

***Sāmhārī* : A Unique Game of Elephant Fighting**

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Since ancient times, fights between animals were organised by humans and the fights between animals and men were quite popular amongst both royalty as well as the masses. Cockfights, dogfights, bullfights as well as gladiators fighting with lions are examples of this form of entertainment. To fight against wild beasts was always considered a heroic act by humans all over the world. Arrangement of such fights in public for the entertainment was a common practice. During Roman era, many such fights were arranged in the Colosseum for the entertainment of the masses. Wild beasts from across the world were brought to Rome, for such fights. These fights were ruthless and full of bloodshed.

India has a long history of kings and royals. During British rule, India had many princely states and the heads of these states kept themselves busy with hunting and animal fighting. Two of these states patronized a unique sport called *sāmhārī*. In this, a violent and aggressive elephant was confronted by men in the arena like gladiators. These men were called *sāmhārs*. This uncommon sport was played during early twentieth century, in the states of Barōa (Gujarat) and Kōlhāpur (Maharashtra).

Elephants have been tamed in India for centuries and have been employed in war and in sport of hunting however not much is known about sports involving humans fighting elephants. There are records which show that this game was very popular in Barō a state. Chatrapatī Śāhu, the Māhārājā of Kōlhāpur, experienced the thrill of this sport during his visit to Māhārājā Sayājīrāō Gāikwā of Baroda. He soon introduced this sport in his state as well.

In 1913, Chatrapatī Śāhu sanctioned, the plan of the arena for *sāmhārī*, called ‘Agā’. This is a specially designed enclosure for elephant fights. The state executive engineer, Mr. A.D. Vicār, was the architect of the arena¹ (ref. Plate 1). In 1915, the construction was completed and the cost of this Agā was 40,000 /- rupees².

The Agā is rectangular in shape, 300 feet long and 250 feet wide. The ground is surrounded by a strong stone wall, 10 feet high. There is an entrance is a passage 50 feet long, 12 feet wide enclosed by a strong stone walls which are about 10 feet high. This passage has two strong gates to prevent the elephant from escaping from the arena. On the ground and in the center, there are half a dozen circular structures like wells, with four entrances to them. These were used by the men, to hide

¹ Heritage Insights, IT Professional and independent researcher, Pune, India.

² Heritage Insights, Owner, M ’blem Digitals and independent researcher, Pune, India.

during the fight. The inner diameter of these structures is approximately 15 feet and 10 feet tall. Besides this, there are a few semicircular structures as well, which are attached to the side walls. A few wells have stairs on the inside to climb the walls of the well (ref. Plate 2)

Similar or comparatively smaller Agās were built at two other places as well viz. Rajputwadi and Rādhānagarī³ (ref. Plate 3). No remains of these two Agās are found there today.

Elephants of princely state of Kōlhāpur

Possession of good elephants was always a matter of pride amongst royals in India and the state of Kōlhāpur was no exception. The Chhatrapati had 16 elephants in his stable. The names of a few of these elephants were — Jangabahāddar, Barcibahāddar, Maulābakśa, Mōtī, Gajarā, Yaśawant, Śambhu, Bhavānīśankar, etc. These elephants were kept at Kōlhāpur and at places in neighbourhood like Panhālā, Sontā⁷, Rukaī, and Rājputawādī. Chatrapatī Śāhu was quite fond of elephants and ensured their health and care⁴.

Chatrapatī Śāhu sent a few of his elephant attendants to Barōdā to learn this sport. On their return, they trained others⁵.

Śankararāō, Balāne, Bādaśāhā, Bābālāl, Abbās, Mahādu, Bā⁷ā, Gōpā⁷, Gyāndeo etc, were some famous *sāmhmar*⁶.

This sport was usually engaged in when an adult male elephant was in heat, when he tends to be more aggressive and violent. If the male elephant was not aroused enough, he was fed alcohol. A mix of sugar, almonds, pistachio and opium cakes called as Mājum was fed to the elephants. This sport required a lot of practice and Śāhu Māhārāj arranged many practice sessions under his supervision. The elephant ‘Gajarā’ was fed alcohol and used for the practice sessions. *sāmhmar*s with higher expertise were promoted and given the title of ‘Wastād’⁷.

Tools and weapons used in this sport⁸

The original tools and weapons are displayed at Chhatrapati Shahu Museum, New Palace Kolhapur and are used as reference for sketches.

¹ Source: Inscriptional Plaque at sāmhmarī ground , Kōlhāpur

² Salunkhe, H. (1998): *Chatrapatī Ūāhu smrutī darūan*. Mahārāsmra Granth Bhāndar, Kolhapur.(pp.60-61)

³ Latthe, A.B . (1924): *Memoirs of His Highness Shri Shahu Chhatrapati Maharaja of Kolhapur*. Kolhapur.

⁴ Sangve,V. & Khane, B.D. (Ed.): *Rajashri Shahu Chhatrapati Papers*. Shivaji University, Kolhapur.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ The tools and weapons are identified based on *Chatrapatī Ūāhu smrutī darūan*. Mahārāsmra Granth Bhāndar, Kolhapur by Salunkhe, H. (1998) (pp 58-59)

dupemmā: - A red coloured cloth, approximately 8 feet long and 4 feet wide, which was used to tease the elephant.

cimamā (clamps):- Various iron clamps were specially designed to fit the leg of an elephant. These round clamps had sharp nails or teeth on the inner edge. These were thrown towards the leg of the elephant. The shock of impact snapped the toothed clamp shut, causing pain to the elephant. This would slow down the elephant. These clamps were used to save the team mate on whom the elephant was charging and was closing in.(ref. fig. no.1 & 2, Plate 4)

dagbī (spiked chain):- It is approximately three feet long chain, which had metal spikes on it. This chain was thrown with the help of a rope, around the neck of the elephant when he became extremely violent. (ref. fig. no.3, Plate 4)

ankuśa (goad):- Piercing weapon used by Mahauts for controlling elephants while riding (ref. fig. no. 4, Plate 4).

Carakī (Smoke screen maker) – A tool which was used to create a smoke screen. It was used when a *sāmhmar* was under attack and the elephant was closing in. It was made up of a horn with a wooden handle to it. The horn was hollow from inside and it was filled with gun powder. When the elephant was in close vicinity of a *sāmhmar*, the person holding this tool used to ignite the gun powder which created a smoke screen. Thus, the life of the *sāmhmar* could be saved. (ref. fig. no 5, Plate 4)

bhālā (lance):- 8 to 10 feet long pointed lances are used to poke the elephant which made him violent and aggressive.

Dressing of *sāmhmars*: - Turban, short shirt and a jacket, tight slacks or short dhoti.

The sport of *sāmhmarī*

Usually 15 *sāmhmar*s participated in this sport at a time. The senior most acted as an Wastād (expert) and others followed his instructions.

Once all the *sāmhmars* took their positions, the elephant was set free into the arena. The Elephant, who was in heat and was already aggressive and violent, would approach *sāmhmars* who were waving *dupemmā*. If the *sāmhmars* hid in the wells, the elephant used to run around. If the elephant walked away, the *sāmhmar* waving *dupemmā* used to shout and tease by loudly chanting ‘Cay Lag Lag Lag, Cay Bha Bha Bha’ (). The elephant would then chase the *dupemmā*. The *sāmhmars* would run away or take shelter in the well. The elephant could throw his trunk over the parapet of the well to catch the *sāmhmar*, but *sāmhmar* would escape through the doorway of the well. Other *sāmhmars* goaded the elephant. These *sāmhmars* kept a safe distance from elephant. While the *sāmhmar* was being chased, the other *sāmhmars* used to prick him from behind with lances.

The elephant would get more and more violent and attacked the *sāmhmar* in the vicinity. The *sāmhmars* were trained well, in teasing and escaping. To save a team mate, a *sāmhmar* threw clamps on the elephant's legs. The sharp toothed clamp caused pain and the chasing elephant would slow down. *sāmhmars* sometimes used 'carakī', the smoke screen to hamper elephant's vision. When the elephant became uncontrollable, the *sāmhmars* used 'dagbī' a thorny chain, which was thrown around the elephant's neck. Due to severe pain, the elephant would halt. Gunshots were also used to frighten the elephant (ref. fig. no. 3, Plate 3).

This sport of *sāmhmarī* needed plenty of courage and physical fitness on the part of participating *sāmhmars*. A few *sāmhmars* even lost their lives during a game. This sport was played in honour of visiting guests of state, as well as for the amusement of masses. Chatrapatī Sāhu patronized *sāmhmarī* and ensured health and wellbeing of the *sāmhmars*. The Chatrapatī Sāhu, often, granted prizes like land or cash to *sāmhmars* for their dare devil acts or displays of outstanding courage. Elephants were also well cared for. No records have been found about the continuation of *sāmhmarī*, after the death of Chatrapatī Sāhu in 1922.

Unfortunately, there are no reports by eye witnesses available, who have watched or participated in this sport. The Agā, where this sport was played, is the last silent witness still standing and gradually losing its original look.

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Plate 1



H.H. Sayajirao Gaikwad of Baroda



H.H. Chatrapati Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur



Inscriptional Plaque at Kolhapur Agad



Inscriptional Plaque at Kolhapur Agad in Marati



Elephant and man fight: sculpture at *Sathmari* entrance, Kolhapur

Plate 2



Kolhapur Agad today (now converted into sports complex)

Plate 3

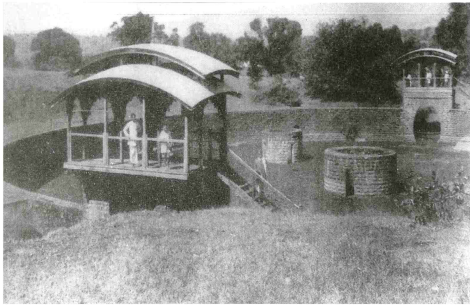


Fig. 1 Old photograph of Radhanagari Agad

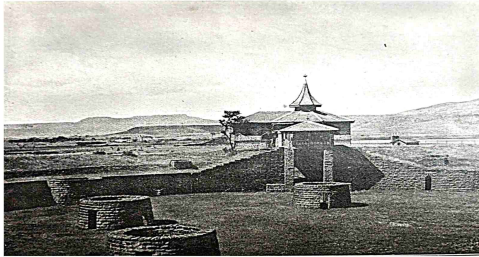


Fig. 2 Old photograph of Rajputwadi Agad

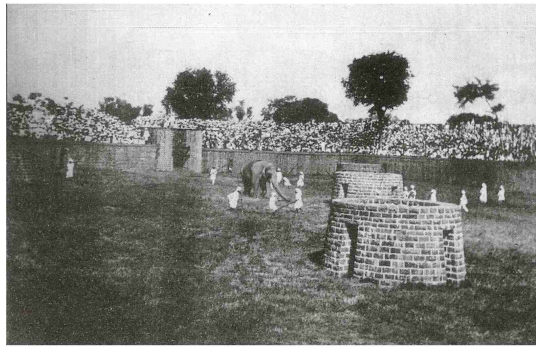


Fig. 3 A rare photograph of *Sathmari* sport in action

Plate 4: Tool & Weapons used for *Sathmari*

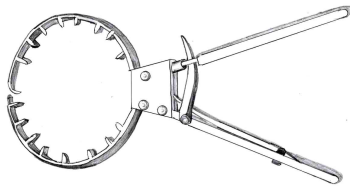


Fig. 1 *Chimata* (Clamp) Type 1

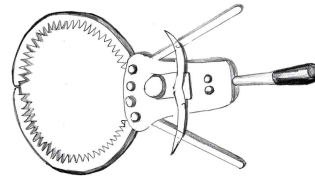


Fig. 2 *Chimata* (Clamp) Type 2



Fig. 3 *Dagbidi* (Spiked Chain)

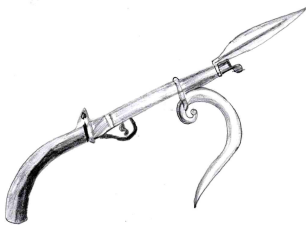


Fig. 4 *Ankush*

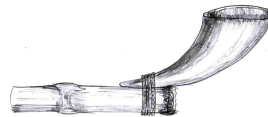


Fig. 5 *Charaki* (Smoke Screen Maker)
(a conceptual illustration)