

Vivekananda Byam Samiti and Community Identity in Colonial Bengal (1772-1946)

Swarup Mal¹, Prasenjit Deb²

¹University Research Scholar, Department of lifelong Learning & Extension, University of Kalyani, Nadia, West Bengal
Corresponding Author Email: [swaruplle24\[at\]klyuniv.ac.in](mailto:swaruplle24[at]klyuniv.ac.in)

²Professor and Supervisor, Department of lifelong Learning & Extension, University of Kalyani, Nadia, West Bengal
Email: [drprasenjitedeb\[at\]klyuniv.ac.in](mailto:drprasenjitedeb[at]klyuniv.ac.in)

Abstract: *This study examines the historical and socio-cultural role of the Vivekananda Byam Samiti in shaping physical culture and nationalist consciousness in colonial Bengal. Drawing on primary archival sources, oral histories, and secondary literature, it analyzes how the Samiti translated Swami Vivekananda's "man making" philosophy into institutional practice. The findings demonstrate that the Samiti functioned not only as a center for physical training but also as a site of youth mobilization, social service, and anti colonial engagement. By integrating indigenous martial traditions with modern organizational forms, it contributed to redefining the Indian body as a symbol of strength, discipline, and national identity. The study highlights the significance of Murshidabad as a regional site of cultural revival and underscores the broader role of physical culture in processes of nation building. Drawing upon primary sources, including institutional records, local archives, and oral histories, alongside relevant secondary literature, the paper analyzes the dual role of the Samiti as both a center for physical training and a site of nationalist mobilization during the Indian freedom struggle. It argues that the Vivekananda Byam Samiti functioned not merely as a gymnasium but as a significant space for youth formation, anti-colonial consciousness, and community solidarity. Situating the Samiti within the broader akhara and physical culture movement in Bengal, the paper further highlights how regions such as Murshidabad—politically marginalized since the late eighteenth century—rearticulated their historical identity and cultural pride through initiatives of physical and spiritual regeneration.*

Keywords: Physical Culture, Somatic Nationalism, Murshidabad, and Colonial Masculinity

1. Introduction

The period from the establishment of the East India Company's rule in 1772 to India's independence in 1947 witnessed a fundamental transformation in the organisation, meaning, and social function of physical culture in the subcontinent. Prior to colonial intervention, physical training in India was primarily practised within akharas- indigenous gymnasiums where activities such as wrestling (kushti) and stick-fighting (lathi khela) were closely associated with local militias, caste-based groups, and ascetic orders. Under colonial rule, however, especially in Bengal, British imperial discourse increasingly characterised the Indian body as weak and effeminate, particularly in contrast to the so-called "martial races." This racialised representation contributed to the reconfiguration of physical culture into a more self-conscious and organised practice, promoted by Indian reformers and nationalist groups as a means of bodily discipline, cultural regeneration, and political assertion.

A central figure in this revival was Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), whose philosophy of "man-making education" underscored the integral relationship between physical strength, moral development, and spiritual awakening. His well known exhortation, "Strength is life, weakness is death," provided a powerful ideological foundation for reimagining physical culture as a vehicle of national regeneration. Inspired by these ideas, a number of institutions known as Vivekananda Byam Samitis (or byamagars) emerged across Bengal. These organizations combined indigenous martial practices with elements of modern physical training to cultivate disciplined, resilient, and nationally conscious youth.

Beyond their overt function as centers of physical training, many of these samitis assumed a more covert political role during the high phase of nationalism (c.1902–1946). Organizations such as the Anushilan Samiti exemplified how gymnasiums could also serve as sites for revolutionary networking, recruitment, and anti-colonial activism. In this context, the evolution of akharas into structured byam samitis reflects a broader shift in the Indian freedom movement- from localized and sporadic resistance to more organized, disciplined, and ideologically driven efforts toward Swaraj.

This paper seeks to examine the emergence and development of the Vivekananda Byam Samiti as a "nursery of nationalism" in colonial Bengal. It focuses particularly on its role in challenging colonial stereotypes, fostering youth mobilization, and contributing to the transformation of physical training into organized sport by the mid-twentieth century. By situating the Samiti within the socio-political landscape of Murshidabad, the study also highlights how a historically significant yet politically marginalized region engaged in processes of cultural revival and identity formation through the intertwined pursuits of physical and spiritual discipline.

This study therefore aims to provide a localized institutional history of the Vivekananda Byam Samiti in Murshidabad, examining its role in linking physical culture with nationalism, community formation, and socio-cultural transformation in colonial Bengal.

2. Review of Literature

Existing scholarship on physical culture in colonial India highlights its close association with nationalism, gender discourse, and socio-cultural reform. Indira Chowdhury (1998), in *The Frail Hero and Virile History*, conceptualizes physical culture as a site of “nationalist reclamation,” emphasizing how bodily discipline became central to constructing an idealized nationalist masculinity. She foregrounds the role of Swami Vivekananda in redefining physical training as both a moral duty and a spiritual imperative.

Similarly, T. S. Avinashilingam (1943), in his compilation of Vivekananda’s educational ideas, underscores the Swami’s conviction that physical weakness lay at the root of India’s socio-political decline. This perspective situates physical strength as foundational to both individual development and national regeneration.

Abhijit Gupta (2012), in his study of bodily cultures in colonial Bengal, examines the institutionalization and professionalization of indigenous physical practices such as wrestling and gymnastics. He demonstrates how prominent families, including the Guhas of Calcutta, integrated traditional akhara practices with modern organizational structures to contest colonial stereotypes.

Further, Mrinalini Sinha (1995), in *Colonial Masculinity*, analyzes the binary construction of the “manly Englishman” and the “effeminate Bengali,” illustrating how such colonial representations necessitated a nationalist response centered on reclaiming physical vigor and masculine identity.

While these studies offer valuable insights into the ideological and cultural dimensions of physical culture, they largely focus on macro-level narratives, leaving scope for localized institutional histories.

This study moves beyond a descriptive institutional history by contributing to existing historiography in three important ways. First, it bridges the gap between macro-level theories of “somatic nationalism” and micro-level institutional practices by demonstrating how ideological constructs were operationalized within local organizations. Second, it reconceptualizes the byam samiti not merely as a site of physical training or revolutionary activity, but as a hybrid socio-political institution where bodily discipline, community formation, and nationalist consciousness were simultaneously produced. Finally, by foregrounding Murshidabad as a peripheral yet dynamic region, the study challenges the prevailing Calcutta-centric narrative and highlights the role of localized institutions in shaping regional expressions of nationalism and identity in colonial Bengal.

3. Research Gap

Despite substantial scholarship on the physical culture movement and revolutionary organizations in colonial Bengal, several critical gaps remain with respect to the study of Vivekananda Byam Samitis (c. 1772–1946):

- 1) Historical Continuity: Most studies begin with Vivekananda’s Chicago address (1893), with limited exploration of how pre-colonial and early colonial akhara traditions evolved into organized byam samitis in the early twentieth century.
- 2) Social Inclusivity: Existing literature predominantly focuses on the *bhadralok* elite, neglecting the participation of lower castes, subaltern groups, and rural youth, and thereby overlooking the broader social reach of the “man-making” ideal.
- 3) Functional Duality: Byam samitis are often viewed either as centers of revolutionary activity or as institutions of physical training. There is a lack of integrated analysis that examines their dual role- both technical (development of indigenous sports) and political (nationalist mobilization).
- 4) Regional Imbalance: Scholarship remains heavily Calcutta-centric. Peripheral regions such as Murshidabad and branches beyond Bengal (e.g., Tripura) remain underexplored in terms of their distinct interpretations of Vivekananda’s ideals.
- 5) Archival Limitations: There is a scarcity of internal institutional records- such as membership registers, training manuals, and dietary practices- leading to an overreliance on oral histories and colonial administrative reports.

4. Research Objectives

The present study seeks to address the above gaps through the following objectives:

- 1) To examine the transformation of indigenous physical traditions- such as akharas and *paik* practices—into organized gymnastic associations under colonial conditions.
- 2) To analyze the emergence of the Vivekananda Byam Samiti within the specific socio-political context of Murshidabad, including its founding circumstances, leadership, and institutional motivations.
- 3) To investigate how Vivekananda’s philosophy of “man-making”- emphasizing physical strength, moral discipline, and spiritual development- was embodied in the practices and organizational ethos of the Samiti.
- 4) To explore the role of the Samiti as a space for nationalist consciousness, youth mobilization, and community solidarity, particularly in relation to the broader Indian national movement (c. 1905–1946).
- 5) To document the institutional life of the Samiti, including its governance structures, membership patterns, training regimes, and cultural activities, in order to understand its continuity and adaptability over time.
- 6) To situate the Samiti within the wider network of physical culture organizations- such as the Anushilan Samiti and other contemporary byam samitis- highlighting its distinctive contributions.
- 7) To contribute to the recovery of marginalized local histories by constructing a systematic historical account based on archival materials and oral testimonies.

5. Methodology

This study adopts a historical-interpretive research design, combining qualitative analysis of both primary and secondary sources to examine the evolution of the Vivekananda Byam Samiti between 1772 and 1946.

1) Primary Sources

- Institutional records, where available (membership registers, rules, training manuals)
- Oral histories from founding members' descendants, long-standing members, and local community elders
- Archival materials from district repositories and organizational records
- *Key archival sources include:*
- Murshidabad District Library and municipal records
- Records from the Ramakrishna Mission archives
- Digitally accessed colonial records from the British Library (India Office Records)

2) Secondary Sources

- Scholarly books, journal articles, and theses on physical culture, nationalism, and colonial Bengal
- Studies on akhara traditions and the ideology of “muscular nationalism”

3) Analytical Framework

- The study employs:
- Textual analysis of ideological discourses on strength, masculinity, and nationalism
- Comparative analysis between indigenous physical traditions and colonial sporting practices (e.g., the contrast between British “muscular Christianity” and Indian physical culture)
- Contextual historical analysis to trace institutional development within broader socio-political transformations

4) Field-Based Inquiry

- Interviews with stakeholders associated with the Samiti
- Documentation of existing practices, traditions, and institutional memory

In addition, to ensure methodological rigor and reproducibility, the study employed purposive sampling for oral history interviews, selecting participants based on their direct or inherited association with the Vivekananda Byam Samiti. A total of 15–20 respondents were interviewed, including long-standing members, descendants of founding members, local historians, and community elders with demonstrable knowledge of the institution's history. Oral testimonies were cross-verified through triangulation with archival records, secondary literature, and internal institutional documents wherever available, in order to minimize recall bias and retrospective reinterpretation.

To enhance the reliability of oral data, repeated interviews and narrative consistency checks were conducted, and conflicting accounts were critically evaluated against documentary evidence. In addressing archival gaps—particularly the absence of continuous institutional records—the study adopted a corroborative reconstruction approach, combining fragmentary archival materials, district

gazetteers, colonial administrative reports, and oral narratives to build a coherent historical account. This multi-source validation strategy ensures both evidentiary depth and analytical reliability in reconstructing the institutional history of the Samiti.

6. Result and Discussion

1) Vivekananda Byam Samiti and Nationalist Mobilization

The Vivekananda Byam Samiti emerged as an important institutional space in colonial India, helping transform the Indian body from a symbol of subjugation into an instrument of resistance. Rooted in the eighteenth-century akhara tradition, these gymnasiums gained ideological direction from Swami Vivekananda, who linked physical strength with national regeneration (Avinashilingam, 1943; Chowdhury, 1998). By promoting ideals such as “muscles of iron and nerves of steel,” they directly challenged colonial stereotypes of the “effeminate Bengali” (Sinha, 1995).

Between c. 1902 and 1946, many byam samitis operated not only as training centers but also as sites of covert nationalist activity. Indigenous practices such as wrestling, gymnastics, and lathi khela were used to mobilize and train youth¹ (Gupta, 2012). Organizations like the Anushilan Samiti played a key role in this process (Rosselli, n.d.; Kaviraj, 1995). These institutions embodied “somatic nationalism,” where the disciplined body became a means of political expression (Chowdhury, 1998).



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/VBS1941/>

Leaders such as Aurobindo Ghosh and Bagha Jatin recognized the value of such spaces in cultivating self-strength (atma-shakti) and collective discipline (Kaviraj, 1995). By the 1940s, when Subhas Chandra Bose organized the Indian National Army (INA), earlier samitis had already laid the groundwork for disciplined nationalist mobilization (Marshall, 1987; Gupta, 1975). In this sense, these institutions linked bodily training with broader political goals and contributed to a more organized form of nationalism².

¹ Basu, [initial unknown], Deshpremik Mallabir Gobar (undated manuscript; details unavailable).

² Majumder, [initial unknown], Balider Katha (undated manuscript; details unavailable).

2) Vivekananda's "Man-Making" Philosophy

At the core of Swami Vivekananda's thought is the idea that a nation depends on the character and capacity of its people. His concept of "man-making" emphasized self-realization through the balanced development of body and mind (Avinashilingam, 1943).

Vivekananda argued that India's decline was rooted in weakness. His statement that one may be "nearer to Heaven through football than through the Gita" highlighted the importance of physical vigor (Avinashilingam, 1943). He envisioned an ideal individual marked by strength, integrity, and service (seva).

Within this framework, nation-building becomes a collective outcome of individual transformation. Institutions like the Vivekananda Byam Samiti thus acquired a broader role. They were not merely spaces for exercise but sites for shaping disciplined and socially responsible individuals committed to national service (Chowdhury, 1998).



Source: <https://www.maasamiti.org/our-story/swami-vivekananda>

3) Social Role during Colonial Rule

During colonial rule, byam samitis extended their role beyond physical training into social service and community welfare. Members often worked as organized volunteer groups, responding to crises such as famines, floods, and epidemics (Bala, 2014; Singh, 1998).

A notable example is the plague relief work in Calcutta in 1899, carried out under Vivekananda's inspiration and the leadership of Sister Nivedita (Annyadananda, 1960). Volunteers engaged in sanitation drives, slum cleaning, and medical distribution, often compensating for limited colonial responses.

These activities were not purely charitable. They fostered discipline, resilience, and collective responsibility. Through such practices, members developed a sense of self-reliance and social unity across caste and class lines (Chaturvedi, 1987; Madan, 2008). The samiti thus functioned as a bridge between physical culture, social reform, and political awareness.

4) Impact on Sports Culture in Murshidabad

Murshidabad had a long tradition of indigenous martial practices such as raibenshe, linked to the Nawabi military culture (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2003; Das, 2002). In the early twentieth century, byam samitis incorporated these traditions—along with lathi khela and kushti—into structured training systems, giving them new nationalist meaning (Gupta, 2012).

The district, known for institutions like Krishnath College (established in 1853), also witnessed the rise of organizations such as the Vivekananda Byamagar at Khagra, Berhampore (Biswas, 2014; Roy, 2018). These institutions redefined sport as a civic and patriotic activity.

During the 1920s and 1930s, emphasis shifted toward strength-based activities such as gymnastics and weightlifting. This provided an alternative to colonial sports like cricket and helped build confidence among local youth (Gupta, 2012).

These spaces also promoted social integration. Participation cut across caste and community divisions, turning gymnasiums and sports events into sites of collective identity formation (Islam, 2015). Thus, byam samitis played a key role in both cultural revival and community cohesion in Murshidabad.

7. Findings

The study shows that colonial policies, particularly disarming measures after 1772, weakened traditional akhara institutions (Marshall, 1987; O'Malley, 1914). However, these institutions adapted rather than disappeared. By the late nineteenth century, they evolved into centers aimed at regenerating collective identity (Gupta, 2012).

A key finding is that the Vivekananda Byam Samiti challenged colonial stereotypes of the "effeminate Bengali" (Sinha, 1995). Drawing on Vivekananda's ideas, it redefined the body as a site of strength (shakti) and self-reliance (atma-shakti) (Avinashilingam, 1943), contributing to a shift from narratives of weakness to those of capability.

The study also finds that the Samiti successfully integrated indigenous practices such as raibenshe into modern physical culture (Das, 2002). In Murshidabad, this created continuity between earlier martial traditions and emerging sports culture (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2003).

Finally, voluntary service played a crucial role. Activities such as famine relief and sanitation work became structured forms of character formation (Bala, 2014). These experiences fostered discipline and collective responsibility, which later supported nationalist mobilization.

8. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Vivekananda Byam Samiti played a transformative role in linking physical culture with nationalist consciousness in colonial Bengal. Emerging from the akhara tradition and shaped by Vivekananda's philosophy, the Samiti redefined the disciplined body as a

site of strength, identity, and resistance. Its activities extended beyond physical training to include social service, youth mobilization, and community integration, particularly in regions such as Murshidabad. The findings highlight how localized institutions contributed to broader processes of nation building by integrating cultural tradition with modern organizational practices. Future research may further explore comparative regional developments and the long term influence of such institutions on post independence sports culture.

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This work is based on both primary and secondary sources available in different libraries of West Bengal.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that no competing interests exist.

Author's contributions

Since it is the research works of the Ph.D. Scholar, hence the scholar collects data from various primary and secondary sources. Both the authors contributed equally to the theoretical development, analysis, interpretation and writing of the manuscript.

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