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Embodying Empire: Wrestling, Masculinity, and the Military Labour Market in Mughal India

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ABSTRACT

Military conflict was a structural feature of the Mughal Empire, requiring a constant supply of trained fighting men. While historians have examined the mansabdari system and the circulation of military labour in early modern North India, little attention has been given to the bodily practices that sustained this order. This paper argues that martial sports, particularly wrestling (*pahelwani*), played a crucial role in linking physical discipline, masculine identity, and imperial patronage. Through akhara training, daily drills (*kasarat*), and staged competitions at court, the Mughal state cultivated disciplined bodies that embodied imperial authority. Wrestling arenas functioned as theatres where strength, honour, and hierarchy were publicly displayed and rewarded. By situating wrestling within the broader military labour market, the paper demonstrates how martial training served both as preparation for warfare and as a pathway to social mobility and imperial service.

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I. Introduction

Military conflict was a structural condition of the Mughal Empire. From campaigns of territorial expansion to the suppression of internal rebellions, the stability of imperial rule depended upon the continuous availability of trained fighting men. While historians have examined the mansabdari system, revenue extraction, and the circulation of military labour in early modern North India, far less attention has been paid to the bodily practices that made such a military order possible. This paper argues that martial sports, especially wrestling (*pahelwani*), functioned as a crucial interface between bodily discipline, imperial patronage, and the production of hegemonic masculinity in the Mughal world.

Rather than treating wrestling as mere recreation or courtly entertainment, this study conceptualises martial sports as a political tool of empire. Through daily drills (*kasarat*), *akhara*-based training, and staged competitions at court, the Mughal polity cultivated disciplined, display-ready bodies that embodied sovereignty itself. Wrestling arenas were theatres of imperial power where strength, honour, hierarchy, and loyalty were publicly performed and materially rewarded. The Mughal court's investment in wrestlers through titles, stipends, jagirs, robes of honour, and mansabs transformed bodily prowess into convertible political capital. Physical strength became a medium through which men could access patronage, mobility, and imperial service.

In this context, the military labour market of North India must be understood. It was more than merely an economic structure; it was a gendered field structured by embodied competence. Martial training in *akharas* linked village society, urban elites, and the imperial court, producing a pool of men whose disciplined bodies signified readiness for service. Thus, wrestling served both as preparation for warfa-

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-re and as a visible credential of employability. By rewarding even defeated wrestlers and publicly staging competitive bouts, Mughal rulers naturalised a hierarchy of masculinity that bound imperial authority to bodily excellence.

Drawing upon court chronicles, travel accounts, and visual material, this paper situates Mughal wrestling culture within broader debates on sovereignty, masculinity, and the politics of the body. It argues that imperial governance operated not only through revenue systems and administrative hierarchies but also through the cultivation and circulation of martial bodies. In doing so, the study bridges military labour history with cultural history, demonstrating that the Mughal Empire governed through spectacle, discipline, and the embodied performance of ideal manhood. Martial sports were one of its most visible and socially generative foundations.

This paper is divided into four sections, excluding the conclusion. The first section examines how martial values found elaborate expression in the courtly life of the Mughal elite, highlighting the importance of military training and physical accomplishment in shaping princely and noble identities. The second section discusses the significance of wrestling within Mughal court culture. For this purpose, a range of sources has been utilised, including didactic texts, Mughal paintings, the autobiography of the Mughal emperor Babur, court chronicles such as the *Ain-i-Akbari*, and relevant secondary scholarship. The third section explores the varied forms of martial sports and their broader social and cultural relevance within Mughal society. Finally, the fourth section analyses Mughal martial culture through conceptual frameworks, examining how martial sports, such as wrestling, served as mechanisms for cultivating disciplined, able-bodied soldiers and warriors for imperial service.

II. Martial Sports in Mughal Court Culture

It is important to explore how martial values found elaborate expression in the courtly life of the Mughal elite. Mughal princes and nobles regularly engaged in a range of martial sports that required both physical strength and mental discipline. Their education placed strong emphasis on military training from an early age. In the Mughal Empire, the transition of a prince from childhood to adulthood was closely tied to his administrative and military training, reflecting the central role of governance and warfare in princely education. Munis Faruqui has noted that before the formalisation of the *mansab* system in the 1570s, a prince's progression toward adulthood typically began when the emperor entrusted him with a significant administrative or military responsibility (Faruqui 2012, 85–86). For instance, Akbar was just nine years old when his father, Humayun, assigned him to govern Ghazni in 1551. To assist in such early duties, princes often relied on experienced personnel from the imperial household; in Akbar's case, the retainers of his deceased uncle, Hindal, were reassigned to him.

After the 1570s, with the gradual institutionalisation of the *mansab* system under Akbar, the education and advancement of princes became more structured. The conferment of a *mansab*, a graded imperial rank with military and administrative responsibilities, became a key milestone in a prince's transition to adulthood. This shift was often marked by two formal rituals: first, the replacement of the prince's modest daily allowance with a *mansab*, and second, his move from the central court to a separate residence, sometimes with or without a provincial command. The grant of a *mansab* not only formalised the prince's position within the imperial hierarchy but also functioned as a crucial stage in his military training and preparation for future leadership, typically occurring before marriage (Ibid.). For instance, Jahangir was assigned the mansab of rank 10,000/10,000 when he was also just nine years old (Jahangir 1999, 6).

In one of the passages from *Storia do Mogor*, Aurangzeb harshly rebukes his former tutor, Mulla Ṣāliḥ, for failing to prepare him for the practical demands of kingship—particularly the art of war. He laments that instead of teaching him about the histories, strategies, and governance systems of great empires like the Assyrians, Persians, Turks, and Franks, or even the military exploits of his own ancestors like Timur and Babur, his education was focused on mastering Arabic and scholarly pursuits with little

relevance to rulership. Aurangzeb criticises this narrow, ornamental learning for wasting his formative years, during which he could have been trained in military leadership, political strategy, and the practical skills required to rule and defend an empire. He asserts that a Mughal prince should be prepared to command armies, besiege fortresses, and navigate the realities of internal conflict—including fighting his own brothers for survival or the throne. He praises Sheikh Mir, who taught him the art of war and died fighting for him, as his true tutor (Niccolao 1907, 29–33). This rebuke highlights Aurangzeb's belief that military training was not just useful but essential for a prince, and that without it, a royal education was fundamentally incomplete.

This view is further supported by Niccolao Manucci, who notes that 'when the little princes have reached the age of five, they are taught to read and write the paternal tongue, which is the Tartar, or the ancient speech of the Turks. After this, they are made over to learned men and courteous eunuchs, who bring them up with great strictness, and teach them the liberal and military arts' (Ibid., 347). For instance, Prince Kam Bakhsh, the son of Aurangzeb, received instruction in archery from Saif Khan, a trusted official in Aurangzeb's service (Aurangzeb 1908, 136). On another occasion, Aurangzeb advised his son, Prince Muhammad Azam Shah Bahadur, to be diligent and not neglect the proper training of his own son, Aurangzeb's grandson (Ibid., 13).

III. Wrestling's Place in Mughal Court Culture

The illustration (Fig. 1) captures one of the most beloved tales from *Gulistan* by Saadi Shirazi, encapsulating a moral deeply embedded in martial traditions. The story recounts an aged wrestling master who imparted every technique he knew to a favoured student—except one. When the young wrestler, brimming with pride, claims before the king that he has learned all there is to know, he adds that he refrains from defeating his teacher only out of respect. The king, intrigued, commands them to wrestle.

Figure 1: *The Wrestling Master is Challenged by his Pupil.*[1]

At once, the old master employs the secret move he had withheld: lifting the youth above his head and slamming him to the ground, thus humbling the presumptuous student and reminding all present of the importance of humility and lifelong learning in martial discipline (Story 27 Sheikh Mosleh i-Din Saadi Shirazi 1888, 46).

Martial culture in the Mughal era was not confined to the battlefield or courtly ritual; it permeated the public sphere as well. Wrestling and other feats of strength were central to the urban entertainment culture of the time. Champions of such sports gained prestige and material support not only from imperial courts but also from regional elites and noble households, who often sponsored wrestling matches as part of their social gatherings and festivals (O'Hanlon 2007, 498). These champions travelled between courts, responding to royal invitations and noble patronage, in pursuit of both honour and competition. Their movement also fostered a vibrant martial network that connected various political and cultural centres across the subcontinent.

Among the various martial disciplines, *Pahalwani*, a synthesis of ancient Indian *Mallayuddha* and Persian *Varzesh-e-Bastani* (sport of heroes), gained particular prominence under the Mughals. Pahalwani was more than a sport; it was a regimen aimed at building strength, agility, and mental discipline. Practised in *zoorkhanehs* (traditional gyms), it involved *koshti* (grappling) and embodied the shared martial heritage of India and Iran.

The centrality of wrestling in Mughal culture is further highlighted in the *Baburnama*, the autobiography of Emperor Babur. Between 1528 A.D. and 1530 A.D., Babur records numerous wrestling matches held during peacetime or while the imperial camp was halted during travel. These bouts served not only as entertainment but also as displays of physical prowess, fostering camaraderie among warriors (Fig. 2). One such instance was narrated by Babur, in which his strongest wrestler, Sadiq, wrestled another famous wrestler, Kulal. 'Sadiq easily threw his contender, for which he was rewarded with ten thousand tankas, a horse and a saddle, a suit of clothes, and a buttoned mantle' (Babur 1996, 426). The Mughal Emperor Babur also rewarded the defeated wrestler Kulal with three thousand tanks and a suit of clothes so that he would not feel discouraged (Ibid.). Interestingly, even a defeated competitor was rewarded for boosting his morale and encouraging him to participate in future matches, emphasising the importance of participation and sportsmanship in Mughal sporting culture, which valued honour, respect, and encouragement. These accounts reflect Babur's appreciation for wrestling as a form of competition and camaraderie within Mughal society.

Figure 2: *Feast at Sultan Jalaluddin's House from Akbar's Baburnama*.[2]

In another instance, a wrestler of Babur, named Dost Yasin Hiz, was ordered to fight not against the strongest Pahlawan but against the others. Although the custom was to wrestle with the best first. However, the next time Dost Yasin Hiz faced the Skipper Pahlawan Lahori, Dost defeated his opponent with great difficulty (Ibid. 428-29). Both wrestlers were rewarded with suits. Similarly, Babur awarded one of his wrestlers, Yahya Nohani, a fifteen-lac stipend from Sarwar (a Mughal territory) and a clad in a suit of clothing (Ibid. 442-43).

These instances illustrate that in the Mughal world, defeat in competitive bouts, such as wrestling matches, was not necessarily viewed as a source of dishonour. On the contrary, it was often recontextualised as an honourable part of competitive engagement. As historian Dr Parul Lau Gaur notes, defeat, though occasionally marked by shame, was often 'sublimed' in the Mughal ethos, especially in the context of athletic bouts (Gaur 2017, 3). This cultural perspective placed emphasis not merely on victory but on the qualities demonstrated during the contest: technique, determination, and sportsmanship. Thus, wrestling matches served as spaces where resilience was valued and losing became part of a larger narrative of perseverance and honour.

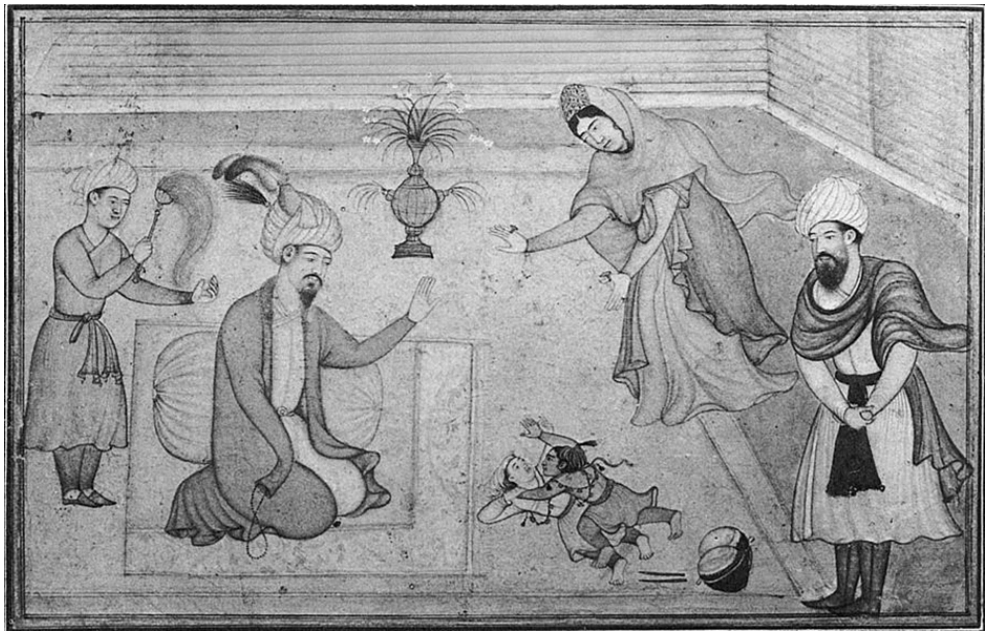

Figure 3: *Young Akbar Wrestling for a Toy in Humayun's Court*.[3]

Moreover, a vivid example of the martial ethos can be found in *Akbarnama*, which recounts an early episode from Akbar's youth. In this account (Fig. 3), the young prince engages in a wrestling match with his cousin Ibrahim Mirza for a kettle drum as a prize. The description of the event is as follows:

> He (Akbar) grappled with Ibrahim Mirza according to the canons of the skilful and of the masters of wrestling and putting his hand before his waist so lifted him up and flung him on the ground that a cry burst forth from the assemblage, and that shouts of Bravo arose from far and near..... His majesty [Akbar] beat the drum he had gained by the strength of his arm, and the joyous sound gladdened the hearts of the royal servants (Abul Fazl 1977, 455).

The wrestling match between Akbar and his cousin Ibrahim Mirza, as described in the Akbarnama, is a significant event in the narrative of Akbar's childhood. It showcases his embodiment of masculinity, attributes befitting kingship, and his assertion of power. Firstly, the act of wrestling itself is deeply ingrained in traditional notions of masculinity, representing physical strength, agility, and prowess. Akbar's ability to grapple with his cousin using the techniques of skilled wrestlers demonstrates his

physical strength and mastery of martial arts, a trait highly valued in masculine ideals. Secondly, the event highlights Akbar's potential as a future king. By defeating his cousin and claiming the kettle drum as his prize, Akbar asserts his dominance and establishes himself as a formidable leader. The act of beating the drum symbolises his authority and control, foreshadowing his future reign as the Mughal emperor. Furthermore, the reaction of the royal servants, who are gladdened by the drum's joyous sound, highlights the power dynamics at play. Akbar's victory instils confidence and admiration among those witnessing the spectacle. This admiration contributes to the construction of Akbar's image as a powerful and capable ruler, supporting his legitimacy and authority.

Following his accession, Akbar continued to patronise martial sports with great enthusiasm. As recorded in the *Ain-i-Akbari*, his court boasted a diverse array of fighters, including Persian and Turani wrestlers, boxers, stone-throwers, athletes from Hindustan, and skilled Mals from Gujarat, among others. Their salaries ranged from 70 to 450 dams (Ibid., 263). Two evenly matched opponents would engage in combat each day, with generous gifts presented to them on such occasions. Among the esteemed wrestlers of the era were Mirza Khan of Gilan, Muhammad Quli of Tabriz (nicknamed *Sher-hamla*, or Lion-attacker by Akbar), Sadiq of Bukhara, Ali of Tabriz, Murad of Turkistan, Muhammad Ali of Turan, Fulad of Tabriz, Qasiin of Tabriz, Mirza Kuhna-suwar of Tabriz, Shah Qull of Kurdistan, Hilal of Abyssinia, Sadhu Dayal, Ali, Sri Ram, Kanhya, Mangol, Ganesh, Anba, Nanka, Balbhadr, Bajrnath (Ibid.).

The appeal of martial sports extended beyond the court and permeated the urban fabric of the Mughal empire. A telling anecdote appears in the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, where Emperor Jahangir, curious about the population of Agra, instructed the kotwal Melek Ally to tour the city's *maarekahs* (venues for athletic and wrestling competitions). The kotwal reported that each arena hosted 2,000 to 3,000 spectators, even on ordinary days not marked by festivity (Jahangir 1904, 12). This scene speaks volumes about the widespread popularity of martial spectacles and the civic culture that supported them. With considerable prestige and financial rewards at stake, it is unsurprising that cities like Agra hosted a thriving network of *akharas* (wrestling schools), contributing to the cultivation of a robust public martial sphere.

Mughal imperial ambition and the dynamics of the military labour market also shaped this culture. Wrestlers, often from communities associated with martial labour, found employment through systems of patronage that linked physical excellence to royal prestige (O'Hanlon 2007, 494). For instance, Jahangir writes in his memoirs: upon receiving ambassadors from the court of Bijapur, he requested a renowned wrestler or swordsman from Sultan Ibrahim Adil Shah II. In response, the Bijapuri delegation brought a wrestler named Shir Ali. When Shir Ali competed with Jahangir's own athletes, none could match his strength. Deeply impressed, Jahangir awarded him a thousand rupees, a ceremonial robe, and an elephant. Shir Ali was subsequently appointed "Athlete of the Capital," granted a *jagir*, and given a *mansab* (an administrative rank) (Jahangir 1909, 335), further solidifying the link between athletic distinction and imperial service.

These anecdotes highlight the centrality of martial arts in Mughal society, where wrestling was both a public spectacle and a means of social mobility. Martial competition embodied the ideals of masculine excellence, loyalty, and merit. Participation alone could earn one a place in the courtly hierarchy, while victory could lead to lasting imperial favour.

Consequently, there was a significant demand for fighters with flexible combat skills in the broader market for military labour. Unlike conventional battlefield engagements, warfare in the subcontinent often required navigating diverse terrain and employing a range of tactical approaches. This fluidity demanded combatants who were not only physically robust but also highly adaptable.

Beyond their roles in the arena, these martial specialists often performed a wide array of functions. Many served as personal bodyguards to nobles and royalty, while others were employed as instructors in specialised combat techniques and physical discipline. Within the network of local gymnasiums -

(*akharas*), they acted as sparring partners, trainers, and even demonstrators of advanced techniques to aspiring fighters. Their role extended into the domain of wellness and physical therapy as well. Wrestlers frequently possessed knowledge of traditional healing methods: they set broken bones, treated battlefield injuries, and offered therapeutic massages to ease muscular strain and rehabilitate wounded limbs (Gode 1955, 85–113). In this way, the wrestler was not merely a symbol of brute force, but a multi-skilled professional integral to both the martial and physical cultures of the Mughal world.

IV. Exploring the Manifestations of Martial Sports

The varied physical activities and sports developed in concomitance with political and societal requirements that required individual drilling and exercise. According to Daud Ali, the oldest literary evidence shows that courtly elites' cultural repertoires included a significant amount of martial exercise in some manner. Didactic literature prescribed the qualities of strength, dexterity, daring, and resolution to be cultivated as part of training in arms, and men's reputations and prospects of advancement depended on their public performance on the battlefield (Ali 2004, 96–102). These activities, which can be seen as early training in skills that would later stand boys in good stead for employment at court, also reflect an attempt to erase the dichotomies between youth and adulthood and to impose an early 'virilisation' on youths as yet unmarked by the physical signs of virility (Coakley 2006, 7).

Mauizah-i-Jahangiri of Muhammad Baqir Najm-i Sani, an Indo-Islamic mirror for princes, written during the reign of Jahangir, between 1612 A.D. and 1613 A.D., provides valuable insights into political and ethical thought in India during the reign of the Mughal emperor Jahangir (1605 A.D. and 1627 A.D.) (Askari, 1965, 104; Khan 2003, 408).[4] While this genre does not provide a systematic account of political thought or a structured analysis of issues related to government, the state, or society, it still serves as a valuable complement to historical and philosophical works. By reflecting the dominant political attitudes of the ruling elite and the social values of the time, it offers important insights into the period's social, intellectual, and religious currents.

Baqir presents a powerful articulation of ideal kingship grounded in martial virtue and ethical resolve. He argues that high-mindedness (*himmat-i Ali*) and valour are the defining traits of a successful ruler, with valour taking precedence over generosity, as true courage naturally breeds selflessness. A ruler who can face mortal danger will not hesitate to give away wealth (Sani 1989, 48). He writes:

> A ruler not endowed with heroism is like a cloud without rain. Wise men have said that permanence of a country and stability of a ruler's power are not possible without [the following] four things:
> First, perfect vigilance (hazm-i kamil) [so that the ruler is] able to envision the face of tomorrow in the mirror of today.
> Second, firm resolve (azm-i rasikh) [so that] infirmity and default will not interfere with his determination.
> Third, sound judgment (ray-i sa'ib) [so that he will] not deviate from the course of moderation into error and confusion.
> Fourth, a sharp sword to ignite the harvest of his opponent's life as incendiary lightning (Ibid.).

The text outlines four essential qualities for lasting rule: perfect vigilance, to foresee future dangers; firm resolve, to remain unwavering in purpose; sound judgment, to avoid error; and the possession of a sharp sword, symbolising military strength. Warfare and victory are seen not as unfortunate necessities but as noble and divinely sanctioned duties. The sword becomes both the means of justice and the foundation of peace: 'Paradise is under the shade of swords' (Ibid). The battlefield is likened to a ruler's true court, where glory is won through blood and bravery:

> Only that person who kisses the lip of the sword
> Can embrace in a leap the bride of dominion (Ibid., 49).

Additionally, Baqir argues that a true ruler, in the heat of battle, does not concern himself with the consequences that may follow. To preserve his honour and reputation, he regards life and property as insignificant in that moment. He chooses to fight rather than allow his name and dignity to be erased. Such a ruler, through his courage, ultimately attains victory. Although the outcome of battle is uncertain, like the edge of a sword or the shifting wind, God, the Most Exalted, is said to favour and protect the brave. History shows that the timid often perish in combat, while bold and fearless warriors frequently survive. One who has experienced the allure of heroism would rather endure a thousand wounds on the battlefield than die helpless in a sickbed like a frail old man (Ibid.).

In this setting, martial skills and literary accomplishments went hand in hand. Archery and wrestling formed part of the education of sons of *Ashraf* urban elites, and well-known literary figures were often also skilled archers and swordsmen (Alavi 2006, 7–13). Rosalind has argued that these gendered bodily and literary accomplishments were, in turn, vital parts of the repertoire of a gentleman of culture, for whom appropriate bodily deportment and the cultivation of bodily health were important signs of gentility (O'Hanlon 1999). The physical activities and combat training of Mughal elites were not merely functional but a cultivated aspect of their *habitus*, shaping and reflecting their social identities. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* refers to the socially ingrained dispositions, habits, and ways of behaving that individuals acquire through participation in their cultural and social environment (Bourdieu 2013, 143). This embodied habitus distinguished them from lower social groups and reinforced their elite status.

Historians have recognised that a particular kind of masculinity was essential and driven by the need for recognition in imperial service (O'Hanlon 1999, 61). O'Hanlon highlights the significance of cultivating bodily skills for cavalry warfare and of establishing a network that provided patronage and employment for specialists in combat (O'Hanlon 2007, 490–523).

Therefore, the Mughal elites engaged in a wide range of competitive combat sports designed to both psychologically and physically prepare them for warfare's rigours and to showcase their warlike and honourable traits in public. These games included contests of man against man, men against beasts and beasts against each other (Garza 2016, 142). The reasons people competed in these games, including whether they did so for fun and self-expression or glory, power, money, and other things, were also impacted by culture. The admiration and respect the contender received elevated him above other royal servants and strengthened his sense of belonging to the Mughal court (Gaur 2017, 5). Such a tangible gift came with an unbreakable connection to pride and honour. Titles and gifts were given as additional ways for the Mughal court to express its worldview.

Furthermore, strength and prowess are the most apparent virtues in military sports. The combats, contests, and enactment of physical power through these modes were an arena where hegemony and masculinity could be seen at work (Ibid, 8). Also, to earn the respect of their troops, a warrior-leader required commanders to excel in physical prowess. Knights, samurai, and Rajput leaders were often

expected to lead by example in battle, showcasing their physical abilities as a symbol of their worthiness to lead. Therefore, Emperors, princes, and high-ranking amirs were highly skilled soldiers trained in horseback riding, archery, swordsmanship, and the use of firearms (Blake 1986, 204). In this context, the Qabus Nama is presented by its author, Kai Kaus Ibn Iskandar, as a guide written for his beloved son and chosen heir, offering advice to help him avoid the dangers of life and follow a path that would bring him the greatest advantage. In this, the author writes:

> Be well aware my son, [Horse] riding and hunting are the occupation for gentlemen, particularly in youth. Yet there must be bounds and measure to every occupation, and one cannot hunt every day. In the week of seven days, hunt for two days, devote yourself to the fulfilment of God's commands for three days and to your own domestic affairs for the [remaining] two.
>
> When you set out to ride, never mount a horse that is too small; however handsome a man may be, he appears insignificant on a little horse, whereas, although a man may be insignificant in stature, he appears to great advantage on a big horse. Also, except when on a journey, do not ride an ambling horse, because while riding an ambling horse, a man holds himself in a bad posture. In the town, therefore, and in your own precincts, ride a spirited and high-stepping horse, so that because of the horse's mettle, you are prevented from being careless of your own person. Always hold yourself erect if you desire not to display an ugly posture in the saddle (Iskandar 1951, 83–84).

The passage from the *Qabus Nama* highlights the importance of disciplined conduct and physical presentation in the life of a nobleman, particularly in relation to horse riding and hunting skills central to martial identity. These activities were integral to cultivating the bearing, posture, and commanding presence expected of a warrior-leader. By holding himself erect and mastering his mount, a commander demonstrated the self-discipline, elegance, and physical confidence that inspired loyalty and respect among soldiers. It reflects a broader martial culture in which commanding the battlefield began with commanding one's body—a prerequisite for any warrior-leader seeking legitimacy and authority in the eyes of his men.

The *Qabus Nama* further advises on giving battle to an enemy: Once you enter battle, any display of laziness or hesitation is unacceptable—you must strike first before the enemy has a chance to act. Once in the thick of the fight, hold nothing back and show no concern for your own safety; after all, one who is fated to die will not return home to rest again (Ibid., 87).

> Though I should have a lion for foe I'd dare,
> Were he unseen or seen, my sword to bare,
> Who's destined friendless in the tomb to lie,
> Can never sleep at home in friendship's care (Ibid.).

The *Qabus Nama* strongly emphasises the virtues of courage, resolve, and unwavering commitment in battle. It advises that once a warrior enters combat, there must be no hesitation or concern for personal safety; boldness and proactive aggression are essential. The text suggests that a true fighter should be ready to face death and continue resisting, even when surrounded or physically overpowered, as visible determination can instil fear in the enemy. Fear or cowardice, on the other hand, not only endangers one's life but leads to lasting dishonour. The consequences of being seen as weak or disloyal on the battlefield are severe—bringing shame among peers and tarnishing one's reputation permanently. Therefore, it is better to die with honour in battle than to live in disgrace and humiliation (Ibid., 88).

Understandably, participation in the Mughal imperial military was deeply intertwined with the concept of masculinity. The Mughal elites engaged in a diverse array of organised combat sports, meticulously

designed to hone their physical and mental preparedness for the rigours of battle. These sporting contests encompassed various activities, from man-to-man combat to confrontations against beasts and even clashes between animals. Individually, participants competed to demonstrate their mastery of various martial disciplines such as boxing, wrestling, fencing, archery, and horsemanship. Additionally, they formed teams to compete in equestrian sports like buzkashi and polo that mirrored the intensity of actual battles. In essence, these organised combat sports served as a crucial avenue for Mughal elites to assert and validate their masculinity while simultaneously preparing themselves for the demands of military service.

Emperor Akbar actively sought to strengthen the symbolic ties between imperial service and idealised manhood, embedding these values deeply within the fabric of courtly life (O'Hanlon 1999, 85). The renowned mansabdars, amirs, and other imperial servants represented the pinnacle of manhood. Prominent mansabdars, amirs, and other high-ranking officials were idealised as embodiments of masculine virtue—figures who exemplified strength, loyalty, and martial competence. As Rosalind O'Hanlon has argued, the health of the polity was closely linked to the physical vitality of the sovereign, whose body metaphorically represented the state. In this vision, the king was likened to a philosopher-ruler whose just and orderly governance held together a kingdom imagined as a unified body with many functioning limbs, each fulfilling its natural role under central direction (O'Hanlon 2007, 498). This ideal of ruler masculinity was further reinforced by Emperor Aurangzeb's counsel to his sons. He instructed them:

> If you are on a march, take horse 48 minutes after sunrise. Should you hunt on the way... If you are on a journey, but it is a day of halt... spend 48 minutes of the morning in archery and musketry practice... Gradually make yourself perfect in the habit of wearing arms (Sarkar 1933, 39–41).

Aurangzeb's words highlight the Mughal emphasis on constant readiness, self-discipline, and martial training, qualities deemed essential for rulership. The cultivation of these virtues was not merely practical but also symbolic, reinforcing a ruler's legitimacy and authority through his mastery over both body and weaponry.

However, while martial sports served as a tool for elite self-fashioning, the motivations for participation among the common masses were shaped by different concerns. For ordinary men, training in wrestling and other martial disciplines offered opportunities for social mobility, patronage, and physical empowerment. Unlike the elite, whose engagement in martial sports was framed by ideals of kingship and governance, the common practitioners sought livelihood, recognition, and personal advancement within an evolving military labour market that increasingly valued physical skill, resilience, and adaptability.

V. Conceptual Framework: Discipline, Capital, and Hegemonic Masculinity

To understand the political significance of wrestling in the Mughal Empire, it is useful to situate the evidence within broader theoretical conversations on the body, power, and masculinity. The Mughal court's investment in martial sports can be read as a part of a structured regime of bodily production.

Michel Foucault's analysis of 'discipline' helps explain how institutions shape and regulate bodies in order to produce individuals who are both obedient and efficient. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that modern systems of power operate not only through laws or coercion but also through subtle techniques of training, supervision, and repetition that cultivate what he calls 'docile bodies' (Foucault 2020, 136–37). These disciplined bodies are capable, skilled, and productive, yet they are also conditioned to conform to established hierarchies and authority (Ibid.). Discipline works through everyday practices such as drills, routines, regulated conduct, and continuous observation, gradually shaping individuals' bodies and behaviour.

According to Foucault, disciplinary systems often rely on methods such as regular training, examination, and hierarchical supervision. Through repeated exercises and strict routines, individuals internalise control over their own bodies, developing habits of self-discipline that align with institutional expectations (Ibid., 145-56). In this way, power operates not only externally but also through the body itself, shaping how individuals move, behave, and perform.

So, Foucault's idea of 'discipline' helps us understand the martial culture and its correlation with the Mughal Empire. The repetitive drills (kasarat), regulated diets, celibacy codes, and akhara training routines resemble techniques for producing docile yet capable bodies. Wrestlers were subjected to continuous self-regulation and public evaluation, and courtly competitions took place under the emperor's watchful authority. Even Jahangir's act of counting spectators at wrestling arenas signals an awareness of visibility and regulation. Wrestling thus combined discipline with performative sovereignty in which the body was both trained and theatrically subordinated to imperial authority.

Furthermore, Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concepts of habitus and capital provide a useful framework for understanding how bodily practices such as martial training operated within Mughal society. Bourdieu uses the term habitus to describe the set of deeply ingrained dispositions, habits, and modes of behaviour that individuals acquire through their upbringing and participation in particular social environments (Bourdieu 2013, 78–79). These dispositions shape how people move, think, and act, often unconsciously, and they reproduce the values and structures of the society in which they live. Habitus is therefore embodied social knowledge.

In the Mughal context, the disciplined routines of the *akhara*, including rigorous physical exercise, controlled diet, regulated conduct, and constant bodily training, cultivated a distinctive martial habitus. Wrestlers developed physical strength, as well as a particular bodily posture, self-control, endurance, and discipline that marked them as members of a martial culture. These embodied qualities were the signs of readiness for military service and distinguished trained fighters from ordinary men.

Closely related to habitus is Bourdieu's concept of 'capital,' which refers to the resources individuals accumulate and deploy to gain status and power within a social field. Bourdieu identifies symbolic capital (prestige, honour, recognition) and cultural capital (skills, knowledge, and cultivated abilities) as forms of capital distinct from economic capital (Bourdieu 1986, 245). In the Mughal world, martial skill functioned as a form of embodied capital. Physical strength, technical mastery of wrestling, and a reputation as a skilled fighter could be converted to advance socially through imperial patronage. Successful wrestlers received robes of honour, stipends, titles, jagirs, and even mansabs, representing how bodily prowess could be transformed into both symbolic prestige and material reward.

Finally, R.W. Connell's concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' provides an important framework for understanding how societies construct and maintain dominant ideals of manhood. Connell argues that masculinity is not a single universal trait but a hierarchy of different masculinities that exist within a given social order(Connell 2021, 36–37). Among these, *hegemonic masculinity* refers to the culturally dominant model of manhood that legitimises male authority and social hierarchy (Ibid., 77). It represents the idealised form of masculinity that is most socially valued and associated with power, leadership, physical strength, discipline, and authority (Ibid.).

This dominant masculine ideal does not necessarily describe the behaviour of all men, but it functions as a normative standard against which other masculinities are measured. Men who embody or approximate this ideal often gain prestige, authority, and social advantage, while other forms of masculinity may be subordinated or marginalised (Ibid.). Institutions such as the state, military, and elite social networks often play a key role in reinforcing these ideals by rewarding behaviours that align with dominant masculine norms.

In the framework of the Mughal empire, the imperial court promoted a form of hegemonic masculinity centred on martial ability, physical strength, courage, discipline, and loyalty to the sovereign. Emperors, princes, mansabdars, and champion wrestlers collectively embodied this dominant masculine model. Public displays of martial prowess in activities such as wrestling, archery, hunting, and equestrian sports reinforced the association between masculinity and military competence. Even the structured nature of wrestling contests, where both victory and honourable defeat were publicly acknowledged and rewarded, helped sustain a system in which masculine prestige was tied to physical discipline and service to imperial authority. In this way, martial sports contributed to the production and maintenance of an idealised form of imperial manhood that supported the political order of the Mughal state.

Conclusion:

Martial sports, especially wrestling, held a much greater importance in the Mughal world than just recreation or courtly entertainment. They were an integral part of the empire's political, social, and cultural fabric. The cultivation of the body was deeply intertwined with the functioning of Mughal power.

At the imperial court, martial sports served as performative spectacles through which sovereignty, hierarchy, and masculine authority were publicly articulated. Wrestling matches before emperors and courtiers dramatised ideals of strength, honour, and discipline, and imperial patronage transformed bodily prowess into social and political rewards. Titles, stipends, robes of honour, jagirs, and mansabs turned physical skill into symbolic and material capital, incorporating successful athletes into imperial service. Thus, the sports arena served as a space where political legitimacy and masculine virtue were visibly enacted.

At the same time, the culture of martial sports extended beyond the court and permeated the empire's urban and rural landscape. Networks of *akharas* and travelling champions connected village society, urban leisure culture, and imperial patronage. For common practitioners, martial training offered a pathway to recognition, employment, and upward mobility within the expanding military labour market. Wrestling operated simultaneously as preparation for warfare, a credential of employability, and a form of public entertainment that reinforced shared ideals of courage, resilience, and honour.

Viewed through the lenses of discipline, symbolic capital, and hegemonic masculinity, Mughal wrestling culture reveals how imperial governance was enacted through the body. In this sense, the Mughal Empire governed not only through administrative institutions and fiscal structures but also through the cultivation and circulation of embodied martial excellence. Wrestling and related martial sports were therefore vital institutions through which the Mughal polity articulated its ideals of power, masculinity, and social order.

VII. References

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[1] The king, sitting in a garden pavilion surrounded by courtiers, witnesses the victory of the old wrestler who holds the young one upside down by his neck and one leg, while other athletes smile approvingly. File:Mahmud Muzahhib. THE WRESTLING MASTER IS CHALLENGED BY HIS PUPIL. Gulistan Saadi, 1543 BNF.JPEG - Wikimedia Commons

[2] Indian, Mughal Empire (1526–1858), Reign of Akbar (1556–1605), Feast at Sultan Jalāu’d-dīn’s House at Karrah from the Baburnama (Book of Babur), ca. 1589-1590. Ink, gold, and color on paper; 26 × 14 cm (miniature), 35.5 × 23.3 cm (sheet). Gift of Mr. Carl Otto von Kienbusch, Class of 1906, for the Carl Otto von Kienbusch Jr., Memorial Collection. (y1971-30)

[3] Akbar, as a young child, wrestles with his cousin for possession of a toy drum in the presence of his father, Humayun, and his governess. 5-akbar-the-great-1542-1605-granger.jpg (900×575) (fineartamerica.com)

[4] Baqir entered the imperial service at the rank of one hundred or three hundred sawar and rose rapidly in the administrations of lahangir and Shahiahan. After serving as the governor of Patna, Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, Gujarat, Delhi, Jaunpur, and Allahabad. His political career ended with his death in 1637. Sayyid Hasan Askari, ‘Mirza Muhammad Baqir Najm-i Thani’, in ‘Arshi’ Presentation Volume, ed. Malik Ram and Md. Ahmad (New Delhi, India: Majlis-i Nazr-i Arshi, 1965), 104. He was linked to the Mughal family through his marriage to the niece of queen Nuriahan. Jahangir affectionately called him son (farzand).(Khan 2003, 408) A man of both the pen and the sword, Bagir symbolized the Indo-Persian social and cultural norms of the ruling elite.