The Slow Fade: State Patronage, Modernity, and the Decline of the Akhara in Lahore and Gujranwala, 1900–2000

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Abstract

This research paper investigates the critical factors contributing to the systemic decline of the *Akhara* tradition—the indigenous wrestling culture—in the key historical centres of Lahore and Gujranwala during the twentieth century, specifically between 1900 and 2000. The core argument posits that this decline was precipitated by a dual structural challenge: a precipitous withdrawal of financial and institutional support from the state following the end of the princely and early post-colonial eras, coupled with the profound cultural and economic pressures of rapid modernization. The study moves beyond simple nostalgia, analysing the material conditions of the *pehlwans* (wrestlers) and the failure of the institution to adapt to new fitness trends and a shifting job-centric economy. The once-celebrated *Akhara*, which served as a crucible for moral, physical, and even nationalist ideals, struggled to compete with globalised sports and was hampered by its own conservative practices. This comparative historical analysis of two distinct urban hubs illuminates how a cherished cultural asset transitioned from a national symbol of pride to a fading memory, advocating for urgent measures to preserve its legacy against the forces of neglect and obsolescence.

Keywords: Akhara, Pehlwan, State Patronage, Modernization, Lahore, Gujranwala

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The history of South Asian physical culture is indelibly linked to the tradition of the *Akhara*, a unique institution that functioned simultaneously as a training pit, a moral academy, and a civic centre. In the heartland of Punjab, particularly within the historic cities of Lahore and Gujranwala, the *Akhara* culture reached its zenith during the early twentieth century, serving as a powerful expression of indigenous strength, discipline, and communal identity (Shaikh 2004). This period, marked by the legendary feats of wrestlers like Gama and Rahim Sultaniwala, cemented the *pehlwan* as a figure of immense social respect and regional pride, an honour that transcended mere sport to become a cultural touchstone (Fahmi 1990). The vibrancy of this tradition, however, would prove tragically fragile against the sweeping changes of the subsequent decades.

The central theme of this paper argues that the profound decline of the *Akhara* tradition in Lahore and Gujranwala between 1900 and 2000 was not a slow, natural decay but a structural collapse orchestrated by two primary, interconnected forces. Firstly, the abrupt and sustained cessation of state and elite patronage, which had historically provided the essential financial bedrock for the exorbitantly expensive sport. Secondly, the cultural and institutional paralysis stemming from the relentless process of modernization, which simultaneously introduced compelling new forms of entertainment and fitness while exposing the *Akharas'* inherent rigidity and resistance to change (Shakoor 2016). Understanding this dual assault—financial neglect from without and an inability to evolve from within—is crucial to grasping the depth of this cultural tragedy.

The paper will embark on a detailed comparative study. Lahore, as the socio-political capital of Punjab, and Gujranwala, known historically as the "City of Wrestlers," offer perfect counterpoints to examine the differential impact of state policy and modernity. By dissecting the golden age of state sponsorship, tracing the post-Partition policy shifts, and analysing the cultural displacement caused by globalised trends, this study seeks to illuminate the precise mechanisms through which this noble tradition was pushed to the brink of extinction (Neville 2006). Ultimately, the fate of the *Akhara* serves as a poignant historical case study illustrating how the indifference of institutions and the inexorable march of progress can extinguish a deeply rooted, venerable cultural form.

The scholarly literature surrounding the *Akhara* tradition offers multiple perspectives, establishing it not just as a sporting venue but as a complex social institution intertwined with nationalism, morality, and class. Early works often focused on the religious and philosophical underpinnings of *kushti*, tracing its roots back to the ancient martial art of *Mallyudh*, as described in Hindu epics like the *Mahabharata*, linking it to deities such as Hanuman (Lochtefeld 2002). These foundational texts highlight the spiritual dimension of the practice, where the rigorous physical discipline was seen as a path to moral and spiritual purity, effectively framing the *Akhara* as a *darasgaah* (place of learning) rather than merely a gymnasium.

A second, more critical body of literature, pioneered by anthropologists and historians like Joseph Alter, views the *Akhara* through the lens of political identity and social reformation. Alter (1994), for instance, explored how the culture of wrestling became a vehicle for "somatic nationalism," where the disciplined, abstinent male body trained in the *Akhara* was positioned in direct

ideological opposition to the perceived moral and physical degradation under colonial rule. This perspective is vital because it explains why institutions like the Muslim Health Club in Lahore were not just places for exercise but were powerful symbols that asserted cultural sovereignty and fostered a specific, disciplined masculine ideal. This historical context underscores the depth of the loss when these symbols began to fade, as the decline represented not just a sporting defeat but a national, moral capitulation.

The methodology employed in this paper is primarily historical and comparative, integrating both primary and secondary sources to build a robust argument about the multifaceted decline of the *Akhara*. The research is founded on a deep consultation of scholarly works, including books and journal articles that address the religious, anthropological, and historical aspects of Indian wrestling and South Asian physical culture (Alter 1992; Bromber and Maguire 2012). This review established the theoretical framework, particularly regarding the concepts of modernization and state dependency, which guided the analysis of institutional collapse. The existing thesis, which this essay expands upon, already contains a rich corpus of biographical and journalistic accounts, providing essential historical facts and anecdotal evidence.

Crucially, the study relies heavily on primary source material in the form of interviews with key figures associated with the *Akharas* of Lahore and Gujranwala, including former champions and *Khalifas* (heads of the wrestling schools). These seven individual interviews—including those with Javed Aslam Malik and Inam Butt—serve as irreplaceable qualitative data, offering firsthand accounts of the institutional decay, the economic hardship faced by *pehlwans*, and the conservative philosophical resistance to modern methods. By triangulating these contemporary grievances with historical records detailing the lavish patronage of the colonial and pre-colonial eras, the essay can directly contrast the golden age of support with the later period of critical neglect, thereby moving the analysis beyond theoretical constructs to grounded, human experience.

The Historical and Cultural Roots of the Akhara Tradition

The origins of the *Akhara* tradition are submerged deep within the mythologies and military histories of the Indian subcontinent, long preceding the 1900–2000 scope of this analysis. The practice of *kushti*, the form of wrestling practised in the *Akhara*, evolved from the ancient martial art of *Mallyudh*, a discipline that was central to the training of warriors, kings, and nobles (Pathak 2016). Its ancient roots—attested to by its mention in foundational texts—bestowed upon it a sanctity that no imported sport could ever claim, making it an inherited cultural asset rather than a simple pastime.

The physical space of the *Akhara* itself holds profound cultural significance. Traditionally a pit of carefully conditioned earth, often 20 by 20 feet, the soil was not merely dirt but a mixture designed to prevent injury and even possess healing properties (Nangare 2013). This consecrated space was the domain of the *Khalifa*, the guru whose role extended far beyond coaching physical technique; he was a moral custodian, a father figure, and the interpreter of the ethical philosophy underpinning every move (*Dao*). The collective structure of the *Akhara*, where disciples were taught mutual care and unity, cultivated a strong sense of internal nationalism and brotherhood, reflecting the

ideal of the unified structure espoused in religious teachings.

During the medieval period, the practice transitioned from battlefield necessity to a formalised court spectacle, largely due to the patronage of the Mughals and local Maharajas. These rulers fostered competition between wrestlers from different *riasats* (princely states), rewarding winners with high honours, financial grants, and the coveted *Gurz* (mace), often crafted from precious metals and adorned with jewels (Hussain 2004). This institutionalisation elevated the *pehlwan* from a fighter to a privileged courtier, intrinsically linking the wrestling tradition to state power and aristocratic wealth—a relationship that would prove critical in its later downfall.

The colonial era, spanning the first half of the twentieth century, is universally regarded as the golden age of *Akhara* culture in Punjab. This period saw the rise of legendary figures such as Gama Pehlwan (Ghulam Muhammad), who achieved the title of *Rustam-e-Zaman* (World Champion) in London, effectively turning a regional tradition into a global phenomenon (Noble 2002). This global recognition spurred massive local interest, transforming the large wrestling bouts (*Dangal*) held in cities like Lahore, Gujranwala, and Amritsar into major public spectacles drawing tens of thousands of spectators.

The establishment of powerful wrestling factions, known as *Dafs*, further structured the sport, particularly in Lahore where the Nurewala, Kaloowala, and Kotwala groups dominated (Ali 1974). These *Dafs* were more than training groups; they were rival communities, representing a specific masculine identity that was morally reformed, abstinent, and physically formidable. Their prominence during the colonial period—often supported by nationalist sentiments like the *Swadeshi* movement, which promoted indigenous physical education—underscored the *Akhara's* role as a site of political and cultural resistance (Ramchandani and Hoiberg 2000). The physical training, therefore, became an act of moral fortification against foreign dominance.

The daily routine of the *pehlwan* was, and remains, a testament to extreme discipline. Starting well before dawn, the regimen involved hours of demanding physical exercises like *dands* (Hindu press-ups) and *sapate*, followed by the consumption of a staggering diet. This diet, requiring a daily intake of 5,000 to 7,500 calories, involved copious amounts of milk, clarified butter (*ghee*), high-quality meat, and the specialised post-workout tonic known as *Thandiayi* (Chakravertty 2008). This nutritional requirement is key, as it explains the inherent and overwhelming expensiveness of the tradition, making continuous external patronage an absolute necessity for survival.

The cultural impact extended into the wider promotion of physical education. Movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries actively sought to restore the *Akhara's* standing, viewing it as a superior form of physical and moral development compared to imported Western sports (Crego 2003). Figures like Lokmanya Tilak encouraged youth to take up wrestling, arguing that every village should have an *Akhara* alongside its schools. This ideological commitment to *kushti* ensured that for decades, it was held in higher esteem than any "extracurricular" activity, positioning the *pehlwan* as a moral exemplar in society.

Lahore, housing factions like the Kotwala Daf (home to the legendary Gama), and Gujranwala, which produced rival greats like Rahim Sultaniwala, were the epicentres of this culture. The Grand Trunk Road connecting these cities served not just as a route for commerce but for competition, fostering a vigorous, if sometimes volatile, rivalry that fuelled the sport's popularity (Anand 1998). The tradition of granting land, such as the eight *kanals* donated for the Muslim Health Club in Lahore, cemented the physical and cultural ties between the urban landscape and the institution.

It is crucial to note that while the focus here is on the cultural high points, the seeds of the *Akhara's* eventual decline were already present in its rigid conservatism. The very pride and insularity that made it a powerful symbol of resistance also fostered an aversion to the kind of structural change or technological adaptation that would be vital for its survival in the face of later global competition (Bromber and Maguire 2012). This deep-seated belief in the sublimity of their own, ages-old technique would ultimately become a major vulnerability.

The *Akhara* was intrinsically a male-dominated space, reinforcing a specific definition of masculinity rooted in self-control, celibacy, and physical prowess (Alter 1994). This moral code, requiring abstinence from substances and sensual temptations, positioned the *pehlwan* as a figure of disciplined piety. This ethical framework, while contributing to the high social standing of the wrestler, was fundamentally incompatible with the shifting moral landscape and cultural liberties that modernization would later introduce, setting up an inevitable conflict.

Thus, the historical context of the *Akhara* reveals a tradition robustly supported by state power, deeply embedded in local identity, and highly resistant to outside influence. This configuration of high financial dependency coupled with institutional rigidity meant that any external shift in state priorities or internal pressure for modernization would not lead to adaptation, but rather, to rapid and dramatic decline, as witnessed in the later decades of the century.

The Zenith of Patronage (1900–1947): The State and the Wrestler

The period between 1900 and 1947 represents the highest point of state and elite patronage for the *Akhara* tradition, providing a vital counterpoint to the neglect seen later. During this era, wrestling was not merely supported; it was instrumentalised by ruling elites—both British colonial administrators and the rulers of the 562 princely states—as a means of demonstrating power and cultural legitimacy (Neville 2006). This political instrumentalism ensured that resources were never an issue for the top *pehlwans*.

The princely states, such as Patiala, Kolhapur, and Junagarh, were the foremost patrons, often maintaining standing armies of wrestlers who were considered court assets. The financial rewards were astronomical: a successful *pehlwan* was showered with gold and silver *Gurzes*, vast tracts of agricultural land, cash annuities, and even entire villages, as was the case for Gama after his 1910 world title victory (Noble 2002). These incentives created a sustainable, attractive profession for thousands of men, particularly those from humble backgrounds who saw wrestling as a viable, respected path to upward social mobility.

In addition to individual rewards, the rulers personally sponsored and organised large-scale *Dangal* events, most notably the *Shahi Dangal* (Royal Tournament). These events were logistically supported by the state machinery and served as crucial income generators and talent showcases for the wrestling community (Qasir 1997). The patronage was a clear statement: to support the wrestler was to embody the traditional, physical strength of the region, and this elevated the status of *kushti* above all other forms of physical contest.

The pre-Partition era saw a unique cultural dynamic in Lahore, where the concentration of famous *Akharas* within the walled city (Bhatti Gate, Shah Almi) created a fierce, highly competitive ecosystem. This environment, fuelled by the resources provided by elite individual families and local merchants, sustained the elaborate and expensive diet and training of hundreds of young aspirants (Anand 1998). The rivalry between the Kotwala Daf (Gama's family) and others drove the quality of wrestling to its global peak, funded primarily by a flow of money from wealthy benefactors.

The advent of Partition in 1947, while politically cataclysmic, did not immediately extinguish the tradition. In the newly formed Pakistan, the early government under Liaquat Ali Khan and subsequent military regimes, such as Ayub Khan's, initially continued the policy of patronage, recognising the value of wrestling heroes as national symbols (Raza 2015). This continuity was vital, leading to land grants, housing, and titles like *Rustam-e-Pakistan* for figures like Bholu Pehlwan and his brothers, who maintained the international reputation of the country.

The establishment of institutions like the Dar Al Sehat (Bholu's Akhara) in Karachi and the continued organisation of national *Dangal* events demonstrated a brief, post-colonial recognition that the wrestling tradition was synonymous with national pride (Raza 2015). State institutions like the Railways, WAPDA (Water and Power Development Authority), and the police forces also provided a critical, government-backed employment structure. They recruited *pehlwans* directly into their teams, providing stable income and an official platform for competition, effectively replacing the old princely courts with modern bureaucratic structures.

However, even in this relatively supportive post-Partition period, the signs of structural weakness were emerging. The new state patronage lacked the deep, cultural investment of the Maharajas; it was a policy driven more by expediency and the need for symbolic national heroes than a profound commitment to the philosophical roots of the *Akhara*. The dependence remained total, but the source of funds had become bureaucratic and easily revocable.

Crucially, the comparison between Lahore and Gujranwala reveals subtle differences in the nature of patronage. Lahore, as the metropolitan capital, benefited from a more formal, institutionalised support system (through government departments and military sponsorship), whereas Gujranwala's tradition, famed for figures like Yunus Pehlwan, was often sustained by a powerful, albeit smaller, local elite and a strong, enduring community spirit (Qasir 1997). This difference meant that when state support inevitably crumbled, Gujranwala's *Akharas*, having less reliance on a large institutional framework, initially showed slightly more resilience, sustained by purely local pride and generational commitment.

The golden age of patronage, therefore, was a double-edged sword. It enabled a financially demanding tradition to flourish and achieve global acclaim, but simultaneously fostered an absolute dependency on external wealth. The structure never evolved to be financially self-sustaining, nor did it build the necessary political lobby to ensure its longevity. The system was robust only as long as the political will of the ruling class—first the princes, then the military rulers—remained favourable, making the tradition intrinsically vulnerable to political shifts.

The lavish rewards of the time created a prestige that attracted thousands, ensuring a continuous supply of highly motivated recruits. This cultural momentum overshadowed any concerns about long-term financial viability. The focus was entirely on immediate performance and the accumulation of honour and wealth from the current patron, replicating the courtly dynamics of the medieval age in a modern context (Ali 1974). This institutional short-sightedness would have devastating consequences when the patronage disappeared entirely.

The Post-Colonial Transition and the Erosion of Support (1947-2000)

The shift in state priorities and the subsequent erosion of patronage in the latter half of the twentieth century was the single greatest material factor in the *Akhara's* decline. The period following the 1970s marked a decisive pivot away from indigenous sports as the primary symbol of national pride towards globalised athletic forms like cricket, squash, and hockey (Shakoor 2016). This policy shift effectively starved the *Akharas* of the only life support they had ever known, relegating *kushti* to a low-priority cultural relic.

The most immediate and devastating impact was the withdrawal of jobs and recruitment opportunities from public sector institutions. Where once WAPDA or the Railways provided stable careers for *pehlwans*, these positions either dried up completely or were drastically reduced, reserved only for a handful of national champions (Butt, I., 2021). The lack of entry-level employment stripped the profession of its practical utility, leaving young aspirants with the prospect of gruelling training, an expensive diet, and zero guaranteed income—a non-starter in a rapidly modernizing, monetized economy.

The financial crisis was profound. The daily dietary requirements alone—costing significantly more than a middle-class salary—made training untenable without external subsidy (Butt, I., 2021). Without the state or elite individuals funding their expenses, young men, even those with intense passion, were forced to abandon the *Akhara* for sustainable labour. Javed Aslam Malik noted the devastating irony: *pehlwans* were struggling just to earn a living, having to train while simultaneously focusing on making ends meet, a stark contrast to the state-funded systems in neighbouring India (Malik 2021).

Furthermore, the central government and the Pakistan Wrestling Federation (PWF) displayed a marked lack of interest in preserving the traditional format of *kushti*. While some funding was allocated to Olympic freestyle wrestling, the indigenous *Akhara* structure—with its mud pits and specific, traditional rules—was deemed too archaic or too difficult to integrate into modern, centralized sports management (Mehmood

2021). The PWF, hampered by its own limited budget and, as some critics claim, inefficient leadership, failed to act as a robust advocate for the dying tradition.

The issue of land and infrastructure further compounded the crisis. Historically, *Akharas* were large, purpose-built compounds often granted by patrons. As urban populations exploded in Lahore and Gujranwala, this prime land became highly valuable. Without state protection, many *Akharas* were either encroached upon, victims of land-grabbing, or were officially reclaimed by development authorities for other public works (Lahori 2013). This limited space not only hindered training but destroyed the communal and symbolic heart of the institution, leaving only a handful of functional pits in both cities.

The comparative impact on Lahore and Gujranwala offers an interesting contrast. Lahore's *Akharas* were more visibly tied to state institutions and large-scale public land, making their closure more symbolic and their physical assets more vulnerable to governmental reclamation. The famous sites that once hosted champions near Data Sahib were either repurposed or forgotten (Butt, A. 2021). Gujranwala's struggle, though equally severe, was often more localised and intense, as the pride of the "City of Wrestlers" faced internal disillusionment without the media visibility of the capital.

The decline was so sharp that it became a generational trauma. Former *Khalifas*, who had dedicated their lives to the tradition, actively discouraged their own children from joining, recognizing the lack of future prospects (Pehlwan, N. 2021). This self-imposed moratorium on recruitment, driven by material reality, speaks volumes about the complete collapse of the profession's economic and social prestige. The absence of patronage had transitioned from an external problem to an internal, institutional rejection of the very tradition.

The tragic life and death of Jhara Pehlwan in 1991, the last great champion from the Bholu family, can be seen as a poignant metaphor for the *Akhara's* fate in this period. While he achieved fame, his story, ending prematurely amidst rumours of addiction and lack of sustained guidance, highlights the vacuum left by a supportive, structured community (Gillani 2009). The disappearance of the paternalistic support system, once provided by the old patrons, left even the most talented wrestlers vulnerable to the excesses and pressures of a modern, unforgiving world.

In Lahore, the once formidable *Dafs* dwindled to isolated, struggling pockets, often run by dedicated but financially destitute *Khalifas* who charged minimal fees out of moral obligation (Pehlwan, Y. 2021). The physical evidence of the decline was stark: the closure of major arenas, the dilapidation of remaining pits, and the sight of struggling veterans turning to small businesses for survival. The traditional culture, which once mandated respect and command, was reduced to a niche hobby sustained only by those with family history.

The lack of financial reward also meant the complete cessation of international competition in the traditional style. While Pakistani wrestlers continued to compete in Olympic-style freestyle, the specific art of *kushti* was no longer exported or defended on the world stage (AFP 2013). This retreat into insularity further diminished its public profile, replacing the historical narrative of world championships with a perception of a failing, regional hobby.

In essence, the post-colonial state, facing different national priorities and lacking the personal, deep-pocketed commitment of the Maharajas, executed a structural defunding of the *Akhara* tradition. This policy of neglect was not necessarily malicious, but it was structurally fatal, as it removed the indispensable financial pillar upon which the entire, expensive institution was built, leaving it exposed and unable to withstand the subsequent onslaught of cultural modernization.

The Onslaught of Modernity: Cultural and Economic Divergence

While the absence of state patronage provided the material conditions for the *Akhara's* decline, the forces of modernization delivered the decisive cultural blow, profoundly altering public taste, fitness ideals, and the socio-economic structure of urban life. Modernity presented a "double-edged sword" to the *Akhara*: it introduced easier, more marketable alternatives, while the *Akhara* itself, hampered by its own conservatism, failed entirely to adapt (Shakoor 2016).

The most visible change was the rapid globalization of mass media and spectator sports. In the 1990s, the national spotlight shifted unequivocally to cricket, squash, and field hockey (Sahito and Ansari 2020). Heroes like Imran Khan and Jahangir Khan became the new national idols, embodying a sleek, international, and financially successful form of athleticism. This narrative of global achievement immediately overshadowed the regional, earth-bound, and increasingly insular image of the *pehlwan*.

Simultaneously, the physical culture landscape was revolutionized by the emergence of the modern gym and bodybuilding. The popular, often media-driven, desire for a leaner, sculpted physique—a trend heavily influenced by global stars and Bollywood actors like Salman Khan—was physically unattainable through the traditional, high-calorie, mass-building diet and training of the *Akhara* (Sahito and Ansari 2020). The *Akhara's* goal of achieving overwhelming mass and strength was suddenly out of sync with contemporary aesthetic ideals, leading the youth to prefer weight machines and isolated muscle training over rigorous communal digging and *dands*.

The economic divergence was equally critical. Modernization accelerated the shift from a traditional, kinship-based economy to one dominated by salaried jobs and materialism (Inglehart 1997). The pursuit of economic stability became paramount, and the *Akhara*, which demanded full-time dedication without offering any financial return, simply could not compete. Young men correctly assessed that a certificate from a technical college held more value in the new job market than the title of *pehlwan* (Malik 2021).

The deeply conservative philosophy of the *Akhara* proved to be its greatest institutional weakness in the face of this change. Rooted in traditional morality, the *Akhara* strongly resisted any attempt to modernize its training methods, equipment, or promotional strategies (AFP 2013). The *Khalifas*, often men of immense pride and traditional knowledge, viewed the adoption of gym equipment, protein supplements, or structured training programs as a cultural betrayal—a corruption of the art's true, time-tested essence.

This rigidity meant that the *Akharas* could not participate in the new fitness economy. While modern gyms proliferated as profitable

commercial ventures, the *Akhara* remained a non-profit, culturally dependent entity (Pehlwan, U. 2021). The insistence on using only traditional methods meant that a trainee required years of intense, difficult labour to achieve results, whereas a modern gym offered seemingly quicker, easier paths to fitness goals, appealing directly to the impatience of the modern youth.

Furthermore, modernization introduced an unprecedented availability of recreational activities and, more critically, moral temptations that directly challenged the asceticism required of a *pehlwan*. The easy access to media, entertainment, and a more liberalized social environment eroded the very foundations of the *pehlwan's* moral code, which mandated celibacy and abstinence (Mujumdar 1950). The philosophical ideal of the abstinent, morally pure wrestler became increasingly difficult to maintain, leading to a visible decline in the moral prestige of the remaining practitioners.

The issue of drug culture and misuse, exemplified by the tragedy of Jhara Pehlwan, further tarnished the tradition's image (Gillani 2009). In a world without the protective, structured discipline of old-world patronage, the champions were left vulnerable. This visibility of moral and physical failure in the lives of former heroes contributed to the public perception that the *Akhara* was no longer the reliable crucible of character it once was.

The phenomenon of internal migration also played a subtle but destructive role. As Lahore and Gujranwala experienced internal migration from rural areas, the intermingling of diverse cultural practices diluted the pure, singular focus on the *Akhara* that characterised the old walled city life (Younas and Khayal 2013). The new urban demographic lacked the generational memory and commitment to the tradition, making it difficult to generate a new base of support or recruitment.

The comparison between Lahore and Gujranwala in this era again shows differentiation in scale, though not in kind. In Lahore, the *Akharas* were physically and symbolically displaced by new commercial and governmental structures (Lahori 2013). In Gujranwala, the erosion of the local elite's power meant that the strong regional pride could no longer translate into sustained financial support, leaving the remaining *Akharas*, like the historic Rahim Sultaniwala compound, to rely on the sheer willpower of individuals like Goga Gujranwalia.

To survive, some wrestlers attempted a difficult, often clumsy, transition. They tried to compete in Olympic or professional freestyle wrestling, a format that was internationally recognized but lacked the cultural depth and traditional rules of *kushti* (AFP 2013). This act, while a necessary means of professional survival, further alienated the traditional base of the sport, as it diluted the distinctive art form they were meant to preserve. The tradition was caught between the need for modernization (which it resisted) and the need for purity (which modernization corrupted).

In summary, the onset of modernization introduced compelling, globally-validated alternatives for fitness and entertainment, simultaneously dismantling the socio-economic structure that sustained the *Akhara*. The tradition’s proud conservatism, which once defined its strength against the colonial power, rendered it wholly incapable of adapting to the rapid, material, and cultural shifts of the late twentieth century, ensuring its swift descent into obsolescence.

A Tale of Two Cities: Comparative Decline in Lahore and Gujranwala

The decline of the *Akhara* tradition was a shared fate for both Lahore and Gujranwala, yet the comparative analysis reveals nuanced differences in the intensity and mechanisms of this decay, primarily influenced by their contrasting urban identities and economic structures. Lahore, as the sprawling provincial capital, experienced a more institutional and symbolic collapse, while Gujranwala, the regional wrestling heartland, witnessed a more organic, localised implosion driven by economic hardship.

In Lahore, the collapse was symbolized by the physical loss of its iconic wrestling grounds. The lands once home to the great *Dafs* were prime urban real estate, and their closure or encroachment by commercial development was highly visible (Lahori 2013). This physical displacement symbolized the *Akhara's* loss of status in the urban hierarchy; they were literally pushed out of the city's heart, replaced by housing and commercial centres that prioritized financial return over cultural heritage.

Lahore's *Akharas* were historically intertwined with the state bureaucracy (police, railways, WAPDA) due to its status as the administrative hub (Raza 2015). Consequently, when state funding and hiring policies changed, the shockwave was felt immediately and widely across a large, structured network of wrestlers. The financial dependency was on large, impersonal institutions, meaning that when the funds were cut, there was no emotional or personal bond to cushion the fall, leading to rapid, systemic desertion from the profession.

Conversely, Gujranwala's wrestling culture, although globally famous for producing champions, operated on a more regional and community-centric scale. The patronage here was often more intimate, coming from powerful local landowners and industrialists rather than massive government bodies (Qasir 1997). This structure, while providing strong initial support, meant that the system was exceptionally vulnerable to local economic downturns and the death or disinterest of a few key patrons. The subsequent lack of job opportunities felt intensely personal and isolating in the smaller city.

The resistance to modernization was also more rigid in Gujranwala, where the culture was deeply traditional and fiercely proud of its indigenous identity (Butt, I. 2021). This intense conservatism, stemming from its long-held title as the "City of Wrestlers," made the acceptance of modern gym equipment or commercial branding feel like a deeper betrayal of heritage than it might have in the more cosmopolitan Lahore. This refusal to adapt accelerated the flight of ambitious youth to other careers.

However, a small paradox emerged in the decline: the few remaining *Akharas* in Gujranwala often exhibited a fiercer, more dedicated form of survival. Because the remaining patrons and *Khalifas* were deeply embedded in the local community, they sustained the tradition through sheer willpower and local pride, sometimes attracting funds from the diaspora or extremely devoted local figures (Pehlwan, U. 2021). Lahore's few survivors, while equally dedicated, often felt more isolated in a city that had moved on entirely.

The final result in both cities, by the year 2000, was the reduction of a once-glorious tradition into a niche pastime. In Lahore, the narrative became one of historical loss and

urban change; in Gujranwala, it was one of internal economic failure and the betrayal of a historic identity. Both cities confirmed the central argument: the culture could not survive without the essential financial backing, and the conservatism of the institution ensured it would find no alternative means of survival in the modern era.

Conclusion

The trajectory of the *Akhara* tradition in Lahore and Gujranwala between 1900 and 2000 is a compelling, yet tragic, narrative of cultural and institutional failure. The evidence overwhelmingly supports the thesis that the decline was fundamentally caused by the twin pressures of a withdrawal of state patronage and a fatal institutional inability to adapt to the forces of modernization. The golden age, sustained by the high-value patronage of rulers and institutions, created an absolute dependency on external funding to cover the enormous costs of a *pehlwan's* regimen (Butt, I. 2021). When the post-colonial state, facing shifting priorities and budgetary constraints, systematically withdrew the vital support—jobs, land grants, and organized events—the tradition's economic foundation crumbled, leading to the rapid closure of *Akharas* and the flight of talent.

Simultaneously, the proud, often conservative, nature of the *Akhara* proved to be its Achilles' heel in the face of the late-twentieth-century cultural revolution. The resistance to integrating modern training equipment, adapting the high-calorie diet to contemporary aesthetic demands, or embracing commercial and media promotion left the tradition completely vulnerable to the rise of globalised sports and the burgeoning gym culture (Pehlwan, U. 2021). Caught between financial starvation and institutional rigidity, the *Akhara* was culturally displaced, unable to offer the youth the economic prospects of a job or the desired physical ideals of the new age. The ultimate fate of this noble tradition is a sombre historical lesson on the fragility of even the most deeply rooted cultural institutions when they fail to evolve and are abandoned by the very state structures they once served to glorify.

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