

## **Physical Culture as Site of Power Play in Mughal Court**

**Dr. Parul Lau Gaur**

Assistant Professor, Ramlal Anand College, University of Delhi email: [parullaugaur@gmail.com](mailto:parullaugaur@gmail.com)

Physical culture includes all forms of movement and physical activities that people in particular social world create, sustain and regularly include in their collective lives<sup>1</sup>. Physical culture and its manifestation cannot be autonomous. The cultural field of sport embodies the representatives of cultural practice, social groups and power relation operating in social structures. They emphasize the plurality of cultural meaning attached to sport and insist that politics and power relations suffuse everything.<sup>2</sup> Sport must be properly located within the social, cultural and historical context in which it moves and is located.<sup>3</sup> Sport may be useful for two reasons (1) because it seems to mirror closely the greater society in which it is embedded and (2) because it enjoys tremendous visibility.<sup>4</sup> Therefore attempts are made to explore the meanings, symbols and power relation at play within any particular cultural setting. The form the play itself takes –it's level of physicality, its degree of regulation ,its time span –is linked to shared characteristics of the people playing at that moment of time.<sup>5</sup> Physical activity is one of the most important sites of masculine practices within culture. Masculinity can also be concerned with physical size and capabilities of body. Therefore research in physical culture is important because it helps us understand how people think and feel about their bodies and how they define movement and integrate into their lives<sup>6</sup>.

Scholars are now increasingly treating sport, games, physical activities as an important aspect of culture. Sport serve as a medium for learning more about society and also a platform to study social relation of everyday life. In the past every historical dynasty had its own cultural traditions. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century Indian subcontinent was ruled by a powerful Mughal dynasty. The Persian language term “Mughal” broadly signified people of central Asian regions. The Mughal court represented the centre of imperial power. The power and authority which the Mughal kings possessed was clearly reiterated and manifested during the conduct of various

courtly pursuits. Court was also visible arena for the outward manifestation of cultural activity which would include physical culture, sports, feasts, ceremonies, dances and so forth..

The role of physical activities and its manifestation remain an area of neglect in Mughal society and also the interplay of complex relationship between sport and wielding of power. The present paper attempts to study the Mughal physical culture and the ways this culture with its various components formed an integral part of Mughal court. The Mughal court which was characterized by ideas of kingship, world of heroism, display of masculinity was ruled by Babur(1526-30 founder of the Mughal empire)and his descendents Humayun(1530-36), Akbar(1536-1605), Jahangir(1605-1627), Shahjahan(1628-1657) and so forth. The issues which would be addressed would be like why did the above Mughal rulers patronized particular form of physical activity, its meaning and what they meant to different individuals, groups of people and to what extent it fulfilled the Mughal society requirements. For a convenient approach the paper is divided into three parts – forms and components of physical activities, functional aspects of sports and structural properties of sports.

Historians have taken cognizance of a fact that a particular kind of display of masculinity was essential and driven by the needs to get recognition in imperial service.<sup>7</sup> It was essentially a willingness to take part in the wider arena of struggle for advancement and power. Playful activities also provided Mughal men with the opportunity to use their bodies as a display of hegemonic masculinity. Body also became the site of power or locus of domination.

### **Forms and Components of Physical Activities**

The shaping of physical culture in Mughal India was the direct outcome of the needs of Mughal monarch to expand and consolidate their regime and power which lead to increase military confrontations. Soldiers were required for battle and it was important for them to remain physically active and fit. Hence warfare was a sport and part of life of Mughal period.

Apart from the monarchs, members of the nobility and princes mastered over art of warfare.. Physical activities and sports toughened their bodies and Mughal men were trained in armed and unarmed combat, swordsmanship and horse riding. The medium of display of power was in terms of combats and physical activities in Mughal world. The manifestation of power could be gauged in terms of strength, courage, charisma, aggressiveness in attack and perseverance. The 'men of sword' were able to command the respect of their troops and lead them in battle.<sup>8</sup>

Mughal men contested and participated in varied sport like wrestling, swimming, archery ,*chaugan* or polo .The Mughal sources gives reference to such kinds of sport which essentially served warfare purposes .The official chronicles written during the reign of various rulers ,their memoirs and miniature painting provides us with the glimpse of the above mentioned sports. Henceforth the paper now attempts to overview the above mentioned sporting activity.

Wrestling which was a national pastime in Iran was a favorite activity in Mughal India. Wrestling is believed to have flourished in India as early as 1500 B.C and is mentioned in classical epics such as Rig veda, Mahabharata and Ramayana. Wrestling and its exercises with variety of holds and techniques become a necessary appendage to military practice and preparation. Baburnama (memoirs of Babur) gives the name of favorite wrestler of Babur named Sadiq who beat another famous champion named Kalal , whereupon the Mughal emperor rewarded him with a gift of 10,000 *tankas* (Mughal currency) , a saddled horse, a jacket with buttons . The defeated wrestler Kalal was given 3,000 *tankas* to save him from despair.<sup>9</sup> It is notable that even a defeated competitor was rewarded so as to boost his moral and encourage him for future bouts. The defeat which is sometime marked by dishonor seems to have been sublimed in the Mughal world in the context of competitive bouts. These combats also allowed Mughal men to prove what their body was capable of achieving. Similarly wrestler Dost-i-yasin was set against the boatman champion of Lahore in which Dost was victorious and both were rewarded.<sup>10</sup>

Many of the wrestling bouts were undertaken during peacetime or at halting spots when the court encampments were on move .Wrestlers were also given rest from participating in the bouts after their fatigue days. Babur mentions that Sadiq had asked respite for 20 days on the plea of fatigue from his journey ;as now 40-50 days had passed since the end of his respite ,he was obliged to wrestle.<sup>11</sup> Wrestler Yahya Nohani was given fifteen lac (currency denomination) stipend from Sarwar ( a Mughal territory) and a clad in a suit of clothing.<sup>12</sup>The wrestlers also possessed literary qualities and were well educated thus proving their multi-facet traits. There is reference to wrestler Muhammad Bu-Said who also composed poetry and wrote vocal and instrumental music.<sup>13</sup> The details of wrestlers are pictorially represented from a Persian text *Gulistan* (written in 1258) by poet Sadi.

Similarly Akbarnama , an official court chronicle written during the time of Mughal emperor Akbar ,also gives an account where Akbar as a child wrestled with his cousin Ibrahim Mirza for a kettle drum which was a symbol of sovereignty. The description of the wrestling bout ended with the below mentioned note:

.....His majesty [Akbar] beat the drum which he had gained by the strength of his arm, and the joyous sound gladdened the hearts of the royal servants.<sup>14</sup>

An illustrated painting describes child Akbar wrestling with his cousin for a printed drum. Akbar's above wrestling bout was a medium where the future Mughal emperor could display bravery to prove his indomitability and there was a clear powerful enactment of bodily techniques. After becoming the emperor Akbar watched wrestling bouts almost every day. Agra Fort and Red Fort were the popular venues of many wrestling bouts in the times of Mughal emperor Shahjahan (1628-58).

## Functional Aspects of Sports

Sport was certainly an avenue for advancement in administrative hierarchy. The hierarchal order was maintained at Mughal court and the system also provided opportunity by which an individual can ascend and move close to the emperor. This hierarchal order was regulated officially through Mansabdari system which was an essential component of Mughal administrative machinery vital for running a vast empire.<sup>15</sup> In this system the institution of the army, the civil service and nobility interpenetrated and combine into one imperial service. *Mansab*(rank/numerical grade) was bestowed on its office holders (*manabdar*) and increase in the rank was done only if the officers had distinguished themselves in action. *Mansabdars* were also responsible for recruiting their army contingent. The high ranking officers were provided with kettle drums<sup>16</sup>. The kettle drums were honorary gifts bestowed upon nobles above a certain rank. The sound of the beating of drums was the sign of a strong army unit, for they were only permitted to mansabdar of more than 2,000 *zat*.<sup>17</sup> (*Mansab rank which determines holders personal pay*). A mansabdar was a product of the socio-political culture of the period. He was expected to have training in wrestling ,sword fighting and archery. Akbar's forces comprised four million soldiers, divided between different *mansabdars*. They included wrestlers, sword players and other kinds of sportsmen.<sup>18</sup> The active combatants were recorded on muster rolls (*chehra*) and there was a *bitikchi*( army scribe) to oversee everything.<sup>19</sup>

The motives of conducting such bouts that whether they were played for fun and self expression or for prestige ,power ,glory, financial gain and other motivation were also culturally determined. The praise and acknowledgement received by the competitor lifted his prestige above other court attendants and intensified identification more closely with the Mughal court. The bestowment of such physical object were inextricably linked with idea of honor and pride. The conferring of titles, gifts were also outward means by which Mughal court ideology was communicated.

Apart from wrestling, swimming was vital for rulers, elites and nobles practicing warfare. The long marches to the enemy's terrain required crossing of varied landscape where rivers and streams were an essential ecological component. The Emperor Babur was a good swimmer and sources indicate that he usually kept a record of number of strokes he needed to cross a particular river. Babur in his memoirs records 'I crossed it with thirty three, without resting, swam back again. I had swum the other rivers; the Ganges had remained to do'.<sup>20</sup> The above particular memoir of Babur which establishes his competency in swimming is quite in contrast to private memoirs of his son Humayun where in one of his military expeditions he struggled to cross Ganges and in fact a water carrier had enabled him to swim the Ganges<sup>21</sup>.

Archery which required skill in shooting arrows (both on foot and mounted) was another warfare requirement. Archers were employed for the purpose of shooting down the enemy's commander. The *Qabaq* (literally meaning gourd) field was for mounted archery practice. Many competitions were organized where archers shot at targets from various positions. Bowmen carried arrows of wood or steel in quivers slung over their shoulders, leather guards protected their arms, and rings of steel guarded their thumbs and fingers. The autobiographical work written by Mughal Emperor Babur, *Baburnama*, gives instances where Babur and his associates performed various feats of archery as an integral part of their routine military training. There is reference to Babur's close companion *Islim Barlas* who excelled in *qabaq* field and *Muhammad* whom Babur described as one of the best archers.<sup>22</sup> The description of archers like *Muhammad* is stated that his bow was strong, his arrow long and he was an expert shooter. He was given the governorship of a territory like *Andkhui*<sup>23</sup>

Humayun rewarded this show of marksmanship with handsome gifts of horses and dresses of honor. *Bernier* observed that a Mughal archer could lose six arrows before a musketeer could fire twice clearly providing an edge to this physical art man ship. The Mughal emperor *Bahadur*

Shah Zafar could shoot at a sack filled with three mounds of wheat from a long distance and as the bag was pierced, the grain that spilled was distributed to the poor .<sup>24</sup>

Fencing (the use of sword for attack and defense) was practiced for close combat, for which the sword served the purpose. The Mughal emperor Jahangir was physically trained under a Deccani fencing master and was impressed by the man's skills that he granted him the title of "Varzesh Khan" or Chief of Sports at the Mughal court.<sup>25</sup> Ball throwing (*geru*) was another popular game . The game of polo (*chaugan*) and hunting were also part of military exercise.

Polo was played on horseback with a stick and ball. It was usually the game of aristocracy The game was popular with the Mongoloid ruler Chengis Khan and his clansmen. The game was incorporated into court rituals of Mughal rulers. The official chronicle during Akbar's reign mentions two forms of *Chaugan* . Akbar introduced a special kind of luminescent ball that could be used during nights. <sup>26</sup>The game was played with a flaming ball made from *dhak* wood .The emperor also had knobs of gold and silver fixed to the top of the *Chaugan* sticks. Abul Fazal also enlists the merits of the game.<sup>27</sup> He states that "it tests the value of a man and strengthens bonds of friendship. Strongmen learn in playing this game the art of riding ;and animals learn to perform feats of agility and obey the reins. Externally the game adds splendor to the court ; but viewed from a higher point it reveals concealed talents"<sup>28</sup>.Akbar also allows betting in this game so as to increase the excitement.

Sport was also taken to entail hunting and shooting. The countryside was rich in forests taming many wild animals like lions, tigers and elephants. Hunts could be organized when the court was temporarily settled in the capital and when army was on move.<sup>29</sup> Hunting was a powerful manifestation of political authority and legitimation in Mughal Empire. Physical mobility was a characteristic feature of Mughal imperial court life. The Mughals took the entire court and all its accessories along with them when the imperial court moved itself out and resided in tent

encampments. Hunting expeditions were organized to mobilize troops and inspect *mansabdari* contingent. Hunting tiger or a lion was a royal privilege. The most exciting method was with bow and arrow and matchlock.<sup>30</sup> The Mughals hunted within *qamargah* (ring hunt) which was fenced off area several kilometers in area . The boundary fence was gradually moved inward, trapping hundreds of animals to hunt. The animals thus hunted encountered hunters on all sides. Akbar realized the value of such exercises for cavalry training. He hunted and trained wild animals and chased them on horseback in the jungle of Narwar .<sup>31</sup> (a small town) . The chief interest of Jahangir was to enquire about good hunting places. His court moved slowly through countryside, pausing regularly for pleasure trips to famous sights and the daily hunt.<sup>32</sup> Traveler Manucci reports that Shahjahan was fond of tiger hunting for which he kept ferocious buffaloes with very long horns.<sup>33</sup> Hunting expeditions of Shahjahan are reported from places like Bari ,Gwalior ,Bhimbar, Bhera ,Palam and Kanuwahan.<sup>34</sup> Hunting expedition were accompanied by various competitions characterized by physical activity.

The varied physical activities and sports developed in concomitant with political and societal requirements which needed individual drilling and exercise. Fighting skills certainly required the development of bodily proficiencies. To build strength and stamina they exercised with dumbbells, heavy sticks of wood, clubs and chain bows. Daily rehearsal of a coordinated sequence of movements called *kasarat* (exercise) developed agility and quickness.<sup>35</sup> The Mughal men wrestled and engaged in mock fights with heavy sticks and shields, they jousted at tent –pegs with lances,shot arrows at small targets while galloping full speed and trained their horses to stand on their hind legs and jump forward in a maneuver designed to attack elephants<sup>36</sup> .These drills and exercises were a prelude preparation before battle combats.

The combats ,contests and enactment of physical power through these modes was an arena where hegemony and masculinity can be seen at work .They were also dominant metaphors for conceptualizing relations of power .Masculinity is a fragile construct .<sup>37</sup> It is depicted and socially



sanctioned as being a tough and rugged form of ideology where muscles have become the dominant physical manifestation within one's visual imagery.<sup>38</sup> Competition and success in sport were also highly regarded with in masculine ideology. To define further hegemonic masculinity could be equated to establish dominance over subordinated and marginalized masculinity.

Masculinity in Mughal court culture was based on outward display of power of male body. They underwent rigorous training as stated above in sports like archery and wrestling to display their physical valor and prowess. By carefully nurturing the body and control of his physical environment enabled the competitor to display his personal accomplishments to his peers and to give individual expression to bodily virtuosity.<sup>39</sup>

Masculinity was intrinsically connected to imperial service. The Mughal emperor Akbar sought to strengthen associations between imperial service and ideal manhood and to make them a more public and explicit part of court culture<sup>40</sup>. The great amirs, *mansabdars* and other imperial servants were embodiments of ideal masculinity. They developed the skills, stamina and strength to prevail in individual combat.

Hegemonic masculinity can be constructed around the Mughal emperor as there existed an ethics of absolute personal subordination to the emperor. The Mughal accounts abounds the strength, endurance and military prowess of the Mughal monarchs who were skilled soldiers. Babur's masculinity is heightened as he was marching through floods, rode without water great distances and captured the city of Samarqand with five hundred men. Combat sports were not only between human beings but there was also involvement of beasts. Akbar was famous for taming and riding his *mast* elephant Hawai and he chased another elephant on to a pontoon bridge over the Jumna river.<sup>41</sup>The emperor publically displayed his bravery by performing such daring enactments. The subordinated or marginalized masculinity can be seen identified with the common man or people from low social status. The Mughal emperors gave them an ample

opportunity to display the modes of physical strength which ended with rewarding them. This is true in case of a champion from Lahore who was a boatman, the drivers of the elephants who were engaged in elephant fights and the huntsmen involved in hunting expeditions.

Mughal observers often attributed human qualities to beasts and treated them accordingly.<sup>42</sup> Akbar for instance rewarded his royal cheetah (tiger) for displaying excellent hunting skills. Akbar ordered that a drum should be beaten in front of that cheetah.<sup>43</sup>

The Mughal court also provided noble women with an opportunity to participate in sports. Nur Jahan was a good polo player which she played with other women. She also participated in various hunting expeditions.<sup>44</sup> A feasting ceremony during the time of Humayun refers to elite women namely Shad Begam and Mihr –angez Begam who were good compatriots and played polo and shot with bow and arrow. It is described that they also used to wear men's clothes which would have been driven by the necessity to adorn one while practicing field sport.<sup>45</sup> Women were also engaged in playing board games (chess and *chaupar*).

### **Structural properties of sports**

The structural properties of the above mentioned sports also calls upon for attention like lack of fixed limits on territory, duration or the number of participants, loose distinction between playing and spectating roles, test of identity in general, variation in rules and emphasis on physical force as opposed to skill.<sup>46</sup> All these properties were culturally constructed and socially shaped. It is imperative to mention that four Mughal emperors Akbar, Jahangir, Shahjahan and Aurangzeb were settled for about 65 percent and for about 35 percent they were migratory in the sense of tours, military campaigns or hunting expeditions.<sup>47</sup> Therefore many of the combats and hunts were carried out when imperial camp was on move crossing rough terrains and wilderness in the countryside. Hunts were conducted both by emperors and small groups who were assisted

by retinue of soldiers and servants whose number ran into thousands. The entry into hunting grounds was restricted. Unauthorised persons were strictly prohibited from entering the hunt areas. If anyone, whether native or traveller, had the misfortune to wander into the corral, he would be taken and sold into slavery or slain like one of the wild animal<sup>48</sup>. Therefore moveable courts were other alternative sites for the contests. There was also no fixity of time and number of participants was also not fixed except for polo. The passage in Ain( official history written during the time of Akbar) states that:

.....His majesty never orders any one to be a player; but chooses the pairs by the cast of the die. There are not more than ten players; but many more keep themselves in readiness. When one *ghari* (20 minutes) has passed, two players take rest and two others supply their place.<sup>49</sup>

Rules of the games were relaxed to benefit the new contestants. In wrestling for instance in opposition to the rule of gripping the strongest first , wrestler Dost - I -Yasin was told not to fight with the champion Sadiq . He performed exceptionally well with eight other wrestlers<sup>50</sup> . The function of play is described as a contest for something or a representation of something.<sup>51</sup> The quest for identity through sport involves the quest for recognition.<sup>52</sup> The Mughal contests and competitions were a potential strategy to quest for recognition which also facilitated the distribution of power and wealth. They were representations of physical prowess of participant, courage and a medium to. display masculinity in front of the emperor and spectators. The audience were thus constitutive of the sport as spectacle and not merely an adjunct or an accretion.<sup>53</sup>

The Mughal power certainly required secure alliances, a functioning administration and a degree of control over the Indian people.<sup>54</sup> Sports is one of the ways the social system integrates it's differentiated components and one of the ways society socialises individuals into what is expected of them. The conduct of physical activity and sports functioned as a means to dilute the racial and religious distinctions. The composition of the Mughal nobility was diversified and included Mongols, Turks, Persians, Marathas and Indian Rajputs. All the members of the

nobility had their own different military culture but despite this they followed regimes of physical preparation for warfare. People with remarkable talents could access position in the nobility.<sup>55</sup> Some Mughal rulers like Shahjahan were very particular in maintaining hierarchy of the assembled nobility who were arranged in rows according to their ranks. It was in the third tier of ranking that one notices the military subalterns: swordsmen armours, archer's mace bearer's matchlock men and so on.<sup>56</sup> The court elites were expected to master fencing, archery and horsemanship. The spectators flocked the wrestling arenas and also witnessed animal fights. They could identify themselves with the representations in a combat. Moreover masculinity, rage, honour, pride are also constructed by the spectators who can appreciate its meaning. The physical culture patronized by Mughal rulers was characterized by playfulness involved, excitement, a medium for displaying individual identity and a domain where the focus of domination and resistance was operational. The sporting event celebrating physical culture were determined by ideological and political motives. Sports and games that the emperor encouraged evoked common participation. The rewards given in these events created a bond between emperor (donor) and the common participants and also symbolized emperor's interest in sports. The chronicles clearly indicate the varieties of rewards granted to people participating in sports and various physical activities. Apart from monetary gains, the skilled sportsmen were bestowed with titles like 'Chief of Sports', given dresses of honor, animals, stipends from various principalities and also people who were dexterous in their respective field were even made governors.

To sum up physical attributes becomes a key site where the recognition takes place. The competitors strived to gain recognition by winning contests and always vied to get attached to imperial services. Both the masculinities, hegemonic (vested in Mughal emperor) and marginalized (identified with common men) were given appropriate spaces to function within the frame work of physical culture. The sources do not indicate any physical combat between the

Mughal monarchs and common men. Such physical encounters were not feasible due to the supreme imperial authority of the king and due to hierarchy which was maintained at imperial court. The participation was not based on social status and class position. An individual was free to even challenge sportsmen or champion of great repute. This was seen in the case of champion wrestler Sadiq who was challenged by a boatman wrestler from Lahore. It can be paraphrased that even masculinity of common man could be identified and harnessed through various acts of power play adorning the Mughal court.

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## End Notes

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<sup>8</sup> Refer Stephen P.Blake , Courtly Culture under Babur and the Early Mughals , *Journal of Asian History* , Vol.20.No.2 , p.204.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid ; p.656.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid ; p.688.

<sup>12</sup> *Baburnama* , Wheeler and Thackston ,pp.442-443.

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<sup>15</sup> For the evolution of the Mansabdari system refer W.H.Moreland , Rank (Mansab) in the mogul state service re-printed in Muzzafar Alam and Sanjay Suubrahmanyam (ed.) *The Mughal State* , 1526-1750. pp. 213-233.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid; p.92.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> *Baburnama* ,Beveridge , Vol II. P.655.

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- <sup>41</sup> *Akbarnama* , Beveridge,Vol.II ,pp.233- 234. Akbar's painter Basawan has portrayed this dramatic event.
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<sup>43</sup> Shireen Moosvi, *Episodes in the Life of Akbar*, New Delhi, 1994 , p. 39.

<sup>44</sup> A portrait from Jahangir's album shows Nur Jahan with a gun painted by Abul Hasan.

<sup>45</sup> Humayun Nama ,Beveridge , p.120-121.

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