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## Development of gymnastics in ancient India

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### Abstract

The purpose of study is to trace out the development of Gymnastics in ancient India. The data / information were derived from primary and secondary sources. The information was analysed qualitatively which was facilitated with internal and external criticism. Gymnastics is very oldest sports whose foundation was found in ancient Greece. After that it was spread all over the world. The investigator tried to trace out the existence of Gymnastics in ancient India. People of ancient India practised some form of exercises to fit them physically and mentally. Out of these, some exercises were similar to the gymnastics exercises. They practiced yoga asana, acrobatic movements for health, physical & mental fitness and recreation. Acrobatic movements were performed by a group of people called Banjaras. They performed gymnastics activities and acrobatic feats to earn their livelihood. Gymnastics skills and acrobatic moves were not only the practised by the Natas but these skills were also mastered by the princes and youth of higher Varnas. In 17<sup>th</sup> century, a gymnasium was built in Maharashtra for practicing gymnastics exercises. On that time popular apparatus were mallkhamb, heavy club swinging, lazium, stone-dises. Modern Gymnastics apparatus like Horizontal Bar, Parallel Bars, Vaulting Horse, Balance Beam, Roman Rings were introduced in 18<sup>th</sup> century in European countries, which were unknown by the Indian till Britisher came to India.

**Keywords:** gymnastics, acrobatic movements for health, physical & mental fitness and recreation

### Introduction

Sports and games are part of every culture and have important place in every society worldwide. Gymnastics has vital role in the development of mankind. Egyptian aristocracy was entertained by acrobats about seven thousand years ago. The Chinese were engaged in gymnastic exercises as early as 2000 B.C. The term "Gymnastics" derived from Greek word "Gymnos" which means naked art. In ancient Greece male athletes performed exercise without clothing in school of gymnastics which was called as Palestra. Activities included wrestling, running, jumping, throwing, weight lifting, boxing and swimming all classified as gymnastics (Hackensmith, 1966) <sup>[6]</sup>.

The Greek idea of gymnastics could not have been understood by the early Romans. The gymnasium was basically a training place. The wooden horses were used to train the soldiers to mount and dismount quickly.

Johann Bernhard Basedow had opened the first school to give a gymnastic program to all people. Christian Carl Andre recognized as the founder of modern gymnastics. He was first to introduce free hand exercise to the pupil in indoor hall. Johann Christoph Frederick Guts Muths (1759-1839) was considered as the real founder of modern physical education and the grandfather of German gymnastics. Prominent families had urged Guts Muths as the tutors to instruct their children in gymnastics (Van *et al.*, 1959) <sup>[15]</sup>

In the nineteenth century, Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1778-1852) followed the footsteps of Guts Muths predecessor. He was known as the father of German gymnastics. Jahn helped the German to get liberated from the clutches of French rulers. He introduced some apparatus horizontal bar, balancing beam, vertical rope, ladder, pole vault to train the boys and young men. Later he introduced more apparatus like vaulting bucks, crude parallel bars. After war of liberation for Prussia in 17 March, 1813, he published the book, "Die Deutsch Turnkunst" (German Gymnastics). This book became the turner's guide throughout Germany (Hackensmith, 1966) <sup>[6]</sup>.

Gymnastics came to Great Britain from the other European countries. In 1822, the Government

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obtained the service of the Swiss Army Officer and Director of Gymnastics, Phokian Clias, he was given charge of all physical training in military and naval schools, and also was employed to teach in the Charter House Public School. His theories and methods were largely based upon those of Guts Muths and other Germans (Leonard, 1922) <sup>[10]</sup>.

Gymnastics came to India through British regiments. The Indian military establishment always had a close relationship to the British army since the East India Company. Gymnastics training in the Indian armies began soon after the establishment of the gymnastics staff in Britain. This training was transferred to India through several means, the exchange of ideas between officer serving in British and Indian regiments. The transfer of gymnastics staff –trained regimental instructors in India with their units (Warden, 1937) <sup>[16]</sup>.

Gymnastics concern a system of physical exercise either for recreation or for promoting health and fitness. It is the most aesthetic and beautiful sport. In earlier times gymnastics was an essential part of training of army recruits. Not only this, it was also used as the means for the improvement of the physique and wellbeing of children. It is most popular Olympic sports, and as concern to the India, it was played for the last many decades yet there is not much literature available which enables us to know the origin and development of gymnastics in India. So keeping in view this, it becomes necessary to trace out the beginning of gymnastic in India.

### Method and procedure

A survey study was designed to collect the required information and material through primary and secondary sources.

### Primary Sources

- Official Records:- To get first-hand information the investigator visited various offices, institution and colleges libraries like A.C. Joshi library Panjab University Chandigarh, N.I.S Patiala,
- Pictorial Records:- Photographs relevant to the game was collected as document for the study.
- Published Material:- Published material, Government reports, magazines and souvenirs was studied and valuable information was collected.

### Secondary Sources

The material / information were collected from secondary sources which are as follows:-

- Sports Magazines
- Books
- Research Thesis and Dissertations
- Newspapers
- Internet Sources
- Survey

### Analysis and interpretation of information

Data or information collected through primary and secondary sources was analysed qualitatively with internal and external criticism.

### Presentation and Analysis of Data

Gymnastics is very beautiful and most enthralling Olympic sports. Today's gymnastic exercises are totally different from the past time. In ancient Greece activities included wrestling, running, jumping, throwing, weight lifting, boxing and

swimming all were classified as Gymnastics. It was modernized in late 1700s and pushes the Germanic countries into the lead in the sport. Side vault, parallel bars, horizontal bar, balance beam apparatus were introduced and exercises on these apparatus performed with more graceful in an artistic manner. Whereas, in ancient India gymnastic was unknown, people of ancient India practice yoga asana, acrobatic movements for health, physical & mental fitness and recreation. The practice of asana to keep physically, mentally fit and for the meditation.

In ancient India, Vedic civilization was one of the richest civilizations of the ancient world. It is interesting to remark that in a Vājasaneyi Samhitā mentions the word Vamsha–Nartin, which means acrobat or pole dancer, is cited in the Yajurveda (Bhargava, 1971) <sup>[2]</sup>. Acrobatics was probably the earliest form of Gymnastics in the Indian history. Acrobats moving from place to place to earn their livelihood, indulged in acrobatic feats which increased individual strength, suppleness and skill. These feats consisted of dancing on bamboo (Majumdar, 1950) <sup>[12]</sup>.

In the Epic age, people of that period have high standard of physique. They gave privilege to the development of their body strength. The Sudras were professional sportsperson who earned their livelihood on the dexterity in various physical activities (Deshpande, 1992) <sup>[3]</sup>.

The Palvaka (Acrobats playing on pole), the Mallas (performer of gymnastic exercise), and the Langhikas (the tumblers doing acrobatic feats) refers to professional entertainers who exhibit their skills and performance on the festivals to attract the crowd (Basak, 1960) <sup>[1]</sup>.

In Mourya period (321BCE -185BCE), the communities of acrobats known as Banjaras performed gymnastics activities and acrobatic feats to earn their livelihood.

The Natas, Mallas, Jhallas, Kusilavas, Naratkas, Mosustikas, Plavakas, Lankhas were the people to be considered the above category. Gupta, 1972 <sup>[5]</sup> described some of the acrobatic and gymnastic skills performed by the acrobats are as under:

1. Hastacankramana: Moving about hands in speed in tune with dance.
2. Urdhvpada: The skill consisting of raising-up of legs and whirling the head with palms rested on the ground. It shows popular gymnastic skill, i.e. full arm balance
3. Alatapada: Raising up on one leg and contrasting the other and dancing -side ways.
4. Makaralanghana: Leaping like a sea –monster.
5. Vrschikalanghana: Moving like a scorpion.
6. Matsyodvartana: Darting like fish.
7. Syenapata: The swoop of a hawk.
8. Utkrosapata: The fight of a sea-eagle.
9. Mokkhacika: This is a kind of gymnastic skill performed in air. Buddhaghosa (5<sup>th</sup> century Indian Theravada Buddhist philosopher) has explained this as turning somersault in the air or with the help of a stick.

The above mentioned activities of gymnastics skill and acrobatic moves were not only practised by the Natas but these skills were also mastered by the princes and youth of higher Varnas as revealed in Dasakumaracarita of Dandin. In this, it was mentioned that Visruta disguised as Kusilava, display various acrobatic feats in the court of Pracandavarman (Deshpande, 1992) <sup>[3]</sup>. There were also some acrobatic feats, rope tricks to be performed on the bamboo-pole and rope mentioned in Jaina literature (Jain, 1947) <sup>[9]</sup>.



**Sculpture of Acrobatic show in Ancient India**

An old Sculpture of acrobat in ancient India found at Airavatesvara temple, located in the town of Darasuram, Tamil Nadu. This temple was built by Rajaraja Chola II in the 12th century. ([www.phenomenalplace.com](http://www.phenomenalplace.com))



**Acrobatic performance provincial Mughal circa 1760 A.D**  
Courtesy: National museum

In Jaina Sutra, quotes 'Kundipura' as a seat of learning in which specialized training in gymnastics was given. The popularity of gymnastics in India is strengthened by the description given in Buddhist Canonical text giving the story of the medical practice of Jivaka, a reputed physician and surgeon they add; His third important case of the Banars, where a merchant's own had a strangulation of the intestines, caused by a gymnastic feat (Rajagopalan, 1966) <sup>[13]</sup>.

Mahajan, 1991 <sup>[11]</sup> revealed the sports and recreational activities in mughal era (1526-1857) that early Mughal emperors were inherited a taste for outdoor exercise and sports. Hunting, swimming, animal fighting, pigeon fighting, polo, wrestling were the popular outdoor sports. Chess, Phansa, Pachisi, Mujra and Mushaira were also very popular recreational activities in that time. The acrobats moving from place to place to the pleasure of the peoples were known as 'Bazigar'. The term Bazigar is a word of Persian derivation meaning "one who performs Bazi, which means "play," refers in this context to a kind of entertaining performance based on acrobatic acts (Schreffler, 2011) <sup>[14]</sup>

Majumdar, (1950) <sup>[12]</sup> revealed that in 17<sup>th</sup> century Shree Samarth Ramdas Swamee was considered as the pioneer of

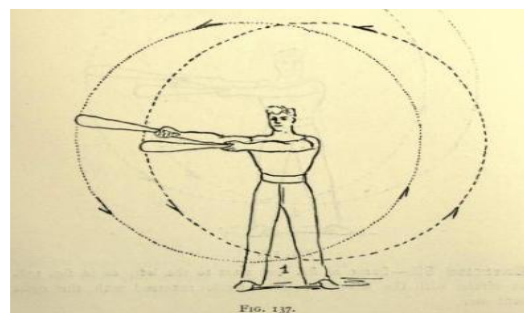
organised Gymnastic Institution in Maharashtra. He was considered to be the incarnation of strength and skill, he travelled for and wide in the whole of India and inspired the people to build a temple of Hunuman (God of strength and valour) with a gymnasium attached to it. These gymnastic institutions were crowded with members who regularly and systematically practice the gymnastics exercises like dand, baithek, wrestling, mallkhamb, heavy club swinging.

The investigator further cites the gymnasium of Nanasaheb Peshwa 1720-1761 (the third Peshwa in Maratha Empire) was very well equipped. It contained 24 sorts of apparatus for gymnastic exercises such as stone-disks, heavy nals, heavy clubs, lezium, kharbnji (a kind of mace), big cudgels, sandal clubs, karela sticks, mallkhamb, swords etc. In 18<sup>th</sup> century, Balambhat Dada Deodhar a physical instructor to the Peshva Bajirao II revived the art of wrestling on Mallkhamb (Indian gymnastic apparatus). Malla means gymnast and khamb means pole, a wooden pole on which gymnast practicing to hold the grip, balance, turns, stretch, twisting exercises upward and downward.



**Gymnast performing skills on Malkhamb**

The Indian clubs was another one very popular apparatus of gymnastic exercise practiced by Indian people. It is a bottle shaped weight club swung in the hand, a gymnastic exercises for developing the strength. It was very popular in India as well as in England. In 1825, P.H. Clias army and navy superintendent of gymnastic exercise, advocated Indian club swing for English troops and the public (Heffernan, 2016) <sup>[7]</sup>. Swinging Indian Clubs.



**Courtesy: Indian club and How to use them (Ferdinand, 1889) <sup>[4]</sup>**

Modern gymnastics apparatus which start getting popularity in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe was comparatively unknown to the Indians. Horizontal Bar, Parallel Bars, Vaulting Horse, Balance Beam, Roman Rings were introduced by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn of Germany (Father of

Gymnastics) in Berlin. Pen Henrik Ling of Sweden evolved free callisthenic exercises into competitive sport now known as Floor exercises in gymnastics.

In India, apparatus gymnastics was introduced by the British regiments. The Indian military establishment had close relationship to the British army since the establishment of East India Company. Formal gymnastic training was used by the British military leaders to accomplish two primary goals: first, to make the Indian soldier more fit, and to increase his fighting capacity; second to make the Sepoy a better man one who matched the British conception of character, morale, and martial aptitude. Gymnastic training in the Indian armies began soon after the establishment of the gymnastic staff in Britain. This training was transferred to India through several means- the exchange of ideas between officer serving in British and Indian regiments, the transfer of gymnastic staff-trained regiment instructors to India with their units, finally the official implementation of physical training scheme by the hierarchy of the Indian Military (Warden, 1937) <sup>[16]</sup>.

### Conclusions

- In ancient India, people were performing yoga asana and some other exercises for their health, physical and mental fitness. Acrobatics was probably the earliest form of Gymnastics in the Indian history. Acrobatic movement was performed by a group of people called Banjaras. They performed gymnastics movements and acrobatic movement to earn their livelihood.
- The Natas / Banjaras performed some gymnastics and acrobatic activities such as Hastacankramana, Urdhva pada, Alatapada, Vrschikalanghana, Makarolanghana, Matsyodvartana, Syenapada, Mokkhacika etc.
- The Bazigar performed acrobatic / gymnastic skills to the pleasure of the peoples in Mughal Period.
- In 17<sup>th</sup> century, Shree Samarth Ramdas Swamee was considered as the pioneer of organised Gymnastic Institution in Maharashtra. These gymnastic institutions were crowded with members who regularly and systematically practice the gymnastics exercises like dand, baithek, wrestling, mallkhamb, heavy club swinging.
- People of India practice the gymnastics exercises on different apparatus, but the most popular apparatus were Malkhab and Indian clubs. Malkhab was used for movements, balance, turnover movements and Indian club used to develop the strength of arms and shoulders.
- The modern apparatus of gymnastics which were introduced in 18<sup>th</sup> century were unknown to India at that time.
- British introduced the modern apparatus of gymnastics to India like Horizontal Bar, Parallel Bars, Vaulting Horse, Balance Beam, and Roman Rings after establishment of East India Company.

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