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# Wrestling in Indian Literature

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**Abstract:** One can find stray reference to wrestling in Indian Literature, this article is an attempt to collate these references and create a rough time frame of wrestling right from ancient to modern period.

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**Keywords:** Wrestling, Physical Culture, History, Archaeology, Sports, Martial Arts, Literature

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## Introduction

Wrestling is the structured somatic principles based on how the wrestlers make sense of who they are through the medium of their bodies (Deshpande 1993: 202). The game of wrestling is considered the King of Manly games in India (Mujumdar 1950: 173). In Sanskrit it is known as Mallavidya and the people who practice it were known as Mallas (Joshi 1957: 51). Over a period of time the word wrestling became synonymous with a number of other words like Kushti, Malla-Yuddha, Bāhu-Yuddha, Pahalwani (Deshpande 1993: 202) and Saṅgraha (Agarwala 1953: 158).

Wrestling takes place in akhādas or mallaśālas. Membership can range from 5-6 persons to 50-60 as well. All the members show their allegiance to a Guru who is aided by guru bhais or dadas in the management and the running of the akhādas. These akhādas usually have an earthen/mud pit where the wrestlers fight and practice, an exercise floor, a well and a temple or a shrine. Some exquisite akhādas also had vikṣanamaṇḍapas (visitors' galleries) where Mallakrīḍāmahotsavas (grand wrestling festivals) took place (Deshpande 1993: 202, Das 1985: 36, Joshi 1957: 51).

For all the wrestlers, wrestling today as well as in the past was not just a sport; it was and is an elaborate way of life involving general prescriptions of physical culture, diet, health, ethics and morality. It was not directly implicated in the caste hierarchy. It was and still is a very unique phenomenon in the Indian society (Deshpande 1993: 203, Mujumdar 1950: 173, Mallapurāṇa: 2). India has a very long and rich tradition of wrestling. The art of wrestling has evolved over a period of time, through ages. To study the nature of wrestling today, one needs to delve into the past and trace its antiquity for a better understanding of the art.

Study of the literature throws light on the contemporary social, economic, political and religious structures. Wrestling in the form of a sport, martial art and a technique of warfare, hence becomes an integral part of all the above mentioned structures.

An attempt has been made to understand and set a tentative time frame of wrestling, taking in to accounts various texts of religious as well as secular nature along with the works of modern scholars.

The Vedic texts give stray references of Boxing or MuṣṭiYuddha. The Vedic texts mention that the enemies were defeated by blows of the fists. There are references that “of all the warriors the brave boxer is the chief”. Another reference says, “Let the brave boxer fighter among the vegetarians proceed to the big and strong cities for victory” (Das 1985: 26; Deshpande 1993: 46).

Epics such as the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa give information on wrestling, which was an important aspect of the physical culture of the contemporary period (Joshi 1957: 50).

Wrestling during the times of the Epics was commonly known as “Malla-Yuddha” or “Niyuddha” or “Malla- Kṛīḍa”. Wrestling was considered as an important art in warfare and also as significant component of physical culture and recreation (Deshpande 1993:119).

Wrestling was adopted by the people as a profession and the professional wrestler was known as a “Malla”. There was a professional class of wrestlers whom the kings and the noblemen employed in their courts and on the festive seasons and arranged their bouts for the amusement of the common public (Deshpande 1993:120).

A different type of sport, resembling wrestling was prevalent during this period. It was called “Bāhu -Yuddha” or Free- Style wrestling. This was a kind of No- Holds- Barred fight where the motive of the wrestlers was to injure or even kill the opponent. Certain tricks such as use of knees, kicking, pulling hair which was banned in competitive wrestling was allowed in this form (Deshpande 1993:120).

A professional wrestler’s daily exercise routine consisted of:

- Wrestle with a wrestler of superior strength.
- Violent gymnastic exercises.
- Headlong plunge into water.
- Leap from an inordinate height or a ditch.
- Long distance swimming.
- Carrying heavy weights or loads.
- Running over long distances in full speed or keeping pace with a horse.
- Long distance walking.
- To try to restrain a runaway bull, horse or any other animal.

In the SabhāParva of Mahābhārata, chapters 23 and 24 give detailed information about the wrestling match till death between Bhīma and Jarāsandha. These chapters throw light on the contemporary nature of the art of wrestling through various moves mentioned like neck holds, leg locks, etc. along with their traditional names like *prṣṭa-bhanga*, *purṇa-kumbha*, etc. (Mahābhārata vol. 1÷ Sabhā Parva: 354).

Wrestling seemed to be given great amount of importance in the Rāmāyaṇa as well. Hanumāna, Vāli, Sugrīva, Aṅgada, Jāmbuvān and Rāvaṇa were very well versed in the art of wrestling.

In the KiṣkindaKāṇḍa section 14 of Rāmāyaṇa, Vālmiki talks about the battle between Vāli and Sugrīva and in the YuddhaKāṇḍa section 40 he talks about the battle between Sugrīva and Rāvaṇa in which he mentions the art of wrestling in grave detail (Rāmāyaṇa Vol-4: 730; Rāmāyaṇa Vol.-6:1214; Vyas 1967:232).

Various sleights and tricks were used by Sugrīva and Rāvaṇa in their battle, namely:

- *Maṇḍala*- It is of four kinds, Cāri i.e. proceeding with one leg, Karṇa i.e. advancing legs alternatively, Khaṇḍa i.e. special movements after Karṇa and Mahāmaṇḍala i.e. two or three Khaṇḍas combined.
- *Sthāna*- A particular adjustment of steps is called Sthāna. It is of six kinds, Vaiṣṇava, Sāmpāda, Vaiśāka, Maṇḍala, Prātyāliḍha and Āliḍha. In these modes pouncing of animals like lion, tiger, dog, etc. is imitated.
- *Gomutraka*- A kind of motion resembling the flow of the cow's urine.
- *Gāta and Pratyagāta*- Advancing and retreating.
- *TiraścīnaGāta*- Bird-like movements.
- *Vakraḡāta*- Circular movements
- *Parimokṣaṇam*- Hastily executed retreats to make the enemy miss his/her aim.
- *Vajrānam*- Avoiding the onslaught of the enemy.
- *Paridhāvanam*- Running round the enemy, eying him/her all the time to get the opportune moment to strike.
- *Abhidhāvanam*- Swiftly confronting the enemy.
- *Aplāva*- Advancing haltingly likes of a frog.
- *AvasthānamSavigraham*- Standing fearlessly before the enemy after having engaged him in a conflict.
- *Paravṛttam*- Withdrawal after defeat to a corner.
- *Apavṛttam*- Moving off from the side of the enemy.
- *Apadṛta*- Moving with a low posture for seizing the adversary's thighs.
- *Avapluta*- Going for a kick.
- *Upanyāsta*- Stretching forth one's arms to seize those of the enemy.
- *Apānyāsta*- Distending the chest so that the enemy may not catch hold of the arms.

Wrestling was greatly respected by the people in the times of the Purāṇas. The evolution of the sport went to the pitch of modern free style wrestling with No-Holds-

Barred. Wrestlers from far away were invited for bouts by the Royal Authorities and men and women from all castes and creeds used to assemble to watch them. Lot of arrangements were made like seats, stadiums, etc. Pairing of the wrestlers on ethical grounds was made and if that was not done the spectators showed their discontent (Das 1985:95).

In the Skanda 10, chapters 43 and 44 of the BhāgavataPurāṇa and the ViṣṇuParva of HarivamśaPurāṇa give a detailed account of wrestling matches between Kṛṣṇa and Chāṇura, Balarāma and Muṣṭika, Kūta and Balarāma and lastly Kṛṣṇa's fights with Śāla and Tosala (BhāgavataPurāṇa: Sk. 10, Sinha 1950:434, Bhagwati 1988:227, HarivamśaPurāṇa÷ ViṣṇuParva÷ 30: verses 7-54).

These above mentioned texts mention the rules and ethics of wrestling, various moves that the wrestlers did to overcome their opponents' e.g. grabbing necks, arms or hitting with their fists, knees etc. Some of the moves mentioned are, (HarivamśaPurāṇa÷ ViṣṇuParva÷ 30: verses 7-54, Solis 1984: 83).

- Sannipāta - mutual laying hold of each other.
- Avadhuta - letting go of the adversary.
- Kśepaṇa - pulling to and casting back.
- Muṣṭinipāta - striking with fists.
- Kilānipāta - striking with elbows.
- Vajrānipāta - striking with fore-arms.
- Jānunirghāta - pressing or striking with knees.
- Bāhusighāttana - interfacing with arms.
- Prāmṛṣṭa - inter-twinning of the whole body.
- Aśmānirghāta - according to some texts it means striking with stones and in some it means striking blows as hard as with stones.

The above mentioned texts also give detailed accounts of various preliminary arrangements to arrange a *Samāja*(festival/celebration/gathering). A respected teacher or a Droṇa would select a site free from stones, thorns, bushes and trees. On an auspicious day it would be worshiped in front of the citizens. The BhāgavataPurāṇa mentions King Kāṁsa of Mathura held a "MallaKṛīḍaMahotsava in Mathura and a special stadium was built for the wrestling bouts between wrestlers Chāṇura, Muṣṭika, Kūta, Śāla and Tosala against Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma.

Such theater had many stories (nirvyūha), covers (chadi), sloping roofs (valabhi), uppermost apartments (uttamagara) and railings (vedikā). They had gavākṣa and ardha-candra type of ventilators and doors with bolts (argala). Garlands and wreaths (malyādama), golden paintings studded with gems were used for decorations. Spacious mats (kutha) of various designs (prakirṇakuthaścitra) and other carpets were also spread. Seats were arranged in rows leaving space for corridors. The highest seat was the king's seat. Separate seats were provided for subordinate rulers and their

retinue. These seats were accessible through stairs (mañcārohana). Ladies of the harem had their own prekṣāgāras.

Separate apartments were provided to chief courtesans. People of different guilds and groups had high seats marked by their signs. Similar arrangements were also made for the people of the Janapada. A good number of seats were formed by tying wooden planks. Near the arena special seats were provided for the umpires (praṣṇika) and the wrestlers.

The responsibility of choosing the wrestlers of equal strength was given to the umpires who were known by the names, madhyastha, niyuddha- praṣṇika and maryādā-pālaka. General built of the body, scientific knowledge of the subject; stamina, strength etc. were used to make pairs. The umpires themselves were expected to be well versed in the art of wrestling (Joshi 1957:51).

During the later period when a wrestling contest was about to take place, a week before the contest a tambourine player perambulated the town announcing the event. Wrestling matches used to take place either in the palace or the enclosures set aside for games and shows. It was one of the favorite diversions for the aristocracy and the common people alike.

In certain cases the nobility hired the athletes and made them fight in public. The scene of action was gay with flags flapping in the breeze and the seats of the stadium were filled fast. The wrestlers entered the arena flexing their muscles, leaping in the air, clapping their hands, holding each other tightly with their hands. Then they grappled, holding each other's necks, waists, shoulders, etc., their legs inter-twined, either trying to pin the down or breaking other's hold.

The victor was rewarded handsomely by the King and was presented with a victory standard, the possession of which gave him a national distinction (Auboyer 1965: 251). Buddhist texts also give stray references of wrestling, which is enough to establish the fact that it was popular sport or a martial art among the kingship and the masses. The *Jātaka* stories give a detailed description of breath-taking wrestling bouts, decoration of the arena, wrestling pits, seating arrangements, etc. Wrestling was a popular sport and men used to take part in it to display their valor and strength (Das 1985:101). A wrestler was known as a *Muttika* (Agrawala 1953:158). The *Vinaya* texts also give stray references of sports like wrestling, boxing, chariot races, etc. (Das 1985:101) *BrahmajālSutta* of the *Dighnikāya* gives a detailed account of the games and sports of the contemporary period like wrestling, boxing, etc. (Agrawala 1953:158). According to the *Lalitavisātra* physical exercise consisted of wrestling, boxing, running, etc. The athletic art has described as VyāyāminkīṇamVidyānamFunanam. It enumerates four types of fights with Bāhu (arms), Daṇḍa (baton), Muṣṭi (fists) and Asthi (bones) (Das 1985:101).

Among secular works *Pāṇinī* refers to the term *Saṅgrāha* i.e. gripping in wrestling. Even *Patañjali* calls it *MallasyaSaṅgrāha* and *MuṣṭikasyaSaṅgrāha*. The bout began with a

challenge *āhvāna* which was answered by a responsive action, *karma-vyatihāra* (Agrawala 1953:158).

Taxila and Nalanda, which were two of the most important centres for education, also gave a lot of emphasis on the study of the art of wrestling, archery and climbing apart from study of scriptures, medicine, etc. (Das 1985: 112).

The Great Pallava King, Narsimhavarman was given the title of Mahāmalla i.e. The Great Wrestler for his physical prowess and knowledge of the art of wrestling (Das 1985: 112).

In the medieval period wrestling commonly was known as MallaYuddha or MallaVinoda. Continuing on from the Historic Period, wrestling's popularity and significance increased even further during the early phases of the medieval period. It enjoyed royal patronage and was considered as one of the sixty-four arts to be learned by all as it played an important part in the war training. Even the people of the higher classes including the kings developed wrestling as a martial sport. There were two major objectives behind why the public resorted to wrestling, firstly, it helped in self-defence and secondly, it had become a means of subsistence (Deshpande 1993:202).

This period saw the growth and development of wrestling as a separate science and discipline. A number of works on the subject have been compiled into what is now known as the *Mallapurāṇa*. Even though the date and the authorship of this work has been a matter of great debate, but none the less this work is of great importance as it chapter-wise gives insights on the art of wrestling.

According to the *Mallapurāṇa*, the term Malla denotes a wrestler or a boxer. But later it also says that in the present context it is used for only wrestlers (*Mallapurāṇa*: 2).

According to the chapter 2 of the text the Mallas are divided into Jyeṣṭi, Antarajyeṣṭi, Gopakula and Bhavisya based on their characteristics like strength, weight, etc. (*Mallapurāṇa*: 8).

Chapter six of the *Mallapurāṇa* describes the various actions and the positions of the wrestlers like, Urḥsāra, Skandhasāra, Bhujasāra, Kaṭisāra and Jānusāra. Then the Raṅgabhumi or the wrestling arena is described also known as Ākhāḍaka. It was constructed in a number of varieties, high and low, usually its three dimensions were around 101 cubits, 50 cubits and 21 cubits. Its' shapes are described like circular, squarish, etc. Even the type of earth used is mentioned along with measures to keep it away from stones, wood and other injurious objects (*Mallapurāṇa*: 9).

Chapter nine, deals with the diet of the wrestlers. It provides a seasonal diet chart for the wrestlers. It says in Hemant heavy food with wheat as the base should be consumed along with ghee and jaugary. In Vasanta, food consisting of barley and wheat, cold water, etc. is recommended.

The chapter says good qualities of flour are eight times superior of rice, milk is eight times superior to flour, māṁsa/meat is eight times superior to milk and finally ghee is eight times superior to meat (Mallapurāṇa: 10).

Chapter ten, talks of the various types of exercises to be done by the wrestlers like, (Mallapurāṇa: 11).

- Raṅgaśrama
- Stambhaśrama
- Bharamaṇikāśrama
- Śvāsapreraṇikābhyās (stamina building)
- Sthāpitaśrama
- Uhāpohaśrama
- Guru Goṇitaka
- LaghuGoṇitaka
- Pramadāśrama
- Āmardakīśrama
- Āsthādanka
- Kuṇḍakarṣaṅk (circular movements)
- Anyakṛtkaraśrama
- Jalāśrama
- Prānārohaṇā
- Bhojanordhvabhramaṇ

Chapters thirteen and fourteen of the *Mallapurāṇa* mention the 64 Kalās. They also describe the wrestling matches arranged by the kings for the public. The kings witnessed the bouts in the company of their queens, ministers and other personnel. The fights were arranged between equals and a code of ethics was followed. After the match the victors were handsomely rewarded and were taken around the town on elephants (Mallapurāṇa: 11).

The wrestler used to put on a Āyudha on the fingers, knitted with thread. When the opponent was broken or defeated the wrestler emerged victorious.

In *Mallapurāṇa* wrestling is divided into various types, namely:

**Dharaṇīpāta-** It seemed to be the common type of wrestling where the aim was to get the opponent down on the earth. This was achieved by the force of palm, arm or throwing oneself down and bringing the opponent down with you. The wrestling types such as Bhīmsenī and Hanumantī seem to be of this type.

**Āśura-** This type was fiercer and looked like a free-fight which included injuries to ear, nose or felling of teeth. This type of wrestling is also known as Mathara or Masura. It leads to the fall of the wrestler but if he dies the king is responsible. People also used to

call it the Dharmayuddha. This type of wrestling draws parallels with the Jarāsandhī form of wrestling.

**Vajramuṣṭī**- This was a free fight which included kicking, boxing on head, pressing knees etc. A hit below the chest was considered a foul game (Mallapurāṇa: 22).

In the text, *Mānasollāsa* of King Someśvara great emphasis has been put on wrestling in the chapter called Mallavinoda. This particular chapter throws light on the contemporary wrestling traditions.

This chapter hierarchically divides wrestlers into Jyeṣṭhi or Jyeṣṭikas were the wrestlers of the first grade while Antaryjeṣṭhis or Antaryjeṣṭikas and Gopakulas or Govalas were the second and third grade respectively. The wrestlers who were below 20 years of age were known as Bhaviṣṇu i.e. a promising wrestler and the wrestlers around 30 years of age were known as Prauḍha. Usually a Prauḍha wrestler who was above the age of 32 years was considered unfit to wrestle and hence was retired from the royal court.

All the wrestlers had a very rigorous daily physical routine and were also given adequate nourishing and allowances. They were kept under a strict watch of the Superintendent or the adhyakṣa. Especially the Bhaviṣṇu class, they were kept under restraints and for them celibacy was a must. Bouts were regularly arranged among the same class or even between different classes on occasions (*Mānasollāsa*÷ Mallavinoda: 36; Deshpande 1993:203; Das 1985:114; Joshi 1957:51). The King supported these wrestlers with sufficient allowances and a nourishing diet like pulses, milk, etc.

Regarding the nature of wrestling and the training the chapter states the wrestlers should be conversant with four *Sansthānas* i.e. sthānakas and Vijñānas. The four sansthānas seemed to be the four chief positions viz. front, back, right, left while the vijñānas were the special tactics colloquially known as *Penca* and these should be practiced under the supervision of a teacher.

The text also mentions various forms of exercises that a wrestler should do to improve his performance in the arena. These exercises are:

- *Bhāraśrama* - lifting weights with both hands and feet
- *Bhramaṇaśrama* - walking
- *Salilaśrama* - swimming
- *Bāhupellāṇakaśrama* - clasping hands with a firm grip
- *Stambhaśrama* - modern Mallakhamba

Lastly the text also mentions that the King selected the pairs of wrestlers and ordered the chief to build a suitable arena. In the same arena a Maṇḍapa or a shrine was supposed to be made for Lord Kṛṣṇa which was called the KṛṣṇaMaṇḍapa. The first class wrestlers were brought on elephants wearing attractive dresses gifted by the king. Before the match they were given curd and rice (akṣata) as a good omen. Once the



wrestlers were given the signal from the king, they began their bout by clasping each other's hands and the one who managed to break the other's limb or did not get fatigued won. If both the wrestlers seemed to be equally fatigued the bout was stopped and both were declared winners (Mānasollāsa÷Mallavinoda: 37).

Among the modern scholars D.C. Mujumdar in his work, the Encyclopedia of Indian Physical Culture has given detailed information on the art of wrestling and its variations with illustrations. He says that by no other exercise can the body develop so symmetrically, beautifully and muscularly than wrestling and that the secret of wrestling is that a good wrestler can vanquish his opponent though superior in strength and weight. Wrestling not only gives courage and self-confidence to a wrestler but also gives him a sound mind (Mujumdar 1950: 173).

Based on the various holds and body maneuvers Mujumdar has given the typology of modern day wrestling under the following heads, namely:

**Bhīmsenī-** As the name suggests this type of wrestling requires immense strength and brute force. To execute the holds and locks under it, the wrestlers need to be very strong. Some of the moves are, lifting the opponent by throwing one's hand between his thighs, waist back press, loin-cloth grip, etc. (Mujumdar 1950: 176).

**Hanumantī-** This type of wrestling requires the in-depth knowledge of the art of deception. It includes tricky holds and locks which can be used to over-power a stronger and a heavier opponent. Some of the moves are arm-jerks, single leg hold, cross-buttocks, etc. (Mujumdar 1950: 184).

**Jāmbuvantī-** This type of wrestling majorly includes locks. Locks are useful for exhausting the opponents and get them under your control. Some of the locks used by wrestlers are, arm locks, neck locks, ankle locks, etc. (Mujumdar 1950: 195).

**Jarāsandhī-** This type of wrestling involves limb-breaking holds. This form of wrestling is presently not practiced as it leads to heavy injuries to the opponent. Some of holds are, wrist breaking hold, strangle-hold, etc. (Mujumdar 1950: 199).

## Discussion

A careful review of Indian Literature helps to set a tentative timeframe of wrestling right from the ancient to the modern period. This shows that wrestling right from the ancient times was an important element of physical culture in India.

This study broadens the scope of the interdisciplinary approach taken for the study of antiquity of wrestling in India. This study paves way for more disciplines like Archaeology, Sociology, etc. to be a part of the holistic research.

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