

RIISING STARS

The Rise and Fall of The Samurai

by Tadib Muqtada

THE Samurai were Japanese hereditary warriors for almost seven centuries. They made up more than five per cent of the population. They were members of the warrior caste in feudal Japan and claimed to be descendants from the Sun goddess Amaterasu.

The name Samurai was derived from the word 'Saburau' which means 'service'. In the beginning, the Samurai were military retainers but later on they became military aristocrats and military rulers.

The Samurai dominated the bloody civil wars of Japan during the Middle Ages.

The Samurai became involved with governments from 1156. From 1160 to 1185 the warrior Taira Kiyomori dominated court affairs, after taking over the Minamoto, Yoritomo, who took over, now formed the first military government known as the Shogunate. This dominated the political life from 1185-1868.

The Samurai of the medieval period were illiterate agricultural workers who fought between battles. During the Tokugawa family (1600-1868) the Samurai were powerful military aristocrats. They were trained in military and administrative skills. Hence, the status of the Samurai shifted distinctly from being a provincial warrior class to a more disciplined military and administrative class during the Tokugawa period.



The Ways of the Samurai Warrior

The original Samurai of the 11th and 12th century fought on horseback wearing light armour carrying bows and arrows and a sword. After the 12th century they fought on foot and carried two swords.

The Samurai had a special set of ideals called the Bushido (Way of the Warrior). Honest simple living, courage and honour were stressed in this code.

Their first duty was to their lord and they believed that it was better to die in honour than live in shame. They believed that it was better to commit suicide, than to accept failure. If they lost or failed, their relatives would think them dead. Many Samurai committed 'seppuku' or 'hara-kiri' or ceremonial suicide.

Although the Samurai were supposed to be the models of virtue and obedience, they were also known for misusing their power. There are many horror stories of how they tortured or roasted and boiled or buried their enemies alive.

Apart from their skills as warriors, the Samurai were also known for their skills in art and craftsmanship. The Samurai culture under the influence of Zen Buddhism produced the art of flower arrangement and tea ceremony which are still practised today.

The Sword of the Samurai

At birth every Samurai was given a warrior's most prized possession — the sword. The sword was meant to have his soul. He kept it with him as long as he lived and when he died he would be buried with it.

Two swords were always carried by the Samurai — the 'katana' which the owner used during battle, measuring anything between 2½ to 3 feet, and the 'wakizashi', which the owner used later to despatch a defeated foe.

A fine blade was handed down from generation to generation, usually for its razor-sharp edge. It was believed that one of these fates were brought to the owner by the sword — good fortune, property, wealth, virtue, long life, fame, sickness or poverty.

Unlike other swords made around the world, the Samurai swords were extremely sharp. If it couldn't cut off a man's head in one blow, the Samurai was dishonoured. So all the swords had to be razor-sharp.

The Samurai believed the best swords possessed supernatural power. So they were made by skilled craftsmen un-

The Life-style of the Samurai

Like all other warriors, they were very worried about the way they looked. Most of them gathered their long black hair in a nice bundle in the back of their head, which they called a 'tea-switch' style. Many had small moustaches or beards. They wore light and loose trousers, short-sleeved undergarments, long flowing robes, and wooden slippers. The colours of their garments and robes usually depended on their rankings.

The Samurai usually just ate enough to live on, and since they were great hunters, they enjoyed eating the flesh of most animals. During service they ate twice a day, which consisted of one-and-a-half pints of rice, which was wrapped in leaves or bamboo tubes. Some foods were also thought to contain special powers. Eating venison was thought to give you longer life, and wild boars flesh in October to keep diseases away.

Samurai houses were usually in a garden with an ornamental lake and a quiet flowing river. This changed during the year, with the different seasons.

There were many interesting pastimes and pleasures as well, such as flower arranging, fishing, mushroom picking, and board games such as chess, writing poetry, and football were also very popular.

The Fall of the Samurai

The Tokugawa period in Japan (1603-1867) was very peaceful. The Shoguns allowed no change, and they formed such a close order which made it impossible for any outsider to enter. They were divided into ranks. Under the Shoguns were the 'daimyo', or feudal lords, while at the bottom were the 'ashigarus' or foot soldiers.

In the later years of the Tokugawa period, the lower grades of the Samurai became very poor and discontented. Many of them helped in the movement which brought an end to all feudalism in Japan. The Samurai were then officially abolished as a class, though they retained the title of Shizol.

In 1868, the last of the Tokugawa Shoguns abdicated and slowly handed over the government to the emperor

Meiji. Then the four great clans of Choshu, Satsuma, Tose and Hizen surrendered, and with that all feudal titles and privileges of the Samurai were abolished. In 1877, the Samurai were ordered to put away their swords.

The majority put away their swords, but a minority was always there to fight for the traditional way of life. Although the powers of the Samurai were officially abolished after the end of feudalism many played a leading role in the later wars and in the creation of modern Japan. At times, during the 1870's, some among the Samurai rose in rebellion, but failed against the powerful, emerging national army.

THE SAMURAI

"The summer grass is all that remains of brave warriors dreams" Matsuo Basho (1644-94)

The samurai, an elite warrior class of feudal Japan serving under the daimyos, or barons, were the dominant military power in Japan from the 12th century through the Tokugawa period (1600-1868). Following the abolition of feudalism in 1871, they became prominent members of the government of modern Japan. The samurai here displays the two swords, ceremonial headdress, and kamishimo, a bulky, lamellate garment that distinguished the samurai class.



Life is madness

by Samia R Islam

ONCE upon a time (Nah, that style is really old; well, let's see! How would I start it? No, on second thought I would start it that way)

Once upon a time there was a little boy who lived in a little house with his mother. They were really poor. Three months ago, his father had died, leaving behind a teeny meeny (not literally) house for them. (Gosh, he should've left back atleast a diamond which could have been sold for a fortune. Whaddaya say, eh?) His mother from that time started working in a garment factory. The boy stopped going to school and started the occupation of a 'tokai'. Now, one day this Mr Tokai did what poverty makes young boys do. (You guessed it? Hey, you're really a genius!)

Yes, he stole a bun from the shop nearby. And surely, Mr Owner caught him and gave him a few beatings, now and then shouting 'Chor. Chor!' So loud that his vocal chord was about to burst. (I wonder why it didn't). A man was passing by when he heard such commotion. He stopped to find out what it was all about. And when

he did, he got so mad at Mr Owner that he threw his shoe at him. Now, Mr Owner was really busy convincing people to sentence Mr Tokai to death. Therefore he didn't notice the person who threw the shoe at him. He thought that another Mr Pedestrian was the culprit and victimised him by throwing an egg at him. Poor Mr Owner missed his target and guess what? The egg smashed into a lady's face. The lady had a few small cakes and as every action has an equal and opposite reaction, she, to equalize the action by throwing the pastries at Mr Owner.

The 'thanks giving party' continued amidst which the little boy escaped with four buns which he managed to take. (Steal, specifically) during this 'food festival'. (Oh God, can you imagine that? Throwing food at one another?!) — The boy ran as quickly as possible and on his way home, he saw a beggar begging (Amma, O Amma, Imitating him, the boy also started begging and got (after working steadily and diligently) four takas. Very happy at this tremendous success, the boy

happily started towards home. Again he came to a shop with many dainties kept on trays. This time he had money (so he didn't need to steal) and made his grand entrance. He devoured a banana (1 taka) and a banana (1 taka) and again a banana (1 taka). (Geddit?) He got one taka back and bought a lottery ticket. (God, I taka's a lot, man. One hundred paisas make one taka.)

The ticket proved to be really worth it. Guess what? He won the draw and he and his mother received 3 lakhs taka cash! (Talk about luck!) They had so much money, that they didn't know what to do with it all. Finally the mother came up with a great idea. She dug a small hole and put all the money there.

After a week she planned to take an ectasy beetsy peek at the money. When she opened the hole she saw that all the money had been nibbled by moles and all those creepy crawly creatures. (Talk about generosity. Imagine giving 3 lakhs taka to moles to nibble.) Life was terrible! But after a few hours the son returned and calmed her down. Within a week they forgot the whole situation and returned to their usual jobs. Their everyday life began and began to live regularly ever after.



AS the train came into the station, Batukeshor Shyamanta made a desperate leap for the platform and, inevitably, tumbled straight to the ground like a pumpkin rolling from the cart.

Good grief! The man could have been killed — a universal cry of sympathy seemed to rise from all around.

You see — this is how the Bengalees are killed! — an all knowing person announced from the crowd.

By now, Batuk had picked himself up. He was more humiliated than hurt.

He rolled up his sleeve. Watch your mouth, sir. Do you know how many generations my family has been living in Calcutta?

So what? A Bengalee is always a Bengalee, the same jack-of-all-trades informed again.

This was too much for Batuk. He wanted to grab one of the man's ears and make him do situps. But anything of the sort would not only be dangerous, but also foolish. He was a stranger here — if everybody decided to donate a slap or two, he would be done for. It was better to sneak away while he had the chance. He was on his way out when the station master blocked his way.

"Won't you wait a bit, sir?"

Why, what have I done to earn this honor?

You hurt yourself at my station, he said apologetically. Why don't you come into the office — I'll give you some first aid. After all, you are from Calcutta. We wouldn't want you to go back and say that we're rude or anything —

"Shut up!" Batuk snapped. You don't have to be mister nice guy. A train doesn't stop for half a minute at your station and you call yourself a station master? Why you're nothing but a point's man!

Point's man? How dare you! I'm going to sue you, file a defamation case against you!

Defamation, inflammation, certification — do whatever you want. Go to whichever hell you want to. Batuk marched out of the station.

What a way to start his first vacation to his father-in-law's home. Batuk cast a pitiful glance at himself. His favorite Shantipur dhoti was torn at the knee. His silk Punjabee was stained. As if his father-in-law had no other business but

to settle in this good for nothing, middle of nowhere village. A station where no train stops for more than half a minute and the people are so uncivilised cannot be a place for gentlemen. But since he had already arrived what else could be done now? Besides, he remembered that his mother-in-law was an excellent cook. His mouth began to water just at the thought of what would be waiting for him on the dining table.

But first, he had to get to that place — Ghoradanga.

Three ox-carts were standing under the shade of a huge tree outside the station. The drivers charged towards him as soon as they saw him. No; not to beat the daylight out of him.

"Where are you going, sir? Where?"

"Ghoradanga."

"Come, sir, come with me."

"Come with me, sir. I'll get you there quickly."

"Mine are no ordinary animals, sir. They're unicorns. I'll fly you there!"

Batuk was very confused. Two drivers were pulling at both of his hands and another was clenching his Punjabee. The three drivers began a strange cacophony around Batuk.

"Hey, what's going on here? You're trying to have fun with this gentleman?" Batuk heard a shrill voice. Then suddenly a man seemed to emerge right from beneath the ground. He was over six feet tall, his skin black as coal. A six inch long nose was hanging over his face. He had an old, worn-out shirt on, his sleeves rolled up. He looked like a mini ogre.

The man's sudden appearance seemed to work like magic. The drivers shrank back three paces from Batuk.

The huge man cried out again. "Can't you see what a fine gentleman he is? He's not going to ride in those carts of yours." He grabbed Batuk under his arm. "Come with me, sir."

"Exactly who are you?" Batuk tried his best to loosen the man's grip.

"Nobody, sir. The giant showed a smile half a mile wide. My name is Pankeshta Parui. Your servant, sir."

The Never Ending Taxi Ride

by Narayan Gangopadhyaya

Translated by Adeeb Z Mahmud

you go that easy? Pankeshta's face beamed with another half mile wide smile.

Suddenly Batuk was frozen stiff with fear. What are you trying to do, eh?"

"Don't worry, sir. I'm not a bad man. I might look like this, but my heart is as soft as cheese. I saw what those barbarians were doing to you and I couldn't bear it any longer."

"I'm grateful for your kindness. Now if you would just let me go..." Batuk was panting now.

"Let you go? Are you kidding? You're my passenger, sir. Do you know how long I have been waiting for a man like you? Where are you going sir? I'll drive you in my taxi."

"Taxi? Where?"

"There — under that mango tree. Don't you see it?"

It was a taxi alright. But one couldn't recognize it unless somebody else told him so. An ancient Austin about a hundred years old, covered with dust and dented so much that not even its owner could probably remember the original shape.

"That thing?"

"Yes sir. Pankeshta's face beamed again. It might be a bit old but it's authentic. Not like the fancy cars they build now. I've named it, 'Doduldola'. Take a ride sir, you'll fall asleep in two minutes."

Batuk was going to say something but he didn't get the chance. Pankeshta literally flew him over to Doduldola. The rusted door was tied with a few ropes. Pankeshta opened the knots and held the door open. "Get in, sir."

"Get in? In where? Batuk stared inside in utter disbelief."

"Inside the car, sir, on the seat. I'm not asking you to get up on the roof."

"Exactly where is the seat?" Batuk swallowed hard. The "seat" was a pile of springs poking up along with some coconut rind.

"How am I supposed to sit on that?"

"Oh, the springs? They're as soft as cotton."

handle at the front. He seemed to be annoyed. "You're very fussy, sir. You won't get a better taxi than this out here. You know how many Lords and Dues I've carried in this car? And you're making a fuss..."

He brought a rag from the engine, folded it and laid it on the seat. "There, now get in."

Batuk was thinking that even those ox-carts were better than this taxi. But then he remembered that Ghoradanga was a long way. Even if it was a

horn a few times. Batuk covered his ears. All the crows sitting on the tree above flew away. Some crows which were grazing nearby, went crazy and began a hundred meter sprint across the field.

Doduldola was on its way. But before the car had gone two yards, it jumped up and then fell to the ground with a tremendous thud.

"I'm dead," Batuk thought aloud.

"Not yet, sir. It's still a long

way to Ghoradanga. Pankeshta turned around from the driver's seat. "Do you have rheumatism, sir?"

"No."

"How about arthritis?"

"No."

"Then may be gout?"

"No, no, I don't have any of these," Batuk grew angry. "I wish you did, sir." Pankeshta seemed hurt.

"Why is that?"

Doduldola blew its horn,

cried out, "I'm getting out right now."

"I can't just stop the car whenever I want to, sir, when she runs out of fuel, then you can get down."

"What do you mean? Then how are you going to stop at Ghoradanga?"

Pankeshta was annoyed. "Well, we might be a bit off target."

"Off target?" The violent shaking and the poking springs grew more painful. "How much is 'a bit'?"

"Can't say, sir." Pankeshta blew the ear-pearing horn again. "Don't make me tall so much, sir. I might have an accident."

Batuk zipped his lips.

The Austin was going like a mad dog. One moment it was flying up and the next moment it was landing on the road again. Batuk's head was spinning, he was seeing stars. He just managed to squeak out. "Are we going to make it?"

"It's impossible to say, sir, but I'll try," Pankeshta replied. Batuk gave up everything to fate.

Suddenly he heard Pankeshta's excited cry. "Ghoradanga! We're here, sir..."

Batuk sat upright and looked out the window — they were passing through a village.

"Stop, stop!" he shouted out. "Can't stop till she runs out of fuel!" Pankeshta replied calmly.

"So what are we going to do?"

"Don't worry about that, sir. There's a turn five miles ahead. I'll turn the car around. By then, she'll run out of fuel."

The car shot through the fields.

"What if she doesn't?"

"We'll go back to the station — take more fuel and come back."

"What if we go through Ghoradanga again?"

"Then we'll turn back again," Pankeshta replied.

"Murderer! Thief!" Batuk cried out.

"Don't call me names, sir," Pankeshta roared. His face showed a sinister expression. "I'll just bang the car against that tree over there. Then you can't blame me."

Batuk was stiff as a log.

The car reached the intersection, turned left and started back the way they had come.

"Are we going to stop at Ghoradanga this time?"

"Sure he will. When he manages to figure out how much fuel he needs to stop at Ghoradanga, then he'll take his fare. May be today, maybe tomorrow, may be a month later," his father-in-law replied.

