

A Descriptive Study on Medieval Indian Edged Weapons

ᵀSauradeep Nath
ᵀResearch Scholar
ᵀAssam University

Abstract - The edge weapons, such as, swords, dagger, axes and spears, have always been a counterpart of a warrior before the dawn of fire arm. Apart from dagger which are still in use, other edge weapons have fallen into oblivion, to be found only in museums and privy collections. India has a rich martial tradition since the time of the Vedas which continued throughout the successive periods. This paper, thus, tries to bring into light the age-old weapons of Medieval Indian soldiers while limiting itself to the boundaries of edged-weapons. In doing so the paper attempts to catalogue and describe the war armaments forged by the Delhi Sultans and later by the Mughals. For convenience, the paper is divided into four segments, each dealing with a form of edged-weapon, vis-à-vis, swords, daggers, axes and spears.

keywords - Sword, dagger, spear, axe

Introduction

The Oxford Dictionary defines a weapon as, “A thing designed or used for inflicting bodily harm or physical damage.” The pre-historic hunter-gatherers were the first to design the earliest sharp-edged weapons made out of either stone or bone. Soon, after the discovery of metals and with their subsequent use, weapons began to be forged, first with copper, then with bronze and later with iron. The shape and size of weapon may vary from place to place based on utility and purpose. For example, in close combat a dagger would be preferred instead of a projectile weapon, such as, a *chakram*. Yet their purpose remained the same, i.e., as the definition suggests, inflicting bodily harm.

During the Medieval period, there was an inclination towards curved blade sword due to the influence of the Turks and Arabs who came to India in the 11th - 12th centuries. In 1206, the Ilbari Turk, Qutub-ud-din Aibak who was once a slave of Muhammad Ghori, founded the Delhi Sultanate. The reins of the Sultanate were soon followed by four successive Turko-Afghan dynasties, namely the Khilji, the Tughlaq, the Sayyids and the Lodhis, who ruled till 1526. The last potentate of the Sultanate was Ibrahim Lodhi who was defeated in the first battle of Panipat by Babur, once ruler of the petty state of Fargana, in present-day Uzbekistan. He was succeeded by a brief reign of his son Humayun, followed by Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb whose death in 1707 led to the gradual de-centralization of Mughal authority. The death blow to the mighty Mughal empire came in 1857 with the passage of the last Mughal ruler Bahadur Shah Zafar II.

I. SWORDS

Wielded either by one or both hands, a sword is an edge weapon comprising of a blade to which a hilt is attached. The average length of a typical sword is 40 cm, below this range the sword loses its character, making it no less than a knife or a dagger. It is a weapon used both for stabbing as well as lacerating. Some swords, for instance, the Sabre (a curved blade sword with a single cutting edge) due to their design, specializes in slashing while other types such as Rapier (a sword with a straight and thin, needle-like pointed blade) are best suited for thrusting. In any ways, the various types of the swords made and used during Medieval period are discussed below: -

- a. Talwar – The Talwar is one of the most iconic Indian swords utilized by both Rajputs and the Mughals. It has curved blade designed for slashing as well as thrusting. Its hilt is composed of short tang, oval grip and short quillon. It was a weapon of choice for cavalry and infantry soldiers.
- b. Tegha – Tegha is a sword quite similar as the talwar. It has a similar design, i.e., a curved blade and a hilt. The only distinction that can be made between a tegha and a talwar is that the former has a broader blade (in width) than the latter. Due its size, it was heavy and hence was wielded with both hands.
- c. Saif – Saif is an Indo-Arab sword having a curved blade. The uniqueness of Saif remains its hooked pommel.
- d. Kilij – Kilij was popular among the Sultans of Delhi who ubiquitously used it in battles. The blade was curved, short and broad. The width of the blade significantly widens midway to the point. Its hilt is shaped like a hook or that of a pistol.
- e. Yataghan – Yataghan is another Turkish sabre. Its blade, however, is not curved rather it has an incurved blade with no cross-guard and its pommel is shaped like a wing of a bird.
- f. Pulouar – An interpretation of talwar designed by the Afghans who came in contact with the Rajputs during the medieval period, the pulouar is similar in shape and size with its counterpart, the talwar. However, the sword’s uniqueness remains its downward drooping quillon.
- g. Zulfikar – An unsheathed sword Zulfikar has a curved blade with a bifurcated point. Its hilt has a cylindrical grip, disc pommel and in most cases has a knuckle guard.
- h. Shamshir – Literally meaning curved like a lion’s tail, Shamshir is the most revered sword of the Mughals. The sword is usually made out of Damascus steel. The blade is curved and thin. Its hilt is pistol shaped having a cross-guard with one sided pommel.

II. DAGGER

The genesis of Indian dagger can be traced in the flint hand-axe of the Stone Age. A warrior used the dagger during close combat and scuffle when sword could not be manoeuvre properly. The dagger also became the companion of Kings and Queens who wore the dagger as an attire. In many cases, during hunting or games, a prince in order to prove his valour would use a dagger to give the death blow to the kill. Daggers were an important warrior accessory throughout the ancient and medieval, and also to some extent during the modern period when daggers were replaced by bayonets. In any ways, the Medieval Indian daggers and knives can be classified under the following types:

- a. Jamadhar – One of the iconic and well known of Indian daggers is the Jamadhar. The origin of jamadhar is traced back to the Vijayanagar kingdom in the 14th century. However, in the 16th and the 17th centuries its usage became popular among the Rajputs and the Mughals. Its blade was wide, short and prudent by the tip and it has two parallel bars connected by two cross-pieces as handles. The dagger was more likely used as a jab.
- b. Chilanum – Chilanum is a double-edged, re-curved dagger that has a strong spine and fuller. It has knuckle-guard hilt with a pommel. The Mughals ornamented their chilanum with precious stones and gems. The Marathas were very fond of this dagger.
- c. Bhuj – The dagger has its origin in Bhuj, Gujrat. It is a very unique dagger for it has features similar of both an axe and dagger. The blade was single-edged, short and heavy.
- d. Bichhawa – Preferred by the Marathas, the bichhawa literally meaning a ‘scorpion’. Its blade was double curved and double-edged. Its hilt has a knuckle guard. Often baghnakh (tiger-claw) was combined with a bicchawa which was called bicchawa-baghnakh.
- e. Kard – Kard was a dagger introduced in the 16th century by the Mughals. It was Persian in origin. It had a single-edged, straight blade, the hilt of which is made of jade or ivory.
- f. Jambiya – Jambiya is a curved blade, single-edged dagger. The hilt is made out of various material such as, wood, horn, ivory and metal, and is often laden with precious jewels. Its scabbard is made of leather.
- g. Khanjar – The Mughals were the devotee of this particular dagger. The khanjar had a slightly curved, double-edge blade made out of Damascus steel. Its hilt was made either of ivory or metal embellished with precious and semi-precious stones.
- h. Khanjarali – It was an 18th century variation of khanjar. It had a re-curved blade with a knuckle guard hilt. However, it was its wide mushroom like pommel that catches the attention.
- i. Kindjal – Introduced in the 13th century by the Turks, Kindjal had its province in the Caucasus region. Its blade was straight and double-edged, having a sharp point. The hilt was broad having a dome-shaped pommel, with no knuckle-guard.
- j. Peshqabz – Peshqabz is a single-edged, re-curved blade with a thick back. Similar to kard, it was of Persian origin and was introduced by Mughals in India.
- k. Quma – In regard to the design of quma, it is similar to kindjal and quaddara that is each have a straight, double-edge blade with a dome shaped pommel. Yet, a distinction can be made among the three. Qumas are usually shorter than kindjal while quaddara is longer than the other two, assuming the length of no less a sword.
- l. Ayada Katti – Ayada Katti was used by the Mophlas of Malabar and Coorg. It had a heavy, broad, single-edged blade. Its hilt was made of ivory, horn or wood. It was seldom sheathed.
- m. Tanjore Dagger – Tanjore Dagger hails from Tanjore, Tamil Nadu. The dagger has a re-curved, double-edged blade. Its hilt was apparently made of brass and has a knuckle-guard.

III. SPEAR

A spear is a mid-range edged weapon. It is comprised of two parts – a leaf shaped sharp edged blade and a long shaft either made of bamboo or reed or even metal which is attached to the blade. Spears were favoured by both infantry as well as cavalry. The practice of wielding spears and javelins were continued by the Turks and the Mughals during the medieval period. A brief classification of the Medieval Indian spears is given below:

- a. Bhala – It was a weapon of choice for the infantry and was wielded by both hands. The bhala was basically used for thrusting, hence it was never hurled. The blade of a bhala was leaf-shaped that may or may not have a medial-rib. The shaft was made of either bamboo or a long wood. The blade had a hollow shank where the shaft was inserted.
- b. Neza – Neza was a lance used by the cavalry. It was approximately 8 to 10 feet long. Its blade was made of steel and shaped in the form of small arrow head. The shaft was typically made of bamboo. It was hurled.
- c. Baracha – Baracha was also a lance to be used by the cavalry. The uniqueness of the blade is its blade which does not have a uniform standard design. Its blade is designed in triangular, quadrangular, pentagonal, hexagonal or even octagonal shape. Unlike any spears in our tally, the baracha’s shaft is made completely out of iron. The lance might also have a grip with a knuckle-guard. Due to its thin structure the baracha was also ideal for throwing.
- d. Tschehouta – Tschehouta was a lance the blade of which were of varied sizes. In both the sides of the shaft blades were attached.
- e. Sak – It is a spear to which a flag is tied along the tip. The blade is leaf-shaped and the shaft was made of wood. At the bottom of the shaft was a metal pointed cap.
- f. Sank – Also known as sang, it was a preferred weapon of cavalry. The blade along with the shaft were made completely of iron. The average length of sank is 9 feet. Its grip was laden with leather, making it effective to hold. Moreover, it had a chain fixed with saddle.
- g. Selara – A selara has features similar to that of both a Baracha and a Tschehouta. Like a Baracha, it has a grip in the center for convenient holding and like a Tschehouta, it has blades attached to both ends of the shaft. The only difference is that the upper blade is a bit broader than the lower blade which is thinner. The shape of the blade is triangular.

- h. Ballam – Ballam is a shorter version of a Bhalla. Due to its short size, ballam became particularly easy to maneuver by the infantry. In a similar way with the Bhalla, the blade of a ballam was leaf-shaped in which a wooden shaft was fixed.
- i. Javelin – A javelin is a light throwing spear. It is one of the most effective projectile weapons used by both the infantry and the cavalry. Efficient cavaliers could throw a javelin from a charging horse with much efficiency magnifying its effectiveness.

IV. BATTLE-AXE

Axes have been used for many utilitarian purposes, such as cutting woods for hearth or to clearing forests for agricultural lands. But from time to time axes were used for martial purposes as well. Some of its types are:

- a. Tabar – Tabar had a curved, semi-circular blade approximately 7 to 15 inches long, with a wide cutting edge. The shaft of Tabar was made out of wood which was inserted in the blade's socket.
- b. Tarangala – This battle-axe was similar to tabar, the only distinction being an addition of spear-head attached at the tip of the axe. Therefore, it can be used to lacerate as well as for piercing armour. The shaft of tarangala was made primarily of metal.
- c. Jaghnol – It was designed in the form of a scythe, particularly effective to pierce armour and coat of mail. It had a thick beak-like pointed head to which a shaft is attached by the socket.
- d. Tabar-Jaghnol – As the name suggest, this battle-axe combined the features of both tabar and jaghnol, i.e., on one side there was a blade similar to that of a tabar while on the other side remained a beak like hook. Its shaft was made of iron. It was quite effective in battle for it served both purposes, to inflict wound once the chain mail is pierced.
- e. Tabar-Zin – Tabar-Zin was a battle-axe fastened to the saddle, also known as chamkhaq, chamkhmaq or chanagh. It was a weapon used by the cavalry to disarm the opponent's control over his horse. Its sharp edge hook was particularly intended for cutting the reins of a horse. The shaft of tabar-zin was made of either wood or metal. The shaft usually had metallic cap or knobs on both ends.

V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the weapons have travelled a long distance from rudimentary stone and bone implements to advanced steel made edged weapons. Its journey elicits the human desire to create havoc and holocaust. Yet, without its invention and innovation large territorial empire could not have been created either by the Turks or by the Mughals. During the medieval period particular attention were provided to the quality of swords and daggers and for this purpose high quality wootz steel was used. The artistic quality also reached its heyday as gold, silver along with precious metals were inlayed in the swords and daggers. In some daggers jade was used to make the hilt. Again, not all edged weapons were of functional type, that is, these were not always used for combat, some were also used for decorative purposes. The wearing of decorative weapons in form of side arm, along with the garment as a complementary accessory by the nobles, kings, princes and courtesans demonstrated the martial heritage of the later and likely elevated their status. Moreover, over the period of time, socio-cultural and religious implications were also attached to edged-weapon and as such it became an active part in marriage rituals as well as religious ceremonies. The manufacture of weapons also benefitted the economy as it created employment opportunities with many royal *karkhanas* being established for forging war armaments.

REFERENCES

- [1] G.N. Pant & Y. Agarwal, A Catalogue of Arms & Armours in Bharat Kala Bhavan. Delhi: Parimal Publication, 1995.
- [2] K. Roy, From Hydaspes To Kargil: A History of Warfare in India from 326 BC to AD 1999. Delhi: Manohar, 2004.
- [3] K. Roy, Warfare in Pre-British India – 1500 BCE to 1740 CE. New York: Routledge, 2015.
- [4] T. Capwell & H.J.S. Withers, The Illustrated World Encyclopedia of Knives, Swords, Spears and Dagger. London: Lorenz Books, 2017.
- [5] E.J. Paul, Arms and Armours: Traditional Weapons of India. New Delhi: Roli Books, 2005.
- [6] E.W.E. Egerton, Indian and Oriental Arms and Armours. New York: Dover Publication, 2002.
- [7] Weapons Universe. (2019). The Origins of Edged Weapons. [online] Available at: http://www.weaponsuniverse.com/Swords/The_Origins_of_Edged_Weapons.shtml [Accessed 7 May 2019].