


*Pahalwan Baba Ramdev: Wrestling with yoga and middle-class masculinity in India**

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Abstract

In the view of many people, Baba Ramdev embodies the practice of modern yoga in twenty-first century India. A tremendously successful entrepreneur, infamous ‘godman’ with political ties, and a highly visible TV personality, he is also a vocal supporter of *pahalwani* (Indian wrestling) as a way of life and of wrestling in India as a national sport. Beyond sponsorship of tournaments and support for a new professional wrestling league, he promotes a form of modern, nationalistic masculinity that draws on the ‘ideals’ of yoga, competitive athleticism, ‘Hindu’ conceptions of embodied power, and fetishized Vedic asceticism. In complex and often contradictory ways, Baba Ramdev’s embodiment of these ideals shapes the bio-morality of wrestlers as they train, compete, and endorse his products. Critically analysed in terms of gender theory, his sponsorship of wrestling belies deep contradictions in religious nationalism, middle-class modernity, and in the gendered morality of both wrestling as a sport and yoga as a form of practice.

Introduction

Baba Ramdev, one of the most famous and controversial public figures involved in the practice of yoga in India (Alter 2008b; Jaffrelot 2011; Khalikova 2017; Sarbacker 2013; Thomas 2012), has recently sought to identify himself with India’s international wrestling champions. In doing

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so, he has entered an arena where the terms of a new form of middle-class masculinity are being self-consciously worked out, broadly in urban India, but specifically in the context of athleticism, body-building, and embodied articulations of physical power (Baas 2018; 2020: 165–204). In relation to this—and quite apart from the fact that India’s female wrestlers have been more successful and have received more recognition than their male counterparts—he has incorporated ‘traditional’ wrestling, which is heavily marked with masculine significance, into the framework of his nationalist rhetoric. Literally, as well as figuratively, grappling with masculinity, he has turned himself into a wrestler—a *pahalwan*—playfully competing with national and international champions to make a serious point about the gendered physicality of his ascetic, other-worldly persona, and the relationship between asceticism, nationalism, and the new middle-class in contemporary India.

Despite phenomenal popularity, and even though media-enhanced virtual reality distorts perspective, Baba Ramdev is, on one level, simply the most recent incarnation of a long line of godmen who have animated middle-class consciousness in India (Chakraborty 2006; Deka 2017; Imy 2016; Mahendru 2010; Van der Veer 1989), especially in the context of Rishikesh and Haridwar, two adjacent pilgrimage centres in North India that combine asceticism, ritual performances, and nationalism in particular ways (McKean 1995). There also are important connections of cultural logic in how Baba Ramdev embodies the mystique of asceticism as found in popular representations of more ancient, ‘Vedic’ religiosity (see, for example, Monti 2002; Whitaker 2011). His public self-image is cast—albeit sometimes playfully—in the mould of iconic sages generally associated with the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* epics, as well as, more particularly, sage gurus who embody the adept practice of yoga, Ayurvedic medicine, and martial arts (Chakraborty 2007).

To a significant extent, Baba Ramdev’s popularity is rooted in the conflation of wisdom and power manifest in the physical embodiment of classical world renunciation, indexing a utopian, other-worldly future rooted in the imaginary past of an ongoing ‘crisis’ of nationalism and national character. However, he is unique and exceptionally powerful in several ways that require careful analysis and assessment. It is much too easy and simplistic to dismiss him and his associates as the latest frauds in a long line of self-sacralized, but all too human, charlatans.

Importantly, Baba Ramdev’s power derives from the fact that he is, at once, virtual and actual in a way made possible by contemporary forms of online mediation. His identity is deeply embedded in, and shaped by, a

virtual presence on social media, news feeds, blogs, YouTube channels, and websites, and both the hyper-immediacy of these forms of communication as well as their atemporal, ever-present existence in a transcendental archive. This virtual archive, a kind of mediated eternal return (as against one that is purely mythological), brings things he has said and done in the past—interviews, press releases, yoga demonstrations, guided tours of his various enterprises, and, as we will see, staged wrestling bouts—back into the discursive immediacy of the present as a result of the facility people have to post and repost the results of internet searches.

In conjunction with the multidimensional articulations of virtually transcendental meaning this presence generates, internet forms of culture such as this produce significant methodological challenges (see Boellstroff et al. 2013; Boyer, Faubion and Marcus 2015). The approach taken here brackets many of these important challenges, including questions of how virtual communities of practice are constituted; and who posts and reposts what on social media, for whom, and who responds. The focus in this article is on websites generated by Patanjali enterprises, if not directly by Baba Ramdev himself, as well as commentaries, interviews, performances, and recorded events. As intimated in the language used to describe Baba Ramdev's mediated presence—and recognizing continuities in the analytical methods of interpretive anthropology that relate to both actual and virtual domains of experience (Boyer 2010)—what follows is a mythopoetic reading of an inherently unstable, virtual archive. This reading is set against the backdrop of more traditional—but perhaps thereby no more inherently grounded—ethnographic work with actual wrestlers and practitioners of actual yoga.

Branding the Baba: yoga, Ayurveda, and the spirit of asceticism

There are many ways in which to analyse Ramdev's persona and to contextualize his popularity. Media in general, and social media in particular, is clearly very important, as are a spectrum of twenty-first century changes in the habitus of middle-class India (see, for example, Donner 2011). Reflective, collective, and somewhat nervous, class-based self-consciousness is critically important for understanding how a person like Ramdev embodies a kind of confident, seemingly timeless, but

nevertheless very modern 'ascetic' alternative to the manifold anxieties and ambivalences associated with consumerism and hyper-acquisitiveness, and the looming impress of competitive globalization in the affected experience of upwardly mobile individuals and families in contemporary India (Chakraborty 2006). To understand this, it is important to recognize the diverse ways in which gender is being articulated in contemporary India and, in particular, the way in which class and masculinity intersect in complex ways (see, for example, Chopra 2007; Chopra, Osella and Osella 2004; Chowdhry 2015; Dasgupta and Gokulsing 2014; Derné 2000; Doron and Broom 2014; Sreenivas 2010). Furthermore, one must recognize the way in which current class-based gender dynamics interact with the legacy of colonial forms of gendered social stratification (Dayal 2007; Osella and Osella 2000) and various manifestations of contemporary masculinity that invoke complex histories of sexuality (Srivastava 2001, 2004), athleticism (Alter 2011), and politics (Banerjee 1999, 2003, 2005).

Here, however, the goal is to focus specifically on one dimension of a different kind of fetishism within this larger dynamic, namely, the way in which Baba Ramdev performs an articulation of masculinity that is distinctively contemporary, and both radical and conservative at the same time. We can understand this in terms articulated by Judith Butler, Susan Bordo, and other scholars who recognize the way in which the performance and iterability of gender opens out contested spaces for the interpretation of meaning and identity (Butler 1993, Bordo 1999). These performances, which can be sensually complex (Baas 2016), often go against the grain of normative representations to reveal the dynamics of power and desire in relation to gender and the artifice of gendered categories.

Baba Ramdev's performance of masculinity must also be understood in relation to sexuality, in part because of the way in which *pahalwani* involves the practice of celibacy, but also because of his proclaimed prejudice against LGBTQ sexualities, including incendiary claims he has made about being able to cure homosexuality with the practice of yoga. In 2013 he forcefully reiterated and expanded upon this claim following a legal decision to uphold an imperial-era law against so-called 'unnatural' sex (*Times of India* 2013). Then, following the Supreme Court's landmark 2018 decision to decriminalize homosexuality, Ramdev seems to have changed his position, but in a way that involves as much humorous ambivalence as serious contrition (Worth 2018), with the humour suggesting that he is attuned to the plasticity of gender and sexuality in practice, but also savvy to the way in which the problem of

flexibility manifests itself in the conservative attitude of many who conceptualize themselves, normatively, in firmly bracketed, binary terms. Indeed, it seems as though Baba Ramdev fully understands the power of humour and laughter (Yog Amrit 2013), itself an increasingly popular yogic technique in the form of *hasyasana* (Yog Amrit 2017), to enable his followers to bracket their identification with some, but not necessarily everything, of what he says. This further enables him to strategically and tactically equivocate by making different statements to different audiences. In any case, and in short, the controversy surrounding Baba Ramdev's attitude towards homosexuality has become a complex feature of his performance of a kind of masculinity that entails blurring gendered conceptions about the embodied practices of *pahalwans* and yogis.

One of the most intriguing things about Baba Ramdev is that he represents, for those who believe in what he does and says, a radical, and seemingly seamless, reconciliation between what appear to be irreconcilable values and antithetical goals in the understanding of those who see him as a charlatan and fraud. In other words, he embodies profound contradictions, perhaps most dramatically in terms of ascetic, anti-Western, so-called Vedic values, on the one hand—indexed by his saffron robes, long hair, full beard, and Sanskrit-inflected rhetoric—and phenomenal commercial and corporate success, on the other (Pandey 2009). He is, above all else, an entrepreneurial neoliberal business tycoon—a postmodern Hindu version of this-worldly Protestant asceticism that Weber so clearly linked to the birth of the spirit of capitalism itself. In terms of revenue, Baba Ramdev's pharmaceutical and healthcare company, Patanjali Ayurved (Divya Yoga n.d.), increased in value from Rs 163 crore in 2010 to an estimated Rs 5,000 crore in 2016 (Deka 2017: 46–47). He has, clearly, identified a very lucrative market niche, combining yoga with Ayurveda to create a powerful lifestyle brand within the rubric of Hindu ethics and personal, biomoral self-development (Khalikova 2017). There are interesting ways in which Patanjali Ayurved's marketing and product development relates to the different gendered ways in which Ayurvedic medicine has been commercialized in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Haynes 2012; Islam and Kuah-Pearce 2013).

The brand name, Patanjali, is taken from the name of the sage author of the *Yoga Sutra*, a text that has come to represent—however problematically within the reductive purview of essentialized nationalist Orientalism (see Sarbacker 2013)—the ineffable wisdom of Vedic philosophy (Chakraborty 2011). Baba Ramdev has also used the name

of the sage to establish a very large centre for the practice of yoga and Ayurvedic medicine in Haridwar called Patanjali Yogpeeth (Divya Yoga [n.d.](#)). Making choices from a range of thousands of products processed and packaged on an industrial scale in Haridwar, marketed online, and sold through more than 10,000 franchised Patanjali outlets, middle-class consumers are told they are buying pure, authentic, natural, non-Western health foods and medicines (Patanjali Ayurved [n.d. a.](#)). They spend money to buy home-grown, indigenous products sold on the promise of restoring traditional health and transcendent wellbeing within the ambit of an alternative, nationalist modernity. There is no doubt at all that many middle-class individuals in India, ranging across the vast spectrum of this social bracket, like the quality of Patanjali products, their affordability, as well as the way in which they appear to materialize a nationalist ideal of indigenous self-sufficiency.

Baba Ramdev has gained recognition and notoriety in recent years because of his support for the right-wing nationalist movement that brought the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi to power in 2014 (Chakraborty [2006](#); Jaffrelot [2011](#)). In conjunction with continued, if sometimes equivocal, support of Modi, Baba Ramdev's rhetoric is stridently critical of the political establishment. Despite being accused of corruption, fraud, and various other illegal activities, he and his associates have sought to define themselves as populist political reformers inspired by the highest standards of ethical and moral conduct. As one can well imagine, this has produced a public discourse of sharply polarized views. Positive views, on the one hand, tend to be exaggerated because of Baba Ramdev's charismatic, populist, 'Everyman' appeal. On the other hand, those who consider themselves to be rational defenders of reasoned, liberal cosmopolitanism react with visceral antipathy towards everything that he appears to stand for.

Baba Ramdev, television, and yoga

Baba Ramdev's prominence on the national stage, however, predates Narendra Modi and is directly linked to the tremendous popularity of several long-running, regularly broadcast, daily television programmes in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Alter [2008b](#)). These programmes, focused on health and wellness, involved Baba Ramdev guiding viewers through the performance of *asana* and *pranayama* routines, while providing a running commentary on the benefits of yoga as a way of

life. Rough estimates suggest that millions of people watched these programmes, adopted the practice of yoga in some form or another, and, significantly, came to associate the practice of *asana* and *pranayama* with Baba Ramdev as a charismatic television personality.

It is important to note that before Baba Ramdev's twenty-first century success, the Bharatiya Yog Sansthan (BYS) had established a programme for the propagation of cultural reform and revival through yoga in the 1970s and 1980s (Alter 1997). The BYS was inspired by the Hindu nationalism of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Primarily located in Delhi and other North Indian cities, the BYS promoted the formation of neighbourhood groups. These groups started to get together in public parks to practise *asana* and *pranayama* for the purpose of promoting health and wellness within an ideological rubric closely associated with anti-Western, non-acquisitive Hindu nationalism. Whereas the BYS programme was—and to a significant extent remains—remarkably bureaucratic, institutionally structured, low-tech, resolutely secular, and largely anonymized in terms of leadership, Baba Ramdev literally embodies the charismatic authority of a popular, saffron-clad religious teacher, even though he is, for all practical purposes, an entrepreneurial businessman with a virtual presence on social media that is larger than life.

Unlike other self-consciously religious teachers, Baba Ramdev does not have a following of disciples nor does he articulate a spiritual or philosophical message that is distinct from promotional rhetoric and advertising copy. The yoga he teaches through televised performance contrasts with the many ways in which postural yoga is mediated and consumed in India as either modern and purely athletic, or inherently spiritual and arcanelly soteriological. He is not the first and only one to do this. A case in point is Dharendra Brahmacharya who taught yoga to Indira Gandhi and performed *asana* and *pranayama* in a popular programme called *Yogabhyas* on Indian state-run Doordarshan Television in the 1970s. But Baba Ramdev has been successful, in part because he is remarkably adept at adapting his performances to particular audiences (Longkumer 2018), and in part because individuals read into them what they want to see and hear. Through television programmes—and now through social media and YouTube—he has effectively turned yoga into a form of Vedicly inflected, other-worldly practice, while also making it modern in a non-Western, distinctly Indian sense. In the virtualized imagination of many neo-liberal middle-class Indians, this seems to have contemporary cultural relevance and resonance in a way that the self-consciously secularized,

medicalized yoga of India's socialist twentieth century never really did, even under the rubric of RSS-inspired Hindu nationalism. The significance of Baba Ramdev's television programmes, and the range of different forms of collective, physical practice to which they have given rise, including yoga camps, mass yoga demonstrations and rallies, yoga health retreats, and now International Yoga Day, cannot be exaggerated, especially in terms of understanding the intersection of identity, performative self-expression, nationalist class consciousness, and embodied experience.

Grappling with yoga and masculinity

One of the interesting things about Baba Ramdev's embodied practice of *asana* and *pranayama* is the way in which it seems to have become more and more athletic, aerobic, and callisthenic over the past 20 years. Specifically, he has incorporated various aspects of *pahalwani* into his instructions for practising yoga and his advocacy for healthy self-development, including two exercises—*dands* (jackknifing push-ups) and *bethaks* (squats).

Pahalwani is constructed around the sport of wrestling in southern Asia. Colloquially known as *kushti*, it has a long history. There are references to various aspects of training, self-development, martial application, and royal patronage in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* wherein wrestling prowess often signifies the embodied power of *shakti* (power that is at once supernatural and physiological) in the accomplishments of Bhim, Krishna, and Hanuman, among other heroic figures in the pantheon. Wrestling is also documented in Persian texts from the Mughal courts, in the medieval literature of various princely states, and in several pre-modern works that describe *malla yuddha* as a martial art (Alter 1992). At least in part on account of the masculinist pretence of British imperialism and the effeminizing effects of Orientalism, as well as modern intellectual histories that tend to overlook the significance of athleticism, *pahalwani* is a somewhat marginalized, popular tradition. It is also regarded as hypermasculine, for a range of reasons that frame and are problematized in this article, including the emphasis on physical bulk and strength, and on the practice of celibacy (Alter 1994).

Pahalwani is keyed to a regimen of self-discipline—including diet, exercise, and training—designed to maximize the production and retention of semen, which is thought to be the essence of masculinity. It is a bio-moral substance that manifests itself as *shakti*, stamina, virtue, and character. *Dands* and *bethaks* are two primary forms of exercise that

define physical self-development in terms of this bio-moral substance of masculinity. As a way of life, *pahalwani* is closely associated with *akhardas* and the structured training of disciples by gurus in these gymnasiums. For a number of reasons, there are interesting structural congruities between yoga, Ayurveda, and *pahalwani*. This is most clearly reflected in the persona of the guru as an adept teacher and sage master in all three traditions, the emphasis on celibacy as a form of self-discipline, and on the underlying logic of bio-moral transubstantiation that links breathing, diet, and exercise to the production and retention of semen.

In producing a synthesis of yoga and *pahalwani*, Baba Ramdev is being self-consciously innovative and creative. But he is, nevertheless, articulating one of a number of different ways in which the practice of yoga in India has been closely linked to the development of athleticism, physical fitness, and bodybuilding throughout the twentieth century (Alter 2006, 2011). Most notably, Dr Shanti Prakash Atreya, state wrestling champion of Uttar Pradesh (who also earned a PhD in philosophy from Banaras Hindu University), developed an argument about the way in which *pahalwani* and yoga are based on a common theory of physiological transformation that derives from the philosophy of Samkhya and *hatha* yoga (Alter 2013). Without acknowledging Atreya's work, or an interest in the finer points of academic philosophy, Ramdev has, in effect, reproduced Atreya's insights through creative practice, albeit by means of blurring gross physiological distinctions rather than articulating, and enumerating, subtle points of correspondence between yoga and wrestling. As a sport that can logically be interpreted within the biomoral framework of yogic *asana* and *pranayama*, *pahalwani* allows for the embodied performance of a kind of flexible, dynamic, and multidimensional masculinity (Alter 2011). In this form—which is certainly contrived—masculinity can be made to fit into a cultural context where profound contradictions are seemingly seamlessly incorporated into the idea of a transcendent, modern 'Hindu' nationalist truth. In fact, Baba Ramdev performatively weaves together three very different manifestations of embodied masculinity—corporate (his identity as the founder and figurehead of Patanjali Ayurved), ascetic (his identity as an adept yogi), and athletic (his self-identification with *pahalwani*). Using the 'warp' of nationalism and revisionist, utopian history and the 'woof' of Olympian globalization, he appears to have produced a popular cultural logic of individual success by means of which moral, ethical, and physiological contradictions are mooted.

On one level, Baba Ramdev's association with wrestling is, in terms of sport and athleticism, rather straightforward and overtly concerned with

marketing and self-promotion. On the Patanjali Ayurved webpage, as well as on billboards and in magazines throughout India, Sushil Kumar, a national champion, promotes the consumption of Patanjali-brand pure ghee made from cows' milk (Bharat Swabhiman 2015a). The advertisement is rich in significance because it unambiguously draws together the embodied aspects of powerful masculine physicality, the purity of the cow—especially in the context of its resurgent significance as an index of Hindu nationalism—and the condensed essence of ghee as a substance closely associated with health, wealth, masculinity, the moral rectitude of family in the village, and the traditional integrity of ritual observances. Beyond this, Baba Ramdev's sponsorship of wrestling tournaments is in keeping with standard practice within the cultural sphere of *pahalwani*, in the sense that wrestling competitions are often funded by wealthy patrons intent on making a name for themselves to secure competitive advantage in local and regional politics.

What is more interesting than all of this is the subtext of a kind of masculinity invoked by means of dramatic performances that pit an adept yogi against national and international champions. Before examining the dynamics of these performances, it is important to briefly sketch out the way in which free-style and Greco-Roman wrestling in India in the twenty-first century are connected to twentieth-century *pahalwani*.

Pahalwani is a way of life that essentializes home-grown, rugged, rural masculinity. It is, almost by definition, based on exaggeration (Alter 2001). Iconic *pahalwans* of the last century are said to have consumed vast quantities of ghee, milk, and almonds; engaged in hours and hours of exercise, doing thousands and thousands of *dands* and *bethaks*, while abiding by a strict moral and ethical code of regimented conduct. This code of self-discipline is—or can be said to be—like the moral and ethical principles of *yama* (restraints) and *niyama* (observances) in yoga, both in terms of structure and substantive content. *Pahalwani* is intimately manifest in the body of the wrestler as the condensed, somewhat ineffable, but nevertheless very real essence of semen (Alter 1992). Semen is cognate with ghee. Building up a biomoral reservoir of semen produces a kind of embodied masculinity that radiates power and virtue. And, although fitness and physical power link semen to masculinity, sex and a discourse of sexuality factor into the logic of *pahalwani* with reference to ideals of celibacy and the comprehensive self-discipline of athletic asceticism (Alter 2008a). As we shall see, this is one of the ways in which Baba Ramdev's performance becomes especially interesting and complicated.

Although grounded in the biomorality of practice, *pahalwani* can best be understood discursively as a way of life that lives on in the imagination of men born before 1960, precisely because it is always being brought back to life to be mourned again, one last time, by means of recycled, perennial laments concerning its imminent, tragic demise. One might call this recidivist nostalgic contemporaneity, although it produces an odd sense of timeless persistence. The ‘tragic death’ of *pahalwani* is remembered, repeatedly, in terms of being forgotten. A discourse of forgetting and losing what is essential about this way of life is not what has preserved it, nor even what has led to an invention of tradition. Forgetting and loss is what constitutes *pahalwani* itself as a domain of experience. The difference is subtle but very significant, since memory of loss, as a chronic state of mind, produces a kind of essentialized, embodied, ‘nervous’ masculinity that can only ever be on the verge of realization; but, even then, only with reference to its impending dissolution (Alter 2001). By championing the cause of wrestling in India, Baba Ramdev embodies the power of remembering what is constantly at risk of being forgotten, and transforming the future through an invocation of memory itself, if not, by any means, in terms of an actual history of wrestling or a history of yoga in relation to wrestling.

Gender, modernity, and the performance of *pahalwani*

Since at least the turn of the last century, wrestling in India has come to be defined by international standards of competition. Most, if not all, contemporary wrestlers aspire to compete in the Olympics, the Commonwealth Games, and the Asian Games. What this means is that local tournaments are increasingly defined in terms of the rules, regulations, and cultural expectations of international competition, even when local tournaments fall short because of inadequate funding, poor or non-existent equipment—mats in particular, sub-standard coaching, and underqualified officiating. In many ways, wrestling in India today has become increasingly fraught with contradictions and ambivalence about the trajectory of modernization. While this is not entirely new, *pahalwani* in the twentieth century, and especially before economic liberalization in the early 1990s, was a well-defined and self-contained sport, albeit one heavily influenced, especially in its ‘traditional’ guise, by the globalization and institutionalization of sport in the context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonialism (Alter 1992, 1994; McDevitt 2004). Champion wrestlers who achieved success within

this rubric found it very difficult to compete on the international stage, in part because of differences in rules and techniques, but also because of significantly different ideas about the nature of embodied power and the methods of training required to produce that kind of power.

The single most significant marker of change in recent years involves the unprecedented success of Indian women wrestlers. It would be hard to exaggerate the extent to which the success of two sisters from Haryana, trained by their father, a *pahalwan* in his own right, has turned on its head a sport heavily inflected with masculinity. The story of Babita, Geeta, and their father, Mahavir Singh Phogat, has been made into a blockbuster film, *Dangal*. The success of these women, and a considerable number inspired by them, is directly linked to the broader shift of wrestling in India away from *pahalwani* as a gendered way of life, even though aspects of it have come to shape popular conceptualizations of wrestling as a sport for women as well as men. Nevertheless, the striking success of female athletes most certainly complicates questions about the relationship between the sport of wrestling, the history of *pahalwani*, and the flexibility of masculinity in the twenty-first century.

The professionalization, institutionalization, and bureaucratization of international-standard freestyle and Greco-Roman wrestling in contemporary India has produced what might be called a culture of wrestling that is global in aspiration and orientation but rooted in an ethos of nervous masculinity. *Pahalwani* is linked to regional, patriarchal caste communities and is neither urban nor cosmopolitan, although competitions are held in cities. Since India has virtually no structures in place to promote sports in the population at large, through schools, colleges, and universities, or through state-run training facilities, the process of training and competition can be arbitrarily selective, alienating, and frustrating. There are relatively few national champions who have been successful in international competition, although those who have been are well known and highly regarded.

Along these lines, it is not surprising that the Phogat sisters from one village in Haryana, trained by their father, have become international champions. Thus, the idea that *pahalwani* sets the standard for Indian national success on a global stage is one fraught with ambivalence, anxiety, and frustration. It is a mythic ideal, powerful unto itself, but disconnected from the reality of what other countries have invested in—a centralized and professionalized recruitment system to produce a deep pool of athletes. Those athletes go through selective national training programmes that lead, collectively—rather than in terms of exceptionalism—to the realization of Olympic dreams. In essence,

rhetorical nationalism undermines the possibility of real national success in international competition, especially since it is young men and women from lower class, mostly rural communities who bear the burden of being at once mythologized and fetishized by the new Indian middle-class.

The allure of winning gold medals for India in the Olympics, along with factors that have produced the frustrations highlighted above, have generated interesting and complex representations of wrestling, and wrestlers and masculinity, in contemporary India. *Bharatiya Kushti Patrika*, an independent monthly magazine devoted to *pahalwani*, founded in 1962, provides a perspective on significant changes over the past several decades. While championing the success of international wrestlers such as Sushil Kumar and the Phogat sisters, the magazine, and its corresponding Facebook page, regularly and prominently feature regional tournaments where local champions compete in ways that index what is thought to be the essence of traditional Indian wrestling—very large, bulky men wrestling barefoot in earthen *dangals* (wrestling tournaments) wearing cotton *janghia* (thick cotton briefs), being honoured, symbolically, with *saphas* (ceremonial sashes), *pagaries* (turbans), and flower garlands (Bharatiya Kushti n.d. a and n.d. b; see also Kushti Wrestling n.d.).

To be sure, the tournaments highlighted in *Bharatiya Kushti Patrika* are very modern, often featuring international champions. And prize money and awards are also of considerable value, including cash, motorcycles, cars, and other luxury goods. But, as a magazine for wrestling enthusiasts—its Facebook page has 55,000 followers—it is noteworthy that deep continuity over time is emphasized over and above gold medals and Olympic pre-eminence won on rubberized mats by competitors wearing spandex singlets, wrestling shoes, and protective headgear. Moreover, the physicality of the *pahalwans* typically featured in *Bharatiya Kushti Patrika* represent a kind of masculine ideal—itself rather bombastically exaggerated—that is different from the masculinity embodied by international champions, especially when they are featured wearing spandex singlets in newspapers and magazines intended for a more general readership.

Pahalwan Baba Ramdev

To some degree, Baba Ramdev's involvement with wrestling simply reflects different aspects and degrees of ambivalence about the modernity of a hyper-traditional sport. However, it is important to note that he was born into a relatively poor rural family with a caste

background closely associated with *pahalwani*, especially in the state of Haryana. As a boy, Baba Ramdev, then known as Ram Kishen Yadav, was much more inclined to academics than athletics, but he did wrestle in the local *akharda* (Deka 2017: 7). After suffering from a stroke that partially paralyzed his left side, however, Ram Kishen turned for help to a *pahalwan* at the *akharda* where he began to do exercises for rehabilitation.

Too much should not be made of this since Baba Ramdev turned more directly, and at the same time, to yoga *asana* and *pranayama* to restore his health. And he came to an understanding of the value of yoga for health and physical fitness through reading as well as through embodied practice. Nevertheless, Ram Kishen experienced the connection between *pahalwani* and *asana* and *pranayama*, as did Shanti Prakash Atreya while growing up in a village in Uttar Pradesh before theorizing the connection between yoga and *pahalwani* at Banaras Hindu University (see Alter 2013). Most certainly, Ram Kishen grew up with an understanding of *pahalwani* as a comprehensive way of life and not simply as a competitive sport. In any case, his articulation of yoga as a means by which to develop health and fitness draws directly on those aspects of *pahalwani* that contributed to his physical recovery.

In conjunction with being a wealthy entrepreneur who seeks to embody the values of his nationalist vision, Baba Ramdev is a performer, clearly understanding how rhetoric and dramatic self-presentation produce and maintain his persona, and how this constitutes a certain kind of charismatic authority, even when the act verges on self-parody. There are many YouTube clips providing evidence of this. He has ‘competed’ on a dancing show, played in a football match against Bollywood stars to raise money for a charity, arm wrestled with one of India’s leading cricketers to inaugurate a match, among several other things that obviously extend beyond his expertise in yoga. However, Baba Ramdev characterizes his competitive prowess in all domains—business, dancing, football, arm wrestling, and wrestling itself—in terms of yogic athleticism, effectively turning the dance show, for example, into a wrestling match involving competitive *asana* techniques coupled with *pahalwani dands* and *bethaks*. The televised performance plays off the dramatic discontinuity produced by a yoga guru dancing on a stage where viewers expect to see Bollywood stars and fashion models (Tej 2016)

The discontinuity is, in large part, linked to the supposed distinction between what is worldly and what is other-worldly, but here there is also a significant set of blurred distinctions concerning sexuality and gender. As Wendy Doniger points out in her book *Asceticism and*

Eroticism in the Mythology of Shiva (1981), the blurring of binary distinctions of gender and sexuality provides a structural framework for understanding how transcendent power is embodied by the Maha Yogi—the greatest of all yogis. In one of his many manifestations, Shiva is half male, half female. He can be both aroused and dispassionate at the same time. The androgyny of asceticism, articulated through athletic *asana* and *pranayama*, and the embodied performance of yogic *pahalwani*, allow Baba Ramdev to play with masculinity against the backdrop of a complexly gendered mythology of flexible sexuality. But to play with it in this way depends on actual masculinity being somewhat more precariously embodied by ‘real’ men in worldly, middle-class India (see Alter 2017; Dasgupta and Baker 2013; Dasgupta and Gokulsing 2014; Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery 2008) than it is virtually in the domain of myth and ritual.

In 2015 Baba Ramdev recruited Sushil Kumar, India’s most decorated international wrestling champion, to endorse Patanjali ghee. Kumar’s caste background is virtually identical to Ramdev’s, both hailing from Jat-dominated southern Haryana not far from Delhi. Since 2003 Kumar, who competes at 66 kg, has won many gold, silver, and bronze medals, most notably gold in both the 2010 and 2014 Commonwealth Games, and a silver medal in the 2012 London Olympics.

As an international champion who often identifies himself as a *pahalwan*, Kumar embodies both dimensions of wrestling in contemporary India, and he does so in ways that accentuate the difference between wrestling as an international sport and *pahalwani* as a ‘traditional’ way of life closely associated with rural masculinity (see Baas 2020: 165–204). But Kumar’s ability to navigate these two dimensions, and to represent the nationalism of internationalism in a form that can easily be reconciled with populist Hindu nationalism, is precisely what makes him an ideal champion for the kind of cultural politics that Ramdev himself embodies. Kumar’s masculinity, coded to *pahalwani*, is both what makes him an ideal spokesman for Patanjali ghee as well as a symbol of embodied power in relation to which Ramdev is able to embody a kind of multidimensional, flexible masculinity that blurs a number of distinctions involving entrepreneurial success, ascetic morality, embodied sexuality, and physical strength.

Further capitalizing on his relationship with Kumar, Baba Ramdev decided to organize a *dangal* on the Patanjali Yogpeeth campus in Haridwar, bringing in world class wrestling mats and bleachers to redesign a massive performance hall built to accommodate thousands of participants for regularly held national yoga camps (Bharat Swabhiman

2015b). The *dangal* was characteristic of *pahalwani* wrestling tournaments in general, as these are organized by wealthy patrons. Organizing a *dangal* and contributing significant prize money, as Baba Ramdev did, enhances the prestige of the patron not so much through the success of any one wrestler but in terms of the close correlation between wealth, power, prestige, and masculinity. This is played out in the *dangal* as a complex performance wherein wealth as a measure of power takes on greater value through association with masculine physicality. Here economic capital, symbolic capital, and the material production of condensed, fetishized masculinity blur together to significant effect. Because of the different meanings that overlap within the rubric of a political economy of power and status, *dangals* are risky performative ventures that often devolve from structured competition to chaotic confrontation and conflict. Precisely because the stakes are high, significant risk is involved: as the whole event is very public and visible, there is much prestige to be gained if, as a patron, you are able to keep such a volatile performance on script and under control.

Baba Ramdev's *dangal* was, however, unique in several respects. First, it mixed together elements of international freestyle wrestling with the cultural idiom of *pahalwani* (Aaj Tak 2015). Although referred to as a *dangal*, the rules and regulations, as well as the mats and spandex singlets worn by the wrestlers, were those designed for international competition. Second, it was staged as a nationalist event intended to promote wrestling as an indigenous sport. Third, it involved matches between both male and female wrestlers. Fourth, it was dramatically oriented towards a middle-class audience—broadcast on television, posted both on YouTube and a blog devoted to *pahalwani*—a factor directly linked to the nationalistic idea that middle-class Indians need to take pride in their heritage.

All this being equal, Baba Ramdev's *dangal* came to national attention once independent news and popular social media outlets picked up on what became the *dangal*'s signature bout—that between Baba Ramdev himself and Sushil Kumar. Self-consciously staged, purposefully choreographed, and designed to make people smile—if hopefully not laugh out loud (but, then again, the elevation of risk is what *dangals* are all about)—the bout highlighted the apparent discontinuity and disjuncture of athleticism and asceticism, youth and middle age, as well as very distinct kinds of embodied strength and different manifestations of masculinity. Making the discontinuity both explicit and meaningful, the bout was characterized as a demonstration of the power of yoga pitted against the power of wrestling.

Wearing India's national team uniform, Kumar faced off against Baba Ramdev, wearing his trademark saffron robe pulled up tight, as a *dhoti* would be if worn as a wrestler's *langot* (G-string cum jockstrap). Baba Ramdev was naked above the waist and barefoot, just as he is when performing *asana* on stage. The bout itself involved what one might expect, with Kumar twisting, turning, and flipping in ways that made it seem like Baba Ramdev's feints and parries were putting the national champion on the defensive, often as though he was about to be pinned. Points awarded to Baba Ramdev resulted in him 'winning' the match.

There are several interrelated ways to interpret this bout within the context of the *dangal*, as the *dangal* should, in turn, be interpreted within a national framework where the discontinuity between wrestling and *pahalwani* reflects the larger precarity of middle-class masculinity and national anxiety. If Kumar's masculinity, as a middle-class national icon, is precariously based on his identity as a *pahalwan*, Baba Ramdev's gendered identity is precariously defined by the way in which he embodies the power of yoga. His sage persona most certainly contributes to this precarity, in the sense that ascetic celibacy produces a more distinct set of problems concerning the embodiment of masculinity than does celibacy in the logic of *pahalwani*, where condensed, self-contained semen produces the biomorality of *shakti*.

In essence, Baba Ramdev's ascetic persona, which is essential to his success both in the world of business and in the niche he has carved out in the marketplace of global yoga, threatens to undermine all that he has achieved. In this sense his gendered identity is, by definition, precarious precisely because of what he has secured, financially and in terms of charismatic authority, through the practice and performance of yoga. He does not so much need to prove that he is a 'real man'—in the idiom of Vivekananda and other earlier godmen who suffered under the effeminizing burden of Orientalism—as demonstrate that entrepreneurial asceticism is compatible with capitalism which is compatible with Hinduism which is compatible with nationalism which is compatible with globalized middle-class cosmopolitanism. It is within this larger set of concerns that *pahalwani* and yoga are woven together to fabricate a multidimensional sense of middle-class masculinity. Ramdev performs asceticism in one moment as drag and in another as the essence of yogic authenticity, just as Kumar performs *pahalwani* both as drag—in the context of the bout and, in some sense, in any *dangal*—and as a way of life that defines who he is, apart from what he, a young man from the Jat community in Haryana, has come to stand for as a heroic icon of middle-class Indian Olympic ambitions.

Since 2015, Baba Ramdev's investment in wrestling has increased. Patanjali is one of the primary sponsors of the newly established Professional Wrestling League of India (PWL), a commercial initiative involving collaboration between the Wrestling Federation of India and ProSportify, a company focused on the professionalization of sports in India (Pro Wrestling League n.d. a). For what is billed as 'Asli Dangal' (Authentic Wrestling) the PWL has recruited wrestlers from Russia, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe as well as other parts of the world, including Tunisia, Venezuela, Canada, and Mongolia, to join an equal number of wrestlers from India to form six teams of nine wrestlers each, five male and four female. Each team is named after an Indian city, state, or region. The League is well funded through sponsorship and private investment, with significant prize money, generous stipends, and travel expense accounts for high-profile wrestlers who have won medals in international tournaments (Pro Wrestling League n.d. b).

Baba Ramdev supports the League through investment and advertising, promoting Patanjali Herbal Power-Vita as an indigenous alternative to Cadbury's BournVita, a long-standing, very popular but—at least from a nationalist perspective—problematically colonial brand of malted chocolate drink developed in England in the 1920s as a healthy tonic for children. A video commercial for Power-Vita produced by Patanjali Ayurved provides a fascinating perspective on embodied forms of power that blurs gender, age, class, and a range of different forms of athletic and intellectual prowess (Patanjali Ayurved n.d. b).

In conjunction with promotional support and advertising, Baba Ramdev inaugurated the opening round of League competition in January 2017, taking on the role of honoured patron and patriotic advocate for the professionalization of world wrestling in India. In an interview on ESPN/Sony he articulated a nationalist vision of modern wrestling in India rising up again to the level of popularity enjoyed in the glory days when kings and princes supported large stables of *pahalwans* (Pro Wrestling League 2017).

In conjunction with a series of competitive bouts between highly skilled athletes, Baba Ramdev moved from rhetoric into the arena itself, having arranged a bout between himself and Andriy Stadnik, the Ukrainian wrestler who beat Sushil Kumar in the London Olympics. Even more so than in the bout against Kumar two years earlier, Baba Ramdev characterized his quite obviously staged victory over the silver medallist as a demonstration of how the practice of *asana* and *pranayama* had produced physical strength and a kind of skill that enabled him, an

adept Indian yogi who had defeated paralysis, to beat a world champion wrestler (ABP News 2017; Pro Wrestling League n.d. c).

Conclusion

To some extent, Baba Ramdev's playfully serious engagement with middle-class masculinity works in the context of wrestling because of how public masculinity in contemporary India is articulated in ways that do not neatly synch with embodied forms of cultural meaning. In other words, it is no longer the case—if it ever really was—that the most powerful forms of patriarchy are encoded directly in masculine physiology. To some degree, the displacement of power from community, kin, and caste groups to commodity and commodification in neoliberal India has not so much changed what men do with their bodies to express masculinity—which has always involved fetishization—as it has produced a degree of nervousness about what might be called the cultural integrity of embodied meaning in society at large (see Alter 2017).

In conjunction with this, Baba Ramdev's performance of gendered power in relation to middle-class masculinity works because of the way in which female wrestlers have, in effect, demonstrated that the emperor of *pahalwani* has no clothes—that the fetishization of seminal *shakti* is exactly that, a fetish of masculinity with nothing but a transparent *langot* to immodestly bind up the essential fiction at the base of a mythology of gendered power. As Susan Bordo (1999) points out, all articulations of hyper-masculinity reflect a kind of nervousness about the possibility that the opacity of fetishization occludes the transparency of cultural creativity, even as creativity leads to the production of new fetishes.

Considering this, it is important to keep in mind that Ramdev's nationalist critique of multinational corporations and his strident advocacy for Indian self-sufficiency makes many people nervous, at least in part because self-sufficiency and indigeneity do not synch very well with middle-class ideas about how to embrace globalization. By manipulating masculinity, Baba Ramdev is, in many ways, challenging the fetishization of Bollywood fashion and the growing popularity of bodybuilding in urban India (see Baas 2020), while carving out space for what might be called affected ascetic athleticism. While engaged in all manner of commodity fetishization, Baba Ramdev embraces the precarity of gendered identity by manipulating the meaning of *pahalwani*

in relation to yoga, and yoga in relation to *pahawani*. Playfully poking fun at masculinity, class, and acquisitiveness, he is banking heavily on his performance being taken seriously.

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