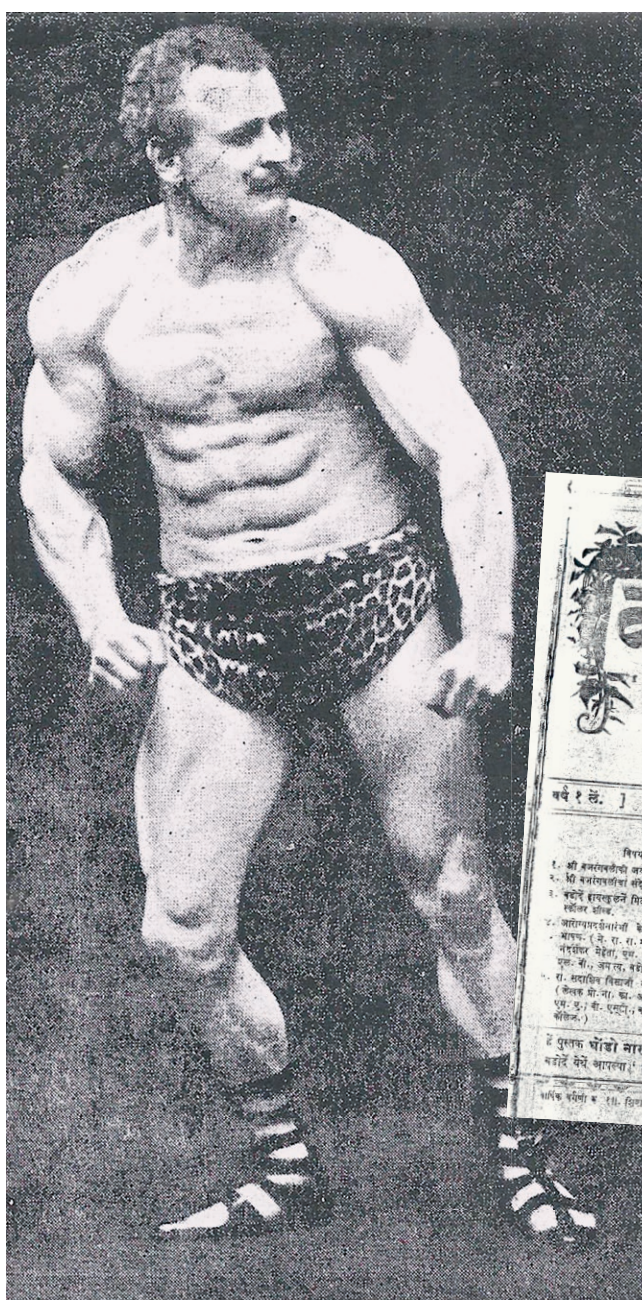


# Notes on *Vyayam*: a vernacular sports journal in western India

The initiation of vernacular press in western India was followed by the penetration of print and proliferation of a range of journalistic endeavours by the early twentieth century. While political journalism has had its share of historians, the story of sports journalism has remained rather under-researched and obscure in mainstream narratives of the subcontinent. In this article, I focus on the contents and policy of a unique Marathi language periodical, *Vyayam* [Exercise], which was launched in 1915 and was committed to the popularization of sport and physical culture especially among the educated middle classes of the region.

Namrata R. Ganneri



Above: *Vyayam* frontpiece, Eugene Sandow (June 1938).

Inset: *Vyayam* frontpiece (detail), inaugural issue (October 1915).

## A brief profile

*Vyayam* was a monthly that maintained steady circulation figures of 1000 through most of its life, though in 1926 the circulation reached an all-time high of 1500. It wound up in 1954 after uninterrupted publication for nearly four decades. Remarkably, this outstanding journal acquired legendary status even in its own day. The guiding spirit and mentor of *Vyayam* was Dattatreya Chintaman Mujumdar (1882-1954), the son of a leading notable and himself a pleader serving the princely state of Baroda. A sportsman trained in western as well as 'indigenous' sports,<sup>1</sup> Mujumdar was impelled to found a sports journal following a trip to Europe in 1913. The project involved considerable personal investment; his wife worked in the photography section, familial resources were funnelled into the venture to tide over financial losses, sometimes to the tune of a thousand rupees a year, and finally Mujumdar

availed of voluntary retirement from his service in 1931 to devote himself exclusively to writing and publishing. Since DC Mujumdar was in government service, he chose Dhondo Narayan Vidhwans, a friend and confidante, as the editor and in subsequent years, ND Mujumdar, a close kin, was appointed as the co-editor of this journal. It was published by the Shriramvijaya Printing Press, situated within the Mujumdar estate in Baroda. The ruling princes of Baroda, themselves sport enthusiasts, were ceremonial patrons, and offered financial support to select special issues.

The first issue of *Vyayam* rolled out on 15 October 1915, and all subsequent issues were published on the 15th of every month. It was a two-colour periodical, averaging 24 pages, with approximately eight contributions. The contents included articles and poems on the benefits of exercise, elaborate descriptions of newly opened gymnasias, short biographies of leading wrestlers and sportspeople, both Indian and foreign, rules of games, information and visual documentation of various sports. The column *Vyayamavrutta* [News], featured details of various inter-school and inter-collegiate tournaments, announcements of forthcoming wrestling bouts, and other on-going competitions, as well as physical education conferences. A formal editorial emerged only after a decade of its founding, though the editorial voice was present in dialogues that were interspersed with implicit and explicit editorial comments: for instance, dialogues between advocates and an opponents of exercise. In such dialogues, which very well may have stemmed from traditional oral narrative genres and then set in print, one character either provided instruction to the other or they both engaged in conversation about a controversial topic. Importantly, both sides were granted space to present different viewpoints. There existed a Baroda-based team of regular contributors to the journal, though articles from interested writers were actively solicited. Further, many pieces were translated from magazines coming from the North Atlantic region, and a comparison with the American magazine *Physical Culture* was a running theme right from the inaugural issue of the journal. *Vyayam* had evocative frontpieces as well as a plethora of photographs of renowned as well as upcoming wrestlers, physical culture and muscle training enthusiasts from various parts of western India, which in turn constitute a rich visual archive. Undoubtedly, the development of the new cult of the body was directly linked to novel ways in which the body could be viewed and 'consumed' through photography and mass media.

The journal was sustained primarily through subscription fees; a successful model of commercial publishing, including advertising, was never developed. The efforts to draw in British patronage came to nought, and municipal schools in Bombay Presidency could not be convinced to subscribe to *Vyayam*. Hence the editors routinely addressed existing subscribers at the conclusion of each year, lamenting rising costs of production, and reiterated their publishing agenda, that of seva [service] to the Marathi people.

## Scope

Right from the start, the journal seemed to court certain kinds of audiences. The objectives of the periodical, as presented in its inaugural editorial of October 1915, focused on physical training for the educated. "The main theme of our journal is 'Exercise' and its propagation. Upon meditating on one's worldly, spiritual and social desires, readers will recognize the importance of this issue ... In the present age people have acquired English education and ignored their physical well-being, especially physical training

... We have become weak in the past eight to ten years, and require exercise more than even English education." (p.6)

The journal sought to attract sufficient numbers of subscribers from the newly educated classes. Though the literate population was ever-expanding following the introduction of compulsory primary education, readers had since acquired a taste for novels and 'entertaining fiction' interspersed among the burgeoning Marathi periodicals of the times. Despite being a 'dull' read, subscribing to *Vyayam* was, then, presented as a panacea for all ills, and the journal's early proselytizing zeal was evident in aphorisms that appeared in the footer of each page in all issues of the first decade.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the inaugural issue clearly indicated that, while it accorded space to the contemporary (read: western) physical training regimens and sports, it also advocated the practice of 'indigenous' sports and games, and a debate between 'eastern' and 'western' ran like a red thread through into the 1940s. These debates were representative of a characteristic middle-class response and the 'cultural anxiety' surrounding the introduction of institutions of colonial modernity that was typified by colonial sports.

*Vyayam* had categorically asserted its stance to steer clear of political issues, most probably to avoid colonial surveillance and censorship. In actual practice, it did include biographical sketches of anti-colonial nationalists and also occasionally of foreign statesmen like Woodrow Wilson of the USA and Benito Mussolini of Italy. The journal disavowed commercial considerations, saw its primary task as that of 'instruction' on issues of physical fitness and general well-being. That debates about health were already circulating in the Marathi public sphere is evident from the response of one reader who argued in favour of the journal advocating the benefits of exercise for women in particular. Letters to the editor subsequently became a regular feature of the journal.

Indeed, the production and circulation of this journal has to be located in a range of publication processes that sought to textualise physical culture. Many people whose work featured in *Vyayam* were producing literature on sports, particularly indigenous sports in vernacular languages. Remarkably, British sports were introduced in Japan in a similar fashion through the creation of small pamphlets in Japanese, and described as the 'play' movement.

## Physical Culture Movement

In India, the introduction of colonial sports had multiple trajectories. Nevertheless, sport was not simply a vehicle for expressing anti-colonial and nationalist emotions; Alter draws attention to the myriad physical culture regimes that prevailed in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Although there is some empirical evidence of an increasing interest in sports, more interestingly, 'indigenous' sports were getting transformed in terms of patronage, space and spectatorship, through middle-class intervention. As games, particularly *kabaddi* and *kho kho*, evolved into organized competitive sports, the creation of a canon of Indian physical culture was an important concern of the publicists. Thus, the entire range of activities (from framing rules, publicising them to standardization and the promotion of various sports especially among young students – male as well as female), manifested in several rapidly proliferating gymnasiums and physical culture clubs called *akharas* and *vyayamshalas*, is described as the physical culture movement.<sup>4</sup> Youths were trained in all kinds of sports by certified instructors. The pedagogic models evolved by these new institutions were distinctly suited to being incorporated in the curriculum of most schools in the twentieth century, and eventually influenced the institutionalization of physical education. We encounter several such 'modern' institutions in the pages of *Vyayam*. Featuring debates and discussions about the ongoing movement, the journal itself constitutes a veritable archive of sporting activities in western India.

## Concluding comments

A survey of this lone sports periodical in Marathi seeks to go beyond underlining the importance of vernacular sources in writing the social history of sport. Neither does one propose to highlight the introduction of an 'exotic' genre to the literary landscape of Marathi periodicals, like women's periodicals or even cartoon-based humour magazines. A preliminary overview of the rich material contained in *Vyayam* in fact explicates how Indians negotiated with modernity, exemplified both through sport and print.

Namrata R Ganneri is Assistant Professor, Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNDT Women's University, Mumbai. She has recently completed a Government of India (UGC) funded research project entitled, 'Transforming Indigenous Sport: A Study Of Physical Culture Clubs In Western India c. 1900-1950'. (namrata.ganneri@rcws.sndt.ac.in)

## References

- 1 Some of the popular 'indigenous' sports in western India were wrestling and its allied exercises such as *dand* (jack-knifing push-ups), gymnastic sports like *mallakhamb* (exercises performed with a wooden pillar), martial sports like *lathi kathi* (stave training), and other team games like *atya patya* (game of militant chase) and *kabaddi* (a vigorous game of team tag).
- 2 For example, '*Bal ho! Vyayam che khel khelon aarogya milva*', '*Tarun ho! Vyayam karoon aarogya va shakti donhi kamva*', '*Vrudhha ho! Vyayam karoon aarogya rakshan kara*'. When roughly translated these read, 'O children! Play games so as to gain health', 'O Youth! Exercise so as to gain both health and strength', 'O elderly people! Exercise so as to preserve your health'.
- 3 Alter, J. 2007. "Physical education, sport and the intersection and articulation of 'modernities': The Hanuman Vyayam Prasarak Mandal," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 24(9):1156-71
- 4 Of the many gymnasiums founded in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, the Hanuman Vyayam Prasarak Mandal (Amaravati), Samartha Vyayam Mandir (Bombay city, now Mumbai) and Maharashtra Mandir (Pune city), all in the modern state of Maharashtra, survive to this day.