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THE NEW INDIAN MALE
Muscles, masculinity and middle classness

Michiel Baas

Introduction
The August 2013 edition of *Men’s Health* investigates a pressing matter: ‘Why being Indian is good for your health’. The special section opens with a bold statement:

From the spicy food on your plate and the martial blood pumping through your veins to the love lavished by your family and the benefits of advice professed by the Kamasutra – here’s why India is the only country on the planet you would want to be in right now.

The first article in the above-mentioned special section takes inspiration from classical Indian sports. Accompanied by five pictures featuring two muscular male models engaged in hand-to-hand combat, their bodies smeared with what looks like mud or soot, they perform various ‘traditional’ Indian fighting techniques. The first picture introduces the so-called *kalari* elbow strike, referring to the martial art of *kalaripayattu*, which has its origin in the southern state of Kerala. The next set of pictures illustrates how to throw one’s opponent on the floor in three comprehensive steps making use of techniques derived from *pehlwan* wrestling. Finally the last picture in the article showcases the *muki* or ‘lighting fist’, a reference to *musti-yuddha*, a South Asian form of boxing usually referred to as *muki* boxing and (now) mainly practised in Varanasi. Other articles that fall under the ‘India Issue 2013’ header discuss the merits of an Indian diet (‘eat Indian for a metabolism spike’), what can be learned from Indian superheroes (‘how to gain mental superiority over others’) and finally how ‘our [Indian] tradition makes us sexy’, specifically discussing the workout merits of various positions from the Kamasutra. While the article alludes to ‘local’ Indian workout techniques, the end result is a body that adheres closely to bodily aesthetic ideals that are inherently ‘globalized’ in nature. It is a body that could easily don the cover of any of the forty editions of *Men’s Health* that appear in forty-seven different countries on a monthly basis but for the fact that the model ‘looks’ Indian, which gives the cover a ‘local’ flavour. Although it could be argued that globalization presents itself in a heterogenized form here its ambition to insert ‘Indianness’ actually underlines that the allusion is not a natural one.
Those familiar with the aforementioned classical sports will also agree that the bodies on display in the article actually do not resemble those that would ‘naturally’ be the end result of practising these sports.

The cover of the above-mentioned Indian edition of *Men’s Health* features a model who in terms of his body type – lean and muscular – will be referred to as the ‘new Indian male’. Throughout this chapter I will discuss this ‘new Indian male’ in terms of it being an ‘ideal type’. Invoking Weberian typology here serves two purposes: it draws attention to the near impossibility of such bodies and it highlights the process of becoming of which such bodies are imagined to be the end result. This increasingly visible ‘ideal type’ adorns billboards – advertising a whole gamut of products ranging from toothpaste to four-wheel drive cars – and features prominently in TV series (in particular soap operas) and Bollywood movies.

It is this new ‘visibility’ that lies at the heart of what this chapter seeks to explore. Glassner (1989: 183–184) argues that the way we experience our own bodies is done so within the context of a media environment of repeating images. Furthermore Glassner argues that: ‘The physique has become a cardinal sign of the self in a way which add-ons such as fashion and cosmetics (the appearance-enhancer signs of modernity) no longer can’ (Glassner 1989: 183–184). Visually processing and meticulously reading our own as well as the bodies of others for social cues about beauty, love, identity and status is something we are trained to do from a very young age, argue Casper and Moore (2009: 3). Bodies are seen and the act of seeing itself is a reflexive activity; we interpret what we observe (Waskul and Vannini 2006: 5). In line with this I propose to make the following questions central: How can we understand this ostensibly new Indian male? Who is he, what is he the product of, how is he produced and what produces him? Principally what I am interested in is the question of what the arrival of this ‘ideal type’ articulates about contemporary India in relation to socio-economic developments. I will do so by drawing upon various fields of scholarly research including studies that have engaged with the body in terms of its socio-cultural significance; studies that have discussed the (Indian) male body and its associated masculinity; and finally recent studies that have examined the shape and composition of the Indian middle classes. Besides that, this chapter takes inspiration from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a small neighbourhood gym in South Delhi over the period of nine months in 2013–2014. In addition to this interviews were conducted with fitness and health professionals, gym members and bodybuilders in four cities: Delhi, Bangalore, Mumbai and Patna.

A glossary excursion through the Indian edition of *Men’s Health* (see Figure 30.1) reveals that it is not just about an ‘ideal type’ body that is desirable in terms of aesthetics and associated masculinity (denoting masculine strength and fitness) but that this body also stands in direct relation to notions of socio-economic success, cosmopolitanism and even professionalism. This contrasts significantly with the way ‘midriff rotundity’ used to signify wealth and prosperity among men belonging to the middle classes, something that clearly juxtaposed with the wiry/veiny muscularity of the labour classes. This connection between rotundness, health and prosperity was also reflected in the depiction of male Hindu gods, often sporting a ‘healthy belly’ and sometimes even being directly associated with particular sweets rich in ghee (clarified butter). More recently, however, some of the iconography of deities such as Ram, Krishna, Shiva, Hanuman and even Ganesha has undergone a process of muscularization as well (see also Anand 2007). While I am well aware that I am taking big steps here, sketching and contrasting without leaving much space for the kind of nuance which always characterizes reality, it helps set the stage for what I wish to unpack further in this chapter: the arrival of an ‘ideal type’ and its symbolic associations which on the one hand are clearly the product of recent developments yet on the other hand also channel previously
hegemonic associations between body, class and masculinity. India’s recent economic growth and the effect this has had on middle-class formation has made an impact on the way Indian (middle-class) men have started to reflect on their own bodies and associated masculinity. This new ‘middle-class’ masculinity and its associated bodily ideals do not just reflect notions of masculine strength, fitness and health but also narrate a complex array of desires, expectations and anxieties of ‘middle-class’ life.

Bollywood, *Men’s Health* and the fitness industry

*Men’s Health*, launched in India in 2006, is now available at virtually every newspaper stand in the country. As such it has become part of an ever-growing group of health and lifestyle oriented magazines specifically targeting English-speaking middle-class men. According to its editorial director Jamal Shaikh the magazine has continued to sell more copies with each new edition than the previous one since its launch in 2006, something that is particularly interesting considering the lack of celebrities on its cover (author’s interview 07 February 2014). Instead the magazine relies on unknown male models who purportedly show up in droves on days when the magazine recruits new talent, requiring the presence of security personnel to keep the numbers in check. Sitting in a meeting room with *Men’s Health* magazine covers adorning the walls it is not hard to notice how the cover models all have a similar lean, muscular look, in line with an ‘ideal type’ informed by what has become an almost globalized standard for which the magazine itself seems to set the tone. In particular Bollywood stars have adopted this look and virtually every mainstream blockbuster movie
now has one or two scenes which sets the stage for the male hero to take off his shirt and flaunt his chiselled physique often making only marginal adjustments by use of make-up and colour to bring the body in line with a certain mood, period or style. A recent example of this is *Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela* (2013), a Romeo and Juliet-esque adaptation revolving around two feuding families in provincial Gujarat. In one of the opening scenes, the male hero played by Ranveer Singh goes around town dancing and singing. From the moment he arrives on scene, lying on a white Royal Enfield ‘Bullet’ motorcycle, his purple shirt unbuttoned revealing washboard abs as if carved out of marble, his ‘heroism’ is primarily underlined through the body on display. Driving home this point even further, towards the end of the song he even takes off his shirt and strikes a number of classical bodybuilding poses, all while loudly cheered on by the female onlookers of whom one even faints.

The video of the song described above would frequently play on MTV, the channel of choice for the small neighbourhood gym in South Delhi in which I conducted ethnographic fieldwork. Almost all other videos running in a loop similarly revolved around key-moments when the male lead would dance bare-chested; Farhan Akhtar revealing his muscular and distinctly veiny body that gave him the necessary ‘athletic’ look for his role as sprinter Milkha Singh in *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*; Hrithik Roshan flexing his densely muscled physique for his superhero reprisal in *Krish 3*; or the more rugged muscular ‘working-class’ look of Arjun Kapoor who featured alongside earlier mentioned Ranveer Singh in the retro-infused period action crime thriller *Gunday*. The ‘making of’ such bodies generates considerable media attention in conjunction with the launch of new blockbuster movies. Popular English-language magazine *India Today*, for instance, discussed the ‘Making of Milkha’ by displaying a bare-chested Farhan Akhtar as Milkha Singh, arrows pointing to various body-parts explaining how the actor had worked on these. About his shoulders the articles explains: ‘Farhan’s favourite exercise, according to his trainer, was lateral raise which helped him develop round muscled shoulders. Along with that, he did fifteen sets of front raises with dumbbells regularly’ (29 July 2013). The same article also dedicates a separate column to his (personal) trainer who was instrumental to developing the necessary workout routines and dietary restrictions. In that way newspaper and magazine articles frequently discuss the active partnership between actor and trainer. In the case of Hrithik Roshan this even resulted in a workout guide in which he featured and which was authored by his personal trainer Kris Gethin titled: *The Bodybuilding.com: Guide to Your Best Body* (2013). Bollywood stars are also actively employed in the opening of new fitness centres particularly by brands such as *Gold’s Gym* whose establishments are decorated with pictures in which a famous Bollywood star like John Abraham is seemingly casually working-out alongside ‘regular’ clients.

It is clear that a highly specific male bodily ideal has taken up an increasingly prominent place in public space and popular media and that this is a relatively recent development in which Bollywood is an important factor. Jamal Shaikh of *Men’s Health*, for instance, claimed that before the magazine was launched in 2006 there was virtually no interest for muscle-building exercises in popular media. In fact the first line on the first cover of the Indian edition of the magazine was: ‘Indians can have abs too!’ (Author’s interview 07 February 2014). The following year, one of Bollywood’s biggest stars Shahrukh Khan was allegedly the first to adhere to what had come to be referred to as the *Men’s Health* standard and flaunted six pack abs as he performed the lead role in blockbuster movie *Om Shanti Om* (2007). However, it was particularly the Hindi remake of the Tamil action movie *Ghajini* (2008), which those already active in the fitness industry at the time remember as a turning point. Not only the specific haircut of lead actor Aamir Khan would quickly become fashionable among young men across India, the rapid transformation of Khan’s body from that of ‘next
door neighbour’ in *Taaare Zameen Par* (2007) to the hulking muscular physique he sported for the lead role in *Ghajini* actually led to a surge in new members of fitness clubs everywhere in India.

While there are no official statistics available on the number of gyms in India, the owners and trainers I interviewed agreed that the explosive growth the industry has witnessed is by and large the product of the last five to six years. A report by the IHRSA (International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association) (quoted in Andrews et al. 2013) speaks of 765 fitness clubs in India in 2008. However, a search entry for ‘gyms’ on *Just Dial.com* produces already 500 addresses each for cities such as Bangalore, Delhi (NCR) and Mumbai. Although these search results also include a limited number of yoga and dance studios it does provide a snapshot impression of how exponential growth has been. This is further underlined by the recent announcement of a company such as *Snap Fitness India*, the Indian master franchisee of the US-based company, which was in the process of raising $10 million in 2013 to finance its expansion plans. Having entered India in 2008, the company already operates four company owned and thirty-six franchisees with about 30,000 members. With the sought funding it would be able to fund its mandate of 300 gyms, forty of which it was hoping to open in 2013 alone. The news which appeared in the Indian business daily *Business Standard* furthermore reported that the ‘wellness industry’ as they referred to it was now valued at $3 billion and that 95 per cent is dominated by the unorganized sector, the rest by brands such as *Fitness First* (British), *Gold’s Gym* (American), *Snap Fitness* (American), and *Talwalkars* (Indian).14 *Gold’s Gym*, for instance, now operates eighty-nine gyms in India, the majority of which are located in the state of Maharashtra (twenty-five, mainly in Mumbai and Pune), Karnataka (sixteen, mainly in Bangalore) and Delhi-NCR region (seven).

India’s urban landscape is now dotted with gyms, both small ones operating on a neighbourhood-level and larger facilities set-up by nationally or internationally operating brands. Especially in middle-class neighbourhoods, such as the one in which the gym was located where I conducted fieldwork myself, it is often striking how many gyms and health-oriented establishments such as so-called ‘fat clinics’, providing weight loss solutions, and shops selling protein powder and other supplements, there are. In the near vicinity of my home in CR Park (a traditionally Bengali middle-class neighbourhood) I counted at least seven other gyms within walking distance (under fifteen minutes) besides the one I frequented on a daily basis for fieldwork in nearby neighbourhood GKII. Easily recognizable for what they are and seemingly on an ever-expanding quest it is worth considering the ‘visibility’ of these gyms themselves as a factor in the way they encourage and/or instil (in the middle class) a sense of inevitability to work out.

**Men, masculinity and ‘modern’ India**

It cannot be ignored that the development whereby Indian men have now become the object of the gaze instead of ‘simply’ being the bearer of the look (Waskul and Vannini 2006), coincides with a decade of considerable economic growth15 and a rapidly expanding middle class. It is this middle class which is specifically targeted by the marketing endeavours of gym chains, the more general product advertisement of brands that make use of lean, muscular models, and who are the targeted audience of health and fitness magazines. What stands out about the Indian middle classes is not just the ensuing rhetoric on economic growth and the way it drives the political agenda on certain matters (Baviskar and Ray 2011) but also how it has become a self-referential category to which many aspire to belong. In describing their socio-cultural/family backgrounds I have often observed how informants do not simply explain that
they are 'middle class' but frequently use words such as old/new or lower/middle/upper to be more specific in terms of where they consider themselves to belong in relation to others (see also Baas 2009, 2010). Considering the size of the Indian middle classes for which estimates in size vary between 100–350 million it is perhaps not surprising that Jaffrelot and Van der Veer (2008: 11) argue that it is a 'notoriously elusive category'. As a result the ‘criteria for drawing boundaries’ has become a main focus for studies discussing the Indian middle classes (E. Sridharan 2011: 27), with a particular focus on household income, level of education and the way people are able to profit from recent economic growth (e.g. Fernandes 2006, 2011; Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2009; Jeffrey *et al.* 2008; E. Sridharan 2011). To complicate matters further, besides economic terms the middle classes are furthermore dividable along linguistic/ regional, ethnic, religious and caste lines (Nijman 2006).

Describing the ‘new Indian male’ as a ‘middle-class’ phenomenon inspires to ask two important interrelated questions: 1. Within the context of belonging to the middle class where we can position this ‘ideal type’ male body? 2. In relation to what this body is imagined or understood to signify to those belonging to the middle classes, how does this resonate with or contradict existing notions of Indian masculinities? It is clear that Indian masculinities have been discussed in relation to a wide variety of issues ranging from the stereotyping of Hindu men during colonial days (Osella and Osella 2006), the ‘muscularization’ of the Hindu movement (Alter 1994a, 1994b; Hansen 1996; Anand 2005, 2007, 2008; Rogers 2008), to the way masculinities have been depicted in religious and mythological stories (McLain 2009; Srinivas 2010). Although the body features prominently in such studies, it either concerns traditional, culturally specific bodily ideals and/or groups of men who are not well educated, clearly belonging to the working classes (see also De Neve 2004). Of particular relevance here are studies which have examined the role the body plays in traditional Indian sports such as *pehlwan* wrestling (Alter 1992, 1995, 2011), the south Indian martial arts form *kalaripayattu* (McDonald 2007; Zarilli 2000), or the Punjabi team sport *kabbadi* (Mills 2005). While these studies deal with ostensibly ‘traditional’ sports, ‘assumed’ to be predecessors of more modern forms – *pehlwan* wrestling being one of the oldest forms of wrestling, *kalaripayattu* as ancient form of martial art – what stands out is how they interact and compete with socio-economic change and (associated) globalization.

As modern-day workout routines borrow from those developed for the training of *pehlwan* wrestlers and, in the case of the Delhi-NCR region, fitness trainers, especially those from nearby towns and villages, often have a background in this sport, it makes sense to examine in what way practices and associated (masculine) ideals overlap or digress. Joseph Alter’s seminal work in this regard is particularly illuminating. Alter uses the term ‘integrated self-development’ (1995: 112) to describe the way a *pehlwan* wrestler develops himself through ‘eating, sleeping, resting, walking, talking, defecating, as well as practising moves and countermoves or doing various types of exercises’. His diet, high in fat and calories, not only gives the wrestler the necessary energy he needs to wrestle and exercise (ibid.: 115), but also produces a particular body type which, as informants often assured me, is easily recognizable. As such *pehlwan* wrestlers clearly distinguish themselves from bodybuilders whose fixation on ‘external form’ is characterized by a focus on distinct body-parts – something that also comes with its own lingo (bulging biceps, ripped abs, muscular back) – as opposed to the more holistic development of what could be understood as a ‘smoother’ body, one ‘of one colour and uniform texture, through attention to the matter that goes into and comes out of it, and an exercise regime that is inseparable from devotion’ (Jain 2001: 206). Joseph Alter even argues that the wrestling *akhara* or public gymnasium provides a social environment which allows for a certain morality to be performed, particularly with reference to celibacy or
semen retention, which as a critique of postcolonial desire gets disseminated among village and neighbourhood men. ‘Thereby a “moral” form of popular culture is pitted against the popular hedonism of modernity’ (Alter 2011: 29).

Although Alter’s work on pehlwan wrestlers as renunciate or brahmacharya is revealing in its exploration of the moral, material and physical roots of masculinity in India, how to relate these idealized notions of (embodied) masculinity to developments in contemporary ‘middle-class’ India poses us with a challenge. While it appears as if a definite shift has been made towards the external form, characterizing not just bodybuilding but working-out in general, I will argue that this development comes with a new specifically ‘middle-class’ type of masculinity, which is not so much ‘pitted against’ modern life but communicates directly with it. As Ghosh (2009: 38) argues, the shape and beauty of the body is emerging as the marker of modernity for young people in the metropolitan milieu; the body as an entity in the process of becoming and ‘open to reconstruction’ is linked to self-esteem and personal control (over one’s environment). The ubiquitous, highly visible presence of an ‘ideal type’ male body in public space and popular culture plays a key-role in this, I argue.

**Trainers, bouncers, the floor and the land**

When Ratish Khanna (23) stands in front of the mirror flexing his muscles the floor trainers whose focus should be on the gym’s clients, making sure they do their exercises properly, shifts to what is on display: heavily pronounced pectoral muscles (‘pecs’), sharply defined triceps, bulging biceps and a v-shaped back. Ratish has recently finished his degree in hotel management from an elite institute in Switzerland and has moved back to Delhi to search for a job. Clearly of an upper-middle class background, he is well able to afford top-of-the-line supplements and is at liberty to spend his free time – which he has in abundance – in the gym. In the morning we usually catch up briefly basically to discuss ‘how things are going’, conversations which are eagerly participated in by the floor trainers whose English is often limited and who struggle to follow what the discussion of the day is about. Ratish interlaces his stories with rapid Hindi that generally lacks in the slang that lubricates the bolder tales of the trainers. Hailing from lower or ‘new’ (generally meaning ‘recent’) middle-class families, this is generally the first gym they have found employment in. Essentially a ‘neighbourhood’ kind of place with limited facilities; the majority of its members find their way to the gym from nearby affluent middle-class suburbs such as GKII, CR Park and Chirag Delhi. Being business owners or employed in professions (e.g. accountant, dentist, IT professional) that require higher education and fluency in the English language, their family histories often reveal that their self-identification as upper-middle class rests on having already been considered ‘middle class’ for a number of generations. They come in to ‘reduce fat levels’, ‘improve general health’, ‘become more fit’ and in addition to this, a remark which was often accompanied by a hopeful shrug, ‘to build some muscle’. While the ideal of a lean, muscular body had coaxed them to the gym, their expectations with respect to their own bodies would generally be more realistic. In that sense they contrasted markedly with the trainers whose bodies had not only landed them this particular job but who also keenly realized that in order to tap into the lucrative personal training market or to work for more prestigious gyms they would have to work even harder in order to bring their bodies as close as possible to the desired ideal.

The situation described above illustrates the complexities that come with locating the ‘ideal type’ male body within a highly concrete setting such as the gym itself. This is where the ‘ideal type’ body is produced; under the guidance of trainers, observed through
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its omnipresent mirrors, the Bollywood clips on the TV screens hanging above portraying the ‘end result’ in various contexts often making specific statements about its associated masculinity. It is here that the muscular body and its associated symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984, 2001) are on full display. However, instead of being ‘semiotically divorced’ from its association with physical labour and associated class (Bourdieu 1984), the perceptions of what this body stands for, how it can be interpreted, what it is assumed to communicate, and also what it is imagined to facilitate varies along (middle-)class lines.

In his study on so-called bouncers or doormen, Simon Winlow argues that ‘Having large muscles immediately illustrates vibrant maleness; masculinity does not need to be spelled out through complex verbalizing or accepted modes of mutually congratulatory conversation’ (Winlow 2001: 98). As such the muscular body can, as Winlow phrases it, ‘claim to the spirit of all that is masculine’ and accentuates ‘differences from all that is feline’ (ibid.: 99). Yet while Winlow argues that what bouncers bring with them as ‘crude bodily capital’ (for which he refers to Wacquant’s seminal study on boxing, 2003), offering their bodies as marketable assets, he also cautions that this is not simply a process of use and exchange value. Equally important is what he calls the sign value of a bouncer’s body, his speech and body language, facial expressions and demeanour and so on, basically what customers ‘understand’ (ibid.). Although bouncers can be considered entrepreneurs in bodily capital (Winlow 2001: 103), their bodies carry the kind of symbolic weight that should ideally be enough to deter others from misbehaving. Winlow (2001) and Lee Monaghan’s studies (2002a, b) make clear how bouncers’ bodies (often the product of bodybuilding) are layered with lower or working-class connotations.

In discussions I had with floor and personal trainers in terms of the way they utilized their bodies with respect to attracting clients or finding employment in a particular gym, the way they narrated about their bodies and what they hoped to communicate could be placed on an axis where muscularity and masculinity intersects with various notions of middle classness. The bulkier though decidedly muscular body the result of pehlwan wrestling, a sport many had practised in their native villages or towns (often in the near vicinity or even part of the NCR region), was associated with a particular ‘lower’ middle classness which stereotypically let itself be illustrated by a low level of education, aggressive behaviour and being ill-adjusted to big city-life. The ideal transformation was envisioned as one where not just the body went through a metamorphosis that brought it increasingly closer to the desired ‘ideal type’ but also, in tandem to this, that by means of education (English language and various certifications in the field of personal training, diets and new exercise routines) and the daily interaction with clients, a closer match would emerge between the body and what it was imagined to stand for in terms of professionalism and success. However, faced with the high cost of building and maintaining their bodies, trainers would often have to ‘make sacrifices’ and would be forced to accept jobs outside the gym such as that of bouncer at a club or bar. While still operating in a decidedly middle-class environment, no longer would their muscular bodies be the source of admiration of (and information for) clients, instead their relatively ‘lower’ middle-class status would be highlighted and associated with an aggressive masculinity which in turn would be informed by presumptions about a provincial/rural background.

Clients, professionalism and changing (urban) India

Ratish Khanna, one of the gym’s clients whom we met earlier, would frequently visit the above-mentioned clubs and bars which for him was part of the lifestyle of a young urban upper-middle class Indian. Now in his twenties he would be quite frank about how overweight
he had been as a youngster. His immediate goal now was simply ‘to get bigger’, something to which he would sometimes add: ‘huge’, and also ‘drier’, meaning a lower fat content making his muscles and veins more visible, and for which he was considering growth hormones and/or steroids. While he believed a ‘fit’ body would help him in his search for a suitable managerial position with an international hotel chain, his story also betrayed body image insecurities that were the product of a personal history with obesity. Traditions and customs that once provided a clear route in life – as was the case with for instance arranged marriage (Baas 2009) – can no longer do so in the straightforward manner they once did. As Crossley (2006: 22) argues, drawing upon Anthony Giddens (1991, 1992), individuals increasingly embark on their own identity-making projects in which the body plays a crucial role. I would suggest that Foucault’s take on reflexive embodiment could be folded into the notion of (bodily) ‘self-making’ here. The onslaught of modernity and the dwindling importance of socio-cultural factors and boundaries that shape self-making projects inherently produce the kind of reflexivity and internalization of the gaze of others that is ‘powerful’ enough to trigger the (bodily) self-policing/disciplining that Foucault (1978, 1979) suggests.

The kind of self-making that a magazine like *Men’s Health* promotes revolves around the interplay of, indeed, internalizing the gaze of others (and thus self-disciplining, moulding oneself into the required/desired shape), yet it is also guided by a process which is encrusted with notions of ‘newness’, in tune and able to deal with a rapidly changing society. The same issue of *Men’s Health* as the one this article opened with also features an article with the header ‘Surprising Superphysiques’. Titled ‘The Software Engineer With Hardcore Abs’, its subtitle reads: ‘This Bengaluru-based IT expert proves how focused training and willpower can transform into a chiselled core’ (August 2013: 52). Describing his transformation from 120 to 81kg, Mayank Goswami (31) explains how he works out at Snap Fitness which is open 24-hours per day. ‘Even when I get held up in meetings till 10 or 12 at night, I still make it a point to head to the gym’ (p. 53). Virtually every edition features one or more comparable narrations of self-transformation in relation to dealing with a demanding job, stress, professionalism, as well as a busy social/family life. In line with this, the July 2013 issue presents 32-year-old Rakesh Badola who is an associate director with the food and beverages department of the Hyatt Regency in New Delhi. ‘In the service industry, you want people to believe in the importance of well-being and fitness. No one takes a pot-bellied associate seriously. You need to be fit and presentable to convey your message,’ he explains (p. 61). The February 2014 issue gives the stage to Sandeep Singh, a 28-year-old inspector with the Narcotics Control Bureau who with reference to this job says: ‘I know one thing about myself: if I am knocked down by any adversity tomorrow, I am sure getting back up again. This resilience gives me an edge over others’ (p. 61).

Aforementioned examples from *Men’s Health* further underline that the objectification of the (Indian) male body in terms of an easily recognizable lean, muscular ideal does not only narrate easily ‘quantifiable’ notions of health and fitness but is in fact layered with a more complex interplay of associations. While personal and career related ambitions and notions of professionalism are communicated through the ‘ideal type’ body, this appears to stand in direct relation to ideas of coping with emerging consumer culture, globalization and the manifold challenges rapidly transforming cities bring with them as well. The gym trainer (whether ‘floor’ or ‘personal’) could be thought of as a broker in bodily capital in this regard, yet considering the middle-class context in and through which the idealized form is produced it is also clear that this bodily capital cannot completely make up for a lack in social capital. As such the ‘ideal type’ male body allows for a critical reflection on a number of intersecting debates that all have the question of socio-economic change in urban India at its heart.
Conclusion

In the second half of 2013 the Hindustan Times ran a ‘Get Healthy, Delhi’ campaign in which ostensibly ‘ordinary’ Delhiites featured who had taken the pledge to get fit. On Saturday 12 October 2013 the paper ran a large article titled ‘Kisme Kitna Hai Dum’ (roughly: Who Is The Strongest?) on two businessmen who accordingly ‘say their biggest weakness is food’ and were pitted against each other in a face-off to see whoever could lose more fat. Accompanied by a set of jovial pictures the battle is a good-natured one yet touches upon a fast growing problem in India: obesity and associated problems such as diabetes and hypertension. The two businessmen, one who even hails from Kalkaji, a nearby area in South Delhi, are in many ways interchangeable with many of the male clients who would frequent the gym I conducted fieldwork in. Arriving throughout the morning, the ‘valet parking’ outside taking care of their vehicles, workouts would regularly be interrupted by calls, which they would answer on one of their multiple cell phones. It was up to the floor trainers to come up with a workout for the day often specifically tuned to one or two body-parts. Life was hectic and time short; most would be in ‘construction’ and spend the bulk of their day stuck in snail-pace traffic from building-site to building-site. It is of course this dilemma that magazines such as Men’s Health also tap into when they discuss the benefits of a lean, muscular body. Ultimately, however, this body is an ‘ideal type’. For by far the majority of men in urban India the challenge will be exactly as the one so jovially illustrated by the Hindustan Times: reducing fat levels and thus potentially avoiding certain serious ailments.

This article gave the floor to the ‘new Indian male’, one who is not only synonymous with a lean, muscular ‘ideal type’ bodily physique but whose body, in tune with a changing socio-economic climate, resonates with notions of success, professionalism and being able to deal with the onslaught of consumerism, materialism and globalization. Ubiquitously present in public space and popular culture this body often gets inserted into typically ‘Indian’ settings and contexts yet it cannot be denied that through the thin layer of veneer shimmers a globalized ideal. In that sense it is perhaps not surprising that when Men’s Health first appeared in India, as Jamal Shaikh explained, people were doubtful if the cover model was actually Indian (author’s interview 07 February 2014). While this was partly about the disbelief that ‘Indians can have abs too!’, it also reveals that for middle-class men in India this was already a widely recognizable ‘ideal type’.

However, while the ‘new Indian male’ with its aesthetically pleasing ‘ideal type’ body may at first glance simply reflect globalized notions of attractiveness, as an exploration of the Indian edition of Men’s Health also revealed this body stands in direct relation to notions of professionalism and success. While the body itself is pitted as a piece of work and as an accomplishment, the result of hard work and dedication, it resonates with ideals of self-making which in turn are fuelled by changing ideas of work and education with a focus on merit as opposed to family and community ties (e.g. Baas 2009; Upadhya and Vasavi 2008). As such a new kind of ‘ideal type’ masculinity emerges which unites bodily ideals with a highly idealized urban lifestyle that the body also inherently reflects. Yet planting this body firmly with his feet on the ground, or the gym floor for that matter, also reveals the impossibilities of the idealized reality this body conjures. For the trainers and clients of the small neighbourhood I conducted fieldwork in the challenge is not just their own body but also very much the wider context in which their lives take shape.
Michiel Baas

Notes

1 Besides, Kerala kalaripayattu is practised in adjoining areas of Tamil Nadu. Originally it was also practised in Tulunadu (a Tulu-speaking region) what is now part of the state of Karnataka.

2 Pehlwani is a form of South Asian wrestling sometimes also referred to as kusti. In order to distinguish it from the western/Olympic variety of wrestling I will refer to this particular type as pehlwani wrestling.

3 For a more extensive discussion on this, see Roland Robertson (1995).

4 ‘Lean and muscular’ should be thought of as a shorthand for a variety of body types which could be grouped under the same heading here. Leanness refers most of all to low body-fat, as such not only enhancing the visibility of various muscles but also producing a much desired veininess, making veins clearly visible even when not working-out. Muscularity is not only a question of size but also of proportion. In that sense the ideal clearly builds upon a bodybuilding-ideal yet tends to stay away from the massiveness which is desired to compete in this sport.


6 This fieldwork was part of a larger project of which the principal aim was to investigate so-called ‘new middle class professionals’, people who have found employment in professional categories that emerged out of recent economic growth in India. Besides fitness trainers, research was also conducted among coffee baristas and people employed in high-end malls. I thank Nalanda University (Rajgir) for providing me with a fellowship to conduct this research.

7 Colloquially this movie is usually referred to as ‘Ram Leela’.

8 The Men’s Health edition of September 2013 even dedicated a three-page article to how the actor had built his body for the role of Milkha Singh. However, the article was critical in tone, raising the question ‘Should you get a body like Farhan Akhtar?’ (p. 53) and cautioning that one should ‘[b]eware of six-hour training regimes without proper guidance on a daily basis.’ (p. 55). As advice the article mainly reflects common sense yet also hints at the problem of how highly specific training routines that actors follow under strict guidance for particular roles have a tendency to gain popularity in a relatively short time. Several fitness trainers I interviewed also mentioned this during interviews and how it worried them what kind of risks especially youngsters were willing to take in terms of diets and ‘supplements’ in order to achieve a particular bodily ideal portrayed in the movies.

9 A romantic-reincarnation movie set in the 1970s and featuring more than forty-two well-known Bollywood stars.

10 This does not mean that it was the first movie in which an actor had gone bare-chested; Salman Khan had already appeared bare-chested in Maine Pyar Kyu, a movie that came out in 1989. Although his body is clearly ‘muscular’ it does not come close to the sharply defined lean muscular one that Shahrukh Khan would introduce with Om Shanti Om in 2007. Trainers I interviewed would sometimes also refer to older Bollywood stars such as Dara Singh (1928–2012), a pehlwan wrestler who initially started as stunt film actor and then went on to play the lead role in a number of productions.

11 The Tamil movie Ghajini was itself an adaptation of the Hollywood production Memento (2000). The story centres on a man who is trying to find out who murdered his wife and who suffers from anterograde amnesia, impairing him to store new memories.

12 This movie was reissued as Like Stars on Earth. Aamir Khan plays an art teacher who takes a special interest in a talented eight-year-old boy who excels in art but has poor school results due to dyslexia.

13 Although the website does not say so explicitly, it appears that JustDial.com maximizes its search result to 500 spread over twenty pages of twenty-five results each.

14 ‘Snap Fitness India to raise $10 million to fund expansion,’ Business Standard, 30 May 2013. Available online.

15 According to figures provided by Index Mundi, India’s economic growth shot-up to 8.3 per cent in 2003 from 4.3 per cent the previous year. The following year (2004) witnessed somewhat of a decline in terms of growth (6.2 per cent) but in subsequent years it picked up reaching a high point in 2010 with 10.1 per cent. In more recent years, however, Indian economic growth has stalled: in 2011 it was 6.8 per cent, for 2012 6.5 per cent was reported, and in 2013 it was only 4.4 per cent. Source: www.indexmundi.com/g/g.aspx?v=66&c=in&l=en (accessed 17 June 2014). Disappointing economic figures are generally assumed to have been a major factor in the Congress Party’s dramatic electoral loss in 2014, bringing the BJP back in power with a landslide victory.

16 See Upadhya (2011) for a useful discussion of the distinction between old-and-new and its implications.

17 Modern-day workout routines with weights often have their roots in more ancient ‘non-western’ ones. For instance, kettle bell swinging which has been reintroduced in many modern gyms in the
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last few years draws heavily on techniques used by Russian farmers. Pehlwan wrestlers use a similar technique of swinging or juggling for their training making use of meels or clubs. These meels actually are of Persian origin though they were also used in ancient Egypt.

18 GK=Greater Kailash, though locally never pronounced as such. The same goes for nearby CR Park, which stands for Chitaranjan Park, but which is colloquially referred to as CR Park.


20 A recent article in British tabloid the Daily Star titled ‘Welcome to the small village that is the bodybuilding capital of the world’ (29 June 2014) describes a village in North India where 90 per cent of the men between 18 and 55 work as bouncers and security guards in New Delhi. The accompanying photos and video show various workout techniques which, making use of alternative/limited means (for instance using the tyres of a tractor or a motorcycle for weight lifting), as well as recommended diets (‘[…] about 3–4 litres of milk, one dozen bananas and half a kilo of cheeku […]’), clearly drawing inspiration from pehlwan wrestling.

21 Although for the purpose of this research a more extensive and comparative content analysis of Men’s Health magazines around the world was not made, it needs to be noted that in the period of writing this article (June–July 2014) American, British, Dutch and Singaporean editions did not discuss featured models in relation to their jobs and/or issues related to professionalism and career.

References


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