

کیا گاما کبھی پہنچا لاما کے دیش؟  
क्या गामा कभी पहुँचा लामा के देश ?  
འགའ་མ་སྐྱ་མའི་ཡུལ་ལ་བསྐྱེབ་ཤེས་ས།

Did Gama ever reach the Land of Lama ?  
(Ladakh in a much wider perspective)

*An almost poetical essay*

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STRESZCZENIE: Ten foto-esej stawia w poetycki sposób następujące pytanie: jakie odniesienie do Ladakhu ma słowo gama w tajemniczym zdaniu *Nie bądź gama w krainie lamów*, niezależnie od tego, iż przydrożne tablice informacyjne ze zwrotem często się tam pojawiają. W związku z tym przytaczamy także opowiadanie Intizara Husaina (7.12.1923–2.2.2016) استاد *Ustād*, 1951, które, oczywiście, również nie ma nic wspólnego z Ladakhiem. Natomiast pomagają zrozumieć, jaki jest sens kryjący się za słowem gama.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Ladakh, Gama, lama, znaki przydrożne, lingwistyka, Intizar Husain.

ABSTRACT: This photo-essay deals in a poetical manner with the following question: what has the word *gama* in the cryptic phrase *Don't be gama in the land of lama* to do with Ladakh, apart from the fact that sign boards bearing this phrase appear frequently in Ladakh. In this connection, we will also feature the short story استاد *Ustād*, 1951, by Intizar Husain (7.12.1923–2.2.2016), which of course, likewise has nothing to do with Ladakh. But it helps to understand what the idea behind the word *gama* is.

KEYWORDS: Ladakh, Gama, lama, roadside signs, linguistics, Intizar Husain.

Linguistic signs are arbitrary, in the sense, that they are conventionally established to convey some meaning. The same meaning can be conveyed by different signs: different words in different languages, different scripts, or pictograms, for that matter. Pictograms are especially common with traffic signs. Whatever form they take, in order to be linguistic signs, all signs have to convey some kind of information or message.



Figure 1. "Horn please!" Painted road sign near Turtuk. Photo: BZ, 1.10.2015

Some signboards along the roads in Ladakh, however, display a linguistic sign that for most of us appears to be arbitrary to the extent that we don't understand what it stands for, except perhaps for the purpose of rhyming:





Figure 2. Road sign on a boulder on the Diskit-Turtuk highway, near Yagulung, Nubra.

Photo: RK, 13.9.2012

The questions thus are:

Is this a linguistic sign, at all?

And if so, does the sign “gama” have a meaning at all?

Or if not, does the whole sentence have a meaning?

And whom is the phrase actually addressing?

Many travellers have been puzzled by this signboard:

*Don't be gama,*

*In the land of the lama... (even the Bhutanese don't know*

*what in the world a 'gama' is!)*

<http://bhutanwander.blogspot.com/2011/07/day-4.html>, retrieved 29.8.2019

Some people found the phrase simply ridiculous:

*But the most ridiculous one of the lot was ‘Don’t be gama (?!) in the land of lama’*


<https://completewellbeing.com/article/postcards-from-ladakh/>, retrieved 24.8.2019

*... yet more hilarious signs (“Don’t be gama in the land of lama”)*

<https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/travel/the-gentle-side-of-himalayan-trekking-in-ladakh-a3545196.html>, retrieved 24.8.2019

Some people even try to make a business out of the mystery:

A yellow cautionary road sign that reads Don't Be Gama in the Land of Lama on the Leh-Manali Highway Ladakh, India - Image ID: CW668K



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A yellow cautionary road sign that reads Don't Be Gama in the Land of Lama on the Leh-Manali Highway Ladakh, India  
Contributor: Elen Clark / Alamy Stock Photo  
Image ID: CW668K  
File size: 25 MB (2.1 MB Compressed download)  
Dimensions: 3626 x 2408 px | 30.7 x 20.4 cm | 12.1 x 8 inches | 300dpi  
Releases: Model - no | Property - no | Do I need a release?  
More information: A yellow cautionary road sign that reads Don't Be Gama in the Land of Lama on the Leh-Manali Highway Ladakh, India  
Date taken: 26 June 2012  
Location: Leh-Manali Highway, Ladakh, India

Figure 3. Advertisement (9 € for us, ₹1,999 for Indians!)

<https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-a-yellow-cautionary-road-sign-that-reads-dont-be-gama-in-the-land-49923795.html>, retrieved 21.2.2017 and 29.8.2021 by a search from Germany and 24.8.2019 by a search from India.

But who would buy it, don't we even have a better one?



Figure 4. Road sign along the Indus, towards Mahe. Photo: RK, 23.9.2011

Some people at least got the message in one way or another.  
*gama* (adjective) = 'silly', 'foolish', or also 'proud', 'disrespectful'.

*Road sign in Ladakh, "Don't be gama in the land of lama" (gama = foolish?)*

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/517914025867838184/>, last retrieved 24.8.2019

*Gama means proud in Ladakhi.*

<https://vanwarides.blogspot.com/> retrieved 21.2.2017

*'Don't Be Gama In The Land Of Lama', it means avoid being crazy in the Lama land called Ladakh.*

<http://www.clicksandtales.com/ladakh/milestones-ladakh-safety-signs/> retrieved 21.2.2017

*'Don't be Gama in the land of Lama' (the word 'Gama' meaning 'silly' and the word 'Lama' referring to the many Buddhist priests residing in this area)*

<https://www.davidheiner.com/new-blog/2018/8/31/makha-valley>, retrieved 29.8.2019

The message is thus understood roughly as: Do behave properly!

*No Gama in the land of Lama; says the Border Roads Organisation's roadside advisory, meaning don't show undue haste and bravado in this land of high mountains and Buddhist lifestyle.*

<https://www.rediff.com/news/special/55-years-ago-they-fought-to-the-last-man-for-india/20171118.htm>, retrieved 24.8.2019

But this warning is often applied to other activities than driving on the road, such as mountaineering or even visiting monasteries ...

*The words of one of our ustaads (instructors) stuck a chord with this humbling experience, he would always say, "Don't be Gama in the land of lama". In other words it meant that no matter how strong one is, he will always be weaker than the mountains.*

<https://www.outdoorjournal.com/slider/the-making-of-a-rock-climber-at-jawahar-institute-of-mountaineering/> retrieved 21.2.2017

*The simplest way in Himalayas is ask the shepherds which you find everywhere or vil-lager enroute and don't be Gama in the land of Lama means no experiments.*

<https://crisscrossingindia.wordpress.com/2012/04/14/most-common-trekking-dangers/>, retrieved 24.8.2019

*Don't be GAMA in the Land of LAMA...!!!" -Anonymous ? . . Whenever you are in the land of LAMA means land of gompas monasteries and surrounded by lamas ie, say remote Himalayas, just leave your stress behind and enjoy the peaceful environment.*

<https://stalkpub.com/tag/budgettravell>, retrieved 29.8.2019

With respect to the Kālacakra event of 2014, that went utterly wrong, because of the inclusion of a pop concert, Lobsang Wangyal wrote on 20 July 2014:

*Don't be Gama in the Land of Lama ... !*

*Respect the sentiments of people of the land ... !*

*Kalachakara is not Woodstock gathering or Mela...!*

*Good that You were spared...!*

<https://www.tibetsun.com/opinions/2014/07/18/the-other-way-i-will-remember-33rd-kalchakra-in-ladakh>, last retrieved 24.8.2019

One Saurabh Purohit wrote in rather bad English on July 13, 2018:

*the saying is based on one story*

*there was a guy name gama who used to climb mountains, it was very easy for him to climb any mountain. He started climbing many difficult mountains after which he was so confident that no one can climb like him and even he was so confident that he use to think mountains is nothing hard and important and he started disrespecting the mountains. So one day he went for an climb whos trail was from another side but as he was lama he did not cared for trail and went on overconfidence and from that day no one has seen him so on that this saying was made*

*dont be gama in the land of lama*

*(lama means gods of mountains for them)*

*this story i have heard it from many locals in chopta and lohajung village*

<https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-meaning-of-Dont-be-a-gama-in-the-land-of-lama>, retrieved 24.8.2019

This only shows that even the locals usually don't understand what the signboard means, and, when asked, start to invent suitable stories

The most ridiculous such invention and, in the above sense, the most 'gama' one is given by one Sonam Sonsnow on May 14, 2018 who claims: "I was born in Tibet and brought up in India", suggesting:

*The literal meaning of Gama in Tibetan is either Woman or Wife, so "Don't be a Gama in the land of Lama" means it's not a right place for a Woman to stay in monasteries where the Lama's or learned religious leaders stays. As there is possibility that she may commit sins by seeking the attention of those learned religious leaders and distracts their religious life to a worldly life.*

<https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-meaning-of-Dont-be-a-gama-in-the-land-of-lama>, retrieved 24.8.2019



Ajay Jain in his little booklet *Peep Peep. Don't sleep!*, p. 121,  
thought that one

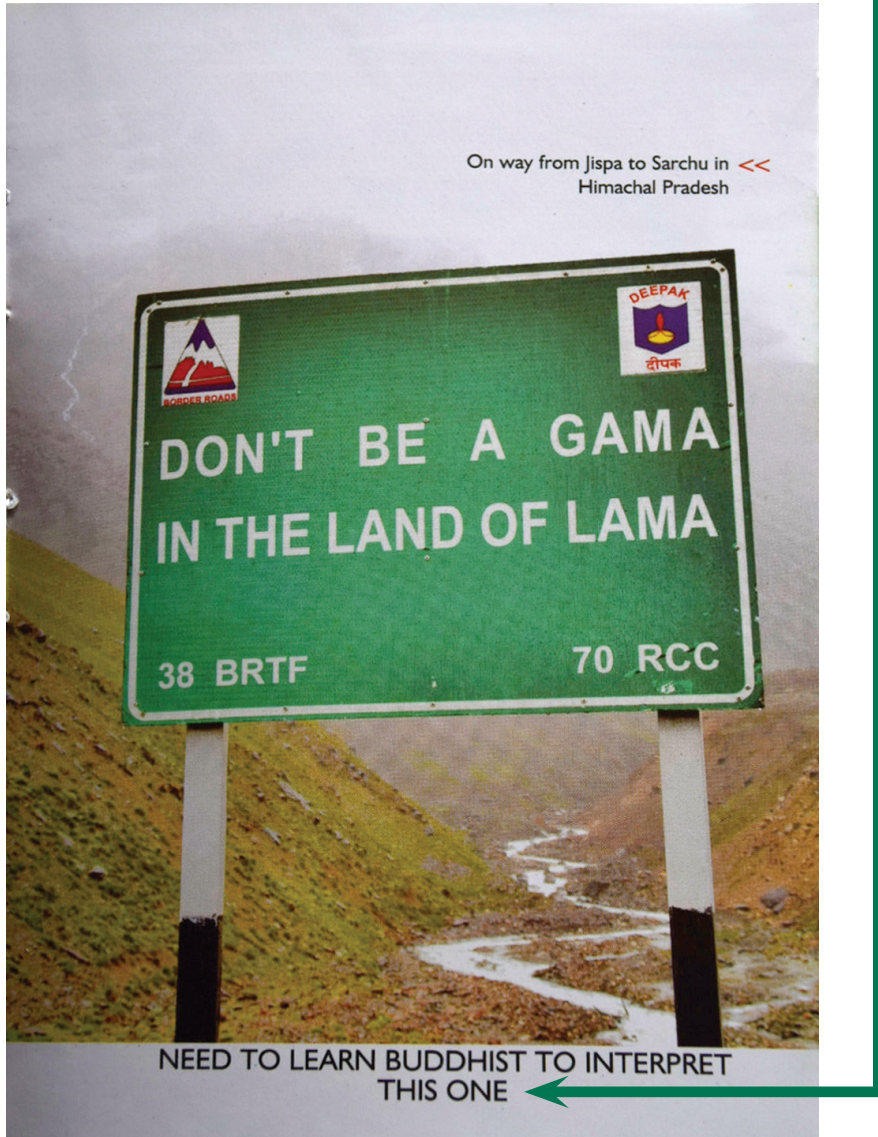


Figure 5. A mist-inspired mystical reading?

We think that the answer is more down to earth, and to be found not in Ladakh, but further down in lowland India, to be more precise: in the Panjab.

As per spring 2017, at least one internet posting indicated this, as well:

*Don't be Gama in the Land of Lama. The highway sign that marries India's best-known wrestler to spirituality is funnier than most.*

<http://epaper.livemint.com/epaper/viewer.aspx>, retrieved 21.2.2017;

<https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/oTbF6pdlyB7HjlQQJegG8l/Photo-essay-Zen-and-Adrenalin.html>, retrieved 24.8.2019

Meanwhile the comments in this regard have become more frequent (or perhaps just more accessible):

Vivek Nagarajan wrote on July 6, 2016:

*Not 100% sure but I guess they refer to the legendary wrestler "Gama" who was a very massive person.*

*Such a person will not have an easy time in a place like Tibet, which is the "land of the lama". People in the high altitude mountains are wiry and small, otherwise they will not survive the constant climbing and descending.*

*Not an environment for a person like Gama who probably weighed more than 150 KG  
The meaning is that you need to adapt to the place you live in - a similar sentiment as "In Rome, be a Roman"*

<https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-meaning-of-Dont-be-a-gama-in-the-land-of-lama>,  
retrieved 24.8.2019

Similarly another traveller wrote:

*Don't Be Gama... In The Land of Lama's...!*

*(Gama was the world famous wrestler and Lama's are meditating peacefully living people)*

*Recently we visited the Ladhak and I heard this dialogue from our driver Rigzin...*

*This saying is perfectly apply to the Adventure Tourism and Trekking anywhere in the world... Nowadays everyone wants to travel in Leh Ladhak but no one thinks about precautions and ethics in Adventure Tourism... Ladhak is the High Altitude place...*

*Anything can happen over there bcoz of low oxygen... people should understand this...*

*As per saying we should not show strength as of Gama in Ladhak... Understand the situation... Understand our limits and enjoy the adventure...*

<http://amidstraveller.blogspot.com/2019/01/blog-post.html>, retrieved 24.8.2019

Ali Kirmani, on Nov 10, 2018, was somewhat more precise:

*Ghulam Muhammed or the great gama is considered as the greatest wrestler of all times. An Indian punjabi wrestler who wrestled worldwide and remained totally undefeated in 52 years of his career. Of course, the land of Tibet is about meditation and not about wrestling. So don't be gama in the land of lama.*

(under <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-meaning-of-Dont-be-a-gama-in-the-land-of-lama>, retrieved 24.8.2019)

And in fact:



Figure 6. Gama in Spiti

<https://www.bcmtouring.com/forums/threads/mission-spiti-2015-with-shipki-la-kaurik-lepcha-accomplished-jun-20-28-2015.64485/page-2>, retrieved 3.3.2017

This sign board on the road to Spiti says in clear Hindi:

लामा की भूमि में गामा बनने का प्रयास न करें

*Don't try to be like Gama ...*



So who is *Gama*?  
 India's best known wrestler??  
 THE LION OF PUNJAB???

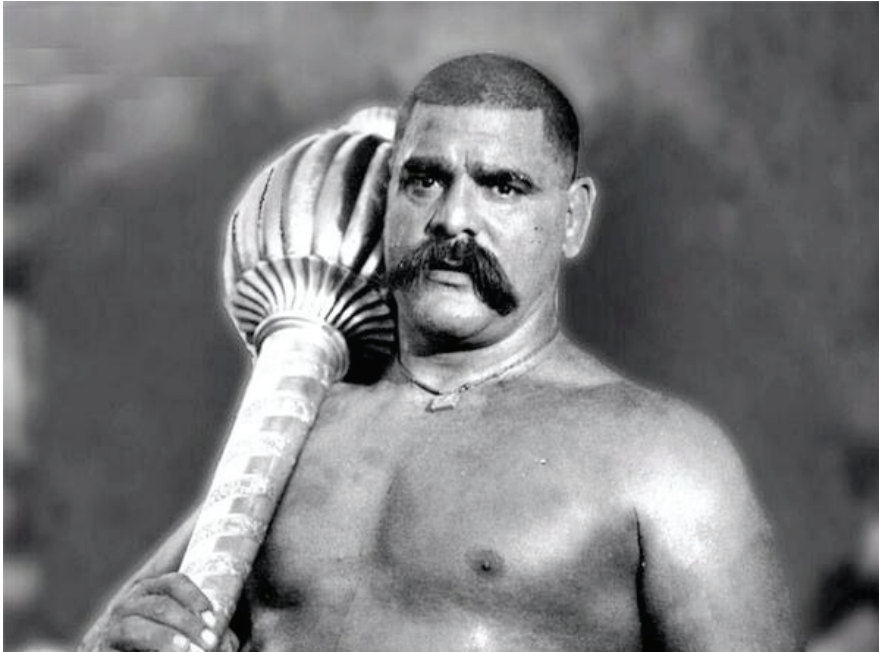


Figure 7. Gama, The Lion of Punjab

<https://steemitimages.com/p/99pyU5Ga1kwqSXWA2evTexn6YzPHotJF8R85JZsErvTWYDsmGTncBJjTzrWeYhnZCLxH55TySHyh4adA4JFxt49CpnYp3ysK7gD3Eij9Z5L5yprBp9AsSqAQn9ARuZve?format=match&mode=fit&width=640>, last retrieved 15.10.2019

#### GHULAM MUHAMMAD BAKSH BUTT

Born 22 May 1878 in Amritsar. Died 23 May 1960 in Lahore. Stage name: The Great Gama, also known as Gama Pehalwan (Wiki.en).

Gama became world champion in 1910 and held the title – uncontested – for about 40 years, when he finally resigned. Despite this fantastic glory, he seems to be rather a tragic figure. He had not many opportunities to set records as his potential challengers seemed to be afraid of him.



Even his world championship came by default.

In the first fight on 10th September 1910, the reigning champion Stanislaus Zbyszko from Poland was immediately put to the ground, where he remained for 35 minutes (or in other variants: 3 hours), unbeaten, but practically immobilised.

The rematch was scheduled on 17th September, but Zbyszko did not show up. Hence Gama was declared world champion by default.

The rematch did take place 18 years later in India, and Gama threw his opponent down in no time. However, this victory is overshadowed by some doubts: somebody might have paid Zbyszko – behind Gama's back as it seems – just to have a show (NOBEL 2000).

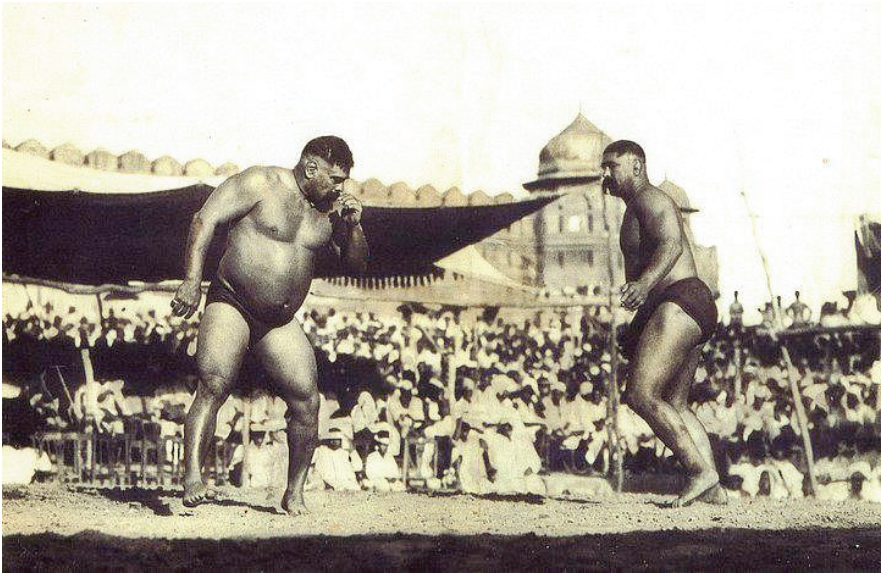


Figure 8. Gama (left) and Zbyszko (right) at Patalia 1928

<https://www.sportskeeda.com/wrestling/the-god-of-wrestling-gama-pehlwan>, last retrieved 10.20.2019

After partition (1947), Gama migrated to Pakistan, where he was to die in rather poor conditions, both financially and healthwise. He was almost forgotten, when G. D. Birla, an Indian industrialist and wrestling fan, donated ₹2,000 and a monthly pension of ₹300. Later, also the government of Pakistan granted him a pension, but he, nevertheless, had to sell even his championship belt – to meet the expenses for the treatment of his ailments: asthma, consumption, kidney failure, and high blood pressure, which lead to several minor heart attacks, certainly a result of his extreme diet.

It is said that Gama consumed in his youth:

20 litres of milk, half a litre of clarified butter, four kilos of fruit and three-fourths of a kilo of butter (KUNDU 2016)

or

2 gallons (7.5 litres) of milk, 1 ½ pound of crushed almond paste made into a tonic drink along with fruit juice and other ingredients (Wiki.en)

or,

at the age of 50: a meat extract of 3 chicken or 5 pounds of mutton into which a quarter pound of ghee was mixed. He drank 10 litres of milk, ½ litre of ghee, ¾ pound almond paste (ALTER 2000)  
– all that per day!

Other wrestlers are reported to have consumed:

*Abdul Rahim*: the extract of 25 pounds of meat, 5 pounds of sweetened milk-solids, 1 pound of butter, 1 pound ground almond paste, plus an unknown volume of fruits;

*Tappe Dubbe*: in the evening 1 pound of ghee, a tonic drink made from 500 almonds, 10 pounds of milk, and, as asides, meat, fish, fruits, butter;

*King Krishnadevraj*: 1 ½ pound sesame oil...

This may seem exaggerated, if not impossible, but so was the training, as well, with the thousands of “baithaks” (deep knee bends), “dands” (push-ups), the turning of the heavy clubs over the shoulder, etc.

Gama used to exercise by running laps with a 200 pound = 80 kg grindstone around his neck:



Figure 9. Gama's exercise grindstone. Sports Museum, Netaji Subhas National Institute of Sports. Tribune India, November 24, 2001

<https://www.tribuneindia.com/2001/20011124/windows/museum.jpg>,  
last retrieved 5.10.2021

According to ALTER (2000), Gama became a symbol, a national hero representing the freedom struggle, and his masculinity stood for Indian nationalism and the lower middle class.

(By the way, his granddaughter, Begum Kalsoom Nawaz, is the wife of former prime minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif. Incidentally, another of his granddaughters, Saira Bano made an attempt to contest elections in 2013. Needless to say, that she herself was the daughter of a renowned wrestler, Goga Pehalwan, and had been married to a famous wrestler, Jhara Pehalwan...)

A touching story has it that in the days of Partition horror, when a Muslim mob attacked his Hindu neighbours, Gama went out into the street and trashed them all up, so that nobody dared to attack them again.

All in all, the Great Gama seems to have been a commendable person.



**S**o, why not take him as a role model? Why not be (a) Gama, whether in Ladakh or anywhere else?

Just because of the health risks of his diet?

In order to understand the message of that mysterious signboard better, we should perhaps try to understand what it means to be a pehalwan, a wrestler in India,

the wider associations that come along with the notion of a wrestler.

The very *idea* of a wrestler.

We think that nobody has illustrated this idea better than the Urdu author

INTIZAR HUSAIN (7.12.1923–2.2.2016)

in his short story استاد *Ustād*, 1951.



Figure 10. Intizar Husain (left) and RK, Lahore, September 2009

*The Ustād in question is the Master (Ustād) of a school  
of pehalwans, apparently somewhere in the Panjab.  
Maybe one should rather say: he is the boss  
of a gang of youthful bullies.  
And so he is also the unspoken master of the town.*

*He is renowned and feared by all.  
Does he care for authorities or rank?  
Not at all.  
The higher a person keeps his nose, the more  
will he suffer from the Ustād.*

*There is the rich and arrogant money lender:  
his sister disappears  
(it is up to the reader to guess what happened to her).*

*Others (including the boss of a competing gang)  
get severely beaten up with shoes!  
In India, the utmost humiliation.*

*The Ustād has quite a special relation with the daroghas or  
police inspectors, who seem to be particularly arrogant:*

*Inspector Har Gian Singh, e.g., has the impertinence to set  
himself on horseback in front of the Muharram procession!  
He obviously doesn't count with the rage of the Ustād.*

*He is lucky enough that the mayor and the Sufi intervene,  
otherwise, what could possibly happen?  
But he is also off from his horse in no time.  
And he drops his cigarette in a haste  
(which as a Sikh he shouldn't smoke anyway).*



*The first thing a new inspector should do, when transferred to this town, is to pay his respects to the Ustād.*

*There is one newcomer who doesn't. He even dares to note down one of the Ustād's men as a criminal! A few days later, he goes on his inspection tour together with some constables. As soon as they are outside town, they are cornered by the Ustād's men. The soldiers quietly disappear. The inspector, all alone, ends up green and blue, fettered to a tree like a donkey. He begs for water and mercy. And then immediately sends a request to be transferred again.*

*Other authorities suffer as well. One does not need to be very arrogant. It suffices that one's actions are somehow against the liking of the Ustād.*

*Ustād's darling Shaffu is a very tender boy, a real beauty, but not very bright. One day he arrives bitterly crying: the headmaster had failed him!*

*Crimson flames of wrath flare up, the Ustād sends one of his bullies, the headmaster gets kicked off into a canal, there is hue and cry, people rush together, but the bully disappears. The police wakes up, but rather slowly. What can they do? After all, nobody knows where that bully has gone. After two months the bully returns as if nothing happened. And the next year, Shaffu passes...*

*What a festivity, however, when Shaffu finally passes the entrance exam after five futile attempts!*

*Shaffu's wedding is, of course, splendidly arranged by the Ustād.  
The festivities last the whole night. Even an Elephant is there.  
Dancing girls have come from far.*

*No need to talk about the local dancing girls,  
they have to work for the Ustād anyhow.*

*And he is, beyond any doubt, the only one  
who can really judge the art of their mistress.*

*The Ustād is the uncontested master.*

*Whenever there is a fight between rivalling  
groups, his group is victorious.*

*A wrestling competition? His boys win.*

*At the kite festival he has magic hands –  
and a recipe for the paste  
(to be applied on the strings), top secret,  
he would rather cut off the string immediately,  
should his kite be cut, but he never loses his kite,*

*the defeated kiss his hands.*

*He takes and he gives –  
splendid feasts.*

*He is the Master.*

Of course, after describing in detail the festivities at the height of the Ustād's glory, the story takes a sad turn with Partition, but this is of no further interest here, except that it shows an interesting parallel to Gama's decline – and quite unexpectedly pays obeisance to our hero :

*The riches of the Ustād: all gone.  
His followers: all cleared off.  
There are new masters now, overconfident,  
each one a new Rustam (of Shahnameh fame),  
each one – you got it? –  
a new Gama the Great (of still present fame)...  
But, hey, by the holy Qur'an!  
Compared with the Ustād, these kids are just zeroes,  
wretches, less than that.*

What is more important than the story of decline is the association of the wrestling folk with the underworld and the local games of power.

The Ustād doesn't care about the law,  
he has his own rules.  
He does not respect authorities,  
rather he claims that they honour his unwritten authority.  
He bestows favour to those who submit to his authority and he fights  
and humiliates those who think they are something better.

He is the Don.

This is not to say that Gama was a criminal.  
Nor that the present day pehalwans are all criminals.  
But the sports of wrestling and boxing (and perhaps a few others) have a history  
of close affiliations with the Dons of the underworld.

And with politics and power :

In India's medieval history, wrestlers were employed at royal courts both as bodyguards and status symbols. As ALTER (2000) in his pommo-poco (postmodern-postcolonial) jargon has it, wrestlers "became the king's body and affected a dramatic translation of royal power into tangible physical strength." It was also not uncommon that kings and princes were wrestlers themselves, and according to Alter, "physical fitness [was regarded] as metonymically coded to royal authority."

Still in colonial times, wrestlers earned their livings at royal courts, and so did Gama, following in the footsteps of his father, who was court wrestler at Datiya for Maharaja Bhavani Singh. Gama gained his first recognition in 1904 and 1906 in tournaments organised by various Maharajas. Gama's trip to England was sponsored, this time not by a prince of blood, but by a prince of money, Sharat Kumar Mishra, a Bengali millionaire, whose motive was to demonstrate the strength of Indian physical culture right in the heart of the British Empire.

After Gama won the title of a world champion, in 1910, he became the court wrestler of the Maharaja of Patiala Yadvindar (ALTER 2000) or Bhupinder Singh (KUNDU 2016). And it seems to have been this very Maharaja who, if the rumour is true, paid Zbyszko in 1928 some \$50,000 (today's value ca. \$375,000 to \$635,000) for a faked loss (NOBLE 2002), just to have a great show in front of 40,000 (ALTER 2000) or 100,000 (KUNDU 2016) spectators. What a prestige to gain, if the royal man wins!

This long-standing association between the court wrestlers and royal prestige might explain why a wrestling master outside a royal court could have some kind of princely power in his home town, as described for the Ustād.



**A**nd if  
 the Ustād were  
 ♪ a (drugstore) truck driving man ♪ ♪,  
 he'd probably not care about speed limits.  
 He would bully those in front of him.  
 He would take risky manoeuvres.  
 He'd probably drink – if he were a Sikh and not a Muslim  
 (although Sikhs shouldn't drink either...)  
 He'd try to side-step his traffic tickets, with persuasion (a little money) or brute force.

What the Ustād as well as Gama the Great embody is pure masculine pride. And masculinity is certainly also the pride of the Indian truck driver community.

It is the community of Panjabi truck drivers who is addressed by the sign board, and it is they who understand the word play:

don't [try to] be [like] Gama...  
 ... or rather like the likes of the Ustād ...

which possibly means:

Do respect the police!  
 Do not overspeed!  
 Do not take risky manoeuvres!  
 Do not drink!

Do not wrestle! ...

and please, please,





Figure 11. Road sign near Uley Trokpo.  
Photo: BZ, 30.5.2017



**T**o return to the initial question of the title:  
Did Gama ever reach the land of Lama?

It should be clear from his biography that the Great Gama had other things to do than to make friends with a lama. He quite obviously never came to Ladakh.

Or did he? ...



Figure 12. Destroyed signboard on the road between Gya and Upshi.  
Photo: BZ for RK with his camera, 29.9.2012

So perhaps one should add another rule:

Don't be Gama, don't crash the signboards!



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