



PHYSICAL TRAINING, ETHICAL DISCIPLINE, AND CREATIVE VIOLENCE: Zones of Self-Mastery in the Hindu Nationalist Movement

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Since its inception in 1925, the founding organization of the Hindu Nationalist Movement, the National Volunteer Organization (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh [RSS]), has established branches (*shakhas*) in numerous Indian neighborhoods through which the movement has thrived. Physical training, comprised of military drill, calisthenics, and instruction in the use of nonmechanical weapons, forms a core activity that volunteers collectively undertake. Training takes place on a daily basis, usually early in the morning, under the tutelage of the branch's teacher (*shikshak*). The exercises are posed as martial rituals, cited in Vedic Hindu texts, which are indispensable to cultivating *samskars* ("ethical habits") for upper-caste Hindus. Physical training is therefore cast as "tradition" and as an "ancient" practice. Teachers are also responsible for leading sessions of "discussion and learning" (*bhaudik*) in which volunteers are taught interpretations of Indian history that celebrate a golden age when Hindu kings sublimely ruled the subcontinent. Such tellings offer a selective reading of history because the mythical Hindu era is said to be brought to an abrupt end by the violence of "invading Muslims." According to this historiography, Christian missionaries and British colonialism prolonged the denial of a return to Hindu rule on the subcontinent. These discussion sessions also include a form of sociological diagnosis in which contemporary Hindus are said to be "divided and enfeebled," thus explaining their historical demise, and their vulnerability to the predations of Muslims. Physical training is therefore posed as an indispensable transformative practice that disciplines, morally and physically strengthens, and ultimately internally "organizes" (*sangathan*) Hindus. In the Hindu Nationalist view, the

physical training of each additional Hindu is understood to place a revitalized, able, and unified Hindu community—and eventually India as a whole—closer to recovering an imagined golden age.

Scholars have explored how physical training within the Hindu Nationalist Movement draws on and creates powerful nationalist sentiment. Young males tend to join branches, analysts suggest, because of the attraction of enlisting in a movement that aims to transform and deliver the nation from a debilitating physical and moral condition (Andersen and Damle 1987). Furthermore, physical routines that are enacted in branches foster a powerful form of nationalist solidarity among volunteers who imagine that it is performed simultaneously in localities that span Indian territory (Dhooria n.d.; Jaffrelot 1996). Such forms of membership may also give volunteers a sense of collectively sharing a secret, as if among siblings, about an inextinguishable spirit that is steadily enabling a “nation-civilization” to realize a renaissance (Blom Hansen 1999). Physical training is said to respond to pressing social and political conditions in the present because drill routines physically and mentally prepare the Hindu nation to confront perceived threats from demonized others in the imagined future (Bacchetta 2004; Sarkar 1993).

Although the nationalist valence of training is undeniable, I present a contrasting account, arguing that physical routines of Hindu Nationalist shakhas are part of an ethical enterprise that evolves as a result of critical sensibilities that operate within it. I demonstrate that techniques of drill are simultaneously learned and innovated by volunteers, thus transforming training into an unfolding enterprise that departs significantly from the mechanistic vision of it highlighted in most analyses emphasizing nationalist dimensions. Rather than being exercises that are blindly imitated or forcefully imposed by movement leaders, I argue that physical training is oriented toward attaining virtues of physical and moral self-mastery through the performance of combat routines within a disciplinary zone of self-experimentation and exploration. Within such a zone, volunteers modify drill routines, enriching and refining them on an everyday basis. Such forms of physical self-exploration are socially significant because movement volunteers understand the iterative probing of physical practice as being driven by a resolve that deepens the volunteer’s moral fortitude. Through analyses of my ethnographic experiences with drill training and interviews conducted with volunteers, I show how physical and moral processes are intertwined, and routines of violence are sustained as a social and ethical practice.

Furthermore, I connect the physical–moral enterprise of training to anti-Muslim pogroms that took place in postcolonial Gujarat, demonstrating how the evolving nature of physical conditioning shapes, prolongs, and enables the

improvisation of tactics of ethnic cleansing.¹ Such devastating acts of violence, I demonstrate, were fueled by the volunteers' pursuit of self-mastery, rather than only being influenced by discourses of ethnic hatred, as previous scholars emphasize. Examining this evolving dimension of violence in shakhas in Ahmedabad, the largest and most politically important city of Gujarat, is especially important, because it illuminates how the movement has grown there and made Gujarat its stronghold and a laboratory for ethnic cleansing.

It is often argued that drill training is primarily a vehicle for garnering support for the movement's political party, the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (hereafter the BJP) (Brass 1997, 2003; Varshney 2002).² Indeed, movement volunteers have participated in acts of violence that were organized—at specific moments—by party leaders. However, this occasional connection to organized politics does not account for that which sustains the volunteers' everyday participation in physical training: that it constitutes an ethical practice.³ Recent anthropological work concerning religion and ethics emphasizes the manner in which virtuous subjects are cultivated through the undertaking of ethical practices (Asad 1993; Hirschkind 2001, 2006; Mahmood 2005). Within this vein of scholarship, attaining religious forms of virtue is, in important manners, dependent on the subjects' self-discipline in enacting scripted ethical techniques. (In the case of Islam, these techniques include regular prayer, donning the veil, and avoiding prohibited acts [*haram*].) Although physical training is initially presented to new volunteers as a set regimen that should be followed closely, attaining virtue (i.e., self-mastery) depends on the innovation of the regimen itself. Physical training, thus, offers a different case of ethical praxis because its techniques are oriented toward innovation and less dependent on scripted action.

To be sure, similar processes have been explored in contexts of religious dispute and the fabrication of rumors in contexts of war (Fischer 2003; Silverstein 2002). However examining the effects of physical self-innovation in the Indian case illuminates how invention is located within disciplinary practices that are situated at the nexus of religion and militant violence. Hindu nationalism is also compared with some frequency to fascism, with drill training described as mechanical, homogenizing, and coercive. Movement volunteers are assumed to be victims of false consciousness who lack any agency. The moral dimension of the movement's physical enterprise is significantly eclipsed in these inquiries.⁴

My analysis emphasizes the innovative and, thus, ethical aspects of physical training to advance understanding of what drives Hindu violence against Muslims. I start below with reflection on ethnography in the context of hate and violence.

Because the ethical aspects of physical training develop through technique, I then describe these techniques, the routines they are part of, and the ideological role of branches. I then describe how innovation and internal struggle nourish physical training. Finally, I highlight how physical training has animated and shaped acts of ethnic cleansing in India.

ETHNOGRAPHY WITHIN THE AMBIT OF HATE

Complex anti-Muslim sentiment was woven within the branches of the Hindu Nationalist Movement in which I worked. On the one hand, Muslims were identified as agents who violently interrupted the sublime rule of Hindu kings in medieval India. They also were said to be unified within their ranks today and in solidarity with other Muslim nations. On the other hand, Hindus were said to be fragmented by sectarian differences and with few transnational sources of support. Accordingly, Hindus would continue to be vulnerable to a “natural propensity” for violence by Muslims and their non-Muslim sympathizers until “Hindu unity” was effectively achieved. Enlistment in a shakha was a crucial first step. These themes were reiterated and reified daily through sessions of “learning” [bhaudik] about, for example, “the glorious ancient Hindu capital of Gujarat” in Pathan, which was supplanted by the establishment of Ahmedabad by Ahmed Shah in 1411 (itself claim to sit on the site of the “Hindu villages of Karnavati”). The teacher supplemented this “Gujarati history” [*Gujaratno ahitiyas*] with stories about Muslims in the city. These sessions often became animated as volunteers interjected with accounts of violent encounters with Muslims based on stories that circulated within the volunteers’ families.

In Rampuram, which was an all-Hindu neighborhood in the city of Ahmedabad, such sessions of “learning” were a prism through which volunteers understood their conflicts with a small orthodox Muslim community that resided across a nearby main road. Although competition over commercial and residential property in the locality had increased with the introduction of neoliberal economic policies in Gujarat, it has acquired an increasingly communal character in Ahmedabad where municipal resources are seen to be monopolized by one of the two communities. For branch volunteers, these civic conflicts confirmed both historical characterization of Muslims as archrivals of Hindus, and the purported unity of Muslims.

The ethical dilemmas of working as an ethnographer in such a context were multiple. I formed relationships with probable perpetrators of communal crimes, but I also had to suspend my visceral rejection of hate speech so that I could trace its texture and contours. This meant striving to comprehend the range of views

on Muslims, including proposals for “their extermination,” that “they be forcibly expelled from India,” or “be Indianized” (i.e., interned) through a combination of violence and policy initiatives.

My entry into this context began, ironically, with physical training, because my morning routine (while working on a project initially focused on violence and urban space) included a physical “workout” at the same time as branch meetings. As with most potential volunteers, a full study of my background was undertaken beforehand, details of which would allow me entry into the group. Thus, one morning the teacher asked me to join them “for exercise” [*kasrat*]. Before joining I disclosed that I was conducting research in Ahmedabad and that I would write critically about my experiences (which was accepted). I later learned that the following two factors significantly helped to secure my candidacy: I resided with a family of high-caste *brahmins* in Rampuram, which located me within an envelope of upper-caste purity, and I was a native speaker of pure Gujarati, the language—falsely perceived—to only be spoken by higher-caste Hindus. Although my poor aptitude for mastering the techniques of physical training ensured that I did not become an exemplary volunteer, the combination of these “qualities” made me a candidate for branch membership and it provided me with an analytically valuable opportunity to understand the regular practices and ethical investments that sustain violence from within this militant movement, an opportunity that is rare in the study of Hindu nationalism.

PHYSICAL TRAINING IN THE HISTORY OF THE RSS

The RSS was founded in 1925 and its popularity fed on important events in the history of Indian independence, such as Partition (1947). Nonetheless, the RSS approach to physical training built on precedents within the colonial period. Physical training appeared in mid-19th-century colonial Bengal as part of a recuperative project that aimed to restore a sense of masculinity to upper-caste Bengali men. This project was driven by almost three decades of writing about “the effeteness” of Bengali men, which left an imprint both on English discourse in India, and on increasingly important Hindu reformist movements (Rosselli 1980:123; Sinha 1995). Early Bengali nationalists in the 1860s, like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, viewed effeteness as an affliction that threatened the Indian nation in general and embraced physical training as a panacea. Similar to the RSS later, according to Chandra, training was based on the precept that “the physical is the father of the moral man” (see Rosselli 1980:123). Bengali leaders invested in the hope that regular performance of drill and calisthenics would engender a moral-physical

renaissance among Indian men, developing strength of character within them that would restore their valor. The connection between physical training and a robust national character was further buttressed by European nationalist figures. Bengali thinkers emulated Giuseppe Mazzini, for example, who endorsed military forms of discipline as a means for his organization (Young Italy) to lead a mass movement that sought to unify Italy (Jaffrelot 1996).

By the late 1860s, physical exercise was a prominent feature of Bengali societies and at Hindu festivals. Participants of such festivals were also involved in organizing neighborhood-based wrestling in which self-discipline, the use of bamboo staffs (*lathi*), gymnastics, and a celebration of Bengali military heroes were encouraged.⁵ Daily training aimed to rejuvenate elite male Bengalis who formed its core participants. Daily routines were supposed to deliver them from their putatively weakened moral and physical constitution by cultivating physical capacity and pride in Bengali–Hindu identity, which—together—would foster protonationalist vitality.⁶

Religious piety became imbricated with physical training when “terrorist societies” emerged in the early 20th century with an aim to disrupt British colonial rule, especially after a partitioning of Bengal was attempted (in 1905). The societies’ regimen required enlistees to undertake twice-daily training in the use of bamboo staffs (*lathi* play). Similar to the “pure” habits the RSS would later endorse, volunteers were also required to observe religious vows of celibacy and abstain from smoking and alcoholic consumption. These ascetic injunctions drew from a Vedic notion of austerity, or *brahmacharya*, one that was especially meaningful for the societies’ upper-caste adherents whose religious beliefs were often anchored in Vedic texts.

Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, who would found the RSS, observed the methods of these Bengali societies and borrowed heavily from them in forming the RSS program for mass mobilization (Curran and Damodaran 1979).⁷ Under the influence of the views of Hindu reformists who came before him, which held that Muslims outpaced Hindus in their internal cohesion, Hedgewar diagnosed modern Hindus as a fallen community that was morally corrupt, culturally rootless and internally divided. He conceived the *shakha*, literally meaning “branch,” as the preeminent site through which to cultivate virtuous Hindus through moral and physical training. He hoped that a national celebration of Hindu mythology would be engendered and through it national unity and vitality.⁸ Within neighborhood-based branches, teachers would offer volunteers instruction in military drill, while also inculcating ethical habits of Hinduism (*samskars*). Volunteers were required to swear

allegiance to the RSS saffron-colored flag (*bhagwa dwaj*), and play “Indian games” to cement a fraternal bond between volunteers.⁹ Volunteers would also act as civic stewards in their neighborhoods by organizing Hindu festivals that were widely observed by most Hindus.¹⁰ A goal, at many levels, was to build unity.

The partitioning of British India (1946–47) and the prior presence of physical exercise programs at the grassroots level laid the ground for the extension of the RSS program throughout India. The violence between Hindus and Muslims during Partition afforded the RSS an opportunity to provide relief aid to Hindu victims, which, in turn, helped attract new recruits, especially in Gujarat, which is contiguous with Pakistan (Valiani n.d.). RSS “welfare and relief” activities for Hindus in Gujarat advanced its aim to expand and it continued in the postcolonial period. The RSS was often the first to offer aid to victims of natural disasters, for example, housing, and food relief for those Hindus who were displaced when the Morbi dam broke in 1979 (interview, Girish Patel, Ahmedabad, summer 2004).¹¹

As communal relations deteriorated during Partition, the RSS introduced its physical regimen as a means for Hindus to prepare their defenses against “aggressive Muslims.” Physical training was, however, not entirely new to Gujarat. At times, the RSS competed with forms of organized physical training that already existed within the Gandhian movement and within local wrestling arenas (*akhadas*) of the Gujarat Vyayam Pracharak Mandal (Gujarat Organization of Advocates for Physical Education; see Hardiman 1988; Valiani n.d.).

Although the RSS was banned for a year in 1948, after one of its former members (Nathuram Godse) assassinated Gandhi, branch meetings have seldom been curbed in postcolonial Gujarat, whether the state legislature was governed by the movement’s party (the BJP) or not (Bhattacharjea 1970; interview, Girish Patel, Ahmedabad, summer 2004).¹² Physical training tended to draw in curious Hindu males, affording them with an opportunity to learn and explore techniques of drill and weapon use (Valiani n.d.). Since the 1960s, especially, the physical program of the RSS has increasingly become part of morning routines that are practiced (or admiringly watched) by Hindu residents in middle- and lower-middle-class neighborhoods in Gujarati cities like Ahmedabad.¹³ Significantly, an increasing number of Gujarati males participated in branches in this period even if they later left the RSS, disagreed with the organization, or joined secular movements against the RSS. In the past three decades especially, branches have become key conduits for civic participation, leading in neighborhood improvement projects and resolution of minor disputes.¹⁴ The RSS grew considerably as a political and legal organization during this period, but becoming a regular branch volunteer continued

to center on physical training. However, the physical program did far more than channel volunteers toward projects of community “protection” and improvement. The physical routines that were enacted in branches were viewed as an ethical means to embody privileged upper-caste Hindu virtues of moral rectitude and self-mastery—especially when they were performed with virtuosity.

DRILL, SELF-MASTERY, AND ETHICS

I focus now on training sessions that took place in a shakha associated the World Hindu Council (Vishwa Hindu Parishad [VHP]) a prominent organization within the RSS.¹⁵ The branch consisted of 12 men, ages 13–30, plus the teacher (named Chetan), and it was situated in the all-Hindu locality of Rampuram in the city of Ahmedabad.¹⁶ Combat training was collectively performed by branch volunteers and formed a central part of the daily physical regimen.¹⁷ Specific exercises that made up this training session included military-style drill, in which volunteers learned and practiced the wielding of a bamboo staff (*lathi*) or a trident (*trishul*).¹⁸ Training was practiced on open grounds, for approximately an hour in the early morning. Volunteers performed the exercises barefoot.

A typical session began with “games,” of which *hututu* was very popular and enjoyed by all the volunteers. *Hututu* was a form of full-contact “tag” in which a single volunteer was “it” and chased by the remaining branch volunteers. Training with weapons followed game playing and involved learning a select maneuver that the teacher demonstrated. Becoming proficient in drill required volunteers to correlate the correct nomenclature of a given drill maneuver with specific body movements. It also required coordination of weapon manipulation, breathing, and the performance of symbolic rites associated with each exercise.

For example, the teacher demonstrated a simple strike maneuver with a bamboo staff, called *Puja Danda* [lit. stick prayer], by observing the following procedures: first, he stood directly in front of the staff, which was followed by the folding of his palms (as in prayer), after which he took the staff in his hands. He held the staff slightly less than a foot from its end, holding it directly in front of him at a 45-degree angle from the ground. He exhaled forcefully, raised the weapon above his head and then initiated lateral movement of his body by pivoting on one foot, forward then backward, each pivot completing a rough semicircle. This was done several times using alternate legs to build up his momentum and to claim space for the maneuver and its subject. Once in movement, he loudly called out “*puja danda*,” raised the staff and then brought it down as if to strike an opponent. The execution of the strike was broken into four parts: (1) raising the staff by

swinging one's arms over the head, (2) lowering of the elbows until they were in line with the chest, (3) lowering the forearms until the entire arm was extended, (4) completing the strike by exhaling. Each segment was counted aloud, "one, two, three, four [*ek, bey, thrun, char*]." Expressionless, the teacher quickly repeated the strike three times, bringing down and pointing the staff in a different direction each time by pivoting on his foot. Despite his movement, the staff was always accurately stopped in line with his knees. After the demonstration, the teacher put the volunteers into pairs, and asked them to practice the exercise. In almost all the pairs, the volunteers animatedly repeated the maneuver, pointed to their partners' knees, saying: "again . . . like Chetan did . . . stop the staff exactly in line with your knees [*pacho kero, jeritai Chetan kariyu, lathi tarat pagno sameh rako*]."

The teacher's demonstration rendered intelligible, with virtuosic flair, a complex physical operation involving movement and breathing. His smooth execution of the maneuver revealed a command of its various parts and a technical facility that was attributed to the teacher's physical self-mastery in general. Although Chetan's position as the most experienced volunteer certainly invested his demonstrations with pedagogical authority, the style in which he executed the movement was understood as an effect of possessing physical proficiency and an ability to deploy the forms of knowledge on which this proficiency depended. Therefore, practice was viewed as a vital part of a broader enterprise through which to cultivate physical mastery instead of only being concerned with learning the minutiae of drill routines. For younger volunteers, the teacher's physical displays were a resource with which to measure the unfolding of one's own physical capacities and mastery, as evinced by the practicing youths who urged their partners to emulate the teacher. To be sure, young volunteers focused on learning the technical aspects of particular maneuvers; however, the advancement of technical proficiency was not the only end, but, rather, a means toward attaining an encompassing perfection of the self. As such, the teacher's demonstrations moved beyond functioning only as a disciplinary force that was imposed on the volunteers. Instruction afforded inexperienced volunteers with an example of physical mastery that they could work toward.

Crucial to the physical dimension of self-mastery was its moral character. The teacher demonstrated the maneuver with an unmoved emotional disposition; there was no celebration or victorious fists in the air. Physical virtuosity was a sign of having embarked on a moral course of self-transformation; modesty was the appropriate disposition for training. In one instance, young volunteers trained together by practicing a specific maneuver at the end of which they hopped in the air

in celebration. The teacher gently reprimanded them and asked them to “practice in earnest [*mahavro aturtathi mukvu*].” This was followed by more practice but with a markedly somber tenor on behalf of the young volunteers. For branch volunteers, “correctly” performing physical techniques was predicated on a sincerity [*sachun*] toward learning them, which, in situ, meant that skill was pursued with a tenor of dispassion. The teacher’s demonstrations conveyed how cultivating his bodily capacities relied on the volunteer’s proper ethical orientation toward them.

Joseph Alter’s rich ethnography of physical conditioning among wrestlers (*pehelwans*) in north India makes a distinction between the physical routines that are enacted in wrestlers’ akhadas (gymnasia) and shakhas (Alter 1992, 1994b). Because RSS volunteers can be required to execute drill techniques in military formation, in tandem with the commands of the branch teacher, Alter argues that physical routines within branches are primarily intended to create discipline and obedience (1994b). “The point of RSS drill is to discipline through coordinated movement.” Alter says, “Individual physical fitness is ancillary to the power of obedience; it is only significant as it pertains to the collective strength of the group” (Alter 1994b:576). In contrast however, Alter describes the physical training of wrestlers as depending on individual interpretation of routines to produce the divine force (*shakti*) that drives the bodies of Hindu and Muslim *pahalwans*. The work of wrestlers begins with an ascetic orientation, encompassing celibacy and self-control, which produces a form of enlightenment that can impact social life (Alter 1994a, 1994b).

As I observed them, shakhas were settings for similar operations and meanings of drill, having a physical as well as a broader social and moral valence. For example, branch volunteers who are especially physically adept are often held in high regard by the community outside the shakha. In Chetan’s case, he was viewed as a moral figure by the residents of Rampuram because they recognized two dimensions of his character. Residents viewed his physical capabilities as the attainment of a sacred form of wisdom [*gyan*] while also recognizing the moral strength he commanded to train regularly every day. Such a commitment to daily training was indicative of an ascetic way of life that was view as exemplary for the community. Second, his somatic wisdom could also be put in “service [*seva*]” of the Hindu community, such that his physical expertise was seen as a means to solidarity with local Hindus.

One manifestation of Hindu solidarity that Chetan invoked were claims that his instruction could potentially cure ailments of lethargy and asthma, particularly among young boys (ages 10–15). Strikingly, parents who did not train in the branch often sent their children to the shakha in hopes that they would become more

physically active or at least better manage an ailment. Although such initiatives were always taken with Chetan's approval, they rested on collective recognition that his physical virtues could also be beneficially bestowed on community members and volunteers alike. Significantly, the techniques of drill training themselves were viewed by parents as a sanctioned physical practice for Hindus which produced shakti [in this case, energy] that had curative effects on individual volunteers, while also imparting them with "ethical habits [samskars]" that would serve them productively in their daily life. Other instances of Chetan's "service" to the community includes his leadership in preparing for local festivals, attending to the needs of families in emotional or socioeconomic distress, the sharing of contacts for employment or legal matters, and relief during natural disasters. Although Chetan attended to "real-world" needs of the residents, his capacity to do so were seen to emanate from his somatic-moral mastery. Thus, the full complement of his bodily movements, from drill to "social service," was an ethicophysical force that ameliorated the community as a whole.¹⁹

Alter also distinguishes between ways the training of wrestlers accommodates "inspired improvisation," whereas drill in branches does not encourage it (Alter 1994b:574). I concur with Alter (1994a) that drill performed at large—and public—training camps was indeed choreographed to spectacularly display the numbers, strict discipline and physical coordination of the RSS rank and file. My observations of everyday physical training within neighborhood shakhas, however, offers a different view of drill, in which physical conditioning was a markedly sober and meditative enterprise that lent itself to subtle modifications of the exercises by individual volunteers. As I describe in the next section, the introduction of variations of drill routines were self-directed elaborations of the physical regimen that animated the volunteers investment in physical conditioning and it was an extension of physical training that had little to do with the enforcement of discipline by branch teachers. Such technical innovations enriched the pursuit of attaining self-mastery because they creatively extended the physical-technical parameters of drill while also intensifying the focus required for training. Volunteers entered into such a zone of experimentation at a certain level of mastery and it was equated with a form of quiet deliberation [*dhyana*] that marked the volunteer's arrival onto a privileged moral plane.

CRITICISM, PHYSICAL TECHNIQUES, AND INNOVATION

RSS branch volunteers bring a critical sensibility to physical training that opens up a zone of self-exploration. Daily practice is driven by a critical evaluation of

one's technique, which results in technical experiments that aim to achieve rigor and precision. Self-scrutiny animates and sustains physical training. Such forms of innovation do not merely entail technical manipulation; they are understood to contribute to moral character. Physical training is, thus, much more than ideological indoctrination. Significantly, the emergence of experimental zones of practice is largely unintended because the modification of drill exercises are not instructed by the teacher, nor are part of the RSS rhetoric concerning physical training. The following case of supplementary training that one volunteer undertook illustrates how the exploratory dimension of training emerges out of the volunteer's scrutiny of daily practice.

Almost all of the more proficient volunteers from the branch that I worked with continued to train individually, usually after the meeting of the shakha ended. In these cases, it involved solitary training with weapons. In one instance, for example, one volunteer (named Ragu) had returned to the field with his personal lathi and proceeded to exercise alone. Within the branch, Ragu was considered to be a committed and "strong [*himant waro*]" volunteer that meant that his regular practice afforded him with an advanced aptitude for weapons maneuvers.²⁰ When I observed this instance of individual practice, he performed the same maneuver repeatedly. It was a variation on the maneuver Puja Danda that had not been part of the training regimen in the branch that day. As he practiced, he sweated profusely, performing the maneuver in regular intervals with an equal exhalation between each repetition. After several intervals he stopped, briefly looked at me, and then nodded to the ground in dismay. "I can't get it [*Authi nathi*]" he said. "What?" I asked. "Lathi!" he shouted in frustration, shaking the staff in the air. He returned to performing the same maneuver. After approximately ten more minutes of training he seemed satisfied. He stopped and began to walk toward his home, indicating that he finished his training.

As we walked together he explained: "I like to practice a little more everyday. It feels proper [*chokkas*] practicing Puja Danda in my own way and I do it over and over again until I am satisfied . . . at least for that day." As we continued to walk, he conveyed that when he practiced lathi it had to feel "comfortable" [*barabar*] before he stopped for the day and that usually meant training on his own after the branch session ended. Although it might appear that he was very capable wielding a lathi and was singled out as one of the most skilled volunteers, he had to feel in full possession of his body and of the weapon ["*maro pase che*"—lit. "with me"], he said. As a consequence of the extra training that he elected to undertake, the

exercise itself came to be altered. For Ragu, only continued supplementary training revealed what kinds of technical refinements were appropriate, he explained.

For many volunteers, the project of attaining self-mastery evolved from a critical sensibility that they brought to training. Instead of drill being a matter of mimicry or automata, the drive for technical precision forced the volunteer to subject his technique to scrutiny expose “error”; in turn, such critical evaluations necessitated corrections and modifications. This capacity for self-evaluation opened up a new—and crucial—course of training. Physical training evolved into a probing undertaking concerned with self-improvement based on technical improvisation.²¹ The kind of supplementary practice provoked was not a “private” forum through which the volunteer escaped the regimen of physical training (or the teacher’s disciplinary gaze). The exploratory dimension of physical conditioning depended crucially on methods of drill and disciplined practice as the means for elaborating new techniques of physical training. Indeed, this sphere of invention involved a kind of poetics of training in which the technical aspects of each maneuver that the teacher prescribed were the basis on which new experiments with physical routines were tested by volunteers—ultimately braiding together discipline, control, and creativity that removed the mundane repetitiveness from the regimen of daily training.

Although Alter describes a similar site of practice for wrestlers, the procedure described here is somewhat different because volunteers experimented alone, unlike Alter’s two wrestlers who developed moves on each other (1995). For Alter, the merits of executing a technique were judged according to its effects on the opposing wrestler’s body; however, the successful modification of a given drill technique was constituted differently for movement volunteers. For branch volunteers, the kind of improvisatory practice that I describe here was intended to produce rupture in a set series of actions. Such practices probed each element of a given maneuver, deliberately fracturing it, then introducing an unscripted gesture. The volunteer’s individual body, which, when in movement, revealed how an established repertoire of submoves was productively breached by minute redirections and adjustments. Thus, executing such modifications in an unbroken series was the metric by which to judge the conduct of technical innovation.

The innovation of drill does not consist of technical refinements alone, however. Being able to modify physical routines was understood to be connected to the volunteer’s attainment of a privileged level of moral enlightenment and virtue. At advanced levels of proficiency, it was expected that volunteers would summon the requisite self-discipline and sincerity toward physical training, and this was seen as

an ethical orientation. One of the key thresholds for novices to pass involved moving from a mode in which the volunteer consciously executed individual maneuvers separately (with a start–stop cadence) to one in which he embodied the techniques, moving fluidly through the exercises, seamlessly linking one to another, inserting inventions on specific parts or the entirety of particular maneuvers. This entailed, in one instance, the volunteer beginning with the Puja Danda maneuver but, after executing part of move number 2 (moving the staff downward with an intention to strike), the weapon was quickly leveled out horizontally (as if to block an incoming strike), followed by a swift body pivot under the staff and away from the sphere of combat. Crucially, both volunteers and onlookers viewed such refinements of lathi as the moral effect of the trainee’s entry into an immovable state of concentration and focus. The innovation of movements depended on entering into such a mode of deliberation [dhyana], as it was called. As such, technical modification of specific drill routines did not simply involve novel physical mutations by a particularly skilled volunteer. Instead, invention confirmed that the volunteer had passed over a symbolic threshold, demonstrating a deepening of his moral stakes in the craft.

In other words, the ease with which a maneuver was embellished, with spins, tumbles, pivots, and half moves, signified that the volunteer had morally worked himself over and become a consummate subject of self-mastery. He had submitted to all its ethical demands of asceticism and self-control. I now examine a second moral dimension of introducing innovations to drill, which involved the volunteer initiating an internal moral struggle between different parts of the self.

TECHNICAL VIRTUOSITY AND STRUGGLE

Although volunteers conceived physical techniques as a constituent part of training, cultivating an advanced aptitude for weapons maneuvers also depended on the volunteers’ interior moral struggle. The following testimony from a former branch volunteer suggests how self-mastery was dependent on the volunteer’s ethical orientation toward his advanced skills.

In the late 1960s, Ram was a volunteer in a branch that was run by the RSS. During sessions of physical practice, he excelled in the wielding of the trishul (sword), particularly when it was deployed in the context of staged combat. This normally involved two volunteers who had a comparatively advanced aptitude for lathi or swordplay that were selected by the teacher to engage in mock combat. During such bouts, the volunteers were required to employ the maneuvers that they had been taught in front of an audience of branch volunteers and onlooking neighbors. Because Ram was adept at manipulating weapons, he often ended

up “vanquishing” his partner, usually by deploying an adaptation of a specific maneuver or an unusually quick execution of two maneuvers that were combined together. Ram was proud of his successes and secretly commended himself for each victory even though volunteers were required to spar with an unmoved emotional disposition (even internally). Eventually, he became very confident in his combat skills and, feeling that he had little more to learn from the teacher, he stopped attending the shakha. He continued to train physically and, in the evenings, active branch volunteers sparred with him. Slowly he noticed that his physical skills began to deteriorate. He was unable to smoothly execute specific maneuvers as he had earlier and—more seriously—refine them through modification. As Ram put it, “the ethical habits [*samskars nu adat*]” he had painfully cultivated in the branch “had disappeared [*heylo gaya*].” In his distress, he went to the branch teacher for counsel. The teacher invited him to return to group practice in the branch.

Gradually, Ram’s physical aptitudes with swordplay returned. He explained that, unknowingly, daily training in the branch positioned himself as his most formidable adversary. Under the moral conditions that operated in the branch, he was pushed to become proficient at swordplay while keeping a keen eye on “the habits [*adat*]” of his training, specifically the sincerity he brought to the enterprise. Importantly, this necessarily involved a struggle between vanity and a disposition of humility, the latter of which had earlier come to be eclipsed by pride. The problem was that Ram’s “pride was on top of his will [*jiv, merzi upper hatu*].” Such forms of discipline were crucial particularly for highly skilled volunteers. The sincerity [*sachun*] that advanced volunteers brought to training is what gave the entire enterprise its ethical orientation. Thus, the more virtuosic the physical proficiency of the volunteer, the more important it was to “fight inside of oneself [*under ti laray jarur kerne*].”

The physical training described here was not an opportunity or conduit for unbridled display of physical power. The emphasis on internal combat points to the crucial role of self-vigilance in the project of attaining self-mastery. In the moral sphere of the branch, physical training engendered relational tensions within the self. In the case examined here, one between pride and will. Rather than be established at the outset, volunteers had to struggle with such internal tensions as a constituent part of physical training. Daily conditioning fostered and deepened the commitment toward sincerely practicing physical techniques by requiring volunteers to consistently align their physical capacities with ethical ones. As part of attaining self-mastery, then, advanced volunteers had to foster the capacity to continually diagnose immodest and self-serving inclinations resident in

the self. Physical competency could only manifest itself when their ethical approach toward training was properly oriented.

VIOLENT PROPENSITIES AND ETHNIC CLEANSING

Physical forms of self-mastery that affirm volunteers' moral standing as Hindus have contributed to the ethnic cleansing of Gujarati minorities (particularly Muslims) at specific moments in postcolonial Gujarati history. Rather than repeat the analysis in which Hindu Nationalist leaders are said to have carefully planned the violence (which is undeniable; Brass 2003), what merits our attention here is the manner in which daily drill nurtures aptitudes for experimenting with violence, innovating its tactics in manners that are unforeseen.

In 2002, over 2000 Muslims were killed in carefully planned attacks by the VHP and the *Bajrang Dal* (Concerned Citizens Tribunal 2002). The state was governed by the BJP in 2002, and BJP representatives brazenly justified and abetted the violence (Human Rights Watch 2002).

The state of Gujarat had also endorsed attacks on Muslims in 1969. Then, too, the police watched idly as the RSS unfolded its violent program.²² It is productive to review aspects of the events of both 1969 and 2002 because testimonies from victims and perpetrators confirm that the violence reached a ferocious pitch because volunteers from the RSS carried out improvisatory attacks on Muslims (Concerned Citizens Tribunal 2002; *Times of India* 1969a). My own direct observations of the violence in 2002 confirm its experimental nature.

The violence in 1969 was precipitated by a scuffle between Hindus and Muslims during which idols that sat in a Hindu temple were broken. The event catalyzed the strategic circulation of rumors by RSS leaders in which it was suggested Hindus were going to be put "under siege by Muslims."²³ Several days of targeted killings of Muslims and the destruction of property owned by members of the community followed. Although the targets were carefully surveyed and attacked, the volunteers devised unexpected lines of assault to continue and fully carry out the violence. In one conflict between the police and RSS volunteers, the latter refused to stand down when the federal government compelled the (state) police to open fire (*Times of India* 1969b). When the police and fire brigade began to respond to calls for help, the volunteers erected blockades to prevent them from reaching Muslim residences that required assistance (*Times of India* 1969a). In another instance, a full curfew had been imposed after the army was allowed to fully deploy in the city. When a degree of order returned to the city, the curfew was temporarily lifted to allow residents to emerge and purchase food. Volunteers seized the moment and attacked Muslims

just after the curfew was lifted (*Times of India* 1969a). Although the pogrom was unquestioningly planned by various senior figures within the RSS and the Jan Sangh (an earlier incarnation of the BJP), the tactics that the volunteers evolved were not designed by senior RSS and Jan Sangh leaders, nor did they continue to be welcome when they wanted to later end the siege (Bhattacharjea 1970; Reddy et al. 1970). What was supposed to be a tightly coordinated pogrom turned into a simmering and prolonged conflict.

Ram, introduced above, was a participant in the violence of 1969. He explained how “people from Jan Sangh” (an earlier incarnation of the BJP) had called on the volunteers of his branch to “defend Hindus” from the “premeditated” attack on the temple by Muslims. The impetus to act immediately was also shaped by an adhoc public meeting, organized by the “Committee Defending the Hindu Religion,” in which rumors that Muslims (who numerically dominated a nearby municipal ward) were “already” marching toward Ram’s neighborhood “to kill and rape Hindus.” Rumors and “community meetings” projected Muslims as they had been cast in the “learning sessions” of the shakhas: Muslims had desecrated a Hindu social space (the temple) and had “already” organized into an attacking force. As such, violence against them was ideologically cast as a corrective to Muslim aggressions in the past and in the present, which subdued (or “Indianized”) them while also being justified as a defensive act (Reddy et al. 1970: III, p. 27). Although these ideological framings of the 1969 events suggest how the violence was understood—at least before the macabre killings began—testimony from perpetrators reveals that the evolving nature of the drill routines of the shakha also shaped and sustained the use of lethal force. I stress this here because I argue at the outset that volunteers’ narratives about “Muslim crimes” do not, on their own, explain the intensity and shape of the violent acts.

Ram explained that senior RSS leaders had prepared them for engaging in a “limited” attack on known Muslim shops and homes around Raipur Gate. Although various companies of RSS volunteers were “ready” to attack specific targets, the volunteers of Ram’s shakha extended their assigned assault into the night—something he did not anticipate. The violence was prolonged, he explained, because it depended on his physical capacities, which he was unable “to use simply,” as “an animal who was charged with the carrying of a burden.” Wielding the trishul was an “onerous undertaking [*motu kam*]” that required “a full commission of the enterprise [*akhi prayog*], like in the *shakha*.” Here Ram referred to the temporal and moral sphere of daily physical training that permitted volunteers to elaborate their techniques while also, perhaps perversely, invoking a Gujarati proverb that identifies the reflexive

capacity of a person as that which differentiates humans from animals. He could not divorce the reflexive component of bodily training, which initiated physical improvisation, from the execution of drill techniques during the attack.

Confirming the magnitude and gratuitousness of the violence in 1969, sociologist Ghanshyam Shah observed that the killings constituted “an orgy of violence” that included performances of death rituals on victims (Shah 1970:195). Physical training fostered creative aptitudes for violence that it helped volunteers innovate forms and strategies for the use of force. Such strategies enabled the volunteers to confront obstructions that were erected by the state. Volunteers redeployed their physical capacities to catalyze new phases of violence, extending it and making it more savage. Senior RSS leaders, who were anxious to end the violence as it spiraled out of control, confronted the volunteers of Ram’s shakha personally in the middle of the night. In a feeble—and ineffectual—invocation of the meanings of physical training, the leaders accused Ram of “losing control when self-control was the virtue that volunteers were known for.” Although the branches were indeed a convenient force that party officials believed that they could call on for their own ends, they underestimated aptitudes for violence created by them, which resulted in an expectedly long episode of ethnic cleansing.

The following example from the attacks of 2002 is equally instructive. The violence of 2002 was precipitated in late February when a train returning from Ayodhya, which was carrying VHP volunteers, was attacked by Muslims in the Gujarati town of Godhra. The event sounded off an intense four-month episode of attacks on Muslims of Gujarat, which the BJP-governed state had carefully planned (Concerned Citizens Tribunal 2002). Sporadic violence continued for several months afterward, involving itinerant mobs destroying property and attacking Muslims in Ahmedabad, something that went against the desires of BJP officials who aimed to quickly hold assembly elections after August within a communally polarized state that they hoped would reelect them (Human Rights Watch 2002). According to an informant within the state, BJP leaders commandeered the violence from a “control room” at the onset of the violence but were having trouble “turning it off” by July 2002.

I observed an instance of these mobs at a BJP rally in the Keshavnagar neighborhood that was near Rampuram. A stage had been set at one end of an open field for the Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, to give a speech. Slowly crowds gathered to hear him speak. I was purchasing groceries from a nearby shop and I noticed the crowd on the field. I also spotted Chetan and Ragu in addition to other volunteers of the shakha on the grounds. As people from the local commercial strip joined

the gathering crowds, various media buses drove onto the field to report on the event. The crowd cheered for the bus of the Gujarati television network (ETV) and booed when the bus of NDTV approached. (NDTV was then a Hindi–English television network that was viewed in Gujarat as “secular,” meaning that it likely employed Muslims and therefore was biased toward them. For many Hindus, the anti-Gujarati posture of NDTV was confirmed when the network broadcast evidence of the state’s role in the violence and the extent of the destruction that Muslims faced in 2002.) Chetan and the volunteers moved toward the NDTV bus and took out modified lathis and pikes as they ran toward it. When they reached the vehicle, they began to smash its metal side. Their strikes involved arced movements of their arms, identical to the maneuver Puja Danda. BJP officials looked on unmoved; in light of the continued violence of the city and the attendance of shakha volunteers, this was an intended outcome (of a certain magnitude, I would later learn).

The violence intensified as the volunteers modified their strikes against the bus, breaking windows in such a way that the glass was turned into sharp projectiles that were launched into the cabin of the bus; its occupants began to scream. The bus itself was no longer the only target, the volunteers had refocused their attack on its occupants, something that prompted the BJP officials on the stage to panic and hurriedly send over a party worker. I approached the bus and arrived at the same time that the party worker did. He pleaded with the volunteers to stop, admonishing them by saying that their attack on the occupants would prevent the holding of the elections [*chutni neih aushe, poori kam kariya, bas*—there won’t be an election, you’ve finished the job, stop, it’s enough]. Because maintaining relative peace in the city was crucial to earning a mandate to hold elections from the federal Election Commission, the exacerbation of the attack was the worst kind of development for the BJP.

When I later met with Ragu and the volunteers, I asked them about the incident. Ragu explained that a man from “bajap” [the BJP] had informed him of the meeting and that the “pro-Muslim” press (i.e., NDTV) would be there. The volunteers were asked to damage their vehicles and verbally assault them but not harm anyone. They went to the rally intending to vandalize the vehicles and he expected that the most basic deployment of his skills would probably suffice. But when he was “breaking the bus,” he felt that he was “not doing anything at all.” “I felt that I had to break the whole bus including the people inside,” he said, explaining that he was a master [*sharahn*] of lathi and that his physical skills had to always

be employed “in the way he worked on them.” They had to be “opened up [*kooli kariyu*]” so that he “could enlarge the sweep of the instrument [the lathi].”

This testimony revealed how volunteers’ aptitudes for experimenting with violence in the shakhas could not be simply arrested when it was deployed in other domains. As a continuation of their mastery, *swayamsevak*s like Ragu extended their violent task, experimenting with techniques of delivering force. Ragu himself, for example, described the discovery of a more efficacious technique to employ his lathi. Such efficacies were tested on the bodies of living targets that—all the more vividly—reflected the outcomes of the volunteers’ extemporization with force.

In these examples, we learn how Hindu perpetrators of communal violence perceived their actions and the bodies of victims, the latter serving as surfaces on which to craft gestures of physical force. The effects of such actions (i.e., bodily injuries), and the techniques by which they were achieved, were read by the volunteers as indexical of their physical–moral mastery. Although the NDTV network and its employees were vilified as “anti-Gujarati” and “pro-Muslim,” the direction, form, and intensity of the violence made reference to a more extended project in which moral selves were cultivated by refining one’s capacities for force. Hate speech had a role, as anthropologists of violence have previously established (Aretxaga 2003; Daniel 1994; Denich 1994; Nelson 1999; Taylor 1997), but the violence should also be understood as an effect of a mode of subject formation animated by ethically oriented and validated use of force. Violence against Muslims was driven by orientations and practices that were internal to routine physical training sessions as much by hate, fear, and explicit incitement by movement leaders.

CONCLUSION

Hindu nationalist physical training involves modes of praxis through which moral subjects capable of creative and intense violence are formed. Rather than being routines that are mechanically performed in conformity with a nationalist ideology, physical training involves a critical sensibility that transforms it into an evolving enterprise. Conceived as a project of moral and physical self-mastery—rather than one concerning imitation or blindly conforming to religious norms—volunteers constantly analyze the performance of drill techniques, refining and improving them on a daily basis within a zone of exploration. Such self-experimentation—and especially the probing manner in which it is pursued—demonstrates a deepening of moral fortitude and do not merely represent physical manipulation of drill. Crucially, branch volunteers view technical mastery and invention as exemplary only if accompanied by observances of modesty. To secure the moral moorings of

training, volunteers must maintain a disposition of humility and advanced volunteers must engage in a continued internal struggle to remain sincere to the enterprise of training.

In contemporary Gujarat, such physical–moral capacities have been generative of orientations that have proven “useful” in acts of ethnic cleansing. Volunteers are not only especially effective in executing anti-minority pogroms. They are also able to work creatively and collectively to invent new forms of force. Physical training generates intimate relationships between volunteers and force, enabling them to direct and reshape ethically validated force, ultimately, in acts of genocide.

Admittedly, RSS branches have been called into service during electoral periods. But the instrumentalities and rhetoric of political parties should not be seen as the sole force producing violent subjects. The intertwined moral and corporeal dynamics that have enabled branches to thrive must also be recognized. This essay demonstrates how the evolution of physical training extends far beyond narrow electoral objectives. The moral force of religion alone cannot be said to sustain physical training either, because it uncritically assumes that the subjects of such discourses embrace the practices it prescribes as automatons governed by blind faith in ritual precepts. Such an assumption denies the reflexive capacities of the involved subjects, ones that I have illustrated here as being vital to the pursuit of physical–moral mastery.

Are the forms of training enacted within RSS branches something that may disappear with the waning of the electoral fortunes of the BJP? I think not, and so physical conditioning and the arenas in which they are enacted call for continued study. In India, as the BJP and RSS struggle to rebuild their fading popularity, the shakha’s physical training programs continue—and are now seen as a model by the rival Congress Party (*Times of India* 2003). In Gujarat, certain Congress leaders have called for the organization of local physical training to build their own bases of popular support within the state.

Anthropological investigations of physical training as a form of ethical practice can extend ongoing and ever important studies of the way violence is produced and plays out. Physical training is not, of course, always productive of violent subjects. Physical training does, however, always travel beyond the actual space of training, literally shaping subjects, who move in the world conditioned by their training. Habit, skill and affective (if not expressly ethical) investment come together in physical training in ways that stage what subjects are capable of, and see as possible, appropriate, necessary and even virtuous. The connection between physical training and violence is, thus, underdetermined, but rich with potential.

ABSTRACT

This essay advances understanding of how projects of self-mastery within neighborhood physical training programs associated with the Hindu Nationalist Movement produce subjects that are simultaneously ethically oriented and creatively violent. Such an analysis is contrasted with the conventional view that Hindu Nationalist volunteers are mere objects who blindly conform to a nationalist ideology or religious norms. Drawing on the author's participant observation of physical conditioning within the movement, the essay illustrates how combat training depends on an analytical sensibility by which techniques of drill are simultaneously learned and innovated by volunteers in a disciplinary zone of self-experimentation. Within such a zone, volunteers modify drill routines, enriching and refining them on an everyday basis. Thus, the evolution of physical techniques transforms training into an unfolding enterprise that is continually oriented toward attaining physical and moral self-mastery through the probing of bodily exercises. The essay underscores the social significance of such forms of physical self-exploration, in which movement volunteers understand the iterative probing of physical practice as driven by a resolve that deepens the volunteer's moral fortitude. The essay illuminates how a set of physical and moral processes are intertwined, processes through which militant subjects are culturally formed and routines of violence are sustained as a social and ethical practice. Physical training is connected to anti-Muslim pogroms in postcolonial Gujarat demonstrating how the evolving nature of physical training shapes, prolongs, and enables the improvisation of tactics of ethnic cleansing.

Keywords: Hindu nationalism, communal violence, religion, ethics, physical training.

NOTES

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1. In specific instances, volunteers have attacked minorities in manners that movement leaders carefully planned out, usually before election periods, thus polarizing the electorate along religious grounds, to the party's benefit (Bhattacharjea 1970; Shah 1970).
2. In part, scholars have not been able to study daily physical training at length because branches are often elusive sites that are not regularly open to participant observation.
3. Bacchetta (2004) and Sarkar and Butalia (1995) suggest a similar point by concentrating on everyday activities of female volunteers within the movement (belonging to the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti [National Women Volunteers Committee]).
4. Given the complexity of and secrecy within the movement, the reader should note this essay is not an exhaustive study of the movement. For a rich historical review, see Christophe Jaffrelot's *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India* (1996). The reader should also note that I may not describe every concept that has been associated with the movement, namely because

this essay cannot detail a complex network of organizations that I gloss as “the movement.” I draw on observations that are, largely, situated outside the RSS offices in Nagpur, Pune, and Ahmedabad although I visited some of these places also. Therefore, I may not rehearse the rhetoric of Hinduness (*Hindutva*) or the importance of constructing Ram temple in Ayodhya, north India, which have been related to shakhas and have continued importance for the electoral project of the BJP. This has been amply studied (Andersen and Damle 1987; Bacchetta 2004; Basu et al. 1993; Brass 1997, 2003; Curran and Damodaran 1979; Engineer 1984; Jaffrelot 1996; Sarkar 1993) and not only requires little added revision, but departs from the uses to which daily training in the branch is put, as I observed it.

5. Such a celebratory approach to history was built on a popular form of historical revisionism in which Hindu mythology was interwoven with modern understandings of nationalist Indian history.
6. In one case at the time, the leader (Nabagopal Mitra) of one wrestling gymnasium (*akhada*) claimed that his efforts reappropriated the centuries-old institution of wrestling from lower-caste Hindus and Muslims who dominated it at the time (Rosselli 1980). Both the absence of training in gymnasia among privileged Bengali males, and it becoming an institution that came into the hands of lower-caste Hindus and Muslims, was understood by figures like Mitra as the consequence of Indian males being tempted by material security and education that the British introduced, thus causing upper-caste Bengalis to abandon gymnasia. Joseph Alter’s (1992) rich ethnographic survey of Benarsi akhadas suggests a more complex genealogy in which akhada-based wrestling was a martial art practiced by various higher and lower castes of Hindus as well as Muslims of various social strata.
7. Hedgewar was not alone in embracing physical training. The utility of various techniques of physical training was gradually being realized among a range of Indian movements from Mohandas Gandhi’s militant nonviolent movement to openly violent Hindu protection organizations (Hindu Mahasabha), particularly after World War I (Valiani n.d.).
8. Hedgewar and Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (1940–73) were the first two “supreme leaders” (*sarsangchalak*) of the RSS who introduced and then elaborated, respectively, the moral uses to which physical training ought to be put.
9. Perhaps ironically, flag hoisting and the RSS uniform (khaki shorts) were adopted from the colonial police (Sirsikar 1988). In recognition for the renunciation of teachers who were unmarried and committed to organizing for the RSS on a full-time basis, volunteers collected monetary collections during the *Guru Dakshina* festival. These proceeds would support the teacher and, ultimately, fund the movement itself.
10. These six festivals observe the Hindu new year (*Varsha Pratipada*); the coronation anniversary of the Maharashtrian king Shivaji (*Hindu Samrajya Divas* or *Shivajirajyaroohanastava*); *Dussehra* (or *Vijay Dashami*), which celebrates Ram’s mythical victory over Ravana (narrated in the epic, the Ramayan) through the worship of weapons; and *Makarsankranti*, normally a kite festival, which the movement interprets as a simultaneous act that confirms the existence of nationalist sentiment throughout India. *Raksha Bandhan* is also observed widely during which female adolescents tie a ribbon on the wrists of males whom they recognize as a sibling (and therefore as a protector). Within the movement, the festival is an opportunity to recognize the need to sacrifice one’s life to protect Hindus. Last, *Guru Dakshina* (or *Vyas Puja*) involves collecting funds for branch teachers.
11. Curiously, the RSS did not participate openly in anti-British agitations in early 20th-century Gujarat as did the more well-known Congress party of which Gandhi became the figurehead. Prior to the early 20th century, organizations like the Arya Samaj prepared the field in which the RSS and Congress mobilized its ranks through social reform and religious education (Hardiman 1981).
12. At the federal level, the growth of *shakhas* and RSS activities have been the subject of government monitoring, engagement, and some forms of regulation. Although India’s first prime minister remained convinced that the organization was fascist, the architect of Gandhi’s nonviolent movement, Vallabhbhai Patel, endorsed the RSS discipline and patriotism. Moreover, he negotiated with jailed RSS leaders, urging them to adopt a written constitution (Golwalkar 1969; Jaffrelot 1996).

13. The RSS continued to expand also by contributing to mass agitations against “state authoritarianism and corruption” (in 1958, 1974, and 1987).
14. The movement has grown tremendously since its inception with 40,000 volunteers in 1938 and, according an RSS spokesperson, 100,000 by 1940 (Basu et al. 1993:24; Curran and Damodaran 1979:14). A Government of India report, published in 1981, estimated that one million regular volunteers participate in the RSS with financial contributions from them totaling Rs10 million annually (see Basu et al. 1993:53). Bacchetta counts, in 1994, 2.5 million volunteers in the RSS alone (2004:95). My attempts to inquire into the numbers of volunteers in movement in Gujarat were unsuccessful because senior movement leaders were very secretive about organizational matters. Although these figures may be somewhat useful, they are unreliable because the movement does not publish a census of its active volunteers, something that is always fluctuating. Moreover their analytical purchase for an examination of the physical–ethical practices of training, such as this one, proves to be limited.
15. The following four organizations form the more visible parts of “the family” of institutional entities of the Hindu Nationalist Movement, also called the *Sangh Parivar*. They include the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bajrang Dal, and the Bharitiya Janata Party (BJP); all of which are steered by the movement’s founding organization, the RSS. The VHP concerns itself with “cultural” activism (and protection) around “public representations of Hinduism,” the Bajrang Dal “organizes the Hindu community’s defense,” the BJP is the electoral party of the movement, and the RSS is a “cultural organization” in charge of nationalist regeneration “one volunteer at a time” (interviews, June 1999 and June 2003). Despite these claims to distinct sphere of activity, I found that the domains overlapped despite the rhetoric offered by volunteers, “pracharaks” (full-time, salaried organizers), in the RSS, VHP, Bajrang Dal, and politicians of the BJP.
16. All names that identify persons or neighborhoods have been changed to keep the identities of the branch volunteers anonymous.
17. Calisthenics were also incorporated into the routines of daily branch sessions, often at the very end of the physical portion of the meeting just before “lessons and instruction” began (described at the outset).
18. The symbolism behind these instruments should be noted. Swords emulate the weapon carried by Lord Shiva, the god of destruction. Bamboo staffs were carried historically by rural police (*lathials*) and although it became a weapon of the colonial police, it retains an association with akhadas also. Weapons used in branches are cared for by teachers who, in the case of the branch I trained in, stored them in his residence.
19. Another point of divergence between wrestling and shakhas involved the more elaborate health regime to which wrestler’s adhered (Alter 1992, 1994b, 1995). Branch volunteers did not conform to the strict diet of the wrestler (milk, ghee, and almonds). Also, the issue of balancing semen within the body was less pronounced in contrast to the wrestlers Alter discusses.
20. Among all of the volunteers and the teacher, there existed a common understanding of whom was “fast” and whom was “coming along [*ave che*]” (the latter of which was a euphemism often encouragingly applied to myself because of my poor physical skills).
21. In using the term *unforeseen*, I am drawing the reader’s attention to the manner in which exploratory practice evolved out of the disciplinary routines that were initially practiced within the confines of the branch.
22. Further state sponsorship manifested itself when the state administration limited the deployment of the army, which was sent in by the federal government to subdue the violence, thus abetting more attacks in localities in which the army was absent.
23. Here, I acknowledge the seminal work of Veena Das (1998) in which she aptly observed the manner in which perpetrators of violence experience their own acts as if they were the victims. Although she observed this in the context of the 1984 attack against Sikhs in New Delhi, this is a characteristic of the manner in which narratives of violence are organized in Gujarat also. Here also, I recognize the possible voyeuristic character of descriptions of violence. Therefore, I strive to include parsimonious descriptions of violence that are sufficient enough to sharpen my point concerning the relationship between physical training and ethnic cleansing.

Editors Note: Cultural Anthropology has published other essays on Hindus and ethics; see, for example, Erica Bornstein (2009), "The Impulse of Philanthropy," Deepa S. Reddy's (2007) "Good Gifts for the Common Good: Blood and Bioethics in the Market of Genetic Research," and Andrew Willford's (2006) essay "The "Already Surmounted" yet "Secretly Familiar": Malaysian Identity as Symptom."

Cultural Anthropology has also published a number of essays on the embodiment of ethics more broadly; see in particular Saba Mahmood's (2001) "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," and Brian Silverstein's (2008) "Disciplines of Presence in Modern Turkey."

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