

Dear LUTSF Secretary

I am pleased to send you this report of my trip to India for research and study of Mallakamb rope. It was a very interesting experience which has given me a lot of lines of thought to follow up in my work back home.

*Project:* A privately arranged skills exchange between Maddie McGowan (UK Aerialist) and Parag Vatak (champion of Mallakamb rope).

*Dates:* 20th January - 19th February in India, 20th February - 13th March in Nepal.

*Location:* Pune, India; Kathmandu, Nepal.

I publicised the kind scholarship and the work of the Trust through a charity with which I went on to volunteer after my study trip: The Esther Benjamins Trust in Nepal. This charity rescues and rehabilitates marginalised Nepalese children. They have a large interest in performing arts and creative arts for therapeutic effects and also as potential careers for their beneficiaries.

I certainly feel that in the two weeks available to us, Parag and I made a great start in learning and exchanging each other's expertise. Of course, there is still a long way for each of us to go - a second training session is very tempting to take the work further!

My suggestion for future awardees is not to limit themselves to existing courses within established schools as a way to further study and education. There was no course for the discipline I wanted to try, so I set up this project through some very basic lines of enquiry online. Simply by asking people and being open to possibilities, you can arrange your own study experience specified to your interests. With the backing of a body like LUTSF, physical practitioners can imagine and realise fascinating international exchanges. In the future, I hope to work this fresh input into my work in the UK.

Many thanks for your support and best wishes for your continued projects

Madeleine McGowan

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### Mallakamb Rope Report

By Madeleine McGowan

#### Intro

In January 2012 I travelled to Pune, India, on a travel bursary from the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund. This money was awarded to me to undertake a project that would further my personal development as a performer and teacher of aerial rope (also known as corde lisse), through experiencing a unique and little known style of Indian aerial work called rope Mallakamb.

The project I planned was a skills exchange between me and Parag Vartak, a champion competitor in the gymnastic techniques of Mallakamb rope and pole. In exchange for classes with him, I would

teach him western style aerial silks (photo below), a discipline in which I have specialised in my work as a contemporary circus performer. We agreed there would be no money exchanged, it was a contract of goodwill and curiosity, with the aim for each to expand our knowledge of a physical language from a culture that is not our own. Mallakamb rope and aerial rope clearly have similar vocabulary in some ways but are from different cultures and with some distinct differences, so we



hoped it would be a fascinating and valuable experience.

No one, to the best of my knowledge, knows much Mallakamb in the UK, so I was intrigued by the prospect of actually going to India to try some of their techniques firsthand.

### The Mallakamb Tradition

Mallakamb is a form of Indian gymnastics and is performed on a wooden post or a rope. It is most practiced in the southern Indian state Maharashtra. There are various clubs around the state, and nation-wide competitions are held every year.

I first became aware of rope Mallakamb through seeing videos on YouTube. In these videos tiny framed girls would scramble up a slim rope using the notorious toe climb and perform beautiful rapid sequences of moves and jaw-clenching drops. We use the same ascent in the Western tradition, the rope is gripped between the big and second toes and effectively 'walked' up. It has a reputation for being very uncomfortable, sometimes painful, causing redness, calluses and ripped skin between the toes, which in turn can lead to painful infections! Like all the moves with the rope, the body adapts and hardens with time and practice. Personally, I have always liked doing 'toe climb' (although my feet do frequently resemble elephant skin) so perhaps that is part of what drew me to Mallakamb, and made me want to try it for myself. What was remarkable about these YouTube videos to any rope performer like me, was the breakneck speed at which these small girls did this. Another interesting aspect was that some of the moves they did I could recognise from my own knowledge, but other things baffled me.



Above: Mallakamb pose Shivassen

Crucially in Mallakamb the rope should not ever be knotted. Wraps, holds and tension are used, but the rope is never actually knotted over itself. Knots are commonplace in the western tradition, a wide range is used and this allows the performer to be supported in the air. The drawback is that a knot must always be unknotted and this can restrict fluidity of movement – a problem that Mallakamb does not have.

### Parag Vartak

I began by googling keywords and soon found a website for the Academy of Physical Education, a school in Pune where Mallakamb is taught. Through this website I came into contact with Parag Vartak, who had been a teacher and competitor. Parag was immediately interested in the idea of a skills exchange. He was enthusiastic to try silks – he had seen it when a Brazilian aerial artist visited the Mallakamb championships. His own mastery of Mallakamb has been well recognised. At home his parents proudly show a display of medals, cups, trophies and photos chronicling their son's success and he has three national records to his name. In 2006, at the National championship in Amritsar, he won all five gold medals, despite the fact that he was the youngest in his category and it was his turn to perform in the early hours of the morning at 1 degree temperature outside! Coaches from the club spotted his talent and potential on a scouting trip to his school when he was twelve. They immediately saw that he was flexible, could become strong, and pick up moves. He trained at the club on evenings and weekends, going on to become one of the best competitors.

### The rules of Mallakamb

Like gymnastics, Mallakamb is subject to a series of rules and judges award or deduct points for a sequence depending on the skill in the execution of a move, and the difficulty of the move. The rules are fixed by the Mallakamb Federation of India. This is a very different approach from the aerial arts I have studied which are not assessed and competitive in this way, rather they are considered as a performance skill. Individuality and creativity are praised and the performer aims to be expressive in

the movements in the air. Mallakamb artistry is of a more scientific kind and a strict points system must be adhered to win a competition.

Parag has won several state and nation wide championships and explained the rules to me in this way:

- A set should be 90 seconds long. Points are lost if the set is longer than 90 seconds or less than 60 seconds. This accounts for the speed that I had seen in the videos.
- Sets are scored out of 10 and points are deducted for imperfections
- Faults are categorised into:
  1. Minor fault –small mistakes such as legs slightly bent instead of straight, brief loss of grip and slipping
  2. Major fault – touching the ground with any part of the body during a set, falling from the apparatus.
- Minor faults cause a 0.2 point deduction, major faults lose 0.5 point
- Competitors are divided by gender and age. There are groups for men and women as follows: under 12, under 14, under 18, above 18
- The boys under 18 category have to perform on all three Mallakamb apparatus: rope, pole and hanging
- Girls perform only on rope
- There are two sets for each apparatus – a compulsory set and an optional set
- In the compulsory set, 10 elements or moves must be displayed by every competitor. If he or she scores over 5.0 points, they qualify for the next round, the optional set, in which they perform a routine made more to choice.

### Our Skills Exchange

Parag arranged for us to train in the gym of the Tiny Tots KG and Pupil's Academy school in a suburb of Pune called Warje. The gym was generally used for physical education lessons and wrestling, and so the floor was covered in a thick mat. The ceiling had suitable structural beams for rigging a rope from and there were already some climbing ropes in the space. It suited our purposes well. We had access to the space after school finished at 4pm but Parag's own education commitments meant we could usually only train for 1 or 1.5 hours a day.

We divided this time in two. First I was pupil and Parag the teacher of Mallakamb, then he the student I the instructor in Silks. It was great that, despite the difference in our ages and



backgrounds, we were both keen to learn and comfortable enough in our disciplines to teach. We were both happy to be teacher and student by turn, so the dynamic between us was very good.

I brought rigging (attachments for aerial apparatus) with me from England but not the fabric for a silk

because I wanted to avoid carrying 16m of heavy, bulky fabric on a long haul flight. I reasoned it would probably also be cheaper to buy long stretches of fabric in India than in Europe. So, in my first days there I went to find a fabric suitable to use as aerial silks. After desperately trying to bargain the price down (as everybody advised me to do), I settled on some stretchy red velvet (polyester mix), like I have used previously. I took Parag through safety precautions in looking after the fabric and rigging it correctly. He was absolutely thrilled.



The first time I tried Parag’s rope I noticed the differences from our Western style rope – it was much slimmer, and made of a natural fibre. As I climbed I could feel my hands having to work harder in the grip and my fingers being more squashed. In fact now, weeks later, I still feel the stress in my baby fingers from this adjustment. When I did the normal wraps that I am accustomed to, the rope pinched and gripped a little tighter than I am used to. However, the toe climb was easier than on a thicker western rope. Parag shot up extremely fast - I couldn’t go so fast!

#### Our work....

We worked Monday-Friday for two weeks. Parag introduced static moves for me slowly; I taught him some basic locks in the silks. I recorded the moves I learnt in a notebook and built on them each day. Simultaneously to my own practice, I had to consider what was best to get Parag doing towards learning silks in the short time available to us.

Mallakamb incorporates yoga asanas (postures) which are performed in quick succession on the rope. This was interesting for me because I am a long-term student of yoga, but in fact on the rope my unbalanced flexibility became a problem. Parag takes his flexibility on both sides completely for granted, he has been stretched in this way from a young age.

We found many similarities in the rope vocabulary. Many Mallakamb moves have parallels in Western aerial practice but avoiding an actual lock, using the toe grip instead, so they are a little more precarious. This next part may make little sense to anyone who doesn’t do aerial rope, but here is a list of some moves I learnt and the Western equivalent I have compared them with to get a sense of how the two sets of vocabulary from different cultures overlap.

| Mallakamb name: | Western equivalent:   |
|-----------------|---|
| Recip           | one foot hang (keeping the rope between the toes whilst locking around the foot)                          |
| Gurupakkhan     | hox (the same)  |
| Pattanghi       | knee hang (but with the rope wrapped around the leg and gripped in the toe)                               |
| Simple Adhi     | standing split (bottom foot in toes, rope in front not behind)  |
| Shivassen       | closed back balance (the rope tail stays looped about one leg and gripped in toes, the body is held flat) |
| Jesus Christ    | amazon, but wrapping the leg from in to out, not out to in, gripping in the toes to free the other leg    |
| Yoga Asanas     | Y-balance and foot to head – the same   |

There are a few moves which don't have a Western version:

|                |   |
|----------------|---|
| Gaurai         | a knee hang, then the other foot joins on the rope in a 'frog' shape, or yoga lotus pose      |
| Nidrasen       | body is in a horizontal sideways position with wraps, no locks, one hand to head, one to hip. |
| Padmasen       | Seated lotus pose   |
| Pashimotanesen | pike hold seated in the rope  |

Other observations of Mallakamb technique:

- They also use a lot of held straddle/arm climbs to go up.
- They use jump descents off the rope to finish an act, such as swing into half turn off, and back summie off.
- Many of the moves start from wrapping the leg around the rope from inside to out, rather than outside to in as we generally do in Western style, resulting in the rope being in front of you and across the hips for straddle ups – as opposed to supporting you from behind such as for the basic rope move catchers. It works on the same principle but the body is in a different relationship to the rope, bringing about different possibilities.

By the end of our training period I had a short sequence of Mallakamb moves, and Parag had learnt several drops.

I did feel disappointed that I didn't get onto the more difficult drops. But I also worked as hard as I could in the two weeks and the limited training time we had! I have a series of amazing videos from an evening class I dropped in to watch at a school, where some girls were getting ready for a competition. I saw them doing really difficult fast sequences, and it was lovely to know some of the moves and be able to talk about it with them. When I got up and showed them some of my rope tricks they were absolutely delighted and immediately understood the reason for my visit and the skills exchange. I wish I had met them earlier in my visit.

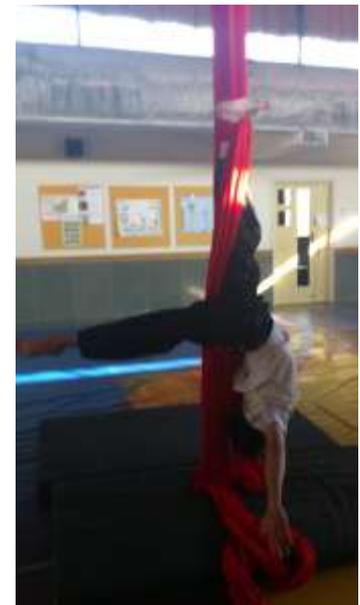


Physical hardships: Parag really struggled on the silks with how 'pumped' his arms got. This is a term aerialists use to describe the forearm muscles being over worked and filling up with lactic acid. They feel stiff, swollen and strained. The cure is to back off working and gently stretch. With time and practice this effect is massively reduced, but in these two weeks Parag suffered a lot, which cut down on how much time he could spend on the silks. I was surprised because I would have thought his comfort on the rope would transfer onto silks, but the fabric is so much stretchier he wasn't used to that. I also assumed he was gripping a bit too tight on the unfamiliar material and so I told him to relax the grip.

Similarly, I suffered on the unusually thin Mallakamb rope, and my toes were cramped every day and in need of lots of moisturiser to prevent the skin from cracking.

### The future

Parag now has his own set of silks and I very much hope he will continue to train. I gave him the advice that, in order to continue successfully he must find a training partner, both for security reasons, and to keep up motivation and interest. There are other Mallakamb performers who could be very interested in learning. Potentially, he could do very well because he is already very strong and flexible. He needs to get comfortable on the fabric and train when possible. In the future he could make a small business for himself as an aerial performer if he wished. The moves are so close to Mallakamb that he can adapt quite easily with regular practice, and there are few aerial performers in India, making it an open market for him to work in.



I plan on incorporating some of the moves and shapes from Mallakamb into my own choreographies. There are some moves I can directly 'lift' and put into rope sequences, others I may chose to play around with and try to make new material. The Mallakamb study has given me some new lines of inquiry to follow – and that is exciting, because making original material is one of my major interests in performing rope. Another thing I very much hope to take into my practise is the use of speed. I was so impressed by how fast the Mallakamb players move on and ascend the rope. In their practice they have to, because every act is strictly timed. I also find it very beautiful so I would like to work this more into my work. It will take a lot of practice and repetition, but is a new direction in my work I would like to explore. I can begin this by adding timed work on the rope as a training exercise.

If I were to do an exchange like this again, or if I wanted to do part 2 of this exchange, I would insist we schedule in more hours per day to focus on the work. I felt like I could have achieved more had

Parag had more time to work with me, which was frustrating, given how far I travelled. Now that I know the basics of Mallakamb, I would open the skills exchange up to involve more people. Parag is very interested in a trip to the UK and I could arrange for other aerialists who are interested to do some workshops with him.

I am thrilled to have travelled all that way to study something I saw on a video. It is a beautiful example of how an idea stemming from passion and interest can be brought to fruition.

Madeleine McGowan

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