



Lathi

A symbol of power.

Lathi is a symbol of power and authority. Lathi is basically a bamboo stick which is generally 2- 6 feet long with various types of uses. The uses have evolved and changed throughout history. From the most ancient to the modern civilizations people have used it for support while walking, in the olden days, lathi was like the extension of the arm itself. The lathi as a weapon is as old as a man's need to survive harsh situations. The earliest dwellers of the civilization have used the lathi to walk and navigate across difficult terrains, to direct and protect domestic animals, to defend themselves against thieves or carry parcels made of cloth containing food and other necessities, tied around their lathi while on the go. From the Neanderthal man who used the stick for hunting to today's policemen who use it to punish criminals, the lathi has not changed its basic purpose. In the Mughal era the soldiers used lathis to control crowds, manage access and discipline workers.

Throughout the world, different variations of lathi are used. They are known as batons which are made of polycarbonate, plastic and rubber. They are shorter and thicker as compared to Indian lathis. Today in India, polycarbonate lathis are only used by a reserved group of police forces. Lathis were introduced in the late 19th century and were used extensively by the police then to crush the protests. The British came up with lathi guidelines that included commands such as “jabbing”, which meant hitting people in the gut, and “cutting”, denoting a blow to the neck and head. Eventually in the late the 19 th century the British started using it extensively in India to crush all protests as well as to exploit people. Thereon the Lathi economy grew and till date the economy is still viable.

Lathi khela is a traditional Bengali martial art. A kind of stick fighting practised India. A practitioner is known as a lathial .Other than fighting, lathi was often used to control domestic animals. Lathi is also used by the elderly people for support while walking. In the rural areas and in the ancient days a literal form of the bamboo stick was used whereas now sticks have been developed for better usability.

With Lathi comes mythological stories of Radha-Krishna according to which Lord Krishna visited his beloved Radha’s town, Barsana. If legend is to be believed, Krishna teased Radha and her friends, who in turn responded by taking offence at his advances and driving him out of Barsana with a lathi. To this date Lath Mar Holi is celebrated in Mathura district, UP. A hard blow from the lathi leaves a numbing sensation and blow to the head can also be fatal.



Left to Right:

- 1) Action of Lathi charge.
- 2) Early man hunting.

A very contrasting image is created when one thinks about Mahatma Gandhi with his lathi. Mahatma Gandhi's lathi symbolises peace and non violence as opposed to its current use. When Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation, visited Ghorghat village in Bihar's Munger district in 1934, the villagers wished to give him a lathi. The Mahatma said he would accept it only under one condition — the villagers would have to stop making lathis in the interest of the nation as it was the Britishers' weapon of choice against unarmed freedom fighters.

Lathi has had a large impact on the social and political system of India. Before independence it was used by the British police to beat up the freedom fighters and exploit people. The role of lathi continued even after the Britishers left. The image of a policeman with a Lathi creates a sense of fear towards the police among the people. A common step taken by the authorities to prevent any protest or marches is to simply enforce a lathi charge. Sometimes police also take unfair advantage of their power. There have been many instances in the country where policemen have used their lathis against people just on the basis of suspicion and in many cases have gotten an innocent killed. This misuse of power is the sad reality of our country.

{1} <https://gaatha.com/laathi-charged/>

{2} <https://thewire.in/law/police-lathi-coronavirus-lockdown>

{3} <http://www.acant.org.au/Articles/TheLathi.html> (Image Source)

{4} <https://www.quora.com/How-did-early-humans-hunt> (Image Source)

{5} <https://5.imimg.com/data5/QU/ER/AS/SELLER-4734974/police-cane-stick-500x500.jpg> (Image Source)

