

Arambai: A Weapon for Guerrilla Warfare

Rajkumari Barbina
Archaeological Survey of India
Kolkata Circle, Kolkata
West Bengal, India
Email: barbinark@gmail.com

Abstract

The Manipuris, particularly the Meiteis, are excellent horse riders and skilled warriors. They fought various battles mounted on ponies. They are known to be belligerent and believed to have retaliated against multiple attacks, including the ones by the Burmese. They used various weapons, and one such weapon was the Arambai, which was used by the Manipuri warriors and mounted on Manipuri ponies. Very few people know about this indigenous weapon, preserved as an exhibition game in Manipur. This paper attempts to bring out the importance of Arambai in the history of weaponry. Some scholars' views were considered while carrying out the study.

Keywords: Arambai, Burmese, Dart, Manipur, Pony, Meitei, Horsemen

Introduction

Since the dawn of human history, conflict and warfare have been an integral part of life due to the desire for more land for economic exploitation, administrative dominance, associated status, and to show superiority over other groups. The emergence of societies with fully articulated social structures that provided stability and legitimacy to new social roles and behaviors led to warfare (Gabriel and Metz, 1992). The Meiteis are inhabitants of Manipur, a small state in the Northeastern part of India. Various political and social conflicts surrounding these people made them organized as a distinct group. They were no exception to warfare, and they used multiple weapons. The Manipuris, particularly the Meiteis, are excellent horsemen and skilled warriors. As cavalry operations played a vital role during various military endeavors of the Manipuris, cavalry weapons consisted an essential part of weaponry. They fought battles mounted on horseback and were known to be aggressive. As ponies were quite famous, they made the Manipuris expert horsemen. Using this expertise, they frequently attacked and created havoc in Burma (Harvey, 1925). By the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century, the monarchy in Burma gradually declined. The Manipuris took advantage of this situation and attacked and destroyed villages in the Burmese territory (Phayre, 1883). They also managed to expel the Burmese from Manipur in 1825 (Dun, 1886). Out of the various weapons they used, one such weapon is the Arambai.

What is an Arambai ?

As mentioned above, Arambai (Plate. 1) is a vital weapon the Meitei cavalry used during battles. It is a dart consisting of two parts: one is a piece of pointed iron similar to an arrowhead, and the other is a bunch of peacock feathers tied together to form a hole where a bamboo sheath with a cord is tied in it is inserted and acts as a handle. Cock's tail is also used alternately. There are two types of Arambai: one made of wood and cane and the other made of bamboo.

A handle (Plate. 2) is used to single out and throw it at far-off places. It can be thrown in all directions, retreat and attack. It can fly to a distance of around 30 to 40 ft when thrown towards the back while retreating. It can travel far in front and upwards. The length of an Arambai is about 2 ft with the handle attached and 1.5 ft without a handle. In one Arambai, there are 9 to 12 quills of peacock feathers. They are carried in quivers strapped on either side of the saddle on a pony, both in front and behind. Around 50 Arambai were kept in a leather quiver (Plate. 3). A warrior could hurl the Arambai upon the enemy from about 70-80 yards. It can fly around 80 yards, but the

distance depends on the capability of the thrower. They could be thrown singly or in bunches. If thrown singly, a throwing stick was used to provide more impetus, increase the range, and support the feathers because if they buckled when about to be thrown, the poisoned tip could scratch the thrower and kill him. When thrown using a throwing stick, it is always done over the arm, but throwing a cluster of five or six together is done underarm. They can be thrown forward when going into the attack and behind or from the side when being chased.

The sharp tip of an Arambai is applied with poison and thrown at enemies to defend or attack in times of war. The tip is poisoned with snake venom, bee sting venom, or chilly. To get the venom, a snake is made to bite the tongue (*Alocasia et al*) or alpha (banana stem), and from there, the poison is extracted and applied to the tip. It was boiled in the case of chilly, and the pungentness was removed and used on the tip. The more rusted, the more potency. Sometimes, the bee sting venom is extracted and applied on the tip.

Genesis of the term Arambai

There are two theories regarding the origin of the name Arambai. The first theory is that it is derived from Arai Sankuchek, another name for peacock in Meiteilon (lingua franca of Manipur). The name of the dart was taken from Arai and later became Arambai. This theory is brought up because of the use of peacock feathers in Arambai. Earlier, two different types of peafowl, the Burmese Peafowl (*Pavo muticus*) and the Common Peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*), were found in the state, mainly in the hills (Higgins, 1934). According to Choudhury (2009), peafowl can occasionally be seen in the Yangoupokpi-Lokchao Sanctuary of the state and are also found in Ukhrul and Chandel districts along the India- Myanmar border. However, nowadays, they have disappeared from the wild in the state, mainly due to hunting (Praveen et al. 2019).

The second theory is that the name is taken from araapada paaiba, which means to fly to far-off places. In Meiteilon, araapada means far-off places, and paaiba means to fly, hence the name Arapai=arambai.

Literary evidence/ Mention of the word

The use of Arambai was first mentioned in an ancient text known as Kumphii. It was mentioned that the Kumphies guarded King Meidingu Punshiba with various weapons, including the Arambai. It was also used by Meidingu Ningthoukhomba in 1433 while waging war against the Khongjais and by Meidingu Kiyamba to defeat the

enemies. The text also mentions the use of this weapon by Queen Tangchakhombi during Meidingu Khunjaoba (1642- 1666) to conquer Nungsoi and Wainem (Rishikesh and Singh, 2015).

Johnstone (1896) mentioned the dreadful darts of the Manipuri cavalry, which was feared throughout Upper Burma. He states, “Manipur in the old days possessed a famous breed of ponies, larger and better bred than the so-called Burmese ponies from the Shan states. On these ponies were mounted the formidable cavalry that in the last century made Manipur feared throughout Upper Burmah and enabled her rulers, on more than one occasion, to carry their victorious arms within sight of Ava, where their Rajah Pamheiba erected a stone pillar to commemorate the event. The cavalry used the regular Manipuri saddle to protect the legs and was armed with spears and two quivers of darts. These darts in a retreat were grasped by a loop and swung round in a peculiar way when the shaft formed of peacock feathers with an iron head suddenly became detached and, flying with great force, inflicted a fatal wound wherever it struck. A skillful man could throw them with great precision”.

Another mention of the dart was by Hodson (1908). In his book ‘The Meithei’, he wrote. Their weapon was the Arambai because shock tactics could not be successfully carried out with such light cavalry in any country they were called on to operate. “It consists,” as Dr. Brown says, “of two parts- one, the outer, is formed of ten or twelve long quills of peacock feathers, which are bound together to form a narrow hollow cylinder. At one end is fastened a heavy pointed piece of iron; into the sheath thus formed, a bamboo rod is placed, projecting outwards about five inches, and forming a handle; to this handle, to give a better hold, a piece of cord is attached; each horse rider had two quivers full of this Arambai fixed on either side of his saddle behind; in using them, the handle of the rod, which fitted the sheath with moderate firmness, was grasped firmly and the sheath flung, leaving the bamboo core in hand; the heavy iron on the point made the Arambai fly true. In pursuing, the Arambai was thrown in front, and in retreating was useful in throwing behind and impeding the enemy”.

Archaeological evidence

Explorations carried out by the author and excavations taken up by the Department of Archaeology, Government of Manipur and Department of History, Manipur University, at the site of Andro in Imphal East District of Manipur yielded some arrowheads (Plate. 4), which the people could have used for both huntings and as Arambai for warfare. The barbed arrowheads must have inflicted more damage and were difficult to retrieve. The standard arrowheads must have been used for hunting animals as they were easier to withdraw from the prey. As the other parts of

an Arambai were made of perishable materials, only the presence of iron arrowheads is logical. This finding shows that Arambai must have been an integral part of the life of the people of Andro.

Devi (2005) of Manipur University excavated eight burials at Andro Khuman, and antiquities consisting of iron implements comprising of sickle, spade, butt-end of an arrow, and knives were unearthed. The chronology of the burial site is placed between the late 18th century and early 19th century. Some spearheads were also found at a secondary urn burial site at Andro Khuman by the Department of Archaeology, Government of Manipur (IAR, 2002-03). Until recently, the people of Andro used spears to hunt animals and offer them to the Almighty as part of the annual offerings.

Iron was smelted on a large scale in the state's southeastern part using traditional methods and techniques. Excavations conducted at Tummy Ching in Kakching District uncovered several iron slags. Some baked sediments from the site were dated using the TL dating method, and based on it, the site was active from the 3rd to 5th century CE (Sheikh, 2016).

The guerrilla warfare tactics using Arambai

Arambai, an essential weapon of the Manipuri cavalry, was used extensively during the Battle of Wangjing in early 1718 CE by the troops of King Garibniwaz to defeat the Burmese forces (Singh, 2017). According to Laishram Subhash (personal communication), the Arambai was used extensively during the reign of King Pamheiba to defeat Awa (modern Burma) and Takhel (modern Tripura). Despite the Manipuri cavalry being armed with around 300 guns, arambai was given more importance. Arambai was also frequently used by Prince Herachandra, the son of King Labanyachandra (1798-1800 CE), as one of the weapons for his guerrilla warfare. The Burmese invaded Manipur in 1819 CE and occupied Manipur for seven years. The period between 1819 CE and 1825 CE is known as the Seven Years' Devastation in the history of Manipur. Prince Herachandra was critical in driving the Burmese away from Manipur in 1825 CE. During this period, he extensively used Arambais. The warriors were specially trained to use this weapon.

It is said that the Burmese, during their attack, walked around looking at the skies for the next shower of arambais as the soldiers of Herachandra threw arambais from tree tops and high grounds. Even now, people who walk around looking at the sky are called possessing 'Awa mityeng,' meaning Awa's look (M, 2008). The deadly weapon arambai was used extensively by the Meitei soldiers under the leadership of Prince Herachandra to defeat the Burmese (Sharma, 1960).

The Manipuri ponies were specially trained to maneuver as soon as the rider had

thrown the arambai while galloping into attack mode. This kept the horse riders at a more extended range from the enemy, and they could concentrate on throwing, knowing their ponies would retreat as soon as they had thrown.

Manufacturers of the Arambai

There are varieties of Meitei puyas (manuscripts) that deal with various subjects. One such puya (manuscript) is the Mashil, which deals with the occupation of the people. In this puya, it is mentioned that the Nandeiba is responsible for making quiver, the Thangsaba makes the iron arrowhead, the Potshangba for collecting peacock feathers, and the Khutheiba is assigned the duty of assembling the parts (Thangjam, 2016). This allotment of duty was strictly followed during the monarchical times. Even at present, the blacksmiths are from Thangjam's family.

Discussion and Conclusion

The Manipuris were considered excellent horse riders by the neighboring kingdoms. The Burmese considered the Manipuri war captives as clever workmen, and their expertise in horse management was used well. The name 'The Cassay Horse' was given to the Burmese cavalry, consisting mainly of the Manipuris (Snodgrass, 1826).

In addition to being excellent horse riders, the Meitei cavalry was feared by neighboring kingdoms for using Arambai. The British may also have been fascinated with Arambai as some collected this weapon and donated it to museums. Some Arambai collections in the Pitt-Rivers Museum were donated by J. C. Higgins, who was a Political Agent from 1910 to 1924 (N, 2008). This powerful and lethal weapon gradually lost its importance after firearms came to be known to the people of Manipur. Gradually, the number of Meitei soldiers proficient in using this weapon decreased as the Arambai was slowly discarded in favor of firearms.

The National Games in 1999, which was held in Manipur, saw the display of Arambai for the first time in the form of an exhibit both for the state's people and visitors from outside the state. It is preserved as an exhibitory game and generally displayed during state-organized festivals and functions.

Acknowledgments

I thank Prof. Rabindra Kumar Mohanty for his constant support and guidance. I am also grateful to my aunt Ratna Mutum, who went through this paper and provided

various inputs. I also thank my family and friends for their continuous assistance and encouragement.

References

Choudhury, A. "Significant Recent Ornithological Records from Manipur, North-East India, with an Annotated Checklist." *Forktail*, no. 25, 2009, pp. 71–89.

Devi, K. I. "Excavation at Andro Khuman." *Archaeology of Manipur*, vol. VI, Annual Administration and Excavation Reports, 2005, pp. 31–33.

Dun, E. W. *Gazetteer of Manipur*. 1886. Reprinted, Delhi: Manas Publications, 1992.

Gabriel, Richard A., and Karen S. Metz. *A Short History of War: The Evolution of Warfare and Weapons*. 1992. Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute.

Harvey, G. E. *History of Burma*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1925.

Higgins, J. C. "The Game Birds and Animals of the Manipur State with Notes on Their Numbers, Migration, and Habits." *The Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*, vol. XXXVII, no. 1, 1934, pp. 81–95.

Hodson, T. C. *The Meithei*. 1908. Reprint, Akansha Publishing House, 2010.

Archaeological Survey of India. *IAR: Indian Archaeology- A Review*. New Delhi.

Johnstone, James. *My Experiences in Manipur and the Naga Hills*. London: Sampson Low, Martson and Company, 1896.

Lokendra, M. "Chahi Taret Khuntakpada Soknakhiba Herachandragi Lallong" (in Manipuri). Paper presented at the Seminar on Lamdamsigee Puwarida Herachandragee Mapham, Imphal, Manipur, June 1, 2008.

Lokendra, N. "A Brief Note on the Manipuri Historical and Cultural Materials Available in Some British Museums." Edited by Bezbaruah et al., pp. 134–139. *North-East India: Interpreting the Sources of Its History*. New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2008.

Phayre, A. P. *History of Burma including Burma Proper, Pegu, Taungu, Tenasserim, and Arakan*. London: Trubner & Co., Ludgate Hill, 1883.

Praveen, J., R. Jayapal, and A. Pittie. "Updates to the checklists of birds of India and the South Asian region—2019." *Indian BIRDS*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1–9.

Rishikesh, A., and M. Chourjit Singh. "Arambai: A Deadly Weapon of Ancient Manipur." *neScholar*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2015, pp. 66–68.

Sharma, N. Meitrabak (In Manipuri). Imphal: O. K. Store, 1960.

Sheikh, Md. R. "Physics for Cultural Heritage: Traditional Iron Smelters Flourished in the South Eastern Part of the Valley of Manipur." *International Journal of Innovation in Science and Mathematics*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2016, pp. 110–113.

Singh, Kh. G. "Relationship and Conflict between Manipur-Burma (Sanskritisation to Before Seven Years Devastation)- An Overview." *CSSEIP, MU, Working Paper*, vol. 40, Manipur University, 2017, p. 6.

Snodgrass, J. J. *Narrative of the Burmese War*. London: John Murray, Albemarle-Street, 1826. pp. 85–86.

Thangjam, H. "Arambai: The Weapon of War that Scripted History." *Souvenir of 10th Manipur Polo International 2016*, Imphal, Manipur, November 22-29, 2016.



Plate.1. Arambai without handle



Plate.2. Arambai and handle



Plate.3. An Arambai expert with his collection of arambais in a leather quiver



Plate.4. Iron arrowheads found from exploration at Andro