Religious, Caste, Gender Inequalities and the Making of *Akhāṛā*s (Wrestling Gymnasiums) as a Social Space in North India

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Abstract

Religion, caste and gender are the fundamental axes of social inequality in India. These three categories can be defined in Bourdieuan terms as "structuralist constructivism," which establishes notions of social categories and dynamics of power relation in social spaces through a symbolic system organised on the basis of "logic of difference." The *akhāṛā* (wrestling gymnasium), a social and spatial congregation organised for the practice of a specific Indian martial art of wrestling popularly known as *khusti*, is one such symbolic social space. Despite having a shared "moral universe" whose attitudes, practices, and orientations overlap significantly, *akhāṛā*s are beset with tendencies of social divisions that manifest themselves along religious, caste and gender lines. Most *akhāṛā*s have a strong Hindu element in both their membership and their symbols. The sanctity of the *akhāṛā*s heavily relies on the Hindu notions of "purity" and "pollution." The notion of *akhāṛā*s has also been shaped with the articulation of concepts like *brahmacharya* (abstinence), masculinity and physical prowess. The strength invigorated in *akhāṛā*s through wrestling epitomises "virility" and "ideal masculinity," qualities ascribed to men. These notions reinforce the exclusion of women and low castes from *akhāṛā*s. However, "massage," "*dangal*s" (wrestling bouts) and "inter-dining" practised among wrestlers in *akhāṛā*s act as an agency for transcending the bounds of caste hierarchy based on "purity" and "pollution." Secondly, the last decades of the twentieth century saw female wrestlers from north India turning gender equations upside down by entering the "male-sacred" space of *akhāṛā*s and taking part in this supposedly "all-male" sport of wrestling. This paper argues that *akhāṛā*s act as "heterotopias of deviation" – a "social space" that provides a model of liminal experience for emulation and identification, which proves more important than competing and cuts across religious, caste and gender lines.

Keywords: *akhāṛā*, wrestling, religion, caste, gender, inequality

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"*The natives all over India are exceedingly fond of these diversions; which are regulated by certain ceremonials, observed with the most scrupulous etiquette. A sufficient space is marked out, generally in the smoothest ground, and if possible, under the shade of trees, which is carefully dug up, and cleared of all the stones, hard lumps, &c. This is called the Uk,hara, and is held sacred; no one entering it with his shoes on, nor any impure things being suffered to be brought within its limits*."[1]

The above statement, made by a British military adventurer Thomas Duer Broughton in 1813, aptly sums up the 'popular' and 'symbolic' Indian 'cultural tradition' of *akhāṛā*.[2] *Akhāṛā* is both an institution and a socio-cultural space. As an institution, *akhāṛā* is a congregation or league denoting a place of training for a specific form of Indian martial art known as *kushti* (wrestling) with facilities for boarding, lodging, and education under the leadership of a *guru* (teacher). Its form as a socio-cultural space[3] arises from a more ubiquitous and intricate concern with the place of the human body in the society and the significance of embodied practice with regard to religious, social, and moral values. Even though the contours of *akhāṛā* have morphed and adapted with changing times and different historical contexts, *akhāṛā* had always its own symbolic significance – whether under rajas and maharajas, from ancient India to modern India, during the national movement and India's Partition, new nation-state and the Nehruvian era, globalisation and economic liberalisation.[4]

At the turn of the twentieth century, *akhāṛā* metamorphosed into a 'social space' where religious, caste and gender identities were constructed and expressed through symbolic actions. These three categories can be defined in Bourdieuan terms as 'structuralist constructivism', which establishes notions of social categories and dynamics of power relation in social spaces through a symbolic system organised on the basis of 'logic of difference'.[5] Most *akhāṛā*s have a strong Hindu element in both their membership and their symbols. In his study of the *akhāṛā*s in Banaras, Joseph S. Alter found that all the wrestlers were Hindus.[6] Norbert Peabody, who studied *akhāṛā*s in Kota in the state of Rajasthan, found that Hindu and Muslims trained in separate *akhāṛā*s. Furthermore, the lower castes and the former 'Untouchables' had their own *akhāṛā*s.[7] The sanctity of the *akhāṛā*s heavily relies on the Hindu notions of 'purity' and 'pollution'.[8] The notion of *akhāṛā*s has also been shaped with the articulation of concepts like *brahmacharya* (abstinence), masculinity and physical prowess. The strength invigorated in *akhāṛā*s through wrestling epitomises 'virility' and 'ideal masculinity', qualities ascribed to men. These notions reinforce the exclusion of women and low castes from *akhāṛā*s. However, 'massage', '*dangal*' (wrestling bouts) and 'inter-dining' practised among wrestlers in *akhāṛā*s

act as a means for cutting across the restrictions of the caste system founded on 'purity' and 'pollution'.[9] Secondly, the last decades of the twentieth century saw female wrestlers from north India turning gender equations upside down by entering the "male-sacred" space of *akhāṛā*s and taking part in this supposedly "all-male" sport of wrestling.

A dialectical relationship can therefore be said to have developed between *akhāṛā*s and society structured on religious, caste and gender inequalities. This paper argues that in this dialectical relationship *akhāṛā* acts as, to use Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec's term, 'heterotopia of deviation',[10] a social space that provides a model of liminal experience for emulation and identification, which proves more important than competing, and that cuts across religious, caste and gender lines. The study begins by exploring how 'religious', 'caste' and 'gender' identities and relationships are constructed *differently* in the *akhāṛā*s from that of the society.

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In the context of caste hierarchy, the 'heterotopia of deviation' of *akhāṛā*s, can be seen specifically in the practise of 'massage', '*dangal*s' (wrestling bouts), and 'inter-dining' practised among the wrestlers. Wrestlers usually consider massage as an extremely significant exercise. Massage involves close physical contact between wrestlers. A wrestler not only touches another wrestler, he also touches that wrestler's feet and head, which are the most impure and purest parts of the body, respectively. For example, a Brahman wrestler can be seen giving a massage to the feet of an elder 'Untouchable' wrestler. Contrariwise, an 'Untouchable' wrestler can massage the neck and back of an upper-caste wrestler. "Massage is, then," argues Joseph S. Alter, "a potentially dangerous activity. It poses a real threat of contagious pollution, which can have a serious impact on caste rank."[11] Shanti Prakash Atreya argues that it is indeed for the reason that massage challenges the caste system that it is, in general, significant to the social space of *akhāṛā*s: "[In reciprocal massage,] status, class and caste distinctions are erased."[12] Significantly, the wrestlers consider "massage" as a challenge to the caste system. They use massage as a way of making their way of living different from the usual way of living which is organised according to strict rules of the caste system. Therefore, by undermining the caste system, massage is considered as a means for rising above the illusionary constraints of the caste system.[13]

A number of anthropologists like Alan R. Beals,[14] D. N. Majumdar,[15] David G. Mandelbaum[16] and H. Orenstein[17] have argued that wrestling contests are atypical cultural occasions because these contests are moments where caste rules are openly challenged.

Majumdar says: "No caste restrictions are observed in choosing the combatants. All feelings of superiority and inferiority are laid aside, and a *Thakur* can wrestle with a *Chamar* or *Parsi*."[18] Joseph S. Alter suggests that *dangal*s serve as a critique of caste hierarchy. Alter argues that in practical terms, it is possible that an 'Untouchable' wrestler can put his knee on a Brahman wrestler's neck and overturn him on to his back and into shame. In a society founded on rigid rules of caste, where a person is made subservient to the caste system, and where much social intercourse is directed by an inherent conviction in the truthfulness of auspiciousness, fate and contagious impurity, and, it is unsettling to see an 'Untouchable' act in terms differently from that stipulated by the caste system and cultural authority.[19]

In *akhāṛā*s, wrestlers also eat food in the same plate – in a breach of caste rules – without discrimination. Raj Singh Khalifa of Jhajjar, Haryana, says that along with many 'Dalit' wrestlers, he has eaten food in the same plate. Sadiq Hussain, a wrestler from Mewat, states that a wrestler has only one caste, that is, he is a wrestler. According to Ved Prakash, director of Pratap Akhāṛā, Kharkhauda, the entire human race is a single caste. He said, "caste is artificial, the real thing is man."[20]

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A study of the forms of violence adopted by the Hindu wrestlers during riots in the early twentieth century against the Muslims in north India establishes the "heterotopiaic" structure and nature of *akhāṛā*s and the worldview of wrestlers. A case in point is the fierce Hindu-Muslim riot that took place in Kota, a city in the state of Rajasthan, north Indian state, on 14th September 1989. The wrestlers' actions were freighted with values, ethics and practices originating in *akhāṛā*s.[21]

The riot began on the day of Anant Chaturdashi, a Hindu festival, while participants were organising religious marches through Kota. The carnage took the lives of twenty-six city inhabitants and a further ninety-nine people were injured. Innumerable more "walking wounded" were given treatment on an outpatient basis in local clinics or by neighbours or friends. Furthermore, incendiarism, vandalism, and robbing caused loss of property. Although Muslims constituted only nine per cent of the population of the city which is roughly 5,00,000, they faced the maximum fatalities and bore a huge amount of loss of property than others.[22] Norbert Peabody argues that "a locally exalted variant of wrestling known as *vajramushti kushti*, or 'fighting with thunderbolt fists', which historically permitted the use of hand-held weapons and was linked to the religious practices of Shakta tantrism, left a clear imprint on the aims and forms of collective violence perpetrated by wrestlers."[23]

The Hindu-Muslim riots in the city of Kota were part of a bigger anti-Muslim pogrom. However, the forms of violence employed by these wrestlers betrays numerous characteristic features. Among these, the most striking feature was the non-existence of many violent methods that were employed in other communal violence. For instance, only one rape case was reported from Kota's riots, which was not like the communal violence that took place in 1992 and 1993 in Bombay, or in 2002 in Ahmedabad, where rape of both Muslim women and men was widely reported. In Kota, young children and Muslim women were mostly not subjected to the worst forms of the violence that was carried out directly against Muslim males. Secondly, Kota wrestlers were resolute that they should not use guns, while ten persons were killed in police shootings. Nearly all the brutality was in the form of "stabbings," in which the attackers used old-fashioned bladed weapons, such as "the *talwar* (a short scimitar-like sword), the *ballam* (a pike with sharpened steel points at both ends), and various types of small knives." A large number of those wounded or killed suffered cuts, with wounds on the arms, shoulders, and head. Norbert Peabody argues that "the decision not to arm themselves with guns clearly involved an element of conscious choice because it maximised the amount of Muslim blood that flowed in the streets, which is further suggested by the slogans that they chanted during the riots: 'We shall take revenge on Babur's progeny by spilling their blood, and kill them, cut them'."[24]

In his study of *akhāṛā*s in Banaras, Uttar Pradesh, Joseph S. Alter has shown that the wrestlers were concerned about the "loss of semen" (for them semen was *amrit*, the nectar of eternal life) – whether this happened through masturbation, nocturnal emissions or sexual intercourse – and, to achieve this, efforts were made to control carnal desires and erotic feelings. It was for these reasons that wrestlers preferably followed the rules of *brahmacharya*, the first of the four Hindu life-stages. *Brahmacharya* involves religious education, sexual abstinence and discipleship.[25] Echoing these principles, numerous wrestlers of Kota argued that a concern for loss of semen underlay the disinclination to rape Muslim women and men in the city's 1989 riots. The wrestlers of Kota's considered rape as neither empowering or a legitimate form of communal violence. They thought that rape wasted precious semen stores.

Although a large number of wrestlers in Kota are unmarried, young, and celibate, there are nonetheless many wrestlers who are married, older and sexually active. "That many wrestlers in Kota are sexually active," argues Norbert Peabody, "does not negate Alter's larger thesis about the importance of semen retention in their worldview. But it does situate it in a somewhat different set of sexual practices that [Alter] does not discuss, which derives from Indian tantrism." The most famous of these practices is *coitus interruptus* whereby the male devotee in sexual union with his female partner redirects his discharge of semen away from his

partner's womb and channels it up his spinal column into the storage chamber in the cranial vault. These sexual techniques climax in the practice whereby the adept fully ejaculates within his partner and then, through the dexterity of "urethral suction" (*vajroli mudra*), reabsorbs his own ejaculate, along with the menstrual and sexual discharge of his partner, which is far more powerful than that produced by the male partner, back into his penis before sending the mixture up the spinal column. The belief is that uterine fluids are important in the production of *amrit* in the cranial vault for eternal life.[26]

These beliefs concerning the importance of uterine fluids in the production of *amrit* in the cranial vault also explain why *vajramushti* wrestlers made the drawing of blood from the head the specific object of their combat. Causing one's opponent to bleed from the head – the locus and store of the life-giving elixir that was made from the mixture of male semen and female uterine blood – weakened him in ways going beyond simple anaemia. Indeed, given that "*vajra*" remains a common euphemism for a hardened penis, this act also referenced the sexual penetration of one's opponent and extraction of his "uterine" blood. Commenting on the prevalence of head wounds during Kota's riots, Norbert Peabody argues that gendered ideas about bleeding from the head were frequent reference to Muslim victims as "cunts."[27] Blooding an opponent asserted the masculinity of the victor while feminising the vanquished.

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Bettina van Hoven and Catherine Horschelman in *Spaces of Masculinities* argue that in adherence to the existing power structure, spaces are divided in terms of gender as an operating social order with certain sets of system, structures, geographies, institutions, relations, customs, values and practices. This bifurcation of social spaces leads to the conservation, maintenance and enforcement of certain patterns of behaviour that are socially acceptable. This leads to the creation of "gendered spaces and construction of gender identities in different socio-cultural settings. Reserved and used almost exclusively by the male population, these are the spaces where power and legitimacy of masculinity are cemented and displayed."[28] The *akhāṛā* is one such space which has been defined and embraced as a traditional place of "male" possession. It is a place with ritual and spiritual dimensions under the guidance of a *guru*.[29] The *guru* instructs the members of the *akhāṛā* in physical and mental discipline to achieve a certain balance in life through *brahmacharya*.

The notion of *akhāṛā* has been shaped with the articulation of concepts like *brahmacharya* (abstinence), masculinity, physical prowess, vegetarian diet and *guru-shishya* (master-disciple) tradition. In popular perception, the *akhāṛā* is a homosocial space, which is

considered as a symbol of "ideal" masculinity, "signifying both the symbolic and material dimension of male power."[30] This ideal masculinity is further reinforced by excluding women and subordinate masculinities. Moreover, the exclusion has been naturalised by making femininity as the anti-thesis of "spiritual" masculinity, which the *akhāṛā* invigorates in young boys and men by the Spartan-like regimented schedule. This invigorated strength is used to master *kushti* or *pehalwani*, a unique form of Indian wrestling whose origin goes back several centuries. The *pehalwan* epitomised strength and virility, qualities ascribed to men. It is the sport of *kushti*, "considered a way of life that symbolises masculinity at its best."[31]

It is important to note that the *akhāṛā* is considered as a sacred space with immense power along with a sense of magic facilitating the assiduous pursuit of what is socially consider as to be morally superior activity. Narendra Shastri of the Jhajjar Gurukul, Haryana, in his interview said that just by watching the *akhāṛā* a person gets immense motivation to become *balwaan* (powerful) and *chritavan* (dignified character).[32] The *akhāṛā* constructs a masculinity which commands respect and sets a person apart even in his mundane life from normal humans. This masculine status is reinforced with the institutional arrangement of the *akhāṛā*, which consists of strictly regimented schedule of an intense practice of *kushti* under the tutelage of the *guru*.

The Dronacharya Awardee wrestling coach, the late Shri Yashveer Singh emphasised in his interview that "the discipline which the *akhāṛā* cultivates in the wrestlers is achieved by cutting them off with the outside world." In this context, Singh recounted that he joined the *akhāṛā* at the Chhatrasal Stadium, Delhi, as a coach at the age of twenty-nine. He rarely used to visit his family. Singh emphasised that "he was afraid to go to his home to meet his children because of the distraction it causes to him. He can only inculcate discipline in young wrestlers when he himself will follow it."[33] Wrestling coach Hemand Kumar, for whom wrestling has always been his passion, says, "the boys who take [*kushti*] up are saved from 'the nonsense' of the streets."[34] In other words, "outside world," which is considered as a symbol of distraction, has to avoid to become great wrestler. The territorial sacredness of the *akhāṛā* is centred on a strategy of cultivating discipline in young boys to resist the sensuous appeal of the "outside world." Here the "outside" is comprised of one's own family and any habit out of regimented schedule of the *akhāṛā*. This art of self-control, that is, to detach oneself from the 'outside world' is achieved through severe training and surveillance by the *guru* on the activities of the wrestlers. Any breach of discipline is harshly punished, and hence, it is not for everybody to live the life of a wrestler. Therefore, wrestlers, it is believed, are above the ordinary human

beings. They live in their own sacred space cultivated into them by the *akhāṛā* which empowers them with a spiritual power even in their social and everyday lifestyle.

The success and power of the wrestler is associated with the embodiment of self-control to attain balance between sexual passion and celibacy. Sexual passion renders the hard work of a wrestler, his practice, obedience and devotion meaningless. The whole regimen of wrestling is wired around the principle of celibacy.[35] Sushil Kumar, the most famous and successful wrestler of India who won two Olympic medals, is considered the most disciplined wrestler. According to Yashveer Singh, Sushil Kumar is one of the most accomplished wrestlers because his marriage is "100 per cent arranged marriage and he never got distracted by the 'outside world'."[36] Here, the comparison of celibacy with arranged marriage was done to imply that women's participation in wrestling acts as a distraction to the male wrestlers. He was concerned about the love marriages that are taking place between male and female wrestlers which, in his opinion, leads to a decline in the career of the male wrestlers.

The masculinity of a wrestler is based on the "exaggerated concern with celibacy, discipline, self-control and the absolute restrain of semen."[37] In particular, the connection of celibacy with the loss of semen is used to construct masculinity. Loss of semen is considered to result in loss of masculinity. Celibacy is regarded by a wrestler as essential for his self-control, which he needs to repeatedly earn and construct. Hence, the entry of woman into the *akhāṛā*, which is considered as inherently 'male' domain, is seen as contesting the masculinity of a wrestler. Prem Chowdhry argues that in a milieu where sport occupies an important social role and the normative sport is male, entry of female athletes especially in certain select "male sacred" sports which have been traditionally an exclusive preserve of men poses a critical challenge.[38] Moreover, according to Anne Bolin, the presence of robust female athletes demonstrates that sporting prowess is not naturally masculine.[39]

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Wrestling is patronised by the state of Haryana. The state is known for producing wrestling champions since the days of Leela Ram Pahalwan, who had won a gold medal in the Asian Games in the 1960s, to Sushil Kumar, who was a silver medallist at the 2012 London Olympics. Every village in Haryana would have an *akhāṛā*, even though many villages lacks educational facilities.[40] However, girls were never allowed or encouraged to participate in sports, in general, and wrestling, in particular, despite the fact that wrestling was a part of popular culture. Wrestling in an *akhāṛā* meant the girl and her family would have to suffer condemnation. Roger Horrocks and others show how important male sport is in the

consolidation of various masculine images and lifestyle.[41] The "basic hegemonic ideology of sport has been defined by scholars as 'male'."[42] It validates "male dominance not only by excluding or marginalising women but also by naturalising a connection between masculinity and the skills of sport, aggression, physical strength, success in competition and negation of the feminine."[43] Thus, female athletes' involvement in sports questions this version of masculinity and the power that emanates from it. According to the critics, under such an ideology, female athletes "put their 'femininity' at risk, threaten the social order and invite disapproval and hostility because they 'act' male."[44]

Among such ideology where wrestling is considered as a male domain, the introduction of female wrestling was a radical step. It was in the mid-1990s that wrestling was introduced for women in India. According to Yashveer Singh, India was "forced" to allow women enter in wrestling. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Asian Federation of Wrestling put the condition before the Indian Federation that India would be allowed to participate in the Junior Wrestling Championship only if they would also allow female wrestlers to participate. Hence, this condition was the only reason for such a drastic change.[45] This decision was not well received among the wrestlers and the coaches. In 2002, when wrestling was starting to allow women train with men, coaches and wrestlers criticised the Haryana Sports Department coach, Ishwar Singh Dahiya, for allowing "goats to stay among lions."[46] Here, goats is a euphemism for the girls and lions is for the boys in context of the all-male sport of *kushti*. This initiative of letting the "goats" train with "lions" was considered as a challenge to the social norms of a patriarchal tradition.

Female wrestlers not complying with their prescribed gender roles, thus, "challenged a gendered visual economy" in Haryana.[47] In Haryana, the physically powerful and competent women who are desired for performing agricultural work therefore become suspect when they use this prowess in another field, especially like those of wrestling and boxing. Men accused female wrestlers "of 'building their muscles' by lifting weights, 'wearing *kachcha*s' (underclothes) and exposing their bodies to the public and indulging in wrestling." Some of the girls complained that they were even discouraged from playing sports that might make them "manly."[48] This negative opinion shows "threatened masculinity" in the state of Haryana.

In this context, Rupal Oza argues that it is neo-liberal policies adopted by India that helped "accommodate the contradictions of Haryana's profound gender bias while at the same time produce and celebrate successful female athletes."[49] Medals at national and international events helped the girls get recognition, while jobs through the sport allowed them to be self-sufficient and motivated others to join in. In 2001, a cabinet resolution was passed where

sportspersons winning gold, silver and bronze medals in the Olympics, world championships and Asian Games were promised out-of-turn appointment as officers in the Haryana Civil Service and Haryana Police Service.[50] Sakshi Mallik's coach, Ishwar Singh Dhaiya, explains that the popularity of the sport of wrestling has grown among women in the past ten to twelve years because the state confers jobs on successful athletes. "Getting government jobs became a source of motivation for the girls to start wrestling. More than [thirty] girls from the centre have got jobs in various departments, including Haryana Police, Railways, etc. Last year, nine wrestlers, including two girls, from the centre got in as coaches in the Haryana sports department and one girl got a job in the Sports Authority of India,"[51] said Dahiya. These jobs come with *izzat* (respect) and significant power. Parents of wrestling women support their daughter's interest in wrestling hoping that her success will eventually fetch fame, a job, and *izzat*.[52] Oza further points out that the majority of wrestling women are from the *Jat* upper caste families. For instance, Sakshi Malik's success and Geeta Phogat's story cannot be understood without consideration of her *Jat* caste and the social, political and economic control that *Jat*s have exercised in the state for decades. While not disputing Malik and Phogat's achievements and struggles, Oza says that "the context within which they are made possible reveals that the prospect of steady employment, prize money, and gifts of acres of land are options for a select few, and virtually impossible for those lower in the caste hierarchy."[53]

However, neoliberalism and caste alone cannot explain such a transformation in Haryanavi society. The liberal-minded approach and support from the families of the female wrestlers is also a crucial factor. Master Chandgi Ram, the winner of the 1970 Asian Games heavyweight wrestling, was the first person who trained his daughters, Sonika and Dipika, as wrestlers despite facing backlash from the society. Taking inspiration from his *guru*, Chandgi Ram, Mahavir Singh Phogat did the same for his daughters and nieces. In the biography of Mahavir, it is mentioned that his struggle to introduce his girls in wrestling was not easy. When Mahavir, "a former wrestler, thought of training his daughters in the sport, the villagers were up in arms. They were dead against the idea of girls slugging it out with the boys in a mud pit."[54] Mahavir not only faced derision from his community, but his own family, especially his father, was the biggest detractor in his mission. Mahavir's father, who himself was a wrestler of his time, was strictly opposed to women participating in wrestling.

Mahavir Singh Phogat's story of success is crucial to understand the gender dynamics of the *akhāṛā*. Not only did Mahavir go against the grain with his mission of training his daughters and nieces as wrestlers, but his attitude in training of his daughters was also unbiased. He was cultivating wrestlers where the focus should be only on training. Every distraction by

the girls in training was meted out with severe punishment. In Mahavir's approach, his students being girls was never a matter of question. The regimented schedule of the *akhāṛā* was the only thing that mattered to him. This becomes clear from his stance on the length of a wrestler's hair.

> "[In] wrestling […] certain traditions have to be followed. A wrestler needs to maintain short hair as it does not require as much upkeep. The time they save by this can be applied to training. The same rule applies to both girls and boys. […] Being kids, they try to disobey my instructions but then it is the job of the coach to keep his ward in line and see the larger picture."[55]

Mahavir Singh Phogat's transgression challenged the rigid gender boundaries of a patriarchal society in Haryana. Especially, *akhāṛā*, which is a space where brute strength and disciplined life is the way of success and living, got a new definition where hard work, focus and training, irrespective of gender, provides the same result of success. Geeta Phogat mentions that his father taught all of his daughters and nieces that "gender does not play [any] role in a person's ability."[56] Such novel and radical thinking reflects the change in perception and dynamics of patriarchal notions. "When I started training my daughters, there weren't any *akhāṛā*s that allowed girls. Now, there must be at least 50 *akhāṛā*s that train girls,"[57] says Mahavir.

Geetika Jakhar was fortunate to be born in a family that let her decide her own destiny. Initially, she got hooked on wrestling just to keep fit. But she soon developed a fascination for the sport and within two years, became national champion in her age group as well as in the seniors category. "I am lucky that my parents supported my decisions. Today I've been able to achieve my dreams because of them,"[58] says the country's first female wrestler to be conferred with the Arjuna Award. Very few female athletes in Haryana get the kind of support that Jakhar received from her family. Even a decade-and-a-half into the twenty-first century, most Indian women cannot take education and participation in sports for granted. All this could happen because Jakhar's parents did not discriminate with her on the basis of gender.

"We are pursuing wrestling because of our parents' support. Otherwise, it wouldn't be possible to pursue the sport at this age. They want me to make a name in the sport and win glory for the country. Other things come next,"[59] said Rekha Kadiyan, who won silver at the 2013 Commonwealth Championships in South Africa. "In the beginning, people used to question my father about why he had put me into wrestling," says Lalita, the grappler who made it to the Commonwealth squad. "To date it is considered a male bastion. But I was lucky that my father

didn't pay much heed to them. Today the same people are congratulating my father and if I return home with a medal, they will all queue up to honour me,"[60] she adds.

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Although female wrestlers from Haryana are turning gender equations upside down and fighting prejudice in a state infamous for its patriarchal mindset, they have to fight hard to overturn gender discrimination and deliver a sucker punch to convention. "From the time my daughters started wrestling to now, I can see some change. But it's not the majority that has changed. Many still wish for a boy to be born, and take the birth of a girl in their family as a burden,"[61] says Daya Kaur, Mahavir Singh Phogat's wife. A woman's journey from womb to womanhood is the bumpiest in Haryana when compared to girls in other Indian states. Born in a state with the country's worst sex ratio (879 women for every 1,000 men according to the 2011 census) and a worsening child sex ratio (just 834 girls for every 1,000 boys), women are often at the receiving end of deep-set patriarchal prejudices.[62] In a state where female foeticide is still a major issue, the Phogats give hope about the end of the darkness. Braving hostile circumstances, a minuscule minority of girls is using its fists and reflexes to announce to the world that Haryanvi girls are as good as, or even better than their male counterparts. The state once infamous for suppressing the girl child is today a hub of wrestling and boxing for girls, disciplines once meant just for the 'stronger' sex. As Rupal Oza puts it: "For women, in particular, wrestling and sport generates an opening and the possibility to construct a non-normative script."[63]

These interviews and statements give a glimpse of the emergence of equal gender relations in Haryana. Haryanvi female athletes today form the pride of the nation as Olympic medallists. The *akhāṛā* occupies an important social space by being a normative space of male. The entry of female athletes into this 'male sacred' space and sports poses a critical challenge to patriarchal and masculine gender politics. Such a breach challenges the social norms of patriarchy, where talent and skill have a scope of existence irrespective of gender. Can these changes be of a substantial level to defy the patriarchal institutions is still a crucial question? But at the same time, it cannot be denied that *akhāṛā*s act as "heterotopias of deviation" – a space that creates differences as well as challenges those differences. Hence, *akhāṛā* becomes a site to analyse religious, caste and gender dynamics of society in a new light.

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[1] Thomas Duer Broughton, *Letters Written in a Mahratta Camp During the Year 1809: Descriptive of the Characters, Manners, Domestic Habits, and Religious Ceremonies of the Mahrattas*, Westminster, Archibald Constable and Company, 1813, pp. 163-65, available at, https://archive.org/details/letterswritteni00brougoog, [accessed, 25th December 2019].

[2] Romila Thapar describes symbolic cultural tradition as "behaviour patterns socially acquired and socially transmitted by the means of symbols. […] Culture in relation to tradition links the past to the present. It has therefore a historical context which is as significant as the cultural form itself." Romila Thapar, 'Cultural Transaction and Early India: Tradition and Patronage', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Feb., 1987), pp. 3-4, available at, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3520436, [accessed, 25th December 2019].

[3] Henri Lefebvre's key idea in *The Production of Space* (1974) is that humans not only produce social relations and use-values, but in doing so also produce social space. In more general terms, "each living body *is* space and *has* its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space" (Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1991, p. 70, emphasis original). There is a dialectic of social relations and space: "Social relations, which are concrete abstractions, have no real existence save in and through space. *Their underpinning is spatial*" (p. 404, emphasis original). Social space contains the social relations of reproduction (personal and sexual relations, family, reproduction of labour power) and the relations of production (p. 32). It is a "social reality," and "a set of relations and forms" (p. 116). There is a dialectic of social space and human action: "Itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others" (p. 73). Space is part of a dialectic of production: "Space is at once result and cause, product and producer" (p. 142). Social space is "always, and simultaneously, both a *field of action* […] and a *basis of action*" (p. 191, emphasis original). Social space interrelates "everything that is produced either by nature or by society" – "living beings, things, objects, works, signs and symbols" (p. 101). Space is material and cultural at the same time. It is contested and negotiated producing diverse and concrete effects. Space and spatial relations are both expressions of social practices – space is produced (N. Smith, *Uneven Development*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1984) and a means of creating further space – space is a resource (K. H. Halfacree, 'Locality and Social Representation: Space, Discourse and Alternative Definitions of the Rural', *Journal of Rural Studies*, Vol. 9, Issue 1, January 1993, pp. 23-37, available at, https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167(93)90003-3, [accessed, 25th December 2019]). "General structures do not float above particular contexts but are always (re)produced with them." So, "when we

reconsider space, we must not only consider structures producing that space but also the way in which that space is subsequently used to produce other space […]" (A. Sayer, 'The 'New' Regional Geography and Problems of Narrative', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol. 7, Issue 3, September 1, 1989, p. 255, available at, https://doi.org/10.1068%2Fd070253, [accessed, 25th December 2019]). Thereby, space is produced in society and is used to re-produce space, structures and society. "Social life is both space-forming and space-contingent." E. Soja, 'The Spatiality of Social Life: Towards a Transformative Retheorisation', in D. Gregory and J. Urry, (eds.), *Social Relations and Spatial Structures*, London, Macmilla, 1985, p. 98.

[4] Sharda Ugra, 'The Play's the Thing: A History of Sport in India', *The Indian Express*, 5th December 2015, available at, https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/books/the-plays-the-thing-a-history-of-sport-in-india/, [accessed, 25th December 2019].

[5] See, Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977; Pierre Bourdieu, *Physical Space, Social Space and Habitus*, 1996, available at, https://archives.library.illinois.edu/erec/University%20Archives/2401001/Production_website/pages/StewardingExcellence/Physical%20Space,%20Social%20Space%20and%20Habitus.pdf [accessed, 25th December 2019].

[6] Joseph S. Alter, *The Wrestler's Body: Identity and Ideology in North India*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992, p. 46, available at, https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft6n39p104;brand=ucpress, [accessed, 25th December 2019].

[7] Norbert Peabody, 'Disciplining the Body, Disciplining the Body-Politic: Physical Culture and Social Violence among North Indian Wrestlers', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 51, Issue 2 April 2009, p. 378, available at, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417509000164, [accessed, 25th December 2019].

[8] A. M. Shah argues that "ideas of purity/impurity were present all over Hindu society for centuries: In domestic as well as public life, in exchange of food and water, in practising occupations, in kinship and marriage, in religious action and belief, in temples and monasteries, and in a myriad different contexts and situations. These ideas played a crucial role in separating one caste from another, and in arranging them in a

hierarchy, that is to say, in ordering the basic structure of the society. A. M. Shah, 'Purity, Impurity, Untouchability: Then and Now', *Sociological Bulletin*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (September-December 2007), pp. 355-56, available at, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23620634, [accessed, 25th December 2019].

[9] Alter, *The Wrestler's Body*, p. 119.

[10] Michel Foucault is primarily interested in two main types of sites – the 'utopias' and the 'heterotopias'. According to Foucault, utopias are sites with 'no real place'. Utopias 'have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society', which present 'society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down'. By way of contrast to 'utopias', Foucault describes 'heterotopias' as 'real places', which act like 'counter-sites', where a utopia is 'effectively enacted', and in which the real sites are 'simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted'. These 'heterotopias' are governed by certain principles, as enumerated by Foucault. Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1986), p. 25, available at, https://www.jstor.org/stable/464648, [accessed, 25th December 2019].

[11] Alter, *The Wrestler's Body*, p. 114.

[12] Shanti Prakash Atreya, 'Pahalwani Malish Ki Niti' [The Virtue of Wrestling Massage], *Bharatiya Kushti*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 1986, p. 27, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 118.

[13] Alter, *The Wrestler's Body*, pp. 118-19.

[14] Alan R. Beals, 'Conflict and Interlocal Festivals in a South Indian Region', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 23, Issue S1, June 1964, p. 107, available at, https://doi.org/10.2307/2050625, [accessed, 25th December 2019].

[15] D. N. Majumdar, *Caste and Communication in an Indian Village*, Delhi, Asia Publishing House, 1958.

[16] David G. Mandelbaum, *Society in India*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1970, pp. 182-183, 331-332.

[17] H. Orenstein, *Gaon: Conflict and Cohesion in an Indian Village*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1965, pp. 201, 232, 254.

[18] Majumdar, *Caste and Communication*, pp. 304-05.

[19] Alter, *The Wrestler's Body*, pp. 195-96.

[20] 'Jaat Na Poocho Pehlwan Ki' ['Don't Ask the Wrestler His Caste'], *Dainik Tribune* [*Daily Tribune*], 26th February 2013.

[21] Scholars like Norbert Peabody ('Disciplining the Body, Disciplining the Body-Politic, p. 375), Shail Mayaram ('Communal Violence in Jaipur', *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 28, No. 46/47 (Nov. 13-20, 1993), p. 2529, available at, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4400416, [accessed, 25th December 2019]), Sudhir Kakar (*The Colors of Violence: Cultural Identities, Religion, and Conflict*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996, pp. 56-86), Rajnarayan Chandavarkar (*Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance and the State in India, c. 1850-1950*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 112-16), Sandria B. Freitag (*Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989, pp. 122, 225) and Nandini Gooptu (*The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India*, Cambridge, University Press, 2001, pp. 291-315), have documented that those people who were at the heart of collective violence against Muslims in north India during the early twentieth century insofar as they personally lead the attacks and had the requisite technical training to do so, people whom Paul Brass has called "riot specialists" (Paul R. Brass, *Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 9), were practitioners of a distinct north Indian form of wrestling – *kushti*.

[22] Peabody, 'Disciplining the Body, Disciplining the Body-Politic', p. 372.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 375.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 385.

[25] Alter, *The Wrestler's Body*, pp. 129-35.

[26] Peabody, 'Disciplining the Body, Disciplining the Body-Politic', p. 390.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 391.

[28] See, Bettina van Hoven and Catherine Horschelman (eds.), *Spaces of Masculinities*, London, Routledge, 2005.

[29] Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics 1925 to the 1990's*, New Delhi, Penguin, 1996, p. 35.

[30] Prem Chowdhry, 'Masculine Spaces: Rural Male Culture in North India', *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. XLIX, No. 47, November 22, 2014, p. 41, available at, https://www.epw.in/journal/2014/47/special-articles/masculine-spaces.html, [accessed, 25th December 2019].

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[32] Narendra Shastri is a teacher at Jhajjar Gurkul, Haryana, India. He is in charge of the *akhāṛā* and other sports facilities there. This interview was conducted on 11th December 2017.

[33] The late Shri Yashveer Singh was a wrestling coach at the *akhāṛā* of the Chhatrasal Stadium, Model Town, Delhi, India. He is the recipient of the Dronacharya Award and mentored Olympic medallists like Sushil Kumar and Yogeshwar Dutt. He died at the age of fifty-six in September 2018 due to prolonged illness. I was fortunate enough to conduct this interview on 28th April 2017 at the Chhatrasal Stadium.

[34] Nick Perry, 'Ancient Wrestling Offers a Future for Some in Modern India', *Associated Press News*, 12th December 2017, available at, https://apnews.com/9111a26a92c7466e8d3047892125ceb5, [accessed, 25th December 2019].

[35] Joseph S. Alter, 'The Celibate Wrestler: Sexual Chaos, Embodied Balance and Competitive Politics in North India', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 29, No. 1-2, January, 1995, p. 113, available at, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F006996679502900100 7, [accessed, 25th December 2019].

[36] Interview of Late Shri Yashveer Singh, 28th April 2017, Chhatrasal Stadium, Model Town, Delhi, India.

[37] Joseph S. Alter, 'Nervous Masculinity: Consumption and the Production of Embodied Gender in Indian Wrestling', in Diane P. Mines and Sarah Lamb, (eds.), *Everyday Life in South Asia*, Bloomingdale and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2002, p. 133.

[38] Chowdhry, 'Masculine Spaces', p. 45.

[39] Anne Bolin, 'Buff Bodies and the Beast: Emphasized Femininity, Labor and Power Relations among Fitness, Figure and Women Body Building Competition 1985-2019', in Adam Locks and Niall Richardson, (eds.), *Critical Readings in Body Building*, London and New York, Routledge, 2012, pp. 29-57.

[40] Saurabh Duggal, 'The Fight for Her-yana', *Hindustan Times*, 20th August 2016, available at, https://www.hindustantimes.com/brunch/the-fight-for-her-yana/story-sdPFyvOQX7AJZuZ6w2MGwN.html, [accessed, 25th December 2019].

[41] See, Roger Horrocks, *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity in Popular Culture*, Great Britain, Palgrave Macmillian, 1995.

[42] Martha Saavedra, 'Sport', in Philomena Essed, David Teo Goldberg and Audrey Kabayashi, (eds.), *A Companion to Gender Studies*, Malden, Blackwell Publishing, 1997, pp. 437-54.

[43] Michael Hall, 'Shifting Spaces of Masculinity', in Hoven and Horschelman, *Masculinities*.

[44] Bolin, 'Buff Bodies and the Beast'.

[45] Interview of Late Shri Yashveer Singh, 28th April 2017, Chhatrasal Stadium, Model Town, Delhi, India.

[46] Women's wrestling started in June 2002 with Kavita and Sunita being allowed to train with the boys.

[47] Rupal Oza, 'Wrestling Women: Caste and Neoliberalism in Rural Haryana', *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, Vol. 26, Issue 4, 2019, p. 14, available at, https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1502162, [accessed, 25th December 2019].

[48] Chowdhry, 'Masculine Spaces', p. 45.

[49] Oza, 'Wrestling Women'.

[50] Grover, 'How Does Haryana Top India's Medal tallies?'

[51] Duggal, 'Indian Women's Wrestling on World Map'.

[52] Oza, 'Wrestling Women', p. 12.

[53] *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

[54] Duggal, 'Fight for Her-yana'.

[55] Sagar Duggal, *Akhada: The Authorized Biography of Mahavir Singh Phogat*, Gurgaon, Hachette, 2016, p. 78.

[56] *Ibid.*, p. 124.

[57] Damini Nath, 'The Sisterhood of Wrestlers', *The Hindu*, 7th January 2017, available at, https://www.thehindu.com/sport/the-sisterhood-of-wrestlers/article17000478.ece1, [accessed, 25th December 2019].

[58] Duggal, 'Fight for Her-yana'.

[59] Duggal, 'Indian Women's Wrestling on World Map'.

[60] Duggal, 'Fight for Her-yana'.

[61] Nath, 'Sisterhood of Wrestlers'.

[62] Source: https://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/haryana.html [accessed, 25th December 2019].

[63] Oza, 'Wrestling Women', pp. 18-19.