

The Big Picture

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MALLAKHAMB ACADEMY IN CHHATTISGARH

Abujhmad's pole stars

In the Naxal hotbed of Abujhmad, where childhood is scarred by loss and violence, a mallakhamb academy run out of a ramshackle structure is helping youngsters land safely on their feet. JAYPRAKASH S NAIDU meets the coach and his wards who have now their sights on the world stage

PHOTOGRAPHS: CHITRAL KHAMBHATI

THE NINE-year-old stands facing an 8.5-foot wooden pole, his body covered in white chalk dust, his eyes narrowed in concentration. It has been a long day of studying and practice, but Yujit Manjhi is determined to land his routine. Around him, the music starts. It's a medley of *Ganesh Vandana*, KGF's *Sultan* and Dhurandhar's *Fa9la*, a cue for Yujit to clamber onto the pole, dive down and execute a backflip, wedging himself precariously into a groove. Then comes an eye-popping manoeuvre — a deft spin around the pole, foot locked in, his body now parallel to the ground. As cheers erupt all around, he acknowledges with a winning smile, and returns to finish the rest of his routine.

Located in a corner of the vast Parade Ground in Chhattisgarh's Narayanpur town, the Abujhmad Mallakhamb and Sports Academy is all of two ramshackle single-storey structures. This has been Yujit's world since the summer of 2022, when his uncle brought him and his elder sister to the academy to train in mallakhamb, a traditional gymnastic sport. He now goes home to Farasgaon village, in neighbouring Kondagaon district, only during the holidays.

Last year, the academy's trainees were invited to perform at *America's Got Talent*, two years after lifting the winner's trophy in the 2023 Indian edition of the talent show. The invitation marked a milestone not only for the group but for Abujhmad, an area at the heart of the Maoist conflict.

As the central government's March 2026 deadline to end the Maoist insurgency approaches and security operations intensify in Chhattisgarh, for these youngsters, the conflict is far more personal.

"Most students here come from villages affected by insurgency," says coach Manoj Prasad, a 31-year-old commander with Chhattisgarh's anti-insurgency Special Task Force (STF) unit.

The journey

With roots dating back to the 12th century, mallakhamb was primarily a preparation workout for wrestlers. The sport, which tests agility, balance and core strength, has been included in military and law enforcement training drills in several European nations, though Germany took the most interest in nurturing it.

Recognised by the Sports Authority of India, the first competitive national mallakhamb event was organised during the national gymnastics championships at Pa-

harganj stadium in Delhi in 1958, while the first national mallakhamb championships were held in Gwalior in 1962 as part of the national gymnastics championships.

Although it has largely remained an exhibition sport at global events, it has become more structured over the years — featuring as a medal event at the 38th National Games in Uttarakhand last year.

Since it was set up in 2017, the Narayanpur academy's trainees have swept up around 400 medals at district-, state- and national-level games.

Much of this is down to academy founder Prasad, a man with a ready smile and a quick word of praise.

Originally from Ballia district in Uttar Pradesh, Prasad, an athlete, was picked by his STF unit to go to Mumbai for a 15-day training in mallakhamb. He was expected to pick up some skills and help his colleagues take up the endurance sport.

But it wasn't his colleagues he ended up training. On his return from Mumbai, Prasad was sent to a camp in Chhotte Dongar in the Maoist-affected Narayanpur. Here, an IPS officer, Santosh Singh, chanced upon his performance and invited him to an Independence Day function.

Soon, he began getting calls from schools, asking if he could train children. "I was obsessed with teaching mallakhamb and would pay for the equipment myself," he says. "I would go to various schools during my leave to teach mallakhamb free of cost."

It was around this time that he met wife Poonam, who was then working as a volunteer with UNICEF. "She would help me set up mallakhamb poles and we got talking. We are now married and have two children," Prasad says, smiling.

For Prasad, his early mallakhamb training offered respite from the trauma of his STF work. "I've faced many encounters and have seen my colleagues and friends die. Sometimes, I felt dead on the inside. But I think I'm alive to serve a greater purpose," he says.

Among his early students was Rajesh Korram, then six, the son of a Kosa silk seller from Ansar village deep inside Abujhmad.

"When our team won gold at the national mallakhamb championship in Bilaspur [in 2020], I got a cheque of Rs 50,000 and gave it to my father. My father was confused and asked me, '*Chori toh nahi kiya na* [I hope you didn't steal this],'" Korram, now 14, says, laughing.

Then there is 26-year-old Shyamal Pottai. From Gumiabeda village in Abujhmad's Kohkameta tehsil, Pottai, then



(Anti-clockwise from top) Training sessions at the academy involve complex manoeuvres; coach Manoj Prasad with his wards; training is followed by study sessions; the academy is located in a corner of Parade Ground, Narayanpur

19, had only cricket on his mind when Prasad showed up at his porta-cabin school in Narayanpur's Devgaon in 2017 and screened videos of mallakhamb.

Pottai was hooked. "I loved cricket but I thought mallakhamb would be good for my health," he says. "When I started, I used to get hurt because it's a difficult sport. But I'm proud that my efforts paid off."

But the journey wasn't smooth. A police commando teaching tribal children drew suspicion, and inquiries soon began from Maoists.

Says 16-year-old athlete Rakesh Kumar Werda, "They (Maoists) would contact my parents and siblings back in my village and ask them to call me back, but I never went. I heard they surrendered last year."

"Once the boys started winning medals, our intentions were clear and the Maoists never bothered us again," adds Prasad.

The setback

By 2020, Prasad's dreams for a training centre of his own finally took wing, and he started the academy at the Parade Ground. But then, the pandemic struck. The timing could not have been worse.

Curfews were imposed, schools shut down, and the academy suffered. The big-

gest blow came when Prasad was posted to a remote camp in Abujhmad. "My dreams were shattered. I requested a transfer back to Narayanpur," he says.

Months later, he was reposted to Narayanpur town and began searching for his wards in the remotest corners of Abujhmad, tracking them from as far as Orhha and Kutul, some 40 km away, and urging them to return.

"The children wanted to come and their parents wanted them to do better, so there was no trouble getting them back," he says. "Some of them were grazing animals, some were farming. I brought all 25 children back to Narayanpur town and kept them in my two-bedroom home for the remainder of the pandemic."

It wasn't easy. The house was too small for 25 people, and food bills mounted.

"We would take surplus food rations from those who didn't need them, have *gud-chana* for breakfast and mostly *dal*, rice and *sabzi* for lunch and dinner. His [Prasad's] salary would run out in a week," says Saurabh Pal, 30, an assistant coach at the academy.

As bills rose, so did disagreements at home. "But in the end, my wife understood," Prasad says.



The future

Back at the academy, the students are hard at work. Prasad watches as a young woman does her stretches. As the opening bars of *Fa9la* start to play, she clammers up an aerial rope and performs a graceful backflip, swinging midair with her body arched, arms reaching down and a leg stretched upward.

On the wall — between the slogans '*Main khelunga, padhunga aur duniya ka sarvashreshth khiladi banunga* (I will play, study and become the best athlete in the world)' and '*Utho, jaago aur lakshya prapti tak ruko matt* (Get up, wake up and don't stop till you've reached your goal)' — is the pride of the place: Olympic rings made of repurposed cycle tyres.

The Mallakhamb Academy currently has 100 students, including 30 girls, all between ages 4 and 22, three coaches and one cook. The academy is self-funded, meeting its running costs of approximately Rs 1 lakh a month from winnings, supplemented by a goods transport business run by Prasad.

To ensure they don't lose out on education, students are enrolled in nearby government schools. Practice starts at 6.30 am and lasts a few hours. Then it's time for school. Evenings are dedicated to practice — until 5 pm for younger kids, with the sessions for seniors stretching to midnight on some days.

Next to the training centre stands a makeshift pine-green shed, sparkling in red, green and purple fairy lights put up a few months ago. It's the academy's residential quarters.

It's 9 pm, and practice is over. Inside the quarters, with its three-tiered bunk beds, students sit poring over schoolwork under overhead bulbs, some in groups and some alone.

"These children and I built this place from scratch. From welding to painting, we did everything ourselves," Prasad says. "We had little money to spare and saved whatever we could to buy food or tiny items for decoration."

Initially, Prasad had his students perform at little-known shows. "We did multiple performances, including a Bengali talent show, just to get exposure," he says.

As the academy grew, Prasad had little time for anything else. "From 2016 until 2023, I didn't even travel to Ballia to meet my parents. I told them I was busy," he says.

Now, Prasad and his staff are considering a second academy.

"We have also had aspirants from Odisha, Gujarat, Delhi and Haryana come to us for advanced training," trainer Pal says.

In 2023, after the group's *India's Got Talent* victory catapulted it to national recognition, they received a hero's welcome in Narayanpur as hundreds lined the streets to greet them.

"As a pole artist, I want to perform in *America's Got Talent* and put Abujhmad on the world map," says 16-year-old Ramesh Kumar Werda. "But my dream is to someday perform mallakhamb at the Olympics."

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