



# WRESTLING WITH TRADITION: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF AKHARAS IN AMRITSAR, PUNJAB

Sartaj Singh Josan <sup>1</sup>, Dr. Gurshaminder Singh Bajwa <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, School of Social Sciences Guru Nanak Dev University Amritsar, India

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, School of Social Sciences Guru Nanak Dev University Amritsar, India



## Corresponding Author

Sartaj Singh Josan,  
[Sartajosan12@gmail.com](mailto:Sartajosan12@gmail.com)

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## ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study explores the cultural significance, everyday practices and challenges faced by traditional wrestling akharas in Amritsar, Punjab. Drawing on unstructured interviews and field observations conducted across five akharas i.e. Bijli Pehalwan da Akhara, Gol Bagh Akhara, P&T Akhara, Akhara Bajrang Bali Ustaad Kuldeep Pehalwan and Panj Peer Akhara. The paper examines how these male-only spaces serve as enduring sites of physical culture, religious devotion and social identity formation. The research highlights the persistence of the guru-chela tradition, the preparation of wrestling grounds using indigenous methods and the integration of spiritual rituals into daily training routines. Despite the growing popularity of modern gyms and professional training centres, these akharas continue to attract young men seeking discipline, fitness and social recognition. Findings reveal a stark contrast between resource-rich and underfunded akharas, with varying degrees of professionalization, infrastructure and government support. Wrestlers often grapple with economic constraints, lack of state assistance, and threats of urban encroachment, yet many remain committed to sustaining this legacy through voluntary labour, donations and community support. The paper also documents how traditional fitness practices coexist with modern techniques and how social media and competitive wrestling tournaments are shaping contemporary akhara culture. Ultimately, the study underscores the role of akharas as vital institutions preserving Punjab's wrestling heritage and as lived spaces where the body becomes a site of endurance, masculinity and cultural continuity.

**Keywords:** Akhara, Wrestling, Punjab, Masculinity, Physical Culture, Ethnography, Guru-Chela Tradition, Pehalwan, Kushti

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Wrestling, locally known as kushti or pehalwani, holds an enduring place in the cultural and physical landscape of the Indian subcontinent. Among the oldest surviving physical traditions in South Asia, wrestling transcends mere sport, functioning as an integrated system of physical discipline, spiritual cultivation, moral development and social organization (Alter, 1992, 1993). It is not merely a competitive activity but a way of life that intertwines the development of the body with the cultivation of the mind and spirit. Wrestlers are expected to follow strict codes of conduct that regulate not only their training but also their daily routines, diet, and social behaviour, fostering a holistic lifestyle deeply embedded in cultural norms. Historically, wrestling has been embedded within broader philosophical and religious frameworks, including elements of Hinduism, Sikhism, and indigenous health systems such as ayurveda, making it a unique embodiment of body-soul unity, ritual discipline and community cohesion (Alter, 2000; Majumdar & Mehta, 2009). This intricate blend of physical rigour and spiritual practice has allowed wrestling to persist for centuries, serving both as a tool for self-transformation and as a medium for transmitting intergenerational cultural values.

The primary site of this practice is the akhara, a sacred wrestling space traditionally consisting of an earth pit, prepared meticulously with a mixture of mustard oil, turmeric, neem, fatkari (alum) and salt, believed to have healing and purifying properties. The preparation of the pit itself is a ritualized act, symbolizing respect for the earth and the interconnectedness between the body, nature, and spiritual forces. Wrestlers take collective responsibility in maintaining the pit, reflecting the values of shared labour, discipline and humility. The akhara is not just a physical training ground but a symbolic institution, functioning simultaneously as a gymnasium, temple and school (Alter, 1992; Yadav, 2020). It serves as a space where physical transformation and spiritual growth occur side by side. Within its boundaries, the guru-chela (teacher-disciple) relationship is paramount, where the guru (ustaad) imparts not only wrestling skills but also moral instruction, religious discipline, dietary control and life philosophy. This relationship is grounded in profound respect and loyalty, where the chela (disciple) submits to the guru's authority, trusting the guru not only to shape his body but also to guide his ethical and spiritual development. The akhara thus becomes a microcosm of a moral world, where daily practices of training, prayer, dietary regulation and interpersonal conduct are deeply infused with cultural and spiritual significance (Alter, 1992; Parshad, 2021).

Wrestling culture in India reflects indigenous epistemologies of the body, contrasting sharply with modern gym-based fitness models rooted in global capitalist systems. These indigenous knowledge systems prioritize functionality, discipline and moral strength over external aesthetics or commercialized notions of body image. In the akhara, the wrestler's body is viewed not as an object of display but as a site of ethical labour, spiritual refinement and social responsibility. The emphasis is on internal strength, endurance, resilience and the ability to control one's desires and emotions. The wrestler's body is cultivated not for appearance but as a moral, disciplined and sacred vessel. Daily practices like celibacy, controlled diet, abstinence from intoxicants and strict adherence to training routines are designed to produce a body that is both physically capable and morally upright. This process embodies what Foucault (1979) termed "technologies of the self," where the body becomes the medium through which individuals work upon themselves to achieve physical mastery, spiritual purity and social respect. The wrestler, through repetitive bodily discipline and ritual observance, transforms himself into an ethical subject whose strength is not merely physical but deeply rooted in cultural and spiritual ideals. In this way, wrestling serves as both a personal and collective project of moral and physical self-making (Alter, 1992; Yadav, 2020).

In the context of Punjab, wrestling is intricately tied to Sikh martial traditions, local religious identities and rural masculine ideals. Wrestling in Punjab is more than a physical practice; it is a reflection of the region's historical emphasis on valour, discipline and community defense, deeply embedded in the Khalsa martial ethos and broader Punjabi cultural identity. Historically, Punjab has been a stronghold of martial cultures, where wrestling served not only as a method of physical training but also as a vital tool for moral development, character building and cultural preservation. During the colonial and post-colonial periods, wrestling acted as a form of cultural resistance, offering an indigenous counterpoint to the imported British sports culture that sought to marginalize local physical practices (Alter, 2000). Wrestling was embraced by local communities as a means to assert cultural pride, autonomy, and resilience, resisting colonial narratives that framed native bodies as inferior or undisciplined. Akharas have been central to sustaining this tradition, serving as spaces of not only physical training but also spiritual cultivation and collective identity formation, offering an alternative to both colonial sports institutions and the rising modern gym cultures introduced in the neoliberal era (Dimeo & Mills, 2004). In this way, akharas became strongholds of indigenous knowledge and practices, reinforcing a distinctly Punjabi model of masculinity, solidarity and embodied resistance against external cultural influences.

The city of Amritsar, a major urban and religious centre in Punjab, continues to host several akharas that serve as critical sites of traditional wrestling. As per Vikram Sharma, a coach at Gol Bagh Akhara, the number of akharas in Amritsar has dropped from approximately 25 in the past to merely ten today. Despite rapid urbanization, the influx of global fitness trends, and the encroachment of commercial gyms, these akharas remain bastions of embodied knowledge, spiritual discipline and cultural heritage. Wrestlers here are expected to adhere to strict codes of celibacy, vegetarianism, abstinence from intoxicants and daily rituals, reflecting a holistic approach to physical and moral well-being. Training begins with prayers to deities, particularly Hanuman Ji, revered as the divine symbol of strength, loyalty and devotion, and in the Sikh context, figures like Baba Deep Singh Ji, known for their valour and sacrifice. The spiritual dimensions are inseparable from the physical routines, where every act of grappling, exercising or maintaining the earth pit is imbued with ritual significance (Alter, 1993; Majumdar & Mehta, 2009). Wrestlers do not merely prepare their bodies; they sanctify them through this daily labour of devotion.

However, these akharas are not insulated from modern challenges. The pressures of urban expansion, declining land availability and the absence of sustained government funding are existential threats. Rapid urbanization has resulted in the encroachment of lands traditionally reserved for community spaces, including akharas, which often operate without formal ownership documents, making them vulnerable to displacement. Rising real estate prices and infrastructure development further threaten these spaces, forcing many akharas to either shrink in size or shut down entirely. The state's focus on promoting Olympic-style wrestling has led to the marginalization of traditional earth pit based kushti, reducing it to a peripheral status within India's sports ecosystem. This shift reflects a broader policy preference for medal-oriented, internationally recognized sports formats that align with global standards, sidelining indigenous practices rooted in local cultures and histories. As a result, many young wrestlers are increasingly drawn towards institutionalized sports academies like the Sports Authority of India (SAI) and private wrestling centres, which offer modern training facilities, access to international coaching and opportunities for participation in national and global competitions. In these settings, the emphasis is on competitive success, performance metrics and career advancement rather than the preservation of cultural heritage, spiritual discipline and the collective ethos that defines the akhara tradition (Shekhar & Kumar, 2019; Salve, 2020). This migration towards professionalized spaces creates a growing rift between cultural continuity and modern sports professionalism, posing serious questions about the future survival of traditional akharas and the values they embody.

Compounding this are economic challenges faced by wrestlers, most of whom come from lower-middle-class or working-class backgrounds. Wrestling in akharas is rarely a full-time profession that guarantees stable income. Most wrestlers must balance their training with daily wage jobs, small businesses or labor-intensive work to support themselves and their families. Unlike athletes in professional academies who may receive sponsorships, stipends or government support, traditional wrestlers are largely self-funded, depending heavily on the goodwill of their local community and occasional financial aid from former wrestlers or patrons. Participation in local dangals (wrestling tournaments) provides not only cultural validation but also essential economic support. Prize money from these tournaments, while modest compared to professional sports earnings, is a significant source of income for many wrestlers, helping cover not just personal expenses but also costs related to diet, travel and training. These tournaments, often linked to religious fairs like Maghi Mela, serve a dual function of preserving cultural heritage through the ritualized practice of kushti and offering wrestlers a platform to gain social respect, community recognition and financial sustenance (Deogan, 2018; Srivastav, 2020). The danga is not merely a sporting event but a social gathering where honour, reputation and identity are negotiated within the community. For many wrestlers, success in a local danga brings more than money; it reinforces their role as upholders of tradition and as moral exemplars within their social milieu.

Furthermore, the rise of global fitness culture, with its emphasis on aesthetics, individualism, and commercialization, has reshaped notions of the ideal body. Modern gyms promote a hyper-commercialized, appearance-driven form of fitness, marked by protein supplements, bodybuilding and performance enhancement drugs (Turner, 1996). In contrast, the akhara promotes a body that is functional, disciplined, and spiritually anchored, which is valued not for its outward form but for its resilience, humility and service to the community. This reflects two divergent philosophies of embodiment; one rooted in market-driven self-optimization and the other in collective identity, tradition and moral discipline.

Ultimately, the akharas of Amritsar emerge not as relics of the past but as dynamic, living institutions, where the body becomes a site of endurance, cultural preservation, spiritual discipline and social resistance. They serve as microcosms of broader social transformations, embodying the tensions between cultural continuity and modernity and offering vital insights into how traditional knowledge systems persist amid rapid change.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study of wrestling in India intersects multiple disciplinary fields, including cultural anthropology, sociology of sport, gender studies and postcolonial theory. Traditional Indian wrestling has been approached not simply as a form of athletic competition, but as a rich cultural practice embedded in religious symbolism, moral discipline and local economies of identity. It serves as a vital lens to understand how embodied practices mediate broader questions of tradition, modernity and social change. This literature review contextualizes the current study within prior academic engagements with physical culture in South Asia and builds a theoretical foundation for analyzing the akhara as both a material and symbolic institution.

## 2.1. WRESTLING AS CULTURAL PRACTICE

Joseph Alter's foundational ethnographic work has been instrumental in framing kushti as a complex system of somatic nationalism and indigenous health. According to Alter, the wrestler's body in North India is produced through techniques that blend Hindu religious ethics, ayurvedic principles and regimented bodily control. Wrestling is not only a means of cultivating strength but also of demonstrating self-mastery, celibacy, vegetarianism and spiritual purity. The akhara in this context becomes a sacred space – simultaneously a gymnasium, temple and school – where discipline is enacted through daily ritual, communal eating and devotional training. Other scholars have further explored the socio-religious dimensions of wrestling. Alter highlighted how wrestling in India has historically been positioned as an indigenous counter-narrative to colonial sports introduced by the British. Alter examined akharas as embodied spaces where nationalism and masculinity are performed through everyday training and where the physical self becomes a site of resistance to westernized gym culture. Wrestling is thus not merely sport; it is a performative tradition, transmitting cultural memory and asserting sovereignty over the Indian body (Alter, 1992, 1993, 2000).

## 2.2. AKHARA AS A SOCIAL INSTITUTION

The akhara, as an institution, is central to this discussion. It operates through moral codes that are reinforced by the guru-chela system, a pedagogical and disciplinary framework based on loyalty, respect and hierarchy (Alter, 1992). This relationship shapes not only physical routines but the ethical subjectivity of the wrestler. Akharas also function as egalitarian yet caste-aware spaces, where lower and upper-caste men sometimes share the training ground, but rarely the same social capital or recognition (Dimeo & Mills, 2004). In many places, wrestling becomes a means for upward mobility, especially for young men from rural or working-class backgrounds. Furthermore, akharas maintain traditional methods of training that involve indigenous tools such as mugdar (Indian wooden club), nals (desi weights) and kahi (shovel hoe), as well as the use of turmeric, neem and mustard oil in preparing the earth pit. These practices have been preserved despite the increasing popularity of mechanized gym equipment and internationalized sports science. Yet, many akharas face existential threats from lack of funding, gentrification and declining youth participation. The transition from community-supported to state-neglected spaces reflects broader political shifts in how indigenous institutions are valued.

## 2.3. MASCULINITY AND THE DISCIPLINED BODY

R.W. Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity provides a useful lens for interpreting how wrestling bodies are constructed and valorized in Indian akharas. Wrestlers cultivate a body that reflects moral strength, discipline and resilience – traits historically linked with Indian nationalist ideals and rural masculinity. However, such masculinity is not static; it is continually renegotiated through performance, ritual and relational hierarchies within the akhara. For many wrestlers, the body becomes a currency of honour, a social marker that earns them recognition, trust and sometimes employment.

Michel Foucault's (1979) concepts of discipline and the "technologies of the self" are also valuable in analyzing the akhara space. Through repetitive training, restricted diets, celibacy and prayer, wrestlers engage in bodily techniques aimed at producing a virtuous subject. The wrestler's body is not only shaped by external surveillance (via the guru or peers) but is internalized as an ethical project of the self. These embodied practices are not merely personal. They are also political, challenging the commodification of health and fitness in neoliberal gym cultures (Turner, 1996).

## 2.4. SPORT, MODERNITY AND RESISTANCE

In contemporary India, wrestling stands at the intersection of tradition and modernity. On one hand, the Sports Authority of India (SAI) and other elite institutions promote Olympic-style wrestling with mats, weight categories, supplements and international exposure. On the other hand, grassroot akharas often function with minimal resources, relying on community donations and cultural capital. While modernization has professionalized wrestling to some extent, it has also marginalized traditional spaces that operate outside the purview of formal sports infrastructure (Deogan, 2018; Srivastav, 2020; Shekhar & Kumar, 2019).



Rural and small-city akharas like those in Amritsar thus represent both resilient and vulnerable forms of cultural practice. They maintain sacred rituals, folk histories and pedagogical relationships while simultaneously engaging with broader systems such as state tournaments, dangals and digital promotion. The present study engages these tensions through a grounded ethnographic approach, treating the akhara not only as a spatial site of training but as a social field where identities are shaped, negotiated and performed. In doing so, it highlights how traditional wrestling becomes a subtle form of resistance against the homogenizing forces of global modernity.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, ethnographic approach to explore the contemporary realities of traditional wrestling akharas in the city of Amritsar, Punjab. Ethnography, with its focus on immersion, lived experience and contextual understanding, is particularly suited to investigating embodied cultural practices such as wrestling, where the meanings of discipline, identity and community are deeply rooted in social routines and physical spaces (Emerson et al., 2011; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). The objective was not to quantify behaviours but to uncover how the cultural logic of the akhara persists, adapts and transforms in the face of modern pressures.

#### 3.1. RESEARCH SETTING

The fieldwork was conducted across five wrestling akharas located in different political constituencies of Amritsar, namely:

- Bijli Pehalwan da Akhara (Amritsar North)
- Gol Bagh Akhara (Amritsar Central)
- Krishan Pehalwan's P&T Akhara (Amritsar West)
- Akhara Bajrang Bali Ustaad Kuldeep Pehalwan (Amritsar South)
- Panj Peer Akhara (Amritsar East)

These sites were selected to represent a diverse range of akhara typologies, including government-supported training centres, community-run institutions, historically significant spaces and akharas serving economically marginalized populations. All akharas were male-only spaces, reflecting the traditional gendered exclusivity of wrestling in Punjab.

### 4. DATA COLLECTION

The data were collected over a span of several weeks through unstructured interviews and participant observation. A total of five key informants (one from each akhara) were interviewed. These included head coaches (ustaaads), senior wrestlers and administrators who possessed extensive historical and experiential knowledge of their respective akharas. The interviews were conversational and open-ended, allowing for the spontaneous emergence of themes related to ritual, training practices, institutional challenges and perceptions of change. Field notes were maintained during and after each visit, capturing non-verbal cues, spatial arrangements, daily routines and religious practices observed in the akharas.

The unstructured nature of the interviews was a deliberate methodological choice, rooted in the ethnographic tradition of letting the respondents lead the narrative (Spradley, 1979). Rather than imposing a rigid questionnaire, the researcher engaged informally, often sitting through wrestling sessions, assisting in pit preparation or observing post-practice massages, which allowed for rapport-building and access to insider perspectives.

### 5. REFLEXIVITY AND POSITIONALITY

The researcher acknowledges their positionality as an outsider to the wrestling community but a member of the same regional-cultural context (Punjab). This insider-outsider dynamic influenced access, interpretation and rapport with participants. Reflexive journaling was employed throughout the fieldwork to remain attentive to power asymmetries, emotional responses and interpretive biases (Davies, 2008). While some wrestlers viewed the researcher with suspicion or indifference initially, repeated visits and informal engagement helped build mutual trust.

## 5.1. DATA ANALYSIS

The collected data were analyzed thematically using manual coding methods. Recurring patterns were identified across transcripts and field notes in relation to:

- Institutional structure and history
- Ritual and religious practices
- Training methods and equipment
- Perceptions of modernity and change
- Economic challenges and sustainability
- Identity formation and masculinity

Themes were developed inductively, without relying on preset categories, to allow the emic (insider) perspective to guide the analysis. The findings are presented in narrative form in the next section, supported by direct observations and interview excerpts where relevant.

## 6. FINDINGS AND ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

### 6.1. ETHNOGRAPHIC PROFILES OF FIVE AKHARAS IN AMRITSAR

#### 1) Bijli Pehalwan da Akhara (Amritsar North)

Bijli Pehalwan da Akhara, located in a quiet neighbourhood of Amritsar North, is one of the oldest and most respected traditional wrestling centres in the city, with a history spanning over a hundred years. The akhara is managed solely by Ashok Kumar, who serves as both the ustaad (coach) and caretaker. The land is owned by the Bijli Pehalwan Wrestling Sports Club, which ensures that the akhara remains a community-centred space rather than a commercial enterprise. Nearly twenty members are enrolled in this akhara. Wrestlers are not charged any membership fee and the akhara is maintained through voluntary contributions from members whenever required, especially for repairs and upkeep.

**Picture 1** View of Bijli Pehalwan da Akhara



**Source** Clicked by Researcher

The akhara functions as both a physical training ground and a spiritual space. It has a traditional mitti da akhara (earth pit), which is regularly prepared with natural materials like mustard oil, turmeric and neem, believed to have medicinal properties that prevent injuries and maintain flexibility. Attached to the pit is a small Hanuman temple, where wrestlers offer prayers before beginning their training, invoking strength, discipline, and protection. Training here follows the traditional methods of Indian wrestling, using indigenous equipment like mugdar, santola (wooden club with two handles) and kahi, along with handmade weights and basic desi gym setups. Wrestlers engage in rigorous physical

exercises, grappling techniques and strength-building routines while also participating in wellness practices like preparing their own herbal tooth powder, hair oil and other natural products for personal care and hygiene.

The akhara serves as a hub for physical fitness, social bonding and moral discipline. For many, it is not merely a place to learn wrestling but a space to cultivate values of hard work, humility, obedience to the guru and community solidarity. While a few wrestlers begin their careers here and move to advanced facilities like Gol Bagh Akhara for professional training and participation in national tournaments, most members come for fitness, cultural pride and maintaining the traditional way of life.

Despite facing challenges such as lack of government support, financial limitations and competition from modern gyms, the akhara continues to survive through the commitment of the ustaad and the support of the local community. It remains an enduring symbol of Punjab's rich wrestling heritage, where the blend of physical strength, spirituality and cultural values continues to thrive.

## 6.2. GOL BAGH AKHARA (AMRITSAR CENTRAL)

Gol Bagh Akhara, located in the heart of Amritsar Central, is one of the most prestigious and professionally managed wrestling centres in the city. Established during the pre-independence era, the akhara has a long-standing legacy in Punjab's wrestling culture. It is managed by Vikram Sharma, an accomplished Greco-Roman coach and Punjab Police officer, who has trained several wrestlers for state, national and international competitions. The akhara operates on government-owned land, which provides stability in terms of space but also presents challenges due to a lack of consistent financial support. Despite this, Gol Bagh Akhara attracts around 100 to 150 active wrestlers, offering a structured and professional training environment. It is one of the few akharas in the region that provides both a traditional earthen pit for kushti and a wrestling mat for freestyle and Greco-Roman styles. The presence of hostel facilities, gym equipment, kettlebells and pilates gear allows it to function as a semi-professional training centre.

Spirituality remains an important part of the akhara's daily routine. Wrestlers begin their sessions with prayers to Hanuman Ji and Baba Deep Singh Ji, maintaining the tradition of combining physical discipline with spiritual devotion. The training schedule is divided into three slots. Morning for joint practice, afternoon for beginners, and evening for senior wrestlers, ensuring systematic skill development according to experience and age.

**Picture 2** View of Gol Bagh Akhara



**Source** Clicked by Researcher

The akhara strongly emphasizes discipline, rigorous training, and ethical conduct, following the traditional guru-chela system. Wrestlers are expected to adhere to strict routines in diet, behaviour and physical preparation. While modern fitness practices like gym-based strength training and the use of dietary supplements have been partially adopted, traditional methods like pit preparation with mustard oil, turmeric and neem are still regularly followed.

Despite its reputation for producing high-level athletes, the akhara struggles with financial challenges. The wrestling mat, installed in 2017, is still in use despite being worn out due to delayed or denied government assistance. Regular appeals for funding or facility upgrades often go unanswered, forcing the akhara to rely heavily on the contributions of alumni and the local wrestling community.

In response to modern challenges, the akhara has started exploring social media ways to build a digital presence to promote its activities and attract support but is still in the early stages of that process. Challenges such as urban encroachment, lack of state support, and competition from private wrestling academies continue to impact its sustainability. Nevertheless, Gol Bagh Akhara remains a crucial institution in Amritsar's wrestling landscape, representing a unique balance between traditional values and professional sports training.

### 6.3. AKHARA KRISHAN PEHALWAN (P&T AKHARA IN AMRITSAR WEST)

Krishan Pehalwan's P&T Akhara, established in 1970, is located on railway-owned land in Amritsar West. It was founded by Krishan Pehalwan, whose legacy is now carried forward by Darshan and Kamal, who manage the daily operations and training. The akhara is known for its strict focus on discipline, regularity and traditional wrestling values, providing a structured space for about 20 to 25 wrestlers.

**Picture 3** View of Akhara Krishan Pehalwan (P&T Akhara)



**Source** Clicked by Researcher

The akhara has two sheltered wrestling areas i.e. an earthen pit for traditional kushti and a mat area for modern wrestling styles. The space is simple but well-maintained, with special attention given to cleanliness and orderliness. The spiritual aspect is central to the akhara's functioning. Each training session starts and concludes with prayers at the Hanuman Mandir, fostering a sense of dedication, humility and mental focus among the wrestlers. Diet and lifestyle are key components of the akhara's discipline. Wrestlers are encouraged to follow a vegetarian diet, considered essential for maintaining physical health and mental clarity. While some may use basic supplements like whey protein or multivitamins, these are not central to the regimen due to both economic constraints and adherence to natural dietary traditions.

Beyond physical fitness, the akhara plays an important social role. Many young men are sent here by families to develop discipline and avoid negative influences, particularly drug addiction, which is a significant concern in the region. The akhara thus functions not only as a training centre but also as a space for moral guidance and personal transformation.

Wrestlers from P&T Akhara regularly participate in dangals (traditional wrestling tournaments), especially in Himachal Pradesh and neighbouring regions, where they compete for both prestige and monetary rewards, which also supports their livelihood and sustains their wrestling careers. Despite limited financial resources and no government support, the akhara continues to thrive through the commitment of its managers and the dedication of the wrestling community, upholding the traditions of discipline, spirituality and cultural heritage.

### 6.4. AKHARA BAJRANG BALI USTAAD KULDEEP PEHALWAN (AMRITSAR SOUTH)

Akhara Bajrang Bali, located near Gurdwara Shaheeda Sahib in Amritsar South, is managed by Ustad Kuldeep Pehalwan, a dedicated and passionate practitioner who views wrestling not just as a sport but as a fading cultural tradition that he is determined to preserve. The akhara operates in a space that was historically a temple compound, adding spiritual significance to its existence.

The akhara consists of a traditional earthen pit, which is covered with a shed to allow training in all seasons. The pit is prepared using indigenous materials like mustard oil, turmeric, and neem, maintaining its healing properties and



flexibility. This akhara is solely focused on freestyle wrestling in the traditional earth pit, with no mat-based wrestling involved. There are approximately 50 active members, most of whom are from working-class backgrounds, including self-employed individuals and small business owners, particularly from the Sikh community. The akhara functions as a fitness and discipline hub, where members come not only to train but also to maintain their health, mental focus and cultural identity.

**Picture 4** View of Akhara Bajrang Bali Ustaad Kuldeep Pehalwan



**Source** Clicked by Researcher

Training at the akhara combines physical rigour with spiritual practice. Each session begins with prayers to Hanuman Ji and Baba Deep Singh Ji, reinforcing the belief that wrestling is a form of devotion and discipline. Wrestlers use traditional equipment like mugdar and kahi, which serve both as tools for strength training and for maintaining the wrestling pit. While the akhara has acquired some basic modern gym equipment, financial limitations prevent most members from accessing expensive diets or nutritional supplements. The focus remains on traditional foods and natural strength-building methods, consistent with the akhara's ethos of simplicity and discipline.

A significant concern for the akhara is the threat of property encroachment, as the land is not permanently secured. Ustaad Kuldeep Pehalwan expresses deep worry about the future of the akhara, believing that without his leadership, the tradition may not survive, given the lack of formal support and declining interest among the younger generation. For the members and the ustaad, wrestling here is more than physical training; it is an act of cultural preservation, spiritual commitment and resistance against the erasure of indigenous traditions. The akhara stands as a testament to the enduring values of discipline, faith and resilience in the face of modern pressures.

#### **Panj Peer Akhara (Amritsar East)**

Panj Peer Akhara, located in Amritsar East, is a small traditional wrestling centre affiliated with Dera Baba Panj Peer, a site of local religious significance. The akhara trains around 15 male wrestlers, most of whom come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, working as daily-wage earners, including drivers, masseurs and street hawkers.

**Picture 5** View of Panj Peer Akhara



**Source** Clicked by Researcher

Wrestling here serves as a means of maintaining physical fitness, discipline and dignity amid the challenges of daily life. Training is held only in the evenings and takes place in an open, uncovered earthen pit. The absence of a shelter means that practice is seasonal, often suspended during rains, which highlights the akhara's limited resources and material constraints. There are no modern gym facilities, and the focus remains on traditional, low-cost methods of strength training. The pit is prepared using a mixture of alum powder, neem, mustard oil, turmeric, and salt, materials believed to maintain the pit's hygiene, prevent infections and support flexibility. Alongside physical training, prayer rituals remain an essential part of the daily routine, reinforcing the spiritual connection wrestlers have with the akhara. Massage practices are also central, both as a recovery tool and a means of fostering a sense of community among the wrestlers.

Wrestlers from Panj Peer Akhara primarily participate in jhandi di kushti (local wrestling competitions) held during community fairs such as Maghi Mela. Unlike professional wrestling tournaments, these local tournaments are less about career progression and more about honour, survival and social recognition within the community. Strength training is carried out with basic, handmade equipment like desi dumbbells, suhaga (wooden leveller), and nals, emphasizing functionality over form. For the wrestlers here, participation in the akhara is not driven by ambitions of national or international success but by the need for discipline, community belonging, and the pursuit of physical and moral strength in the face of economic precarity.

Despite the lack of infrastructure and financial support, the akhara continues to survive due to the faith, commitment and fellowship of its members. For them, wrestling represents more than just physical activity. It is a way of preserving cultural identity, maintaining dignity and resisting the marginalization often faced by working-class communities.

## **7. CROSS-CUTTING THEMES**

### **7.1. RITUAL AND SACRED SPACE**

All five akharas maintained daily rituals, with invocations to Hanuman Ji as a protector of wrestlers. Earth pit preparation itself was ceremonial, involving oils and herbal mixtures believed to aid healing. Akharas thus operated as sacred sites. Simultaneously, temples and gyms where the body was trained and the soul purified.

### **7.2. MASCULINITY AND MORAL DISCIPLINE**

Across the board, discipline was gendered: akharas were male-only, and strength was framed not merely as muscular power but as endurance, celibacy and moral restraint. In line with Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity, wrestlers cultivated their bodies as moral projects, often through abstinence, obedience and sacrifice.

### **7.3. RESISTANCE AND ADAPTATION**

Akharas showed varying degrees of adaptation to modernity. While Gol Bagh incorporated mats, pilates, and gym gear, akharas like Panj Peer and Bijli Pehalwan retained strictly traditional methods. However, even the most modern centres emphasized faith, ritual, and collective ethics, illustrating the coexistence of tradition and innovation.

### **7.4. ECONOMIC INSECURITY AND LACK OF STATE SUPPORT**

Despite their cultural significance, most akharas struggled financially. No akhara reported consistent government funding and mat replacement or building repairs were often delayed for years. Wrestlers relied on community donations, personal sacrifice and prize money from dangals, underscoring the economic fragility of traditional sports infrastructure.

### **7.5. IDENTITY, CASTE AND SOCIAL MOBILITY**

Though not explicitly discussed, caste dynamics subtly influenced akhara participation. Most wrestlers belonged to working-class backgrounds and the akhara offered a pathway to social recognition and mobility. In some cases, coaching jobs or police recruitment were secured through sporting achievements, reinforcing the akhara's role as an alternate ladder to respectability.

## 8. DISCUSSION

The ethnographic findings from five traditional akharas in Amritsar reveal not only the persistence of India's indigenous wrestling culture but also the multiple tensions that define its current existence. These spaces are shaped by a constant negotiation between ritualized tradition and material modernity, between cultural pride and economic precarity. Through their embodied practices, symbolic routines, and moral architectures, akharas continue to function as social institutions of discipline, belonging, and identity formation, particularly for working-class men. Yet, they are also increasingly marginalized in a landscape dominated by commercial fitness centres, Olympic wrestling academies and urban redevelopment. The akhara, in this sense, becomes both a resilient archive of cultural memory and a contested site of relevance in 21st century India. Despite the challenges, these spaces continue to foster alternative visions of health, masculinity, and community that resist the homogenizing pressures of neoliberal fitness culture. Their continued survival reflects not only a commitment to preserving tradition but also an adaptive response to the socio-economic transformations reshaping contemporary India.

### 1) Embodied Tradition as Moral Pedagogy

As shown in this study, wrestling in the akhara is more than a sport. It is a system of bodily ethics grounded in everyday practice. The emphasis on natural diets, celibacy, devotion to Hanuman Ji and respect for the guru reflects what Foucault (1979) termed technologies of the self: techniques through which individuals discipline their bodies in the service of ethical and spiritual development. Wrestlers are not simply athletes; they are moral subjects, formed through repetition, austerity and embodied ritual. The earth pit, prepared with turmeric, neem, and oil, is not just a training ground but a sacred medium – one that heals, purifies, and connects wrestlers to the past. These embodied practices serve as a counterpoint to neoliberal gym culture, where health is individualized, commodified and aestheticized (Turner, 1996). In the akhara, strength is relational and spiritual, not only physical. This distinction also highlights broader anxieties about cultural erosion and globalization, as many wrestlers see gym-trained bodies as rigid, inflated and incapable of the fluidity required in kushti. The akhara thus emerges as a site of resistance, where alternative epistemologies of the body are sustained.

### 2) Masculinity, Morality and Social Reproduction

The akhara's masculine order is both performative and pedagogical. Wrestling becomes a ritual of man-making, where boys transition into men through hardship, injury and discipline. Titles like Punjab Kesri and Rustam-e-Hind carry social capital, but more importantly, they confer a moral identity rooted in endurance, modesty and loyalty. This aligns with Connell's (2005) model of hegemonic masculinity, but with a regional twist: Indian wrestling valorizes not dominance or aggression per se, but controlled strength, humility and submission to the guru. At the same time, the exclusivity of the akhara space – its male-only character, its caste-inflected hierarchies, and its deference to tradition raises critical questions about inclusivity and change. While some akharas in India have begun training women, none of the five studied here do so currently. Gendered bodily discipline remains a core feature and hypermasculine ideals continue to shape the boundaries of participation. Yet, within this rigidity lies an ethic of mutual care: massages, collective rituals, and elder mentorship create a sense of brotherhood and solidarity, often missing from individualistic gym environments.

### 3) Ritual, Faith and Cultural Resilience

Religious devotion was a unifying feature across all akharas. The presence of Hanuman mandirs, ritual offerings and daily prayers illustrates how wrestling is spiritually anchored, making the akhara not only a gym but also a temple. This convergence of faith and fitness complicates western binaries between the secular and the sacred (Alter, 1992). Wrestling here becomes a moral-spiritual journey, one that links physical prowess to divine protection and cosmic order. In a rapidly secularizing and commercializing urban context, this ritual density allows akharas to persist not through state policy, but through belief, habitus and community trust. It is this symbolic power that renders the akhara resilient. Even in financially poor or physically deteriorated spaces like Panj Peer Akhara, wrestlers derive meaning and identity from the continuity of sacred routines, emphasizing that tradition, when lived and embodied, can outlast material decline.

### 4) State Neglect and Infrastructural Insecurity

While akharas are deeply valued by their members, they remain largely invisible to the state. Despite their cultural and historical significance, none of the akharas studied receive consistent government support. Facilities like mats are

outdated, buildings are under threat of encroachment, and training costs are self-managed through donations or personal sacrifice. This lack of institutional support reflects a broader devaluation of vernacular knowledge systems and indigenous sports in neoliberal India. Even at Gol Bagh Akhara, the most professionalized of the five, the coaches struggle to maintain infrastructure and are forced to rely on temporary sponsorships. The fact that a wrestling mat installed in 2017 is still in use beyond its functional lifespan speaks to the symbolic rather than functional role assigned to such spaces in policy discourse. These findings echo critiques in the sociology of sport, which show how elite, market-oriented sports receive disproportionate support while grassroots institutions languish (Dimeo & Mills, 2004).

### 5) Tradition in Transition: Innovation without Displacement

Interestingly, adaptation does not always entail abandonment. While older methods like use of mugdar, kahi and herbal preparations still persists. Some akharas have cautiously introduced modern elements, such as kettlebells, pilates and even digital ambitions (as seen in Gol Bagh's upcoming social media plans). This suggests that akharas are not frozen in time; rather, they are dynamic institutions negotiating how much to modernize without losing their cultural core. This negotiation is often generational: younger wrestlers lean toward mat wrestling and dietary supplements, while older ustaads maintain orthodoxy. However, this does not result in rupture. Instead, these spaces operate through layered temporalities. Simultaneously old and new, sacred and practical, nostalgic and futuristic. The akhara thus resists neat categorization, instead embodying what Stuart Hall might call a "living tradition" – capable of change, yet always grounded in historical continuity (Hall, 1990).

## 9. CONCLUSION

This ethnographic study of five traditional akharas in Amritsar offers an in-depth view into the social, cultural and moral life of India's indigenous wrestling institutions. Through unstructured interviews and field observations, the research has shown that akharas are not merely sites for physical training; they are embodied communities that anchor wrestlers in systems of belief, discipline, ritual and relational ethics. Each akhara, whether resource-rich like Gol Bagh or precariously sustained like Panj Peer represents a unique articulation of tradition-in-practice, revealing how indigenous institutions continue to shape identity and moral subjectivity in contemporary India.

Across these five sites, several interwoven themes emerged: the sacralization of the wrestling body, the centrality of guru-chela hierarchies, the interplay between faith and fitness, and the economies of survival that define traditional sports in the face of urbanization and state neglect. Wrestlers, often from lower-middle or working-class backgrounds, engage in bodily practices that are as much about self-transformation and dignity as they are about competition. Wrestling offers them a cultural world structured by devotion, solidarity and reputation that often stands in contrast to commodified gym cultures and neoliberal wellness trends.

Despite their resilience, akharas face existential challenges. Shrinking land access, lack of financial support, declining youth interest and urban encroachment threaten their survival. Government sports policies overwhelmingly favour Olympic-style mat wrestling, with little regard for the cultural and pedagogical value of earth-pit kushti. Moreover, the absence of consistent funding, protective zoning, and structural investment reflects a broader marginalization of vernacular physical cultures in contemporary India. Yet, rather than portraying akharas as static or regressive, this study affirms their adaptive vitality. Wrestlers and ustaads are experimenting with selective incorporation of modern tools, nutrition, and even digital platforms without fully compromising their spiritual and communal ethos. This suggests that akharas function not as relics of a disappearing past, but as living archives of embodied knowledge, offering models of fitness, masculinity, and moral life that are distinctly Indian and deeply rooted.

From a policy perspective, the findings advocate for culturally sensitive sport planning, one that recognizes the value of traditional practices alongside formalized, competitive athletics. Institutions like the Sports Authority of India (SAI) and the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports must not only support professional wrestling but also protect and integrate grassroots akharas into broader sport and health infrastructure. Preservation is not just about maintaining heritage; it is about nurturing local systems of care, belonging and identity.

Future research can expand this study in several ways: by incorporating female perspectives from emerging women's wrestling programs, by examining akharas in rural versus urban settings, or by exploring the comparative experiences of wrestlers who transition between akharas and gyms. Longitudinal research tracking wrestlers over time could also provide insight into how bodily discipline shapes long-term well-being, employment trajectories and social mobility.



In conclusion, the akharas of Amritsar stand as enduring spaces of resistance, cultural memory and transformation. Amidst the forces of modernization, they continue to provide young men with a disciplined environment where the body is cultivated not merely for physical strength, but as an embodiment of tradition, sacrifice and moral selfhood.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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