

Pectorals, patriotism and pansies

BY
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When the annual Mr Zoroastrian contest in Mumbai was cancelled due to a lack of entries earlier this year, it signalled the fading out of the Parsi bodybuilder. The Parsis were among the first to take up bodybuilding in India, and, along with the Bengalis, produced some of India's finest strongmen. Murali K Menon explores the fascinating story of the two communities' initiation into physical culture, which involved legendary bodybuilder Eugene Sandow, the stigma of 'effeminacy', superhuman feats, muscular nationalism and serene yogis.



Bombay strongman and Physical Culture Institute director Tehmurasp Sarkari tore thick telephone directories into pieces with his bare hands

About twelve years ago, Hutoxi Doodhwala, vice-president of the Sir Ness Wadia Club at Rustom Baug, in Byculla, Mumbai, landed up at the home of Parsi philanthropist Naryman Dubash. Doodhwala had heard about Dubash's munificence through the grapevine, and she was hopeful of his sponsoring a few of the annual events organised by her club. Dubash was keen to help and willing to donate a considerable amount, but he had a few conditions. A part of the money was to be used to set up a modern gymnasium at the Parsi residential enclave, built in the 1930s by the Wadia family. He also wanted a separate gymnasium for women, since he believed,

says Doodhwala, that young Parsi women were fragile and more interested in modelling than in being healthy. The other ideas that were discussed by Dubash and other members of the club, after they had agreed to his conditions, was a fund for former Parsi bodybuilders and weightlifters, and a Mr Zoroastrian contest, to be held every winter at Rustom Baug.

Doodhwala is a chirpy, pleasantly plump woman in her early fifties, with brown tints in her hair, and a Samsung Note phone that never leaves her side. Doodhwala tells me she is “not the gymming type”, as she savours her frothy cold coffee at her elegantly appointed ground floor apartment, which is done up entirely in white. But the men’s and women’s gymnasiums, she recalls, did encourage a lot of residents to work out. She wasn’t so sure of the Mr Zoroastrian contest, though. “When they got this keeda (crazy idea), I thought it will never run. People don’t come to see men. Only the May Queen Ball works, I thought.” The first Mr Zoroastrian competition, in 2001, was a hit. It had over 23 participants and an audience of over 700 people, and a majority of them were Parsis, some of whom had travelled from far-flung suburbs. Doodhwala says she was “zapped” by the response. “My entire senior citizen group was also there. I asked them, ‘Arre girls, what are you doing here?’, and they said, ‘We toh enjoy this.’”

Dubash himself presented the sash and trophies to the winners for the first five years, and always spoke to the “boys”, says Doodhwala, about eating well, and staying away from steroids. The club also honoured former Parsi bodybuilders and weightlifters. “There were no parameters as such. If the community spoke highly of someone, we gave him a cash award. That was the way he (Dubash) wanted it,” says Doodhwala. The Mr Zoroastrian contest was held every February at Rustom Baug for the next ten years. It drew participants, both young and old, not only from around Mumbai, but also from other parts of Maharashtra, and from Surat and Navsari in Gujarat. But this February, the event was cancelled due to a lack of entries.

I tried to meet Dubash, who lives in Colaba, in south Mumbai, to find out what he thought of it. But the bachelor, who is now about 85, has been ailing for the last couple of years, and is virtually inaccessible, thanks, some in his community believe, to the insidious influence of a caretaker who is now alleged to have turned inheritor of his vast fortune. But I think I can see what Dubash, who also sponsored a gymnasium in Malcolm Baug, in north Mumbai, some nine years ago, had in mind when he helped fund the Mr Zoroastrian contest.



Adi Irani, 71, a former Mr Bombay, works out regularly at the Khushrow Baug Gymnasium in Colaba

In the 19th century, as Europe glowed with nationalistic fervour, many new gymnastic disciplines and exercise regimens were invented to further the cause of the respective nation-states of the continent. Strong nations required strong men, and this zeal for physical fitness was economically as well as patriotically motivated, says Mark Singleton. In his book, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (2010), Singleton writes that “to survive and earn a livelihood in the new industrial world, one could not afford a weak constitution.” The British, who, at the time, were building what would soon turn into a colossal territorial empire, put the cultivation of the body in the service of imperialism. By the turn of the century, physical culture, as the various fitness regimens were collectively called, “bound together a cluster of ideological items, including manliness, morality, patriotism, fair play, and faith, and it was a means for moulding the perfect Englishman,” says Singleton.

In India, the Parsis, who were part of the colonial elite, adopted not just the British way of life, but also their outlook towards physical activity. They drank tea, wore double-breasted suits and monocles, and went to the opera, and, like their rulers, they pumped iron, and were competent cricketers, tennis players, swimmers, and cyclists. As far back as 1884, the Zoroastrian Physical Culture and Health League, which was located near Dhobi Talao in south Mumbai, started Bombay’s first Boxing and Fencing Club. H. D. Darukhanawala’s *Parsis and Sports* (1935), one of the few copies of which is today available at the Parsi Punchayet Library in Mumbai, provides a snapshot of noted Parsi physical culturists of yore. Among them were Mahatma Gandhi’s naturopathic physician Dinshaw K Mehta (“a master statue-poser, supreme in grace and perfect in art,” says Darukhanawala); Behramshaw F Mukati (“a perfect specimen of the Body Beautiful — a model of perfect grace — his muscles being symmetrically developed”); Cowas Captain (“From Weakling to Physical Perfection.” (Also a) “Proficient Tap-dancer and Expert Ventriloquist”), and several other broad, ripped, proud men who stand slightly self-consciously before the camera, wearing gladiator sandals and faux leopard skin underwear, flexing their powerful arms, which end in clenched fists, and thrusting their well-defined chests forward.

Darukhanawala’s book also records many impressive displays of strength by Parsis, such as ‘The Hanging Feat’, which was performed by Dr S N Katrak at the Grant Medical College, in 1926, in the presence of Leslie Wilson, the then governor of Bombay. “It is a very difficult feat and requires great neck strength...the rope was tied round the neck with a loose slip-knot...the knot was placed round the nape of the neck...then pulled over the cross rods of hanging pilloo and Dr Katrak was hauled high up in the air, several feet above the ground, hanging only by the rope round his neck and not on his jaw-bones. He was kept in this position for about half a minute and then dropped down. There was a clear rope mark around his neck which was examined by His Excellency who appreciated the feat very much and it was repeated a second time,” writes Darukhanwala.



Eugene Sandow's visit to India in 1904 inspired generations of Indian bodybuilders

Numerous gymnasiums or 'health homes', either owned by Parsis or funded by them, mushroomed across Bombay, in Mazagaon, Marine Lines, and Dadar, at the turn of the century, and the biggest and most reputed schools in and around the city prided themselves on having Parsi gymnastic instructors. In 1904, a wealthy Parsi merchant called Dhunjibhoy Bomanji invited the legendary Prussian strongman Eugene Sandow to India. Sandow, who strove for Grecian ideals of physical perfection, was the first modern superstar of physical culture. Bomanji, who divided his time between Bombay and London and owned large estates in both cities, is believed to have trained under Sandow, who drew delirious crowds at his shows worldwide, and who would ultimately be appointed Professor of Physical Culture to King George V. Sandow's visit electrified Bombay, and apart from entering various Indian languages as a synonym for strength, he, in a way, also ensured that nearly every Parsi boy growing up in the ensuing decades idolised a muscular uncle or father or cousin.

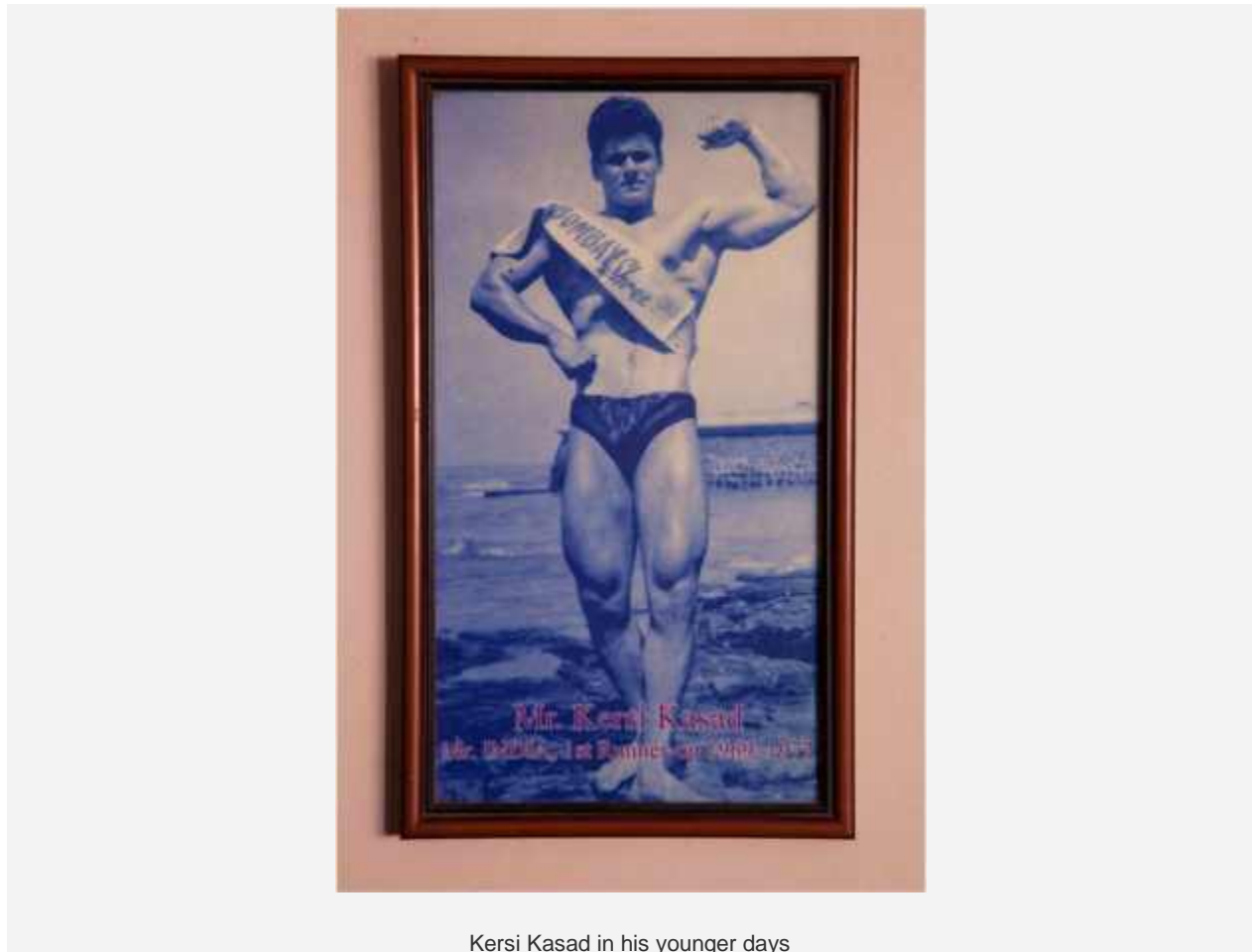


Champion weightlifter Viraf Panthaki, former Mr India Tehemton Gowadia and Kersi Kasad, Mr India runner-up in 1969, at the Sir Ness Wadia Club Gents Gymnasium in Rustom Baug, Mumbai

Tehemton Gowadia lives in the Sohrabji Byramji Bhabha Sanatorium in Bandra. The massive Victorian building, with its sprawling grounds, neighbours film actor Shah Rukh Khan’s bungalow, and overlooks the Arabian Sea. The 63-year-old priest, who is also the caretaker of the sanatorium, has kind eyes, but is built like a bull. “What does the name Tehemton mean? ‘Man of steel. It was in reality a title given to jahan pahalvan Rustom in the Shahnameh (epic poem by Persian poet Ferdowsi, written between 977 and 1010 AD). Rustom was a strong man, the greatest wrestler in the world,” says Gowadia, his voice acquiring a mildly dramatic tone. He is sitting on a rocking chair under an old wall clock in his drawing room. A pile of international bodybuilding magazines lies on a table next to the chair. Gowadia doesn’t work out any more, but he tells me he still occasionally reads bodybuilding magazines. Gowadia grew up in Hubli, in Karnataka, and used to watch, along with his brother Rohinton, their father workout everyday. The brothers started working out in their early teens fashioning crude equipment out of car components. Gowadia, who won Mr Mysore in 1967, came to Bombay in 1971 to join the Banaji Limji agiary, in Fort, and the titles he has won include Mr Bombay, Bharatshree, and Mr India (Tall-Men class). Former champion weightlifter Viraf Panthaki, an acquaintance of Gowadia, lives in Khushrow Baug, in Colaba. Panthaki, a former Union Bank of India staffer, is 69, and stout and jowly, but he still speaks of his uncle Jehangir Khalera with childlike awe. “Elephants would walk over planks placed on his chest, he would pull trucks using just one hand. People used to stop and stare whenever he visited the fire temple. All this in Bombay, in the 1940s. He was a real hero.”

As young men, Gowadia and Panthaki, who was born and brought up in Surat, led quiet lives. They worked in the mornings, and worked out in the evenings along with other Parsi men in gymnasiums in the residential colonies closest to their rented homes or workplaces. “I don’t think we ever thought ke bhai what after bodybuilding. We enjoyed it, we did it. That is not possible today. Bodybuilding is an expensive pursuit and it just doesn’t pay. There is just too much pressure on youngsters to study and earn. Their parents would rather they pursue cricket, or even badminton. Look at Saina (Nehwal),” says Gowadia. “We might never have been rich or famous, but the community respected us, and that respect made us happy.”

The relatively uncomplicated lives they led is not the only thing that differentiates them from the current generation of Parsis. Gowadia, Panthaki and other former Parsi bodybuilders such as Kersi Kasad, the 1969 Mr India Runner-up, always use the word strong when they describe themselves or contemporaries they admired. They were proud to be men of great strength, while Meherzad Chinoy, a 26-year-old national-level weight-lifter with humungous arms and a multiple winner at power lifting at Rustom Baug, says his friends think he is “too big.” Is masculinity viewed differently today, I ask Joseph S. Alter, a sociocultural anthropologist, and a professor at the University of Pittsburgh, in Pennsylvania, and the author of several books, including *The Wrestler’s Body: Identity and Ideology in North India*, and *Moral Materialism: Sex and Masculinity in Modern India*. “Yes and no,” says Alter. “The cult of physique has outstripped the question of strength and power. The early bodybuilders were strong men and prided themselves on being able to perform superhuman feats. This was much more in the tradition of the pahalwan, who was known for his power and strength rather than for his muscular development and definition. What has happened now is that the shape and cut of muscles unto themselves have become almost all that is important.” Earlier generations of Parsi bodybuilding enthusiasts didn’t just have role models in the community, they also had patrons in the form of businessmen, and physical culturists, who set up gymnasiums and invited youngsters to join them at very nominal rates. Adi Irani (Mr Bombay, 1969), who, at 71, is a regular at the Khushrow Baug gymnasium, and who, with his flowing, silvery beard, bears a distinct resemblance to pictorial depictions of Moses, trained for a nominal fee at the now defunct Pestonji D. Marker Physical Culture Home. When he first came to Bombay, Gowadia frequented a gymnasium near Bombay Central, set up by a former bodybuilder called Tehmurasp Sarkari. Sarkari never took money from Parsi youth who exercised at his gymnasium, says Gowadia, whose burgeoning bodybuilding ambitions were later funded for a couple of years by Dinshaw Mehta, a Parsi industrialist.



The likes of Sarkari and Mehta were keeping a very Parsi tradition alive, of encouraging and assisting promising bodybuilders. Over the years, this created an environment, and contributed to an ethos that helped Parsi bodybuilders thrive right up until the 1990s. Dubash's Mr Zoroastrian was an attempt to inculcate in his young Parsi brethren the ideals of an age when his community was known as much for its impressively built men as for its industriousness and charity. Rustom Jasoomoney, the president of the Sir Ness Wadia Club, smiles when I ask him about Mr Zoroastrian 2013. "We are striving, hoping, and working towards getting entries," says Jasoomoney. Gowadia isn't so sure. He clucks his tongue and tells me that, despite men like Navroze Dapotawala, a 46-year-old former Mr Zoroastrian, who aced his category at last year's Mr India competition, an era could have passed.

The fading out of the Parsi bodybuilder mirrors the crisis of the community. In her *The Good Parsi: The Fate of a Colonial Elite in a Postcolonial Society* (1996), Tanya Luhrmann, an American psychological anthropologist, presents an excerpt from 'Jamasni Jilloo', a much read Parsi column that appears in the *Jame Jamshed* weekly, to illustrate the predicament of the Parsi community in modern India, and it uncannily speaks for the decline of the Parsi bodybuilder as well:

Bomanji: "In those days, our young Parsi men were so well built. Unlike the thin, sickly looking men of today, they did not flit aimlessly wearing t-shirts with meaningless slogans like 'I love

you' and 'Kiss me quick'. They used to go to Pestonji Marker and to the Physical Culture Home at Gowalia Tank and did exercises to make their body fit and healthy. Our Parsi musclemen used to perform physical cultural shows as well."

Jilloo: "Well, talking of these old times tales reminds me of what I had read in the newspapers a few days ago. It seems that at the Alalumpur airport, a muscled body builder pulled a 28-ton Boeing with his hair, much to the amazement of his audience."

Baimai: "An entire plane, merely with hair on his head? Did you hear that Bamanu dear? Would you be able to do that?"

Jamas: "But how could he pull anything with his hair, when he has none on his head?"

Bomanji: "You are talking of these men of modern times. But our Parsi musclemen were no less. In the olden days, our Parsi 'pahelwan' Tehmurasp Sarkari would tear a thick telephone directory to pieces with his bare hands."

Jilloo and Bamai: "Truly, those were the days and those were the men."



Before Eugene Sandow came to Bombay in 1904, he visited Calcutta. While in the city, where he granted an audience to kings, noblemen and rich merchants, Sandow also held forth on the potential of the Bengali physique. In *The Perfect Man* (2011), David Waller says that when Sandow was asked by a reporter about what would happen if Bengalis took up his system, he said that, "from delicate they will become strong". Sandow's message, writes Waller, was "starkly free from racial condescension: he blamed the demonstrably poor physique of the Indian natives on poor diet and want of exercise, rather than any innate limitations of race. "The native Indians have a foundation for the building of large physical men," he insisted, "it is only because of their lack of proper food and systematic exercise that they are thin and haggard."

The British didn't think much of the Bengali physique, and as part of an extremely effective effort at cultural emasculation, they constructed the stereotype of the 'effete Bengali male.' Thomas Macaulay said that Bengalis were "fitted by habit for a foreign yoke because in the vast plain of the Lower Ganges, 'earth is water and the men women'", while another high-ranking government official is believed to have said that Bengalis possessed "the intellect of a Greek but the grit of a rabbit." Sandow was no subversive, and probably was seeking to popularise his techniques, available by mail-order, to a new market, but his unwitting statements added momentum to both the surge of nationalism in Bengal, as well as to the development of bodybuilding in India.

Inspired by the likes of Swami Vivekananda, who emphasised physical education as a means of national emancipation, nationalist leaders such as Sarala Devi, the niece of poet Rabindranath Tagore, and a central figure in the Swadeshi Movement, and spiritual revivalist (and one-time extremist) Aurobindo Ghosh, embraced a militant nationalist physical culture as a response to the British stereotyping. "During this time, a kind of muscular nationalism was beginning to gain ground in Bengal. Fed up of being stigmatised as a 'frail and effeminate' race, Bengalis — both men and women — began to participate in various kinds of physical cultures, ranging from martial arts to gymnastics, trapeze acts to hot-air ballooning," says Professor Abhijit Gupta, who teaches English at the Jadavpur University in Calcutta, and is, at present, doing research on physical culture in colonial Bengal. Sarala Devi founded an academy of martial arts at her ancestral home in Calcutta, while Ghosh and other leaders such as Pramatha Nath Mitra and Pulin Behari Das, founded revolutionary terrorist groups, such as the Anushilan Samiti (literally, society for education of all faculties). The Anushilan Samiti's chapters, which operated as suburban fitness clubs, mushroomed across the state, and in Dhaka (after the partition of Bengal in 1905). The mostly middle class youngsters, the Hindu bhadralok, who joined the Samiti were imparted training in various martial arts, and in exercise techniques by physical culturists. Some of these strapping men adopted western clothing, including double-breasted suits, to stay under the radar of the British and, at the same time, distributed seditious literature and planned bombings. By the late 1930s, though, concerted crackdowns by the British and a series of failed strikes, including the Chittagong armoury raid, broke the back of the secret societies in Bengal. The Anushilan Samiti would morph into the Republican Socialist Party, while the members of organisations such as Jugantar, an alliance of revolutionary groups, either joined the Communist Party or the Congress. But even in less incendiary times, and after Independence, the musty confines of the gymnasium still held a great appeal for Bengali men.



Right until the 1920s, bodybuilding in India, and especially Bengal, existed as a satellite of yoga, which was experiencing a revival at the time. The early physical culturists blended yoga with bodybuilding. “Bodybuilding was a specific manifestation of “muscle control” and yoga and bodybuilding came together in the practice of muscle control, and performances of muscle control,” says Alter, about the technique that involves flexing and relaxing the muscles individually and in groups. A few gymnasiums in Calcutta still carry forward that legacy, and the city’s most renowned bodybuilders were as adept at yoga as they were at sculpting the body. The early days of physical culture in Calcutta also witnessed, like with many other parts of the world, an inordinate stress on lifting prowess (as opposed to the display of the physique) and showmanship, and many mighty men found fame by lifting cars, trucks and through other such stupendous achievements. Among these physical culturists was Manohar Aich, who won the Mr Universe title in 1958, and who, at 100, is, I think, a lot fitter than I am at 38. Sitting on a low cot at his home, on the outskirts of Kolkata, Aich told me that he had started out as a part of the PC Sorcar show. His performance, which took place right before the magician took centre-stage, was called ‘Amazing Feats of Strength.’ Their ability to reel in crowds also made the better bodybuilders of Calcutta a regular presence at religious fairs and political conventions.

One summer evening in 1935, my father was coming back home when he was hailed by Pulin Behari Das. My father was stunned. What could Pulin Behari Das, the revolutionary, want from him, he thought?” Swapan Kumar Das pauses for effect. Das, a stout, bespectacled 56-year-old, runs Iron Man Publishing House and Health Home, which is located in a claustrophobically narrow lane on Amherst Row in Calcutta. His ancestral home, which also serves as his workplace, has damp yellow walls adorned with garlanded images of Sri Ramakrishna

Paramahansa and his apostles, Vivekananda and Sarada Devi. There are also 15 photographs of his father, Nilmoni Das, in various poses. Das would later tell me that, his father, who passed away in 1990, used to get himself photographed bare-bodied on a particular day each year. Nilmoni ages progressively in each of the images, but his broad shoulders never stoop, and his back is always ramrod straight. Pulin Behari Das had heard about Nilmoni's prodigious strength and wanted the latter to accompany him to a fair organised by the Hindu Mahasabha in Malda. Nilmoni's performance at the fair, which included twisting thick metal bars, and his symmetrical proportions, saw him being annointed Loh Manush or Iron Man, says Das. Nilmoni, his son says, was also involved with the Anushilan Samiti and trained many youngsters who joined the organisation. Nilmoni founded Iron Man Publishing in the 1933. Das, who is a physical instructor at a city school, teaches yoga, and still publishes and sells books on yoga and bodybuilding and exercise charts his father wrote several decades ago.



The Ghosh College of Physical Education is located on Ram Mohun Roy Road, a 15-minute drive from Amherst Row. The bright red two-storey mansion is named after Bishnu Charan Ghosh, who was, probably, the most influential physical culturist and practitioner of yoga in the 1930s in Bengal. Ghosh was mentor to Monotosh Roy, who was Mr Universe in 1951, and trained Bikram Choudhury, the Hollywood fitness guru who developed the decidedly faddish but highly popular Hot Yoga. Ghosh learnt yoga from his equally illustrious sibling, Sr Parmahansa Yogananda, who authored Autobiography of a Yogi, and developed, says his daughter Muktamala Mitra, a system of Hatha Yoga asanas based on the 84 original classic postures. "As far as I can tell, Ghosh was the first person to synthesise asana and muscle building exercises," says Alter. He co-wrote the Muscle Control and Barbell Exercise with Keshub C Sen Gupta, which would have fired many a young bodybuilder's ambitions back in the 1930s. In the book, Ghosh, who attended the Bengal Engineering College, writes about how he used muscle development, breath control and muscle control to impress his fellow students with feats such as "lying under a loaded bullock cart, running a car, and a two-ton road roller across my chest" and allowing men to jump on his abdomen from a considerable height. "He was among the very first people to educate Americans and Japanese in yoga, and he made Bikram Choudhury promise him that he would take yoga to the rest of the world," says Mitra, a petite woman in her mid-30s. Mitra took over the reins of the college after the death of her father and strongman, Biswanath Ghosh.

The walls of the many rooms of the college are lined with fading photographs of Ghosh, and Chaudhary, and of Biswanath's vaudevillian acts of strength. The people who frequent the college today are mostly looking for cures to their many ailments, says Mitra, whose office, with its dimpled false ceiling, artificial flowers, and ancient curtains, resembles a doctor's clinic from a 1980s Bollywood movie. "No bodybuilding anymore," she tells me, "we only do therapeutic yoga now." Mitra's move makes sense. After Monotosh Roy and Manohar Aich, the only really notable Bengali bodybuilder has been Tushar Sil, who was Mr India for many years in the 1980s. After that, apart from commendable aberrations such as Samir Ghosh, who won the Mr Universe bantam weight category in 2008, it's all been mostly downhill for Bengal.