

## **PHYSICAL EXERCISE AS PREVENTATIVE MEDICINE: LOOKING BACK AT COLONIAL BENGAL (1860-1947)**

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In recent years, especially during and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of physical activity as a proactive health measure has received substantial attention from scientific researchers, the media, and those who surf the web looking for healthful advice. Interest in the role that exercise might play in enhancing physical well-being is not new and can be traced back to ancient times and several different cultures. The people of the ancient Greek civilization were among the first to espouse sports as medicine. The ancient Greek physician Herodicus, who lived in the fifth century BCE, has been hailed as the father of sports medicine.<sup>1</sup> His disciple, Hippocrates, argued that “exercise contributed to the balancing of the four humours: blood; phlegm; black bile; and yellow bile.”<sup>2</sup> Centuries later, the public schools of Victorian England, believing in the concepts of social Darwinism and eugenics, forged a close connection with the nineteenth century health movement and a philosophical/pedagogical belief called Muscular Christianity.<sup>3</sup> Physical exercise and sports were considered indispensable in sustaining the “planet’s largest Empire.”<sup>4</sup> The British inclination towards physical exercise in the nineteenth century and its gradual dissemination in eastern India where West Bengal and Bangladesh, territories that before partitioning in 1947 were both part of what was called Bengal, predates the modern world’s aspiration of being physically fit.<sup>5</sup> This article attempts to explore the complex relationship between physical exercise and health in Colonial Bengal, which was the nerve center of the British administration in nineteenth-century India. It delves into studying how the British considered physical exercise as preventive medicine in the metropole as well as in Colonial

Bengal. It also aims to study the British contribution to spreading physical exercises among the native youth of Bengal. The article argues that the British policies of spreading physical exercises in schools were part of their public health policies. How the British perception of physical exercise influenced the cognitive space of the Western-educated Bengalis is also considered. The “Colonial” period in India began in the eighteenth century as British East India expanded its operations and began introducing British ideas and practices and taking over governmental control of some areas of the peninsula. In regards to fitness, the British generally viewed the colonized Bengalis to be physically inferior as can be inferred from the following remark of British historian and Secretary at War, Thomas Babington Macaulay, in 1843: “The physical organization of the *Bengalee* is feeble even to effeminacy. He lives in a constant vapour bath. His pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movements languid. During many ages he had been trampled upon by men of bolder and more hardy breeds. Courage, independence, veracity are qualities to which his constitution and his situation are equally unfavorable.”<sup>6</sup>

The larger, and more “muscular” British administrators were not superior to the various diseases like malaria, plague, and cholera that existed in that era. However, Bengali gentlemen of the same period indulged in physical exercise to maintain their health and even restored “lost masculinity” and worked to create a new “healthy” Bengali community. Even some Bengali women were similarly motivated to practice physical exercise regularly because of the belief that the Bengali mother was required to be healthy and hearty to successfully give birth to strong progeny. Thus, it can be asserted that both the “muscular” rulers and their “effeminate” subjects were reassured of the beneficial impact of physical exercise on human life.

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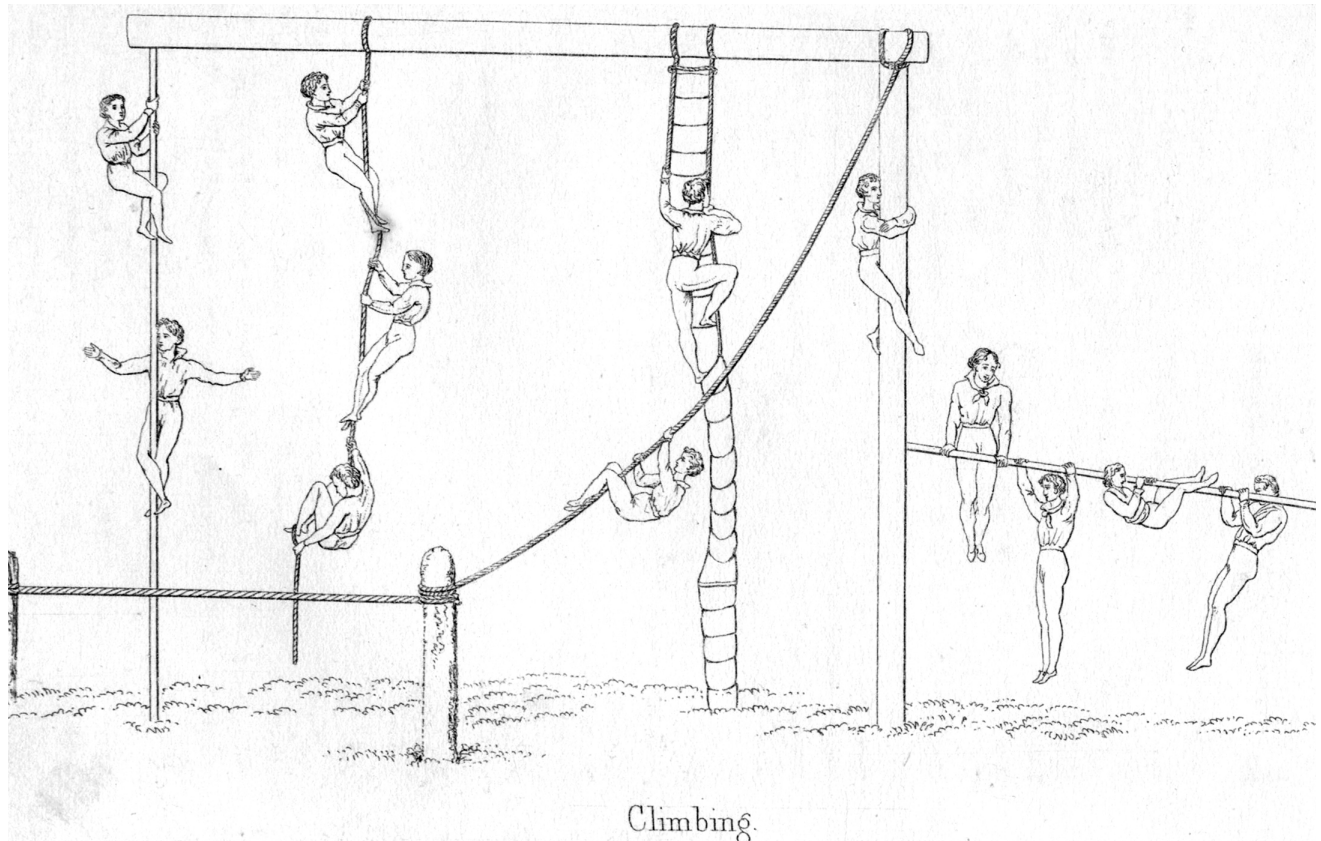
## BRITISH PERCEPTIONS OF EXERCISE AS PREVENTIVE MEDICINE

In a 1959 article in *The Times of India*, author Harvey Day highlights the significance of Britain's colonial legacy for the development of global sporting practices writing, "Sport was Britain's greatest contribution to world culture for no one can dispute that she taught the world to play." Day claims that most forms of sports were innovated by the Britons, taken abroad, and popularized.<sup>7</sup> Along with leisurely play, the British also played a significant role in popularizing exercise in their colonies.

Britain's early nineteenth-century obsession with fitness can be judged from the successful publication of Donald Walker's book *"British Manly Exercise"* in 1835.<sup>8</sup> Walker wrote, "Exercise ensures, in particular, the development of the locomotive organs, and they prevent or correct all the deformities to which these organs are liable. They are best calculated to produce strength and activity and to bestow invariable health."<sup>9</sup>

Walker's book was filled with diagrams and illustrated techniques for rowing, fencing, and instructions on horseback riding, and provided detailed guidance on the procedure to lunge, vault, and wrestle. Walker included ideas from different cultures such as strength training using clubs imported from India, which according to a British officer stationed in the country was undoubtedly "the most effectual kind of athletic training known anywhere."<sup>10</sup> The British military force adopted club swinging and took the exercise system back to Britain.<sup>11</sup>

By the 1850s, participating in either games or physical fitness activities had become an integral part of Victorian values. The significance of physical fitness stemmed from various cultural trends, including Muscular Christianity—a concept that emerged in England in the mid-nineteenth century. The concept of Muscular Christianity permeated the new model of public schools. The young school preceptors displayed their affinity towards games, primarily team sports. The educators believed and



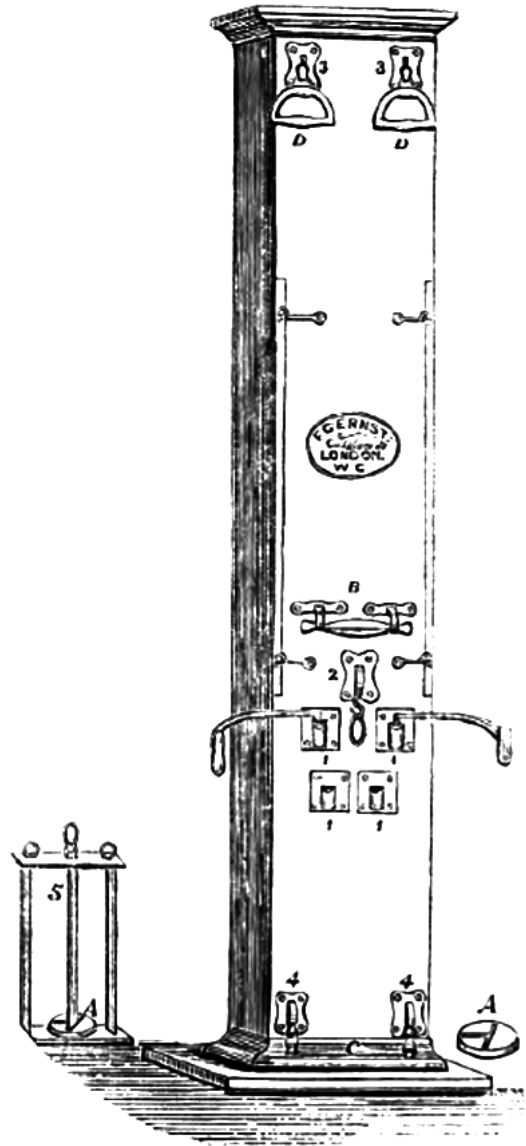
*Walker's Manly Exercises*, first published in London, in 1834, is famous for introducing Indian Club swinging to the British Isles. However, the book contained much more than club exercises and is regarded as one of the most influential fitness books of the nineteenth century. Written by Donald Walker and aimed at the upper classes, the book went through at least ten editions and travelled around the world as Britain's empire grew. Early editions are still frequently found in libraries in India, as well as other countries once part of the British Empire. This drawing, from the 1857 edition, shows climbing and bar exercises done on an outdoor apparatus. The image is copied from similar pictures in books on German Gymnastics and it is entirely likely that these exercises were also done in India.

preached to others that team sports taught morality and would mold the minds of young gentlemen into leaders who would be invariably imbued with patriotic, chivalric, and Christian values.<sup>12</sup> British school authorities increasingly recognized the importance of physical education and these ideas soon spread to America and other countries.

The other motivation for school physical education however was better health and hygiene. Allan Broman, a graduate of the Royal Gymnastic Central Institute of Stockholm, contemplated physical education as an essential component of school hygiene. He confined his unique research to the elementary schools of Britain and argued that muscular exercise was unambiguously necessary for the overall physical and mental growth of a child, both of which could be stunted by the regimentation of school routines. He advanced his ideas before the International Congress of Hygiene and Demography in 1891 and his paper was later published as *Physical Education in Elementary Schools - A Part of the School Hygiene*.<sup>13</sup> Broman explained that when children start attending school their daily routine gets altered; the freedom of the child is hampered when they are asked by teachers to restrain themselves to the benches of the classroom. "This alone," Broman claimed, "would be sufficient to impede and prevent the natural growth and development of the child."<sup>14</sup> In consequence, he argued, most children suffer from several physical deformities like stooping shoulders or narrow chests, combined with spinal curvatures of one form or other. Broman forewarned in his writing that all these physical defects would eventually strike the chest and thus critical organs, such as the heart and lungs. For Broman, the execution of physical exercise over a long period would invariably thwart all these blights and ward off spasmodic occurrences in the human body.

According to Broman, the hypothesis was proved by the experiences he gathered through his own research conducted over the years.<sup>15</sup> Broman's view was that physical exercise directed blood from the central to the peripheral parts of the circulatory system of the human body. In students, the congestions to the brain and pelvic organs caused by intellectual work and the long span of sitting on the school bench were relieved by performance of regular exercise. Thus, Broman argued, physical exercise is advantageous to both the mind and the body conclusively.<sup>16</sup>

Broman's theories were similar to those



Ernst's portable gymnasium was made for home use and consisted of a weight stack inside this wooden case with a variety of handles. In addition to normal pulley exercises, a chinning bar could be attached. Ernst's machine is a close copy of the Polymachinon, invented by exercise expert Captain Chiosso, who published an illustrated instructional manual in 1855—which may have inspired Ernst.

espoused in the writing of Gustav Ernst. *The Portable Gymnasium*, Ernst's 1861 book, touted that "the beneficial effects resulting from the employment of Gymnastic Exercises, as a curative agent in cases of spinal deformity, or other bodily weakness and contraction, are so generally known and appreciated that an advocacy of the system is here quite needless."<sup>17</sup> Ernst also discussed gymnastics in orthopedic practice. Interestingly, Ernst laid the foundation of an efficient "portable gymnastic apparatus"



which could be advantageous to the British to maintain their daily regimen of physical exercise. His endeavor was appreciated and ratified by the contemporary medical practitioners and patients who benefitted from it. The portable gymnasium was manufactured in the form of an oblong pedestal of either teak or mahogany wood, varied in height from six feet to nine-and-a-half feet, and was usually seven to nine inches deep by fourteen inches wide. The pedestal rested on a firm base proportionately larger than the apparatus itself. The whole machine was supposed to be attached to the wall of any sizeable room with strong iron brackets and screws in such a way that it might be removed at any point in time without damaging the wall.<sup>18</sup>

In Britain, sports were regarded as one of the important features of the public school system. The public schools particularly stressed the social values of team sports.<sup>19</sup> At least two afternoons per week were allotted to sports and the number often went up to three or four afternoons. Intramural and inter-scholastic contests also gave a competitive edge to sports.<sup>20</sup> In the universities as well as the public schools, physical education and games occupied a prominent position. Gymnasia, swimming baths, and sporting fields provided students ample opportunities to indulge in physical exercise.<sup>21</sup> In the public schools, a “love of exercising their muscles and training their bodies to physical endurance became a feature of the student life.”<sup>22</sup> This attitude was further cultivated to keep students from “traditional” university recreations like gambling and drinking. It was noticed that in most schools cricket had increased in popularity, racquet courts had been established, and excellent gymnasia drew substantial support. In 1866, an anonymous contributor to *Blackwood's Magazine* thought “the new gospel of athletics” at the universities was considered a splendid thing. It was believed “better to go to bed early tired out by cricket than to sit up drinking . . . .”<sup>23</sup>

The boons of physical exercise as preventive medicine were also disseminated among the British army and navy, who were responsible for the sustenance of the Empire in India. William Augustus Guy, a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, highlighted the importance of physical exercise throughout his report, “On the Sanitary Condition of the British Army.” As the following passage suggests, he argued in the report that exercise is the secret to a prolonged and healthy life:

One of the classes to which I allude consists of men who work indoors with a great deficiency of exercise, at the same time that they inhale a close heated and impure atmosphere. This is the case of tailors and of compositors in printing offices, whose health is destroyed and their lives greatly curtailed by these causes. It is the case also of clerks, though they suffer more from want of exercise than from want of air. I might prove my position by figures; but I prefer stating in general terms that there is no doubt whatever that the lives of men who are thus employed are shortened by confinement and insufficient exercise.<sup>24</sup>

Guy also advised that every soldier must participate in sword exercises or drills; they must be encouraged to take part in every manly exercise.<sup>25</sup> James Dunbar Campbell, in his 2003 doctoral thesis, mentioned that the Army Sanitary Commission in 1858 strongly recommended different forms of physical training for the armies to improve the overall health and physical condition of the soldiers. The recommendation was based on several findings: first, the recognized benefits of exercise in improving physical vitality and therefore augmenting their immunity towards various diseases, and secondly the increasingly lower physical standards found among recruits during the contemporary period.<sup>26</sup> Blake Knox emphasized in his 1911 publication, *Military Sanitation and Hygiene*, that a trained soldier must be fit and this fitness can be achieved by gymnastic exercises.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, as early as 1865 the Queen's Regulation specified a required course of physical training to be taken by all recruits and older soldiers, backed by trained instructors at the battalion level. By the 1890s, virtually all British military installations had a gymnasium or other physical training facility and by the first decade of the twentieth century, most cantonments possessed standard athletic fields and football and cricket pitches.<sup>28</sup> In January 1907, the Army Council changed the entire system of physical training of recruits and young soldiers were introduced to the same system of physical training.<sup>29</sup> All these steps were undertaken under the impression that exercise as a preventive medicine would develop their immunity against the

diseases that were prevalent in the contemporary society of the metropole.

### ENCOUNTERING THE TROPICAL DISEASES: THE BRITISH WAY OF KEEPING FIT IN BENGAL

Colonialism, if anything, whetted the British appetite for the sports that reminded them of England. The British officials who chose to settle in Bengal for their official assignments were disgusted and perturbed by the myriad diseases of this land of rivers and jungles. According to Sir Walter Raleigh, who published *History of the World in the Early Seventeenth Century*, “the Tropics” were “infested with the fearful and dangerous thunder and lightning, the horrible and frequent earthquake, the dangerous diseases, the multitude of venomous beasts and worms.” Thus, the Brits perceived Bengal weather to have an unhealthy effect on the European physical constitution. Malignant fever, liver complaints, dysentery, and diarrhea were common.<sup>30</sup>



This large warrior/god stands at the entrance to a seventh century temple at the UNESCO World Heritage site known as Pattadakal in northern India. The ceremonial club with the arm resting on top is reminiscent of the pose of the Farnese Hercules statue of ancient Rome. This statue demonstrates that the Indian tradition of club swinging has a very old history indeed.

One of the most infamous diseases of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—cholera—broke out in Bengal in August 1817. Between 19 September 1817 and 17 July 1818, almost thirty-seven thousand people died from the disease in Calcutta alone. This particular outbreak continued to spread and by the 1820s reached the Mediterranean region of Europe. David Arnold estimated that between one and two million Indians died in this first of several cholera epidemics.<sup>31</sup> Because cholera is a bacterial disease and is often spread by water, historian Tinni Goswami Bhattacharya argued that the public sanitation and bathing in rivers, such as the Ganges, helped spread the disease. The officials of the East India Company blamed the indigenous people for epidemics like cholera, malaria, plague, and kalazar.<sup>32</sup> In 1831, an article published in *Gleaning from Science* profoundly described the mortality problems faced by British workers during this period.<sup>33</sup> The perilous situation not only affected the East India Company employees but also the British army. The mortality rates of the British colonists were a topic of great anxiety for the men responsible for their being in India.<sup>34</sup>

To combat these problems, the medical men adopted various preventive medicines in India. It was argued that the Indian climate was not necessarily harmful to the Europeans if they were “disciplined and attentive to excess.” The naval surgeon Charles Curtis drew attention to the inappropriate diets of Europeans; he believed the overconsumption of meat was the root of many illnesses. He further added that Europeans injured themselves “from a kind of false bravado, and the exhibition of a generous contempt for what they reckon the luxurious and effeminate practices of the country.”<sup>35</sup> To save themselves from the wrath of tropical diseases, some Europeans embraced indigenous medical practices. European medical men from the early seventeenth century benefitted from the use of indigenous medical knowledge by utilizing local medicinal plants and consulting practitioners of Indian systems of medicine.<sup>36</sup> Some men also adopted physical exercise and sports as a means to develop their immunity and followed the phrase, “Prevention is better than cure.” This can be inferred from the 1863 *Royal Commission on the Sanitary State of the Army in India* that linked their “want of exercise” to the “high rate of sickness and mortality.” Thus, by 1880 sports along with other amusements, were utilized “to keep up the men’s cheerfulness . . . Fighting against the ennui that

is the breeding ground of sickness.”<sup>37</sup>

Europeans of different professions practiced physical exercise in Bengal to avert sickness. However, as noted, much of this keenness for physical exertion was fueled by the belief that such undertakings would help avert maladies in what was perceived as an extremely unhealthy and unclean environment. By the twentieth century, British women also participated in physical exercise nearly as much as their male counterparts. They used to play “violent-tennis” and later took to squash and courted exhaustion by galloping about on horseback in the hot weather.<sup>38</sup> In *Indian Memories*, Baden Powell wrote that there is no doubt that the best way to prevent disease in India is “plenty of work, occupation and exercise.” Powell argued that polo and pig-sticking altered the lives and careers of young officers who had developed a healthy taste of exercise and gave up subaltern habits like drinking and betting. Exercise and sports also imbued them with moral values, and above all, the qualities to be a successful leader.<sup>39</sup> Zebina Griffin, a missionary in India for fifteen years, wrote, “The thing considered necessary for almost the very existence of Europeans in India is the early morning exercises. This is usually in the form of a drive or horse-back ride. A half-hour gallop on horseback sends the blood bounding through the veins, and makes one feel fresh and strong for the work of the day.” He believed that unless duties were very pressing, most Europeans should spend between thirty minutes to an hour on exercise.<sup>40</sup>

The British considered the greatest asset of their army was its fitness, stamina, and temperament. Their fondness for “manly” games helped them acquire these qualities. Members of the forces had always emphasized the benefits of partaking in games, especially polo and football. According to General Waghorn, president of the Railway Board of Simla, the Germans could have won the First World War if they had had the same sporting spirit as the British. Waghorn further exclaimed that the superior performance of British soldiers in the First World War owed considerably to their keenness for sporting activities.<sup>41</sup> It was, in fact, quite important for the sustenance of the empire.

### **SPREADING THE BOONS OF PHYSICAL EXERCISE AMONG THE NATIVES**

The British perception of “exercise as a preventive medicine” was not confined within the Europeans of Bengal, but also spread among

the native youth of Bengal. Public health, according to philosopher Michel Foucault, was a means often used by governments to know and control colonial subjects. It emerged from a reformist mode of governance that was part and parcel of British Imperialism.<sup>42</sup> Historically, public health was confined to sanitary regulations and the organization of medical relief during the outbreak of epidemic diseases. However, by the twentieth century, its mandate included a lot more than appraising sanitation.<sup>43</sup> For example, several governmental policies were undertaken by the British to improve the health of the Bengali youth through physical education and sports.

Health education was defined in a contemporary educational survey of Bengal as “the sum of experiences useful for promoting vigorous health.” The survey also considered that “these experiences may occur in the school or on the playground; or may be outside the immediate school environment.”<sup>44</sup> Physical education, on the other hand, was the participation in adequate bodily activities that further improved human health. The programs of physical exercises were aimed at developing muscles and nerves, strengthening the vital organs and also developing certain social values like discipline, obedience, ready responses, and self-control. In other words—character building through athletic teamwork.<sup>45</sup> A 1927 article in *The Englishman*, claimed that physical education and medical examinations should become compulsory in the schools and colleges of Bengal; therefore, schools would actively support gymnastics, games, swimming, and other forms of exercise in the belief that it would improve the physical health of the students.<sup>46</sup>

In 1931, colonial administrators described the significance of sports and physical exercise in academic institutions by claiming, “Physical culture has long formed an important subject in the curriculum of every public and secondary school in the most advanced countries of the world, and in India, where the climate is so often detrimental to physical development, the need for measures to combat climatic effects and build up young instinct with health and energy is far more urgent and vital. Schools in India have paid little attention to physical culture.”<sup>47</sup> Prior to the advent of colonialism, schools in Bengal did pay little attention to physical education.<sup>48</sup> The *Report of the Indian Education Commission of 1882*, headed by Wilson Hunter, first mentioned the importance of physical training in its recommendations.<sup>49</sup> The report proposed that instead



of conducting just military drills in the native schools and colleges, emphasis should rather be on those exercises that would help in the exertion of all the muscles of the body.<sup>50</sup> A letter from the Government of Bengal in 1889 joined in the discussion by stating that since “Bengalis won’t go in for physical games, something in the way of the drill should be made compulsory.”<sup>51</sup> During the 1880s, British administrators recommended physical development through native games, gymnasiums, and so on.<sup>52</sup>

Reflecting the importance that colonial administration attached to the proliferation of sports and physical culture, the new post of “physical instructor” was instituted in schools and colleges in Bengal. In 1932, the Minister of Education of Bengal opened a new government training center to impart courses in Physical Education.<sup>53</sup> In this regard, a report in *The Times of India* wrote, “To leave nothing to chance in developing a strong and healthy race of Bengalis is the object of the scheme of physical education that the government of Bengal intends to put in operation from the beginning of the next month.”<sup>54</sup>

Another report in the same periodical said similarly, “Educationists and those interested in the future of Indian youth have always expressed anxiety about the apathy towards sports and physical culture which characterizes the Indian school boy and college youths . . . The deplorable effects of this one-sided development upon the physique of the country’s manhood need not be emphasized . . . Government and the Universities have realised this, and for some time efforts have been made to introduce a scheme which may develop the student’s body together with his mind.”<sup>55</sup> With these steps, definite advances were made in the direction of inculcating awareness and interest in physical culture.

Schools in Bengal were frequently encouraged to arrange for annual medical examinations of the students. The results of these examinations were forwarded to the parents and guardians. Masters of each class were requested to maintain a health chart for each student which was appraised weekly by the headmaster. When students failed to achieve the required amount of exercise, their names were forwarded to physical instructors for further consideration.<sup>56</sup> On 22 February 1926, the Bengali Legislative Council passed a resolution making physical education compulsory for boys between the age of 12 and 18 in high schools. Complying with this resolution, a plan was laid

down by the Director of Physical Instruction of Bengal. A curriculum was framed for primary schools where drill was made compulsory for all five classes with the following program:

Class I - Marching, drill, simple movements and games.

Class II - Beginning of simple formal exercises and games.

Class III - Formal exercises, marching, drills and games.

Class IV - Formal drill exercises, complete syllabus of Dr. Gray’s drill book and several other games.

Class V - Revision of the syllabus of Class IV and Western games such as football.<sup>57</sup>

Since 1920 reports of the Students’ Welfare Committee highlighted and classified the prevalence of physical defects and diseases among students. Thus, several recommendations were made concerning the development of physical training across schools:

1. Provision of adequate recreational ground.
2. Introduction of drills, gymnastics and organised games—both Indian and European—under the guidance of qualified instructors in several schools of Bengal.
3. Provision and equipment of gymnasiums in educational institutions.
4. Encouraging school sports as well as annual events along with sanction of liberal grants for inter-school tournaments.
5. More systematic medical examination of school students and as funds would allow, the appointment of qualified medical inspecting staff.<sup>58</sup>

Members of the Physical Education Committee also directed school authorities to ensure proper nutrition for their students. Students were advised to bring *tiffins* (a light meal or snack) from home and eat them to be sufficiently energized to undertake physical exercise after school.<sup>59</sup>

The Ministry of Education under the Government of Bengal realized that it was not sufficient merely to lay down a compulsory curriculum of physical education, but a meager amount of funds should be allocated to buy apparatus for physical training.<sup>60</sup> With the introduction of several policies, it was realized that a fund was required for the smooth functioning of the sporting activities of the schools and colleges in Bengal. The government, on several

occasions, offered monetary assistance for obtaining gym apparatus for the school athletic clubs or gymnastics programs. For them the foundation of playgrounds and gymnasia were objects no less worthy of public beneficence.<sup>61</sup> At Dacca, the leading college in athletic matters, gymnastic apparatus was erected for 1,260 rupees and was restored in 1881 for 804 rupees. The cricket and lawn tennis club received an annual government grant of 100 rupees and an admission fee of one rupee was charged to the students of the college and two rupees to outsiders. The Krishnagar College Cricket Club received 50 rupees from the government.<sup>62</sup> The Presidency College's gym apparatus was purchased at a cost of 611 rupees, of which 500 was paid by Maharaja Holkar. The gym apparatus in the Hare School was acquired for 666 rupees, the cost being charged from the surplus funds of the school.<sup>63</sup> The spread of physical education and sports was perceived by Bengali youths with considerable enthusiasm, and they started believing in the boons of physical exercises.

#### HEALTHY BODY, HEALTHY NATION: ADAPTATION OF PHYSICAL CULTURE BY THE BENGALI YOUTHS

*The amusements of numerous people that do not supply the British with a single sepoy (Colonial soldier) cannot be expected to bear a military character. The god did not make him warlike. Possessed of lax nerves, of a feeble body and of a timid soul, nature has not meant him to handle a gun, or wield a sword.*<sup>64</sup>

Most of the Bengali intellectuals who were influenced by Western education subscribed to the colonial notion of exercise as a preventive medicine. With the help of this medicine they tried to regenerate their lost vitality and aimed to decolonize their “effeminate” bodies. The Bengalis were convinced of their physical degeneration and tried to develop their physical strength through physical exercise along with other Western sports. They used the sports field as a place where they could challenge the British at their sports and the *akhsharas* (gymnasiums) became a new space where they aimed to rejuvenate their “lost masculinity” and strove to create a “new” and “healthy” Bengali community. The concern was that their personal “physical degeneration” would result

in political degeneration. This perception, coupled with the Western cultural emphasis on physical strength, urged the community to create a strong, masculine Bengali race.

Grave concern over the degenerating health of the Bengali youth had reverberated time and again in contemporary writings in the early twentieth century. It was considered that “files and machines dictate our work; cinemas and theatres determine our leisure.” Therefore, young boys were advised to indulge in sports which were considered essential for healthy living.<sup>65</sup>

Vernacular print media took up the responsibility of disseminating knowledge about the boons of physical exercise through their articles. Many contemporary journals, like *Swastha Samachar*, highlighted the importance of *byam* (physical exercise) or exercise. One such article mentioned that a person must exercise regularly to stay healthy. It also mentioned that the lack of exercise would ultimately make muscles and ligaments weak and that if somebody desires a healthy body, he should not compromise with his daily *byam*.<sup>66</sup> Another issue stressed the role of exercise and games in a child's life. It also warned the reader that some kinds of exercises were not beneficial for everybody; an exercise benefiting a child may not be beneficial to an adult. Swimming and walking were beneficial to all, but unfortunately, the pressure of the school curriculum made it difficult for students to exercise which in turn took a toll on their health.<sup>67</sup>

Various contemporary articles advised Bengali youth to develop their physical strength. Writer Hemendra Kumar Roy in *Bharati* (a vernacular newspaper) lamented the fact that Bengali parents always tried to inculcate a feeling among their progeny that education was the most significant component in living a materially fruitful life. Unfortunately, the parents failed to realize that physical development through exercise is equally important. Roy further pointed out that the “weak and fragile” health of Bengali youth was considered deplorable. In his opinion, a casual visit to College Street in Calcutta in the afternoon would reveal how the Bengali student community had become physically weak due to the burden of the university syllabus. This was alarming since they were the future of the nation. They had developed unhealthy habits and consequently lost proper digestive capacity. This accounted for the prevalence of diseases and premature deaths in Bengal. Roy believed that political



propaganda and the movement for *Swaraj* (independence) was a hollow struggle because even if the Bengalis earned independence, they would not be able to enjoy it. He further commented that a good physique was of immense importance and in this sphere, Bengalis would have to bow down before the people of all independent nations. He claimed that Bengalis believed that the attainment of *Swaraj* would enable them to protect the nation, but unfortunately, they were not even physically capable of protecting their own houses.<sup>68</sup>



In 1809, English soldier Thomas Broughton wrote admiringly of the Indian troops' physical culture practices, concluding that not only were such exercises beneficial, but those undertaking them were extraordinarily athletic. The above sketch by Broughton illustrates such practices. 'Daily Exercise, Mahratta Camp,' Thomas Duer Broughton, *Letters Written in a Mahratta Camp During the Year 1809* (London, 1813), 218.

An article in *Sakha* (a vernacular newspaper) reiterated the necessity of exercise for becoming healthy. It advised Bengalis to undertake regular exercise not only to keep fit and healthy, but also to become self-sufficient in coping with adverse situations.<sup>69</sup> Education, which was considered an essential precondition for manhood, promoted the harmonious development of the body and mind. The inclusion of physical education makes education holistic by the reasonable cultivation of all the forces and qualities of which a man is comprised. The moral consequence of physical education was axiomatic, granting self-mastery, moral elegance, and equilibrium.<sup>70</sup>

Several challenges were voiced regarding the development of the physical health of students. Advocates of the idea that school life had bad repercussions upon the normal posture of the body believed that all the studying hampered the proper flow of lymph and blood and the functioning of the systems. They ar-

gued that studious and sedentary habits result in some degree of contortion of the spine. This deformity of the spinal column would distort the spinal marrow, which is the source of the nerves, muddling the operation of other organs and leading to shortness of breath and palpitations of the heart, which were common in schools.<sup>71</sup> It was mentioned in contemporary literature that the Bengali parents usually devoted their complete attention to the cognitive development of their offspring, but they displayed no interest in their psychomotor development which was important for their health. Being unaware of the influence of physique over mind, Bengali parents led their offspring to the impairment of health and fitness causing the breakdown of their health.<sup>72</sup> Contemporary vernacular literature like *Alaler Ghorer Dulal* argued that as far as the children were concerned, it should be ensured that they study and play games simultaneously.<sup>73</sup>

Several devotees of physical exercise in Bengal shared their experience about the positive influence of exercises on their health. Nirmal Chandra Sarkar, a resident of Calcutta, started exercise under Balaram Shill in Vivekananda Byam Samiti. With the help of exercise, he succeeded in overcoming his physical disabilities.<sup>74</sup> Bodybuilder Balaram Babu had been afflicted by asthma and typhoid at a young age, which had taken a toll on his health. However, he started working out and gradually gained strength and vitality.<sup>75</sup> Another interesting example of a person who used exercise remedially was Aruna Bandopadhyay. She had been affected by pneumonia, typhoid, and several other diseases that had made her grow weak. After recovering from the disease, she started regular exercise and made considerable progress in regaining health and mobility.<sup>76</sup>

## BENGALI WOMEN AND PHYSICAL FITNESS IN COLONIAL BENGAL

Bengali women, who in the nineteenth century preferred to confine themselves within the *zenana* (the inner quarters of the house), were also advised to indulge in physical activities. However, they embraced exercise so that they became physically strong in the service of motherhood, since it was believed that only a strong mother could give birth to strong male progeny.

Nineteenth-century Bengal witnessed the emergence of a new form of patriarchy that

molded the educated woman according to male preferences. This patriarchy required an educated wife who would fulfill their husband's demands and organize their family's domestic life. These women were also advised to take part in physical exercise. It was believed that physical exercise would make them strong and that their strength could mean their children would be stronger and healthier. Samita Sen believed that the infant mortality rate, together with the British notion that Bengalis were "effeminate" and unhealthy, made the Bengali nationalists emphasize the need of having an enlightened mother.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, derogatory comments of British overlords concerning the lack of physical strength of the Bengalis convinced the nationalists to take the culture of physical fitness seriously. The situation was so critical that it became a national concern when the rising statistics of infant and maternal mortality rates came to the forefront. After the corroboration of the Census of 1872 and 1881, the Dufferin Fund was established in 1885 to address the situation.<sup>78</sup>

Patriarchal messages involving exercise as a means to eugenic supremacy were also reinforced in the Bengali newspapers. The messages were consistent and clear. Each child was a miracle of creation that needed to be handled gently. Bengali mothers needed to be schooled to make them aware of their responsibility as mothers.<sup>79</sup> Thus, women should participate in physical exercise to secure a healthy and prosperous child. In an article published in the magazine *Cooch Behar Darpan*, Jaitindra Bhusan Ghosh pointed out that strong women would become wives, then mothers. The health of the future citizens of the country depended on the physical health of the women; therefore, like their male counterparts, they should be allowed to do physical exercise.<sup>80</sup> An article published in *Bharatvarsha* (a vernacular newspaper) repeated a similar sentiment that women who intended to become mothers in the future should ensure their proper education and be taught the significance of physical fitness.<sup>81</sup> Both of the authors advocated the participation of women in exercises like skipping and drill. Playing *lathi*, sword fighting, and swimming also provided enhancement of the women's physical strength.<sup>82</sup> Dr. Ramesh Chandra Roy also advised women to be conscious of the fact that they were the procreators of the next generation, as well as the future of the nation. If weak mothers could not produce healthy generations, the Bengalis would consequently lag behind the people from other states.<sup>83</sup> Sarojini Devi advised ev-

ery Indian girl to take part in sports to attain strength, bravery, independence, beauty and to bear physically healthy sons for the greater glory of the motherland.<sup>84</sup> In her speech at the Mahila Vidyapith in Uttar Pradesh, Sushoma Devi, niece of Rabindranath Tagore—the 1913 Nobel Prize winner in literature—emphasized the importance of physical training for every female child as the mother of the future race.<sup>85</sup> Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, the founder of Bharat Stri Mahamandal, introduced games with batons and swords among women, thereby encouraging physical culture among women.<sup>86</sup> However, in retrospect, it must be mentioned that the protectors of patriarchy, with their inclination towards future generations of healthy male children, actually paved the way for women's emancipation. To fulfill their selfish desires to acquire educated wives with healthy wombs to bear their progeny, the Bengali males had to loosen their firm hold over the *antarmahal* (inner quarters of Bengali households) that allowed women to step into the light and make themselves stronger, both physically and mentally. This would ultimately culminate in women getting a stronger foothold in the public realm to assert their rights and voice their opinions.



This drawing is believed to be from the latter part of the nineteenth century and was hand drawn. It depicts an akhara, or gymnasium, and shows two wrestlers training in the center, another wrestler holding two clubs and, on the left, a man holding one club and a weight overhead. Artist unknown.

## CONCLUSION

Mark Harrison believes that it is beyond anyone's capacity to give a comprehensive account of public health in British India in a single volume.<sup>87</sup> Corroborating his viewpoint, this article unearths an aspect of the British public health policy that remains outside the sphere of

prior scholarly writing. It can be argued that exercise and physical culture were utilized by both the colonizers and colonized to stay healthy. It was used by both for the prevention of disease and to develop their immunity towards the malicious diseases of the region. Initiatives of the British evoked a positive response from Bengali youth as they realized that physical fitness was important to remove the stigma of effeminacy and to reconstruct a healthy Bengali nation. Thus, in Bengal, the adoption of Western sport and physical culture by the Bengalis was inextricably linked with the idea of colonial masculinity. According to Jaya Chatterji, the *Bhadraloks* (Western-educated gentlefolks) of Bengal were experiencing a steady decline in self-esteem and confidence during the early twentieth century owing to various factors. First, the decline of the *zamindari* system impeded the continuation of existing economic heft. Second, the exclusion of Bengalis from the Congress high command exacerbated anxieties among the middle-class Bengalis.<sup>88</sup> By now, internalizing the imperial discourse of physical determinism, the *bhadraloks* readily identified various perceptions of physical deficiencies as the source of the sociopolitical crises that they were experiencing. Concepts of deterioration and degeneration served as powerful models explaining everything that was perceived as wrong with the Bengalis. As an author in *The Statesman* wrote, "We Bengalis are not today what we used to be. We are no longer in the forefront of things and I think a great deal of this is due to our physical deterioration."<sup>89</sup>

Thus, the importance of physical exercise and sports as preventive medicine was accepted both by the colonizers and colonized. But their means of usage were different. While the British administrators utilized exercise to develop their immunity to avert the diseases of the tropics, the colonized Bengalis aimed to practice exercise to create a physical fit Bengali *jati* (community).

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