananda exclusively but considers him to be one of the others who saw independence through adopting those very values that the colonizers used as an instrument to establish their dominance (Nandy, 1989). For him Vivekananda tried to "Christianize Hinduism" and spoke of a Hindu identity that was lost and needs to be reclaimed. This identity was highly masculine and was based on "Brahmanism and true Ksatriyahood" (Nandy, 1989, p. 24) which according to Nandy "perfectly fitted the dominant structure of colonial thought, as well as the ideology of some Western Orientalists" (Nandy, 1989, p.24).

The idea of a lost identity was the central argument of Swami Vivekananda. This creation of a loss was a way of dealing with colonialism which tried to see Indians through a lack. Vivekananda turned this *lack* into a *loss* to emphasize on a Hindu identity from the ancient period which was now lost and needed to be reclaimed thereby picking up the very voice (ideology) that has colonized them. It is here that a creation of a past becomes necessary to build up a present. But this creation of the lost identity only became possible after an

internalization of the *lack* that the British tried to establish, thereby, becoming successful in their attempts to colonize the mind of the Indians. By identifying with the lack, Vivekananda, and others similar to him tried to establish Hinduism through the lens of the Britishers / Christianity, where they started attaching superiority to those values that characterized the Britishers which the Indians supposedly lacked. But an acceptance of *lack* would have been a humiliating, un-masculine act which was countered through a deliberate creation of a loss of a masculine past that needs revival. Thus, the response to the British was itself a masculine act by not accepting or submitting to a *lack* and converting it to a temporary *loss* that can now be regained or revived. Henceforth, Vivekananda not only moved into the path of establishing a Hindu Identity and organizing Hinduism as an organized religion with a core book like Gita, (Nandy, 1989) he also tried to relate this Hindu identity to body and masculinity to create men.

Vivekananda's idea of nationalism was based on both masculinity and spirituality, in "muscular spirituality" where the figure of a warrior monk became "integral" to his thoughts (Banerjee, 2005, p. 58-59). Interestingly Banerjee's work urges us to see the similarity in the perspective of Vivekananda on one hand and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee on the other. Bankim Chandra's *Anandamath* brought in an idea of freedom fighters based on the image of 'warrior monk' very similar to how Vivekananda envisioned (Banerjee, 2005). Physical prowess combined with asceticism brought in a different idea of spirituality, masculinity and nationalism. Citing from *Anandamath*, Banerjee brings in a significant perspective emerging from a discussion between Mahendra and Bhavan, the two characters in the novel. The urge to develop "patience practice" among men becomes crucial to understanding the cultivation of a "manly virtue" which were based on *brahmacharya* and a distancing from women or as Banerjee puts it, "untainted by female sexuality" (Banerjee, 2005, p. 62). The need for patience calls for a very controlled virtue of men, instead of an impatient, tempered aggression of manliness. *Brahmacharya* ensures a controlling of desires and not just in context of sexuality but in an overall control of

senses. As Banerjee argues, “Both Chatterjee and Vivekananda seem to inject this notion of spirituality into manhood to emphasize Hindu men’s refusal to give into, in their perception, the crass physicality of the British version of armed masculinity” (Banerjee, 2005, p. 62). Pradip Bose discusses the works of *Anubhiksan* to argue that a strong and healthy body was equated with a body that remains in control and self-restraint. Health was thereby related not just to the body but to a control of bodily senses leading to spiritual benefits (Bose 2005). A focus on spirituality was significant during the 19th century and this was ensured not only through *brahmacharya* but also food and other related activities. According to Indira Chowdhury, Vivekananda, “chose to fuse militant virility with the “pure” brahminical principle of asceticism in order to render masculinity invincible” (Chowdhury, 1998, p. 127). Vivekananda then combined a spiritual and martial idea of masculinity, where spirituality and physicality both remained crucial to his definition of manhood. However, I would argue how Vivekananda’s notion of spirituality was also based on a similar ground of physicality and virility. Vivekananda’s ‘spiritual masculinity’ already presupposed spirituality as essentially a quality of the Indians whereas agreeing to the colonizers on how martial prowess has been lost among Indian (Hindu) men. In both the cases, he presupposes an ownership and a loss and combines the two to counter the colonizers. His emphasis on bodily strength and in playing football shows his idea of cultivation of physical strength and masculinity. His emphasis on *brahmacharya* took into account the significance of the power of semen and the strength and energy one garners from it. By basing one’s masculinity on spiritual aspects of manliness based on celibacy he was attempting to bring in the manly virtues of control and restraint. The ability to control one’s body through strict *brahmacharya* entails bringing in an idea of restraint and control, I argue, among men moving away from mindless aggression. This for him gave them a new meaning to manliness as opposed to the colonizers. “Vivekananda’s emphasis on asceticism and celibacy contributed to a rhetoric of spiritual masculinity by tying physical

strength to the spiritual sphere of influence where India and Indian men could claim superiority to the West” (Roy, Hammer 553). However, even though his redefining of manliness took place through a claimed authenticity of Indian spirituality as superior to the west, his ideas nonetheless emerged from the very questioning of the colonizers of the manliness of Hindu men. In seeking to redefine masculinity, he based it on the idea of authenticity and loss, thereby staying within the definition setup by the colonizers. He didn’t move away from physical and martial prowess but added the element of spirituality in redefining them in conceptualizing his idea of ‘spiritual masculinity’ (Chowdhury, 1998).

### ***Kapurusatva and Tapas: Gandhi’s Body as a Critique to the National Male Body***

Gandhi’s body brought on a critique I argue to the *national (Hindu) body* that was the focus of development in the colonial-nationalist period. Here I will argue how Gandhi’s ideas of passive resistance brought a different and alternative way of countering the British, moving away from hyper masculinity that was the focus of the time. Gandhi’s ideas of passivity, femininity and courage gave new meanings to resistance and also an alternative understanding to body and masculinity.

The British’s relegation of the Indians as effeminate and the self-perception amongst Indians of the same did not affect Gandhi in the same manner. He in turn used cowardice and “*kapurusatva*” (Nandy, 1889) as a tool to question masculinity and thereby effeminacy. I argue, that *kapurusatva* can also be read as emasculation, and in doing so it also remains essentially tied to ideas of masculinity and effeminacy. Gandhi in bringing in a softer side to resistance and in embracing effeminacy, did not move away from questions of masculinity. Manhood and masculinity were quite central to his thought though he has departed from the usual understanding of what counts as “manly”. It is here that it is still significant for us to understand

how Gandhi departed from the British and the nationalist in conceptualizing a distinct form of protest and resistance that did not occur within the parameters set up by the British. This resistance I argue gave rise to a different body which Gandhi embodied. For that it is pertinent to distinguish the dominant understanding of effeminacy and Gandhi's understanding of *kapurusatva*, only to reflect upon the way Gandhi countered the prevalent idea of masculinity.

The idea of effeminacy has, as discussed earlier, emerged in the context of physical fitness, health and frailty (Chowdhury, 1998) (Sinha, 1995). Effeminacy was based on a lack of strength with physical strength playing the central role in defining masculinity and virility. Moving away from such an idea of body and health, Gandhi's body embodied a different form of strength, that of moral strength. Far away from the physically strong, well-built and muscular body that was being cultivated at *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars*, Gandhi's body was thin, frail, non-muscular. The relationship between masculinity and muscularity has been conceived as a form of a "male body ideal" (Wienke, 1998, p. 256). Equated together and seen as an embodiment of masculinity, muscularity has been significant since the colonial period and gained further significance in the post-independent era as discussed by Kajri Jain (Jain, 2004). The focus on muscularity was mainly because of the focus upon physical fitness and strength that was required during the nationalist period.

Gandhi moved away from such an idea to focus on a different form of strength. Although he did not go into the prevailing notions of *bayam* tradition or body fitness, he too remained tied to the body and was also seeking to redefine it in the colonial period (Alter, 2000). His redefining of the body moved away from those of the other nationalists, like Vivekananda, Aurobindo or Bankim Chandra. Rather than focusing on building a physique, Gandhi was concentrating on a deeper level, on an inner idea of the body and strength. This inner idea of body and strength I argue will also remain significant in the following chapters in understanding the *bayam* tradition. Central to Gandhi's thoughts and practices were the ideas

of courage and cowardice or *kapurusatva*. *Kapurusatva*, although tied to the notion of masculinity, is not the same as effeminacy. *Kapurusatva* bases itself on the lack of courage and is translated as cowardice whereas effeminacy bases itself on femininity or feminization. However, what connects both *kapurusatva* and effeminacy is in their association to masculinity where both are read as a failure in relation to masculinity. Gandhi used the notion of *kapurusatva* to counter the British as opposed to the British's use of effeminacy to critique the natives. On one hand, through his everyday practices and political endeavors he was trying to cultivate courage, on the other hand, by using the terminology and idea of *kapurusatva*, Gandhi was trying to oppose the colonizers and their ways. This courage, Gandhi insisted, was in terms of one's ability and determination to stand in front of a gun rather than picking up one. Veena R. Howard argues that Gandhi saw bravery not in one's body but in one's soul (Howard, 2013). As Sebastian Vazhapilly argues, "the Sanskrit expression for cowardice translates as "failure of masculinity `` or "*kapurusatva*" (Vazhapilly, 2001, p.100). When the colonizers described the natives as effeminate for failing to use machines, Gandhi changed the narrative to one's inability to work with one's own hands and falling back or depending upon machines to do it for them as a sign of failure. Spinning therefore became an important part of his struggle to ensure this. This inversion or overturning of what is effeminate or masculine, redefined Gandhi's politics (Chakraborty, 2011, p. 122). As Veena Howard argues, "Gandhi concluded that strength of spirit is required to confront and resist evil and violence, and that strength is obtained not through physical means, but through self-sacrifice and moral force" (Howard, 2013, p. 127). Thus, Gandhi's basis of courage/strength was what he termed as moral strength stemming from within, from the soul or soul force. "Gandhi's inversion negated the very basis of the colonial culture which was rooted in hyper masculinity" (Vazhapilly, 2001, p. 100).

This idea of *kapurusatva* and courage were not simply abstract ideas or thoughts but something that he tried to embody through his everyday practices (Alter, 2000). He was trying to cultivate,

I argue, an embodied idea of courage which was accomplished through his everyday practices of *brahmacharya*, vegetarianism, fasting, vows of silence, cleanliness and others. “Gandhi conceives of a daily regimen that will provide nourishment to the ‘soul force’. Through daily prayer meetings, the charkha, the ashram life, *satyagraha*<sup>xlvi</sup> and the fasts amidst the hurly-burly of politics, and sanitation, healing lepers and nature cure in the later part of his life, Gandhi fashioned diverse technologies of self that would go to sustain the tempo of a satyagrahi’s life” (Gavaskar, 2009, p. 15). His effort to bring in total self-control was simultaneously linked to his idea of courage. “*Brahmacharya*, the elimination of all desire, was to be obtained by diving into, and realizing, this spiritual discipline that furnished the nonviolent armor” (Lal, 2000, p. 105-106). According to Gandhi, “With our *Brahmacharya* the Satyagrahi will have no lustre, no inner strength to stand against the whole world” (Gandhi, 1956, p. 210). This courage was only possible when one who can control one’s desire, wishes, anger, palate and semen, can in totality embody a moral force which he also referred to as the soul force. This soul force for him was stronger than any brute or physical force. It is through the practice of self-suffering in the form of tapas, the ideals of *nishkam karma*<sup>xli</sup> and *anashakti*<sup>1</sup> that remained the basis of Gandhi’s *brahmacharya* and bodily practices (Vajpeyi, 2012), through which he tried to cultivate an inner strength. It is, therefore, that Howard argues, “Gandhi’s spiritual authority rested in his personal detachment and moral method” (Howard, 2013, p.164). Indeed, Gandhi drew his power, from his inside, inner realm of his body, a strength that was within. Yet this within is not an immaterial domain. Courage then was not something that emanated from one’s muscular body nor did it emerge from abstract thoughts and ideas but from fearlessness that was embodied through his everyday bodily practices of detachment. Gandhi’s body therefore, was standing in opposition to the body that was being envisioned by the nationalist.

Gandhi did see *brahmacharya* similar to Vivekananda and others as the basis of claiming power based on semen control which became a growing medical as well as political discourse in itself (Abbott, 2001) (Alter, 2011). However, for Gandhi I argue, it was not in the preservation of semen and the materiality of its significance but in the act of its conservation and the suffering it entailed, that was important. He saw *brahmacharya* through the notion of *tapas* in Hindu philosophy and “trusted in the power of tapas (self-suffering)” (Howard, 2013, p. 153). *Tapas*<sup>li</sup> is translated as an act of suffering, and it is in this control and suffering in the form of *tapas* that Gandhi understood the significance of *brahmacharya*. According to Gandhi *tapas* were steps to reach an ideal. This “holding to the ideal”, according to Borman, involved “efforts” and “physical conditions” that determined *tapas* for Gandhi (Borman, 1986, p. 78). Gandhi’s manliness lay in struggling, because for him struggling played a significant role in shaping us (Gandhi, 2001). Vivekananda on the other hand saw semen preservation as a means of “transmutation of sexual energy into Ojas” (Chowdhury, 1998, p. 130). According to Chowdhury, Vivekananda equated celibacy with strength by following a Hindu belief where ““*biryapat*” or ejaculation weakened the male unless it impregnated female and the containment of *birya* or semen produced strength”. She also notes how the term *birya* in Bengali also connected to other meanings like “bravery”, “courage”, “strength” “vitality”, (Chowdhury, 1998, p. 130). Thus, Vivekananda saw semen preservation as a ground to develop *shakti* or power to transform it into brute force or physical strength of men to combat the colonizers. Gandhi, on the other hand, saw it in terms of an inward power/force, not in physicality but in an embodiment of that power within. Gandhi’s sense of power and strength then was emerging from his self-suffering, or what he would term as *tapas*. Chandrima Chakraborty argues that Gandhi could detach “notions of political activism, courage and the performance of heroic deeds from their association with masculine aggression and male warrior violence, and redefines masculinity as perfectly compatible with feminine virtues”

(Chakraborty, 2011, p. 135-136). According to Chakraborty, “Interrupting the normative colonial stereotype of the relationship between bodies; acts, and identities, Gandhi questioned the definitional relationship between what bodies do and what bodies can do” (Chakraborty, 2011, p. 122). Yet I would argue that Gandhi even though departed and formed an alternative idea of body that came up during the nationalist period, he nonetheless remained in relation to it. His ideas were shaped by an emphasis to negate the colonizer’s ways, thereby situating his ideas and thoughts in an opposition (in relation) to them. By moving away significantly from the colonizers, he and his body provided an alternative to understanding masculinity and body in the context of nineteenth and early twentieth century India. His body in all its materiality was providing a necessary alterity to the concept of body making one rethink the ideals of masculinity, femininity, and effeminacy. In his feminized ways of suffering, in a physically weak body that was effeminized, his strength and masculinity lied in his ideas of complete self-control in trying to bring in self-rule or *Swaraj*. One of the essential features of masculinity has been in the notion of self-control, *brahmacharya*, and in ensuring that Gandhi brought in a different understanding to masculinity. It will be impossible, I argue, to categorize Gandhi as effeminate, feminine or masculine, as his politics brought every aspect of it and to essentialize or categorize him in any one model will erase his politics and his ideas. Gandhi and simultaneously his body in itself remained an unknowable realm, defying categorization and yet providing strong grounds into understanding, politics, masculinity, corporeality and nationalism.

### **Nation, Masculinity and the Male Body**

This chapter tried to put forward an analysis of the ways in which colonialism, masculinity, and body were interrelated in the context of nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal. The relation between masculinity and colonialism has been significantly engaged into in scholarly

works focusing on gendered nationalism (Banerjee, 2003), muscular nationalism (Sinha, 1995) (Chowdhury, 1998) (Sanyal, 2014) and somatic ideologies, (Alter, 1992) (Sen, 2004), women's body (Chatterjee, 1989) "physicality of masculinity" (Sen, 2004). This chapter built on such a scholarship and simultaneously also provided an ethnography of the *bayam samitis* and their history. This method of looking back, through memories, stories and narratives of the past, provides an enriching account and interpretations of the past. By bringing in ethnography and history together the chapter tried to bring in the method of historical ethnography. It seeks to rethink ethnography from the study of the present to engage into the study of the past through the living of the past through the present. The chapter also highlights the significance of the body in the cultivation of an embodied idea of masculinity during the colonial regime. This embodiment was sought through the cultivation and reformation of the body through physical cultures or *bayam* culture, *brahmacharya*, and diet control. This *body* that engaged into physical cultures were always men's bodies meaning that the domain of physical cultures was limited only to men. On asking one of my interlocutors, he was of the opinion, "I think *shorir charcha* was limited and restricted to men only at that point of time...you will find if a woman decided to go out, people used to ask a man to accompany her". This statement not only reveals the way women's movement outside the home was restricted and controlled, what I seek to emphasize upon is the distinction that this made between whose bodies need to be protected and whose bodies need to be cultivated in order to protect. As Joseph Alter argues, "The ideology of nationalism is arguably one of the most masculine expressions of patriarchal politics" (Alter, 2011, p. 49). This chapter also provides accounts of how the notion of masculinity was entering into different arenas of religion, festivals, or health and redefining them. Here masculinity is understood not just in relation to men and their bodies but as an overarching notion signifying the masculine. The politics of gender and masculinity thereby entered various domains restructuring them to the then political discourse.

The male body that became the center of discussion and debates was also always a Hindu upper caste body. Bringing in Milind Wakankar, Deepa Sreenivas argues, “The Hindu upper caste male body became the subject of collective reform and a response to the orientalist portrayals of the effete Bengali/Hindu” (Sreenivas, 2010, p. 125) (Wakankar, 1995). In my conversation with a *guru* of *Bajrang vyayamaghar* and his narration of the history of the *vyayamaghar* made me realize it was constructed solely for the Hindus. He narrated how the weakness among Hindu men was a growing concern during the British period and it was for this very reason that this *vyayamaghar* was constructed. Deepa Sreenivas argues that a “new man” was emerging as the “citizen of the state” (Sreenivas, 2010, p. 114). For her, “The new man is the one who eagerly merges into an overarching “national identity” and eschews all sub-national/extra-territorial loyalties and affiliations” (Sreenivas, 2010, p. 114). Thus, along lines of gender, caste, and religion, the national body was rising and subsuming the diversities into one singular body. This body although was perceived as standing against colonial modernity and masculinity, it was simultaneously also a product of it. The emergence of the figure of a warrior monk, who would ideally embody both physical strength and celibate’s power grounded in the (male) body became significant. Amidst this Gandhi’s body I argue emerged as an alternative to the idea of the colonial and national body. His body not only differed from the colonial and nationalist constructions of masculinity and body and redefined it but also one that opened us to an understanding of an inner body and strength (masculinity). It is this inner domain of body and strength that will remain a significant concern for the upcoming chapters.

This chapter formed a historical background to the study of *bayam*, masculinity and the centrality of the male body in the context of Bengal. It made an effort to understand a period that weaved together *bayam*, body, masculinity and nation. During colonial period associations of health with masculinity, weakness with effeminacy became grounded in notions of *Brahmacharya* and *bayam*. A relationship between a masculine, healthy/fit body, and pure

body emerged in bringing in notions of masculinity, purity, and health. In the coming chapters a focus on the connections of health and masculinity, the medical and the national will be undertaken. However, before going into the questions of the body and *bayam*, I would initiate a conversation with the body of the *akhara* or *bayam samitis* in the following chapter. The historical context I argue finds its grounding or embodiment in the places and spaces of *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars* that continues to live on. The ethnography of the *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars* as places not only brings out their histories but also ways, I argue, to understand *bayam* itself. The structures and specific locations, their histories and their present, open us into understanding *bayam* tradition and the spaces and places that became the ground to construct or create the ‘national body’.

## Chapter 5: Building Bodies, Masculinizing Spaces: The Politics of Places and Spaces of *Bayam Samitis* and *Akharas*

Located in South Kolkata, *Bajrang vyayamaghar* stands amidst the growing gym culture in the neighborhood. Formed in order to bring back manliness among Bengali *Hindu*<sup>lii</sup> men, it traces its history back to the colonial period. The dark red colour of the *akhara* is also significant as it took me back to my very first ethnographic site, The Ghosh college of Physical education<sup>liii</sup> which also had a similar red structure. I found it interesting how the structures of these *vyayamghars*, *akharas* bear similarities to one another and were also interesting in their architectural designs. *Bajrang vyayamaghar* had *swastika* symbols on its walls which perhaps signified it as a Hindu place.



### 16. *Bajrang Vyayamaghar's Bayam Area*

Housed in an old red brick structure, its one end has now become an ayurvedic centre and the other end houses a Hanuman Temple. The structure of the building resembled the structure of old *akharas* having an open courtyard in the middle and surrounded by the building structure

on all sides. The open courtyard at the entrance had a wrestling mud pit back in the early twentieth century. Beside the entrance is the gym room and on another end is an office room. Another central aspect was the *uthon*<sup>liv</sup>. The *uthon* area which lies opposite to the gym room and entrance had different equipment from the colonial period which were used for *bayam*. It also had multiple benches which also became the place where I would sit for daily conversations. Although after my further visits I realized that each of these benches were not merely used for seating but were equipment on which *bayam* is carried out. The gym room houses several *bayam* and exercise equipment from the colonial period. The dumbbells, barbells, pulleys<sup>lv</sup> were almost years old, passed on from the time the *vyayamaghar* was opened in 1935. The gym room also has the latest equipment from the multigym culture and thus became a strange amalgamation of the past and the present.

The men there often used the word *akhara* instead of *bayam samity* or *vyayamaghar*. similar to locals in *Kidderpore Bayam Samity*. Although we associate *akhara* with wrestling *akharas* and wrestling pits, I understood how *akhara* is not merely about wrestling but a place with a particular tradition of *bayam* and culture. This does not mean *akhara* is merely an idea or culture but rather it is embodied in the spaces, culture and the materiality of the places. Peter Van De Veer argues that there was a transformation in the meaning of *akharas* which initially were places for the ascetics but then transformed into places for fighting ascetics and finally turning into gymnasiums for wrestlers. These thereby, according to him, carry forward the ascetic culture (Van de Veer, 2001). The members of this *vyayamaghar* also used the word *akhara* to mean a place of togetherness, where people do not merely come and go but who form a relation to the very place and with one another.

Spaces are not inert containers of culture nor are places mere location or a background to what goes on in them. They are constitutive of what goes on in these realms. There has been an emphasis on the study of spaces as culturally and socially constituted which often eliminates

the question of place, seen through a more factual and ontological understanding of a fixed location. The chapter seeks to revive the notion of the ontology of place and understand how places are also constituted through their rootedness, their materiality and physicality and the everyday engagement that goes on inside them. It will also bring in the question of experience as opposed to only observations and narratives as the focus of the ethnographer. My experience in the field, of what I hear, what I see and what I feel, will constitute my experience and understanding of these places and spaces. The chapter begins by discussing the study of spaces and places in the social sciences and comes to discuss the significance and the need to revive the concept of place in the social sciences. It will seek to discuss the rooted understanding of a place and how its rootedness, its history, constitutes it. This will be significant in understanding *bayam samitis*, *vyayamaghars* not just as spaces but places rooted in a specific location and history.

The *bayam Samitis*, *vyayamaghars* and *akharas* are now considered to be spaces/places in tension with the increasing grip of gym culture, women's participation, rise of protein shakes and steroids in the market (Monaghan, 2001), etc. The chapter seeks to argue instead that these places were always already in tension as contradictions and exclusions are characteristic feature of these places and spaces rather than being a current anomaly. It thereby firstly seeks to question the everyday exclusion that defines the space of an *akhara* and *bayam samitis* and thereby the politics of space making. The spaces are firstly understood through the exclusion of the *feminine* and what insights does my presence as a woman researcher bring into my own experience into these *masculine* domains. Through the narratives and experiences of the members of the *bayam samitis* and *akharas*, and through observing them in their daily practices and experiencing the places, the chapter tries to understand the way men make sense of the spaces they inhabit and what meanings these have in their everyday life. The exclusion of women also brings in the question of homosocial environment of the *bayam samitis* and

*akharas*. I read these spaces through this tension between homosociality and intimacy between men on one hand and the simultaneously masculineness of these spaces. The question of religion and purity is yet another aspect that becomes significant. The coming together of devotion and masculinity, purity and intimacy, brings in a contradiction that I argue remains an essential part of the *bayam samitis* and *akharas* and for *bayam* itself. The chapter also tries to understand the materiality and embedded nature of places of the *akharas* and *bayam samitis* and understanding the places through the storytelling, their making and their histories, their physicality. This is also done through observations, by spending time in the *bayam samitis* and *akharas* and living them through both the spaces, places and the practices that together constitute the *bayam samitis* and *akharas*. In understanding the structure of the *bayam samitis*, *akharas* and *vyayamaghars*, the chapter reads the materiality of the place, through its history and symbolisms. For example, these *bayam samitis* and *akharas* could be, I argue, read as *Hindu* space for how the place and spaces displays, expresses its relation to one religious and cultural group. This resonates with history as they were formed for Hindu men during the colonial period.

The soundscape of the places becomes important phenomenological tools to decipher the *akhara* as a physical soundscape. By recording my presence in the *akharas*, *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars*, and thereby capturing the unwanted sounds and the soundscape of the place, I seek to understand what meanings it holds to understand them. Lastly, on reflecting upon my own experience in the *akhara*, I also narrate my own uncomfortableness as a methodological tool to perceive the *akhara*. Using the sensory perceptions, I seek to feel and experience *akhara* as a space and a place and the meanings it produces. Sensory perceptions have become an important dimension in ethnographic works, where the researcher's senses and perceptions play a key role in making sense of a place. Making *sense* of a place then becomes literally a sense making, where through sensory mediums of sounds, or smell, or bodily perception, one

gains knowledge and engages with the place and space. Thereby in engaging with the narratives, story-telling, experiences on one hand, and observations, sounds, and sensory perceptions, this chapter seeks to bring together a methodological amalgamation in the social, cultural, spatial, political and the ontological understanding of *akharas* and *bayam samitis*.

### **Space and Place-Making**

Addressing the burgeoning domain of space, place and culture studies, scholars like D.L. Zuniga and S.M. Low speaks about a shift in perspectives of “foregrounding spatial dimensions of culture rather than treating them as backgrounds, so that the notion that all behavior is located in and constructed of space has taken a new meaning”. (Zuniga, Low, 2003, p. 2). While spaces have often been relegated as background to a culture, recent studies in social sciences have highlighted the everyday human lives and human experiences in spatial contexts. My following analysis is based upon such growing recognition by scholars about the politics of space and place making.

The focus of the chapter is on the space and place of the *bayam samitis* and wrestling *akharas* in Kolkata. Each of these places has a long history in terms of their formation during the early twentieth century colonial-nationalist period and therefore being some of the oldest *bayam samitis* and *akharas*. Peter Van De Veer argues about the “transformation of religious martiality into sports in the service of an emerging nationalist masculinity” that led to the transformation of the meaning of *akhara* from being “camps of ascetics” to “temple of fighting ascetics” to “gymnasium” of wrestlers (Van De Veer, 2001, p. 100). Considering the current physical structures and arrangements of gyms and workout places, the *bayam samitis* and *akharas* are relatively different in terms of their spatial arrangements and physical structures. This difference is not only in terms of the structure but rooted in the very idea of *bayam/exercise* that I will intend to show in chapters to follow. Thus, I will seek to read the

structure in relation to what goes in these places and further draw relation to how *bayam*/exercise is perceived in these places. *Bayam samitis* unlike wrestling *akharas* were a complete place for physical cultures that included not only *bayam*, exercise, and body building but also had wrestling pits or *akharas* in them. However, with time most *bayam samitis*, especially the ones in which I worked, have given up on their mud pits and have also turned their *bayam* rooms into gym rooms with the latest equipment. Similarly, the wrestling *akharas* have given up their mud pits over mat. However, they have continued to maintain their physical structure and spatial arrangements which have not been given up. These interiors and spatial arrangements have often intrigued me into understanding what relevance they had in making sense of *bayam* and physical culture. *Bayam samitis* and *akharas* are distinct and yet what ties them to a common thread could be their historical stories and the centrality of the notion of *bayam* or exercise. Notably most of these *bayam samitis* and *akharas* I have visited have an open courtyard that defines their physical structure. It is here that they engage into warm up exercises like running. They also have a gym room or iron room where the equipment for exercises are kept. In wrestling *akharas* too there is either a separate room or a space given for the equipment like *mugur*<sup>vi</sup> (an instrument of exercise), dumbbells, barbells or weight lifting machines for men to engage into *bayam* with machines. Apart from these what also makes these places similar is a temple of Hanuman or a place of worship and the focus on ascetic culture. One of the defining features of the *akharas* and *bayam samitis* are the place of worship, where hanuman is quintessentially the figure to be found. “The traditions of the *akhara*, as we encounter them today in cities and the countryside, continue many of the religious ideas and practices of asceticism” (Van De Veer, 2001, p. 100). Together, these places and spaces exhibit both masculine rigour and strength on one hand and calmness of devotion on the other, emanating from what goes on inside these spaces. At the same time, these are also place and

space in tension and marked by exclusions. It is this contradiction of masculine virility and vulnerability that I intend to show through this chapter.

Place and space studies have highlighted a crucial distinction between conceptualizing place and space, where place has been seen from the perspective of geographical location, as a local, while spaces have been imputed with abstract meanings (Massey, 2005). The place and space debate have ranged over a long time developing complex understanding of both. If on one hand a separation has been maintained between space and place, often it collapses on to one another, making them one and the same. Yet at times place is conceived as a part of space, as within space. Amidst these various ways of conceiving space and place, space has often gained an understanding of mathematical space and efforts have been made to do away with such an understanding to see space as a social construction, as socially, culturally produced through interactions and through histories (Low, Zuniga, 2003). In culturalizing and socializing space, place has been sidelined often because of its ontological nature. Space with all its abstractness has been able to argue for an understanding of a social and cultural space, produced, constructed and historically evolving idea without having to be reduced to any specific material locality. Alberto Corsin Jimenez argues to prioritize space over place as he considers place to have an “a-priori” territoriality attached to it. Instead, he argues for understanding space as a “condition” and as a “capacity for social relation” emphasizing on “what people do, not what people are” (Jimenez, 2003, p. 142) This way of conceptualizing space surely removes itself from any ontological associations to see space as completely constructed socially. Such an understanding necessarily removes the importance of studying the place as physically located and moves into the study of spaces as social or cultural constructions. Although spaces remain integral to our fieldwork practices as ethnographers, I argue the field necessarily speaks about

a locality, a place, a territoriality in the very material and concrete, where the study of place also becomes significant.

Viewing space as abstract and as something given, Lefebvre (1991) and Massey (Massey, 2005, p. 9) argue how spaces are reduced to “containers” that only contain people and their relations (Mooney, Hickey, 2019, p. 32). Instead, they argue through Lefebvre, “Lefebvre (1991) encourages scholars to be critical of the ways in which spaces (and the identities produced within them) are produced, maintained and contested through discursive practices that are political and ideological (Mooney, Hickey, 2019, p. 33). This understanding of space also comes up through Massey’s works, where he emphasizes upon the “multiplicity of social relations” and how spaces are constructed through them (Massey, 1994, p. 4). This way of conceiving space, makes it an open domain without any fixed meaning, which as Massey argues, have been generally seen as a static, “immobilized” idea of space. For Massey there has always been a tendency to, “...fix the meaning of particular spaces, to enclose them, endow them with fixed identities and to claim them for one’s own” (Massey, 1994, p. 4). Instead, he suggests that space needs to be understood through space and time and to see space as a “product of interrelations and constituted through interactions”. Space for him is a process then which is “never finished, never closed” (Massey, 2005, p. 9) (Mooney, Hickey, 2019, p. 32).

In engaging with Lefebvre’s work on *The Production of Space* (1991), Zhang argues, ‘space should be seen as the site of ongoing interactions of social relations rather than the mere result of such interactions – a process of production, in Lefebvre’s words, rather than a product” (Zhang, 2006, p. 219). In bringing in Lefebvre’s concept of the triad model of spaces, his concept of lived space remains significant. Bounded between perceived and conceived space, or pure materialism and pure idealism, lived space brings in the notion of embodiment in understanding spaces (Zhang, 2006). Spaces retain an understanding of it being an abstract idea

or notion of a particular aspect, be it urbanity or urban space or rural spaces. For example, a space of an *akhara* is understood by what goes inside it and its culture. It gives us an abstract idea of an *akhara* and what constitutes its inside, its space. This notion of space needs to be separated from place which is more concrete and local, in its materiality and embeddedness. This place cannot be abstracted from its embeddedness and generalized as a culture. It speaks of its uniqueness and differences from other *akharas* as individual places with histories, stories, lived experiences and memories.

Spaces have a bearing upon identities that occupy it, shaping people inhabiting that space. Simultaneously identities inhabiting certain spaces also bring about changes through the way they are made to make sense out of a space, the way they engage with it, maintain it, live it on an everyday basis. By reading *akhara* as a lived space and place, the chapter argues how the *akhara* as a lived space embodies the symbolic notion of masculinity. Here the term *akhara* is not limited to the wrestling pit but extends to the places and spaces of the *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars*. This extension of the term is a deliberate attempt on the part of these *bayam samitis* and also of this chapter, in order to emphasize on the significance they have for the members and for redefining the everyday reality of this space. Therefore, I refer to the *akhara* not just as a specific space but also as an everyday culture in itself. Instead of understanding *akhara* as a culture or only as a space having a culture, the present chapter will seek to argue in seeing *akhara* as a spatial culture. To quote Zuniga and Low again, “The space occupied by the body, and the perception and experience of that space, contracts and expands in relation to a person’s emotions and state of mind, sense of self, social relations and cultural predispositions” (Zuniga, Low, 2003, p. 2). Thus, rather than seeing the space as a material aspect lying outside, spaces are seen as constituted through everyday human experiences; and in making sense of a space, human-cultural lives become constituent parts of it.

The notion of a field as a place or an ethnographic ‘site’ has now been removed from its previous understanding of it as a locality or a location. As Hustrup and Olwig argues, “Generally, we may define the field, not primarily in terms of locality but as a field of relations which are of significance to the people involved in the study” (Hustrup, Olwig, 1997, p. 9). Hustrup and Oldwig’s work on *Sitting Culture* (1997) seeks to focus upon the notion of a moving field or rather the non-fixity of a location as opposed to a fixed idea of a field that existed throughout history in the domain of ethnographic works. Such an understanding once again brings into the space and place studies, a denial or removal of space and place as fixed, given entities where culture resides. I argue as much as it is crucial to do away with such notions of fixity or givenness of a field or location by concentrating on the shifting and moving idea, focusing on relations, it is equally pertinent to bring in the location and its materiality to confront the ontology of the field.

### **The Place of an *Akhara* and *Bayam Samity***

The embeddedness of a place has much to say and yet it has often been sidelined for its ontological implications. The a-priori given nature of a place (Jemenez, 2003), with all its rootedness reduces place to a location beyond which there is no further engagement. On the other hand, with sociological and other studies, the social constructionist perspective has reduced everything to a ‘social construct’, including a place which is denied its placeness and is wholly seen or understood as socially constructed from the meanings that people give to it (Entrikin, 1992). With the ontological turn, I argue, there is a call to return to place from space. The anthropologists and geographers like Rodman (1992), Tim Ingold (2000), Taun (2001), have tried to in turn speak of the place. Rodman’s “Empowering place” extensively spoke of place and one’s sense of self through the oneness with the land (Rodman, 1992). “Places are not inert containers. They are politicized, culturally relative, historically specific, local and

multiple construction” (Rodman,1992, p. 2). By bringing in the concept of multilocality, Rodman challenges the one singular narrative of a place instead to see the multiple ways a single place makes sense. However, to emphasize upon the multilocality of a place should not be to prioritize the interpretations of people over the place itself. Instead, it is needed to reflect upon place, its situatedness through the multiple ways it interacts with people and the narratives it generates and how people make sense of the place through their experiences. It speaks of the interaction of the place with the people. This becomes clear while discussing Entrikin’s *The Betweenness of Places* (1991) where he speaks of a middle ground between both *existential* and *naturalistic* understanding of place. He does so by critiquing a “decentered” view of place or moving away from the idea of *placelessness*, to emphasize upon place as “context” removed from “place as fact” to speak about the ‘subjective experiences’ of places (Entrikin, 1991, p. 7). However, both in the case of Rodman and Entrikin, somewhere the perspectives of people gain supremacy over the place with all its “placeness”.

Herein I wish to argue about the materiality of a place and what it entails for us in our efforts to make sense of places. To experience a place in all its materiality and situatedness, is not to value our understanding over and above the place by attaching meaning to it but instead to give into the place, as a form of submission to what the place makes us feel, experience, know and understand. Following the ontological turn, as Holbraad argues, it is important for us to rethink our own concepts rather than defining the ethnography with our own concepts (Holbraad, 2007). I argue that there is a need to prioritize experience over interpretation. Here I wish to distinguish between the two which I argue is fundamental. Interpretations generally assume there is clear cut divide between the one who is interpreting and the one being interpreted, in this case the place. Meaning making thus, happens through a process of interpretation which necessarily prioritizes ethnographer’s understanding over the place which always happens at a distance. This distance in turn is collapsed in case of an experience. Experience is when we let

ourselves sink into the environment, where the place also makes us feel, know and understand. The relation is formed between the place and us. Rather than giving meaning to a place, the place gives us in terms of how we feel, or know about it. The place makes us rethink and understand rather than we giving our meanings and interpretations to it. Together this constitutes an ontological understanding of the place, where the ontology speaks back to us. Rootedness not only gives a materiality to the idea of a locality but also extends it into how we understand that place and the situatedness of identity.



**17. Kidderpore Bayam Samity Courtyard**

The above picture captures the interiors of Kidderpore Mahabir *Bayam* Samity that was formed in this temple arena of a 300 years old pre-existing Dakshina Kali temple. The presence of the temple and *shakti* worship made the place ideal for the cultivation of *shakti* during the colonial-

nationalist period. This place is then rooted in a specific history that gives meaning to how we understand the *bayam samity* and *bayam* today in relation to *shakti* worship. Ingold discusses how narratives set in place helps in understanding place through “habitation” and “self-identification” with the land (Ingold, 2000). This can be understood from the wrestler’s relation to the mud pit and *akhara*. The *akhara* mud pit is one of the most important part of wrestling as the wrestling bouts takes place on them. It is not just a mere place on which wrestling happens, but a place that is created with care and regard. The mud pit is toiled and prepared through an extensive process after which it becomes ready for wrestling. This toiling does not end in the creation of the mud pit but it becomes an everyday practice of the wrestlers to plough the field and make it ready each day for wrestling. The everyday ploughing makes the mud fluffy before a wrestling bout, preventing the mud from becoming hard. The everyday engagement with the mud pit is then also an everyday engagement with the wrestler’s body. This extensive toiling of the mud from its creation to its maintenance makes the wrestlers develop a relation with the mud. The mud attains a character and significance of its own in relation to the wrestler. The mud pits also become a place of worship.

*Simla Bayam Samity* no longer continues with the wrestling tradition it once had. Although this does not mean that the place has forgotten the tradition. It still lives on not only through the memory of the *akhara* but the physical location, the place of the wrestling pit. One afternoon one of the members of the *samity* took me to the place where the wrestling *akhara* was previously. The place was just beside the office room, overlooking the large ground where *Durga Puja* happens. It was evident that the place was not an enclosed space, but has been converted into so by enclosing it with grills. The ground was made of red flooring and on one end of the wall was a Hanuman temple.



**18. The Location of Simla Bayam Samity's Akhara**

*This is a sacred place so we keep it closed. This red ground, this round space you see here was the akhara mud pit which was almost one or two hands deep.....So kusti happened here.*

On asking about the Hanuman Temple he said,

*It is here since the birth of Simla Bayam Samity. People took vows here. So we don't do anything here. If someone comes into this ground, the sacredness will be lost. You can see how we have covered the area with iron grills.*

The physical place of the *akhara* has been kept protected even though the mud pit is no longer there and the wrestling tradition has been given up. The place, in its materiality, continues to embody the sacredness of the *akhara*. The *akhara* still lives on through the rootedness of its location. The description of the mud by referring to the thickness made me feel the depth of the ground on which we were standing at that moment. He also narrated how one of the members requested for the *mati* (mud) of the *akhara* to be touched on his forehead when he was ill. This showed the deep respect and bond that one had with the mud pit. This was not only about a deep respect one had for the mud pit as a site of worship but also a relation with the mud that the wrestlers formed through the everyday bond they shared with it. This also resonates with *Kidderpore Mahabir Bayam Samity* who has kept their *akhara* mud pit alive till today.



19. *Kidderpore Bayam Samity's unused akhara mud pit*

Attachments were also formed with the place itself, the *vyayamaghar* and *akhara*. I once came across a man one afternoon at *Bajrang Vyayamaghar* who was lying down resting in one of the benches. Sitting near him, I had started a short conversation with him. I came to know he has been part of this *vyayamaghar* since a long time but he no longer engages into *bayam* now due to some health issues. I found it strange to find him still coming to this place in this hot afternoon rather than spending his time at home. On enquiring about the reasons for his visit, he told me how he loved the place and had a deep attachment to it because of which he kept coming back. By just lying there he would spend hours experiencing the place. This instance is relevant to understand how he saw *vyayamaghar* even outside of the *bayam* practices, through the place and his attachment with it.

While the space of the *akharas* and *bayam samitis* are understood through the practices and culture that permeates and constitutes them generating a generalized understanding of these spaces, it not bounded by a particularity of a place or location. However, these local experiences on the other hand bring us to the concept of place which is often defined as “lived space” (Low, 2017, p. 12) with a more concrete, rooted, tangible material domain that has a specific location. These individual or specific stories and experiences of these *bayam samitis* open up the possibilities to understand how people relate to the particular places and how the places relate to them. This is how a place can be understood not merely as a fact but also in a context, or in relation to the people who inhabit the place. This chapter thus addresses *akharas* as not only spaces of strength cultivation and practices but also as places located in specific areas, with histories, geography and materiality.

## Women, Akhara and Politics of Space-making

Rudraneil Sengupta, the author of *Enter the Dangal* (2016), described *akharas* as the “manliest spaces” in my conversation with him. According to him the entire idea of *kusti* is based on a male endeavor. This also meant that what holds *akhara* as a masculine space is also the necessary absence of women. It is similar in context of the *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars* too. Sengupta, who has done his extensive ethnography in *akharas* in North India mentioned how women are never allowed in the *akharas*. *Akharas* are spaces that define its territoriality in terms of certain exclusions. Although with the growing culture of women joining wrestling in current times, these ideas are fast diminishing, yet as Sengupta says, most men or *gurus* of the *akharas* are not happy with this change and they continue to maintain and claim *akharas* as exclusively for men. The absence of women in wrestling became a significant topic of conversation with *Gobor Goho*’s disciple. According to him during their times women were not into wrestling. This absence however is not just a mere lack of participation from women I argue, but a necessary exclusion that uphold *akharas* as masculine spaces. This can be understood in how one of the *gurus/trainers* of a *vyayamaghar* narrated to me the three basic things that men should stay away from in physical cultures or *bayam*. These are women, alcohol and other addictions. This narrative not only gives an idea about the *bayam* culture but also of the *vyayamaghars* and *akharas* as controlled spaces or environment based on certain exclusions. They exhibit a strict disciplinary culture that defines the spaces of an *akhara*. However, the scenarios have now changed whereby women have entered these masculine spheres though not necessarily overturning their masculineness. In my interaction with a *guru* or coach of a wrestling *akhara* in *Jorabagan*<sup>lvii</sup> I was informed how women are also part of the *akhara* at present times. I was informed that the major reason for women to take up wrestling is to learn self-defense in an increasingly unsafe world. This interestingly brings in the difference between men’s and women’s participation whereby women’s choices are more in

response to external threats while men define the space as their own, and therefore fundamental to their subjectivities. This distinction remains crucial in understanding *akharas* and wrestling as a masculine space. It is not simply the presence of men that makes it masculine, I argue that the space itself exhibits characteristics that could be symbolically read as masculine, creating masculine protectors of the nation and its citizens. Thus, women's entry does not change their meaning in any way but rather it is women who seek to enter these domains because of its very masculinity.

It is also significant to reflect upon my own experience as a woman researcher in these places where my entry was often seen as a form of trespassing into the forbidden space and place. My presence in the *vyayamaghar* has often made me uncomfortable. These feelings arise out of my lived gender identity as a woman in a masculine space of a *vyayamaghar* that prohibits the entry of women. Can this then also reflect on the notion of sacred/profane dichotomy in religious spheres? The temple of a celibate God, Hanuman adjacent to the *vyayamaghar* also produces an effect of a place that claim's certain ideas of purity thereby also bringing in the notions of purity and masculinity together (Van de veer, 2001). What does this feeling tell us about making sense of spaces? Sense making is not only about how we understand and experience them through our senses of sight but also through our embodied presence. As James Davies in context of fieldwork experiences argue, "emotions are but one aspect of any human experience, and we do violence to the complexity of lived experience when we make analytical cuts between emotion and thought, or emotion, the senses, thought and action." (Davies, 2010, p. 25). Building on this argument, I emphasize on my feeling of uncomfortableness as something not to be dismissed but as a necessary ethnographic insight.

My presence in the *bayam samitis* and *akharas* has been a perceived problematically. In my initial attempts to enter one of the *vyayamaghars* of South Kolkata, I was always being told

that the place is restricted to men, making it difficult for me to access. In one of my usual visits to one of the *bayam samitis* in an afternoon, I came across men who were busy engaging in exercise in the iron room. I approached one of the men for a conversation when he came out of the gym room. However, he wasn't really welcoming. Not only did he refuse me, he also quite harshly told me that I should not be disturbing them now when they are engaging in *bayam*. For him these are the moments that they solely dedicate to *bayam* and thus they do not want any intruders causing disturbances. This almost came as a warning or advice from him asking me to stay away. This came as quite insulting to me and simultaneously played a very significant part of my research. The idea of disturbance was extremely important to understand *bayam* as an activity that requires a detachment from things around and a need for concentration. But more significantly this detachment should be from the figure of woman. Women have throughout ages been seen as a site of deviation or disturbances to men whether in context of yogic ascetic practices or in everyday life where women are said to be a distraction for men. *Bayam samitis* are also spaces that conceive women as distraction and one of the reasons I was asked not to come during their *bayam* hours was to stop being an element of distraction for these men. Disturbances were not merely about my asking for conversations or talking, because the men always engage into conversations while working out. However, my embodied presence of being a woman in these domains and also an outsider made me a figure to be kept out. This made me experience these spaces as masculine that constantly strives to curb the feminine. I experienced a similar sense of exclusion when I visited an *akhara* in *Barabazar*<sup>lviii</sup>. Even though I was welcomed by the wrestlers and the *guru* in the *akhara* I also felt how the *guru* would constantly practice surveillance and ultimately ensured that I left the *akhara* as soon as possible. This gave me an idea how *akhara* is also a space that comes into tension with the coming up of those who are excluded.

In the above two experiences of mine, I came up as a figure of an outsider. This *outsider* identity was not only in terms of not being a part of the particular *vyayamaghar* and *akhara* in question, but also for being an *outsider* to the very masculine idea of an *akhara* or *akhara* culture. My inclusion as an *outsider* into the inner domains of the *akhara* created an intense tension in the space, the space that exhibits the masculine ideas of strength, virility and masculinity. The embodied presence of a woman brings out a tension in the domain and yet very significantly this tension I realized was always already present.

### ***Bayam Samitis and Akharas as Homosocial Spaces***

The *akharas* are not only masculine domains but are also homo-social spaces that brings in an interesting contradiction of masculinity, bonding and eroticism. According to Bird, homo-sociality is the social bond between same sex people which is based on “nonsexual attractions” or nonsexual relation of members of the same sex. (Lipman Blumen, 1976) (Bird, 1996, p. 121). Thus, homo-sociality maintains the sex segregation (Lipman-Blumen, 1976) and thereby becomes an area for “doing” one’s gender. (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Homosocial bonds between men, is often “defined as a mechanism and social dynamic that explains the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity” (Hammaren, Johansson, 2014, p. 1). Yet homo-sociality has its own contradictions. According to Eve Sedgwick, ““Homosocial” is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with “homosexual,” and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from “homosexual”” (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 1). For Sedgwick “homo-social desire” is an “oxymoron”. “To draw the “homosocial” back into the orbit of “desire,” of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual – a continuum whose visibility, for men,

in our society, is radically disrupted” (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 1-2). This disruption and the subsequent tensions also erupt in any homo-social space, like the *akhara*, where the prevalence of all men group not only creates male-male bonding but also brings in intimacy and tensions. I argue towards reading the *akharas* and *bayam samitis* as “homo-social spaces” because of understanding them in and through the concept of homo-sociality and homo-social desire that defines the space. Although *akharas* and *vyayamghars* are perceived as spaces of masculinity, strength and power on one hand, they are also, I argue, spaces of intimate male bonding, intimacy, erotism and tensions. The essential feature of the traditional *bayam samitis*, *vyayamaghars* and *akharas* have been based on an exclusion of women and anything feminine, making the domain exclusively for men. Coates argues that one of the important ways one can understand hegemonic masculinity is through its denial of femininity that remains because its in that denial that sustains the masculine identity (Coates, 2003). But it is not only the presence of men but also the prevalence of an ascetic masculine culture that pervades the domain (Van de veer, 2001). It is this overtly masculine culture and a simultaneous homosocial bonding and closeness among men that brings the tension and contradiction in the space of the *bayam samitis* and *akharas*.

A *guru* in one of the *bayam samitis* narrated the significance of the *bayam samitis* as places that keep people out of other unnecessary engagements. According to him, men usually end up spending their free evenings engaging in activities like drinking or smoking with their friends. He instead insisted on spending that time in *bayam samitis* by engaging in *bayam*. He further elaborated how *bayam* helps one keep out of the meandering thoughts. This also renders the space as embodying the ascetic culture which is away from the everyday world of work and home, a homo-social space where these men can concentrate on engaging with one another and themselves and their bodies. Alter argues how the wrestlers view their position in relation to a *sannyasi* were the wrestler seeks to bring together asceticism, the everyday disciplines of

wrestling and the moral values of a citizen (Alter, 1992, p. 319). Thus, man-making and *bayam* culture come together, where, through the everyday disciplines of *bayam* and ascetic rituals the person would embody manhood and thereby one's identity as a man and a citizen. *Bayam* thus is not just a practice but an essential aspect of man-making and identity.

However, even though the *akhara* demands a masculine environment with a strict exclusion of women and a place solely for men away from their daily lives, this also becomes a place that brings the idea of masculinity into tension. The homo-social space of the *akhara* that develops and shapes the homo-social bonds between men also slips into homo-erotism. This became more evident when I visited the wrestling mud pit *akharas*. In one of my visits in one such *akhara* as I moved towards the wrestling mud pit, I saw men almost half naked, in their *langots*<sup>lix</sup> (cloth covering the genitalia), lying on the smooth *akhara* mud and rubbing themselves in it. The intimate closeness of their bodies with one another and with the mud made me realize *akharas* as homo social spaces, spaces that exhibit both the characteristics of masculine virility and also an intensely charged intimacy between men. In my conversation with one of the wrestlers from an *akhara* in *Goabagan*, I was told how wrestlers are also perceived as homosexuals. He did not use the terminology but it hinted at such an understanding owing to their close proximity which people often mistook for eroticism. According to him, the reason for people to say that was because wrestlers would jostle with one another with their bodies alongside taking baths together after a wrestling match. This has been a common tradition in wrestling. After spending time in the mud pit, where they would drench themselves in their sweat and mud, they would take a bath together. This would happen either in specific washrooms or in case of *akharas* near ganga or river side, men would go together into the river to wash themselves clean. These physical intimacies between the wrestlers create a homo-erotic moment that brought in sexual tensions.

My own experience of witnessing a bout in an *akhara* in made me come across one such intimate moment. The view of two men embracing one another, which in one of the wrestler's terminology is popularly known as *japta japti kora*<sup>lx</sup>, can at first resemble a fight. But as most wrestlers often say, it is not fighting. Instead, it is an embrace, an engagement with one another, it is love. It is interesting to note how brotherhood and love come together in this homo-social environment that is significantly transformed into a homo-erotic intimacy. It is not just the intimacy between men that I observed. Recalling my very first visit to a popular *akhara* near Howrah Bridge, I came across an erotic moment. This sight is common in all mud wrestling pits where one would usually find men rubbing themselves on the mud or rubbing mud on their bodies. The mud which is created very carefully with utmost care using significant medicinal elements is considered to be anti-septic. Applying it on one's body is a tradition in wrestling not only for the purpose of wrestling but also for the properties the mud has. I observed how men were lying down on the mud pit and rubbing themselves slowly on it. Rubbing oneself on the mud was a tradition that was done with the aim of cooling oneself. The wrestler's body heats up and sweats due to exercise and wrestling after which they prefer to lie down on mud and rub themselves on it. This rubbing entails cooling oneself where the cold mud absorbs the heat of the wrestler's body into it. This moment I argue is eroticized when we understand the mud not just as mud but as earth. Mud is the earth, the bearer, the womb. The mud absorbing the heat of the body is suggestive of a sexual symbolism making it yet another intimate erotic moment.

### **Religion, Purity and Masculinity**

Located adjacent to temples, the physical structure of a *vyayamaghar* has much to say. Gobor Goho, once spoke about the presence of temples adjacent to *akharas* and *vyayamaghars* as a distinguishing mark of the *bayam* or physical cultures of India from the west. "In some

instances, it is difficult to say whether the central aspect of an *akhara* is the temple or the wrestling pit, for the two blur into each other to such an extent as to preclude any sharp distinction” (Alter, 1992, p. 319). As Singleton argues, the western or European discourse of physical culture was integrated into Indian society by remaking physical exercise or *bayam* as “religious practice” (Singleton, 2010, p. 89). The moral, spiritual and religious aspects were emphasized and fused together in order to create an *Indian* version of physical culture that could be separated from its western counterparts despite remaining tied to it. Thus, the place and structure of the *vyayamaghars* and *bayam samitis* have much to say. *Shakti* worship remains an omnipotent background to the *bayam samity* life whether in the form of *Hanuman* or *Durga* or *Kali*. *Durga puja* and *bayam samitis* have a long connection through history, where worship of *shakti* in the form of *Durga* or *Kali* and cultivation of strength or *shakti* in the form of *bayam* is significant. The everyday worship of Hanuman in *akharas* and *vyayamaghars*, *Kali puja* conducted by *Bajrang vyayamaghar*, *Durga puja* by *Simla Bayam Samity* and *Birastami puja* of *Hathkhola Bayam Samity*, speaks of the intimate relation to religion. Here religion or worship takes on a different form moving away from the feminine notions of worship and domesticity to that of a masculine form of worship of strength and power.

Devotion also comes up in context of the *bayam* in itself. Alter argues how wrestlers do not necessarily see their “activities” “as distinct from the ritual and devotional life of the larger religious complex” (Alter, 1992, p. 319). The everyday gym room itself becomes a place of worship, where what is being worshipped are the instruments and the entire practice of body cultivation. My visit to the *bayam samitis* gave me moments to observe them in their practices. I will narrate a field note from one evening from my visit to *Bajrang vyayamaghar*.

*It was an evening in Bajrang vyayamaghar when I observed the guru of the akhara or the trainer engaging in bayam inside the gym room. The utmost care with which he was lifting*

*weights showed his intense patience, dedication towards those instruments. After completion he touched each of those instruments or irons as he prefers to call them and did pranaam or salutation (folded his hands and offered a prayer). Finally, he looked up at a picture of Hanuman, folded his hands and offered a prayer). Bhakti, that he later told me, was very essential for shorir chorchha and shorir gothon (body cultivation), and these instruments are a way through which he does so. For him nishtha or dedication and patience are the pillars of shorir chorchha.*

This moment in the gym room of *Bajranga vyayamaghar* became synonymous with that of the adjacent Hanuman temple. Here in this moment the place itself transforms into a divine realm. I have observed other men too, if not all, who also offered prayers before beginning *bayam*. I recollect another such moment in my first field visit to an *akhara* in bara bazar. It was early in the morning when I reached the *akhara*. As soon as I was going to place my foot for going inside the *akhara*, I was stopped by a man in his thirties who insisted that I first touch the ground as a salutation or mark of worship before entering into the *akhara*. I did the same along with him and entered the *akhara*. The reason behind such a gesture as he explained was because they considered the *akhara* as a temple and worshipping or offering salutations before stepping into it was necessary. At that moment I could no longer distinguish between a temple and an *akhara*, these two realms came together and gave a sense of the place and space of the *akhara*.

Worshipping of instruments that I spoke about above also becomes true in wrestling *akharas* where what is worshipped is the wrestling pit. My very early field visit to an *akhara* in *Jorabagan* made me come across a wrestling *akhara* that has now moved away from mud pit to mat. This *akhara* was not in an open space but rather enclosed in a large room. The mat was spread in the middle of the room where men would wrestle. At the right side of the entrance is a small temple area which houses a Hanuman idol. While I sat there observing the men in the

*akhara*, I noted a young boy doing *puja* (worship) in the Hanuman temple. After worshipping hanuman with an incense stick, he carried it across the *akhara* to worship the place. It made me recollect my experiences at my own home where my mother too while doing her evening *puja* goes into every corner to bless the house. According to Alter, ‘sticks of incense are lighted in honor of Hanuman, and the smoke is wafted by each wrestler toward his face and chest’ (Alter, 1993, p. 54). The young wrestlers were doing the same. Then to my surprise he got down on the mat and worshipped it in a similar manner as he was worshipping hanuman. After worshipping the wrestling pit he came up to me to give me *prasad* or offerings which I readily accepted. This was an everyday ritual in the *akhara* it seemed. After the *puja* was over, the men again got back to practicing wrestling.

The worshipping of the wrestling pit is a significant part of the *akhara* culture. According to Alter, the men in the *akharas* always invoke Hanuman’s name before entering the wrestling pit. It is believed that by doing so Hanuman will protect the wrestlers and give them the necessary “strength” and “courage” they need (Alter, 1993, p. 54). Rudraneil Sengupta (2016) discussed how every *akhara* in North India will begin its day with a *hanuman puja*. The *akhara* mud was considered to be a place of worship. It was a common belief among wrestlers, according to Sengupta, that Hanuman descends on the *akhara* mud every morning and it is thereby I argue that a site of celibate purity, masculine virility and devotion is established. This interesting mythological take was very significant to understand how Hanuman becomes very ‘real’ for these wrestlers. As Rudraneil Sengupta says in his book *Enter the Dangal*, “For Pahalwans, Hanuman is neither a myth, not just an abstract god-figure whose divinity is incomprehensible” (Sengupta, 2016, p. 130). The physicality of Hanuman became alive in the physicality of the mud pit. This is also perhaps for a similar reason that the *akhara* near *Mallick Ghat* places its Hanuman Idol on the mud pit itself.

*Mallick Ghat akhara*, also known as *Siya Ram akhara* located on the banks of river Ganga, holds a traditional mud pit. My field visits to the place in the early mornings made me experience the wrestling tradition there. The mud pit was surrounded by a net and an elevated boundary was there on all sides. On one corner of the boundary was placed a Hanuman idol, and two *mundis*<sup>lxi</sup> that were, I understood, of Hanuman as they were too smeared with vermilion as the hanuman idol. My interlocutor who took me to the *akhara* explained to me that *mundis* are basically stones that are then converted into idols and worshipped. I understood that these two *mundis* were from earlier times when Hanuman idol was not yet prevalent and these were turned into hanuman idols by smearing vermilion and worshipping them as hanuman. What came in as a surprise for me was the location or placing of the idol. The idols were placed inside the mud pit. Usually in every *akhara* that I have visited, hanuman idols were placed in a separate temple area or separate corners and places. The presence of hanuman right on the wrestling field signified its divine presence on the mud pit. The divinity and purity of the mud pit became significant when Hanuman idol was placed on it and along with it, Hanuman's physical presence on the mud was also established. Hanuman no longer remained an abstract figure of purity and masculinity but manifested in the *akhara* mud itself. Thus, the mud pit became a physical marker of masculinity, virility and divinity, of what Hanuman represents.

Hanuman, the epitome of *shakti* and masculinity permeates the place of the *akharas* and *bayam samitis* whether through the idols, wall arts or images on the walls. In every place that I went, a Hanuman temple was always there. However, in wrestling *akharas* Hanuman's presence is more emphasized than in *bayam samitis*. Hanuman thereby becomes an embodiment of divinity and masculinity bringing the two apparently distinct realms together. This is also true for how Hanuman brings the aspects of *shakti* (power/energy) and *Bhakti* (devotion) together as discussed by Joseph Alter (Alter, 1993). According to Alter, *shakti* which is translated as a form of feminine power or energy emanates from "the confluence of physical strength,

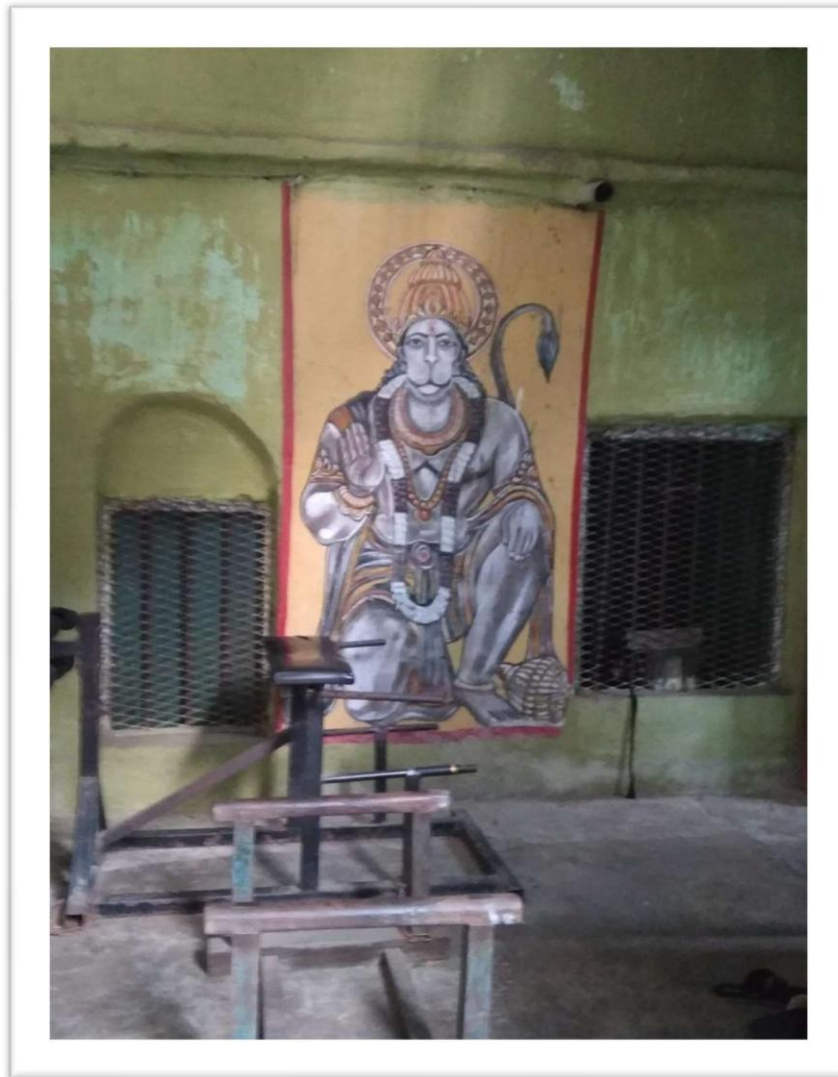
devotion, self-realization and self-control” which Hanuman seeks to uphold (Alter, 1993, p. 170). A similar idea permeates the *bayam* culture and wrestling domains where devotion to Hanuman or *shakti* Goddess remains a significant aspect. In Bengal, however, Hanuman is not the only God who represents *shakti*, but mainly *Kali* and *Durga*. History of *Shakta* tradition in Bengal and the beginning of worship of *shakti* Goddess during the colonial period by the nationalist remains crucial to understand the regional aspect of worship and devotion. In one of my conversations with a body builder in his 50s, I was told how they would visit *Kali* temples. He informed me that while the north Indians would worship Hanuman, for them it was *Kali*. Thus, pictures of *Kali* are often seen to be hanging from the walls of the *bayam samitis* and *akharas* in Kolkata.

Devotion here is not only an abstract idea but devotion is embodied through the everyday rituals of both *bayam* and devotion, and sometimes they come together where *bayam* itself becomes devotion. Alter discusses how the “rote recitation of prayer and the repeated exercise” by wrestlers can be read in a parallel manner to understand how the abstract idea of religiosity materializes in the *akharas* (Alter, 1992, p. 32). The concept of *sadhana* that is integral to religion is also something that is significant in *bayam* cultures. The men of the *vyayamaghars* and *bayam samitis* often referred to their practices as *sadhana*. Though mostly used in religious and spiritual context of devotion and worship, it also translates into perseverance, practice and cultivation, all of which remains significant to *bayam* culture. Adrian Piper describes *sadhana* or “spiritual practice” through specific forms of actions like “disciplines” or “austerities” including *yama*, *niyama* that one practices in their everyday lives (Piper, 2009, p. 129). The religious devotion and the devotion towards *bayam* are enmeshed in these spaces. To read *sadhana* through the spaces of *bayam samitis*, *akharas*, is to understand the spaces and its relation to the people who inhabit those spaces. Crucial to the concept of *sadhana* is also the everydayness of it. *Sadhana* speaks of an everyday engagement of cultivation and practice. It

is here that the spirituality of *sadhana* comes together in context of the everyday materiality of the body. In this context it is worth recalling J. Alter when he seeks to question Partha Chatterjee's distinction between the spiritual and material spheres of nationalism (1989). "Clearly, "Hindu" notions of somaticity – both in terms of ritual, health and social hierarchy – fall within the domain of what Chatterjee refers to as the spiritual discourse of nationalism, and yet bodies are concrete material objects....The literature on *Brahmacharya* clearly illustrates the extent to which, in the late twentieth century at least, the 'spiritual' male body became a focal site for a discourse of nationalism" (Alter, 2011, p. 24). This blurring of what is referred to as a spiritual domain of ideas and the material domain of the body, comes together in context of the 'spiritual male body'.

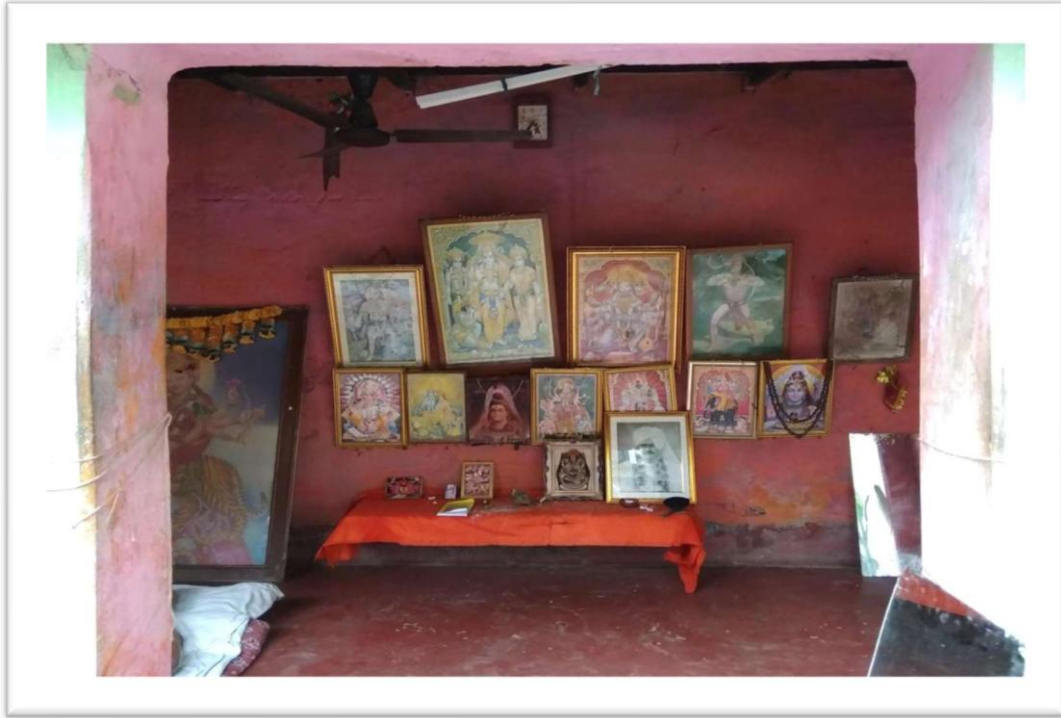
### ***Akhara and Bayam Samity as Hindu space***

On a quiet winter evening as I stepped into *Bajrang Vyayamaghar* the traffic sounds slowly faded and the sound of 'Sri Ram Jai Ram, Jai Jai Ram' came floating into my ears from a tape recorder playing in the Hanuman temple beside. One of the ways of making sense of this place or *vyayamaghar* has been through this song which is played all evening in the temple creating an atmosphere of bhakti. A hanuman temple attached to the *vyayamaghar* is a part of an extension of the *vyayamaghar* itself such that one may fail to separate the two. Together the *vyayamaghar* is experienced not only as a place of divinity but also as a Hindu domain.



20. A courtyard outside the bayam room of Hathkhola Bayam Samity

The *akharas* and *bayam samitis* are spaces and places that can be read as Hindu domains. I use the term Hindu not only in the sense of the presence of predominantly Hindu men but also the design of the spaces that exhibited signs of a particular religious tradition. The presence of hanuman was one such image that has almost become a marker of a Hindu identity. The image above shows the entrance to the gym room of *Hathkhola Bayam Samity*. The large wall art of Hanuman will be of significance to understand how *bayam* spaces, the wall arts and designs reveal a relation to a particular religious tradition.



#### 21. Arjun Vyayamshala Worship Area

This picture from *Arjun Vyayam Shala* located in Central Kolkata gives a glimpse of the worship area. This was an elevated area on one end of the *vyayamshala* on whose opposite side was the mud pit. The image makes it clear how this space of the *akhara* is used as a site of worship. Alongside Hanuman's image, there are several Hindu God Goddesses present in this frame.

A similar image comes up in Yoganath Puri math *akhara* in Cotton street as well.



## 22. Cotton Street Akhara mud pit

The wall behind the mud pit is filled with images of Gods and Goddesses. The proximity of the images to the mud pit where the main action goes on makes the place holy. The places of the *akharas* significantly brought in markers that exhibited characteristic markers of Hindu religious tradition. Apart from that, the *bayam Samitis* and *akharas* formed in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were created specifically for Hindus. Van Der Veer argues how the Hindu idea of masculinity was formed in relation to a Muslim threat towards their “Mother India” (Van Der Veer, 2001, p. 102). The “paranoid nationalism” according to Van Der Veer took on the “discourse on race” where they used the European understanding of Aryan race and created a racial difference between Hindus and Muslims as opposed to only a religious one (Van Der Veer, 2001, p. 102). This led not only to the formation of Hindu organizations like RSS but also the Bengali groups and organizations like *Anushilan Samity*<sup>lxiii</sup> which trained people to fight through indigenous means and where men were made to take vows, including

the vow of celibacy (Van Der Veer, 2001, p. 103). The opening of the various *akharas* and *bayam samitis* in Bengal happened with the similar intention of developing the Hindu male body physically through discipline and self-control. Thomas Hansen argues how the “myth of loss” of masculinity among Hindu men laid the foundation for Hindu nationalist discourse and it is by “expunging” the Muslim “Other” that the Hindus were trying to overcome their effeminacy and thereby recuperating their masculinity (Hansen, 1996 138). “The fear of effeminization not only relates to the colonial experience but also typically to the often violent competition with “the enemy within,” the Muslims” (Van Der Veer, 2001, p. 103)

Every *akhara* that I have visited, alongside *bayam samitis*, the figure of Hanuman was a quintessential aspect prevalent in all. Alongside Hanuman’s idol, the walls of *akharas* and *bayam samitis* will also consist of pictures of Hindu Gods and Goddess, marking the domains specifically as Hindu. Ritualistic worship also takes place in such places too, where Hindu way of worshipping Hanuman is another feature. Hanuman not only resides merely as a symbol of power, masculinity and virility, he is also ritualistically worshipped everyday, alongside in special occasions. For example, *Simla Bayam Samity*, formed on the day of ram Navami, conducts a Hanuman puja on that day marking its beginning. *Hathkhola Bayam Samity*’s *Birashtami puja* focusing on Hanuman worship, Baagbazar and *Simla Bayam Samity*’s *Birashtami puja* on *Maha Ashtami*<sup>lxiii</sup> of *Durga* puja are few such occasions. Apart from this *Durga* Puja has been central to these *Bayam Samitis* as a form of *shakti* worship. This event continues today where alongside *Durga* Puja, they also conduct *Kali* puja. The men in these *bayam samitis* always emphasize on the worship of *shakti* in the form of *Durga*, *Kali* or Hanuman. It is unknown whether *shakti* worship remains a significant part of *bayam samitis* for its association or centrality in the worship of *shakti*/power which is crucial in *bayam* or because of it being a primary form of worship among Hindu Bengalis. But what cannot be

denied are the Hindu religious tradition and the cult of *shakti* worship that remains an important part of *bayam samitis* from its inception.

My curiosity aroused on how people who do not associate with Hanuman or any Hindu identity would be placed in such a context. In my interaction with various men at different points of time in the *vyayamaghar* in South Kolkata, I have never come across anyone other than a Hindu. Created in order to bring back manliness among Hindu men, this particular *vyayamaghar* still continues to be predominantly about Hindu men. Joya Chatterji on discussing the emergence of “bhadralok nationalism” during early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengal considered physical cultures to be one of the central aspects of it (Chatterji, 2002, p. 163). She says,

“The attainment of physical strength and vigour, it was believed, through traditional forms of exercise - sword-play, *lathi-play* and wrestling – would exorcise the feeble and timid anglophile babu within and awaken the dormant strength and vigour of the Bengali nation. The earliest form of nationalist mobilisation in Bengal was thus the “*byayam samiti*” or the physical culture club” (Chatterji, 2002, p. 163).

The belief that a regeneration of manliness among Bengali men would take place through different forms of physical cultures considered the Bengali identity to be only a Hindu identity. The character of the babu has historically been associated with the Hindu identity. The relation drawn between the babu image and that of the Bengali nation then discusses Bengal through the lens of a Hindu identity thereby making Bengali identity from an ethnic identity to a religious one. I already discussed how exclusion of women or anything feminine is crucial in order to uphold the *akharas* and *bayam samitis*. A similar exclusionary practice can be observed in the context of religion. As noted above *bayam samitis* were becoming domains for bringing Hindu men together to join in the struggle against the colonizers and simultaneously

a place for rejuvenating not only manliness but their identities as Hindu men. This is also evident from the literature during nationalist period, especially Bankim Chandra's *Anandamath* which is grounded on the reconstruction of Hindu male identity. Chandrima Chakraborty discusses how countering the British's marking of Bengali's as effeminate, Bankim seeks to rejuvenate Bengali (Hindu) masculinity through a construction of a past which speaks of Bengali (Hindu) valour in opposition to "alien invaders (Muslim and British)". "This presence of physical prowess in the past is then established as constitutive of Bengali/Hindu masculinity" (Chakraborty, 2006, p. 6). I argue it not only constitutes Hindu masculinity but also Bengali identity as essentially Hindu. By showing Bengali's valour against Muslims and British invaders, he establishes not only the British as an enemy and invader but also the Muslims. Thus, I argue he not only establishes the national with Hindu by erasing the Muslims but also the Bengali identity as Hindu erasing the Bengali Muslims from view. Thus, as discussed in the last chapter, the national regeneration was in fact a Hindu regeneration. Since this regeneration was behind the formation of these *bayam samitis*, they too were formed exclusively for the Bengali Hindu men. The histories of the *bayam samitis* also reveal the exclusionary practices through which they were constructed. In my conversations with men in these *bayam samitis* this exclusionary idea came up behind their formation. The *bayam samitis* in most cases were created specifically for Hindu men. A conversation with a *guru* in one of the *vyayamaghars* also made me come across this. He narrated how the failures and weakness of Hindu men during the colonial period was the reason behind the creation of that particular *vyayamaghar* in South Kolkata.

The present admission systems also go through a process of exclusion as discussed in previous chapter. It has often come up from the members how careful they are in admitting people and restrict those who are not conceived by them as "*bhadra*"<sup>lxiv</sup>. This exclusion in terms of "*bhadralok*"<sup>lxv</sup> identity not only speaks about the exclusion of men belonging to class and caste

minorities but also extends to religious identity of men. While discussing the admission process in a *bayam samity* in North Kolkata, it became evident how people from the neighborhood are the ones to become members here. Since in cities neighborhoods are demarcated in terms of religious and ethnic identities, a *bayam samity* that is located in a neighborhood populated predominantly by Bengali Hindus, the members automatically turn out to be Hindus. On further questioning if the *bayam samitis* which were formed mostly for Hindu men still continue to be so or not, the trainer said, “We still do not take in Muslims”. According to him their behavior and manners are very different from Hindus for which they are not admitted here. This difference was not merely a difference but essentially a hierarchical difference. He adds how there has been one Muslim member who was more like them (Hindus) for which he became fit to be part of the *bayam samity*. He further explains how there are no written rules of exclusion but they do it subtly. On asking how they understand whom to exclude, he says, “Chokh much dekhe bojha jaye (we can understand them through their faces)”. The second method according to him is asking their locality or address where they come from. He adds, “There are some places and localities where you already know that boys staying in them can never be good”. Once again coming to localities makes it evident how localities are determining factors of one’s identity. “Geography is relevant to the social construction of race and ethnicity because identities are created not only by the labels that are borne but through the spaces and places in which they exist” (Berry and Henderson, 2002, p. 6). Localities are not merely places but become places marked by identities of religious, ethnic, caste and class groups. The exclusions that are followed make it evident how the places not only exhibit markers of Hindu religious tradition but are also reserved for *bhadralok* Hindu men much the same way it was when these places of *bayam* opened during the colonial-nationalist period. This was I argue for most *bayam samitis* that are spread across Kolkata and would trace their history from the nationalist period. Although *akharas* or *bayam samitis* having wrestling *akharas*, considered to be places where

notions of caste, religion and other differences are given up in order to embrace and come to accept everyone to be ‘one’ with one another, *akharas* also continues to be exclusionary spaces and places. Thus, here the place and the history of the *bayam samitis* and *akharas* become significant which are understood through their rootedness in a specific location that of Kolkata, Bengal and in the specific histories and contexts.

### **Soundscape of *Bayam Samitis* and *Akharas***

My ethnographic endeavor poses an interesting scenario where I reflect upon the soundscape of a space as discussed in a previous chapter. Ethnography entails not only a process of experiencing an everyday space by being there through observation, interviews, and conversations but also through the sounds captured in the process. While we experience the setting by being there through observations and conversations on one hand, we also seek to go back to the space and experience it through its sounds when we use the recordings in order to transcribe the data. In most cases recorders are only used to record any conversation or interview that comes up in a field setting, meaning the recording becomes useful only to the extent it catches the conversations of people speaking. Instead of recording only conversations, my recorder also captured the sounds of the *vyayamaghars*. These recordings provide the sound-space of a space, making one engage into the everyday space of *bayam samity* or *akhara* through the sounds.

In understanding the soundscape of a space, silence or soundlessness becomes a significant aspect. My observations of these spaces of both *bayam samitis* and *akharas* made me come across silence as an essential feature of these places. Even though silence is not something that is always maintained but nonetheless it becomes a necessary way to perceive the place. This also came up in one of my conversations with a trainer in *Simla Bayam Samity* who narrated how *bayam* requires silence. While spending an evening in *Bajrang Vyayamaghar* and

watching the *guru* perform *bayam*, I observed how often he would get irritated with men laughing or talking amongst themselves. He would ask them to keep quiet and would tell me how these were not acceptable in these spaces. Silence was important and this silence also spoke of the silence of a yogi who would also remain detached from his surroundings and would spend dedicating himself to silence and meditation. Silence is significant if seen through the concept of meditation and ascetic practices. In the same manner *bayam* can also be read as an ascetic practice and a form of meditation on the body for which silence becomes essential. Even though the concept of meditation has mostly been used in the context of yoga, I argue that meditation can also remain a concept to be used to understand the practices of *bayam*.

This takes me to my very first field visit to Ghosh College of Physical Education, one of the oldest places in Kolkata, where bodybuilding and yoga came together under Bishnu Charan Ghosh. On entering this age-old structure, I came across a statue of the late Bishnu Charan Ghosh, sitting on a meditative posture of a yogi with his masculine carved body exhibiting, what Krishnaswamy (1998) would say, both strength and restraint. Apart from the silence of the place, silence in itself also remains significant. In my conversation with Gobor Goha's disciple, I came to know how Gobor Guho would practice silence every morning alongside *bayam*, before engaging into wrestling bouts.

Ajay Gandhi and Joseph Alter both have argued how the *akhara* becomes a place that is “surprisingly quite”, “soothing” away from the “thick, dense smell and harsh sounds of urban life” (Gandhi, 2011, p. 218) (Alter, 1992, p. 30). My experience in entering a wrestling *akhara* in *barabazar* was similar. Bara bazar and the alleys are always congested with people and shops, the cacophony of the city life. Amidst this stands this age old *akhara* in one of the busy alleys. My very first visit happened in the afternoon. Looking for an *akhara* amidst this busy, congested area became greatly difficult. Bazar Bazar's cotton street alley is a market area which

is heavily men dominated, with no women in sight. By passing through the uncomfortable gazes, and questions, I finally made my way towards another alley on one side that leads inside a housing structure which I was told leads to the *akhara*. The entrance had a heap of mud in such a manner that entry into the alley was almost impossible. Being unsure about the location of the *akhara*, I left the scene disappointed.

My next visit to this *akhara*, named Yoganath Puri Math, happened on one early morning. The scene was completely different. The shops were closed and the area was inactive. On entering the *akhara* I had come across the soothing atmosphere, similar to ones I have experienced in the *bayam samitis*. Enclosed by walls and yet open in the middle, the place of this *akhara*, both detaches itself from the congestion and noise of the market place and yet opens one to the natural environment at the same time. According to my interlocutor who accompanied me and took me to this *akhara*, this has to be the oldest one since it had a well. Apart from the other *akharas* which were near to ganga, this one being within the interiors of the city and urban layout, maintained its requirement for water from the well.

With very few men in the *akhara*, I mostly observed them engaging in the everyday rituals of *bayam* before a wrestling bout. With minimum interaction, my audio could capture the morning stillness of the *akhara*. As I listened to my audio, I could hear the chirping sounds of birds coming from the open courtyard. Amidst this stillness and quietness, I could hear the loud thumping sound of something hitting on the *akhara* mud. This loud sound as if penetrates the calmness with its powerful thumping, creating a soundscape of masculine vigour. Alongside the thumping comes in the utterances of painful exhaustive sighs alongside heavy breathing that resonates throughout the place. Together this sets an atmosphere to understand the everyday space of the *akhara*. This sound was of a young man lifting up a ten kgs plough and

engaging into the everyday practice of *mati kopano*<sup>lxvi</sup> or ploughing the wrestling pit. With each stroke he would let out a cry and take a deep breath. This happened repeatedly until he covered the entire wrestling pit alone. *Mati kopano* is often said to be the most difficult and painful activity in wrestling *bayams* which forms a very important breathing exercise where one garners the *dom* or breath as one of the wrestlers have told me. Interestingly in these instances of sounds and cries that they evoke while exercising, it brings together notions of pain, breath/*dom* and efforts. These cries and sounds that these men emit while engaging into their everyday *bayams* forms an interesting soundscape for understanding the *vyayamaghar* as a space and *bayam* culture too. These masculine cries, as I seek to call them, render the *akhara* or *vyayamaghar* as masculine domains creating a powerful atmosphere. These cries and sounds are moments of *bayam* that exposes one to the everyday lived experiences of *bayam* culture.

On entering *Bajrang Vyayamaghar*, the sound that one keeps getting is one of the ringing of the temple bells coming from the adjacent Hanuman temple. The calmness and quietness of the space is jolted once in a while with the sound of the bell that resonates throughout the *vyayamaghar* creating an aura of a Mandir (temple). Amidst these sounds one also gets to hear sounds of men crying out. This again takes me back to the realization that I am in a *bayam samity* or *vyayamaghar*. While doing different forms of *bayams*, especially while using heavy exercise equipment like weights or *mugurs* or ploughs, men let out a cry, sometimes also taking the name of Hanuman. Initially I found them to be out of the ordinary resulting from some sudden situations of pain. However, I later came to know how this was an everyday part of the *bayam* culture.

Entering the iron room or the gym area one gets the sound of the iron hitting the irons. The sound is very common whenever one enters or passes by these gyms, especially those having the manual setups. Iron has a strong connotation of suggesting hardness and here too it generates such a feel of hardness that translates itself into masculine ideas of strength. Thus,

the coming together of men and irons masculinizes the space further. The coming together of these sounds forms a strange and contradictory amalgamation of sounds of temple and silence on one hand and sounds of men and irons on the other. This contradiction forms the heart of these *bayam samitis* and *akharas* as a space.

### **Spaces in Tension**

The masculineness of the everyday space of these *bayam samitis* and *akharas* appeared and reappeared through these narratives, soundscapes, observations and experiences that together constitute the space and place of the *akhara* or *bayam samitis*. However, these spaces are considered to be in tension now. The entry of women into these fields, the rise of addictions including protein shakes, the loosening grip of celibacy/*brahmacharya* in today's world, seeks to reduce these places into spaces of tension and vulnerability. This is what has increasingly come up from how my participants, especially those who are elder, have often expressed, through their discomforts, eulogization of the past, and nostalgia. This is a fear I argue because of the threatened idea of masculinity. But to say that these spaces have come in tension now and were somewhere secure previously, will be wrong. I argue instead that these spaces have always been in tension which characterizes the everyday essence of these spaces. It is not that these spaces were masculine and are on the verge of losing its hold. But that everyday vulnerability and precariousness is an essential feature of masculinity itself and so it is for these spaces too. For example, one of the participants narrated their constant fear and disappointment associated with night falls. He would say how they would keep themselves in *songjom* (self-restraint) through food habits. Similarly, he narrated how he would always rush to *Kali* temple which was one of the ways to remain dedicated and away from meandering thoughts and acts through *shakti* worship. Thereby, the masculineness of the space emerges only through the everyday exclusion and practices that upholds and sustains it on a daily basis thereby

perpetually keeping it in a position of vulnerability. Reading the *bayam samitis* and *akharas* through the abstract idea of space makes us understand and bring *akharas* and *bayam samitis* together as a whole. However, it is in the studying of their (*bayam samitis/akharas*) rootedness in terms of the specificity of places that also remains significant. The specific histories, geographies, histories and location of the place, on one hand, and the materiality of the places, their physical structures, equipment on the other, further enhances our understanding of *akharas* or *bayam samitis* as specific places with context. It is in these specificities that the possibilities lie. Everyday life in these *akharas* and *bayam samitis* then cannot be relegated simply as a culture. Instead, what constitutes an *akhara* and a *bayam samity* can be understood through the politics of space and specificities of place-making that interacts with the everyday bodily practices and the lived experiences of the men and their bodies.

A reading of the spaces and places of *bayam samitis* and *akharas* open us to an understanding of *bayam* and also its relation to health. The places are constituted not only through practices and activities that go on in these places but also how their locations, structures are constituted through how one understands *bayam*. The location and environment of *bayam samitis* or *akharas*, reveal a pattern, a few prerequisites that are essential to an *akhara* for example an emphasis on a natural environment which is conceived as crucial to developing healthy bodies and therefore for *bayam*. The inner structures of the *bayam samitis* are also significant markers of how they understand *bayam*. For example, the absence of air conditioning in today's time is significant. The *bayam* culture in the *samitis* have been based on the question of hard labour and the presence of air conditioning goes against the very principle of *bayam* as one of the gym instructor recalled about his initial days of *bayam*. He describes the *bayam ghor* (bayam room) to have a mud floor, no fans or air-condition and the absence of cushioned benches for exercise. This description of a *bayam ghor* not only describes the place and its structure but also reveals the basis of *bayam*. The mud floor suggests a simple and natural layout. The absence of fans,

the manual means of *bayam* and wooden benches points towards the hard labour one has to put in. His rejection of air conditioners for being suffocating and how it disallows the burning of calories is significant in two ways. Firstly, his emphasis upon the element of pain or labour/*Kosto* to understand *bayam* makes us question if *bayam* is based on hardship and pain. Secondly, he relates it to the question of muscles, body heat and other technicalities that concerns the *bayam* and the domain of health. Together this understanding of a *bayam ghor* reveals the basis of *bayam* and its relation to body and health. The consumer oriented capitalistic society always seeks to erase pain and emphasize on questions of health and fitness today. However, the question of pain, hard labour becomes significant in *bayam*. What does these ideas of pain or hard labour do to the idea of health or for that matter to *bayam*? With these questions I will move to my next chapters in seeking to understand health, body and the question of pain in *bayam*.

## Chapter 6: ‘*Dom toiri kora*’: Health, Masculinity and the Cultivation of Power/*Shakti* from Within

One day around in the early morning I entered a narrow street known as cotton street to go for one of the oldest *akhara*s in Kolkata, now run by a trust called *Yoganath Puri Math*. This *akhara* has been existing since 1865 and is over one fifty years old. Though the *akhara* occupies a large space, the entrance to it happens through a narrow lane. As I was about to step into the *akhara*, I was asked by a man (a wrestler) to first touch the ground and worship it. The gesture of worship while entering the *akhara* and the images of Hindu God’s that covered the walls of the *akhara* gave a religious feel to the place bringing in questions of religious ‘purity’. As we entered, I found the *akhara* having an open courtyard at the center, with one end having a room and the other having the wrestling pit. In front of the entrance was a well, a tree and on the opposite end was an elevated area consisting of equipment of *bayam* and mirrors<sup>lxvii</sup>. The open courtyard under the sky, the trees, the mud pit and the well brought in the natural elements together creating a healthy and pure atmosphere. Alter argues that, “the *akhara* is a place where the body gets in touch with a particular matrix of natural elements that serve to orient the body properly to the world” (Alter, 1993, p. 53). According to Joseph Alter the aesthetic environment of *akhara*s are significant for the wrestlers as they emphasize the coming together of different elements like “water”, “wind”, “earth”, “shade” and trees as “geomantic” that creates an “invigorating” environment (Alter, 1992, p. 319). The *akhara* is seen as a sacred place and thus the maintenance of purity becomes a duty of the wrestlers (Alter, 1992). The religious purity associated with sacredness on one hand and natural purity of the environment on the other, brings in a relation of purity with health, masculinity and identity since notions of identity and masculinity are also embedded in contexts of purity. This chapter will be an attempt to understand these elements together in relation to health, body and masculinity.

## **The Modern Discourse of Health and Masculinity**

Health's relation to identity is one of embodiment, and it is in this embodied idea of identity that I situate this chapter. Colonial period, as was discussed in the previous chapters, saw the preoccupation with health emerging from the colonial stereotyping of the colonized as frail, weak, lacking in physical fitness (Bose, 2005). This was especially directed towards Bengali men who were looked down upon for being a weaker race, especially when it came to physical fitness (Sinha, 1995). However, I argue that this question of weakness, frailty, and being unfit were couched in the larger discourse of health and masculinity. Thus, the idea of health and fitness, though seen as prominent features of the present society, were nonetheless also significant during nineteenth and early twentieth century India. Pradip Bose argues that the emergence of the notion of 'national health' that remained a prominent feature of nineteenth century Bengal in context of the nation (Bose, 2005). But what remains intriguing is the connection that such a time period created between the idea of health on one hand and masculinity on the other and repercussions it has for understanding present discourses of fitness and health. The relation between 'unfitness' and 'effeminacy' is something which I wish to focus on in this chapter in order to engage with the relation between health and masculinity.

This politics of health at a particular period of time opens us to an understanding of health which eludes a fixed meaning. Health, during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, was not situated within the notion of wellbeing but in the notion of strength, virility and resilience. It thereby became political<sup>lxviii</sup>. This health, as Pradip Bose mentions in his book, concentrated in the context of Bengali men and their "deteriorating physical health" (Bose, 1992). This relation of health to a specific gender identity brought in an interesting relation with masculinity, a relation that will form the basis of this chapter. This deterioration of health among Bengalis and Indians brought the male body to the forefront of nationalist struggle,

becoming the ground to revive strength (health) and masculinity. It is in this context that *bayam* culture spread across many parts of Bengal, where cultivation of the body to garner health and re-define Indian men began.

Although health situates itself into a common understanding based on the biological body and it's physical wellbeing, health has throughout history signified and meant different things beyond the contours of biology. Health has been conceptualized from different perspectives, whether from a naturalistic or biological perspective or normative perspective, or from a social constructivist perspective. In a widely understood manner, health has meant an absence of diseases, “a negation” of disease or injury (van hooft, 1997, p. 245). But what do these terminologies of ‘health’ and ‘diseases’ signify? The term health has been taken for granted to be always already a condition of wellbeing yet what are the parameters which define its contours? How do we define health other than a negation of what is considered to be unhealthy? Thus, health cannot merely be a condition in itself but a negation of others to bring itself into a state of being defined as appropriate. In the same light what is meant by disease or unhealthy is not merely a given category but one that is produced time and now under different conditions and periods. This also means healthy and unhealthy are relational concepts.

Tristram Engelhardt argues, “the concept of disease acts not only to describe and explain, but also to enjoin action. It indicates a state of affairs as undesirable and to be overcome”. (Engelhardt, 1975, p. 127) Disease prompts action from a state of undesirability to a state of desirability, disease as something to be overcome. It is in this context that health situates itself as not just a state of wellbeing but also an act that restores the body in its desirability and overcomes the disease. However, Lee Monaghan urges us to understand the body not only through its relation to disability or diseases but to its “vibrant physicality” or the manifestation of good health through the “embodied pleasures” of the body (Monaghan, 2001, p. 331)

Foucault in his seminal work on the *Birth of the Clinic* (1973) speaks of the coming up of a “new medical consciousness” moving away from clinical medicine to “anatomo-clinical medicine” in the nineteenth century (Foucault, 1973). I argue that this shift also speaks of the emergence of a new idea of health and its relation to the body that also had its significance in nineteenth century Bengal during the colonial regime. For Foucault,

The locus in which knowledge is formed is no longer the pathological garden where God distributed the species, but a generalized medical consciousness, diffused in space and time, open and mobile, linked to each individual existence, as well as to the collective life of the nation, ever alert to the endless domain in which illness betrays, in its various aspects, its great, solid form. (Foucault, 1973, p. 31)

The new medical consciousness that Foucault (1973) refers to is perceived by him as “open” and “mobile” and which also connects to the others, in effect of its open and mobile nature, such that there is an idea of collectivity inbuilt in it. This openness for him makes one stay constantly on “alert” forever as illness will “betray” itself. A betraying illness suggests that illness becomes something that can never be fully known or perceived, or for that matter understood. The new medical consciousness as Gary Gutting (1989) puts in is distinguished from the classical one as it does not have a predetermined structure but instead is based on constant revisions where one disease or illness is or can be related to the others forming casual relations (Gutting, 1989). This creates an idea of uncertainty that forms the basis of this new medical consciousness I argue. It is this uncertainty that works to create an idea of ‘defense’ in the context of medicine and medical practices and which also seek to define the domain of health. This brings in the concept of body care and fitness that bases itself on such an uncertain idea of health and illness whose uncertainty requires one to always remain *alert* and regularly supervise and regulate one’s body through certain disciplinary regimes of exercise or *bayam*. Gary Gutting, while explaining this change that Foucault speaks about, emphasizes another

shift in an understanding of medicine where medicine is seen as “working for positive ideals and not just for the negative goal of curing illnesses” (Gutting, 1989, p. 116). This is yet another significant change not only in understanding the domain of medicine but also how health emerged the way we know it today. For Foucault medicine does not engage itself into a negative work of “negating” the illness but instead it establishes “positive roles of health, virtue and happiness” (Foucault, 1973, p. 34). As Gutting argues, medicine now seeks to define the “positive norms” that would determine “man’s ideal physical state” as opposed to being one that merely restores an ill body into a healthy one. Gutting (1989) reads this transformation into a move from medicine of health to medicine of normalcy such that there is a binary created between pathological and normal which seeks to henceforth define health as well as illness. Moving away from this understanding, I seek to see this move not necessarily as removed from the idea of health but to see health itself as based on a positive ideal of normalcy. The shift is, I argue, from the idea of restoring a sick body to a healthy one towards an idea that a normality of health predetermines the domain of illness or a sick body. Thus, the healthy body is not one which is restored from a sick body, but instead a healthy body becomes an ideal which determines what a sick body is. Medical consciousness thus brought in a positive understanding of health and medicine seen through an aspiring ideal to live for such that there can be a moment when one would require no doctors (Gutting, 1989, p. 116) (Monaghan, 2001) (Glassner, 1989). This itself becomes a paradox where medical knowledge aspires for such an ideal that will erase the basis of medicine itself. Within it, is yet another paradox where this new emergent idea of medicine is not only based on positive ideals but also on uncertainty such that it is this very domain of uncertainty of illness that requires one to aspire constantly for an ideal normative idea of body and health. I argue this aspiring happens through the emergence of exercise or body care practices that establishes itself into the discourse of health, fitness and medical knowledge in the context of nineteenth century Bengal.

The rise of positive meaning of health leads to the coming up of a different meaning of health that is equated today with fitness. For example, health can be understood through an “absence of pathology” as well as through a “positive meaning as fitness for activities” (Fox, 1975) (Wachter, 1984, p. 56) (Monaghan, 2001). Wachter argues how increasingly a shift in the idea of health has come up in the domain of sports making it dynamic. “The body is not merely healthy, it also functions as a symbol of a healthy existence” (Wachter, 1984, p. 56). According to Wachter, health has moved from a “static” to a more dynamic idea with a lot more emphasis on representation (Wachter, 1984, p. 57). Increasingly a “sportive” conception of health emerges similar to how Ben Spatz speaks of an idea of health as performance (Fox, 1975) (Wachter, 1984) (Spatz, 2015). Alongside this Glassner argues for the fit-looking body that becomes equivalent to symbolize the muscular body (Glassner, 1989). According to Monaghan, looking good and feeling good are increasingly being equated together such that the sportive, performance oriented good-looking body is equated with the healthy body (Monaghan, 2001) (Spatz, 2015) (Watson, 1990)

Pradip Bose (2005) while discussing the Bengali periodicals in nineteenth century colonial Bengal, emphasized on the idea of the emergence of two ideas of health, one national and the other public. National health focuses on the health of the nation and its citizens. Under British colonialism, Indians sought to locate their own indigenous medicine and also an indigenous idea of health thereby focusing on the concept of national health. But paradoxically the emergence of the idea of national health emerged from the colonizer’s defining of the Indians, especially Bengal men as ‘weak’, ‘fragile’, and ‘effeminate’. Accepting this characterization, the Indians, especially Bengali men resorted to revive their health and masculinity, but through their indigenous ways. This decline in health and masculinity cannot only be read independent

of one another rather in relation to one another such that health and masculinity and unhealthy and effeminacy were becoming synonymous during the period. This brought health, masculinity and nation together in one context.

Revathy Krishnaswamy while discussing the emergence of modern masculinity in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe elaborates on Winckelmann's creation of the 'ideal male body' which exhibited both harmony and restraint (Krishnaswamy, 1999). This aesthetics of masculinity formed the basis for the differentiation between races. For Krishnaswamy, "the equation between male beauty and virtue that emerged during these comparisons and classifications became an important aspect of modern masculinity. Such a link between body and soul, outer and inner, physical and moral, was more firmly cemented in the new eighteenth century sciences of physiognomy, anthropology and modern medicine" (Krishnaswamy, 1999, p. 16). Thus, modern medicine too was cemented with the linkages between the physical and the moral, the outer and the inner such that health was not merely an internal condition but something that was exhibited in the aesthetic beauty of the 'ideal male body'. In the same way Rousseau would claim how wisdom would follow from "physical robustness and good health" (Krishnaswamy, 1999, p. 16). Anyone who would not fit into this new ideal manhood would be seen as diseased. For example, nervousness, masturbation, homosexuality all came to be considered as disease. In the context of India, Alter argues how *brahmacharya* became increasingly more about "decoding masturbation and sensuality" similar to the western notions (Alter, 2011, p. 57). "Celibacy thus becomes an integral part of a medical regimen not only to restore health, but to exercise control over both public and private morality (Alter, 2011, p. 57). This also brings a link or connection between what is defined as healthy, moral and what is defined as masculine. During this period health and diseases were defined in terms of certain predefined ideals that corresponded to masculinity and morality. Health and diseases were not

objective realities but predetermined ideals created socially, culturally and morally. Those who deviated from these norms or ideals were defined as unfit and thereby unhealthy.

Joseph Alter in his book titled. *Moral Materialism: Sex and Masculinity in India* (2011) discusses the notion of “seminal truth” and its embodiment in context of India (Alter, 2011). Although the notion of self and morality are integral to both Europe and India, Alter significantly distinguishes between the two. According to him, the western “Eurocentric” notion of self is perceived as “sexually objectified secular self” that is taken as “independent” and “autonomous” from biology and other social aspects. The self comes prior to and in control of these. Whereas in context of Indian *brahmacharya*, in arguing through Mckim Marriott, Alter argues how the self does not come prior to but is instead constituted through different aspects of “humours”, elements”, like “wind and bile, water, fire, air, goodness, darkness and passion”, which together constitutes the ‘self’ (Alter, 2011, p. 58) (Marriott, 1976, 1977). The *Brahmachari* according to him only makes an effort in bringing these elements together “in order to reconfigure his “true” identity” (Alter, 2011, p. 59). Alter therefore suggests that any Eurocentric approach towards self will not be adequate into understand the concept of *brahmacharya* since for the “male *brahmachari*” it is not the self but semen that constitutes it focal point (Alter, 2011, p. 59).

### **Spatial Purity: Akharas as ‘Healthy’ Spaces**

“Wrestlers speak of the akhara as a world unto itself: insulated, self-contained and special. In this regard, the akhara is a place where the body gets in touch with a particular matrix of natural elements that serve to orient the body properly to the world” (Alter, 1992, p. 53).”

*Akharas* and *bayam samitis* are not just places where activities relating to health and fitness are carried out. They are also places and spaces that exhibit characteristics of an environment of

health, purity and masculinity. These places are carefully chosen, designed in their layouts and bring together some essential features that become characteristic markers of these places. *Siyaram akhara* located at *Mallick Ghat*, near Howrah Bridge is one such location. Located just beside river ganga, this place has all the basics of an *akhara*, which includes earth (mudpit), water (ganges), air (open space) and trees. All these four elements are also crucial indicators of health and also the essential feature of an *akhara*. Similarly, cotton street *akhara* mentioned earlier in *Barabazar* also has an open space, a mud pit, a well and a tree bringing in different elements of the *akhara* life. This environment creates a space that is formed out of elements that becomes essential to life and also to *akhara*. *Bayam samitis* are also similar. One of the reasons for this is that these *bayam samitis* had *akharas* inside them earlier. Thus, they occupy a large area and have open courtyards.

According to Joseph Alter, “An *akhara* should be in an open area where fresh air and sunshine mingle. It should be away from dirt and filth and in a place where the earth is soft. It should be set off by a boundary of some sort and surrounded by thick foliated trees. There should be water nearby” (Alter, 1992, p. 25). These various requirements of an *akhara* give an idea that the place and the space should be located in an environment that has some healthy features of fresh air, trees, water and sunshine on one hand and also one that is away from dirt thereby suggesting purity. The question of purity and health becomes significant here. For Alter, “The ideal location for an *akhara* is a cool, clean, quiet area where one can get away from both an atmosphere of domestic obligation and an environment of work” (Alter, 1992, p. 25). This serene environment that is away from the polluting city life, work life and domestic life suggests an ascetic environment that exhibits both purity of the natural environment and that of religious purity as no *akhara* or *bayam samitis* is complete without a temple and a religious environment inside. Purity is not just understood through cleanliness and absence of dirt, but also through ritual and religious purity of understanding the place as a place of worship. This

is evident from the gesture of salutation before entering the *akhara* that I witnessed. This also comes true to witness men saluting the *akhara* mud pit and worshipping it daily. A similar coming together of religious purity and purity connected to the notion of health happens in the context of the mud pit in mud based *akharas*.

A wrestling *akhara* revolves around a wrestling pit which is a central feature of an *akhara*. Mud pits are considered to be an ideal form of wrestling pit. In these current times when the mud pit is increasingly being replaced by mat, there are few *akharas* who are still holding on to the mud-based wrestling pits. I have carried out my ethnography in five such mud pit wrestling *akharas* in Kolkata as discussed earlier. These were the *Siyaram Akhara*, *Kapil Deo Bayam Samity*, *Arjun Vyayamshala*, *Gobor Goho wrestling akhara*, cotton street *akhara*<sup>lxix</sup>. Each of these *akharas* continues with the traditional mud pit and exhibits the characteristics of the requirements of the *akharas*.

In my conversation with a wrestler from an *akhara* near *Goabagan*<sup>lxx</sup>, I was told how the mud of the mud pit has medicinal qualities.

*“The mud pit is made with Multani Mati and other ingredients. Mustard oil is added in the mud, along with turmeric and neem leaf. Turmeric and neem leaf is for antiseptic so that if someone gets hurt, they can apply the mud there which will work as an antiseptic.”*

The mud is said to act as an “antiseptic” as the mud is prepared with a mix of *multani mitti*, turmeric, mustard oil and neem leaf. As the wrestler suggested, it helps one when they get hurt in the wrestling pit and can apply the mud on the affected areas of their bodies and prevent it from getting infected. Thus, the mud combines in itself both a “smooth texture” and “healing properties” (Alter, 1992, p. 319). However, taken outside this medicinal understanding of septic and infection, antiseptic can also be thought through a notion of purity. The creation of a mud pit itself entails a lot of effort by careful selection of essential ingredients that are brought

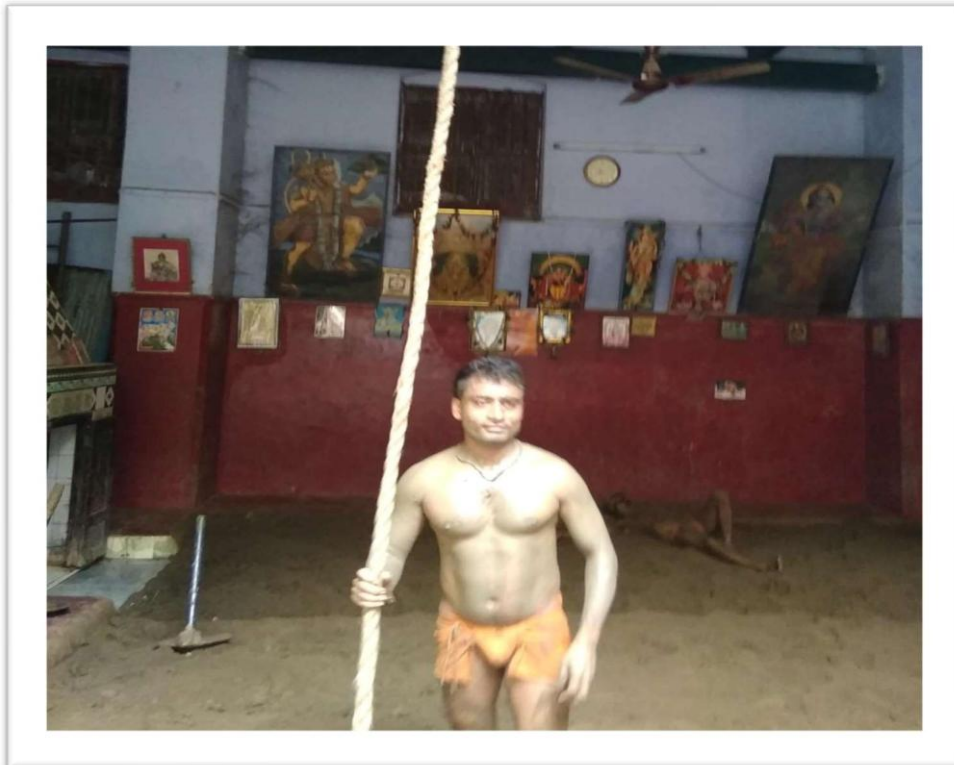
together to create a physical space where wrestling takes place. All these ingredients have medicinal values and also seek to emphasize on notions of purity. Rudraneil Sengupta discusses how the wrestlers create the mud pit by mixing “rose petals”, “pure turmeric”, “ghee” into the mud. This mud however, should always be brought from the banks of a river so that it is pure and free from impurities which is emphasized by one of the wrestlers in Sengupta’s work (Sengupta, 2016, p. 121). This interconnection between medicinal quality and purity, interestingly brings in health and purity together.

My visit to mud pit wrestling *akharas* in Kolkata made me come across men who would spend their mornings lying down on the mud. This picture below is from *Arjun Vyayamshala*. The picture below shows an elderly wrestler sleeping or resting in the mud pit. The picture makes it evident that his body is covered with mud.



**23. Arjun Vyayamshala wrestling mud pit**

A similar picture comes up in cotton street *akhara*. This picture focuses on a young wrestler who was showing a *bayam* with rope. However, behind him one can get a glimpse of a middle-aged man lying in the *akhara* whose whole body is covered with mud. While the young wrestler was ploughing the mud field, the other one was lying and rubbing himself on the mud. By doing so he covered himself in mud.



#### **24. Wrestlers from Cotton Street Akhara**

In the first instance it came as very unexplainable to me. The men would lie down on the mud and would rub their bodies on it. This activity was actually very common. The mud being considered to be medicinal and pure like earth, is enmeshed with the body. This also appears as a erotic moment where the mud or earth absorbs the heat of the wrestler's body. Alter argues that, "wrestlers affect a material bond with the substance of the *akhara*....The power of the earth rubs off and is absorbed by them as they wrestle" (Alter, 1993, p. 52). The mud becomes a significant part of the wrestlers. The mud pit therefore is carefully created and maintained by

keeping it clean on a regular basis. A wrestler from Gobor Goho's *akhara* spoke about their extensive cleaning drive every morning when the *akhara* was reopened. He would narrate how the mud pit had cat's excreta and other dirt. The dirt used to be carefully separated from the mud. This cleaning drive is similar to the idea of purifying the mud pit where all impurities in the form of dirt were removed and the mud pit was brought back into its state of purity.

The mud pit's question of purity also comes up when the mud pit becomes a site where women cannot step in. The mud's purity is claimed and maintained by keeping it away from any form of impurity which also includes women. In my experience in the *akharas* I have never found a woman other than me and stepping into the *akhara* or its mud pit has never been a question. However, I experienced stepping into the mud pit once in an *akhara* located on the banks of ganga. Since the *akhara* mud pit was located inside a room, I had to step into it to go into the other end of the room. This maybe was only possible because there was no one in the *akhara* at that moment to supervise me. However, this was not a moment of triumph nor a deliberate barging into a forbidden space. I experienced it as a humbling experience of understanding the mud. It appeared very fluffy and powdery and I realized why men would spend time rubbing themselves in it. Rudraneil Sengupta mentioned that the mud pit is considered by the wrestlers to be a space where Hanuman<sup>lxxi</sup> descends in the morning. Thus, a claim to purity becomes essential as it becomes the space of the celibate God. Alter argues, "Underlying this pervasive, modern anxiety about the integrity of the male body, is ofcourse, an even more fundamental fear of female sexuality" (Alter, 2011, p. 59).

### **Embodied Purity: *Brahmacharya*, Health, and Masculinity**

The modern discourse of *brahmacharya*, according to Alter, is understood not merely as an ideology or in terms of morality of acts but as a bio-moral practice where the significance is not on the self per say but rather on the human elements like semen that constitutes that self.

He argues, “the morality that *brahmacharya* speaks of is intimately associated with the precise regimen of health, which is codified more in terms of biology than ideology” (Alter, 2011, p. 56). According to Alter, the emphasis is not simply on the act of control of desires even though it is considered to be “noble” (Alter, 2011, p. 67). It is because it is not simply the morality of the acts or the virtue attached to it that is central to *brahmacharya*. Instead, *brahmacharya* is based on the essence of the fluid and its storing that is considered fundamental to healthy living (Alter, 2011).

Health also bases itself on an idea of purity, on a body that is free from diseases or illness where diseases can be perceived as impurity to a pure understanding of a body. This also came up from most men in *bayam samitis*. For them disease cannot enter your body when you are regularly into *bayam* or exercise. Semen, I argue, is also understood in terms of purity, as truth in which case semen, is moved away from the field of impure desires and is stored and embodied as good health. This relation of health, purity also comes in the context of masculinity. Historically, masculinity (men) has been associated with purity, transcendence and femininity (women) with bodies and impurity. This is also evident above in how women are never allowed inside *bayam samitis* and never allowed to step into the *akhara* mud. In his book *Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex and the Body in Indian Buddhism*, John Power writes that bodies have been considered to be sources of “uncontrolled functions”, those of “oozing”, “digestion”, “excretion”, “menstruation” (Powers, 2009, p. 113). Women or femininity has been associated with these oozing menstruating bodies, where material overflow in respect to blood during menstruation or emotional overflow in terms of emotion has been a sign of an uncontrolled and thereby impure body. While it is important to know that men’s bodies too can be overflowing either in context of semen or emotions, it is the very act of control that makes men ‘men’, or makes men masculine. It is here that Alter argues how the discourse of seminal truth is based on a “masculine imperative” and thus has ‘socio-political

implications” (Alter, 2011, p. 83). The significant in context of the modern discourse of *brahmacharya* is that it is opposed to women and strictly dissociates from them. It not only makes women incapable of the act of control, but it also totally dismisses women from the biomoral practice by basing the act of control on a biological matter, that of semen. “The internalization of truth as semen- where “real” selfhood is thought to be biologically located- is in many ways a radical, and some might say radically paranoid, attempt to control female sexuality by defining it as not only dangerous but as antithetical to truth” (Alter, 2011, p. 60). Female sexuality then becomes an antithesis to semen and thereby truth, firstly because separation from female sexuality becomes a necessary way to uphold the “integrity of the male body” through *brahmacharya* (Alter, 2011, p. 59). Secondly, locating “truth” in semen means women can never embody semen as truth thereby becoming an antithesis to truth itself. The question of masculinity, purity, biology and health thereby brings us into another central aspect of *bayam* and physical cultures, which is the act of *brahmacharya*.

In my field visits to *bayam samitis*, it was evident that control of semen, *brahmacharya*, was significant to *bayam* tradition. Although in today’s time no one can strictly observe it, it has not become redundant. While conversing with a bodybuilder who is now in his early fifties, his struggle against night falls or night emissions and semen control came up. He would narrate that night emissions were something that they often failed to control when they were young bodybuilders. Night emissions, known as *swapna dosh*, is perceived as a less “controllable threat” to *brahmacharya* (Alter, 1993, p. 110). This unconscious and involuntary nature of night emissions made it uncontrollable inspite of practicing *brahmacharya*, or not engaging into sexual acts. This involuntary nature of loss becomes an important way to understand Alter’s point that it is not simply the control of desires that is an end in itself or the morality of acts in themselves that is important in *brahmacharya*. It was instead the importance of the material fluid, semen and its embodiment rather than its flow that was of significance. The

body builder would also narrate how their *guru* would tell them the significance of night emission through drawing an analogy between women's menstruation and the flow of impure blood. Men too, according to him, needed to let go of things that are in excess, which might be harmful to the body. This would, according to the body builder, help them deal with the uncontrollable nature of night emissions. However, controlling this unconscious emission also becomes a part of the everyday practice of these people. Alter discusses how this unconscious nature of night falls or emissions are mostly seen as a part and parcel of one's conscious "sensuality" and "lust", that seeks to translate and enter into one's unconscious in the form of "dream imagery" (Alter, 1992, p. 111). Not going into the debate of the unconscious or conscious nature of night emissions, I would rather emphasize the politics of making night emissions a part of one's conscious process. By bringing it in the realm of the conscious, it is able to situate men in the position of responsibility and accountability who are then asked to work towards his unconscious mind by "cleaning out" his conscious mind" (Alter, 1993, p. 111). Thus, the unconscious becomes the repository of the conscious.

One of my interlocutors narrated how they would look for *Kali* temples<sup>lxxii</sup> when they would be travelling for body building competitions. This was to devote himself into *shakti* worship (shakta tradition) as they considered themselves to be worshippers of *shakti* (power). This devotion I argue would work to keep them away from meandering thoughts and thereby from sensualities keeping them in balance and control. Apart from this, in order to control the night emissions, the bodybuilder narrated their attempts to keep themselves cool from inside, thereby controlling the sexual energy and night emissions. For this they would drink *kotila* soaked water that would keep them cool from within. This idea of keeping oneself cool from within also brings in the element of diet in the practice of *brahmacharya* and health. These various ways were used by the body builders, wrestlers and *bayam* practitioners to keep themselves in 'songjom' (self-restraint). It is significant to keep in mind that these various ways of controlling

desires, or these various forms of self-restraints were not in itself important but only to the extent it helps in storing semen or preserving semen. In discussing night emissions, Swami Sivananda Saraswati equates the “laws of nature” with that of “health” and “hygiene” (Sivananda, 1980, p. 71). The natural automatically becomes healthy and healthy also translates into an understanding of the natural ways of being. This equation of health with nature, naturalizes health in turn making it a normative principle.

Another activity that becomes forbidden in this realm is masturbation. “Masturbation is usually represented as a negative, solitary, often sterile, life-denying act” (Clark, 2016, p. 455). As Alter argues, “...masturbation is regarded as such an abominable waste of semen that it is antithetical to everything that *brahmacharya* stands for” (Alter, 1992, p. 110). Historically masturbation has been considered to be an ‘unnatural’ activity thereby becoming the extreme form of sexual offense. Although it is a solitary act, it is nonetheless always already in a relationship as David Clark argues. “masturbation is indeed an act that has a meaning (and multiple meanings) because of its status as an act that is never solitary or unproblematic—always involving others whether as object of desire, physical participant, angelic or demonic onlooker, or reader” (Clark, 2016, p. 456). Engelhardt in his work on the disease of masturbation writes, “... masturbation was held to be potentially more deleterious since it was unnatural, and, therefore, less satisfying and more likely to lead to a disturbance or disordering of nerve” (Engelhardt, 1974, p. 236). He argues that the “moral offense of masturbation was transformed into a disease” (Engelhardt, 1974, p. 239). For him health thereby became based on moral ideas. Disease for him became anything that deviated from a “state of stability” (Engelhardt, 1974, p. 239). Hence it could be argued that the stability of the body and stability of the mind were equated and were based on the notion of stability, an idea of equilibrium. Masturbation was based on pleasure and thereby generated a form of excitement which does not prescribe to the stability of mind and thereby translated into the instability of the body

functioning as well. Thus, masturbation became a "disease" that affects the mind and the body causing health issues in the body functioning (Engelhardt, 1974). David Clark argues how "masturbation is regularly associated with effeminacy and *sodomitical* vice, both of which involve non-hegemonic expressions of masculinity" (Clark, 2016, p. 458). Although in the context of India the semen in itself rather than masturbation as an act, hold a separate place in the discourse of health and masculinity. The control of semen therefore was becoming a prerequisite for a healthy body. "It is a common belief among Hindus that the essence of life is contained in semen" (Alter, 1992, p. 108). Alter points to the significance of the semen in the discourse of health. *Brahmacharya* became a practice for the creation of a healthy body where the notion of health intermingled with notions of biology, purity, morality and virility.

There can be a debate on the significance of *brahmacharya* at present times where such a discipline may not be exclusively found. However, my fieldwork suggests it's continued relevance. In the *bayam samitis* that I have visited, I rarely came across people talking about semen control which made me feel as if it were a thing of the past. No one really expects young men to practice *brahmacharya* today, especially when gyms are on the contrary increasingly becoming grounds to shape one as sexually appealing rather than erasing or denying sexual desires. In my long conversations and elaborate understanding of *bayam samitis*, I have also understood how this was not all. In *Hathkhola Bayam Samity* I was informed by one of the trainers about the continued relevance of *brahmacharya*. Although how he understood *brahmacharya* today was different yet significant. His understanding of a *brahmachari* is not based on a complete disavowal of sexual activities but a strict control of it even within marriage. He describes this as "*shrinkhola pora*" (to be in chains) that brings out how the men practice the act of self-restraint which becomes even more challenging when they are within the realm of marriage and family.

I now come to my conversation with one of the *gurus* in a *vyayamaghar* in south Kolkata who is an important figure in *bayam* culture in Kolkata. Spending one afternoon conversing with him about the past and present, he interestingly brought in the conversation around about semen control. Though initially it came in quite indirectly while he narrated about the young men who join the *vyayamaghar* today and process of disciplining them into the *bayam* culture. He mentioned that he would always emphasize on controlling the time men spend in their bathrooms. He elaborated that controlling the time spent in bathrooms by young men was necessary to supervise if they were engaging in any sexual activities like masturbation. He spoke in a manner that made it evident that this was a common practice among young men and also a matter of concern and control in the context of *bayam*. Since it is not completely in his control, he would advise these young men not to engage into such activities and also ask their parents to supervise. The parent's role in supervising masturbation was also significant in eighteenth and nineteenth century European society where the parents would be involved in constant monitoring of their children's lives (Gottzen, 2020, p. 65).

This everyday struggle of semen control highlights the significance of *brahmacharya* in the *bayam* tradition bringing its relation to masculinity, health and purity. These instances from the past and one from the present show the everyday struggle of these men in semen control. It is this anxiety that the body builder shared, is what is referred to as semen anxiety among men (Edwards, 1983). The anxiety has now been shifted to the *gurus* who wish to maintain semen control. I seek to read this struggle as the precarious nature of masculinity itself that is precariously situated between storing and preserving (of semen) on one hand and flowing on the other.

## Locating the “Present”

My visits to *Simla Bayam Samity* in the mornings gave me the opportunity to spend time in their gym room. The *bayam* samity has now converted the space of the *bayam* room into a multigym with mostly young and middle-aged men being the current practitioners. The men there are mostly from the neighborhood who have been part of this *samity* since their childhood. They have been following their fathers and grandfathers and have now finally become members of the gym. Conversing with them while simultaneously observing them in their everyday exercise regimes, the current ideas of gym and health have come up. Most men here see their everyday life enmeshed into stressful work which becomes a source of frustration as Klein has argued (Klein, 1992), where activity and energy for them are the requisites of the day. Amidst this busy tiring schedule, exercise is something that revitalizes them and also keeps them ‘healthy’. Glassner argues that bodybuilding and exercise provides men with the necessary sense of empowerment amidst the growing feelings of anxiety, stress and the increasing loss of control in one’s life that is characteristic of the present world (Glassner, 1989). The gyms therefore become the arena of regaining the control over one’s life, one’s body and self-hood. In this idea of health, that the men emphasize upon, there is no mention of semen control or celibacy. Instead, the emphasis is on one’s *gothon* or structure, the physical appearance and one’s ability to perform. Several men have spoken about their physical frailness which has been a source of embarrassment that drove them into gyms to cultivate their body. For example, a man in his thirties from *Hathkhola Bayam Samity* showed me a very old picture of him, when he was very thin. This was in an effort to emphasize on his present development of his body, his transformation from a ‘little’ thin boy to a muscular man (Klien, 1993). As Monaghan argues, men who are fitness enthusiasts emphasize on both embodying and displaying “a sense of empowerment and self-mastery” (Monaghan, 2001, p. 334). However, the image of muscularity has always been a significant part of *bayam* tradition as well and not only a

characteristic of present time. Even earlier people have often taken up on building bodies because of the idealized muscular physique. I recall a *guru* from *Bajrang Vyayamaghar*, who narrated about his small thin body as the reason behind his taking up of *bayam*. Yet his journey tells us the different forms of bodily cultivations of bodybuilding, yoga, and *bayam* that he has gone into out of his keen interest in cultivating body and not physique. He still retains the same non-muscular body yet brimming with strength even in his 70s. Below is his picture from *Bajrang Vyayamaghar's* gym room where he is seen lifting weights.



#### 25. *Bayam* room of *Bajrang Vyayamaghar*

Similarly, to say that today the idea of *brahmacharya* or celibacy does not exist in the realm of multi gyms will be to deny the understanding on which health and for that matter, *brahmacharya* bases itself, the notion of detachment. I seek to therefore argue that although in the present times the strict notions of celibacy may not exist, the basis on which it is premised, that of detachment and restraint, is still there but in a different form. *Bayam* and similarly

*brahmacharya*, as I have understood, bases itself on ideas of detachment, sacrifice and control. These three elements remain an essential requisite of *bayam* tradition as well as the present exercise regimes. My conversations with these men in the multi gym of *Simla Bayam Samity* made me come across these three elements. On enquiring about the restrictions in the gym, the gym trainer explained how smoking and drinking were things to be controlled. My visit to *Panchanan Bayam Samity* made me come across a writing on their entrance, which strictly prohibited smoking and drinking. *Nesha* (addiction) was detrimental yet one also understands how it has become increasingly difficult to inculcate that among the young men. In a complaining tone a gym trainer told me how he has often caught hold of young men who had smoked before entering the gym. But for him these men do not abide by the restrictions. One day as we were openly discussing in the gym, the men told me how they avoid late nights, smoking and partying. The entire idea of late night was very interesting and significant. Even if it did not bring out what these late nights mean, it was evident that in today's time late night could signify many things from staying awake till late, to partying, drinking, clubbing to sexual activities. In a nutshell, these men detach themselves from any of these activities and try their best to live a disciplined life between work and *bayam*/exercise, cultivating a life of *songjom* (self-restraint) similar to the previous times.

### **‘Past’ and ‘Present’: Understanding the Difference of *Bayam***

The notion of a *past* and a *present* of *bayam* dominates the present discourse of *bayam*/exercise culture. The past associated with conventionally held ‘traditional’ ways of *bayam* (*bayam* culture) as opposed to the present, associated with newer, ‘rational’ and mechanized ways of *bayam* (gym culture) have come up from the narratives of my interlocutors. This distinction marks an opposition between the two, not only in terms of a ‘past’ and a ‘present’ but also from an inner body cultivation to an outer or external idea of a physique. According to Featherstone,

the inner is increasing expressed through the external understanding of physique where images of ideal healthy bodies become the ground to define health (Featherstone, 1990). These ideas, I argue, also emerge from the field and thereby I believe there is an urgent need to interrogate those instead of either rejecting them or merely upholding them.

The realm of the traditional mud pit *akharas* and the *bayam samitis* seems to embody a past of the *bayam* culture or *shorir chorchha* tradition. Even though there is a distinction between *bayam samitis* and wrestling *akharas*, the places uphold a similar notion of *bayam* and *shorir chorchha*/physical culture. However, this ‘past’ that these places seek to uphold or retain is also ‘present’ in these places. Yet its ‘presence’ does not make it to the ‘present’ which is instead dominated by the norms of gym culture. This conflicting and contradictory understanding of past and the present brings in the question of time. It marks a politics of time, where the understanding of *bayam* associated with the early *bayam* tradition although belonging to the same time presently, is pushed back in time and relegated as outdated, unnecessary. On the other hand, the new means and methods established as ‘present’ become associated with *better* methods. The *bayam* tradition, *samitis* and *akharas* that is in question in this research came up during the late nineteenth and twentieth century, thus occupying the position between the colonial, and the post-colonial but more significantly during the era of modernity. Prathama Banerjee argues that an understanding of modernity necessarily assumes the “modern” to be “ahead of time” (Banerjee, 2000, p. 2). This notion and politics of time as a marker of what is *better* retains its meaning even today where the present gym culture is considered through a similar perspective of being ‘better’ for being ahead in time from what was there previously. This necessarily does not remove the *bayam* culture from the scene, but retains it as a ‘backdated’ one through the notion of a linear, progressive idea of time. A counter to this is made by *bayam samitis* in turn who retain the understanding of their *bayam* culture as a ‘past’ which they seek to glorify and hold on to. Hirschkind’s and Mahmood’s work on Islamic piety

shows how a separation is made between embodying the pious Muslim and the secular demands of the modern democratic nation (Hirschkind, 2009) (Mahmood, 2004). A similarity can be drawn in context of *bayam* culture practiced in *bayam samitis* which are increasingly considered to be fading, unscientific, and the newer ones in context of gym culture as the ideal one based on scientific notions and rationality.

One of the gym trainers discussed how *brahmacharya* no longer remains an essential part of today's *bayam chorchha/ shorir chorchha*. This is very much similar to how Rudraneil Ghosh discusses how the ideas of five hundred to thousand *dand baithaks* are considered to be unscientific today. A similar discussion emerges in *Hathkhola Bayam Samity* when one of the members discusses how young men today follow newer methods in *bayam* like jogging or skipping for warming up. These for him were never part of *bayam* tradition but are now increasingly taken up by men where a kind of redefinition of exercise takes place. The way he spoke he seemed to be welcoming this change as for him the men are capable enough to understand their needs and thereby perform them accordingly. He also discusses how young men today learn from the internet and performs accordingly. They are no more dependent upon a *guru* or trainer but are themselves capable. These ideas speak of a culture that denies any fixed understanding of exercise and that newer concepts and ideas keep coming in making the ground ever so open to changes. On the other hand, there are men in *bayam* who believe and cling to a world of *bayam* where five hundred *dands*, one year of free hand training, *brahmacharya* and other forms of discipline remains significant. As Alter on discussing *dand baithaks* says, "What is most striking about them, however, is the sheer number a wrestler will do. Young men in good health who are well disciplined in their *vyayam* regimen can do more than 1000 *dands* and 1500 *baithaks* a day. *Dand* and *baithaks* together constitute a whole body workout that develops shoulder, upper arm, chest and leg strength" (Alter, 1993, p. 56).

The transition from body or the interior idea of body to that of an external idea of physique has been highlighted by many (Alter, 2002) (Featherstone, 1991). The ethnographic accounts bring out similar understanding from my interlocutors. Those who move away from gyms and are mostly interested in the ideas of *bayam*, claim their authenticity through the idea of a wholesome inner development of the body rather than merely outward. Here by body, they refer to an inner idea of cultivation. The gym goers, on the other hand, emphasize on their *gothon* or structure to look good (Monaghan, 2001). This focus on the external or outwardness entails a form of fitness which is defined by the ideal image, energy and ability of the men, a manifestation of the internal health (Featherstone, 1991) (Glassner, 1989) (Monaghan, 2001) (Spatz, 2015). Even though they do not do away with notions of health as it remains a ground on which gyms, exercises thrive, they redefine health and also translates it into an idea of fitness, where the “fit” is defined in terms of performances and “looking good” (Monaghan, 2001) (Spatz, 2015) (Featherstone, 1991). A performative idea of fitness thereby prevails among the people following the new gym culture. This distinction creates a dichotomy between body and physique, inner/outer, health (cannot be measured)/fitness (measured in terms of activeness). This brings in the distinction between essence and appearance, where the earlier notion locates *bayam* in essence, from within, and opposed to the idea of appearance, or physique in present day gym culture (Watson, 1990). While this distinction persists, some also maintain that there is not much difference between the two periods. The *bayam* or exercises remain the same, only the mediums have changed where it has become easier to carry on exercises with minimum effort. This simplistic idea of a transition necessarily assumes that there existed a relation between *bayam* and health, and that *bayam* existed because it would generate a healthy body where the notion of health was based on certain principles. With the change of those principles health’s meaning has changed today. Thus, the logic of hundred *baithaks* is a myth and that one can do a minimum of it today and garner health. The openness

of this field speaks of ideas of freedom, individual choice as opposed to directed, essential ideas. Those into the gym culture believe that health can be achieved with minimum efforts garnering maximum output, basing itself into a capitalist logic of more for less. Thus, the present ideas reject the previous ones on the basis of myths and for also being unscientific and irrational that has come up from my interlocutors. However, I instead argue how the basis of the two are distinct.

This conflicting views on the distinction or difference between *bayam* culture and the gym culture that have come up from my ethnography necessarily assumes the linearity of time and an emphasis on one singular idea of body cultivation or exercise regime. I instead read the difference as necessarily between two different modes or methods or logic of exercise rather than viewing it hierarchically. The two methods of *bayam* culture and gym culture are not opposed to one another in terms of a mere distinction between ‘past’ or ‘present’ or ‘tradition’ and ‘modern’, ‘unscientific’ and ‘scientific’ but instead they are both based on distinct scientific methods (principles) and perspectives altogether. To see one as scientific or rational and the other as not, is to forget that the basis of *bayam* culture or physical culture in the twentieth century were distinctively based on scientific and modern principles. Although the various traditionalist and nationalist movements were against the west or western societies and modernity, S.N. Eisenstadt in his essay on *Multiple Modernities* (2000) shows how these movements were none the less couched in modernity itself. These movements were characteristically modern yet were also shaped in relation to their specific history, tradition and culture (Eisenstadt, 2000, p. 2). This can also be seen in context of India’s colonial encounter. Joseph Alter and Elizabeth Abbott has written extensively on the discourse of sexuality and *brahmacharya* in modern India which was shaped by an anti-modern and anti-western stance during the colonial-nationalist period of early twentieth century. Yet the cultivation of the male body through the practice of *brahmacharya* was based on a modern scientific discourse in the

bio-moral significance of semen (Abbott, 2000) (Alter, 1994). Thus, it would be wrong to assume a direct opposition and hierarchy between the *bayam* culture as rooted in concepts of *brahmacharya* and other mechanical modes of *bayam* and that of the gyms today with new technologies and methods on the basis of scientific and rational parameters. Instead, it is significant to read the difference, if any, between these two modes of body cultivation or practices as based on multiple scientific perspectives, two different logical premises yet based on the same modern discourse of health.

The notion of *bayam* was not merely about health, it may not be thought through a means to end logic. Instead, I argue how *bayam* can be read as an end in itself. It was in those doings (*bayam*) that constituted health and identity, thereby making it perpetually impossible to separate *bayam*, health and identity. The basis of *bayam* could be understood in pain and hard work. It was not that hundred *baithaks* will generate a healthy body but a belief that hundred *baithaks* entails an engagement with oneself and the body, and it is in this engagement, lies health and from which an understanding of one's identity will also emerge. Joseph Alter draws a similarity between meditation, chanting of mantras with the repeated *dand baithaks*. repetition. "Typically, *dand* and *baithaks* are done in a relatively private corner of the *akhara* where the wrestler can spend an hour or more rhythmically bobbing up and down as he breathes in and out with each prepetition. This experience is likened to the metronomic recitation of mantras, and some wrestlers spoke of *vyayam* as yogic meditation of a highly variant kind" (Alter, 1993, p. 56). It is in this constant repetitive engagement with the body, in the breathing in and out, in which lies the dedication and perseverance towards the body which together constitutes health in *bayam*. So, in an absence of any direct relation between health and *bayam*, *bayam* assumes the way of living. There is a close relationship between the space of the *bayam samity* and *bayam*, such that they together constitute the identities of the individual part of it.

### **Interiority: Interrogating the Possibility of an Inner Body**

In the *bayam samitis* the notion of masculinity is embedded in ideas of purity, semen, on a more grounded and inner or interior understanding of the body and *bayam*. The emphasis has been on developing a body from within “betor theke” (from inside), where this interiority is often expressed in terms of naturalness. Moving away from the inner understanding of a body, today fitness or health situates itself into a creation of a body structure, an outer idea of body based on display and representation. This also becomes a point of difference that is emphasized by my interlocutors in an effort to differentiate their *bayam* practices from that of the gyms and multigyms.

The emphasis that my interlocutors continue to give is an understanding of *shorir chorchha* or *bayam* from “within” highlighting an interior understanding of the body. This also leads to a more essential understanding of body, health and masculinity one that also bases itself on a materiality of semen. But rather than falling into an easy understanding of it, I intend to move towards what this inner or *bhetor* could mean. This idea of an inside or within suggests something ‘natural’ or authentic as opposed to something external and thereby inauthentic. Goffman’s theory on back stage and front stage, and the sacred idea of self to a profane idea of self will also reflect similar understanding which Goffman tries to negate (Goffman, 1956). Whenever we think of a self we emphasize on the interior as the authentic self as opposed to what is presented outside. Thus, a relation of authenticity to that of the interiority is always prevalent. When these men in *bayam samitis* narrate how they prepare students from within, they extend a claim of authenticity and longevity.

From the perspective of Manik da, one of the *gurus* of *Bajrang vyayamaghar*, it was spiritual. Bodily cultivation was not seen as distinct from spiritual cultivation bringing in the idea of the “spiritual male body”<sup>lxxiii</sup> as Alter has argued (Alter, 2000). *Bayam*’s relation to the interiority

can be understood in a similar context. The inner is perceived as untouched by the outside influences in a manner that Goffman discusses the idea of a sacred self in social science debates that assumes an inner sacred understanding of self, pure and untouched by the social (Goffman, 1956). These associations of interiority with something sacred, pure, authentic resonates an essential understanding of the inner domain.

Sarukkai (2002) discusses the realm of the inner body and shows how it is possible to retain an understanding of the inner body without falling into the dichotomy of inside/outside or an inside as essence. He does so by understanding the inner as the phenomenological experience of dimensionality through acts of eating and breathing. Staying within Merleau-Ponty's work, he situated the inner body in Merleau-Ponty's conceptualization of the notion of dimensionality (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). He describes "inside not as a side" but a "quality of sides" which "captures the boundedness of sides and the invisibility of perspective itself" (Sarukkai, 2002, p. 464). He explains how we are aware of the backside of a cube even without perceiving it by being aware of its inside. The idea of an inside helps us understand the distance or space that separates the front from the back thereby giving us an idea of the back. This is the experience of dimensionality and we are aware of it because we also understand the dimensionality of our bodies as Sarukkai seeks to argue (2002). Thus, for him we are aware of our inner body as we experience it through dimensionality, a 'space' that constitutes the inner body. This space for him is experienced through acts of eating or breathing or hunger or and other sensations that generate an experience of the inner body.

James Morley in his article on "Inspiration and Expiration: Yoga Practice through Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of the Body" (2001) discusses Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "lived body" and places it in the discourse of Yoga. According to Morley, Merleau-Ponty understands the 'self-world' relation through the concept of the "lived body". "The lived body is the embodied consciousness, a nexus between the twin roles of active agent of perception and the

passive object of perception by others” (Morley, 2001, p. 75). He understands how the tendency to conceive of a difference between an outer related with the external world and ‘inner’ body that is within us has resulted in an alienation of the ‘inner’ body, or rather “the sentient mass of our bodies, which is relegated to the margins of our ordinary experiences” (Morley, 2001, p. 76). He sees *pranayama* or breath control as a means to overcome this alienation, which will entail a “concrete experience of the body as a relation between inside and outside” (Morley, 2001, p. 76). *Pranayam* or breath control means the inspiration and expiration of breath which forms a relation between the inner and the outer body. Thus, the idea of the lived body is neither in the ‘inner’ nor in the ‘outer’ body, but in *the* relation between the two that is formed through conscious breathing practices, like *pranayama*. Morley sees this process as a reverse of perception which he calls proprioception and later discusses Merleau-Ponty’s theory of reversibility to understand the internal and external relation and exchange. Petri Berndtson enumerates on breathing as an exchange. “Breathing is an experience of the perpetual relation of exchange between ourselves and that which is not ourselves, that is, that which is outside ourselves but which is inhaled into us. In experiential terms, breathing is a constant relation and exchange between us and the world. Breathing, therefore, is the experiential body’s relation with the world in contrast to other vital physiological functions” (Berndtson, 2018, p. 12).

Following Sarukkai’s argument (Sarukkai, 2002), I wish to understand the idea of this inside or *bayam* from within. When they speak about *bayam* as something that prepares from within, are they signifying an essentializing inside? What is the ontology of this inside? What marks its significance? Sarukkai in his theorizing of the inner seeks to deny any ontology of an inside or inner body by replacing ‘side’ from the concept of inside through the notion of dimensionality. However, can we really deny that there is no ‘inside’ or no ontology of ‘inside’? In denying an ‘inside’, its materiality, aren’t we denying a realm that might open us to further understanding? Can we retain an ‘inside’ yet not fall into essentializing it?

### ***Dom: Cultivating Power/Strength and Embodying an Inner Body***

Sarukkai (2002) and Morley (2001), in discussing Merleau-Ponty's theory, brings in the concept of breathing and the act of reversibility as a way to understand an inner body where the inner is understood to be a phenomenological experience of "dimensionality" rather than an ontological essence. However, with ontological turn, I argue, it has been made possible to distinguish between *ontology* and *ontology as essence*. In denying an ontology, social sciences have so far tried to deny the idea of essence. However, in doing so they have also denied a fixed, material, physical, and factual understanding of ontology. Ben Alberti in speaking of ontology or ontological approach emphasizes on "relational ontology" which according to him seeks to destabilize the distinction between a "real, material, or physical world" from the "thought, discourse and narrative" (Alberti, 2011, p. 905). However, this does not mean it negates a physical reality or a fixed reality but instead seeks to deny the a-priori understanding associated with it. Citing Barod and Latour he speaks of ontology as a "shifting ground, not a foundation" (Alberti, 2011, p. 905). This is similar to how Holbraad, Castro and Pederson have argued about ontology as the possibility rather than an essence, about how things could be rather than how things are (Holbraad, Pederson, Castro, 2014). This understanding does not deny ontology yet does not fall into an essentializing trap of naturalizing the ontology as something prior or pre-given. Thus, when I speak of an ontology of the inner body, I do not deny the materiality or interiority of an inner realm but do not reduce it to a pre-given essence. In doing so I seek an understanding about the possibility of an interiority that my interlocutors have always emphasized upon. Martin Holbraad has argued that we often take our own concepts to interpret and explain what we encounter in the field. Ontological turn<sup>lxxiv</sup> makes it possible instead to rethink our own concepts in relation to what we encounter in our fieldwork. Following that I argue, instead of explaining or denying an interiority or inner body through our own ideas and concepts, it became necessary to understand what my interlocutor meant

when they spoke about an interiority. Can we think about the possibility of an inner body? How is the inner body created/formed, felt and understood in and through *bayam*? This happened through the concept of “*dom*”, breathing and *prana*<sup>lxxv</sup>.

Prana or breath has been central to yogic practices and yoga (Yogi Ramacharaka, Atkinson, 2009). Pranayama, one of the stages of yoga, deals with prana or breath and consists of several postures based on breath control, inhalation and exhalation as discussed above. However, “science of breath” has both “exoteric” or external side to it as well as an “esoteric” or internal side to it (Yogi Ramacharaka, Atkinson, 2009, p. 18). It is believed and argued that prana, although means breathing and thereby atmospheric air or oxygen, is considered something more. Prana is considered to be the “universal principle of energy or force, and that all energy or force is derived from that principle, or rather, is a particular form of manifestation of that principle” (Yogi Ramacharaka, Atkinson, 2009). Breathing or prana remains crucial to all forms of *asanas*, *pranayamas* and *bayam*. In my ethnographic accounts, breath came up as pivotal even when it remained unsaid. The sounds inside an *akhara*, yoga centre or gymnasium made it quite evident that breath was central to *bayam* or exercises and physical cultures.

This centrality of breathing came up through my ethnography. I recollect one such day through my audio recorder which accompanied me in my observation, recording snippets of conversations and the sounds that were “natural” to an *akhara* in the early morning. As I heard further, I could hear heavy breathing of a person along with the thumping sound of some heavy object on the mud. I immediately recollected my memory of a young wrestler who was taking up a ten kgs plough and was engaging in ploughing the wrestling pit, popularly known as *mati kopano*, which was central to wrestling warm up practices. I could also hear him utter sounds like ..”ooouuh...oouhh” and could understand the amount of heavy weight he was lifting and the pain that he was experiencing that came out from the sound he emitted of his heavy

breathing. These sounds in themselves were significant for it brought in two important dimensions to my work. One of breath and the other of pain.

*Mati kopano* or ploughing the wrestling pit has been a significant form of *bayam* in wrestling. According to a wrestler from Gobor Goho's *akhara*, *mati kopano* has been central to wrestling not just as a technical method to make the mud light, but also as a form of *bayam* that cultivates breathing. "It is a very good method for warming up. Through it you can do breathing exercises very well. *Khub bhalo dom hoe* (It cultivates *dom*)". *Dom* which also translates into stamina, is central to wrestling as wrestling depends not only on bodily strength but also the stamina of men engaging in it.

The question of *dom* also comes up in the context of a body builder who is currently a gym instructor.

'See I don't smoke so I have a lot of *dom*. *Amar dom anek beshi* (My stamina is huge). There are many young kids who did *bayam* with me but couldn't survive in front of me. *Amake hapate parbe na ora* (They cannot make me go out of breath). *Dom* increases with continuous efforts. It won't happen just today. It will keep increasing. If I ever stop *bayam* my *dom* will decrease. I can tell you about my body, I am very fit. I can climb on top of that almira. I won't require any support".

His association of being able to have more stamina/*dom* because he doesn't smoke brings up the discipline that is central to any form of exercise. Keeping away from smoking or alcohol or any form of *nesha* or addiction has been emphasized in *bayam* practices but its connection to breathing was brought up by him. He emphasizes on *dom* as essential and which is cultivated with time by continuous efforts. The lifting of weights, or the continuous sit ups or *dand baithaks* requires *dom* and also garners *dom*. It's a two-way process. You require *dom* to carry out the continuous exercises and the continuous doing of those exercises develops your *dom*

further. A relation also comes up from his narrative that connects stamina or *dom* with fitness is relevant to understand how he associates fitness with ability to perform. This performance also demands stamina making it central to the question of fitness.

The significance of breathing is perhaps paramount in the context of yoga which includes *pranayama* and *asanas*. In my conversation one evening with Manik da, one of the *gurus* in *Bajrang Vyayamaghar*, the question of breathing came up.

*“Pranayam is about the meeting of your soul and God’s soul. It takes a lot of time and needs “nishtha”/dedication”.*

Manik da begins talking about *pranayama* from a spiritual perspective and then moves into giving a very grounded everyday example of food habits and its connection to breath. In his description of *pranayama*, he picks up *Kumbhak* <sup>lxvii</sup> which concerns not only with inhalation and exhalation of breath but also with breath retention. *Kumbhak* is a deliberate retention of breath and in explaining this he brings in the concept of *dom*. In explaining how long one can hold on to one’s breath, he says,

*It depends on dom. If you eat more you will not be able to hold on to your breath for long as you will be able to when you have eaten less. Pet joto khali korte parbe dom toto beshi. (The more you can keep your stomach empty and the more you can have breath/dom).*

This linkage is intriguing as it connects the immaterial transcendental and physiological understanding of breathing to that of a very material embodied understanding of how breath is produced, cultivated and sustained, used and enacted, restored and left and more importantly how breath is lived. Alter discusses how among wrestlers *kumbhak* is of importance since it helps develop “strength” and “stamina” and breath control remains significant in every form of exercise (Alter, 1992, p. 81) These are various ways the men live and engage with their

breath in their everyday practices of *bayam*. Contrary to the notion that breath is invisible and immaterial, here breath becomes part of the body, becoming embodied in and through these activities. On the other hand, in considering and reducing breath to mere physiological aspects of the bodily function, Petri Berendtsen (2018) discusses the voluntary nature of breathing. Breath here is not an involuntary act of physiology but on the contrary becomes voluntary, something to be cultivated, developed and stored. Following Havi Carel, it can be argued that breathing forms a “juncture” between “physiological”, “psychological”, “existential”, ‘spiritual’, and “cultural” (Carel, 2016, p. 128)

This *dom* and the inner body also become relevant in context of the Covid pandemic. This relation to Covid was drawn in the context of breathing, immunity and power. After the lockdowns were lifted and we were going back to normal ways of living with masks and sanitizers, I also had an opportunity to visit fieldwork with an aim to meet my interlocutors and also understand how the Covid pandemic might have affected them and *bayam*. I visited *Bajrang vyayamaghar* and met Manik da. The discussion on pandemic came up and I was informed by him that the pandemic was all about having a good immunity which for him is cultivated through breathing. This made me reflect back on the idea of “*dom toiri kora*” or cultivation of breath that was central to *bayam* and wrestling. “*Dom*” as I understood previously was about a masculine understanding of power that could be understood as stamina, ability, masculinity and now it also meant immunity. The point this chapter tries to emphasize is the relation that he drew between breathing and immunity. The question of an inner power, something within also stems up in context of the pandemic.

By invoking the concept of *dom* that my ethnography brought in, I resort to an understanding of the same in this chapter. *Dom* is a Bengali terminology suggesting intense breathing, or breath control but can also translate itself into symbolic meanings of ability, stamina, power, strength and masculinity. *Dom* may appear and translate itself the same as breath yet it holds a

different place in physical cultures. *Dom* is not the same as breathing. The way one controls and regulates and stores up one's breath is how *dom* can be translated and understood. It is this concept of *dom* which I argue can be read as a masculine form of breathing, a form of breath control and breath cultivation that is central to *bayam*. Interestingly it is this very idea of breath/*dom* that came up both in the case of wrestling, gyms, yoga and bodybuilding. All these various forms of physical exercises require breathing and *dom* or breath cultivation. In Bengali *dom* also means one's ability to do something which already has a very masculine attribute. This very everyday meaning of *dom* can be connected to the meaning and understanding of *dom* that is central in exercises and physical cultures, including yoga. This concept thus is ambiguous when you try to reduce it to one single meaning but relates to different notions that somewhere together constitutes *bayam* culture or physical cultures. Keeping in mind the various interrelated ideas to the notion of *dom*, I read it also as an embodied notion of breath or a practice of cultivation of breath.

In the field of *bayam*, the idea of inner strength and power is often highlighted as opposed to an outward body development. The idea of *bayam*'s efforts to produce from within and generate power (masculine) located within reflects on an understanding of embodied strength. This idea of strength and power appears abstract but I argue it is embodied for being located within, stemming from semen control or bodily *bayams* and breathing. In *bayam* the word stamina is not an abstract notion of ability but an embodied idea of breath. This embodied idea speaks of an inner realm. The question of an inside, an inner body stems up again and again in the way one formulates or understands health in *bayam*. I argue that what is referred to as within or inside or inner, is a creation in itself rather than an essential domain. This inside that the men speak of in the context of *bayam*, I argue, is described in terms of “*dom toiri kora*” or creating stamina/breath. The inner domain is ontologically constituted through the practices of *bayam*, through breathing and cultivating breath. The creation of a sense of power or strength

from within is thereby not just a creation of power but also a simultaneous creation of an inner body itself which is embodied. *Bayam* from within or ‘inside’ then is not an essential domain existing as a priori but is constituted and embodied through the very act of breathing that creates the power or strength. This power or strength in context of *bayam* I argue is an embodied idea of *dom* or breath/stamina. It is interesting to observe how the people in today’s gyms give the same importance to *dom* or breath cultivation. By comparing the act of boating by fishermen and also those of labourers toiling in the agricultural fields, they bring the question of breath or *dom* even in practices outside *bayam*. It is these repeated activities that creates *dom* or a power within. However, this is not just in context of *bayam* and power but extends to an overall idea of health. This *dom*, translated as ‘stamina’, I argue, can be read as a form of masculine power and strength.

To understand *dom* as masculine is neither to essentialize nor to remove *dom* from the realm of women. *Dom* remains central to *bayam*, labouring, dancing and singing or for that matter every form of activity irrespective of gender. However, when I read *dom* as ‘masculine’ I seek an understanding based on the meaning *dom* has culturally, sociologically and philosophically. Havi Carel’s work on the “Phenomenology of Breathlessness” helps me in understanding the notion of *dom*. What is *dom* but the opposite of breathlessness? Carel’s extensive work on the experience of breathlessness and what it means to live through it, helps me in conceptualizing ‘breathfullness’ or the notion of *dom*. Carel in his work on breathlessness draws two significant experiences and feelings, one of the loss of control and the other the loss of certainty that according to him characterizes breathlessness. Although he emphasizes on the fact how breathlessness cannot be shared or understood by the other, his own experiences throw light on the lived experience of breathlessness. This association of certainty and control to the notion of breathing remains crucial into understanding *dom* or breathfullness. *Dom* is about the control and certainty of breathing, of being able to “have” and “control” breath and not run out of it

that establishes the sense of power and strength of the practitioners. Recollect from the discussions above how one of my interlocutors described his fitness in terms of his inability to go out of breath. *Dom* here in his narrative becomes a masculine disposition while breathlessness calls for one's inability and lack of masculinity. This idea of control and ability relates breathing to the notion of masculinity where masculinity too rests on an ability to control. However, *dom* is not something that one already has but one that has to be rigorously cultivated through *bayam*. Interestingly, *dom* rests on breathlessness and it is through repeated *bayams* and repeatedly going breathless, that one understands and cultivates *dom*. The picking of the irons or the *dands baithaks* or push ups rests between heavy breathing and breathlessness. Carel reads these forms of breathlessness not through the lens of illness but through the idea of positive or "pleasant breathlessness" associated with "running" and "dancing" and other activities (Carel, 2016, p. 121).

I recollect my experience of watching a powerlifter picking up a huge weight in *Hathkhola Bayam Samity*. I will come back to it in detail in my next chapter but it remains significant to understand the relation between *dom* and breathlessness. Power-lifting like other *bayams* requires *dom*/breath/stamina. I observed him lifting a huge weight two or three times after which he went out of breath. He understands his limit which is marked by his breathlessness. The immense pain he has and his breathlessness was evident from the way he was panting. Here pain and breathlessness became one and the same. While he panted heavily, the men in the gym room applauded his efforts, a performance of his masculinity. His ability to lift the weight showed his *dom* or stamina and also his masculinity. Yet he also went out of breath. I understood how one's ability lies between *dom* and breathlessness. The more he can hold on to the weight, the more is his *dom*. *Dom* or breathfullness therefore, cannot be in itself but only in relation to breathlessness.

*Dom* can be understood through the concept of prana or breath although prana suggests something more than mere breathing. Considered to be the “universal principle of energy or force” it is found in “all forms of matter and, yet it is not matter. It is in the air, but it is not the air nor one of its chemical constituents. It is taken up by the system along with the oxygen, and yet it is not the oxygen” (Yogi Ramacharaka, Atkinson, 2009). There is a difference that is suggested between “atmospheric air” and the “mysterious and potent principle contained within it” often referred to as the “spirit of life” (Yogi Ramacharaka, Atkinson, 2009, p. 21-22). Prana can also be stored through regulated and controlled breathing, a masculine endeavor, which results in strength and vitality (Yogi Ramacharaka, Atkinson, 2009). This emphasis on the storing of prana, that I argue, can be conceived as “*dom toiri kora*”, a form of masculine power cultivation that results in strength and stamina for men. Yet it is nonetheless a power emanating from the interiority and from the embodiment of breath and other bodily practices. Breath or prana occupies a strange position. It is present yet it is conceived as absent, it is immaterial as it cannot be touched yet it can be embodied and felt, it is void and emptiness but yet it cannot be empty. It is because of these characteristics, air or breath is mostly “forgotten”. In “The forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger”, Luce Irigaray’s theorizing of breathing and interiority brings in this “forgetting of air”, where she argues, “But this element, irreducibly constitutive of the whole, compels neither the faculty of perception nor that of knowledge to recognize it. Always there, it allows itself to be forgotten” (Irigaray, 1999, p. 8). She beautifully captures how breath eludes perception and knowledge, and more significantly, for being present everywhere and always, it is forgotten. The concept of void which suggests nothingness is actually air or breath or prana. Irigaray therefore, considers air/breath as the unthought, and it is in the unthought I argue lies a new thought or new way of thinking. “The history of Western philosophy is a history of masculine domination in philosophical thought. It is thus no coincidence that as a thinker of sexual difference, it was precisely a woman philosopher, Luce

Irigaray, who *as philosopher* has for the first time in the history of philosophy breathed through her entire philosophy” (Skof, Berndtson, 2018, p. xvii). The split between body and mind which can also be read as transcendence and materiality in cartesian theory reduced breath to the materiality of the body and thus a distinction between thinking and breathing emerged (Berndtson, 2018).

This duality is interrogated I argue in the question of *bayam* which is associated with a transcendental and spiritual masculine understanding and breathing which occupies just the realm opposite to it. The concept of *dom* or stamina speaks of a masculine power, yet ‘forgets’ once again that this power or strength emanates from the humble act of breathing and from prana the life force. This entails a transformation of breath into a masculine concept of *dom* that takes place through the cultivation of breath and body in *bayam* by means of breathing practices, bodily *bayams* and through the storing or rather embodying of the fundamental material element (which is everywhere yet nowhere, everything yet is nothing), breath/prana. The very body and materiality that the men or the masculine seek to transcend becomes the very domain of their strength and power that is embodied.

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## Chapter 7: “*Kosto Kora*”: Embodying Pain, Cultivating Body

Pain has remained significant throughout history in the field of biology, physiology and simultaneously in social, cultural and political realms. “The relationship between pain and knowledge, pain and salvation, and pain and truth constituted three ways in which physical suffering was used as a sign and a medium” (Moscoso, 2012, p. 152). Pain’s physicality has made it intimately tied to the body and yet pain has also emerged as an emotion in itself (Ahmed, 2004). Pain has, I argue, always remained in a domain of contradiction. Keith Wailoo (2014) in *Pain a Political History* shows the paradox of pain in context of Soldier’s pain in war and post war. She argues how soldiers tolerated the grave wounds from broken limbs and other extreme forms of pain in the war but became intolerant when it came to living a post war life in pain. This pain not only became a “bodily paradox” but a “political” one as well which shaped American politics and healthcare since care for the returning soldiers increasingly became a government duty and responsibility (Wailoo, 2014, p. 13). Pain’s contradictory nature also comes up in context of Patricia Lawrence’s (2003) ethnography in context of Sri Lanka’s civil war where pain from torture received at detention centres were countered through further pain by means of ritualistic practices under Goddess *Kali*’s<sup>lxxvii</sup> vow. On one hand the pain from torture became a site of violence meted out through the state power while on the other hand the religious self-inflicted pain became a source for liberating one from the pain of the tortured body (Lawrence, 2003).

Pain’s openness during the middle-ages has come up in several historical works (Pincikowski, 2002) which shows its significance as a “positive force” and the relevance of the “expressive body in pain” in acetic practices, as an “enigmatic force in courtly practices” during middle-ages (Pincikowski, 2002, p. 3). According to Alain Boureau, it was the Renaissance that created a myth of the Middle Ages as a period where “the body and physical pleasures were censured

and mortification of the flesh and denial of the senses were promoted” (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 5). The Middle Ages have been considered a “dark age” when it came to human suffering where pain was seen as a “symptom of sin” that has to be “endured by the sufferer” (Pincikowski, 2002, p. 9). Pain therefore in the middle-ages was related to religious understanding. Modernity on the other hand has to some extent made pain hidden or absent or based it solely in the hands of “science” and “medicine” such that pain has been “secularized” and “medicalized” making it meaningless and only destructive (Pincikowski, 2002, 3-4). By secularization Pincikowski meant the process of medicalization which according to Foucault reduced the human body into an organism (Foucault, 1978). I further argue, ‘secularization’ of pain can be understood in context of modernity and medicalization where pain from being interpreted in religious contexts of sin and nature in the middle-ages was transformed increasingly into being interpreted in the secular context of medicine and science. David Morris argues for the myth of two pains where pain has been reduced to physiological and psychological pain (Morris, 1993). Pincikowski argues through Morris on how, “the medical community considers pain to be a "challenge" to be overcome, a "puzzle" to be solved, a "conquest" to be won” (Morris, 1993, p. 23) (Pincikowski, 2002, p. 3-4). In a capitalist, secular world of modernity and with the coming up of the medical discourse, pain has become something that has to be erased, cured, or overcome where suffering is considered as a failure (Illich, 1976). “Modern expectations of pain have been transformed not just by “extraordinary interventions”, but by an ideology which regards the reduction of pain and physical discomfort as synonymous with progress” (Morgan, 2002, p. 313). I argue that this change in the way pain is understood today stems from a masculine attitude. Pain is no longer about endurance but overcoming which remains crucial to how we understand pain’s relation to masculinity today. Therefore, we also find a distinction in the male and the female bodies in pain where female bodies are often seen to embrace suffering, where pain becomes eroticized to reflect a kind of ecstasy, whereas men

seek to overcome it (Carlson, 2010) (Pincikowski, 2002). This supposedly passive understanding of pain through endurance is not just a feature of female suffering but can also be found in men in terms of enduring religious rituals (Lawrence, 2003), ascetic practices (Van de veer, 2009) or the suffering in *brahmacharya* in the form of *tapas* for Gandhi (Kaelber, 1979).

This idea of overcoming or curing pain is none the less based on the presence of pain in the first place to be cured, negated or overcome. It is here that I seek to understand the significance of pain and its relation to body and masculinity. Pain is complex in its inexpressibility and unknowability. This has been crucial in the understanding of pain where pain remains something that might never be really expressed, represented or known. It is precisely in this unknowability or inexpressibility of it that pain remains most interesting, remaining perpetually in a search to be known. In a world of reason, pain stands for irrationality, in a world of representation, pain stands as unrepresentable, in a world of knowledge, pain stands for unknowability and in a world of medicine and health, pain stands for sickness. Yet pain lurks behind.

An effort to provide an ethnography of pain is one of the challenges. Pain's unsee-ability or invisibility is coupled with its un-shareability. This un-shareability of pain has come up from several works, including Scarry's which has occupied a distinctive place. Scarry discusses in her *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* about pain's failure in language, in its failure to be communicated or shared (Scarry, 1985). Yet some authors point towards the capacity of words, arts and images to express bodily pain which may "lack definition but are no less evocative for that" (Boddice, 2014, p. 1). The editors in *The Body in Pain in Irish Literature and Culture* (2016) argues, "The words that describe or the images that represent that multi-sensory experience of pain might indeed be hopelessly inadequate, yet they do attempt to "figure out" or put into figurative shape the affective experience of pain" (Dillane,

McAreevey, Pine, 2016, p. 3). Sara Ahmed brings this question of feeling the pain of others in her text *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004). “The impossibility of feeling the pain of others does not mean that the pain is simply theirs, or that their pain has nothing to do with me” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 30). She explains the “feeling” of other’s pain through the notion of empathy. She argues how empathy is a “wish feeling” that makes one feel “something” that is different from what the other is feeling yet it makes the person believe that they are able to feel what the other is feeling. She suggests thereby, the ethics of responding to pain involves being open to being affected by that which we cannot know or feel” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 30). Ahmed, in context of Scarry’s un-graspability of pain, distinguishes between “feeling” and “knowing” others’ pain when she says, “I come to feel that which I cannot know” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 30). The other’s pain then is unknowable yet we do come to feel something which might not coincide with the other’s feeling yet we still ‘feel’.

A turn to pain from the question of health in the last chapter is not a leap I argue but a continuation into grasping *bayam*, ‘inner’ body, the embodied power of *dom* and masculinity that formed my argument in the last chapter. The question of an “inner” body will once again resurface in this chapter, but this time it will be in grasping pain. Understanding pain becomes more complex in context of *bayam* and exercise regimes which are a domain of health and fitness that necessarily negates pain. James Mallinson in his talk on *A History of the Role of the Body in Yoga: From Subjugation to Cultivation* argued that the body was subjugated and mortified in the ancient yogic practices and now the move from mortification to cultivation has taken place in recent times in the regime of health and yoga (Karwaan, 21<sup>st</sup> June, 2021). He then necessarily understands an opposition between subjugation and cultivation. However, contradictorily, I argue, *bayam*, yoga and other physical cultures are also a domain where the opposition between subjugation and cultivation can be reconciled. Mallinson brings in ancient texts to discuss how the yogi practicing yoga is referred to as a *tapasvini*<sup>lxxviii</sup> or one who is

engaging in *tapas* or “self-imposed suffering” (Kaelber, 1979, p. 201). It is here that M.K. Gandhi’s body cultivation remains significant to bridge the gap between *tapas* or mortification and cultivation in recent times as his everyday activities geared towards cultivation, are no different from *tapas*, including the simple acts of fasting, *brahmacharya* and others (Alter, 2000). Thus, instead of thinking of pain or the mortification of the body as an impediment, or a thing of ancient times, this chapter will question if pain (through mortification of the body) can be thought of in the cultivation of the body and masculine subjectivity in context of *bayam* and physical cultures. It is this contradiction and this absent-presence of pain in the field of *bayam*/exercise regimes that will remain the core thrust of this chapter.

This chapter will seek to discuss the different ideas of pain that have emerged from my fieldwork in the *bayam samitis*, *vyayamaghars* and wrestling *akharas*. These ideas of pain, I argue, can be differentiated on the basis of two notions. There is pain as ‘injury’ and there is an ‘everyday pain’ that remains crucial to *bayam*. My focus will be on understanding the everydayness of pain in *bayam* which would further lead me into a distinction between ‘physical’ and ‘bodily’ pain. Moving away from pain as injury which is read as exceptional pain, everyday pain takes us into a path where pain is not an exclusive, exceptional aspect but an everyday intimate affair. This domain of pain opens us into understanding pain not only through the notion of physical pain but also one that is not physical yet bodily. This bodily pain I argue will not only make us rethink how we understand pain but also open us to the questions of the ‘inner body’.

Ethnography-ing something that eludes concreteness is a challenge. Ethnography’s emphasis on observation has often made it based entirely on the sense of sight, of what one sees, meaning something that one can grasp in a concrete manner. Observing has also mostly been associated with the sense of sight, seeing over other senses. Charles Hirschkind (2006) discussed this biasness of the sense of sight as opposed to the sense of listening and other senses. In his book

on, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and the Counter publics* (2006) Hirschkind enumerates that from the time of enlightenment the sense of sight, vision or eyes have gained prominence over other senses. Ethnography too, I argue, is largely being consumed by this dominance of vision, of what we see and capture through our sense of sight. However, I argue observation is not simply about vision but about experiencing something closely in order to seek an understanding. This might be based on sight or any other senses for that matter, including sound, emotions, thoughts and feelings. It is the coming together of all these that forms our experience. James Davies argues how the “reactions”, “emotions” that are evoked in context of our fieldwork can aid us into understanding our fields rather than being only an impediment to it (Davies, 2010).

Ethnography-ing pain therefore, entailed a different method. Pain is not a visible and observable thing that can be captured and documented. Pain is expressed in narratives or in expressions, where pain comes in a form of translation from the person in pain to the ethnographer. Yet pain’s translatability is always under question. According to Elaine Scarry, “to have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt” (Scarry, 1985, p. 7). For an ethnographer working on pain, it is about hearing other’s narratives of pain but with what certainty? How do people narrate about pain? Do they at all do? What is lost in the narration and translation? With these questions I entered the field.

Jeff Hern and Vivien Burr argues, “While pain is highly medicalised in modern society, beliefs about pain are deeply socially and culturally embedded” (Hern, Burr, 2008, p. 8). Pain’s relation to masculinity has been one of overcoming as well as of suffering (Van de Veer, 2009) (Brintnall, 2011). On one hand there are those who would assign an idea of overcoming pain. This sort of an argument rests on a masculine notion. Robert Brintnall discusses the “triumphant narrative” of action films in Hollywood and the place of pain in context of the

male “fighting” body. He argues, how actions films have portrayed the male body which is shown through its ability to overcome pain and suffering (Brintnall, 2011, p. 28).

There is also an idea of enjoying pain, a masochistic notion of pain where pleasure and pain come together, or one experiences pleasure in pain (Reik, 1941) (Moscoso, 2012). On the other hand, there are also those who practice suffering and enduring pain by willingly giving into pain. This understanding of pain can be found in religious context. “The Roman Catholic tradition thereby glorified suffering, transforming it from a mundane and earthly reality to a sublime and transcendent element of spiritual redemption” (Silverman, 2001, p. 112). Moscoso discusses how there is a connection or relation between masochism and asceticism where both are based on a “desire for submission” and where one gives into the harmful practices with great vigour (Moscoso, 2012, p. 154). The risk-taking behaviour of the bodybuilders in their extreme body building practices also highlights this same enthusiasm (Monaghan, 2001). But among all these various ways of dealing with pain, there is a *will* that is presupposed. An overcoming of pain, enjoyment of pain or a willful suffering of pain all have in them a conscious *will* that is taking in pain. When we attach a will to the pain, either in terms of enjoying it or in terms of suffering it, we nonetheless focus upon making it controllable and a realm of self-mastery (Monaghan, 2001). It is here I wish to depart from such an understanding, to focus on suffering and pain that is endured but without any will or intention. Such an endurance calls for a rethinking of the relation between pain and subjectivity. (Mahmood, 1998, 2001) (Van der veer, 2009).

### **Pain as “Injury”: The Extra-ordinary Pain**

“Pain and injury remind us of our bodies...While everyday discourse inscribes notions of bodily integrity and wholeness, injury reveals the vulnerability and breakdown of bodies” (Spencer, 2012, p. 132) Pain in the field of *bayam* and physical cultures has a contradictory

existence. In my conversations with my interlocutors, pain has remained as something negative that has to be erased or cured. It has no place in the *bayam* or exercise regime. *Bayam* often becomes a medium to deal with various kinds of pain, for example arthritis and others. Thus, *bayam* becomes a means to cure pain. Yet there is also a pain from *bayam* itself that results in severe physical pain often leading to injury. In context of pain and injury suffered in mixed martial arts and its relation to masculinity, Dale Spencer argues how “pain is not seen as an impediment to fighting but something that can be overcome in battle” (Spencer, 2012, p.127).

In the field of *bayam*, exercise and physical cultures, pain I argue comes to mean differently. In my initial conversations with the men, I understood the question of pain is always equated with injury. Excessive exercise or lifting of weights beyond what is recommended or beyond one’s capacity is considered to result in injury and in turn pain. Some of my interlocutors discussed how they have pain all over their bodies, considering the different injuries they have sustained over time. This also implies how the injuries never really fade away and that their bodies become marked with injuries and pain accumulated over the years. The pain in this context is always a negative attribute, an unwanted medical condition that has to be treated and cured. Yet the pain stays on their bodies, marked and sustained over the years becoming part of them and their identity. While our bodies often, as Leder argues, disappears, or is forgotten and hidden, pain and injury bring out the body, reminding us of our own bodies (Spencer, 2012) (Leder, 1990).

The idea of pain in the context of injury is that of an exception. It is an exceptional pain and therefore takes the form of an ‘out of the ordinary’ experience. When I use the word exception, I do not intend to reduce the pain from injury into a total exception that rarely happens. Injury is very common in the field of physical cultures. Yet this injury takes the form of an exception meaning an experience that is out of the ordinary, something that disrupts the ordinariness of

the everyday. It forms a break. It pauses. It requires treatment and cure and time to heal. It is therefore a condition outside the everydayness of *bayam*. Injury pain acts as a disruption.

There is another side to the story of pain in *bayam* and it is of its everydayness. The regular exercise regimes, the continuous bodily efforts everyday also entail a pain. This pain is both physical and non-physical in terms of the efforts that are put in. In Bengali terminology the men would often refer to this other idea of pain as *kosto*. Understanding this narrative entails us to look into the everydayness of pain in *bayam*. Moving away from the out of the ordinary experiences of pain as injury, everydayness of pain looks into the ordinary, habitual aspect of pain. This pain is not spoken of as pain or *byatha*. It is ambiguous thereby to understand something when no fixed and proper vocabulary exist for the same. Yet it remains significant to understand it and its relation to *bayam*, masculinity and health.

Spending days in the *bayam samitis*, *vyayamaghars* and conversing with the men brought in several stories, personal and collective narratives. Yet the question of pain would remain ambiguous or only come up as an injury. Men never really spoke of or about pain. This collective silence or indifference towards the aspect of pain came as a challenge in writing about pain in *bayam*. However, this changed when I realized my understanding of pain might come up from my experience within the *bayam samitis* rather than only from spoken narratives. Sometimes the field gives you, how you experience the totality of ethnography, in its rawness, everydayness, in its observations, tacit experiences, rather than only in what is spoken off.

### ***Bayam's Pain: Everydayness of pain***

My conversations with the author of *Enter the Dangal: Travels Through India's Wrestling Landscape* (Sengupta, 2016), Rudraneil Sengupta, gave me an idea on the workings of *akharas* across North India. One of the significant ideas that emerged from the narratives that have

come up from his work has been the question of *mehnat* or hard work. The men in his study often used the term *mehnat* to tell him about their daily engagement and devotion. Contrary to our popular belief on why men wrestle or exercise hard, hearing their narratives, I argue, tells us how the core idea of *bayam* and wrestling has been about taking in pain. I seek to understand the *bayam* through the ideas of *kosto kora* (taking pain/working hard) or *mehnat kora* (working hard) that are emphasized in *bayam samitis*, *vyayamaghars* and *akharas*. This emphasis on hard work and intense efforts are not merely an effect or outcome of practices but are essential I argue to the very idea of *bayam*.

The notion of relating hard-work and pain can be found in the context of Yap community. Jasan Throop (2010) in an ethnography in the Yap community discusses how pain is locally understood and experienced in the context of the community where two distinct ways emerge. Pain can be understood or experienced as a form of “mere suffering” which is “unwanted” and “without meaning”, on the other hand there is ‘suffering for’ when the pain transforms into a meaningful thing which “provides moral connection to others” (Throop. 2010, p. 176). This way of transforming pain into an experience for something meaningful and moral is placed in the context of work and “work-based illness” or pain emerging from work based activities. This transformation of the meaning of pain emerging from hard work and efforts into a “morally valenced experience” shows how pain is culturally configured rather than being only a mere sensation (Throop, 2010, p. 182). The emphasis on hard-work and *mehnat*, I argue, similarly also transforms pain into a way of cultivating the body instead of something that inhibits it.

In the context of *bayam* whether in North Indian *akharas* or in Bengal’s *bayam samitis*, the emphasis on thousand sit ups or *baithaks* were an essential part of *bayam* and cultivation of the body. As discussed in the previous chapter, to think of a relation between thousand sit ups or *dand baithaks* to that of health or to devise a ‘scientific’ rationality towards it has often failed.

Instead, today these ways of intense workout have been seen as detrimental and mostly irrational and unscientific. The explanation given by the present gym instructors is the impracticality of high number of sit ups and exercises. They emphasize the requirement of bodies instead of a fixed intense rule. For them even ten sit ups will be enough in order to develop a 'fit' body. By drawing a relation to the requirement for developing a 'fit' body and the number of sit ups, they focus on a logic of correlation with the workout and fitness. However, there are those who follow the earlier ideas of *bayam* have a different logic altogether. Their logic does not base itself on "how much" is required to a fit body, meaning the workout acting as a means towards a certain specified end. Instead for them the 'how much' is already determined, which in turn determines one's body, meaning the workouts are seen as an end in itself instead of a means towards a certain idea of a body or fitness. While the excessive exercise is dismissed as an "excess" by some, this excess is what is essential for cultivating a body for the *bayam samitis* and *akharas*. This excess is not only in terms of an excessive number of fixed practices, but their excessiveness hints at the intense efforts, hard work and pain demanded. It is this intense pain or hard work that cultivates the body which has been essential to *bayam* and physical cultures. By focusing on this argument, I do not wish to romanticize pain in *bayam*. I wish to argue that contrary to the popular beliefs that *bayam* reduces or cures pain, the idea of *bayam* or cultivation of the body is based on the idea of pain. This pain is not an abstract idea that we may feel in terms of *kosto* and hard work. This pain I argue is both physical and bodily. Not only do the men experience physical pain in terms of severe pain in the hands and legs, these practices in themselves are painful in the bodily efforts they demand which are abstract yet grounded in the body. Thus, two distinct ideas of pain emerge which I argue are both grounded in the ontology of the body.

## Physicalness of Pain

One evening I was asked by one of the *gurus* or trainers of a *vyayamaghar* in south Kolkata to come and see the training of newly joined young *bayam* practitioners. After my usual conversation in the *vyayamaghar*, two young boys in their teens turned up around seven in the evening. The *guru* began their training and it started from warm up exercises where the young men ran around in the open courtyard. When they began performing some free-hand exercises I found one of the boys crying out in pain while doing some hand movements. But the *guru* did not allow him to stop and instead asked him to do it over the pain. According to him, doing over pain is the only cure of the *bayam* pain. “*Bayam er byatha bayam e jabe*”. While the boy kept moaning in pain, he continued the exercise on his *guru*’s advice.

Later when I got an opportunity to share a few words with the boy he told me about the intense pain he had from the last day. He narrated how he has failed to sit for excreting on account of the pain he had from repeated sit ups. He referred to it as a post *bayam* pain that usually stays for two to three days. Post *bayam* pains have been narrated by several interlocutors of mine. Recollecting my conversations with the gym instructor from *Simla Bayam Samity*, he once narrated to me about his painful struggle after completing five hundred *baithaks*. He would narrate how his legs would shake due to the intense pain making it difficult to stand on his feet or stand straight. Some have narrated about the first day experiences which often resulted in sickness including that of high fever. Pain and body ache, sickness like fever shows the intensity of *bayam* and its influence on the body. In my conversation with a free hand *bayam* practitioner who has never engaged into exercising with irons, narrated this initial pain that occurs.

*In the first few days you have immense pain. You cannot even move. You will feel someone has beaten you in the entire body. It’s too much. But you have to exercise over this pain and then*

*the pain will go away. Now as it begins, this war, once you overcome seven to ten days...but today's boys cannot overcome this. Once they get this pain, they do not want to come. This is the real addiction. Ei betha je katiye nebe...eta kintu ekta nesha. (One who can overcome this pain, this is a real addiction). This is my opinion.*

The intensity of pain comes up in this conversation. This however, is not seen as something negative or out of the ordinary. Instead, this is perceived as a common experience, an initiation process in *bayam*. The way he narrates this pain is masculine. He uses the trope of war and overcoming to speak of their experience or negotiations with this pain. However, what is important to note is that he understands that continuing with *bayam* over this pain will eventually overcome the pain. This *will* to overcome pain becomes an addiction. He regrets how young boys these days cannot overcome this first stage of *bayam*. His account tells us how young men leave *bayam* due to the intense pain, or sickness that they experience in the first days of *bayam*. This is also evident from the account of another bodybuilder and trainer in a *bayam samity* in north Kolkata who narrated his suffering from high fever along with a friend after their first day of *bayam*. He further added how he made a comeback while his friend didn't, often highlighting his comeback as a turning point, as a sense of overcoming and his success in terms of becoming a bodybuilder.

In my conversation one evening with a *guru/trainer* of a *vyayamaghar* in Desopriyo park<sup>lxxix</sup>, describing the pain in *bayam* he draws an analogy to “*kata phota*” or piercing of a thorn.

*At first we used to have pain (because of lifting heavy weights or by doing 100 dands) but there is no medicine for that pain. The only medicine is more bayam. By doing bayam again and again, the pain goes..... Just like when a thorn goes inside our foot we need another one to get that out. Same happens in bayam. Amader bayam er betha bayam diye e komate hobe. (Our bayam's pain can be reduced through bayam itself).*

Note how he uses the word “those” to refer to this particular form of pain that he refers to as *bayam’r byatha* or *bayam* pain. This pain as he mentions has no medicine other than more *bayam*. Drawing an analogy of getting a thorn stuck in one’s foot for which one would require another sharp thing to get that out, *bayam*’s pain is similar. Pain will go away by taking in more pain through *bayam*. Having no medicine but only a cure in the form of continuing *bayam* shows the everydayness of this *bayam* pain. This is similar to the other man who narrated about overcoming pain through *bayam* to reach a point of addiction. This addiction is significant because it points towards how it becomes a daily endeavor making it everyday which overshadows or seeks to erase pain.

Most of my interlocutors described this pain as something that is there for the first few days or a week of joining *bayam*. This pain is seen as the body’s initiation into the practices of *bayam*, and thus a pain that also goes away in a few days by doing further *bayam*. Even though there is an acceptance of pain, by reading this pain as a temporary occasion what they did was to erase any idea of pain from *bayam*. This attitude is in line with modernity and the medical view of viewing pain as something negative, temporary misfit and its erasure as essential to existence. Here too as the men spoke about this pain, they spoke from a sense of unease. Sometimes they showed the difficult nature of their practice and at other times they just tried to lighten this aspect of pain. In both these distinct ways the idea of physical pain came up exposing the negotiations by these men. Such negotiations came up in different field visits, making me expose to these raw moments<sup>lxxx</sup> of physical pain.

These are moments that are not anticipated but the suddenness and immediacy bring us closer to understanding our fields. I term these moments as ethnographic raw moments. One morning while I was sitting and observing the men exercising in one of the *bayam samitis* in north Kolkata<sup>lxxxi</sup>. I witnessed an ethnographic raw moment of pain. A man in his early 30s while working out with a pulley which is done for arm strength, lent out cries. On asking if he was in

pain, he immediately denied. He referred to the cries as an effort to draw in strength. However, as we went on conversing, he slowly told me how difficult and strenuous it was. On asking whether he was letting out the screams out of pain or not, he told me it was indeed painful. This way of explaining the moment made me realize the ways in which men negotiate pain in *bayam*. His initial denial was in order to show he did not experience pain as that would de-masculinize him. But later this pain or painful moment again became a way of expressing his masculinity as he emphasized on *taking in* pain. These forms of communications, gestures and acts are considered to be normative by Joanna Bourke who argues how pain cannot be a private event, instead pain-as-event is situated and learnt in culture. "Once taught what constitutes a pain-event, subtle messages communicated through language, facial expressions, and gestures help inform people-in-pain how they ought to respond when registering it. These communicative acts are normative. They don't simply document the various ways people-in-pain responded to their affliction: they contain veiled instructions on how people *should* act" (Bourke, 2014, p. 17).

A similar incident happened at *Hathkhola Bayam Samity* one evening when I was conversing with a member of the *samity*. I will pick up a snippet from my field notes to share my experience. I intend to share my field notes that I have written after I arrived that day from field work. Incorporating field notes, I argue, helps us in understanding the mood and feel of the day which helps us to get closer to the experience.

*As I conversed with a member of the samity in the courtyard outside the gym room, I heard loud cries from inside. The shouts were so extreme that it gave a shiver down my spine. I rushed inside to find a popular powerlifter picking up around one fifty kilo iron weight while lying down on the bench. He was giving bench press. He was aided by another man who was there to give support, in case he is unable to maintain the balance of weight upon him and meets with a very deadly accident. When he picked up the weight, his hands started shaking and he*

*gave out a loud cry or howl and soon ran out of breath. When he lifts and then brings it down towards his chest, his hands were shaking tremendously, in effect of the huge weight he is lifting. He lets out loud grunts. These grunts that he let out are a mix of the extreme efforts, pain of lifting the weight as well as the much-needed way to express it and thereby garner more power to carry on with it. He does that once or twice and then runs out of breath. The boy helps him restore the iron weight in its place and he gets up. He pants heavily making it clear he is out of breath.*

This moment has been significant in my fieldwork as it exposed me to an extreme form of exercise or practice in the gym. The extremeness of it did not just lie in the weight he picked but in his response to it. It was evident from his shaking hands, the weight, his heavy breathing and his cries that it was one of the most strenuous and painful moments. The screams resembled the cries I have often heard in the gyms and *bayam samitis*, but only this time were those in its extreme too. On asking if he cried out in pain, he denied. He told me it was only a way of gaining in more strength and power during the session. This was yet again a similar narrative that I have heard from these men. To read this only as a denial of pain and as a way of merely expressing power might do their narrative wrong. They perceive this act as an act of power or strength accumulation. Yet to experience this moment is to also understand the moment of pain and vulnerability as I see the shaking hands, the panting, the screams and the extreme efforts it takes to lift the iron weight of one fifty kilos. It is, I argue, a coming together of efforts, pain and power, a moment when pain is overtaken by one's power to take in pain and then deny it. It was a moment of taking in and overcoming pain, a moment of triumph, a moment of masculinity. This was evident when the other men told me "We are kids. He is everything."

These forms of negotiations with pain have often come up in my field visits. Narration of pain or discussions of pain have always been limiting in my conversations with the men in the gyms, *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars*. It was only when I started witnessing moments of pain<sup>lxxxii</sup>,

that I gained a better understanding of pain in *bayam*. When I say moments of pain, it is only a moment of witnessing a moment of rupture. Pain always comes through interpretation and translation and thereby always a secondary mode of grasping it. Scarry's understanding helps us understand how other's pain will always be a doubt and thus for me these moments I witnessed were also moments of doubts. What does their screams, grunts, cries suggest? Are they in pain or are they expressing their strength? Are these moments of pain or of power? I argue they are both. When I speak of the cries of pain, it is not a mere crying out in pain. These cries are in the form of heavy grunts that we often find one engaging into when one does some heavy loaded work. In *bayam* too these are a common thing. I read them as cries of power, masculine cries I argue that envelop the *bayam samitis* giving a masculine soundscape to it. In this moment of vulnerability and triumph lies the essence of *bayam* and masculinity. It is a coming together of vulnerability (pain/taking in pain) and power (overcoming pain).

These physical pains are not just a matter of initial days of *bayam* which is often emphasized by the men but I argue is also a persisting element in their everyday lives. The everyday engagement of the body with the machines or without machines, through extensive exercises calls for the recurring bodily efforts and pain associated with the same. All the above ethnographic moments took place among men who were already in *bayam* for a long time. Thus, what I witnessed in their engagements were not the initial physical *bayam* pain they speak of but that which is there almost every time they engage into *bayam* or exercise. The ploughing is a daily engagement that the wrestlers go through yet it calls for a similar painful effort everyday that I found wrestlers giving. This is also similar for the men who were exercising in the gyms and *bayam samitis*. The question of addiction that the man pointed is important as it highlights how pain is overcome through an entry into addiction. On asking him about whether he enjoyed the pain, he replied, "I don't like it but when I am doing *bayam* I am getting pleasure. This is an addiction".

This pain then is not something that one necessarily likes or enjoys yet there is a certain pull that makes one engage with it. This is how he defines addiction. This pleasure is not the pleasure of pain but pleasure of overcoming it. This pleasure is what he defines as addiction. The moment the addiction to overcome pain starts, pain ceases to be pain. However, whether the pain lessens or goes away or the pleasure of overcoming makes it an addiction is open for interpretation. The everydayness of it makes it a habitual engagement removing the idea of pain as extraordinary to pain as everyday. When pain becomes habitual and everyday, does it cease to become pain? The men's narratives never mentioned this pain instead they always referred to pain as injury. This is significant to understand how men negotiate the domain of pain. This pain is distinct from the injury not only because it is everyday and thereby habitual but also because it is momentary and may not persist after *bayam* as a form of injury. The pain is felt and lived in the moment. I understood this idea of pain more after my interaction one morning in *Simla Bayam Samity*. On asking about the pain that happens in *bayam*, the trainer says,

*'See the bayam we do results in a pump inside the body, the skin becomes stretched. When we enter into doing bayam, the body does not remain the same. It gains. It swells and stretches. When we continue doing it, we get a pain. We get a pain on spot. But one needs to continue over the pain which will result in further pump inside the body.'*

On asking how *dand-baithaks* results in pain which is a daily exercise he adds,

*"Yes but the pain is only for that moment. It does not stay. It is not a long-lasting pain. On the spot the pain will happen and it will also go away. When I get pain and I can no longer pick up the weight, I realize that the bayam is now complete. When the pain goes away, I pick it up again. The pain comes back again. I repeat the same process. The fact that pain is happening is good. Perfection comes. The pain is like satisfaction."*

This narrative is significant as it brings in *bayam* pain. The momentariness of *bayam* pain is highlighted here by the word “on spot” which hints at an idea of pain that happens at the specific moment of *bayam* and does not last long after that. His emphasis on continuing with *bayam* amidst the pain is similar to others who have also pointed the same thing. There is a repeated idea of *bayam* and pain that he narrates. This repeated *bayam* and pain speaks of the iterated act that normalizes both *bayam* and pain as regular and every day. Pain also results in a form of satisfaction acting as a hint for these men that they are doing it right. This is similar to the previous narrative of addiction, where pleasure is being spoken about in the context of pain. Here it becomes a form of satisfaction. This pain then is not taken as a form of injury or something negative that has to be cured. This pain in turn becomes a positive attribute bringing in a feeling of “doing it right” or “perfection”. This resonates with the Yap community’s ethical mode of understanding pain as “suffering for”. When the pain emerges from their work and efforts to provide for others, their community, and family, it transforms it from “passive” to an active mode of “self-regulated suffering” (Throop, 2010, p. 184). “By situating pain in the context of such illnesses, pain is construed as an indication that a given social actor is approximating the virtues of effortful exertion (*magaer*), perseverance (*athamagil*), and suffering (*gaafgow*) on behalf of others” (Throop, 2010, p. 185). Thus, the pain emerging from their work, “hardwork”, “endurance”, “suffering” and efforts make pain a “virtuous form of sacrifice” and thereby connotes an “ethical modality of being” for the Yapese (Throop, 2010, p. 183-184). The daily engagement in the sphere of *bayam* and exercise also speaks of a different idea of pain, a pain that is not erased, or cured, but a pain that is endured. It is in this endurance that the body is cultivated.

## **Bodily Pain and *Bayam*: The Non-Physical Pain**

Moving away from this idea of physical pain, *bayam*'s focus also takes us into a form of pain that emerges from *bayam* itself, from the intense efforts, "*mehnat*" or "*kosto*" as the men narrate. This pain is not tangible or physical like the above discussed pain but yet I argue it is bodily. One morning in *Simla Bayam Samity* I conversed with the gym instructor who narrated about his own experience of growing up as a bodybuilder during the 70s. In his narration of the *bayamghor* (exercise room) or gym, the vision was quite starkly different from what we see today.

*"At that time there were no multi gyms. It was all manual. There were rods, barbell, dumbbells, meaning this was painful (kosto hoto). There were no cushions but rather wooden benches. There were no fans, the floor was made of mud. But I consider these the best way to do bayam."*

His narration not only pointed to the difference between his time and today's gym but also made clear the basis of *bayam* in painful efforts and hardships. His emphasis on "*kosto hoto*" or that it was painful/hard is significant. By describing the manual structure of the gym, he emphasized not only how manual it was but also emphasized or drew its relation to the pain in working out in a manual structure. This relationality is also evident when he mentions about the lack of cushion benches, concrete flooring and lack of fans. On asking why fans were not there, he said, "Because you have to burn calories. *Kosto koro*" (take pain). His repeated emphasis on "*kosto*" or pain makes its evident how he perceives *bayam* through the idea of pain.

A wrestler's narrative also brings in similar understanding when he recollects his early days in wrestling. He began wrestling in an *akhara* in Goabagan which began on a note of not only cultivating the body through *bayam* but also cultivating the mud pit of the *akhara*.

*“The akhara mud pit was hard and plants came up here and there. The akhara was filled with cat’s excreta everywhere. I called upon a friend and we both used to go every morning, do abhi of exercise like dand-baithak and then clean up the akhara. We used to pick up the plants, clean the excreta and then we used to clean up the mud pit. Over the years the mud has got mixed up with dust. We cleaned it. You will see that in akhara the mud pit has to be cultivated or ploughed. (Mati kopate hoe) so that the mud stays light and powdery.*

He recollected how the *akhara* was started and how he took up the responsibility of setting up the *akhara* again. He would narrate how he would spend the morning visiting the *akhara*, doing *dand-baithaks*, and cleaning the mud pit. The reconstruction of the mud pit was coupled by a cleaning drive. Cleaning of the wastes also involved making the mud pit fluffy again and removing dusts and plants from it. The strenuous nature of the efforts is clear when he spoke about the hardness of the mud pit. Wrestling mud pit have to be soft and powdery and thus an intense effort was required to bring an unused *akhara* mud pit into its original soft powdery form. The creation of a mud has already been discussed in the last chapters which further requires efforts to carefully create the mud pit with essential elements, mixing them and creating the mud pit. It has to be borne in mind how the careful consideration in the making of the mud pit involves preventing men from getting hurt either by making it light and powdery and not hard, also simultaneously, adding beneficial elements that gives value to the mud pit in terms of its anti-septic and healthy nature. Although the mud pit is created to prevent one from getting hurt and consists of materials that have medicinal values, yet the making of it involves a different idea of pain and efforts of going through a process. Infact the contradiction that we witness here and in the overall idea of *bayam*, of taking pain to aid in preventing pain or aiding in health, is a significant contradiction that is at the heart of wrestling practices.

These efforts I argue were not a mere cleaning drive or extra work. In turn it was itself part of the cultivation of one’s body or exercise. I have two reasons for saying this. Firstly, wrestling

is about a way of living and not just about the bouts that we get to see in wrestling matches. Thus, every bit of work that goes on in the context of wrestling, from diet, to lifestyle, to *bayam* and arrangements in wrestling *akharas* are a part of wrestling and plays a significant role in the overall idea of wrestling. (Alter, 1992) Thus, the cultivation and making of the mud pit is equally a part of wrestling and wrestlers and everything involved in this process is a significant aspect to the overall idea of wrestling. To understand this further I come to my second point in the question of ploughing of the wrestling mud pit that he introduces me to.

“*Mati kopano*” is an activity to cultivate and construct the mud of the wrestling pit, it remains a significant aspect of *bayam* in wrestling as discussed in my previous chapters. In my conversations and visits to wrestling *akharas*, I have witnessed and understood how *bayam* in wrestling forms the crux of it. In order to engage into wrestling, which is a tedious and work of immense strength, strength must first be cultivated. This cultivation happens through *bayam* and warm up exercises that take place before wrestling. Amidst the usual *dand*, *baithaks*, push ups, and other exercises, *mati kopano* or ploughing the mud pit remains a crucial yet a method that is fading. As the name itself suggests, *mati kopano* would require *mati* or mud in the first place, placing the emphasis thereby on mud pits. With the passage of time, nowadays wrestling *akharas* do not use mud pits anymore. There are few remaining ones which still carry on with mud pits. However, the act of *mati kopano* is fading since young men do not necessarily engage into this activity considering it as unimportant.

*“Nowadays Bengali boys aren’t interested in doing it. They would instead ask others to do it. But I used to do it as I liked it. Earlier wrestlers used to complete the entire akhara by themselves. Once they used to pick up the plough, they will not put it down until they have completed ploughing the entire akhara. It is a very good method for warming up. Through it you can do breathing exercises very well. It creates very good stamina (dom). It increases your strength in your hands, waist, and thighs.”*

His narrative speaks about how *mati kopano* becomes central to wrestling itself for its capacity to create *dom* or stamina and strength that have been discussed in the last chapter. It is no longer a mere additional work to create the mud pit but instead becomes a central *bayam* or exercise for cultivation of both strength and breath that is crucial for wrestling. This interestingly brings together laboring and exercising, making us question the relation between the two. Ploughing has remained an activity associated with labor work whether in case of farmer's ploughing of land or labourer's ploughing during any construction work. This relation of labor to ploughing of the mud pit is evident and is often brought up by the wrestlers. In a similar context, the men in *bayam* often compare their exercises to labour activities. These references bring a connection between laboring and *bayam*

Recollecting my visit to one of the *akharas* in *Barabazar*, one morning I came across an experience of understanding pain. How do we encounter other's pain? As I was moving around the *akhara*, I came towards the wrestling pit to find a young man engaging in ploughing the wrestling pit. Picking up a plough of ten kgs, with each stroke he lent a cry and took a deep heavy breath. The sight of it was enough to tell me the amount of effort and pain it might be taking to plough the entire mud pit alone with a 10 kg plough. This visual sight of it makes us confront a painful moment although how far it is painful is open to interpretation. The sounds that he emits, his intense breathing further aids us into understanding the efforts and pain he is going through with each stroke. Herein pain and efforts come together making one fail to distinguish between the two.

This also brings in a relation between *dom* and pain. *Dom* can be read as breath as well as stamina that we have discussed in the last chapter. Cultivating *dom* can be read as a form of cultivation of strength or power that rests on the breathing exercises. This cultivation takes place through the continuous laboring at the mud pit, in digging the mud, making it fluffy and light. The heavy breathing that is significant in case of ploughing a wrestling pit also results in

breathlessness, a form of heavy panting when one goes out of breath. This is often referred to as “*dom phuriye asha*” (breathlessness). The men describe this moment as a painful one using the word “*kosto*” where one’s throat becomes dry and they run out of breath. This is a moment which I also read as the coming together of breathlessness and pain. What brings them together is the intense *bayam*. Havi Carey discusses the invisibility of pain and breathlessness which brings the experience of pain and breathlessness in the same platform. The “unsharability” of pain becomes similar to the “unsharability” of breathlessness one experiences. “The complete certainty of breathlessness as experienced subjectively, and the complete doubt it generates when viewed from the outside makes it akin to pain” (Carey, 2016, p. 123)

In Bengali “*kosto*” is a term that cannot have a straight forward translation. *Kosto*’s immediate translation would be pain, which signifies an intense effort and the pain involved in it. This idea of pain is not just about the abstract pain of intense efforts and hard-work but also its physicalness. This *kosto* (pain) symbolizes an embodied pain of all the efforts taken, hard work (*mehnat*) and physical labour that one gives. The continuous laboring at the pit is not only an activity to enhance the mud pit but also enhance one’s body and breath. It is an activity that is both a *bayam* and a work.

Biswanath Ghosh, a disciple of Gobor Goho narrated a day during his early days as a wrestler in Gobor Goho’s *akhara*. He lived there and learnt wrestling from the master.

*Ustadji would wake up around 5 in the morning and would ask to start with baithaks. It was only after completing 1200 that he would allow me to sit. After baithaks he would ask me to massage myself and start with mati kopano (ploughing of wrestling pit). The rule was whoever would start ploughing had to complete ploughing the entire akhara. There were stone collars (30-36 kilos) which we were asked to wear around our necks and run around. This increases your strength and stamina (dom). After all these, kusti would happen. Dand, baithak, dulfi, and*

*bayam with a mugur used to be part of our routine. All these used to happen in the morning. In the evening he would only make us do 300 dands. Nothing else. Only the dands and then he would leave us. This was hard practice.*

This narration in itself puts forward the intense *bayam* that takes place before engaging into *kusti* or wrestling. The strictness is evident from how he was not allowed to sit until he completed 1200 *baithaks* or the fact that one has to entirely plough the mud pit of his own. A continuous *baithak* (sit-ups), followed by wrestling an entire mud pit, walking around the *akhara* with a stone collar weighing 30-36 kilos, and *dand-baithaks* describes the nature of *bayam* / exercise that was needed in a day. At the end he uses the word “hard practice” to describe the *bayam* practices that they engaged in a day. On asking if these were painful, he would say how “malish”<sup>lxxxiii</sup> (massage) was the only cure. This “hardness”, this discipline speaks of the intensity and extent of hard efforts demanded of them and the simultaneous physical pain that emerged. These intense *bayams* not only result in the everyday physical pain or what they call as ‘*bayam* pain’ or ‘*bayam*’r byatha’ but also the pain or ‘*kosto*’ out of the hard efforts put in. This hard practice is described by men in *bayam samitis* as “*kosto kora*”. Without these hard efforts and “*kosto*” one cannot imagine *bayam*. *Bayam* is not merely about exercises but the intensity of efforts demanded of it. *Bayam* could not be separated from the “hard” nature of these practices and ‘*kosto*’ demanded of them. This form of hard effort speaks of a pain that is not physical or tangible but one that occurs bodily and is embodied.

This ‘*kosto*’ or pain is also observed in case of the discipline one has to follow. The discipline centers primarily around three things, detachment from sexual activities and addictions (smoking or drinking), distance from women, control of diet. Distance from women does not literally mean one wouldn’t marry but that one needs to stay in limit as the *gurus* often said. This was also similar to how a trainer in *Hathkhola Bayam Samity* discussed how although *brahmacharya* is not followed in its strict sense today, but every man in the *bayam samity* stays

in their limits. This control is defined as '*songjom*' or self-restraint. Thus, semen control and control of palate remains crucial and equally remains important. Although *brahmacharya* might not be strictly followed in today's time, but there is always an emphasis and relevance of the same which I have discussed in the previous chapter. Food habits have to be strictly followed which not only lists things one should have, but more significantly food one should avoid. The discipline also includes waking up early and sleeping off early. This also meant for the men in the *bayam samitis* to live a disciplined life and avoid late nights implying clubbing or partying or staying awake till late. These various forms of detachments remain a significant part of *bayam* and exercise regimes. As one *guru* of a *vyayamaghar* said, "The only relation between masculinity and *shorir charcha* is the power that men have, in order to preserve it. The power and strength of men is from semen (*birja*), in order to preserve it we have to distance ourselves from women". I seek to read these forms of detachments and *songjom* similar to the "hard practice" that the men engage into during *bayam*, which together results in a form of pain described as "*kosto*". I intend to understand this pain through the Hindu philosophy of *tapas* and argue for an embodied idea of pain that is not physically located but bodily endured.

### ***Brahmacharya, Tapas and Pain: Embodying Pain as Tapas***

"A man striving for success in *brahmacharya* suffers pain as a woman does in labor." – Gandhi (CW, 32, p. 214)

This statement by Gandhi comparing the pain of *brahmacharya* to the pain of women's labor is very significant. Gandhi compares the physical bodily pain of a woman's labor to that of a non-physical, abstract idea of pain (*kosto*) that one goes through in *brahmacharya*. These two different forms of pain become comparable in context of the creative potential that the two pain generates as Howard argues (Howard, 2013). However, my interest lies in how Gandhi's idea of the pain of *brahmacharya* brings us in a realm of pain that is outside the physical and social

dimensions of pain yet I argue, it remains bodily grounded since *brahmacharya* is a bodily form of practice. This idea of pain as bodily yet not physically located will remain crucial to an understanding of pain, expressed as “*kosto kora*” by my interlocutors, that is endured and embodied.

What kind of pain does one go through by abstaining from sexual activity in celibacy? What kind of pain does one go through by abstaining from food in the act of fasting? What is the pain that one goes through by being silent? Deborah Lupton argues about the “historical link between religion, spirituality, asceticism and dietary regimes” that not only focused on control of “sexual desires” but also “appetite” (Lupton, 1996, p. 131). The control or deprivation of food in the form of fasting was also considered as the highest form of self-control (Bynum, 1987, p. 2) (Lupton, 1996, p. 132). Javier Moscoso argues how “fasting”, “not speaking” that are practiced in ascetism, are “pain through deprivation” (Moscoso, 2012, p. 157). This idea of pain is bodily yet not located physically. It is through this line of thought that I wish to think about pain in physical culture where disciplining of the body involves different forms of abstinences, efforts and the pain associated with it. These forms of abstinences and their associated pain and suffering is referred to as *tapas* in Hindu religious tradition. According to Wolpert, *tapas* meant suffering. “When first used in the Rig-Veda, *tapas* meant “heat,” the self-incubating creative power that gave birth to ancient India’s first monistic neuter god, Tad Ekam (“That One”). In subsequent sacred texts, *tapas* refers to yogic powers of contemplation and meditation whose laser like beams were, it appears, hot enough to awaken even a neuter divinity to life” (Wolpert, 2001, p. 3).

In *bayam*, the everyday engagement with the body not only happens through the exercises but also through the strict regime that one has to follow that entails bodily suffering or *tapas*. This is based on the initial two stages of Yoga, Yama and Niyama, that remains central in *bayam* also (Alter, 1993). Adrian Piper discusses how *sadhana*, which is how my interlocutors

described their everyday practices, is related or seen as *tapas* (Piper, 2009). Recollecting my conversation with one of Gobor Goho's disciples, he narrated how Gobor Goho used to spend his morning by keeping silent vows. It was a form of abstinence similar to other forms of abstinences that one follows. Like in asceticism, abstinences form an integral part of the regimes of *bayam* not only in maintaining health but also in the idea of control. Abstaining from sex, certain forms of food, smoking and drinking are central to *bayam* for their direct influence on health. However, I argue, abstinence in general remains significant for its emphasize on the concept of *songjom* which means discipline and control that my interlocutors often spoke of. I seek to read *bayam* as a way of life and draw a resemblance through asceticism and *brahmacharya* which connotes not just control of sexual activities but control of all senses. In *bayam* too, such austere lifestyle including celibacy remains important. This idea of control hints at the notion of masculinity and its associations with control.

*Brahmacharya* was seen as *tapas*, a form of efforts. "Tapas is also associated with the conscious infliction of physical suffering on one's self" (Howard, 2013, p. 105). According to Kaelber, "The meaning of *tapas* as ascetic effort may be clearly seen in its repeated correlation with the root *śram*, "to toil," to "weary one's self," "to exert one's self." . . . [S]elf-imposed 'suffering' and pain, generates an inner heat. This inner heat is also referred to as *tapas*" (Kaelber, 1979, p. 201). For Gandhi these various efforts were a form of "self-torture", self-infliction of violence. According to Wolpert, Gandhi turned himself into "cauldron of pain" by rejecting all forms of "normal pleasures, acquisitive and sensual", through the various everyday practices of fasting, *brahmacharya*, sacrificing pleasure of palate, etc. "Gandhi's passionate embrace of *tapas*" transformed his "frail naked body" into an "impregnable fortress" (Wolpert, 2001, p. 5). *Brahmacharya* as he argues was never about complete non-violence rather it was about cultivating non-violence towards others while directing violence at oneself. This idea of torture and its associations with pain has been the centre of studies in the field of psychology,

sociology and others. Ronal Schleifer discusses how torture takes a unique position where pain is never “mitigated” but rather becomes the purpose of torture itself which rests upon an “increase” in pain (Schleifer, 2014, p. 1113). Self-torture also occupies a similar position with a distinction that the “producer of pain”, the inflictor of torture and the person tortured are the same. This form of self-torture or violence was not physical yet I argue it was bodily or embodied. Gandhi’s understanding of *brahmacharya* perhaps is based on such a notion of an embodied subjectivity as opposed to an understanding from philosophers in the Early modern France who rejected bodily torture or pain as not the location for the emergence of truth and for that matter subjectivity (Silverman, 2001). Comparing torture as a test of endurance rather than of truth the philosophers deny the body as a ground for the emergence of truth/subjectivity (Silverman, 2001). When Gandhi refers to *brahmacharya*’s pain, he refers to this bodily endurance of pain of *brahmacharya* which for him is in itself a way of being a man, where he bases the masculine subjectivity in the endurance of the embodied experience of suffering. In the same light the toiling at the *akhara*, the everyday physical (activities in *bayam*) and bodily (*brahmacharya* and abstinences) toiling also results in a form of pain and suffering that is endured over the years by men to develop not just a physique but a selfhood/subjectivity.

This is also evident in the context of religious activities and rituals where pain or *tapas* remains crucial. For example, the Sabarimala Pilgrimage as discussed by Valentine Daniel’s (1984) ethnographic work shows the centrality of pain as the only form of sensation that dominates the pilgrimage. The austerity demanded before the beginning of the pilgrimage includes no sexual activity, no shoes or garments, no intoxicating thing, or meat or eggs, control of anger, no violence or abuse towards anyone and also not sleeping on mattresses. These various types of restrictions ranging from food to clothing, to control of emotions to taking hardships like not wearing shoes or sleeping on a mattress amounts to a strict and painful regime. This is also followed by the pilgrimage itself which as Valentine Daniel (1984) notes results in physical

exhaustion and pain from covering a huge distance through the mountains and forest. The path of the pilgrimage is considered to be very difficult and also one of the reasons men go for it as a form of deliberate painful efforts only to reach God. This is evident from the belief that Valentine Daniel discusses:

“getting to the Sabari shrine as soon as possible is highly valued because it calls for great physical exertion on behalf of the Lord and indicates a burning desire on the part of the devotee to get to His feet without being distracted by the comforts of rest and other activities en route” (Daniel, 1984, p. 256).

This detachment from comforts, resting and the embracing of pain is central to the pilgrimage itself. These rituals and austerity relate to celibacy as Ayyappan is considered to be a celibate God and it is celibate men or ‘virgin pilgrims’ who are allowed in this pilgrimage. This is one of the reasons menstruating women aren’t allowed in the pilgrimage and thus very few women go for this pilgrimage. One can therefore understand it as a masculine pilgrimage not only because of the pre-dominance of men but a masculine form that the pilgrimage takes. The connection between this kind of pain in the pilgrimage and masculinity is crucial. This is also discussed by Osella and Osella, “It is important to identify the pilgrimage as a gendered ritual, both in view of the markedly different participation rates for men and women and also its overwhelmingly masculine ethos” (Osella, Osella, 2006, p. 145). This “masculine ethos” is nothing but the entire process of the pilgrimage discussed above which involves a masculine ascetic and austere process. It is this “masculine ethos” that dominates the understanding of the pilgrimage which is also similar to the “masculine ethos” of *bayam* culture discussed in earlier chapters. Central to this masculine ethos I argue is the question of pain or *tapas* that dominates these realms.

“If there is one single sensation that predominates over all other sensations, in terms of sheer intensity and quantity, it is the sensation of pain. The aim of the pilgrim is to conquer pain and also to conquer all other less intense sensations with pain” (Daniel, 1984, p. 256).

### ***Brahmachari’s Pain: Embodying Pain and Cultivating the Male Body***

The bodily pain that I speak of in context of *brahmacharya*, austerity involved in *bayam* demands an understanding of the possibility of an inner body. This bodily pain I argue is one that happens within. In my last chapter, I have brought in Sundar Sarukkai (2002), Morley (2001) to argue about the inner body. However, in conceptualizing the inner body Sarukkai (2002) effectively moves away from any ontological considerations. I instead seek to bring Sarukkai’s understanding of the inner body and Arindam Chatterjee’s *Antarmukh Dehobodh* (2005) to enhance my understanding of this inner bodily pain. My claim of bodily pain doesn’t have a location or physicality that can be located in the body. Instead, it stems from within the body. In my last chapter I understood this inner body in the context of *dom* or breath that is embodied. Here I wish to further this argument to understand the inner body through the embodied pain or sufferance one goes through during the abstinences of food, sex or others. It is thereby significant to bring in Arindam Chakraborty’s *antarmukh dehobodh* where he speaks of a similar understanding of an inner body that is infinite and can’t be touched but only felt. This idea of feeling yet not being able to tangibly touch or hold or locate it is what fascinatingly connects to my understanding of an inner experience of bodily pain that refuses any physical location. This inside that he talks about is distinguished from *antar* or inside of one’s heart (mental perception). It is also not an inside that can be reached by cutting one’s stomach and reaching inside the body. He terms it as *antarmukh dehobodh* meaning inward looking bodily sensation which is felt either in case of pain, tiredness, hunger, or thirst. (Morley, 2001). It can also be felt when one tries to understand the feeling that takes place within one’s body. All

these feelings of pain, hunger or thirst happen within our body yet they cannot be touched or be tangibly located. The inner experience of bodily pain, I argue can be understood through the concept of *tapas*.

In *bayam* the idea of *tapas* remains significant. *Tapas* understood as ascetic efforts of toiling or wearing oneself (Kaelber, 1979) can also be read in context of *bayam* which is also a way of toiling. The emphasis on thousands *dand baithaks*, *mehnat* (hard work) or *kosto kora* (painful efforts) are evident of how *bayam* too is based on *tapas*. Thus, the everyday efforts given through exercise, an austere lifestyle also I argue results in suffering, in pain. *Tapas* therefore is associated with a form of pain.

*Tapas* can also be understood in the context of suffering. Parama Roy in her work on “Meat Eating, Masculinity, and Renunciation in India: A Gandhian Grammar of Diet” discusses the “masculinisation of fasting” (Roy, 2002, p. 77) that is prevalent in renunciation practices among Hindu tradition by reading Gandhi’s fasting as a masculine act of self-control as opposed to the feminine act of sacrifice or suffering. However, to reduce Gandhi’s fasting to only an act of self-control, I argue, will be to deny the aspect of suffering inherent in this act of palate control. To deny food is not only a matter of controlling but also an act of suffering, an act of pain that goes hand in hand. How do we read such an act where a masculine self-control is enacted through a suffering self? Suffering has always been given a feminine connotation since it is perceived as a form of self-sacrifice in case of fasting and sacrifice being perceived as a feminine virtue. This interrelation between suffering, sacrifice and femininity plays a crucial role in understanding the act of fasting often related to women and the feminine. Yet again when Roy talks about a masculinization of fasting, she quite rightly points towards the way in which Gandhi’s fast can be read as a self-imposed one as opposed to restraints put on women through rituals of fasting. The self-impositions translate suffering into a self-suffering, a self-purifying act that one goes through to build up one’s ethical self. This process

masculinizes the act of fasting. This also turns suffering into a form of tapas. Kaelber discusses the various understandings of Tapas in Hindu philosophy, where tapas is understood both as “destructive heat” as well as “undesirable pain” which is involuntary in nature. However, he asks if it is possible to think of tapas as self-generated. “Cannot tapas as the heat of a self-imposed pain “burn out,” “consume,” and destroy evil forces, evil, and ultimately impurity? Simply stated, cannot tapas, as self-imposed mortification, effect purification?” (Kaelber, 1979, p. 200). Kaelber comes to say that this understanding of tapas can now be translated as asceticism, “as self-imposed austerity” (Kaelber, 1979, p. 201). It is here the tapas becomes associated with asceticism.

Suffering is often differentiated from pain based on how pain is conceived as a sensation that is felt in one’s body whereas suffering is associated with emotion (Glucklich, 2001, p. 11). Suffering, however, is a form of pain that has an intangibility that does not translate itself as a form of physical pain always. It is usually associated with emotional pain which can be non-bodily as well as non-physical. Suffering is intimate within the self, as a form of experience, something within. Suffering is often differentiated from physical pain which has its physicality, tangibility and thereby overcoming it becomes a way of reclaiming masculinity by denying the vulnerability of the body. Physical pain speaks about the physicalness of one’s pain located at a part of a body. Suffering on the other hand speaks of a staying in (suffer-ing) pain that I argue can also be bodily but might not be tangible. Suffering, can also be an embodiment of pain, like “tapas” whether physical or bodily. Suffering speaks of a continuity, a submission to pain which is why it has been associated with the feminine (Carlson, 2010). It describes the way pain is taken in and endured. This is, I argue, a ‘living in’ of pain. The bodily pain that I discussed above, speaks of an inner body that Arindam Chakraborty speaks about in context of an interior infinite space, which can be felt through the “inward looking bodily sensation” or *antarmukh dehobodh*. This pain is what I speak in context to fasting, *brahmacharya*, and other

regimes of control. As discussed above, fasting can be seen as a form of self-suffering, where I argue this connotes an idea of pain that is bodily, social and lived by the person concerned. The same will be the case with the idea of *brahmacharya*. In case of both, fasting where one denies the body food, and *brahmacharya* where one denies the body sexual gratification, the body goes through a process of embodied suffering, a form of pain that is lived bodily both through the body and senses as well as through one's emotions as a self-imposed pain of self-control. This can be understood as *tapas* where a continuous wearing or toiling of oneself takes place. *Tapas*, which in my interlocutor's word is "*kosto kora*" (to bear pain) or *mehnat* can be understood as an endurance that's speaks of a living in of pain (suffering), where the pain (inward sensation) speaks of a kind of embodiment of pain that is lived bodily and within. This pain is not outside but takes place within the inner body. The embodied ontology of the inner body that was discussed in the last chapter also leads us to an ontology of bodily pain that speaks of another possibility of understanding pain outside the common ideas of physical or emotional or social pain or dis-embodied idea of suffering. Gandhi's equation of women's suffering of labor pain (physical) and *brahmacharya*'s pain (bodily) can be understood in this context where pain is lived, endured and embodied leading to the formation of subjectivity. This idea of a bodily pain remains crucial to the embodied practice of *bayam*. Thus, contrary to the notion that *bayam* entails a cultivation (not mortification) of the body that cures pain and improves health, I argue how *bayam* is not opposed to pain but based on it.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion: The Body in *Bayam*

This research has initially started with the question of masculinity and body (male) in context of physical cultures, but soon I became engrossed in the study of *bayam samitis*, *vyayamaghars* and *akharas* as places and the *bayam* culture that permeates them. The connection that the places could have with a form of bodily disciplinary practice like *bayam* was the intriguing aspect to look into. This interest emerged because of the history these places had in Kolkata, Bengal, and what could these places of *bayam* tell us about *bayam* culture and the notion of masculinity emerging from it. We, ethnographers, enter into a field with an intention to interpret and explain the dynamics. We often carry our presumptions, interests and questions into the field but there are times the field generates diverse possibilities. As I look back at my first field work in North Kolkata, I remember how the place, its structure made me encounter *bayam*, masculinity and body. I pick up a snippet of my field notes from my first day of fieldwork at Ghosh's Yoga College, which was formerly known as Ghosh College of Physical Education established in 1923.

*Brimming with history this place could easily be regarded as a historical place. Located in a wide lane of Ram Mohan Roy street in North Kolkata, it was a red colored building, with an old structure reminding us of one of the remaining few old structures from the colonial period. In front of the gate there were two idols, one of Yogendra Bishnu Charan Ghosh, sitting in a yogic posture, with a body that is erect and muscular yet with a certain calmness that erased from my mind the association of muscularity with aggression. Just opposite to it was a similar idol, but this one was not of any mortal being but of a God, Hanuman. These two idols brought alive the very purpose for which I was visiting this place, to know about the history of masculinity in India and the role of the male body.*

The two idols have stayed in my mind ever since I have visited the place. Both these images at the entrance of the institute becomes the ground to understand the centrality of the place, which was based on body discipline. The images do not merely display the two important beings of the place, one the founder and the other the God who is a quintessential figure in *bayam* and physical cultures. The images, I argue, display the *body in bayam*. The yogic posture displays a certain powerful aura that seems to emanate from the idol. This aura is not one of muscularity and aggression that often characterizes the masculine powers of heros. There is a distinction. This idol sits erect with a certain calmness, rigidity, and discipline that yogic and *bayam* practices demands and yet at the same time it expresses the masculineness that does not fall under how we usually associate masculinity with aggression and brute power. The masculineness that Bishnu Charan Ghosh 's idol embodied is one of ascetic masculinity based on the notion of self-control bringing his image closer to the divine and ascetic masculinity of *Hanuman*. Such experiences of a place through its structures, through the materiality of the place open us into understanding the notion of *bayam* that is practiced there.

### ***Hanuman: The Embodiment of Shakti***

*Hanuman*'s presence in the *bayam samitis*, *vyayamaghars* and *akharas* was a quintessential feature. His idol stood either in temples or shrines adjacent to *akharas* and *bayam samitis* or they would sometimes be right on the *akhara* mud pit. *Hanuman*'s idol's significance is not similar to any other form of idol worshipping that is found in temples but rather his idol stood for its materiality and structure, of how it put forward the *body in bayam*. "The identity of both fighting ascetic and wrestler, exemplified in the figure of Hanuman, is based on a connection between divine power (*shakti*) and physical strength (*bal*)" (Van Der Veer, 2001, p. 100). This body of *Hanuman* depicted not only strength (*bal*) and power (*shakti*), but also a body that reflected devotion or *bhakti* (Alter, 1992). According to my interlocutors, *Hanuman* stood for

*shakti* or symbolized *shakti* which was similar to what the men in the *bayam samitis*, *akharas* were trying to cultivate. But I argue *Hanuman* did not just symbolize but in turn his idol, his body reflected the *shakti* that was materially brought up in the idol. *Hanuman*, according to Wolcott, was considered to be the manifestation of *shakti* (Wolcott, 1978, p. 58). He is considered to be the “essence of strength and virility” (Alter, 1992, p. 169). But *shakti* is not considered to be merely emanating from “*bal*”. Wadley and Alter both distinguish *shakti* from *Bal*, in terms of *shakti* conceived as a form of “creative force”, a transcendental and divine force or “potential energy”. On the other hand, *bal* or mere strength stood for the “active energy” (Alter, 1992, p. 168) (Wadley, 1975, p. 59). Although *shakti* is conceived as a form of transcendental or divine (abstract) feminine power, it is in the embodiment of *shakti* that the cultivation of the body lies for these men (van de veer, 2001, p. 200). This cultivation of *shakti* is not possible however, without devotion or *bhakti*. *Bhakti* is considered to be “spiritual devotion” or “divine love”. “Hanuman’s devotion to Ram provides a clear and pragmatic model for the incorporation of *bhakti* into everyday life” (Alter, 1992, p. 174). *Hanuman* then embodies in him both *bhakti* and *shakti* which also becomes the way the men in the *bayam samitis*, *vyayamaghars* and *akharas* are expected to live their life.

*Brahmacharya* is another central aspect of *Hanuman* (Alter, 1992). He is known as the celibate god, whose celibacy can be considered to be the source of both his strength (power) and devotion. “*shakti*, *bhakti*, and *brahmacharya* constitute a powerful tautological conundrum, p. a spiral of ever-increasing virtue and strength based on moral control and devotion. Hanuman represents the confluence of these forces” (Alter, 1992, p. 175). The notion of celibacy or *brahmacharya* and *Hanuman* being a celibate god, I argue, added to the purity of the *akharas* and *vyayamaghars* as much as the mud pit. The mud pits also reflected purity emanating from the myth that *hanuman* steps in the *akhara* mud every morning. Rather than relegating it as a mere belief and not a reality, I am interested in understanding how *Hanuman*’s presence in the

*akhara* is not merely seen as symbolic but his presence is embodied in his idol, in the mud pit and the structures of the *akharas* and *vyayamaghars* through the beliefs and myths. The *akharas* and *vyayamaghars* are not pure places for the presence of temples but instead the purity emanates from both *Hanuman's* presence, his celibacy and the practices of *brahmacharya* practiced among the wrestlers and *bayam* practitioners. “*Hanuman's* embodiment of *shakti* through absolute celibacy substantiates this symbolism, and links the gymnasium to the sacred realm, defining it as a locus of physically expressed spiritual devotion” (Green, 2001, p. 722). The *Hanuman* idol and Bishnu Charan Ghosh's idol that stood at the entrance of Ghosh 's Yoga College, embodied this essence of *shakti* and *Bhakti* through *brahmacharya*. Their masculinity was distinguished from the aggressive form of power or brute power as it was emerging from *shakti*, *bhakti* and *brahmacharya*. The body not only depicted strength but the calmness that came from the devotional attitude and virtues that is central to cultivating *shakti* or power. However, the way the men tries to cultivate and embody *shakti*, speaks of the relation the men have with the feminine or feminine power<sup>lxxxiv</sup>. Thus, although the *bayam samitis* and *akharas* are places that excludes women and the feminine, the worship of *shakti* and its embodiment brings back the feminine as a significant aspect of *bayam*, *bayam samitis*, and *akharas*.

### **The Male Body in *Akharas* and *Bayam Samitis***

*As I moved toward the wrestling pit of Siyaram akhara one morning around seven am, I could see three four men on the akhara mud, lying down and rubbing one's body on the mud. The mud appeared light and fluffy which meant that the mud has been ploughed by the wrestlers before this. The akhara mud is considered as “anti septic” having alluvial soil along with additional values of neem leaves, turmeric and others that had a healing effect on the bodies. In another shaded area young men and boys were practicing dands. Their bodies moved very*

swiftly, up and down, in a rhythmic manner. There were few others who were running around the akhara mud pit as part of warm up exercise. The bodies of these men were glistening with sweat and each of them were wearing a red langout (g-string) that was tightly wrapped around their genital. They displayed their muscular bodies while they exercised or engaged into bayam. The guru of the akhara would take two mugurs each in one hand and swing it around repeatedly with ease. Another young man lifted dumbbells and continued pulling up and down repeatedly while swinging his body along with each pull. Once the warm ups and bayam ended, they engaged in wrestling bouts which made them covered with mud entirely. They also further applied mud all over their bodies and even on each other's bodies. According to the wrestlers the mud acts as a cooler that cools down their heated bodies after wrestling, restoring 'stamina' or 'dom'. The men's bodies were now completely dripped in mud and sweat which they proudly displayed. After it the men together went down the stairs to river Ganga and took a bath which appeared all holy in nature. This was an everyday in this akhara.

This field note from my field visit to Siyaram akhara made me engage with the male bodies in an akhara. The quintessential figure of the akhara is the naked male body of the wrestler covered in mud and sweat with only a red langot covering his genitals. The male body that we confront here in the akhara is considered to be the epitome of masculinity, muscularity, strength and power. Yet this 'power' or 'shakti', masculinity and strength of their bodies is deeply related to an 'inner body' and is cultivated through an embodied practice.

The men in langot often become a sight of unease because of their nakedness. Nakedness is often connoted with erotic sexual meanings. In this case, the sweaty male naked body could also become eroticized with sexual overtones. However, the wrestler's body, I argue, suggests just the opposite. The langot that the wrestlers wear also hints towards an embodied practice, that of *brahmacharya* or celibacy. Langot is basically associated with *Brahmacharis*, although we commonly associate wrestlers with it or see it as a feature of wrestling. According to Alter,

*langot* is a form of “penis retraction” which is used to tie the penis tightly and “firmly” such that it does not hang as the hanging of the male genitalia is considered to be the cause of its stimulation when it comes in touch with any “cloth” or “skin” (Alter, 2011, p. 79). Rather than being opposed to the clothed and covered body of a woman, the wrestler’s naked body is also subjected to similar norms of ‘clothing’ and ‘covering’ in the form of tying the genitalia so that one can control one’s desires. However, the distinction lies in how the clothing or covering in case of the men is a sign of power stemming of *brahmacharya* and self-restraints while the women’s covering and clothing is a result of a form of subjugation and control of their bodies from outside which are not signs of power but shame. Rosalyn Diprose argues how the male body is defined through the “constitution of women’s modes of embodied existence as other to the norm” (Diprose, 1994, p. viii).

The male body in the *akharas* might not be pleasing when thought of as a group of muscular muddy sweaty men displaying their brute power or strength as opposed to the woman’s body who is ‘clothed’ and ‘covered’. Yet I argue, there is more to the sweaty mud dripped wrestler’s body than the way they are perceived only through physical strength or brute power. The body stands not just displaying the power or *bal* but *shakti* emanating both physical and bodily efforts, as well as from *bhakti* or devotion and perseverance (Alter, 1992). The mud and sweat together come to form a relation between the wrestler’s body and earth/mud (Alter, 1992). As discussed in earlier chapters, mud has its significance in wrestling where the mud cultivates the wrestler’s body and the wrestler also gives back to the mud by mixing his sweat in the mud and making it fertile and also ploughing it as part of *bayam* (Alter, 1992). Wrestlers draw on the energy of the earth and they give back to the earth the energy which flows from their bodies” (Alter, 1992, p. 131). This exchange has sexual overtones as the wrestler’s body heat or “energy” is absorbed by the cool earth in the form of sweat which is symbolic of semen as O” Flaherty argues (O” Flaherty, 1980) (Alter, 1992). In spite of the sexual imagery, this exchange

is considered to be non-sexual and the wrestler's relation as Alter argues is perceived through mother-son relation (Alter, 1992, p. 131).

Apart from sweat's relation to semen, sweat is also energy or body heat that is crucial to the cultivation of the body. Even outside wrestling mud pit, sweat is common in *bayam* and *bayam samitis*, *vyayamaghars*. In the gym rooms or iron rooms of *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars*, the atmosphere will be smelling of sweat. Rather than seen as an aberration, sweating in turn becomes significant in *bayam*. One morning in a discussion on the coming up of air-conditioning in present gyms and multigyms, in *Simla Bayam Samity*, who still continues without an ac, the question of sweat comes up.

*Heating the body is what I need to do. But in air-conditioned gyms the body is not getting heated. It is not allowing it to heat the body. One is not sweating. Muscles are becoming cold in air-conditioned room. If the fan is there it dries up your sweat but the basis of bayam is that you will shed your sweat. Sweating helps your skin to glow by shedding the dust between our body hair. Unless you shed sweat, your skin will not improve. The toxins will not go out from the body. So because of all these we never allowed fans.*

Other than sweating and body heat or energy which is central to *bayam*, what is also crucial is the hard labour that flows in the form of sweat. Sweat also stands for the extreme effort or pain taken in *bayam*, wrestling, that together cultivates and constitutes the male body in *bayam*. The various forms of *bayam* that I described in my field note, starting from ploughing the wrestling pit, swinging the *mugurs*, lifting the *dumbbells*, *dands* and *baithaks*, all comprise of the physical efforts given in which it is not only prevalent in *akharas*, but the same *bayams* can be seen in the *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars*. These forms of everyday regimes cultivate the male body rather than only displaying its power or strength. It is in these repetitive practices, which is

what *bayam* is all about, lies the cultivation of body. Central to it are also the bodily efforts of breathing, pain and *brahmacharya* and the notion of '*songjom*' (self-restraint/balance).

### **The Practice of *Bayam***

*Bayam*'s significance in Bengal can be understood from the *bayam* samitis that are spread across every part of Kolkata. *Bayam* fundamentally refers to any form of physical exercise and forms the everyday exercise regime. *Bayam* is not only an independent form of regime in itself such that people engage into it solely but also forms a crucial form of regime for men who are into wrestling, sports or body building. As Manohar Aich's son, Bishnu Aich once told me in my conversation with him, *bayam* forms the initial step to all forms of physical cultures. *Bayam* in itself is a regime and has its specificity yet again because it's almost an initial and common form of practice it is reduced to mere warm ups in context of other physical cultures. Though most of my interlocutors considered *bayam* as free hand exercise, according to one of the instructors in *Hathkhola Bayam Samity*, free hand can never be *bayam* as then there will be no line to distinguish between what is *bayam* and what is mere movement of the body. For him *bayam* always means lifting weight or irons. Bishnu Aich, on the other hand, was of the opinion that there can never be a free hand exercise/ *bayam* as one always picks up one's own body weight, which is often even more than the weight of instruments. Amidst these debates of what constitutes *bayam*, I argue what distinguishes *bayam* from mere movement of the body is its repetitions in a certain posture, geared towards the cultivation of the body. *Bayam* has a specific culture, a specific idea to it, all geared towards cultivating the body. According to Alter, *yama* and *niyama* which are the initial stages of Yoga are also central to *bayam*, and like yoga it is also a "holistic, regulated control of the body". However, with one difference, while yoga has static postures, *bayam* is based on 'strenuous, patterned, repetitive movements' (Alter, 1992, p. 82). K. P. Singh's rules of *vyayam* listed by Alter in his study, brings in two aspects which

I consider is significant to understand *bayam*. One is understanding *bayam* as no different from a ‘spiritual contemplation’ and thus the place of *bayam* should be proper. Secondly, central to *bayam* is breathing (Singh, 1973) (Alter, 1992, p. 82).

Another feature of *bayam* is its repetitive nature, the intensity of repetition and the number of repetitions. *Bayam*’s emphasis thereby is not just in the external physical strength but also in the internal or inner strength as *dom* that is cultivated through intense breathing accompanied by intense repetitive efforts. This repetitive nature also comes up in *Susruta Samhita* where *vyayam* is seen as any rigorous activity or body movements that causes fatigue or makes a person tired further leading to blood circulation in the body (Rajagopalan, 2014, p. 101). This ‘tiredness’ is often referred to by my interlocutors as “*dom furiye asha*”, or “going out of breath”. What is significant is that *bayam* then is intimately related to breathing and it is the cultivation of *dom* inside, is what counts as ‘strength’. This idea of strength is inner, yet it is not abstract but bodily strength. I will recollect a conversation in context of Gobor Goho’s *akhara* and their *dand baithak* competition, a popular form of *bayam* practiced in almost every field of physical culture. They narrated about the competition which was based on the number of *dand baithaks* a person can do in a given time frame. They recollected about a man, a bodybuilder from a gym who was muscular and huge, almost “twice” the weight from that of the representative member from their *akhara*. In spite of that he failed in front of their member, because the number of *dand baithaks* their *akhara* member could do in one minute, the man could only do a “half of it”.

The conversation shows how they differentiate themselves from the people in gyms and people with huge or expanded bodies like bodybuilders because muscles do not necessarily mean strength for these wrestlers. They tried to explain that their team member’s strength or ability lied in the way he completed a large number of *dand baithaks* in a very limited time while the bodybuilder couldn’t do half of it. This idea of strength I argue is rooted not in an external body

structure but an internal idea of *dom* or stamina or breath. The other man exhausted himself because he was out of breath while the other continued and did intensely showing his strength emanating not from external muscles or body weight but from his inner bodily strength cultivated as *dom* through intense *dand baithaks*. This strength isn't abstract but located inside oneself in the form of everyday *bayam* and embodies the breath through repetitive exercise and breathing accompanying it.

Bodybuilders and gym goers are often considered to be focusing on *bayams* that enlarge their body or beautify them. Yet I argue breathing or *dom* and the strength emanating from inside is fundamental to bodybuilders because weight training which is central to bodybuilding requires *dom* to lift the weights. In the same way breath control and muscle control becomes significant as yoga and bodybuilding are brought together by Bishnu Charan Ghosh in order to bring in muscle control and development through breath control. Thus, the act of pulling a car by one's teeth or allowing a car to pass over themselves are all stunts based on strength but brings in muscle control and breath control together.

“The most important feature of *dands* and *baithaks* is that they be done rhythmically and at a steady pace. The performance of thousands of these exercises produces a mental state not unlike that of a person who has gone into a trance through the rote recitation of a mantra or prayer..... Vyayam is very much like meditation in this respect” (Alter, 1992, p. 88).

*Dand* and *Baithak* are two most common forms of *bayam* that are practiced everywhere in all *bayam samitis*, wrestling *akharas*, *vyayamaghars*. Other than this, any form of exercise or *bayam* for that matter is based on repetition. This repetition other than cultivating breath has another aspect. This repetition, Alter argues, can be compared to “rote recitation of mantras or prayer” bringing in a ritualistic and spiritual idea to *bayam* (Alter, 1992, p. 88). The repetitive *bayam* becomes a way to cultivate oneself as well as one's body. Alter discusses Atreye and

points out how *dand baithaks* and *bayams* not only develop physical strength but also the health and moral character of a man. Thus, *bayam* bases itself in the coming together of the physical, the moral and medical or health. The powerful radiance that was reflecting from Bishnu Charan Ghosh's idol can be compared to this notion of cultivation of the body.

### **Tenets of *Bayam***

*Bayam* is rooted in a complete masculine ethos that strictly demands a separation from the feminine. This was well evident in the very structures and places of the *bayam samitis* and *akharas* and my ethnography brought in the intricacies of the field or place of *bayam* discussed in the initial chapters. Yet I argue the absence or distance from the feminine is itself what sustains the masculine, thereby making it remain perpetually in a relation to it. The absence of women or the feminine that marks the contours of *bayam samitis*, *vyayamaghars* and *akharas* as well as *bayam* in itself, is not a mere relegation of women outside it but rather is a necessity in sustaining the masculine. My intention is not to see *bayam* as a masculine activity but to understand how *bayam's* basis is grounded in masculine ethos and principles that carves out *bayam* specifically as a masculine endeavor. There is no place, I argue, to separate *bayam* from masculinity.

I recall my very first encounter with *Manik da*, a *bayam* practitioner and now a *guru* or trainer in a *vyayamaghar*. My understanding of *bayam* has developed closely from my interactions with him, who almost became like a teacher, teaching me the intricacies, the practices, the philosophy of *bayam* and *yoga*. His narration introduced me to one of *bayam's* foremost norms, the norm of detachment. Detachment from women, alcohol and addictions forms the basis of *bayam*. This detachment, I argue, has been a central theme of *bayam* culture whether in defining the places and spaces of *bayam* or in context of the everyday practices of semen control, diet control, etc. In the present times, detachment also takes the form of detaching oneself from fast

foods, night clubs, late nights, clubbing, and other activities that affect the routine and disciplined life. It is here that *bayam*'s relation or similarity to acetic culture becomes evident, since both are based on ideas of detachment. The idea of detachment is intriguing since it is only realized in practice. It forms the basis of *bayam* yet the basis is not on a stable ground, but based on practices making it dependent and vulnerable to the enactment of the same. Detachment then is not only the basis of *bayam* but also the basis of its vulnerability.

Among the detachments that he mentions, the prime one is from women or *feminine*. In discussing about the construction of political sannyasi by Bankim Chandra and Vivekananda during the colonial period, Chowdhury points towards how a "strict dissociation" from women was indeed essential (Chowdhury, 1998, p. 135). The spaces and places of these *bayam samitis* and *akharas* are also, as I have already discussed, construed through masculine ethos. The presence of women in such a place becomes a threat to the very idea of the place. However, women's increasing entry into these fields of wrestling and exercise does not necessarily overturn the masculinity of the place. In turn I argue, women seek to enter these fields for the very masculinity that these practices seek to embody.

The detachment, I argue, is not only from women but also from the very male body which becomes a threat to its own masculinity through the practices of masturbation and night emissions. Indira Chowdhury argues how a distance from women was not enough during the colonial nationalist period. "Manliness" had to remain uncontaminated by "womanliness" of course, but it also had to be rescued from its own vulnerable carnality" (Chowdhury 1998, p. 135). This "vulnerable carnality" can be understood in context of masturbation which came vehemently under attack during the colonial period. The *bayam samitis* continues with these norms of restricting its members from engaging into sexual activities and other forms of addictions. One of the trainers from *Hathkhola Bayam Samity* narrated how their members stay

in their boundaries and in control. This staying in control brings us to another aspect of *bayam* which is ‘*songjom*’.

*Songjom* which translates as *discipline, abstention, control, self-restraint*, has emerged from the narratives of the men in the *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars*. *Songjom* also translates itself as moderation or frugality suggesting simplicity, modesty and keeping to a limit of bare minimum. This also resonates with simple living. Alter argues how *brahmacharya* is based on ‘simplicity’ with the emphasis of bringing “all faculties under control so as to embody truth” (Alter, 2011, p. 66). This interestingly brings in the power, associated with self-restraint, in relation to the humility and modesty of keeping to the minimum. To keep oneself in *songjom* is the main motive of the men there and this demands the practices of detachment on one hand and the strict *bayam* regimes on the other. *Songjom* often seems to be a ‘state’ of being, to be in control yet this ‘being in’ is never a ‘being’ but a ‘becoming’ or aspiring as it grounds itself on *practices* of self-restraint. Abstinence or self-restraint is not a state of being but a process of continuous efforts and practices. Yet this is assumed and understood as a ‘state’ of restraint or control, as a stable ground. This stability is what is undermined through the vulnerabilities. It is also significant that *songjom* is also a ‘self’ restraint as opposed to restraints put on people from outside. *Songjom* also means a form of balance that the men try to cultivate. It is this detachment and *songjom* that remains central to the *body in bayam*.

### **The Physical and the Moral: Embodying *Songjom***

*“Physical practice is to go through certain forms of control. You have to wake up in the morning, practice, have to have food in a proper manner, so automatically you are leading a controlled life whether you want it or not. Because of which your mind (heart) is not deviating anywhere, like watching cinema or engaging into drugs, or extreme attraction towards the opposite sex. Attraction will be there or else it will mean not normal (laughs). Just like I said*

*about balance. Balance should be there. You do everything at the right age. If you do not do what you should in a particular age, then that is wrong”.*

This narrative from one of my interlocutors describing their everyday life of *bayam* or physical exercise and its relation to the notion of *songjom* or self-restraint and balance brings the physical, moral, mind together. It is usually believed that any form of body discipline focuses upon the control of the body which takes on a cartesian divide where the mind controls the body. Alter argues that in Hindu philosophy this divide is not there. “Rather than a “nightmare of totalization” where the body is subjected to a refined and detailed biomechanics of health and fitness, in India one has a situation where discipline endows the body/mind with a heightened sense of subjective experience and personal self-awareness” (Alter, 1992, p. 78). In the above narrative we find something similar. Instead of the mind, which is considered to be dominating or controlling the body, we find how the *mon* (heart/mind) which refers to both heart and mind in Bengali is controlled by the physical exercise, the body in turn “disciplining the mind”. Instead of seeing or perceiving this as a control, one can understand how the bodily everyday activities of exercises and routines, seen as ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault, 1997), structures one as a ‘man’ or as a being which in turn aids one’s *bayam* and cultivation of the body. It’s a cyclical process. The everyday bodily activities and practices result in a certain form of control and balance, *songjom* which in turns aids in the cultivation of the body. The male body in these *akharas*, *bayam samitis* and *vyayamghars* then is the embodiment of ‘*songjom*’, where pain, *dom* and bodily (*brahmacharya*, diet, breathing) and physical practices (*bayam*, *asanas*, *pranayamas*) are embodied.

### ***Bayam and the Inner Body***

The chapters in this thesis have tried to understand *bayam* not only through the ideas and philosophy of the *bayam samitis* and *vyayamaghars* but also in the everyday practices. This

thesis seeks to argue that the ideas concerning *bayam* in the places are not just restricted to ideas but are constituted through the practices which are further embodied. *Bayam's* relation to the body is evident since it is the body that is central to *bayam*. However, the body is also understood through a split, between an inner and an outer body. In the same manner bodily or physical practices are not merely understood through the *bayams* or exercises one performs everyday but also through a set of bodily practices such as *brahmacharya*, breathing, diet which are central to *bayam* and speaks of a different idea of bodily practices. It is this distinct idea of body and bodily practices that formed the niche of this work either through the notion of *dom* or through the idea of *pain*. *Bayam* or exercise then becomes a way to understand this distinct form of body which remains crucial to my work.

The *body in bayam* then makes us confront a body in its interiority, a body which is inwardly felt and experienced. This 'felt inside' is experienced through the acts of breathing and cultivation of breath or stamina and through the notion of everyday pain in *bayam* that my chapters have discussed. The interiority of the body by taking us 'within', actually opens us into the possibilities of thinking about the body.

## End Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Gymnasiums in Bengal are referred to as *bayam samitis* where different forms of exercise and body disciplines are practiced. In many cases they also house a wrestling *akhara* within it.

<sup>ii</sup> – Gymnasiums where different forms of *bayam*, exercises are carried out. Some *vyayamaghars* and *vyayamshalas* also have or used to have wrestling pits

<sup>iii</sup> *Akharas* refers mostly to wrestling gymnasiums where wrestling is carried out on a mud pit. They have some characteristic features including water source nearby in the form of river or well, a tree, an open area and mud pit which is specially created through mixing of mud with turmeric, multani mud, alluvial soil, neem leaves, etc.

<sup>iv</sup> *Durga* and *Kali* are Goddess belonging to the Sakta tradition. Bengal is known for celebrating and worshipping *shakti* deities including *Durga*, *Kali*, Jagadharti and thereby, every year these festivals are celebrated throughout Bengal.

<sup>v</sup> These *pujas* are considered historical since they are known to have started from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century during the colonial period and the tradition of *Sarbojonin puja*, meaning puja for all caste and creed began in these places.

<sup>vi</sup> temporary structure housing deities

<sup>vii</sup> Exercise

<sup>viii</sup> It is the yearly festival among Bengali Hindus especially in West Bengal where *Durga*, the Goddess belonging to Shakta tradition in Hinduism is worshipped as the Mother Goddess alongside Laxmi, Ganesha, Kartika and Saraswati who are considered to be the daughters and sons of *Durga* visiting her maternal home. The festival occurs in autumn but is considered as untimely since there is no mention of *Durga* worship in autumn

<sup>ix</sup> Worship of Goddess of the Shakta tradition in Hinduism

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<sup>x</sup> *Bayam* is associated with the men and the masculine, where a strict separation is maintained through the exclusion of women from the *bayam samitis* and *akharas*. Yet I argue the *bayam* remains connected to the feminine through the separation as it is this separation that maintains the masculine

<sup>xi</sup> An embodied practice of celibacy which not only relates to sexuality and semen but subsumes in itself all forms of control, of senses and an austere lifestyle.

<sup>xii</sup> Worship of *shakti*, the feminine power

<sup>xiii</sup> A temple of Goddess Kali, a Shakta Goddess in the Hindu Shakta tradition.

<sup>xiv</sup> An association or organisation formed during the early 20th century as a revolutionary hub in order to rise against colonial rule

<sup>xv</sup> The Monkey Deity from the epic of Ramayana. He is a celibate God who is a revered figure in the field of wrestling and physical cultures.

<sup>xvi</sup> Austerity, pain, self-inflicted suffering

<sup>xvii</sup> Postures in yoga

<sup>xviii</sup> The city Kolkata was known as Calcutta during the British period.

<sup>xix</sup> Taking in pain/efforts, austerity

<sup>xx</sup> *Dands* and *Baithaks* are two most crucial forms of exercise or *bayam*.

<sup>xxi</sup> Kimmel has argued how historically men have not been studied as gendered beings and he emphasized on the study of men as gendered beings.

<sup>xxii</sup> Dr. Prem Sundar Das and Late Dr. Dibya Sundar Das are both well known yoga practitioners. Dibya Sundar Das had formed the Yoga Society in Kolkata while Prem Sundar Das had his own chambers in Ghosh's Yoga college and a private chamber.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Mallick ghat is a popular location near Howrah Bridge of Kolkata. It is a place known for its flower market.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Located near Ganesh Talkies in Kolkata

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<sup>xxv</sup> Yoganath Puri Math is a trust that currently runs one of the oldest *akhara* in Cotton street in north Kolkata.

<sup>xxvi</sup> A narrow street in north Kolkata is a business hub consisting of shops.

<sup>xxvii</sup> South Kolkata is basically the part of Kolkata that came up later and thus associated with new forms of buildings and structures as opposed to North Kolkata known for having the touch of the old Kolkata.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Shobhabazar is a place in North Kolkata known for the Shobhabazar Rajbari and its *Durga puja*.

<sup>xxix</sup> A metro station in North of Kolkata

<sup>xxx</sup> Bagbazar is a popular place North Kolkata known for its *Sarbojonin Durga Puja*

<sup>xxxi</sup> Birashtami is a puja that was believed to have been started by Sarala Devi which celebrates the martial prowess of men on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of *Durga puja*.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Most popular bodybuilders in India.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> A place towards the north of Kolkata

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Bishnu Charan Ghosh was a popular bodybuilder known to have brought yoga and bodybuilding together through the notion of breath control. His book *Muscle Control* lays down several techniques in yoga and bodybuilding. He formed a gymnasium known as Ghosh's College of Physical Education that still runs today but has now become a yoga institute.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Every temple has a bell which the devotees ring. It's a common belief that by ringing the bell the devotees announce their arrival to the Gods and Goddess.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> In Bengal the exercise regime is known popularly as *shorir charcha*, which means the cultivation of the body

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay

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<sup>xxxviii</sup> Anandamath is a popular novel by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay written in the backdrop of colonial struggle and the rise of revolutionary secret societies.

<sup>xxxix</sup> - A popular song written by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in praise of the nation as a mother during the nationalist period.

<sup>xl</sup> Saraswati is the Goddess of Education in the Hindu religious tradition and is considered to be the daughter of *Durga* in context of *Durga* Puja in Bengal

<sup>xli</sup> Kartika - God in Hindu religious tradition and is considered to be the son of *Durga* in context of *Durga* puja in Bengal

<sup>xlii</sup> Ganesh, Elephant God in Hindu religious tradition and is considered to be the son of *Durga* in context of *Durga* puja in Bengal

<sup>xliii</sup> Laxmi is the Goddess of wealth in the Hindu religious tradition and is considered to be the daughter of *Durga* in context of *Durga* puja in Bengal.

<sup>xliv</sup> A demon king in the myth of Mahishasura Mardini whom Goddess *Durga* kills in a battle which is celebrated as *Durga* puja.

<sup>xlvi</sup> In Bengal *Durga* Puja is based on the mythology of both Mahishasura Mardini and also *Durga* is seen as the daughter of Bengal (earth) who comes down with her children in her maternal home.

<sup>xlii</sup> Worship of *shakti*, the feminine power

<sup>xlvii</sup> Bodybuilders and wrestlers are referred to as *pahalwans*

<sup>xlviii</sup> A movement led by Mahatma Gandhi

<sup>xlix</sup> Actions performed without any desire for its outcome.

<sup>i</sup> Detachment

<sup>ii</sup> Austerity, heat, pain

<sup>iii</sup> During the colonial period communal tensions became common in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that saw the rise of *bayam samitis* specifically for Hindu men in order to garner strength.

<sup>iiii</sup> Ghosh College of Physical Education was formed by popular physical culturist and bodybuilder Bisnu Charan Ghosh in 1923.

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<sup>liv</sup> *Uthons* are an elevated area located in the inner or outer courtyard of old Bengali houses that forms an important architectural design.

<sup>lv</sup> These are different types of manual exercise equipments

<sup>lvi</sup> A form of exercise equipment similar to a club. The men swing the *mugur* constantly to develop their upper body, especially their hands.

<sup>lvii</sup> A locality in north Kolkata

<sup>lviii</sup> Barabazar is a business hub of Kolkata

<sup>lix</sup> It's a gstring worn by wrestlers as a form of undergarment to tightly wrap up the genital during wrestling (Alter, 1992)

<sup>lx</sup> Embracing one another with a certain force that is usually done during wrestling bouts.

<sup>lxi</sup> Stones that are turned into religious symbols/idols representing a particular God. In context of the *mundi* in Siyaram *akhara*, it stood for Hanuman and was thus smeared with saffron *sindoor*.

<sup>lxii</sup> An association or organization formed during the early twentieth century as a revolutionary hub in order to rise against colonial rule.

<sup>lxiii</sup> The 8th day of *Durga* puja and considered to be of increased significance.

<sup>lxiv</sup> Gentle, well behaved. In Bengal it suggests the class identity of the middle class.

<sup>lxv</sup> Gentleman. In Bengal the term *bhadralok* is used to classify people according to class. *Bhadralok* generally refers to middle class Bengali men.

<sup>lxvi</sup> Ploughing of wrestling pit which forms an important form of exercise in wrestling

<sup>lxvii</sup> Mirrors are present in every *bayam samitis* and *akharas* as men always prefer to see themselves in the mirror to understand how their bodies are being cultivated. The presence of a mirror also highlights how the emphasis is also on the outward structure of one's body.

<sup>lxviii</sup> Health became political because of being tied to questions of identity and nationality

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<sup>lxi</sup> These are mostly located in the North of Kolkata being the oldest wrestling *akhara* that still continue on mud pit

<sup>lxx</sup> A place in central Kolkata

<sup>lxxi</sup> Hanuman is revered in the *akharas* for being the celibate God who too is known for is strength and devotion. It's a common belief that Hanuman comes every morning on the mud pit.

<sup>lxxii</sup> Temples of the Shakta deity *Kali*

<sup>lxxiii</sup> Alter Spiritual male body

<sup>lxxiv</sup> Ontological turn

<sup>lxxv</sup> Prana

<sup>lxxvi</sup> Practiced of retention of breath

<sup>lxxvii</sup> In Srilanka the people worship *Kali*, deity of Shakta Tradition

<sup>lxxviii</sup> One who engages into tapas

<sup>lxxix</sup> A place in South Kolkata

<sup>lxxx</sup> The moments that come up suddenly and directly.

<sup>lxxxi</sup> North Kolkata refers to the part of Kolkata in the north of Kolkata known to be the oldest part of the city.

<sup>lxxxii</sup> Moments when I witness the men going through pain during their exercise regimes

<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Malish or massaging the body is one the essential part of wrestling. The wrestlers often discuss how the pain that occurs in their bodies are cured through massage

<sup>lxxxiv</sup> *Shakti* is feminine power that men seek to embody through *bayam* and physical culture.

(Van de veer , 2000)

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