

***Bayam*, Male Body and Masculinity:**

An Exploration of the *Bayam Samitis* and *Akharas* of Kolkata.

PhD Thesis Synopsis

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1. Kidderpore Mahavir Bayam Samity

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*, *vyayamaghars* and *akharas*. They are occasionally remembered once a year when these *bayam samitis* host their *Durga* and *Kali* pujas and people queue up to witness these historical *puja pandals* yet remaining oblivious of the tradition of *bayam* that remains intertwined in these places with *Durga* Puja and *shakti* worship. 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* and *bayam samitis* 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 various 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 endeavour yet remaining tied to the feminine through a necessary separation. This thesis is an ethnographic study in the *bayam samitis* and *akharas* of Kolkata to intricately understand masculinity and the male body within the *bayam* tradition and physical cultures practiced in these places.

“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 der veer, 2001: 98). There were attempts 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, 2015). However, this nationalist masculinity which was on the rise was specifically Hindu that was inculcating masculinity that was designed to protect the feminized nation from both the colonizers and the Muslims (Alter, 2007). 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).

Bayam samitis were not just nationalist or revolutionary hubs but also places of *shakti* worship that continues even today as most *bayam samitis* are also puja clubs organizing *Durga* and *Kali* puja every year. According to Bhikhu Parekh, the Hindu concept of *shakti* gained political significance during the late 19th century and a new “action oriented political vocabulary” emerged with the concept of *shakti* which became associated with “power”, “energy”, “strength” (Parekh, 1989: 172). *Bayam*, although a masculine endeavour, was essentially tied to *shakti* worship. *Shakti* is conceived as the feminine power or energy or a form of potentiality (Alter, 1992) (Van der veer, 2001). According to Van der veer, *shakti* is considered to be the feminine power that men seek to acquire through celibacy (Van der veer, 2001). 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: 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.

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 *yogins* and *hatha yoga* and *brahmacharis* on the other. James Mallinson argues that the initial practices of yoga were mostly geared towards a self-mortification of the body which later led to the cultivation of the body (Mallinson, 2021). 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, 2017). During that time bodily cultivation and practices were mainly oriented towards somatic soteriology, which is no longer an immediate concern of *bayam* practices today, yet it still carries within it the significance of breath and semen within a newer discourse of health and fitness.

Theoretical Reflections

The second chapter of the thesis focuses on a detailed theoretical and academic premise of my research that is grounded on sociological, historical, and 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 Merleau-Ponty (1962), M. Foucault (1979), Turner (1984), C. Shilling (2003), P. Bourdieu (1984), Judith Butler (1996), M. Kimmel (2011), R.W. Connell (2001).

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). The body was at the heart of modernity, either as colonized body (Arnold, 1993) or as a means of civilization (Elias, 2000) or to shape and mould the modern individual body (Shilling, 2003) or as a centre 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 essentially 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). 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, 1979). 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, bodybuilding, 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.

Considering this thesis grounds itself on a historical background of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal and India, the political period of colonialism and nationalism, I have focused on scholarships that have looked into the historical developments of the male body and masculinity for example, Mrinalini Sinha (1995), Revathi Krishnaswamy (1998), James Mills and Satadru Sen (2004), Chandrima Chakraborty (2011), Indira Chowdhury (1998), Sikata Banerjee (2005), Pradip Bose (Bose, 2005) Peter van Der Veer (Van der veer, 2001) Joseph Alter (Alter, 1992, 2004). Although these have initially provided a ground to understand body and masculinity, 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 (Elain Scarry 1985) (Asad. 2003) (Bendelow, Williams, 1995) (Brintnall, 2011) (Morgan, 2002) (Lawrence, 2003), (Silverman, 2001). Similarly, T. Engelhardt's (1974) work on masturbation and health, Sundar Sarukkai's (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), Mark Singleton (2010), Goldberg (2016) and James Mallison's work on the history of yoga and physical cultures (2017), have helped me understand the emerging ideas in the field of body and embodiment.

Amidst all these scholarships, I argue, there has been little or no work in the context of *bayam* tradition and *bayam samitis* and *akharas* of Kolkata. This thesis is therefore an attempt to provide an ethnography of the *bayam samitis* and *akharas*. 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? It seeks to 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.

Places, Experiences and Emotions: The Intricacies of Fieldwork

This third chapter focuses on the methodological premise of the thesis. When we do ethnography, we engage in ‘fieldwork’ which is central to what ethnographers do. 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 that 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: 1997: 2). This field in ethnography has earlier been only a distant far away land of exotic location. However today, “the field” has broadened to include everywhere there are human beings, and every imaginable human group and context has become an actual or potential research site” (Sluka, Robben, 2007).

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*, *Kidderpore Mahavir Bayam Samity*, *Bagbazar Sarbojanin Puja Committee* in the North Kolkata, *Siyaram Akhara* near, *Yoganath Puri Math akhara*, *Kapil Deo Bayam Sangha*, *Arjun Vyayamshala*, *Monohar Aich gymnasium* and last but not the least *Gobor Goho’s Akhara*. My focus in these specific spaces and places as my ‘field’ is because *bayam*’s history in Bengal remains intertwined in these historical places. 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. Secondly, these places are also predominately for men and restricted to men where in many cases women’s presence is also strictly prohibited.

One of the major aspects that emerged from my ethnography and which has been quite taken for granted in the field of *bayam* 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 contemporary gyms and fitness discourse. Thus, my fieldwork became more than just a study of *bayam* 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. 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: 184).

My fieldwork consisted of visiting these places and inhabiting them, observing the men in their regular everyday regimes and interacting with them. More than interviews, I have preferred conversations, group talks and narratives as methods to know from my interlocutors. 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 sensory perceptions as significant methodological tools. In research, what place does these feelings of unease have in understanding one’s place in one’s ethnographic field or setting? For example, my emotions, feelings and sense making as a woman researcher in the sphere of *bayam* made it evident that the space and place of these *vyayamaghars*, *bayam samitis*, and *akharas* are predominantly masculine domains.

The Rhetoric of Effeminacy: Bayam *Samitis* and Embodied Nationalism

The fourth chapter traces the history of the rise of embodied nationalism at the national level. This embodied nationalism contextualized at the local level through the opening of *bayam*

samitis with an increased focus on reviving masculinity through bodily reform to negate the supposed effeminacy of Bengali men in order to counter colonial masculinity and modernity. While there has been an increased focus on understanding the gendered body of the women in relation to the nation, the gendered male body has escaped critical engagement (Mistri, 2014) (Mayer, 2000). I, instead argue, how the male body and its care and disciplining gained increased prominence leading to the emergence of gymnasiums, wrestling clubs and *akharas* (place of wrestling) in Bengal and became symbolic of the “geo-body” of the nation that would embody the “national integrity and strength” (Alter, 2001: 46) (Sanyal, 2014: 216). This further led to the opening of the *bayam samitis* and *akharas* as places of nationalist uprisings and also as places to cultivate the body to garner ‘*shakti*’ or power as a form of rebellion against the colonizers. The worship of *shakti* in the form of *Durga*, *Kali* and *Hanuman* also began in these places bringing the religious and the political together.

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), masculinity and *bayam* in context of the colonial-nationalist period. For example, my interlocutors highlighted the transformation of the *Durga* Idol structure of *Simla Bayam Samity* with increased emphasis, where a shift happened from the traditional style of accommodating idols in one canvas to the focus on separate canvas. The reason for it, I argue, grew out of a way of redefining the Goddess. The decision to form a separate canvas was an effort perhaps to underemphasize *Durga* as a mother by separating the goddess from her children such that *Durga*’s image as a masculine martial figure, as a symbol of *shakti*, is highlighted more. *Durga* stood for the “militant anger” that helped her represent “martial power” during the nationalist period (Banerjee, 2006: 489) (McDermott, 2011). It is for similar reasons that *Birashtami* came up in the *bayam samitis* as a religious festival which took place on the eighth day of *Durga* Puja and celebrated the physical prowess of men (Banerjee, 2012). *Birashtami* brought the political and

the religious together within the context of corporeality and masculinity. Through these narratives and storytelling from the members of these *samitis*, from photos and local books, I discuss the local histories of these *bayam samitis* to argue how religion, politics, communalism and body discipline became enmeshed within a larger discourse of masculinity that pervaded different domains of religion, culture and politics during the period. The convergence of ascetic tradition, *brahmacharya*, religion and nationalism culminated at a moment which coincided with the formation of the *bayam samitis* and thus *bayam* in these places became enmeshed with the same.

The second part of the chapter argues that the “national (male) body” which was upheld by the nationalist was not entirely opposed to but a product of colonialism. It was Gandhi’s body instead, I argue, that provided a necessary alternative to both the colonial and national body. I do so by bringing in a comparison between Vivekananda and Gandhi’s ideas towards the body. I argue how Vivekananda, like other nationalists, accepted the British ‘s perception of Bengali men as lacking masculinity only to transform that lack into a loss that needs a revival. Thus, he emphasized upon physical and martial prowess but also tied it to *brahmacharya* which brought in physical prowess and spirituality together in the figure of the warrior monk (Chowdhury, 1998). On the other hand, I argue Gandhi’s weak and fragile body became a critique of both the idea of colonial masculinity and the ‘national body’ that aimed at displaying physical and martial prowess. Although Gandhi too emphasized upon *brahmacharya*, his emphasis was not on physical prowess but on self-control which for him would cultivate an inner strength/power, or soul force that was embodied through his everyday practices of fasting, celibacy and others. Gandhi’s understanding of *kapurusatva* (as opposed to effeminacy), *tapas* (self-inflicted pain), soul force/ courage, and his effeminacy 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.

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

The fifth chapter focuses on the ethnography of the *bayam samitis* and *akharas* as places and spaces and its relation to *bayam*. 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 with a masculine ethos and the specificity of each of the *bayam samitis* is also understood through the concept of the embedded nature of the place having a more rooted understanding, with specific history and meaning attached to it. Ingold discusses how narratives set in place helps in understanding place through “habitation” and “self-identification” with the land (Ingold, 2000). For example, the relation wrestlers form with the *akhara* mud shows how the materiality and physicalness of places forms a relation with the cultivation of the body. The physical place of the *akhara* in *Simla Bayam Samity* has been kept protected till today even though the mud pit is no longer there and the wrestling tradition has been given up. *Kidderpore Mahavir Bayam Samity* has also kept their mud pit intact although the wrestling tradition has been discontinued a long time back. The physical place, in its materiality, continues to embody the sacredness of the *akhara* which the members continue to honour and maintain in these *samitis*.



2. The Place of the akhara in Simla Bayam Samity



3. Kidderpore Bayam Samity's Akhara

The *bayam samitis* and *akharas* are understood through the contradiction of masculinity and vulnerability. These spaces/places are considered to be in tension now through the increasing entry of women into these fields, the rise of addictions including protein shakes and steroids, the loosening grip of *brahmacharya* (celibacy) in today's world. However, the chapter seeks to argue instead how these places were always in tension since they are understood through their inherent contradictions and exclusions that are characteristic features of these places and spaces rather than being a current anomaly. The spaces are firstly understood through the exclusion of the feminine where my own contradictory presence as a woman researcher brought out the masculine ethos of the spaces that exhibits the ideals of strength, virility and masculinity. In my conversation with Rudraneil Sengupta, the author of *Enter the Dangal*, *akharas* are described as the “manliest spaces” as the entire idea of *kushti* is based on a

masculine endeavour. My embodied presence of being a woman in these domains and also an outsider made me an element of distraction and disturbance, a figure to be kept out. This made me experience these spaces as exclusively masculine that constantly strives to curb the feminine. I experienced a similar sense of tension and exclusion when I visited *Yoganath Puri Math akhara* in *Barabazar*. Even though I was welcomed by the wrestlers and the *guru* in the *akhara*, I also felt how the *guru* kept making an effort to not engage into conversation and would constantly practice surveillance to ensure that I left the *akhara* as soon as possible. This led me to conceive of *akharas* as places which come in tension with thoughts, actions and identities that are deliberately excluded.

The embodied presence of a woman brings out a tension in the domain, yet very significantly this tension, I realized, was always already present through the homosocial/erotic environment of the *bayam samitis* and *akharas*. The places are perpetually in tension with homo-sociality (Sedgwick, 1985) (Bird, 1996) and intimacy between men on one hand and the simultaneous masculineness of these spaces. My own experience of witnessing a bout in an *akhara* in *Jorabagan* made me come across an intimate moment. The view of two men embracing one another, which in one of the wrestler's terminology *japta japti kora*, 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.



4. Gobor Goho's Akhara's Hanuman Temple

The coming together of devotion and masculinity, purity and intimacy, brings in yet another contradiction. Located adjacent to temples, the physical structure of a *vyayamaghar* is a distinguishing mark of the *bayam* or physical cultures of India from the west as wrestler Gobor Goho once narrated (Bandhyapadhyay, 2018). The places generate a pure and religious atmosphere through the adjacent temples, religious symbols, ritual practices on one hand, and the *sadhana* or devotion towards *bayam* and *bayam* equipment and the worship of Hanuman and *shakti* deities *Durga* and *Kali* on the other. For example, one of the participants narrated their constant fear and disappointment associated with night falls/emissions in maintaining

semen control. He would narrate how they would keep themselves in *songjom* (self-restraint) through food habits and worship of *shakti* deities like *Kali*.



5. Bajrang Vyayamaghar's Gym Room

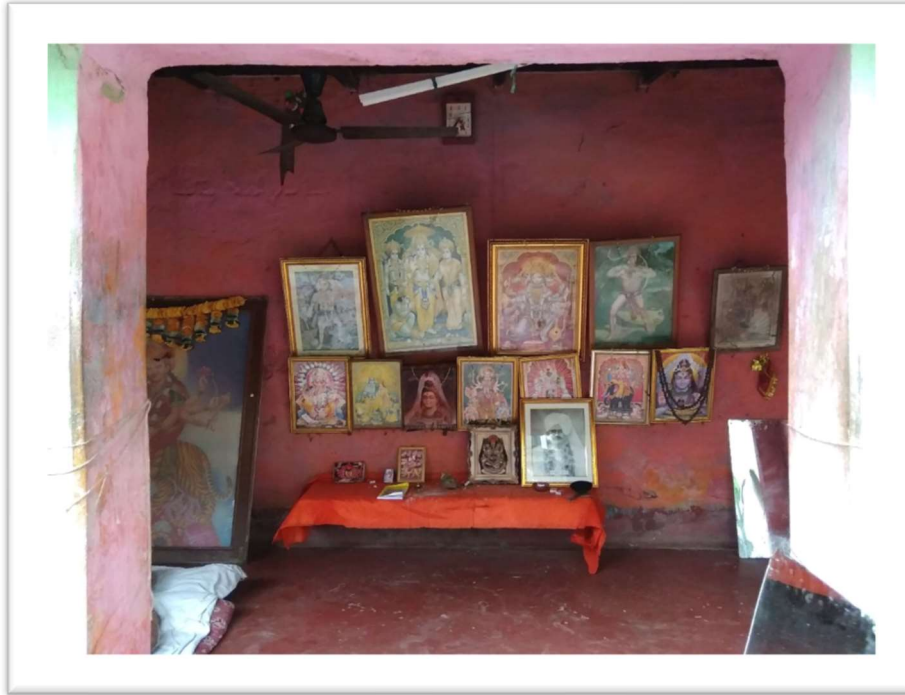
The everyday gym room itself becomes a place of worship, where what forms the basis of worship are the instruments and the entire practice of body cultivation. The above picture shows the gym *ghor* (room) of *Bajrang Vyayamaghar* having all instruments of *bayam*. On one of the wall one can see a Hanuman picture hanging that is worshipped by the members before they start doing *bayam* inside the gym *ghor*. My visit to the *bayam samitis* gave me moments to observe them in their practices. In this section below, I share an excerpt from my field note from my visit to *Bajrang Vyayamaghar* one evening.

It was an evening in Bajrang Vyayamaghar when I observed the guru of the akhara 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 and 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.

This moment in the gym of *Bajranga vyayamaghar* became synonymous with that of the adjacent Hanuman temple beside. This can be understood like a ritual where 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*. I remember I was stopped by a man in his thirties when I was about to enter the *akhara*. He asked me to first touch the ground as a mark of worship before entering into 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*. Alter (1992) thereby discusses how wrestler's invoke Hanuman's name before stepping into the mud pit. Similar to *bayam* room in *bayam samitis*, the mud pit is of ritual/religious significance in an *akhara* in a manner that it becomes impossible to distinguish between the temple and the wrestling pit. Rudraneil Sengupta (2016) discussed how every *akhara* in North India will begin its day with a hanuman puja. The *akhara* mud is considered to be a place of worship. It is 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. 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 and

shakti deities. However, 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.



6. Worship Area in Arjun Vyayamshala

These *bayam samitis* and *akharas* could be, I argue, also read as Hindu space not only for the communal tensions that were behind the creation of the places but also how the places and spaces display and express its relation to one religious and cultural group through its structure and materiality. 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. Hanuman not only resides merely as a symbol of power, masculinity and virility, he is also ritualistically worshipped everyday, alongside in special occasions. I thus argue that the very practices of man-making, the tenets of *bayam* and exercise regimes together constitute these spaces and places. 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.

“*Dom toiri kora*”: Health, Masculinity and the Cultivation of Power/*Shakti* from within

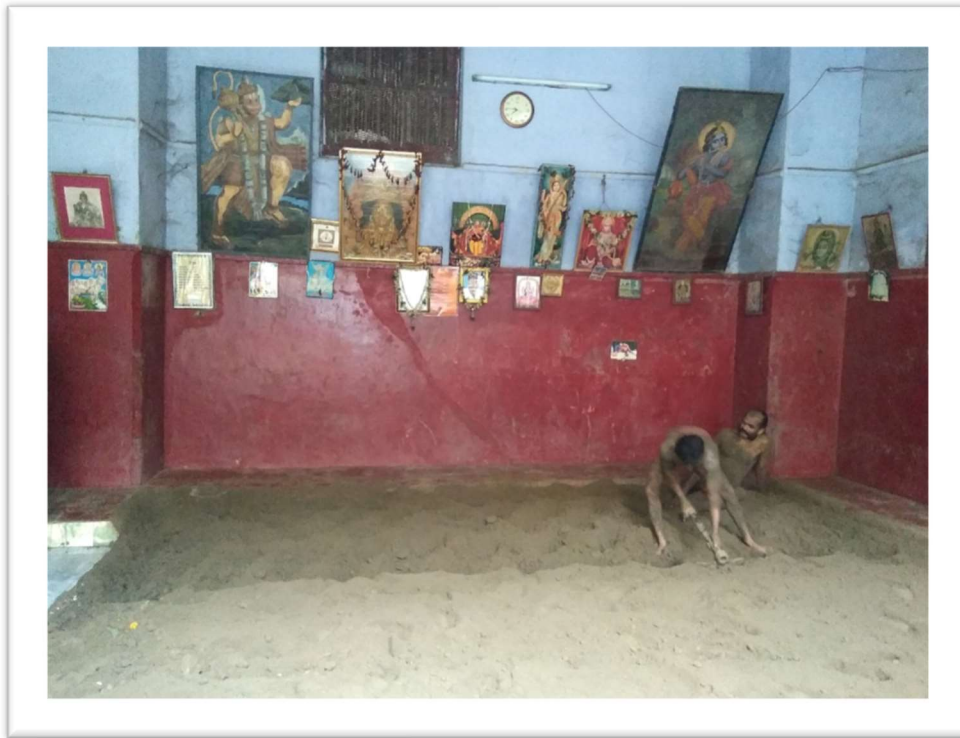
The sixth chapter focuses on understanding health, power and masculinity in context of *bayam* through everyday bodily practices. The relegation of Bengali (Hindu) men as “weak” and “effeminate” tried to establish a relation between the effeminate and unhealthy, such that health and masculinity became enmeshed and synonymous during that period. Thus, the revival of masculinity and health among Bengali Indian (Hindu) men were sought and established through political, moral, spiritual and embodied practices, especially of *brahmacharya* and the location of strength and health in the cultivation of the body and the preservation of semen (Alter, 2011). Reflecting on the ascetic practices of *brahmacharya* among the practitioners, control of sexuality through control managing 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.

The notion of a past and a present of *bayam* dominates the narratives of my interlocutors where the past is associated with conventionally ways of *bayam* (*bayam* culture) as opposed to the present, associated with newer, more “rational” and mechanized ways of (gym culture). 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, between essence and appearance (Watson, 2000). With the politics of time the present gym culture is considered through a 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 based on essence (from within). The contemporary discourse of fitness looks at the *bayam* culture's logic of, for example, hundred *baithaks* as a myth and irrational and believes that one can do a minimum number of exercises today and still develop health. This conflicting view on the distinction or difference between *bayam* culture and the emergent contemporary discourse of fitness in gyms 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* and contemporary gyms 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 early 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 the context of India's colonial encounter. Joseph Alter (2011) and Elizabeth Abbott (2001) have 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 remaining rooted in modernity. The cultivation of the male body through the practice of *brahmacharya* was based on a modern scientific discourse on the bio-moral significance of semen (Abbott, 2001) (Alter, 1994). Thus, it would be problematic 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, multiple modernities, on two different logical premises yet based on the same modern discourse of health.

I, thus seek to understand the *difference* of *bayam* which I argue cannot merely be seen through a means to end logic but as an end in itself. The basis of *bayam* could be understood instead in pain and hard work. It was not that hundred *baithaks* (a form of exercise) 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 the significance of *bayam*. In the *bayam samitis* the notion of health and masculinity is embedded in ideas of purity, semen, and on a more grounded, inner or interior understanding of the body and *bayam*. The emphasis has been on developing a body from within or “*bhetor theke*” (from inside). When they speak about *bayam* as something that prepares from within, what is this inside or inner idea of cultivation? Ontological turn has made it possible for us 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*.



7. The Practice of *Mati Kopano* in an *Akhara* in *BaraBazar*

I recollect one day in an *akhara* in cotton street where I witnessed a young wrestler involved into the popular act of *mati kopano*. I could hear him breathing heavily along with the rhythmic thumping sound of his ten kgs plough on the *akhara* mud pit and his uttering of painful exhaustive sounds like ..”ooouuh...ouhh” that brought out the hard nature of their everyday practice and cultivation. These sounds in themselves were significant for it brought in two important dimensions to my work. One of breath and the other of pain. 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. Here however, ‘*dom*’ is garnered or cultivated by reaching the state of breathlessness. An inner strength or power is emphasized by my interlocutors as opposed to the focus on the development of the external body in gyms, by referring to their methods as cultivating the body from ‘within’ or “*bhetor theke*”. I try to understand this “*bayam* from within” or the inner strength or power, through the concept of ‘*dom*’ (also translated as breath, stamina, power,

masculinity), breathing and prana. Its intriguing how the immaterial transcendental idea of prana based on spiritual yogic breathing practices is embodied through the practices of *bayam* like *dand baithaks*, push ups, chin up, etc based on the aim of '*dom toiri kora*' (cultivating breath/stamina) whereby through repeated *bayams*, breath is produced, cultivated and garnered and more importantly how breath is controlled and lived in *bayam*. Contrary to the notion that breath is invisible and immaterial, in this context breath becomes part of the body, becoming embodied in and through these activities. Breath here is not an involuntary act of physiology but on the contrary becomes voluntary, something to be cultivated, developed and stored. The way one controls and regulates and stores up one's breath is how "*dom*" can be translated and understood. It is this practice of *dom toiri kora* which I argue can be read as a masculine act or endeavour, a form of breath control and cultivation that is central to *bayam*. "*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. Prana can also be stored through regulated and controlled breathing, a masculine endeavour, which results in strength and vitality (Yogi Ramacharaka, Atkinson, 2005). Thus, drawing from Sundar Sarukkai and Arindam Chakraborty's works, I argue for the possibility of an 'inner body' created through the embodiment of '*dom*' where the inner body is constituted, felt and understood through the cultivation of '*dom*' (breath/stamina) or embodied strength / power through the embodied bodily and breathing practices of *bayam*. The power or strength comes through the bodily *bayams* and practices rather than being located in any essence. 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.

“Kosto Kora”: Embodying Pain, Cultivating Body

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). An effort to provide an ethnography of pain is one of the challenges. Pain’s unsee-ability or invisibility is coupled with its unshareability (Scarry, 1985). 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, 21st 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.



8. A popular power lifter from Bengal giving bench press in hathkhola Bayam Samity

Physical pain has emerged from my ethnographic experiences, from what I call the raw moments of ethnography. I recollect one such moment in a *bayam samity* where I have heard the loud shrieks of a man who was lifting a one fifty kilo weight while giving a bench press. I witnessed how his hands started shaking and he let out a loud cry or howl and soon ran out of breath. This moment has been significant in my fieldwork as it exposed me to an extreme form of exercise or practice. It was evident from his shaking hands, the amount of weight he carried, his heavy breathing and panting and his loud cries, that it was one of the most strenuous, vulnerable and painful moment. The men on the other hand perceive this as an act of power or strength accumulation. I argue instead to see this as a convergence of hard efforts and pain, both vulnerability and power. It was a moment of *taking in pain* (vulnerability) and *overcoming pain* (power), a moment of triumph, a moment of masculinity. Thus, pain emerged from my ethnography in an intriguing manner, oscillating between vulnerability and masculinity.

The chapter argues for two distinct understandings of pain that emerges from my ethnography, one understood through pain as injury which is seen as extraordinary pain and the other, through everyday pain. Pain as 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. It is therefore a condition outside the everydayness of *bayam*. Injury pain acts as a disruption. I focus on the latter, everydayness of pain in *bayam* and physical cultures often described as *kosto kora* (taking pain) or *mehnat kora* (working hard) as playing a significant role in the cultivation of body and masculine subjectivity. Biswanath Ghosh, a disciple of Gobor Goho narrated a day during his early days as a wrestler in Gobor Goho's *akhara* which gives us a glimpse into this '*kosto*' and '*mehnat*'.

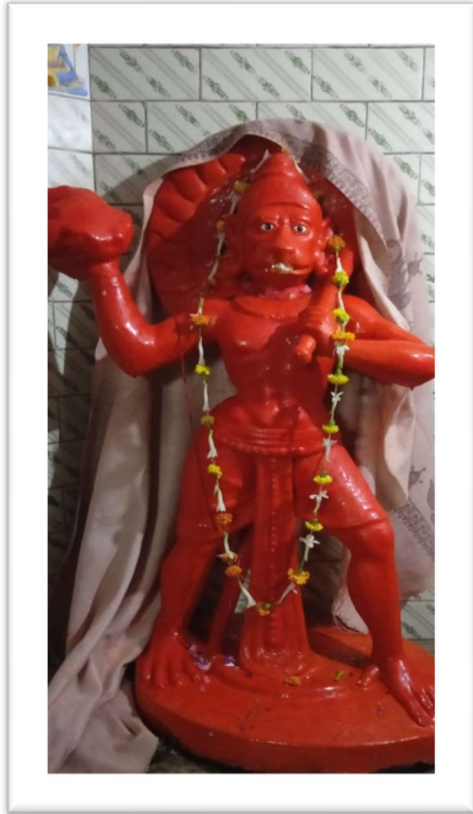
Ustadji would wake up around five in the morning and would ask us to start with baithaks. It was only after completing twelve hundred baithaks that he would allow me to sit. After baithaks he would ask me to plough the wrestling pit. The rule was whoever would start ploughing had to complete ploughing the entire akhara. There were stone collars (30-36 kilos) which we used to wear around our necks and run around. This increases your strength and stamina (dom). After all these, kusti took place. In the evening he would only make us do 300 dands. Nothing else. This was hard practice.

This everyday laborious practice of *bayam* is central to *bayam samitis* and *akharas*. It involves, I argue, two ideas of pain which I distinguish as physical pain which has a location in the body and second is bodily pain which cannot be located physically. Physical pain is a part and parcel of everyday hard practices of *bayam*. For example, the men often talk about failing to stand properly after five hundred *dands* for the extreme pain they have in their legs or the pain they experience while lifting weights. This pain is termed as *bayam'r byatha*, a momentary pain that occurs at the time of *bayam*. The momentariness of *bayam* pain is highlighted by the word “on spot” by one of my interlocutors which hints at an understanding of pain that happens at the specific moment of *bayam* and does not last long after that. My interlocutors emphasized how *bayam* should be continued amidst the pain. This repeated notion of *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 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, a form of pleasurable satisfaction bringing in a feeling of “doing it right” or “perfection”.

On the other hand, I argue for another form of pain which I refer to as embodied or bodily pain, which is not physically located yet it is bodily or takes place within. Can it be described with the idea of immanence? Something which is not manifest? This hard practice discussed above

is described by men in *bayam samitis* as “*kosto kora*”. *Kosto* yet again is a Bengali terminology that does not have an easy translation. *Kosto* means pain but this pain is not physical pain which is translated instead as *byatha*. *Kosto* occupies an intriguing place as an abstract immaterial pain like pain in one’s heart or mind as well as a material embodied pain from hard efforts and difficulties emerging out of bodily efforts in cultivating one’s body. *Bayam* is not merely about exercises but the intensity of pain or efforts demanded of it. My interlocutors would often tell me how it was necessary to take in these hard efforts because it was believed that only through *kosto* (*tapas*) or a form of endurance of pain, will one achieve the perfection of the body. *Bayam* could not be separated from the hard nature of these practices and *kosto*/pain demanded of them. Thus, *kosto* can be understood through the Hindu philosophy of *tapas* as self-inflicted pain or “self-imposed suffering” (Kaelbar, 1979, p. 201) that Piper argues remains crucial to the everyday practices of *sadhana* or devotion (Piper, 2009). This form of hard effort speaks of a pain that is neither physical or tangible nor abstract but one that occurs bodily and is embodied. Bodily pain, I argue, is pain and suffering that happens through the bodily practices of *brahmacharya*, fasting, *songjom* or self-restraints, which are bodily felt, experienced and embodied by the men in the *bayam samitis* and *akharas* yet do not have any location from which it stems. I employ Arindam Chakraborty’s concept of the ‘*antarmukh dehobodh*’ or the inward-looking bodily sensation for understanding an inner body which he refers to as ‘*antar*’ and which can’t be touched but only felt in the form of hunger, pain, thirst, etc. I further bring in Gandhi’s idea of brahmachari’s pain, to make sense of this abstract yet bodily grounded notion of pain in the embodied practices of *bayam*. When Gandhi refers to Brahmachari’s pain, he refers to this bodily endurance of pain of *Brahmacharya* as a way of being a man, where he bases the masculine subjectivity in the endurance of the embodied experience of suffering or *tapas*. 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. 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 founded on it.



9. Simla Bayam Samity's Hanuman Idol established on 1926 along with the Samity

Conclusion: The Male Body in Bayam

The concluding chapter argues that the male body in *bayam* resembles the ascetic masculinity of Hanuman, the quintessential deity of *bayam samitis* and *akharas*. I discuss how *bayam* bases itself in certain principles of detachment, *songjom* and a masculine ethos that defines the *bayam samitis* and *akharas*. My ethnography brings out how *bayam* is essentially tied to the notion of pain and breathing and seeks to explore the possibility of an embodied inner body through the cultivation of *dom* (breath) and embodying ‘bodily’ pain. *Bayam* is a masculine discourse/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 internalised as semen through the practice of *brahmacharya* (Alter, 2011). 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* (*Brahmacharya*) that the masculine body is believed to be cultivated in *bayam*. 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*.

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