



Bettina Zeisler & Rainer Kimmig

کیا گاما کبھی لاما کے دیس پہنچا؟

क्या गामा कभी लामा के देश पहुँचा ?

འགྲུབ་མ་གྲོ་མའི་ཡུལ་ལ་བསྐྱེད་ཤེས་ས།

Did Gama ever reach the land of lama?

Ladakh in a much wider perspective

Presentation at the
18th Seminar of the International Association of Ladakh Studies,
Będlewo 2nd – 6th May 2017



- ▶ 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 or also pictograms.



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.



Photo: BZ



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:



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:

DON'T BE
IN THE LAND OF LAMA
GAMA



Photo: RK



▶ The question thus is:

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.

Some found it simply ridiculous,

Roads signs that caution against rash driving are common in this part of the world. The Border Road Organisation's favourite seems to be 'Divorce speed — if you are married'. Clearly, the single life is not of much value in the hills. But the most ridiculous one of the lot was 'Don't be gama (?!) in the land of lama'.

Once in a while, you come across a sign that says it all. The message was clear...





Some even make a business out of the mystery:

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



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

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But why should we buy it, don't we have a better one?

Stock Photo - A yellow cautionary road sign that reads Don't Be Gama in the Land of Lama in Ladakh, India



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

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Photo: RK



- ▶ Some at least got the message in one way or another.

gama (adjective) =

‘crazy’, ‘foolish’, ‘proud’, ‘disrespectful’

- ▶ And the message is understood roughly as:
Do behave properly!



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Humorous

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



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

Ladakh, Töricht, Straßen, Angebot, Road Sign, The
Land, Range

3.



tenzyyogi, from Leh, says:

on 20 July 2014 at 9:21 pm

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...!



First-aid kit: I cannot stress on the importance of carrying a first-aid kit. You may be absolutely fit on the plains, but in the hills, you won't have access to a doctor (unless there's one in the group). God forbid, if someone in the group falls sick (and that happens quite often), gets hurt, or worse, injured, the first-aid kit would be the best bet at that point in time.

Don't be gama in the land of lama: You may feel that you know a lot about trekking after having done tens of treks and quite some research. But that would be your biggest mistake. No matter how confident you feel, do not try to be over smart. When it comes to trekking, even professional trekkers aren't as good as the people who were born and brought up in the Himalayas. There's a reason why all the sherpas come from the mountainous regions. Remember, it's not a race. Thanks to evolution, their body is suitable to adapt to high altitude regions. It's good to challenge yourself, but do not try to cross your limit. The important thing is to finish. Take your time, and enjoy.

Do not plug-in your earphones: One silly mistake trekkers tend to do is to plug-in their earphones and listen to music. That's a big NO. It would disconnect you from others, and if there's any important thing being said, you may miss it.



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The words of one of our *ustaaads* (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. The lectures were informative and interesting. From do's and don'ts in the mountains to formation of glaciers and avalanche rescue, every lecture ended up providing a new perspective about the mountains.





Or simply:

MY TAKE: Don't read too much!

Like I said before, the key is acclimatisation. All you need to do is follow some simple tips.

'Don't be Gama in the land of Lama' - A signboard in Leh



► Some people think that the word is from Ladakhi:

Vanwa and the trail of dust...

"Welcome to the Paradise of India" indeed! "Peep Peep. Don't Sleep!" - the roadsign that a coffee table book of Indian roadsigns was named after "Don't be Gama in the Land of Lama" - Gama means proud in Ladakhi

 vanwarides.blogspot.ru



"Don't be Gama in the Land of Lama" - Gama means proud in Ladakhi



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- ▶ Similarly, Ajay Jain in his little booklet *Peep Peep. Don't sleep!*, p. 121, thought that one “Need to learn Buddhist to interpret this one.”

On way from Jispa to Sarchu in <<
Himachal Pradesh



NEED TO LEARN BUDDHIST TO INTERPRET THIS ONE



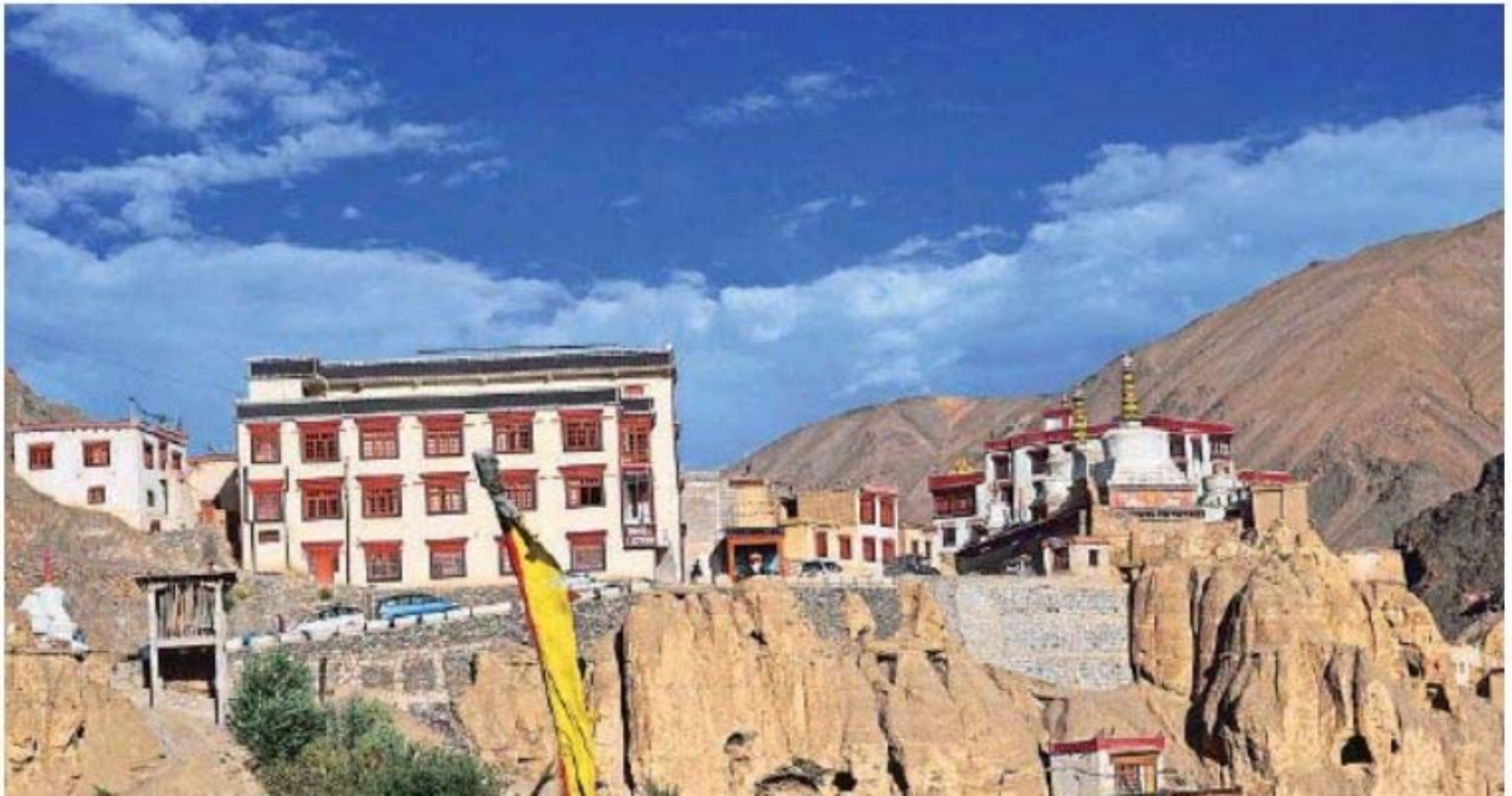
► We think that the answer is more down to earth, and to be found not in Ladakh, but further down in Mainland India, to be more precise: in the Panjab.



At least one internet poster has understood it, as well:



Don't be **Gama** in the Land of Lama. The highway sign that marries India's bestknown wrestler to spirituality is funnier than most. We're headed out from Leh to Kargil (and then Drass) on the NH1D which continues on to Srinagar. Out past the ornate city gate, past the Ladakh Scouts Regimental Centre and their battle cry "Ki Ki So So Lhargyalo (victory to the





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And in fact:



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

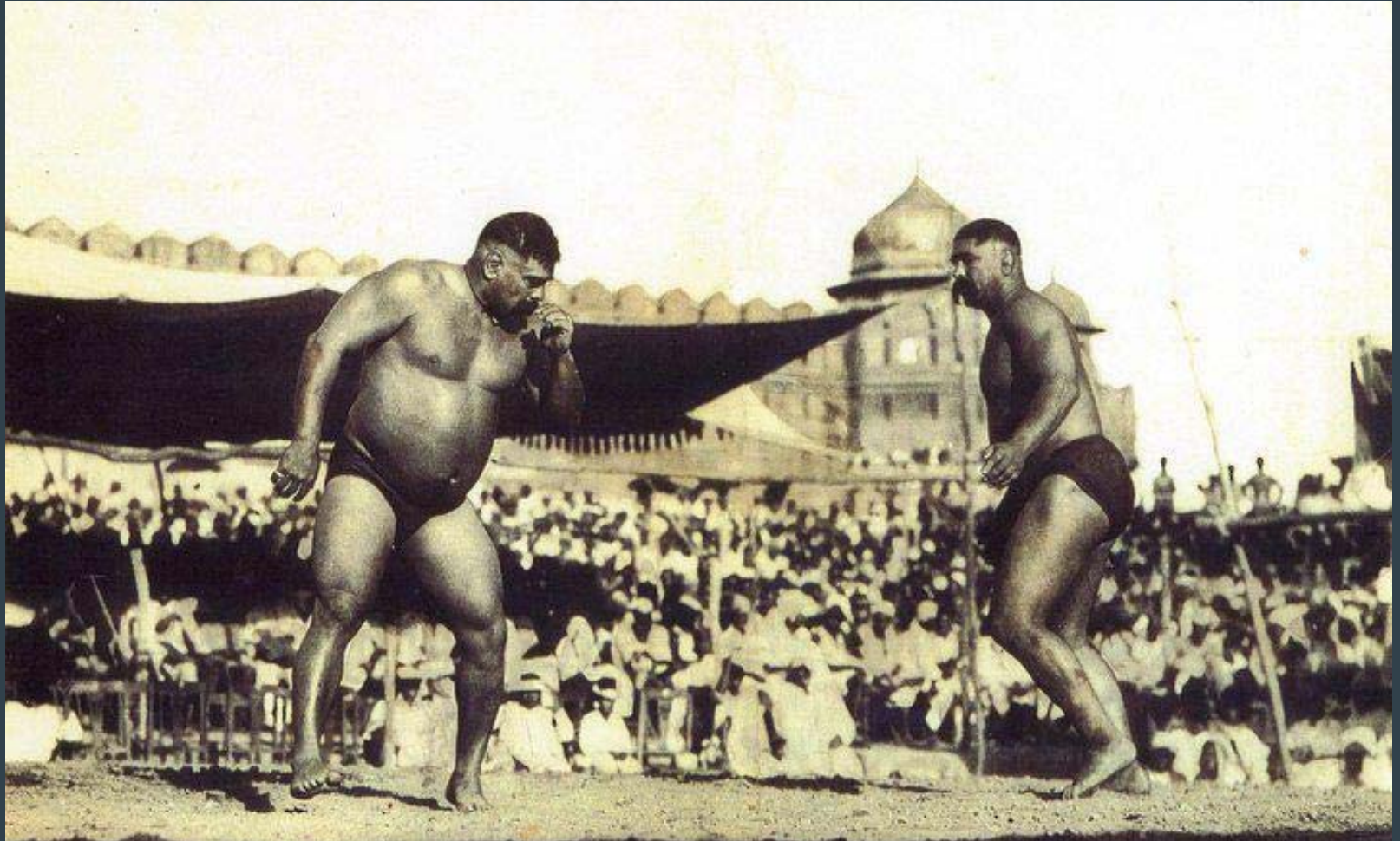


► This sign board on the road to Spiti says it in clear Hindi:

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?



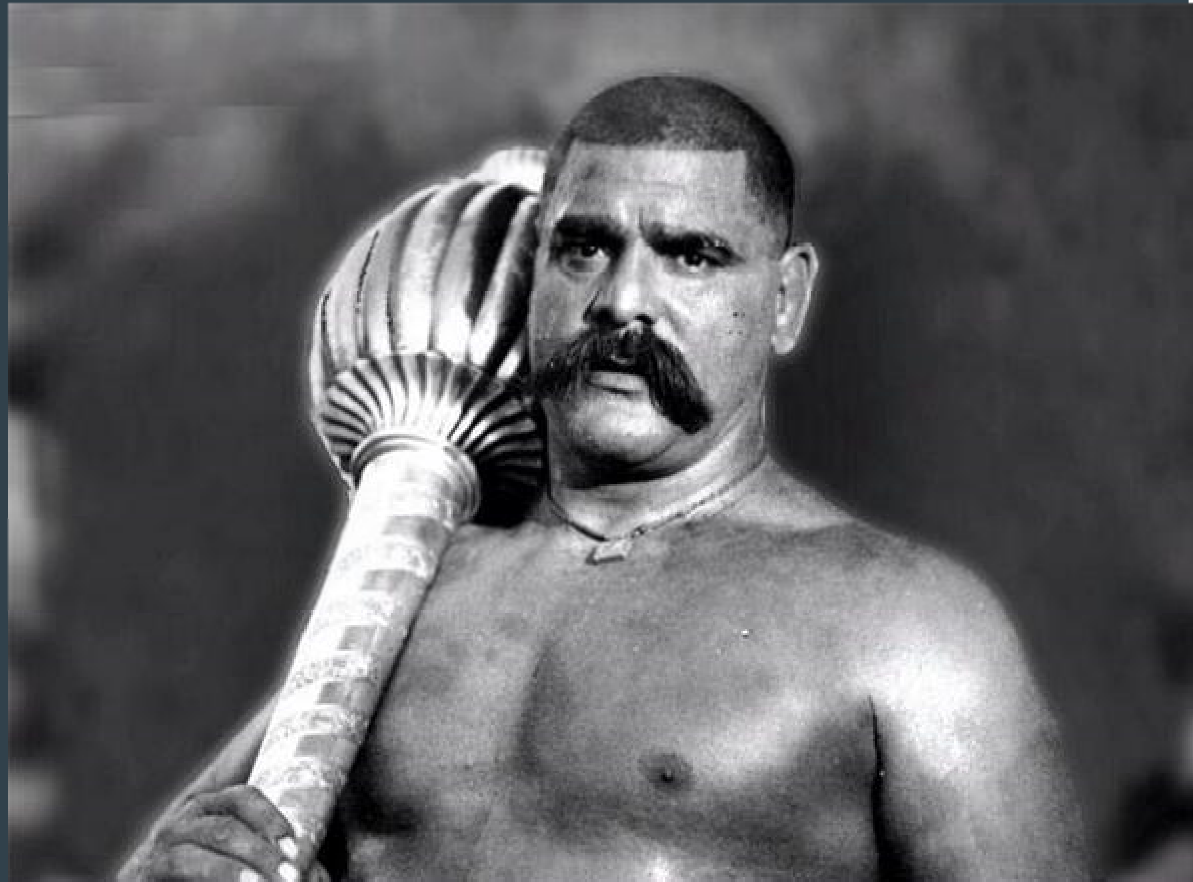
Great Gama (left) <https://www.sportskeeda.com/wrestling/the-god-of-wrestling-gama-pehlwan>



► Ghulam Muhammad Butt.
Born 22 May 1878 in Amritsar.
Died 23 May 1960 in Lahore.

Stage name:

The Great Gama,
also known as
Gama Pehalwan
or
The Lion of Punjab.





- ▶ Gama became world champion in 1910 and held the title – uncontested – for about 40 years, when he finally officially resigned.
- ▶ 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.



▶ Despite this, he seems to be rather a tragic figure. He had not much opportunities to set records, as his potential challengers, especially outside India, seemed to be afraid of him.



▶ Even his world championship was not without blemish.

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 2 hours 35 minutes, unbeaten, but practically immobilised.

Sceptical observers have criticised Gama for not having a technique on the ground.

The rematch was scheduled on 17th September, but



▶ Even his world championship was not without blemish.

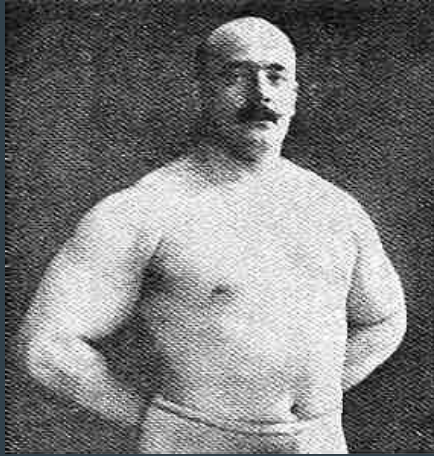
In the first fight on 10th September 1910, the reigning champion Stanislaus Zbyszko from Poland was immediately put to the ground, where he remained for 2 hours 35 minutes (or in other variants: 3 hours), unbeaten, but practically immobilised.

Sceptical observers have criticised Gama for not having a technique on the ground.

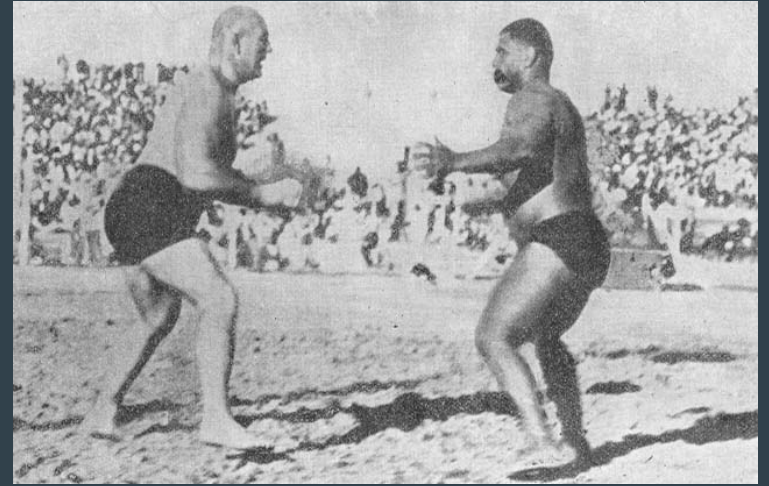
The rematch was scheduled on 17th September, but Zbyszko did not show up. Hence Gama was declared world champion by default.



▶ A rematch did take place 18 years later in India, and Gama threw his opponent down in less than a minute.



Zbyszko 1909



Zbyszko & Gama 1928

However, this victory is overshadowed by some doubts: somebody might have paid off Zbyszko – behind Gama's back – just to have a great show (Nobel 2002).
(I shall return to this issue again.)



► After partition, Gama settled in Pakistan.

By the way, his granddaughter, Begum Kalsoom Nawaz, is the wife of the present 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 married to a famous wrestler, Jhara Pehalwan...)



- ▶ Gama died in rather poor conditions, both financially and healthwise.
- ▶ He was almost forgotten, when G. D. Birla, an industrialist and wrestling fan, donated ₹2,000 and a monthly pension of ₹300. After that, also the government of Pakistan gave him a pension, but he even had to sell his championship belt – to meet the expenses for his medical treatments.

Gama 1953
Gama's grave





► In the end Gama was a mere shadow, too weak to walk, too weak even to eat.

He suffered from asthma, consumption, kidney failure, and high blood pressure, which led to several minor heart attacks, certainly a result of his extreme diet:



► It is said that he consumed

in his youth: 20 litres of milk, half a litre of *ghee*, 4 kg of fruit and $3/4$ kg of butter (Kundu 2016)

or

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

or

with 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, $1/2$ litre of *ghee*, $3/4$ pound almond paste (Alter 2000)

per day!



▶ Other wrestlers are described as having 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

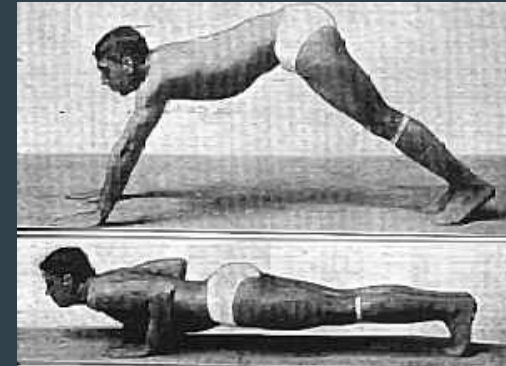
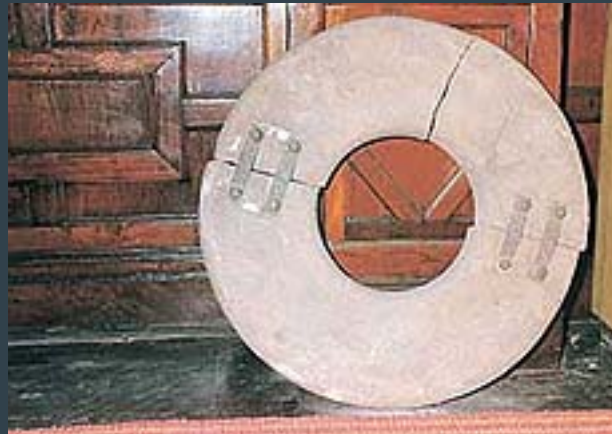
King Krishnadevraj: 1 1/2 pound sesame oil...



▶ This may seem exaggerated, if not impossible,

but so was the training, as well, with the thousands of “bethaks” (deep knee bends), “dands” (push-ups), the turning of the heavy clubs over the shoulder, etc.’

Gama further used to exercise with a 200 pound = 95 kg stone ring around his neck.





- ▶ All in all, the Great Gama seems to have been quite a positive figure.
- ▶ A heart-rending 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.



► So, 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 sign board 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)



Intizar Husain and RK, Lahore September 2009



DFG in his short story

استاد

Ustād, 1951.



► The Ustād in question is the Master (Ustād) of a school of *pehalwans*, somewhere in Northern India.

We suspect that it might be western UP, the region where Intizar Husain grew up.

Maybe one should rather say: the Ustād 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.



▶ The rich and arrogant money lender:

his sister disappears

(she is most probably sold off to an establishment or the victim of a honour killing).

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, who steps forward and seizes the reins.

Luckily, the mayor and the Sufi intervene, otherwise, what could not all have happened?

But the inspector is off from his horse in no time and hastily drops his cigarette (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 beaten green and blue, fettered to a tree like a donkey. There is no other way: 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 Shafu 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 man has gone. After two months the man returns as if nothing happened. And the next year, Shafu passes...

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



► Shafu'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, of course, 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.



► Of course, after describing in detail the festivities at the height of the Ustād's glory, the story takes a sad turn, but this is of no further interest here, except that it shows an interesting parallel to Gama's decline.



▶ The Ustād gets old and weak, many of his disciples leave,

even worse:

times are a-changing:

at the eve of partition, India becomes more modern

or perhaps:

with modernity the law reaches the farthest corners,

in any case, the Ustād is no longer the respected (and feared) person that he once was.

His death goes unnoticed, and so does, almost, the demise of Gama.



- ▶ What is more important 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 favours upon 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 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 (Kundu 2016) Singh.

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.



► And if the Ustād were a (*drugstore*) *truck driving man*,
he would consider himself *king of the road*.



► Most probably,
he would not care about speed limits.
He would bully those in front of him.
He would take risky manoeuvres.
He'd probably drink – if here were a Sikh and not a
Muslim (although Sikhs shouldn't drink either...).
He'd try to get around his traffic tickets, with persuasion
(a little money) or brute force.



- ▶ What the Ustād as well as the Great Gama embody is pure masculine pride. And this masculinity is certainly also the pride of the Indian truck driver community.
- ▶ In fact, it is the community of Panjabi truck drivers, who dominate the roads of Ladakh, who is addressed by the signboard, and it is they who understand the word play:

don't [try to] be [like] Gama...

... or rather like the likes of the Ustād ...
(but that doesn't rhyme)



which possibly means:

Do not over-expose your masculinity!

Do not overspeed!

Do not take risky manoeuvres!

Do not drink!

Do not wrestle! ...

Do respect the police!

Do obey the traffic rules!



To 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 perhaps he did? ...



DFG



Photo BZ with RK's camera for RK

▶ Perhaps one should add another rule:

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





DFG

Thanks





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