

RESOURCE PAPER - 17



INDO-JAPAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

# Samurai

by  
Suguna Ramamoorthy



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## PREFACE

Dear Reader,

We are happy to present 'Samurai' to our discerning readers. The bimonthly Resource Paper of IJCCI brings out a number of interesting and informative educational, cultural and economic aspects on Japan and Japan-India relations.

It is always interesting to read the history of a nation. For us, it gives a sense of pride and happiness to present the readers the heroes of the past and appreciate their heroism. Great Men may leave this world but their heroic deeds remain in the hearts and minds of people for generations.

While understanding the history and the related incidents, one also learns what and what not to follow. Like India, Japan had to face a lot of internal turbulence, face a number of wars and pay a heavy price before attaining peace at the end.

As Nobuhiro Watsuki says "New eras don't come about because of swords, they're created by the people who wield them." I am sure the readers will find 'Samurai' very interesting.

01-03-2018

**N. Kumar**  
President



## Samurai

*Samurai* (bushi) are described as patriotic, powerful, disciplined, highly respected, always carrying with him a tough appearance and born to torment or kill people. This Resource Paper is an attempt to empathize with the 'Japanese Samurai'. Before going through the content, do not judge a Samurai; remember, he always carries a sword with him .

Samurai, members of a powerful military caste in feudal Japan, began as provincial warriors before rising to power in the 12th century, with the beginning of the country's first military dictatorship, known as the *Shogunate*. The samurai had dominated the Japanese government and society until the abolition of the feudal system in 1873. Their teachings can still be found today in everyday life and in modern martial arts.

The term 'samurai' comes from the Japanese word *Saburau*, meaning 'to serve', and was first used in A.D. 702 to describe mid-to-low-ranking court administrators and later, the armed imperial guards. Some clans were originally formed by farmers who had taken up arms to protect themselves from the imperial magistrates sent to govern their lands and collect taxes. These clans formed alliances to protect themselves against more powerful clans. By the 10th century, when provincial governors began offering heavy rewards for military service, the Samurai as we know them, came into being.

### **The Heian Period**

In the early 12th Century, the samurai gained a lot of money power, man power and political power. As a result, the various clans fought among themselves. Two particularly strong family groups, the Taira and the Minamoto, stood out from the rest and went on to influence Japanese politics, took part in the Hogen Rebellion of 1156, a civil war fought over the disputed imperial line of succession following the death of Emperor Toba. The conflict resulted in the Taira rising to power to form the first samurai-led government in the history of Japan. During the Heian period (until 1185) samurai adopted characteristic Japanese armor and weapons and were appointed by the Emperor and non-warrior nobility. Zen Buddhism spread among the samurai in the 13th century and helped to shape their standards of conduct.

In 1274, the Mongol-founded Yuan dynasty in China sent a force of around 40,000 men and 900 ships to invade Japan in northern Kyūshū. Japan mustered a mere 10,000 samurai to meet this threat. The invading army was harassed by severe thunderstorms



throughout the invasion which aided the defenders by inflicting heavy casualties. The Yuan army was then recalled and the invasion was called off. The Mongol invaders are said to have used small bombs, which was likely the first appearance of bombs and gunpowder in Japan.

In 1281, again a Yuan army of 140,000 men with 5,000 ships invaded Japan, which was only defended by a Japanese army of 40,000 samurai. When the Mongol army was still on its ships preparing for the landing operation, a typhoon hit north Kyūshū island and the casualties and damage inflicted by the typhoon, followed by the Japanese defense of the Hakata Bay (Fukuoka Port) barrier, resulted in the Mongols again recalling their armies. These winds became known as ‘kami-no-Kaze’, meaning ‘wind of the gods’, which made the Japanese believe that their lands were indeed divine and protected by supernatural powers.

### **Kamakura & Nanbokuchō period**

This era witnessed dramatic transformation in the politics, society and culture of Japan. The government by warrior chieftains (Shogun) or their regents, controlled the country from their base in Kamakura, near modern Tokyo. While the Emperor remained the titular head of state reigning the country in his capital in Kyoto (Japan had many national capitals in the past), the Shoguns ruled the country (binary system of government). This endured for the next seven centuries. There was a great deal of renaissance that took place during the period - the warrior class favoured artists, treated their subjects with great deal of honesty, resurgence of religious movements, Kamakura Buddhism reached the Japanese extensively and

intensively. This period is considered to be the Golden age for Japanese art - tea ceremony, rock gardens, flower arranging, theatre, painting etc. flourished during the period, until almost the end of 14th century.

### **A period of unrest**

From 15th century to early 17th century Japan witnessed widespread conflict, both physical and social, among the dominant samurai clans of Japan. Japan splintered into dozens of independent states constantly at war with one another. Consequently, warriors were in high demand. It was also the era when *ninja* warriors (belonged to the lower status of the Japanese society who followed unorthodox style of fighting) specialized in unconventional warfare, were most active. The entire country was engulfed in civil wars. Only the strong would survive, and strength lay in assembling large armies and the most advanced weapons. Foot soldiers learned to use traditional samurai weapons such as the bow, while the samurai became adept with the famed *Katana* sword. Although crude Chinese handguns reached Japan by the early 16th century, the later introduction of the European arquebus and its armor-piercing bullets caused a revolution in warfare. The Japanese soon began producing their own firearms. During the 16th century, samurai Toyotomi Hideyoshi, through a series of successful political and military campaigns, asserted control over entire Japan (1591). His power was greater than that of any previous shogun. Samurai Hideyoshi stretched himself thin with attempted conquests of China and Korea. Two years after Hideyoshi's death in 1598, a provincial leader, samurai Tokugawa Ieyasu, defeated Hideyoshi's armies and took control of the military government. Ieyasu's family line ruled Japan through the mid-19th century.

## **Civil War 1868-1869**

In January 1868, the shogunate's army (Japan's military force) numbering over 15,000 and primarily comprising of traditional samurai attacked the troops of Kyoto, the imperial capital. When the pro-imperial troops won the two-day-long fight, several important *daimyos* (feudal lords) switched their allegiance from the shogun to the Emperor. Shogun Tokugawa Yoshinobu left Osaka and withdrew to his own capital city of Edo (Tokyo). Discouraged by his flight, the shogunal forces gave up their defense of Osaka Castle, which fell to imperial forces. Saigo Takamori the 'Last Samurai', led the emperor's troops across Japan to encircle Edo in 1869 and the shogun's capital city surrendered unconditionally a short time later. The well-armed imperial troops under the leadership of samurai Saigo defeated the stubborn northern resistance of the shogunal forces and thus the samurais surrendered and the Meiji Period began. The former shogunal capital at Edo was renamed 'Tokyo', meaning 'Eastern Capital'.

## **End of the samurai clan**

Japan had finally achieved an era of relative peace. The samurai had no armies to fight, they became *Shizoku* (warrior families), the right to wear a katana sword in public was eventually abolished along with the right to execute commoners who paid them disrespect. Emperor Meiji ushered in a new Era, an armed force in favour of a more modern, western-style, conscripted army in 1873. The sword-slashing warrior of yore abandoned his neatly kept ponytail for a partially shaven head and a modern, government-issue uniform, remained the ruling class of Japan. The samurai were not a political force under the new order. Many

of the samurai went on to become administrative bureaucrats. However, the rule of the state by the military class was not completely ready. The Imperial Japanese Armies were conscripted, but many samurai volunteered as soldiers, and many advanced to be trained as officers. Much of the Imperial Army officer class was of samurai origin, and were highly motivated, disciplined, and exceptionally trained. Many samurai took pens instead of guns and took to journalistic field while some others entered governmental service and some became businessmen. For example, Iwasaki Yatarō, who was the great-grandson of a samurai, established Mitsubishi. In defining how a modern Japan should be, members of the Meiji government decided to follow the footsteps of the United Kingdom and Germany. Thus the samurai cult came to an end, almost after 1000 years. What remained was the samurai ideal of unwavering devotion to one's lord, which survives even today in the great value that the Japanese place on loyalty.

### **Wages of a Samurai**

Samurai stipends were paid in *Koku*, a measurement of volume, the equivalent of about 180 litres. In theory, 1 koku of rice (about 150 kilograms) should be good enough to feed 1 man for a year. The *ashigaru* (foot soldiers) were paid 4 koku annually. Where rice could not be grown, the economy was still measured in terms of koku, with other crops and produce converted to their equivalent value in terms of rice. Well paid samurai would receive anything from 100 koku and above. Influential ones were given land and if they received land (in place of rice) then 50% of the rice harvested from that land would be expected as a form of tax. Still, 50 koku was considered a large stipend. The samurai

and the feudal lords also received *Ryou* (Japanese currency during pre-Meiji period ), one ryou was equal to four koku of rice. The feudal lords (daimyo) were rich with the support of the shoguns and the influential daimyo was pampered and made to stay close to castle. The samurai who won the confidence of their master daimyo lead a wealthy life. Also there were *Ronins* (master less heads) employed by the shoguns. Depending on the potential and the performance, the sects were given a number of privileges from time to time.

### **Weapons of Samurai**

The samurai originally carried a sword called a 'chokuto', essentially a slimmer and smaller version of the straight swords. *Bushido* (the samurai code) states that the samurai's soul is in his sword, making it the most important weapon he carried. *Katana* (sword), usually paired with a smaller blade *Wakizashi* and this arrangement was known as *Daisho*. As sword-making techniques progressed, the swords that the samurai used became more curved, possibly one of the most famous swords in the world. A man's honour was said to reside in his sword, and the craftsmanship of swords including carefully hammered blades, gold and silver inlay and shark skin handgrips became an art in itself. Spears also came into use and they commonly used a *Yumi*, a long bow with which they practice extensively. Essentially, the further away you can be when killing someone, the better.

### **The make of a Samurai**

Samurais were style-makers, influencing the fashion of the era. Although their clothing was elaborate, every aspect of it was

designed to fit their needs as warriors. Their regular outfit consisted of wide *Hakama* trousers and a *Kimono* or a *Hitatare*, a two-part vest which left the arms free and could quickly be removed in case of a surprise attack. The samurai fashion sense was just as sharp as their swords. The most distinctive part of samurai fashion was the topknot hair style, partially shaven head to wear a helmet comfortably. *Kabuto* helmet, the most complicated part of a samurai's armor, is a bowl made of riveted metal plates, the face and brow were protected by the armor that is tied around, behind the head and under the helmet, and the neck guard protected the wearer from arrows and swords. Many samurai helmets featured ornaments and attachable pieces including masks with demonic features that both protected the face and frightened the enemy. The US army based the design of the first modern flak jacket on samurai armor.

### **Code of Samurai**

The samurai followed a code known as bushido, which means 'the way of the warrior'. It is said 'the way of the warrior is to be found in dying'. If a samurai failed to follow the code or was captured by the enemy, they were expected to commit ritual suicide in a process known as *Seppuku* or *Harakiri* that involved self-disembowelment by his own hand and then decapitation by an attendant. This was considered an extremely honourable, albeit a rather messy way to die.

Samurai committed seppuku for a number of reasons in accordance with bushido. While battlefield seppuku were common, motivations could include personal shame due to cowardice in battle, shame over a dishonest act, or loss of sponsorship from a daimyo (feudal lord), defeated but not killed

in battle, when the samurai would be allowed to commit suicide in order to regain their honour. Seppuku was an important act not only for the reputation of the samurai himself but also for his entire family's honour and standing in society. Also, sometimes it is performed as a judicial punishment too. A more painful version, called *Jumonji Giri*, involved both a horizontal and vertical cut and the performer of jumonji giri then waited stoically to bleed to death (rather than being despatched by a second). It is one of the most excruciatingly painful ways to die.

### **Planned Seppuku**

Planned seppuku had elaborate rituals. This might be either a judicial punishment or the samurai's own choice. The samurai ate a last meal, bathed, dressed carefully, and seated himself on his death cloth. There, he wrote a death poem. Finally, he would open the top of his kimono, pick up the dagger, and stab himself in the abdomen. Sometimes, a second would finish the job with a sword. Seppuku were usually performed in front of spectators, who witnessed the samurai's last moments.

Women of the samurai class often committed seppuku if their husbands died in battle or were forced to kill themselves. Also, when their castle was besieged and ready to fall, so as to avoid being raped. To prevent an unseemly posture after death, women would first bind their legs together with a silk cloth. Some cut their abdomens as male samurai did, while others would use a blade to slit the veins in their necks.

### **Multi-faceted Samurai**

Samurai clan are well educated, good at reading and math, the bushido code also dictated the warriors to be well versed in arts,

and they participated in a number of artistic endeavours including poetry (haiku), rock gardens (bonsai), ink paintings (calligraphy), flower arranging (ikebana), and tea ceremony (chanoyu), theatrical performance (noh, kabuki) etc.

### **Hard to digest**

In Japanese, ‘Tameshigiri’ literally means to ‘test cut,’ and although it wasn’t practiced exclusively by samurai, it was often done on their behalf. It involved testing the sharpness and quality of a newly forged blade on a straw mat. Sometimes, when the client purchasing the sword was particularly wealthy or of high social standing, the sword would be tested on a live, often-screaming, condemned criminal. Depending on the severity of the crime committed, the criminal could lose a limb or be cut completely in half, with the ease with which this was done, being used as a selling point for the weapon.

### **The Female Samurai Warriors ‘Onna-Bugeisha’**

Japanese history was dominated by powerful female samurais. They were trained to use weapons and martial arts long before the existence of the established samurai class. They were known as the *Onna-Bugeisha*, and they were highly educated in science, mathematics and literature. Female warriors were in the noblest class of feudal Japanese society, and would fight alongside men during warfare.

The weapon often used by the female warriors was known as the *Ko-Naginata*. This was smaller than the male *O-Naginata*, allowing a better balance for women given their height and strength and the *Kaiken* dagger - a double-edged blade with a



length of up to to 10 inches. Usually, these daggers would be used for self-defence in small and confined spaces, where the wielder's movement is limited. The other primary function of the weapon was in the act of ritual. They were expected to protect the family household in days of unrest or war and far from subordinate to any male patriarchal figures. These warriors were ready and able to defend themselves and their family against any attack. Empress Jingu was one such woman skilled and fit to lead a battle, which she did. She personally organized and led a conquest to Korea in 200 AD.

### **Tomoe Gozen and the battle of Awazu**

Tomoe Gozen was described as a woman of incredible beauty, intellect and battle skills. She was a perfect archer and horse rider, a master of the katana and a very competent politician. Her abilities in combat were equal to those of the greatest samurai of her time, and her prowess as a General was renowned throughout the country. The master of the Minamoto clan always pointed Tomoe Gozen as the first true General of Japan. She proved herself in combat on numerous occasions. Leading only 300 samurais, she fought more than 2,000 warriors and was one of the last five survivors. In 1184, in the Battle of Awazu, she defeated and then decapitated Honda no Moroshige, a famous warrior of the Musashi clan.

### **Nanako Takeko**

Highly skilled, extremely intelligent and a master of martial arts, Nakano Takeko was picked as commander of the new fighting force of onna-bugeishas. They were to join the male samurais in the Battle of Aizu in 1868, northern Japan, part of the civil war.

Their army was treated as an independent one due to the gender restrictions of the era, and was named the *Joshitai*, or Women's Army. She died in the ensuing battle, shot in the heart, but not before she had used her ko-naginata to deadly effect, killing a number of male samurai warriors in close combat. Before her last breath, the last of the great female samurai warriors asked her sister Nakano Yuko to behead her, so that she would not be taken as a trophy for the enemy. Her head was buried in the roots of a pine tree in the temple Aizu Bangemachi, where a monument was erected in her honour. That battle, which marked the beginning of the Meiji Restoration Period, was the end of the shogunate, and the last stand of the female samurai warriors.

*It is with great privilege the author dedicates this Resource Paper to the Japanese heroes and heroines who are still worshipped in Japan for their heroism.*



**Tomoe Gozen**



**Nanako Takeko**





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