

Bulging biceps in urban India



Recent Indian economic growth has brought with it new and highly globalized ideas about the ‘ideal’ male body. The dramatic increase in visibility of men with lean, muscular bodies in public spaces (billboards) and popular media (Bollywood, lifestyle magazines) indicates that the physical appearance of the male body is increasingly imagined to be an indicator, and facilitator, of socio-economic success. As a result, the number of gyms specifically targeting the Indian middle class has grown dramatically. Building on ethnographic fieldwork this article investigates the background of these developments.

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ONE OF THE BIGGEST Bollywood box-office hits of 2016 was the movie *Dangal*, a biographical sports film that focuses on competitive wrestling in India. The movie stars Aamir Khan who plays a wrestler who was forced to give up the sport at an early age, but who decides to transform his eldest two daughters into wrestling champions. While the movie received considerable mainstream media attention for its genuinely positive message, equally if not more so did various media zoom in on Aamir Khan’s remarkable bodily transformation for the movie. Khan gained 28 kilos in five months so as to convincingly play the ageing and somewhat overweight main character Mahavir Singh Phogat; he then

managed to transform himself again, emerging with a six-pack to play the younger version of his character. A fit and slim man before the movie, Aamir Khan could have played the young and muscular character first, followed by the older and heavier one, but decided to do it the other way around instead. A YouTube video detailing the transformation has been viewed close to seventeen million times and has been widely discussed in Indian media.¹ It is of course no coincidence that a video in which Aamir Khan, the director of the movie and others involved are seen discussing bodily transformations, was made. Increasingly Bollywood not only relies on highly specific scenes which allow the lead actor to show off his

muscular body, the transformation required for such a body is strategically made a part of the concomitant marketing campaign for the movie as well.

How can we interpret the emergence of a new lean, muscular bodily ideal in popular media (Bollywood movies, TV series and advertisements) as well as in public spaces (e.g., billboards and on the cover of magazines) in urban India? It is this striking visibility that takes up a particularly prominent place in my research. *How are such bodies consumed, what function do they have and what kind of meaning do people attribute to them?* In order to find answers to such questions I conducted extensive fieldwork in Delhi, where I participated in a small neighborhood gym, while also conducting interviews with various people involved in the fitness industry across urban India.

New middle class professionals

The main focus in my research is on fitness (or personal) trainers, a professional category that has emerged out of economic growth in the last decade or so and which mainly attracts young men with lower middle class backgrounds. The profession of fitness trainer therefore needs to be understood within the context of related professions, such as coffee baristas (for instance working at Starbucks) and those employed in high-end shopping malls. Such professions generally require highly specific, on-the-job training and/or the enrolment in diploma courses at commercially-run training institutes. For instance, fitness trainers are known to complete various certification courses (on workout routines, dietary advice and even physiotherapy) through so-called academies that are professionally run by leading fitness and sports brands. In general, such new professions are characterized

Above: Murali Vijayakumar ('Biglee') training a client.

A middle class goes to the gym

by direct interaction with clients who generally hail from 'higher' middle class backgrounds. Besides providing new avenues for making money, opportunities for social mobility and aspiring middle-classness have also been important factors in these professions' popularity in recent years.

For fitness trainers it is of course their own bodies that play a crucial role in securing a job with a popular gym and/or recruiting clients for personal training. However, having an 'ideal type' body alone – to draw from Weberian topology – was decidedly not enough to be successful in the Indian fitness industry I found. Equally if not more important was the way a trainer was successfully able to bridge the ostensible gap in middle-classness. Dealing with clients hailing from the upper middle classes, trainers would often explain that besides keeping their bodies in excellent shape they would also work on their English language capacities and try to learn as much as they could about their clients' lives and lifestyles. Interactions with clients revealed that they did not only look for a trainer whose body resonated with those idealized and glorified in Bollywood movies, but were also looking for those who could effectively 'communicate' about their bodies in terms of workout routines, dietary regimes and otherwise.

Meeting on an almost daily basis, conversations between trainers and clients would naturally focus on how to 'improve' one's body, but also often took on a more personal nature. Trainers told me that clients frequently share aspects of their lives that they might not 'ordinarily' share with strangers. While I have observed this to be the case in gyms in the Western world and East Asia as well, what is remarkable in the case of urban India is that the distance in terms of education, income and social standing between trainer and client is generally much greater than in these other locations. Here it is also revealing how the body itself is 'layered' with various meanings in terms of class and socioeconomic positions in the Indian urban context. A closer analysis of the framing of ideal type male bodies in Bollywood, as well as in the Indian edition of *Men's Health* magazine, is helpful here.

Bollywood and Men's Health

Although it seems as if every Bollywood movie these days comes with a number of specific scenes that allow the male hero to flaunt his 'ripped' body, the industry's incorporation of such specific scenes is actually a rather recent phenomenon. In discussions about the spectacular growth of the fitness industry in recent years, most stakeholders I met agreed that this can be traced back to the blockbuster movie *Om Shanti Om* (2007). This movie was the first mainstream one to carve out a specific scene designed for its lead star (Sharukh Khan) to show off his six-pack abs. While actor Salman Khan had frequently flaunted his muscular physique in various hit movies before – most notably *Pyaar Kiya To Darna Kya* (1998) – in the case of *Om Shanti Om* the subsequent (media) attention was particularly focused on the actor's transformation itself. The lean, muscular body he displayed in this movie would become a standard for many actors to follow. Perhaps even more influential, however, was the Bollywood remake of the Tamil action movie *Ghajini* (2008),² which trainers often reference as a turning point in terms of what young Indians would imagine capable for their bodies. Similar to the earlier mentioned movie *Dangal*, lead actor Aamir Khan's bodily transformation from 'boy next door' in *Taare Zameen Par* (2007)³ to aggressively muscular in *Ghajini* is generally accepted as one of the reasons the fitness industry would grow so rapidly in the years afterwards.

The year in which *Om Shanti Om* was released also saw the successful launch of the Indian edition of *Men's Health* magazine, which was the first magazine of its kind in India. Available at virtually every newspaper stand in the country, it is now part of a growing group of health and lifestyle oriented magazines specifically targeting English-speaking Indian middle class men. Although it occasionally features Bollywood stars on its cover, it continues to predominantly make use of 'amateur models' whose day job is usually in the field of fitness training. An interview with the magazine's editorial director revealed that on recruitment days prospective models show up in large numbers, even requiring the presence of security personnel to keep numbers in check. This is all the more surprising considering that the magazine does not pay its cover models. Instead it assumes that these men see it as an honor and even a specific ambition to feature on its cover; indeed a reason I regularly heard repeated in interactions with trainers and clients. Moreover, trainers imagined that having featured on the cover of said magazine would augment their profile as trainers and thus also attract higher paying clients.

Browsing through a random edition of *Men's Health* reveals that the way the magazine frames ideal type male bodies is not just in terms of desirability with reference to aesthetics and associated masculinity. While sexual attractiveness definitely is an element in this, even more important seems to be the way such bodies are textually linked to notions of socio-economic success, cosmopolitanism and even professionalism. Frequent reference is made to how the modern Indian man is faced with an avalanche of (often unhealthy)

food and lifestyle options, how managerial positions require a fit body not just in order to improve performance, but also for effective communications with staff and clients, and the way such a body resonates with a cosmopolitan attitude, one that is in tune with the demands of modern life. It is not hard to see how this then also contrasts with the way a 'healthy potbelly' used to signify wealth and prosperity among those belonging to the Indian middle classes, whereby veininess and lean muscularity was mainly associated with labor class professions, concomitant low incomes and the struggle 'to get by'. A more recent development, whereby gyms targeting the affluent middle classes are organized in the open air and – building on functional training routines – make use of alternative equipment such as car tires (to be lifted up and rolled over) and heavy ropes (to be pulled or swung), is particularly ironic here. However, it also underlines how thinking about the male body has undergone a considerable transformation itself.

When I recently observed an evening session of an 'outdoor' gym, in an up and coming middle class neighborhood in Mumbai, I couldn't help but marvel at how the workout routines away from air-con and comfort nevertheless clearly attracted highly-educated English speaking professionals employed in nearby office towers during the day. I have known the trainer who started this gym for close to seven years now and have observed him develop his training as well as English language skills over time. He initially trained clients in a low-end gym where he himself worked out, but later he started to train 'hi-fi clients', as he would put it himself, in much more upmarket gyms, in areas such as Bandra West and Santacruz East. Diligently maintaining his own lean muscular physique, he is now his own poster boy, adorning the van that he uses to carry equipment across town as well as the banners he uses to advertise his services in strategic locations. Hailing from a typical labor class family he initially learned most of his workout routines from observing others in the gym as well as trial-and-error where it concerned his own body. The realization that clients preferred an English speaking trainer, even if they could also communicate with him in Marathi or Hindi, made him decide to work on his communication skills; he gradually improved his English by enrolling in courses at language institutes across town as well as by conversing with his clients. As a result he was also able to tap into a greater source of information on fitness and diets online. By regularly posting updates on his own bodily progress as well as that of his clients, Facebook and Instagram have become instrumental to his business success.

The new Indian male

The role of recent economic growth could be underestimated in the developments described above. While a concomitant increase in food consumption has led to various health concerns such as obesity and diabetes, rising middle class

Below: Even the Hindu Gods have become more muscular lately.



salaries also make fitness training, dietary advice and related services more accessible. Yet the way a particular ideal type body is produced and reproduced in the gym cannot simply be attributed to increased spending power, consumerism or health concerns. Its production process, for which trainers themselves often employ lingo such as 'making the body work like a machine', 'burning off fat' and 'building muscles of steel', stands in direct relationship to societal developments, demands and concerns. It is this interplay of factors that ultimately also layers the way in which, what I have come to term, the 'new Indian male' body is interpreted and understood.

Here it is important to understand the way the above-mentioned production process relates to the way such bodies are (re)produced within the gym, as well as outside. While TV screens mounted on gym walls generally show Bollywood video clips on repeat featuring hero and/or heroine involved in complex dance routines, the very physical presence of trainers within the gym creates the impression or illusion that such bodies are actually within reach. Leaving aside how successful most clients are in their endeavor to meet particular ideals, what is ultimately the most important here is what the lean muscular body is imagined to facilitate within the context of belonging to the Indian middle classes. The gym here represents a coming together of those who are held to belong to different segments of this ever-expanding middle class. The upward social mobility that trainers envision, and in which their bodily accomplishments are a crucial ingredient, is one that relies heavily on their interaction with clients and the way they are able to guide them in their process of bodily transformation. For the clients themselves, upward mobility is envisioned through what a lean muscular body is imagined to stand for. While 'simple' attractiveness is an undeniable factor here, as an analysis of *Men's Health* magazine reveals, such a body is also equated with professional success, cosmopolitanism and more generally with the capacity to deal with the onslaught of consumerism and the pitfalls of modern living. The transformation that the clients envision, and which admittedly rarely sees itself fully come to fruition, on the one hand draws on an 'imaginary mobility', bringing them closer to the lives and lifestyles of Bollywood stars, while on the other hand endows them with symbolic (bodily) capital that will aid them in their upper middle class professional trajectories.

Conclusion

I won't deny that in the analysis presented above a certain essentialization is at play that casts trainers and clients in more or less diametrically opposing poles in terms of socioeconomic positions, desires and objectives. The ethnographic reality is decidedly more nuanced and complex. For one, while conducting fieldwork I also encountered trainers who had once been gym clients, as well as highly educated professionals who were now considering gym training as an alternative career trajectory, or trainers who themselves hailed from upper middle class backgrounds. The trainer who is featured in the picture that accompanies this article is an important example. Until recently he was employed as an IT professional in Chennai, but now runs a successful personal training business, something he continues to combine with competing as a bodybuilder. Although his story is less common, irrespective of their backgrounds interviews with trainers, clients and others involved in the Indian fitness industry underlined that there is no denying the symbolic value that the lean muscular body is layered with. As such, clients and trainers alike would often relate to their bodies in terms of an investment; both the capital investment required to build such bodies (ranging from gym memberships, to protein and supplement and substance use) as well as the time/effort required. The total sum was assumed to pay itself off, one way or the other. Discussions about this aspect always hinted at the complexity that presents itself when attempting to understand what the body is held to stand for beyond its immediate use.

While for middle class Indians a muscular body rarely serves a direct purpose in day to day life or work (with the exception of fitness trainers themselves of course), the value and importance that is attributed to it goes well-beyond simple matters of aesthetics and attractiveness. The place and position the lean, muscular body takes up within the context of a rapidly changing Indian urban landscape therefore offers an important window into understanding how urban change, middle class formation and socioeconomic developments are experienced and interpreted at an individual level.

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References

- 1 See <https://tinyurl.com/khantransformation> (visited 23-05-2017)
- 2 The Tamil movie *Ghajini* was itself an adaptation of the Hollywood production *Memento* (2000).
- 3 The actor plays an art teacher here and deals with issues of dyslexia.