

Spectacle of Wrestling: The Narrativization of Nation-State and Citizenship in Gopinath Mohanty's Short Story 'The Somersault'

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Abstract

This article examines Gopinath Mohanty's short story, 'The Somersault', within the framework of *Bhartiya Kushti's* cross-pollination with the postcolonial Indian nation-state's politics of inequality and disparity. Mohanty's narrative is analysed in relation to the politics of spectacle and the notion of the public sphere, highlighting the plight of poor citizens within the democratic practices of the nation-state. What this essay showcase is the divide between wrestling (*Bhartiya Kushti*) as an ethico-somatic framework articulated through Mohanty's protagonist, Jaga Palei, and wrestling's encapsulation as a commodified spectacle—drawing attention to issues of political governance and challenges created by a hypermedia-dominated public arena.

Key Words: *Wrestling, Dangal, Spectacle, Public sphere, Democratic practices*

Introduction

Sports and politics are inextricably linked, despite the common refrain to 'keep politics out of sport!'—a connection particularly evident in Indian wrestling, also known as *pahalwani* or *Bhartiya Kushti*. *Pahalwani* or *Bhartiya kushti* has been an integral element of Indian culture, history and heritage¹. In this essay, the intersection of Indian wrestling with democratic practices, class-

based economic disparity, and media spectacle is examined through Gopinath Mohanty's short story 'The Somersault.'

The first section of this essay outlines a brief overview of the key elements of Indian wrestling and its historical evolution. The next two sections explain Mohanty's short story via the common thread of wrestling as both a sporting spectacle and mass entertainment, and its theorization as a "complex way of life" (Alter, 1992, p. 9). The second section, by positioning the protagonist of Mohanty's story, Jaga, within the state, highlights the spectacle of wrestling and its interrelationship with mass media, offering a discursive representation of the political structure and policies of the nation-state. The third section, through the visualisation of the mediated, commoditised aspect of wrestling, punctures, destabilizes, and unsettles the rhetoric of development, thereby embodying the failures of Nehruvian nation-state policies in addressing poverty.

1. Indian Wrestling: An Overview

Wrestling is not only a popular Indian sport and a leisurely recreation that entertains the public at large but also enacts a public identity through its numerous paraphernalia. In pre-Independence India, the *pahalwan*, via his performance, gave meaning to the complexities of life and dramatized everyday embodied practices by appropriating the motif of the body. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the *pahalwan* provided a paradigm for comprehending the imagined identity of the nation. As a counter-challenge to the 'somatic politics' of the British colonial state,ⁱⁱ the wrestler and the trappings associated with this sport developed into multilayered symbols mapping moral and ethical values onto the body. According to the foremost critic on Indian wrestling, Joseph S. Alter, the *pahalwan* was concerned with embodying the interface of the physical and the moral. Fortifying the body through physical fitness, exercise, and training methods, the *pahalwan* translated "somatic ideology" into nationalist discourse. During the colonial times, Alter asserts, this translation of the body politics framed the wrestler as the "perfect citizen" of the Indian imaginary (1992, p. 195).

One of the most conspicuous features of wrestling, as theorized by Alter in *The wrestler's body: Identity and ideology in north India* (1992), is its performative aspect. The values of the wrestler-in-action, dramatizing skills and exceptional strength, unfolds in a *dangal* (local wrestling tournament), and it is where

the wrestler earns his reputation not only as a competitive sportsman but also personifies “the ideals of a rigorous way of life” (1992, p. 139). However, the competitive aspect of wrestling does not constitute the primary feature of Indian wrestling. Instead, Alter argues that a *dangal* is not as symbolically significant as an akhara. Even as an akhara embodied spiritual strength, Alter notes:

The word *dangal*, which also means unruly crowd, is cognate with a number of other words which suggest disorder: *dang* (perplexity, fear); *dangal* (mutiny); and *dangi* (riotous). A palpable tension permeates many *dangals* whenever two well-known wrestlers compete, and although *dangals* are usually well organized, there is always an underlying sense that the whole affair may degenerate into a free-for-all. (emphasis in the original; 2011, p. 105)

Thus, in Alter’s conceptualization, *dangals* are problematic arenas where disorder and transgression of law frequently occur. Nonetheless, Alter emphasises that the *dangal* does not merely explicate chaotic and unruly energies but also embodies the cosmic energy of the akhara. However, a *dangal* and an akhara, Alter clarifies, are not equivalent. In a *dangal*, unlike an akhara, the guru-disciple relationship fades into the background, foregrounding the “individuality, the public identity, and unique biography” of the pahalwan (Alter, 1992, p. 139). Even though a *dangal* does not strictly adhere to *kushti* laws, Alter insists that the *dangal* functions as “a cultural critique, a lens through which one sees certain aspects of social integration and conformity thrown into sharp and disjointed relief” (Alter, 1992, p. 141).

It is in the context of *dangal* that Gopinath Mohanty’s short story ‘The Somersault’ is examined in this paper. Mohanty’s story ‘The Somersault’ was first published in Oriya in 1968 and translated into English in 1979 by Sitikant Mahapatra.ⁱⁱⁱ The narrative is set in the political climate of 1960s India.^{iv} The story of a wrestler’s journey from success to defeat is not marked by caste or tribal denominations.^v Jaga Palei, the protagonist, is portrayed as a poor laborer and wrestler. Mohanty presents Jaga as a universal symbol of misery and struggle, without invoking other affective or political identities. In his monumental work on Indian wrestling, Alter analysed this short story in the context of *dangal*’s “emblematic individuality of the competitive wrestler” (1992, p. 140).^{vi} However, Alter’s analysis omitted political and cultural factors

that influence and shape the individual. In Alter's analysis, Jaga's rise and fall as a *pahalwan* offers only an oblique commentary on society, and which he does not further explicate. This article seeks to address this omission by analysing how the wrestler in Mohanty's story, Jaga, is framed within and against society. This elaborate deliberation on Mohanty's portrayal of wrestling, I believe, can offer a more nuanced understanding of 1960s India.

2. Spectacle, Media and Public Sphere: Community and Hero

In Mohanty's story, the first picture that reverberates in the minds of the readers is the emergence of a new celebrity athlete, Jaga, in the public domain of visual images, representations, and media spectacle:

The day Jaga Palei of Sagadiasahi defeated Ramlawan Pande of Dharbhanga to enter the finals of the All-India Wrestling Competition—being held in the Barabati stadium - the sky were rent with the jubilant shouts of thousands of spectators. It was not the victory of Jaga Palei that excited them so much. It was Orissa's victory. Orissa had won. This was the feeling everywhere.

. . . A sea of humanity surged forward to greet him, to meet the heretofore unknown, unheard of wrestler. (Mohanty, 1979/1968, p. 81)

This opening montage structures the entire tragic content of Jaga's life, and provides shape, tone and direction to the entire story. Jaga is a wrestler who has won a game in a national sporting event—an all-important semi-final bout against another fellow wrestler. The consequences of this victory are enormous as Jaga's victory is celebrated in media as the victory of the whole region. I call this as 'spectacle' following Alan Tomlinson definition that sporting spectacle are large-scale events attended by many people (2002, pp. 44-60).

In the last three decades, spectacle has become a buzzword of our hyper-mediated life. Historically, the first mention of spectacle was by the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, in his treatise on literature, *Poetics*. For Aristotle, a spectacle constituted a mechanized tool meant only to enhance the visual appeal of tragedy (ch. 6, p. 12). But in contemporary parlance, the discourse of spectacle, as Guy Debord noted in his seminal book *The Society of Spectacle* (1967), is imbricated with power networks and wherein 'authentic social life'

has been corrupted by mediatized representations. Following Debord's work on spectacle, the nature and effect of 'spectacle' has been studied across disciplinary terrains, and its presence is ratified in fields as diverse as politics and identified even in rhetorical gestures. In recent decades, however, spectacle as a category has most often been applied to the domain of sport.

Basing his work on the Olympic Games, John MacAloon outlines four intrinsic elements that comprises the idiom of contemporary spectacle. The first element of spectacle includes "visual sensory symbolic codes." The second element involves "grandeur" while the third element "institutionalize the bicameral roles of actor/audience, performers/spectators." The fourth element of spectacle included the component of "dynamic form, with movement, action and change." It is this fourth element that has become widely popular and is considered as fundamental to modern sports. For MacAloon, this fourth element evokes a theatrical flavour that excites and creates frenzy among spectators, and constitutes sports as the true expression of popular culture (cited in Tomlinson 2002, pp. 50-54). Jaga's victory celebrated by "thousands of spectators" or a "sea of humanity" recalls MacAloon's analysis of spectacle's dynamic 'fourth principle. And it is this principle that shapes the contours of Jaga's narrative.

MacAloon's 'fourth principle' also aligns with Alter's postulation on *dangal*. *Dangal*, as Alter explains, is a locally organized competition which can be sponsored by municipal boards, village panchayats and regional parties (2011, pp. 110-11). As much as a *dangal* involves crowd participation, it remains a small-scale regional event. This difference in the scale of spectacle can be better understood in light of Donald Kyle's (2015) discussion of the distinction between Greek and Roman spectacles. Kyle writes:

Greek sport was more participatory and Roman spectacles were more spectator, and Greek competitors were citizens but most Roman performers were not, but sport and spectacle were complementary. . . . When states institutionalize sporting contests, sport becomes spectacular. . . (2015, pp. 343-44)

The description of the Greek element of spectacle which were more participatory in nature resonates in Mohanty's story as well. We are told that during his training period under his guru, Khalipha, Jaga visits various towns and villages to display his skills. These local tournaments or *dangal* offer Jaga to showcase

his knowledge and talent to his community and function as stepping stones to greater glory. However, in Mohanty's story, these local tournaments also evoke the separation of Jaga's social condition from the commoditised urban sporting spectacle. Mohanty writes,

The town people who cared for wrestling soon knew his name. . . But rarely were these people from among the higher circles of society. Mostly they were shopkeepers, tailors, butchers, drivers, carpenters and so on. The lack of fame in all sections of society was in the part due to the *khalipha's* regulations. No showing off, no publicity. (emphasis in the original; 1979/1968, pp. 86-87)

This is clearly an account of how Alter decoded the workings of a *dangal* where the individuality of the wrestler is foregrounded but with the added touch of the guru-shishya idiom embodied in an *akhara*. Nonetheless, whatever the differences between Greek, Roman and Mohanty's description of wrestling posit, one can say with certainty that the marriage of sport and spectacle is intimately bound to each other, and registers values that extends far beyond the terrain of sporting culture.

Jaga's victory representing "Orissa's national consciousness" (Mohanty, 1979/1968, p. 81) is situated in the urban space of state-managed spectacle ("Barabati stadium," "All-India Wrestling Competition"), governed by institutional rules and state regulated frameworks. The picture of the police trying to control the stampede, which takes place after Jaga wins the semi-final match becomes an instance of the state's manifestation of management and supervision of sport. Kyle also affirms that as the state becomes heavily involved in coordinating the games, staging of sport becomes more elaborate and spectacular (2015, p. 344). Interestingly, the unruliness that breaks out in this visualisation of stampede recalls the etymological definition of *dangal* as chaotic. But whereas Alter's (2011) postulation of *dangal* as a site of chaos and confusion depicts a competition where results are often not forthcoming (p. 106). In Mohanty's story, however, the chaos is contained with the results being declared. However, the implications in Mohanty's story are not controlled and symbolise more than unruly energies.

Jaga's victory in Mohanty's story is reported in the newspapers and blared across the radio. The report of the match and Jaga's artistry is exultingly described in

print media, which enable people who have not even watched the match at the stadium to relive this momentous experience of the epoch win of Jaga. Mohanty (1979/1968) writes,

Excitement spread rapidly to the rural areas as soon as the newspapers published the news. . . The week that followed could legitimately be called 'Jaga Palei Week'. In buses and in trains, in hotels and in the village Bhagabat-tungi, the talk was only about Jaga Palei's wrestling feat. . . Since there were no auspicious marriage dates in the coming year, hundreds of marriages were solemnized in the fortnight following this event and, in these festivities, a frequent subject of discussion was Jaga Palei's wrestling. (1979/1968, p. 82)

The proliferation of the news of Jaga's success to the remotest corners of the state becomes what Akhil Gupta (2006) has observed as the "representation of the reach of the state" (p. 214). The infiltration of the news in the quotidian rhythms of citizens—while travelling in buses or serving as the focal point of discussion during marriage festivities illustrates the enactment of the state and its power in the lives of common people. Whether read as "cultural texts or as sociohistorical documents" (2012, p. 93), the vernacular press, according to Gupta, constitute a form of "situated knowledge" (2012, p. 93). We are told that Jaga's win embodies a symbolic alignment of positive astrological configurations for his local community—leading to even marriages being performed during the 'Jaga Week'—despite not being practically convenient for such endeavours. Jaga, thus, I argue, operates as a hyper mediatized spectacle.

The element of spectacle is not only visible in the proliferation of mediatized images of Jaga's victory but in Mohanty's story (1979/1968), the newspapers position Jaga's victory adjacent to the news items like "'Rocket to Mars,' 'Man's flight in Space,' 'Death of Lumumba' and the subsequent daily events of Congo's politics, 'Success and Failure in *Panchayat Samiti* and *Zilla Parishad* Elections'" (p. 82). What this suggests is not only the inescapability and pervasiveness of sports but also, reifies wrestling as a significant site where socio-political issues are communicated. Also, the news items so mentioned alongside Jaga's achievement pertain to voting and electoral politics, and anticipates the tragic denouement of Mohanty's main protagonist.

Alexander Keyssar (2009) reads voting as central to democracy, and stresses

that “although a nation certainly could have universal suffrage without democracy, a polity cannot be truly democratic without universal suffrage” (p. xx). The description of Jaga’s historic victory, set alongside the news of Panchayats’ ongoing electoral process and in parallel with international politics such as Congo, not only recalls the nineteenth century discourse of wrestling as intertwined with self projection, self representation, and self government, but also foregrounds the centrality of electoral participation in shaping the political apparatus of the postcolonial nation state.

What Mohanty projects in this juxtaposition of voting with wrestling is to document the spectacle of Jaga’s epic win as a narrative of political inclusivity and equality . The mention of Panchayats and Zilla Parishads also brings into focus the idealistic vision of India established at the dawn of Independence under the leadership of the first Prime Minister of Independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964). Sudipta Kaviraj (2011) notes that the Panchayati Raj, or rule by village councils, was established by Nehru as an experiment to counter the economic problems which persisted even after independence. Realizing that formal laws enacted by the state did not penetrate into the hinterlands of the country, Nehru’s effort to build these local Panchayats, as Kaviraj points out, was a step to break the stranglehold of the landed gentry over the control of resources (2011, p. 132). Vijendra Singh (2003) argues that the Panchayati Raj being an agency of the state, was connected to issues of planned development and welfare functions of the nation—to bring about parity and equality amongst different classes, castes, and gender (p.132). In describing Jaga’s victory alongside Panchayat elections, Mohanty problematizes the spectacle of wrestling and frames it within an engaged mode of citizenship.

Wrestling is shown as crucial to the functioning of the nation-state, just as voting is central to translate the idiom of citizenship into the dialogic space of the public sphere—one that includes both the dispossessed and the dominant classes.^{viii} From the position of being merely a subject during the colonial times to becoming a citizen in postcolonial India, public sphere in relation to citizenship involves an ever-widening dimension of duties, responsibilities, and fundamental rights. Citizenship, by definition, is premised on egalitarianism, wherein new members are included to materialize a public space—one that rapidly changes its content to secure political and social identities for those newly incorporated.

The exaltation of citizenship in terms of membership and equality in the new political milieu of independent India after the end of dehumanizing experience of colonialism is depicted by Mohanty in Jaga's stupendous victory and the circulation of the news of his victory across channels. The evocation of Jaga Palei as a "symbol" and "fulfilment of the hopes and aspirations of Oriya people" (Mohanty, 1979/1968, p. 81) becomes a key site "for the expression of various levels of identity and affiliation" (Tomlinson. 2002, p. 44), and an important element to imagine a nation. In the same vein, Boria Majumdar and Nalin Mehta (2009) record the growth of sport during the early years of Independence as "deeply tied to the ideals, hopes, and aspirations of Nehruvian India" (p. 109). Mohanty's description of Jaga's triumph as being shared, felt, and communicated with people of varying backgrounds and class illustrates a sporting site where diverse elements of the society come together and are culturally and politically emboldened to act out their rights in the context of the new political policies of postcolonial India.

Mask of Democracy

Mohanty structures the story of Jaga through two images; the first image is of Jaga as a wrestler and the second image being that of a poor labourer. The story of the poor labourer discredits the earlier story of the march of a nation towards democratic progress and equality, and draws the reader's attention to the socialist democratic policies of Nehru as being more a narrative of exclusion. In the description of the interviews undertaken by the local correspondents, Mohanty brings out the discomfiture of Jaga as he attempts to wrestle his way out of the commoditised, mass-mediated representation of the sport of wrestling. The banal questions like "which party do you support?" "what do you think of the recent changes in the country?" (Mohanty, 1979/1968, p. 88) thrown by the newspaper correspondents at Jaga, at first glance, lead to a false impression of the success of the developmental policies of the nation-state of Nehru. But the fact that Jaga Palei felt suffocated, by the insistent questioning of the media, and the fact that he "ran through the crowd and still afraid that they [the journalists] might follow him" (1979/1968, p. 89), locates a subversive response to these new forms of mass, commercial social identity. It is interesting to note, that Jaga runs to his guru (teacher) for his blessings. The guru, *Khalipha's* praise, "you have preserved my name," (p. 89) is the only one which Jaga appreciates amongst the ratification of his prowess by the

public and the media. Alter describes “the institution of guruship” “as a guiding principle in the world of wrestling” (1992, p. 53) and as central to wrestling’s celebration as a complete ethico-political system. Jaga’s humility and deference depicted in the relationship between him and the *Khalipha*, as well as in the still image of Jaga folding hands to acknowledge the applause of the public, all serve as a stark contrast to the throng of journalists (Mohanty, 1979/1968 p. 89) “jostling and pushing about” for Jaga’s “photograph” to “flash it in cinema slides” (1979/1968, p. 88).

If the concept of public sphere, elaborated by Jürgen Habermas, presupposes a space of debate, discussion, and rational exchanges, in Mohanty’s story, I argue, the circulation of Jaga’s larger-than-life portrait nullifies this idiom of equal participation as one based on reason and critical acumen. Instead, Jaga’s hypermediated spectacle only outlines an abject dehumanisation and commodification, where “[t]he spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life. . . the world we see is the world of the commodity” (Debord, 1967/1994, p. 29). Though the public sphere in Mohanty’s story is supposedly inclusive of even the socially disadvantaged sections of the society, but this pluralism, as Srirupa Roy (2007) observes, is merely a “selective inclusion and transformation of group identities into a particular state-supporting matrix of diversity in which only certain kinds of group identities were recognized” (p. 7).

This selectivity becomes apparent when Jaga’s win is placed alongside the more political news of the Panchayat elections and the Congo elections. The mention of President Lumumba, the first legally elected Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo who was assassinated on 17th Jan, 1961—operates as a “stumbling block to the ideals of national unity, economic independence and pan-African solidarity” (Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2011, n.p). If Lumumba’s death connotes the death of democratic values, likewise, I argue, the juxtaposition of Jaga’s win in print media with international political news represents a tragedy enforced by the corruption that lay underneath the façade of development of postcolonial India. The so-called rendition of democratic values falls flat as Jaga is read as more as a sign that is manipulated at will by the ruling classes and media.

While local organisations seek to share and profit from Jaga’s monumental

effort—whether by issuing press notes, publishing newspaper interviews with Jaga, or through private entrepreneurial ventures that use his name to sell “songbooks”—there is, on the other hand, an obvious lack of ethical care in the 1960s discourse on political governance. The fact that Jaga, a daily-wage earner, deprived of even basic necessities as clothing, clean water, and sanitation (*Red Tape*, 2012, p. 3) is brushed aside defines how the postcolonial Indian nation-state, what Akhil Gupta (2012) described, as illuminates “cruelties of endemic hunger and malnutrition.” Jaga’s socio-economical condition functions as an empty signifier, serving no purpose but merely providing bare information. Mohanty writes, “[n]ewspapers gave out the fact that he was a labourer” (1979/1968, p. 89). Jaga and his family’s tragedy outline a society where the underprivileged are simply pawns in a larger game.

The wrestler who wins is celebrated but the wrestler who is surviving against dire poverty is consigned to a single sentence.^{ix} A wrestler’s diet is a fundamental part of his existence and the fact that Jaga saw “mutton” only “when walking down the tired streets” and where “milk was only a dream” (1979, p. 90) exposes the failure of Nehruvian economic policies to relieve the masses from the dire condition of poverty. What it echoes is the incongruence between an ideal nation-state which benevolently looks after its citizens^x and an ineffective state intervention to relieve the sufferings of poor citizens like Jaga, even to the point of securing the basic necessities of life.

While the victory of Jaga becomes the talking point of the whole region, the celebrity wrestler is shown to persist with his ‘traditional’ mode of life as a daily wage earner carrying gunny bags to and from the ‘maalgodown’ (warehouse). This is a profession he has continued with since the death of his father, Uddhab Palei. Mohanty describes Uddhab’s futile attempt to recover his health by approaching several quacks and ayurvedic physicians. At the dawn of independence, Nehru stressed on the importance of science as being the only means to solve “the problems of hunger and poverty, of insanitation and illiteracy, of superstition and the deadening custom and tradition, of vast resources running to waste, of a rich country inhabited by starving people” (cited in Arnold, 2000, p. 210). But, Uddhab Palei’s death due to pneumonia, as Mohanty noted, “without discovering whether mankind had discovered a cure” for it (1979/1968, p. 83) confirms the violence implicit in the postcolonial policies of the nation-state. Here, the death of a poor citizen is widely accepted

as a normal affair and chronic poverty is no more a tragedy but an everyday affair.

If akharas represent a space of cosmic equality; in Mohanty's story, the utopian picture of an akhara contrasts strongly with that of Jaga's home. Mohanty depicts Jaga's home as surrounded by dirty drains and located at the backside of the local moneylender (1979/1968, p. 84). This reflects the polarisation and the differentiation between the rich and the poor implicit in the growth of urbanisation engendered by the new economic policies of Nehru. Within the fabric of democratic mobilisation and participation that enables individuals like Jaga to enter the domain of sports lies the image of poor and disempowered individuals or groups, depicted as mere waste—no better than trash.

James H Mills (2005) described sports itself as a domain that “invites subalternity.” Mills observed that with “skills, prowess, concentration and guile,” which allows a sportsperson to triumph are not necessarily governed by the logic of “wealth, social status or political manipulation” (p. 1). Sport facilitates even the utterly dispossessed to oppose the dominant agenda imposed by the elites. But in Mohanty's story, sport only reifies the powerful and people like Jaga have to fight it out with other disadvantaged sections of the society—merely to survive. His mother's sweet-shop loses its appeal amongst the masses because of the variety of food items and better seating arrangements provided by migrant labourers coming to live in Jaga's locality (1979/1968, p. 84).

Jaga's physical strength can only be utilised, as Mohanty writes, in the role of domestic servant, as an apprentice in driving bullock carts (1979/1968, p. 84) or far worse, “as a Kichaka; in modern terminology, goondaism” (p. 87). This last role is significant as it is, what Akhil Gupta (2012) claimed, the manifestation of the state in the lives of the poor citizens through various representational modes and everyday practices. Studying various discursive domains such as newspapers, Gupta insisted that the poor are simply interpellated by the hegemonic classes (2012, pp. 19-20), and are, in due course of time, summarily silenced. Mohanty's story represents Jaga as a consumable entity, who is accorded meanings at will by the hegemonic classes. Moreover, Jaga's story exposes the idealistic strain in wrestling discourse as always being corrupted, defiled and used up in the services of the rich and landed elites.

While the sporting spectacle and the media orchestrate the public into being

manipulated by the images, Jaga's response is unique, different, and can be understood within the parameters of *Bhartiya Kushti*. The suggestions of well-wishers to sell his property, the offer of various menial jobs, and the proposal of marriage are all functions to locate him in a role of subservience—devoid of dignity and self-respect—is comparable to that of the condition of slavery. Nonetheless,, Jaga's response to all these offers is negative. His refusal of all these societal propositions encapsulates the ethico-somatic framework distinctive to the ethos of wrestling, and which tragically finds no other takers.

Conclusion

The transformative potential of wrestling, dramatised in Jaga Palei's struggle to maintain his sanity and to survive amidst poverty and death emerges as a subversive response to the political and cultural power of the state. However, the cyclical repetition of the narrative, embodied in the alternative success and defeat of one wrestler against the other, becomes an occasion to strip the idiom of wrestling with any moral, political legitimacy, and casts Indian wrestling only as an empty signifier in the hands of the nation-state.

At the beginning of the story, Jaga defeats a wrestler, Ramlawan Pande of Bihar, and at the end of the story, with the defeat of Jaga, we see the emergence of a new hero, Dilip Singh of Punjab. The very nature of sports imbricated in a paradigm of success and defeat is transformed in Mohanty's story to foreclose any resistance on the part of the individual subscribing to the ethos of wrestling and eventually discredits the democratic policies inaugurated in the aftermath of colonialism.

Where Mohanty's title of 'somersault' renders the ineffectuality of wrestling to transform the state into a political ideal in the postcolonial times, it also undercuts the universality implicit in the rhetoric of citizenship. In Gopinath Mohanty's earlier short story, 'Ants' (1995/1954), ants are described as, "everywhere hungry ants carrying mouthful of rice to live, to survive" (p. 27). We see an echo of this image where individual life and the whole history of wrestling embodied in the figure of Jaga becomes a matter of survival against the privations and hardships caused by the miscarriage of mobilisation programs (panchayats and zilla parishads) during the Nehruvian era.

Unlike, Alter's description of Jaga's plight as a narrative of individual suffering,

in this essay, the tragedy of Jaga thus, verbalises a broader commentary on the anomalies and the irregularities that inform the postcolonial nation-state. Here, the rights of the poor citizen are nullified to the extent of being reduced as a numerical data, and the democratic practices are exposed to reveal the seedy violence of power and the loss of a whole way of life.

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- i *Bhartiya Kushti's* references abound in classical Hindu epics—The Ramayana and The *Mahabharata*—with characters such as Jarasandh, Bheema, Duryodhana, Balaram—being trained wrestlers.
- ii After the First War of Independence (1857), within both colonial and postcolonial politics, the 'body' emerged as the definitive site of power and authority while simultaneously resisting the dominant discourse (See James H Mills & Satadru Sen [2014]; Hargreaves [2007]; David Arnold [1993])
- iii The original Oriya title of this short story was 'Nanmane Nahin,' published by Sathi Prakashan in Cuttack.
- iv Mohanty has not mentioned the date of its setting but it can be interpreted through the mention of the assassination of Lumumba and Congo elections within the narrative (1979/1968, p. 82).
- v As an administrative officer posted in the Koraput region of Orissa, a district with a predominantly tribal population, Gopinath Mohanty is mostly known for his tribal narratives that reflect his personal experience as well as his deep-seated sympathies for these tribes. He won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1955 for his fiction, *Amarutara Santana*.
- vi Alter also mentions Ruskin Bond's short story, 'The Garland on his Brow' as another example of fictional representation of wrestling (1992, p. 140).
- vii 'To make a spectacle of oneself', is an adage which has been exploited to its maximum potential in Renaissance literature depiction of fools (See Burningham 2007).
- viii The notion of public sphere became a popular vocabulary across the world during the early 1990s and has emerged as a key term in political economy with the publication of Jürgen Habermas's *The structural transformation*

of the public sphere. This book was originally published in German in 1962 and its translation in English became available only in 1989. Habermas' contention that during the eighteenth century with the establishment of coffee-houses and the periodical press, a democratic public sphere inaugurated where all could participate and discuss and debate on matters political gained massive momentum during the rise of Eastern European Democratic societies of the 1980s (Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy, 2023)

- ix Individuals being simply rendered as statistic was outlined previously in Chinua Achebe's cult classic novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958).
- x Joseph S. Alter's article 'Subaltern bodies and nationalist physiques: Gama the great and the heroics of Indian wrestling,' draws up a utopian world of wrestling where the state looked after every need of its citizen ((2000, p. 51).
- xi Kichaka, was the army commander of the Matsya Kingdom, and a legendary wrestler in the classical Hindu epic, *Mahabharata*. He was killed by one of the Pandava sons, Bheema, because of his attempt to rape Draupadi.