

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS USED IN MEDIEVAL WARFARE IN BENGAL

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Abstract

Communication is an integral part of every human activity. Warfare is no exception; military communication is thus a very important component in army organisation since the earliest days of human civilization. Hence, signaling equipment are considered equally important as the weapons of attack and defence. Even though there are very few references to the musical instruments used in warfare during medieval Bengal in contemporary historical sources, a chronicle of the instruments may be documented using other sources, especially the war epics. Therefore, a chronicle of the instruments can be documented, and it shows that the medieval poets were quite specific in their descriptions.

In modern warfare, methods of communication have changed revolutionary with the invention of mechanical communication devices. However, during ancient and medieval times, the army relied mostly upon musical instruments and flags for signaling purposes. Since human voices are inaudible in battle, drums and bells have to be used while flags and banners were used to focus their attention in the medieval period. Music had another spectacular usage as well, to arouse the enthusiasm of the troops. Abdul Fazl, the great historian of the court of Mughal Badshah Akbar mentions how the bands of musicians and experienced warriors encouraged the army to fight (Jarett, p. 50). However, its main purpose was to beat time during the march and to give signals.

Since ancient times, various kinds of musical instruments have been used. The earliest form was probably the flutes made of animal horns. Archaeologists have found artifacts from the Iran Age which are made of cow horns with finger holes drilled in the side (Marcuse, p. 71). This kind of instrument is still in use all over the world, but is particularly popular in the Baltic region and in Africa. Another popular type was the drum, a beating instrument made of animal skin, whose main purpose was to make a loud noise, to frighten wild animals. Gradually they transformed into part

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of warfare, as instruments of frightening the opposition and beating for the march.

Music and musical instruments are part of the culture in Bengal since ancient times. However, literary sources about them are scarce. Musical instruments are mentioned in various ancient and medieval historical literature. But they do not have any definitive description of the instruments. They can, however, be found in the greater Indian context. Bharata's *Natyashastra* is the earliest source, where a definition and classification of musical instruments is found. Medieval sources include *Manosollasa* or *Abhilashitartha Chintamani* of Someshvara, *Sangita Ratnakara* of Sharngadeva, and *Sangita Darpana* of Damodara. The earliest known Persian treaty on Indian music and musical instruments is the *Gunyat al-Munya*. It was composed in Gujarat in 1374-75. by an anonymous author. It was Commissioned by the governor of Gujarat Malik Shams al-Din Ibrahim Hasan Abu Raja. In all these and subsequent contemporary text, however, a general discussion about the musical instruments and their attributes are recorded. All accept that music and musical instruments were part of warfare techniques, but there is no specific description of their use in warfare is available. The legendary text of Abul Fazl cited above is the earliest in this regard, in Northern India.

In medieval Bangla literature, in the Mahakavya's, however, there are clear mentions of many such instruments as war-equipments. Below, a perfect example has been cited from the *Rasul Vijaya*:

দুই সৈন্য মুখোমুখি হই গেল যবে ।
 বিবিধ বাদ্যের ধ্বনি উঠি গেল তবে ॥
 ঢাক ঢোল কাড়া শিঙা বিউল কত্তাল ।
 মৃদঙ্গ ঝাঁঝরি বাজে নানা শব্দে তাল ॥
 ঝাঁঝরি খঞ্জরি বাজে দোহরি মোহরি ।
 সারি সারি মধু বেণু অমৃত লহরী ॥
 বীণা বেণু বাজে জঙ্গ উঠে ঝঙ্কারিয়া ।
 যুদ্ধ মাঝে বীর সব উঠে পলটিয়া ॥
 পিনাক বাজএ ঘন রুদ্ধক বিলাস ।
 জথ ঢোল শঙ্খধ্বনি শুনিতে উল্লাস ॥
 সারি সারি সানাই সুস্বরে করে রাও ।
 যুদ্ধ মাঝে বীর সব উল্লসিত গাও ॥

বাজএ বিজয় ঢোল তবলা নিশান
 দগরেত দিলকাঠি, ভূমি কম্পমান ॥
 কম্পিত পৃথিবী হৈল দুন্দুভির ধ্বনি।
 হস্তীগুষ্ঠে দমা বাজে জঙ্গ ধ্বনি শুনি ॥ (Sharif, 1968, pp 34-35)

Almost all the musical instruments used in medieval warfare in Bengal have been mentioned in this one particular stanza. They include, *Dhak*, *Dhol*, *Kadha*, *Shinga*, *Beul* (Bugle?), *Kottal*, *Mridanga*, *Jhanjari*, *Khanjari*, *Veena*, *Venu*, *Pinaka*, *Sankha*, *Sanai*, *Tabla*, *Dagara* and *Dhunduvi*. In *Sikandarnama* there are references for some more, viz., *Damama*, *Bheri* and *Bheur* as follows:

‘আর দিন প্রভাতে সাজিল দুই দল।
 নানা বাদ্য শব্দ হৈল মহা কোলাহল।
 দুমদুমির মহাশব্দ উঠিল গগণ।
 নানা বর্ণে নানা ছত্র ঢাকিল তপন।
 ইস্রাফিল ফুকে প্রাণ ফুকিল কর্ণাল।
 ভেরীকুল শব্দে স্বর্গ বসু হয়ে কাল।
 ঢাক ঢোল দগর বাজায়ে বর্ণে বর্ণে।
 ভূমি তোলপাল শব্দে তালি লাগে কর্ণে।
 শিঙ্গা ভেউরের শব্দ অতি ভয়ঙ্কর।
 শুনিয়া কম্পিত ধরাধর থরথ’ (Sharif, 1968, pp 34-35)

Many other medieval poetical works based on heroism in warfare have similar descriptions. These include: *Imam Vijaya*, *Sri Krisna Vijaya*, *Yousuf Zulekha*, *Annada Mangala*, *Chandi Mangala*, *Dharma Mangala*, *Padmavati* and the Bangla version of the great epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

The instruments mentioned in the two stanzas cited above contains almost all the names available in these literary texts. An attempt can be made to classify and define those by using the definition and classifications found in the general sources mentioned above. Bharata classified four types of instruments:

- Tata (String Instruments)
- Avanaddha (Instruments covered with membrane)
- Sushira (Wind Instruments)
- Ghana (Solid, or the Musical Instruments which are stuck against one another). (Ghosh 1951)

This basic classification is accepted and used in almost all the subsequent scholarly writings, with only the term *Avanaddha* being replaced by *Vitata* in some texts. The first authority to use it is *Gunyat al Munya*; thereafter this term was popular during the medieval period (Dimpy 2012, p. 54). The instruments cited in the texts above can also be classified using Bharata's definition.

a. String instruments:

The largest group of Indian musical instruments belongs to this group. However, string instruments are mainly used in classical music. They are meant for enjoying in a quiet environment. Therefore, these types of instruments are not suitable for the loud spaces of warfare. We can find only one name, the Veena.



Plate 1: Veena

The main body of the Veena is molded from a block of wood and there is a gourd smaller in size which forms a kind of rest or support. The instrument has seven strings, four of which are the main strings for playing the music and three side strings are used for drone cum rhythmic accompaniment. The instrument is played by the deflection of the strings by the lateral movement of the fingers of the left hand and the strings are plucked by the fingers of the right hand.

The term *Veena* was used in ancient India to commonly refer to any string instrument monochord, polychord, bowed, plucked, fretted, non-fretted, zither, lute or lyre. Many believe opinion that the word traced back to. Vana, a string instrument mentioned in the *Rig Veda*, and later in the

Atharvaveda (Dimpy, p. 66). Therefore, even though no other variety of stringed instrument is mentioned, there is every possibility that they were used in warfare.

b. Instruments covered with a membrane

The most widely mentioned instruments of music in war are the percussion. According to Bharata's definition, percussion instruments belong to two different varieties: *Avanaddha*, and *Ghana Vadya*. Of the two, *avanaddha* is a kind of instrument made with a hollow body made of solid equipment, covered with membrane, usually made of animal skin.

Mridanga, *bheri*, *dhak*, *dhol*, *kadha*, *naqara*, *dundhubhi*, *damama*, *dagara*, and *tabla* - all are different kinds of membranophones, known as drums and kettle drums. *Dundubhi*, *damama* and *dagara* are the most cited of them. It is said that the earth trembles when these war drums are beaten.



Plate 2: Naqqara

Dundubhi, *Naqqara* and *Bheri* belong to the same family of large war drums. Indian epics mention these war drums. The battle drum was

regarded with great respect and the war said of this drum implied the defeat of the army. *Dundubhi* was the traditional Indian version, however, during the medieval period, the Persian version, *Naqqara* was very popular. It was an integral part of the army as well as the royal household. Abdul Fazl's description has some details of the instruments used in the Mughal army. He has mentioned the rules of *naubatkhana*, where *Naqqara*'s were beaten at certain intervals along with the music of *Shehnai*. He mentions that during warmarch or hunting, throughout the journey (from departure to arrival at destination) the drummers "would not cease their hands from beating the drums placed on the elephants." It was also usual practice to beat the drums at every *Kos* of the journey (according to the number). The drum was also beaten to sound the alarm of enemy attack (Sarkar, p. 127).

The shape of the drum is conical, often like a large bowl. The shell is usually metallic, made of riveted copper, brass or sheet iron. The diameter of the head is between two and a half and three feet. In some places in North India, there are *naqqaras* with a diameter of as much as five feet. They were so large that they had to be carried on the back of elephants. The drummers used specially shaped sticks, covered at the top with hard, tanned hide to beat them.

Dundhubhi, on the other hand, had a clay pot as its base in ancient times. However, with the Persian influence, the shell transformed to be made of metal or specially wood. The wooden shell's hollow interior used to be wrapped with Kansa (high tin bronze). It was beaten with deer-horn or likely shaped sticks.

Dagara and *Damama* are also larger size of drums, used in tandem with *Naqqara* and *Dundhubhi*. Often they are cited together as *Dundhubhi-Damama* or *Nagara-Dagara*.



Plate 3: Dhole

The smaller variety of membranophones includes *Mridanga*, *dhak*, *dhol* and *kadha*. These create a softer beat compared to the varieties mentioned above. Rather than signalling for any steps of warfare, these types of instruments are used more in march-past and for recreational purpose. Usually these types of drums are of such a size, that the players can carry them by hanging around their necks with strips made of hide. The most common type is called the Dhol, The Dhol is a barrel-shaped drum made of wood, usually about 18 or 20 inches in length and 12 inches in diameter. The size however varies greatly in different places. The skin on both heads is stretched round leather hoops fastened to the shell and kept taut by means of interlaced leather thongs or thick rope. A leather band passed around the shell and over the braces serves to tighten the 2 heads to the pitch (Dimpy, p. 166). The *Dhol* is played both by hand and stick. A relatively larger variety is called the *Dhak*, or *Donka*. Unlike *Dhol*, it is played in only one side, placing it vertically on the ground and beating with sticks only. *Dhak* is more commonly used in warfare, and their special varieties are called as *Joya-Dhak* or *Rana-donka* etc. On the other hand, *Dholak* is a relatively smaller variety.



Plate 4 : Mridanga

Mridangam or *Mridanga* is another popular variety. The name suggests that its shell may have been made of clay-pot. However, it is also made of wood. The shape of the drum is almost cylindrical and it is around one and a half to two feet in length. The right head of the *Mridangam* is covered with three concentric layers of calf and sheep skin and the left side with two layers of buffalo and sheep skin. The centre of the right side has a permanent coating of a black substance which is a mixture of boiled rice, coal dust and other substances. It is this black layer that gives its characteristic tone to the *Mridangam* and facilitates tuning to a particular pitch (Krishnamurti 1971, p. 37).

Tabla is also mentioned in a few places. However, it was not meant to carry and play during war time because it has two different parts. Of the two, one is the *tabla* proper and the other is the *dagga* (*duggi* or *bayan*). The *tabla* is invariably made of wood and it has a vessel broader at the bottom and narrower at the top.

c. Solid Musical Instruments

The second variety of percussion instruments is called *Ghana Vadya* by Bharata. In these instruments, the sound is produced by striking instruments made up of metal pieces. A striker or hammer is used to play

these instruments. Ghana Vadyas are not capable of producing definite pitches that are required for creating a melody. However, they make very loud beats, and therefore, was handy for the loud space of war field.

At least three names are found in the medieval war epics: *Kottal*, *Jhanjari* and *Khanjari*.

Kottal is the a derivation of *Karatala*. The word literally means rhythm of the hand. The instrument is made of wooden blocks with holes for the fingers and circular copper plates. Pairs of Kartals are played with both hands by the movement of fingers.

Jhanjari is a larger variety of *Manjira* or *Mandira*. It consists of two metal plates with strings attached to fix them in fingers. Noise created by striking them with one-another supplements the beats of the drum.



Plate 5: *Khanjari*

Khanjari is a mixture of *Avanaddha* and *Ghana vadya*. It consists of a circular wooden frame about 10 inches in diameter and two and a half inches broad, covered on one side with a skin, preferably that of the wild lizard. The other side is left open. The frame is provided with three or four slits and a few pieces of metal or coins are inserted in a cross bar inside the slit. These make a jingling sound when the instrument is shaken. The variation in sound is brought about by pressing the skin near the rim with the four fingers of the left hand while playing with the right hand.

d. Wind Instruments

In Bharata's description, *Shusira* or the wind instruments are mentioned as the third variety. However, these types of instruments are

considered one of the earliest types invented all over the world. It is also one of the most widely used varieties in Indian warfare since the Vedic times.

At least six names are found in medieval way epics, that can fit into this category: *Sankha*, *Shinga*, *Beul*, *Venu*, *Pinaka* and *Sanai*. Of them, *Sankha*, *Shinga* were the most widely used.

In Vedic literature, the *shankha* is a sacred emblem of the Hindu god Vishnu. It is held in high esteem in the Vedic religion. Trumpeting with *Shankha* is a common phenomenon to start any ritual, be it religious or administrative. It was used as a war-trumpet as well. Shankha is a shell of a sea snail species *Turbinella pyrum*. It is a species found living in the Indian Ocean and surrounding seas. The shell is porcelaneous, the surface of the shell is strong, hard, shiny, and somewhat translucent, like porcelain. To make it a trumpet or wind instrument, a hole is drilled near the tip of the apex of the *shankha*. When air is blown through this hole, it travels through the whorls of the *shankha*, producing a loud, sharp, shrill sound. This sound is the reason the *shankha* was used as a war trumpet, to summon helpers and friends.



Plate 6: *Shankha* and *Shinga*

Shinga is another type of trumpet of the ancient people. *Singa* or *Shinga* (literally horn) is a horn-shaped wind instrument. It was made from buffalo or deer horn, but later on, the material has been changed in to brass or other metals. The *ranashinga* is a specific variety of battle-horn. It looks like a very large English S. Its name is associated with its use during a battle in ancient times.

The *bheri* is a wind instrument made of brass and, like the *ranashinga*, was blown on the battlefield. It is actually a variety of Bugles, and *beul*, mentioned in *Rasul-Vijaya* is most probable this bugle.

Even though there are very little references of the musical instruments used in warfare during medieval Bengal in contemporary sources, a chronicle of the instruments may be documented using other sources. The war epics of the period mention quite a few names, and many of them are either still in use or have been used as modified versions. Therefore, a chronicle of the instruments can be documented, and it shows that the medieval poets were quite specific in their descriptions. The instruments must have been very common during the time, otherwise, the descriptions may not have been so specific.

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