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Original Article

Weapon Artistry: The Ornamentation and Symbolic Significance of Maratha Swords, Bichwas, and Katyars

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Abstract

This paper examines the metallurgical artistry, stylistic ornamentation, and symbolic significance of edged weapons within the Maratha military tradition during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Moving past functional military tactical analyses, this study focuses on the material culture of the Maratha armory (Jamatkhana). Utilizing primary historical sources—including court poetry, inventory ledgers from regional record offices, and European travelogues—this paper evaluates the aesthetic configuration and cultural iconography of signature weapons: the Dhop (straight sword), the Khanda (broadsword), the Bichwa (scorpion-dagger), and the Katyar (transverse-grip dagger). Ultimately, it demonstrates how weapons served as direct material expressions of political sovereignty, ancestral honor (Abhiman), and martial ideology under the Chhatrapatis and the Peshwas.

Keywords: Maratha weaponry, Dhop sword, Khanda, Bichwa dagger, Katyar, weapon ornamentation, Koftgari art, material culture, Maratha military tradition, political symbolism, martial heritage, Indian arms and armour, cultural iconography, Maratha armory (Jamatkhana), pre-colonial India.

Introduction: The Weapon as a Cultural Artifact

In the martial eco-system of early modern South Asia, weaponry was never viewed as a collection of simple tools for combat. Within the Maratha state, edged weapons were treated as deeply respected cultural artifacts, sacred extensions of the warrior's identity, and direct visual symbols of delegated or absolute political authority [1].

The ritual sanctification of weapons during the annual festival of *Dasara* (*Shastra-Puja*) demonstrates that the sword held a central place in the moral fabric of Maratha statecraft [2].

The decoration of hilts, the geometry of blades, and the choices of iconographic motifs were tightly regulated by social status and courtly etiquette. The *Jamatkhana* (Royal Armory) maintained distinct, meticulously detailed inventory registers that classified weapons based on their lineage, metallurgical origin (such as *Faulad* or Damascus steel), and the specific status of the craftsman (*Sikligar*), transforming the weapon into a durable historical record of individual and dynastic prestige [3].

The Sovereignty of the Straight Blade: Dhop and Khanda

The heavy cavalry charges and mobile infantry operations of the Maratha armies required unique sword forms that balanced physical flexibility with high striking power. The courtly hierarchy recognized two straight swords as symbols of supreme command.

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1. **The Dhop: The Emblem of Elite Status**

The *Dhop* was a long, straight, double-edged sword characterized by its exceptional flexibility and length [4]. Unlike the curved, Persian-influenced *Talwar* favored by the contemporary Mughal nobility, the *Dhop* was adapted from traditional indigenous designs.

The weapon featured a distinct reinforced spine along its upper half to maintain structural rigidity while the tip remained exceptionally sharp for thrusting attacks. Scribes recorded that the *Dhop* was the preferred sidearm of the highest military officers (*Saranjamdars*) and members of the royal family [5].

In formal portraiture and courtly audiences (*Darbars*), holding a *Dhop*—frequently encased in a velvet scabbard with precious gold or silver chape fittings—served as an immediate visual indicator of elite administrative and military authority [6].

2. **The Khanda: Cosmic Order and the Basket Hilt**

The *Khanda* was a heavy, broad-bladed sword that widened near the tip, explicitly engineered for devastating downward cutting strokes [4]. The ornamentation of the *Khanda* carried deep religious and political meaning:

The most distinctive artistic component of the Maratha *Khanda* was the traditional **Hindu Basket Hilt** [5]. This design consisted of a wide, circular guard plate, an integrated wide knuckle guard lined with padded velvet, and a long, curved steel spike projecting out from the pommel.

The spike allowed the warrior to grip the sword with both hands for maximum power, while also serving as a secondary blunt-force weapon in close-quarters combat. The blade sides were reinforced with long decorative steel plates (*Stiffeners*) cut into elegant geometric patterns or stylized lotus contours, transforming a structural necessity into an artistic statement of cosmic balance and military power [7].

The Geometry of the Sting: The Bichwa (Scorpion Dagger)

The *Bichwa* (literally meaning "scorpion") was a uniquely Deccani dagger explicitly designed for concealment, close-quarters ambush, and emergency personal defense [8].

1. **Organic Symmetrical Form and Concealment**

The physical anatomy of the *Bichwa* directly mimicked the biological profile of a scorpion's stinger. It featured a narrow, double-curved, S-shaped blade made from highly tempered steel.

The hilt was a simple, hollow loop of metal designed to fit closely over the palm, allowing the user to secure the weapon while leaving their fingers free to manipulate a primary shield or horse reins [9]. Because it lacked a bulky cross-guard, the *Bichwa* could be easily concealed inside the folds of a sash (*Kamabandha*) or tucked directly into the sleeve of a tunic (*Angarkha*) [8].

2. **Ornamental Inlays and Hidden Subtext**

Despite its functional, deadly design, the *Bichwa* was frequently decorated with intricate metalwork. The loop handles of weapons belonging to high-ranking commanders were decorated using the **Koftgari** technique—an artistic process where fine gold or silver wire was inlaid into undercut channels in the steel, creating flowing vine patterns (*Beli*) and classic palmette motifs [6].

The choice to decorate a concealed weapon with high-value materials reveals a distinct socio-cultural value: even an instrument designed for stealth and lethal surprise had to be adorned to match the aesthetic status and wealth of its noble owner [9].

The Katyar: Transverse Grip and Institutional Honor

The *Katyar* (push-dagger) is widely recognized as one of the oldest and most iconic weapons of the Indian subcontinent, reaching its highest level of structural decoration within the Maratha court [10].

1. Mechanical Geometry and Thrust Dynamics

The *Katyar* is characterized by its unique H-shaped hilt, consisting of two parallel sidebars connected by two crossbars that serve as the grip [10]. This design utilized a completely different mechanical alignment than standard vertical-grip daggers.

When a warrior gripped the crossbars, the straight, wedge-shaped blade stood directly in line with the forearm. This physical orientation allowed the full momentum and body weight of the user to be channeled directly into a straight punch, easily piercing leather armor or chainmail links [11].

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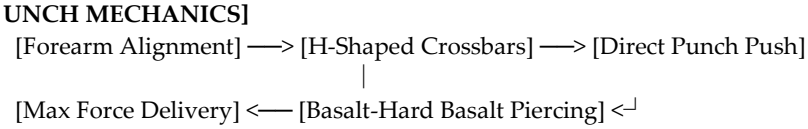

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2. Structural Iconography and Courtly Gifting

The sidebars and blades of *Katyars* served as prime canvases for intricate artistic expressions. Scribes noted that under the Peshwas, specialized *Katyars* were manufactured with hollow, perforated blades containing enclosed steel balls that rattled during motion, historically referred to as the "tears of the wounded" [3].

The hilts were sculpted into elaborate animal designs, featuring charging lions, elephant heads, or open-mouthed sea monsters (*Makaras*) swallowing the base of the blade [12].

Within the strict protocols of the Maratha *Darbar*, a highly decorated *Katyar* was the premier gift presented by a sovereign to honor an individual for exceptional military bravery or diplomatic success. Receiving a royal *Katyar* received directly from the hands of the Chhatrapati or Peshwa transferred an immense amount of institutional honor (*Sanman*) to the recipient, transforming the physical dagger into a treasured hereditary title deed of family prestige [11].

Comparative Assessment: Weapon Metallurgy and Form Across Regimes

To understand the specific design priorities and artistic traditions of the Maratha armory, its core features can be compared with the contemporary weaponry of neighboring powers:

Dimension of Weapon Artistry	Mughal Imperial Armory	Southern Deccani Sultanates	Maratha Swarajya & Peshwa Courts
Dominant Sword Morphology	Curved *Talwar* and *Shamsheer*; optimized for sweeping equestrian cuts.	Curved *Asif-Shahi* sabers and heavy execution blades.	Straight, flexible **Dhop** and broad **Khanda** with basket hilts.
Hilt Aesthetics & Material	Soft jade grips, precious gem inlays, and smooth animal-head pommels.	Heavily filigreed brass work and silver-plated floral decorations.	Solid iron structural basket hilts protected via meticulous **Koftgari** wire inlay.
Dagger Specialization	Curved *Khanjar* and *Kard*; worn openly as symbols of courtly luxury.	Stylized *Jambiyas* and long-bladed thrusting daggers.	Compact, concealed **Bichwa** and H-grip **Katyar** for dynamic combat.

Conclusion: The Artistic Legacy of the Maratha Armory

The critical technical and cultural analysis of the *Dhop*, *Khanda*, *Bichwa*, and *Katyar* demonstrates that pre-colonial Maratha weapon artistry was characterized by a sophisticated blend of engineering functionality and deep symbolic meaning. Far from being simple, unadorned weapons forged under field constraints, these edged weapons were highly designed objects that directly reflected the social status, administrative authority, and political claims of their owners.

By utilizing the octagonal geometry of the basket-hilt spike to represent universal protection, engineering the compact *Bichwa* for flexible personal defense, and using the *Katyar* as a primary symbol of state honor, the Maratha court successfully transformed weapons into indicators of cultural value and power.

The physical survival of hundreds of these beautifully crafted weapons within modern museums—retaining their fine *Koftgari* gold wires, balanced blades, and elegant zoomorphic hilts—stands as clear historical proof of the artistic maturity, material skill, and technical sophistication of pre-colonial Indian martial statecraft.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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