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Integrating Garadi Mane Spaces into Modern Systems: An Anthropological Analysis of the Indian Knowledge System of Physical Well-being

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ABSTRACT

The Garadi Mane, traditional gymnasiums found in Karnataka, India, represent an underexplored aspect of the country's cultural and physical heritage. This research provides an ethnographic account of these spaces, which serve not only as hubs for physical training, particularly for wrestling (Kushti), but also as repositories of local knowledge about nutrition, healing, and social harmony. Drawing on inferences from the short-term ethnography of Garadi Mane in Dharwad, the study explores the socio-cultural significance, daily practices, and material culture associated with these spaces. Despite their holistic contribution to physical, mental, and spiritual well-being, the Garadi Mane are facing decline due to modernisation, changing societal values, and diminishing local support. This paper advocates for the¹ integration of Garadi Mane practices into mainstream education to preserve this valuable tradition and promote a holistic approach to health. The study highlights the need to integrate these spaces to sustain their cultural and practical importance through NEP 2020.

Keywords: Traditional knowledge; Motor Ability; Indian Culture; Training; Ethnography

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INTRODUCTION

Within this vast and diverse culture and heritage of India, the Garadi Mane (as known in Karnataka), or *Akhadas* (as known in North India), are local gymnasiums found in Indian villages and some cities, stand as a particularly intriguing and under-explored aspect. These traditional spaces not only served as hubs for physical training and development, especially for enabling athletes for *Kushti* (local type of wrestling), but also embodied a wealth of specialised local knowledge and practices regarding health, wellness, and holistic physical well-being (Jaideep, 2016). However, in the face of rapid modernisation and the dominance of Western educational and medical systems, these ancient repositories of wisdom and practice have fallen into a state of decline, their significance and potential overshadowed.

This paper aims to provide an ethnographic account of the material culture and life-ways associated with the Garadi Mane, drawing on the author's primary observations and structured interviews conducted within these communities. Furthermore, it will critically examine the factors contributing to this traditional knowledge system's dissipation and avow that relying on government fostering is insufficient. Instead, the paper advocates for actively integrating Garadi Mane spaces, practices and philosophies into mainstream educational curricula to preserve this invaluable heritage and leverage its holistic and preventive approach to health and wellness.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

Using the method of short-term ethnography (Pink & Morgan, 2013), the researchers visited the three Garadi Mane located in Dharwad city i.e., Maulali Garadi Mane of Haveripet, Sri Jyothi Garadi Mane of Maratha Colony, and Sri Maruti *Akhada* of Saraswatipura and two Garadi Mane of Shinganahalli, located 20 kilometre from Dharwad City. The researchers engaged in semi-structured interviews and observations of the daily activities and rituals that unfold within these spaces for two weeks in October 2024. The researchers noted the prevalence of traditional implements and equipment and understood the nuances of these areas. Let us briefly understand these spaces, which were created during the fieldwork.

GARADI MANE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION

The Garadi Mane, as described in a study on the "Rituals and Praxis" of this ancient system, is derived from the Pali word "garu," meaning "teacher," and the suffix "di," denoting specificity of location (Jaideep, 2016). Further, 'mane' refers to a house or specific space in the Kannada language. Overall, the Garadi Mane is understood as a dedicated space for learning, particularly in the realm of physical education and the attainment of bodily mastery. These traditional gymnasiums are not merely sites of physical training; rather, they embody a rich amalgam of cultural and spiritual practices intricately woven into the daily lives of the communities they serve (Skaltsa, 2012). The Garadi Mane can be seen as

the repository of a unique, time-honoured Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) that prioritises the harmonious development of the mind, body, and spirit.

The National Education Policy 2020 has identified Indian Knowledge Systems as a key area for development, promoting interdisciplinary research to study various facets of this knowledge corpus and disseminate it for further academic investigation and societal benefit. (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020; Beerannavar & Pancrasius, 2024) The policy highlights the need to recognise, preserve, and integrate traditional Indian knowledge systems into mainstream educational frameworks to foster a more holistic and culturally-rooted approach to learning and development.(Shukla et al., 2023)

STRUCTURE OF A GARADI MANE

There are no definite dimensions of a Garadi mane. However, a typical Garadi Mane has some definite elements (Figure 1), such as a Lord Hanuman idol, a platform for keeping equipment and warm-up exercises, and a typically square *akhada* or *matti* (mud pit) for wrestling practice. A very important factor of this space is its entrance. The entrance doors are usually small, approximately a square metre, and low, requiring the practitioners to bend down slightly before entering the mane. This door tries to teach humility in its symbolism, asking the one entering it to leave behind one's ego at the threshold before engaging in the practice. Also, they have a minimum number of windows (usually two). When spoken with the practitioners, usually referred to as *pehlwan*s, it is to maintain the heat and minimum moisture of the place.

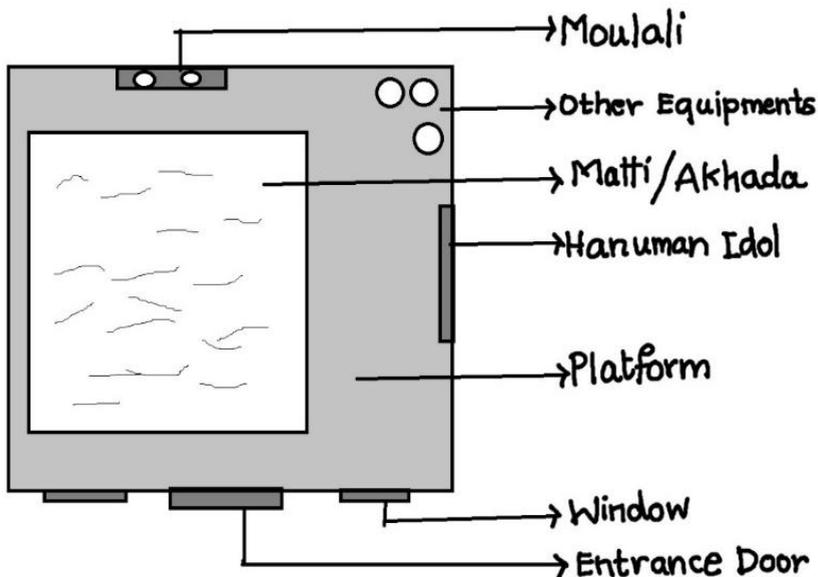


Figure 1 Layout of a typical Garadi Mane

THE MATTI OR MUD-PIT

The preparation of this *matti* or mud pit is unique. The mud is chosen from particular regions, which is usually soft, clayey soil, as well as devoid of pebbles, locally referred to as *kyav*. When inquired, pehlwans informed that they bring this soil from places such as Malligwad, a village in Dharwad district, or Vakkund, a village in Bailhongal taluk of Belagavi district. This soil, once brought, is sieved and dried for a few days (Figure 2). After drying, the mud is mixed with approximately 10 boxes of Palm oil or ghee, 50 liters of Curd (Mosaru), 5 kilograms of Camphor (Karpura), 20 kilograms of Turmeric (*Arshina*), 100 litres of Buttermilk (*Majjige*), 50-100 kilograms of raw lemon pieces (*Nimbe*) and 5-6 litres of mustard oil (*Sasve yenne*) and mixed thoroughly. Once kneaded thoroughly, it is ready to spread over the *akhada*. This mud pit is at least a half feet deep. This practice of preparing *matti* is once a year or once in two years. The *matti* is believed to have medicinal qualities and help in healing practitioners who encounter bruises during the practice, and even local people come to the Garadi to get this *matti* for any skin-related infections. Further, the *akhada* is a sacred place; the pehlwans, before entering this arena, pay their salutations to the Hanuman idol, prepare their bodies by applying coconut oil, and enter with a loincloth, cited as *langoti*.



Figure 2: Initial stage of *Matti* preparation at a *Garadi Mane*

DAILY ROUTINE OF A PRACTITIONER

The practitioners begin their journey of *Kushti* as early as 6 years old. The *Vastad*, or teacher, often a veteran who has played this sport, mentors all the disciples. As a novice first-time in the *Garadi Mane*, one has to go through an initiation ritual where he offers a coconut, some crystal sugar, and incense sticks to the Lord Hanuman Idol of the *Garadi*

Mane, further offering his salutations to the *Vastad* to begin his practice. This initiation ritual may differ among these spaces. Not all practitioners may be hailed as Pehlwan. This title is rather an **achieved status** that people give after a practitioner successfully plays *Kushti* for a few years.

The daily routine of practitioners not only prepares them for physical well-being but also helps in their mental conditioning. One of the important aspects of this type of training is spiritual praxis. Lord Hanuman, a deity of strength and chastity from Ramayana (Andrews, 1933), is a cornerstone of this training process. (Figure 3) Practitioners entangle the values like courage, valour, chastity or *Brahmacharya*, loyalty, humility, and discipline associated with this deity to prepare them for the sport or daily routine.



Figure 3: Lord Hanuman idol at a Garadi Mane of Dharwad. The identity of child practitioners is not revealed due to ethical practices.

A typical day of practice starts at 4 o'clock in the morning. After finishing his natural calls, he reaches Garadi Mane by 4:30, drinks raw eggs (*jawari motte*), and starts his *talim* or training. Starting with 500 Danda Baitak, popularly known as Hindu pushups, followed by a brisk run of 2 kilometres and rope climbing (Figure 4). Further, the training session follows a routine according to the day of the week till 8:30 am. The practice is to help them to build endurance. The practice session ends with meditation, often including pranayamas and traditional breathing exercises. Then, a cold water bath derived from the well (Figure 5) and a hearty breakfast of boiled eggs, soaked pulses, and legumes, which includes a fistful of Bengal gram (*Kadale kalu*), Horse gram (*Hurali kalu*), Green gram (*Hesar kalu*) and Groundnuts (*Shenga kalu*) are savoured. This breakfast is considered to be a source of high protein nutrition and is fulfilling. Juices of mainly sweet lemon (*Mousambi*), grapes

(*Dhrakshi*), or soaked black gram (*Uddina bele*) are preferred for hydration throughout the day. These juices are devoid of sugar and are made of whole fruits.



Figure 4: A Pehlwani during a rope climbing session



Figure 5: Pehlwani taking a bath using well water after their morning talim

As per the responses and interviews, the diet for lunch is that the dishes are sauteed or made from ghee (*tuppa*) as the base, and oil is strictly avoided. Further, any fried recipe is avoided. There is no restriction on the non-vegetarian diet. Post lunch, 2-3 hours sleep is preferred, again starting the training at 4 pm. Evenings are meant for *kushti* practice. The bodies are oiled, and warm-up sessions are completed. An hour of *kushti* practice is done under the supervision of *Vastad*. The training ends at 8 pm again with cooling exercises and meditation.

Further, with a simple dinner and juice of dates (*kajoor*), banana (*bale hannu*), or apple (*Sebu hannu*), the practitioners end their day. Another important nutritional drink is almond milk with a special masala called *Badam thanda*. The masala is a mixture of poppy seeds (*ghas-ghasi*), fennel seeds (*bade saunf*), green cardamom (*yalakki*), watermelon seeds (*kalangadi beeja*), coriander seeds (*havej*) and *mageej* (a local ingredient). It is believed that this drink keeps the body cool, making them practice for longer. Thus, Garadi Mane provide holistic direction to practitioners of physical, mental and nutritional well-being.

SOME IMPORTANT TRADITIONAL EQUIPMENT OF GARADI MANE

The following figure illustrates (Figure 6) some important traditional equipment in the Garadi Mane and their utilities.

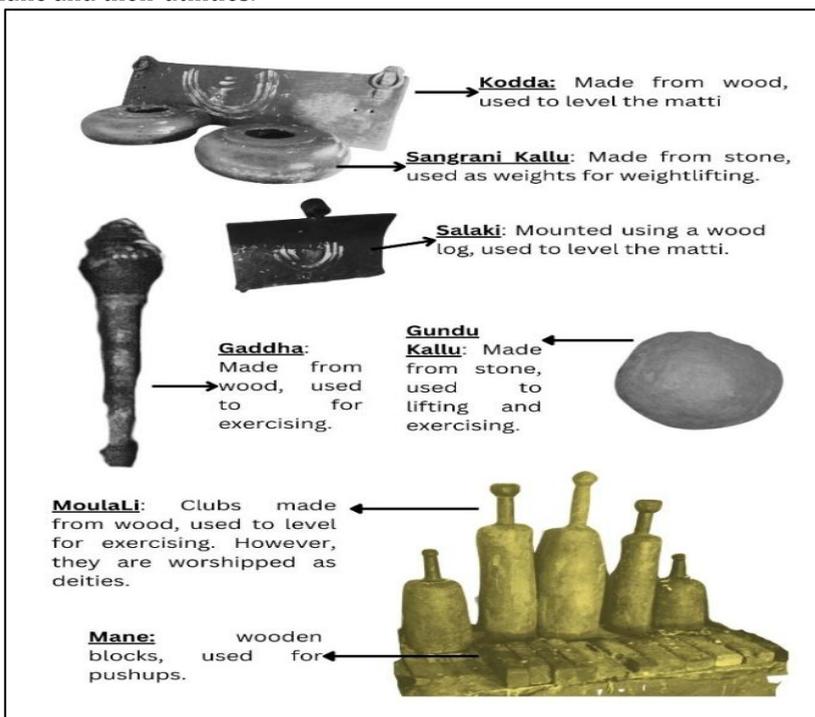


Figure 6: Some Traditional Equipment of Garadi Mane

SOCIO-CULTURAL SETUP OF GARADI MANE

Though the elements of a Garadi Mane are of Hindu identities, like Lord Hanuman, initiation rituals, and others, however, this space does not discriminate its practitioners against religion, caste, or economic status. In an interview with Gadigeppa Nigadi (figure 7), a veteran pehlwan aged 76 years, he proudly notes that Garadi Mane is one of the most secular places in a village or city. Anybody with a passion for excellence is welcomed and trained. There is no fee for getting trained at Garadi Mane; interest and dedication are required.

Many Garadi Mane spaces attract Muslim pehlwans and have imbibed Islamic characteristics in architecture, promoting adaptability, social unity, and harmony, such as Maula Ali Garadi Mane at Dharwad (Figure 8). Hence, these spaces are not just places for physical training but also institutions that impart traditional values, customs, and social equality.

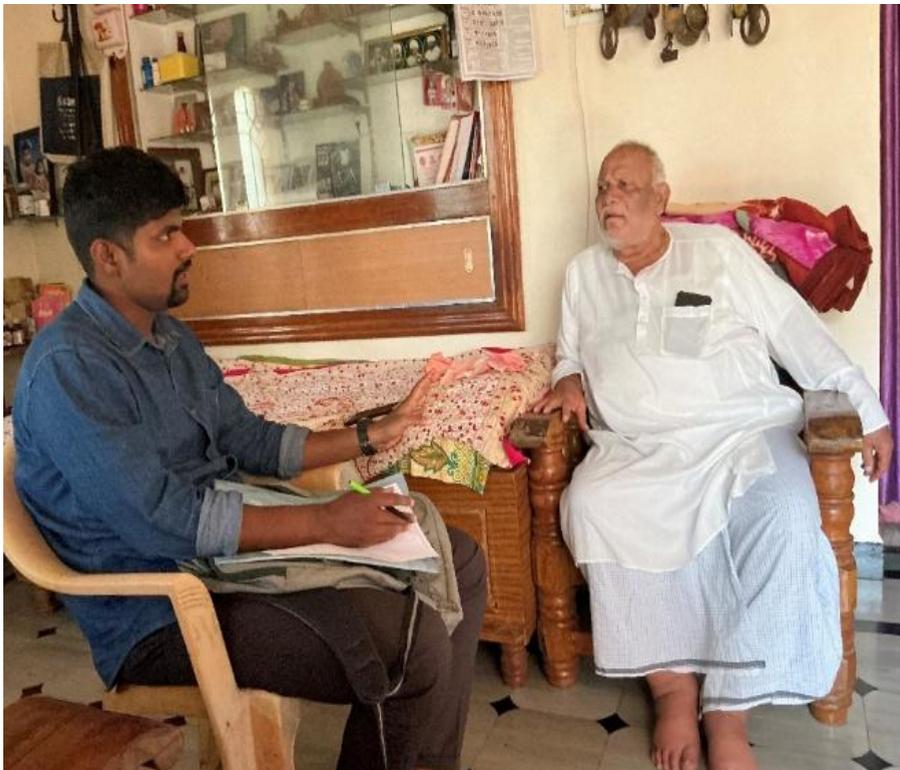


Figure 7: Snippet of an interview with Veteran Pehlwan Gadigeppa (Age 76)



Figure 8: Maulali Garadi Mane, Dharwad



Figure 9: Pehlwan at a Garadi Mane. Two of these pehlwan are State and National medalists in the Khelo India program

Further, some festivals and rituals held at these spaces are noteworthy. Hanuman Jayanti, usually occurring in April, and *Ayudh Pooje* during Dusherra are premier days celebrated with great interest. Every Thursday is set as a holiday at Garadi Mane. This day is set for cleaning, and a small pooja at the *akhada* is performed. Another important day set aside as a holiday on which no *kushti* is entertained is new moon days or *amavasyas*. These aspects indicate the spiritual connection and importance associated with this traditional space.

Vasudevan (2010) notes that practitioners and mentors at Garadi Mane are also well-versed in healing and massaging practices. The *Vastads* who encounter injuries of disciples are experts in the art of treating aches and sprains with oil massages. After retiring from the mud pit, many utilise this expertise to operate massage parlours.

For the competitions per se, *Kushti* events are conducted at the village, taluka level, district, or state levels. Usually, at the village level, the elders or veterans of that village arrange the *kushti* event, commonly called *theatre*, which is communicated through word of mouth to Pehlwan, who ultimately come and compete. Further, district or state-level competitions are held during the annual village jatra festivals or in the major city centres like Hampi Utsav and Mysuru Dusherra Utsav (*Mysuru Dasara*, 2024). These competitions are usually done across the year except during the monsoon season, as they are less feasible for arrangement.

Thus, the above anthropological analysis of Garadi Mane allows us to acknowledge that it is an apt and holistic Indian knowledge System. The figure (Figure 10) below represents some of the aspects of Garadi Mane as IKS.

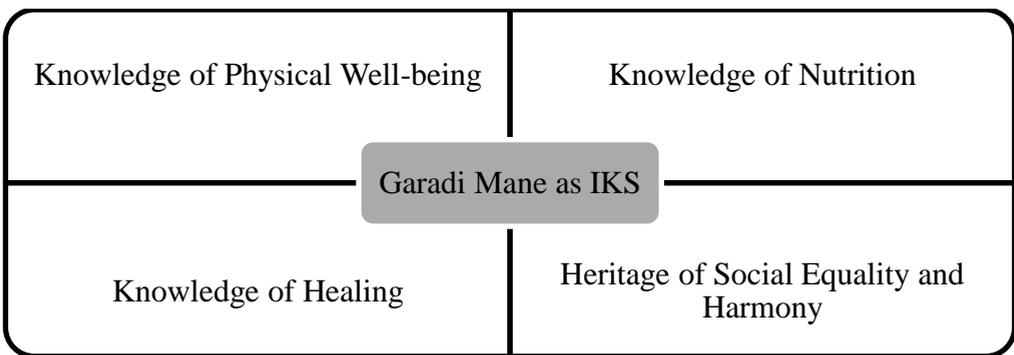


Figure 10: Garadi Mane as IKS

DISSIPATING CONDITION OF GARADI MANE: NEED FOR A MODERN APPROACH

While the Garadi Mane system holds immense physical, mental, and social value systems, it faces the threat of extinction. (Peabody, 2009) (Jaideep, 2016). During our ethnographic visits, we found many instances where the old Garadi Mane stand dissipated due to lack of attention and use, leading to abandonment (figure 11, 12). Though some are used as

articles of worship, the equipment remains underutilised and eventually forsaken (figure 13).



Figure 11: Water-clogged Matti due to Heavy rain at a Garadi Mane



Figure 12: Completely devastated Garadi Mane at a village due to a lack of maintenance



Figure 13: A Gaddha found among other waste articles

A few factors for this cause which occurred in the inquiry and analyses are:

a) Disappearing interest among children:

With the advent of modern sports and fitness regimes, the interest among children and youth in joining Garadi Mane has significantly reduced. Higher academic competition, aspirations, and efforts to endeavour for this have caused the youth to lack time in many traditional practices (Kar et al., 2021).

b) Loss of the traditional Jajmani system

The *Vastad*, who used to be a veteran pehlwan, was revered and appreciated for his skills and values within the village communities. We have already noted that there are no fees for the training and mentoring at the Garadi Mane. However, annually, the *Vastad* received his *gurudakshina* from the practitioners in the form of grains or articles as a matter of respect and gratitude for his services. Also, the village elders used to contribute to the welfare of these *Vastad* and his Garadi Mane. These transactions were often a part of the Jajmani system. However, with rapid urbanisation and migration, as well as with the modern monetary system of exchange, there is a loss of the Jajmani system in the village system (Alam, 2023). The *Vastad*, hence, struggles to maintain the Garadi Mane and finds it hard to make a living out of this profession.

c) Lack of girls or female participation

The limited participation of women and girls in the Garadi Mane practices is another concern. Traditionally, these spaces were reserved exclusively for male practitioners, and the introduction of female participants was seen as potentially disruptive to the serene atmosphere and sanctity of the practice. Factors such as the requirement for bare minimum clothing, strict rituals, and emphasis on chastity in these spaces have historically acted as barriers, effectively excluding half of the population from participating in this traditional system.

d) State support in terms of fostering than integration

The state efforts to promote and preserve the Garadi Mane system have been limited, often focusing on surface-level measures such as providing basic infrastructure or organising occasional exhibitions or competitions. For example, the Karnataka Minister in charge of Mysuru announced 5 lakh Indian rupees each to restore 50 Garadi Mane in Mysuru (Bureau, 2024). However, mere ex-Gratia fostering fails to revive the culture long-term. A holistic approach is needed to integrate the Garadi Mane system into modern education curricula or healthcare practices for long-term sustenance.

WAY FORWARD

Preservation and utility of Indian Knowledge systems for providing holistic well-being for society and as solutions to modern problems has been a primary tenet of NEP 2020. (Kumre, 2023) There is constant effort to revive rich traditions like Yoga, Ayurveda, and Traditional arts in the modern systems.

Similarly, the Garadi Mane system, as an integral part of Indian culture and knowledge, deserves greater attention and integration into the mainstream. When the physical well-being of modern children, especially their motor abilities, is degrading due to the sedentary education system as well as mental impact due to technological dependencies (Kaur, 2018), this ancient model of Garadi Mane can provide the right antidote (Sehgal, 2023).

This integration is not as simple as it seems to look forward. There are some aspects that Garadi Mane has to retrofit to modern sensibilities and practices, like thinking about opening these spaces for girls, as is happening in some Garadi Mane of Mysuru (Shrinivasa, 2022). Also, Garadi Mane should nuance its training to other sports rather than restrict itself to *Kushti* or wrestling. These spaces can be best integrated to focus on developing motor abilities and endurance among children. Similarly, Garadi Mane's curriculum needs to be recognised and incorporated into the physical education curricula at the school and college levels. We currently have models of Bharat Scouts and Guides (BSG) and National Cadet Corps (NCC) integrated with school education curricula. Similar to these models, we need to interweave the Garadi Mane infrastructure and its practices and heritage using extensive ethnographic research and policy making, making it an integral part of school education, thus reviving this Indian Knowledge System successfully. Overall, the emergence of NEP 2020, with a special emphasis on Indian Knowledge Systems, is an ideal beginning for the revival and integration of systems like Garadi Mane spaces, which should not be missed.

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