

## Warfare and Military History in Ancient India – A Case Study

By

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### Abstract

The history of mankind is replete with devastating wars since the beginning of civilisation. The Indian history also witnessed many wars. The earliest wars in India appear to have been fought by the people of the Indus Valley civilisation. Their expertise in building forts to defend themselves confirms this theory. Subsequently, the Aryans waged wars against the natives of the land. The battles depicted in the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata further provide valuable information about the warfare mechanism of the ancient period. Later, Sisunagas, Nandas, Mauryas and Guptas fought various wars to build and consolidate their empires. Findings at the sites of the Indus Valley civilisation like fort-like structures, protective walls and arrow-heads, reveal the war mechanism of those people. Besides wood and stone, their weapons appear to have been made of bronze and copper. The discovery of iron during the Janapadas period accelerated technological changes, and weapons like spears, swords, etc., made out of iron, came into vogue. The ‘Battle of Sindh’ has been considered as the first battle during the ancient Indian history however we are not getting the sufficient sources about this theory. It was fought in between people of the Indus Valley civilisation and the Aryans.

### Evolution and Growth of Military Studies

From Vedic times to modern India, a number of changes happened as we have learnt in history. The Muslim invaders had introduced the Islamic system of learning in Maktabs and Madarsas. Finally, the British has brought the English method of teaching and organising schools and colleges. While both, the Muslims and the British encouraged higher education, the concept of educating soldiers and officers of the military also changed with time. The British set up specialised academies for training officers. Training centres for soldiers were established at different places. Teaching in military studies became different for soldiers and officers. It was no longer a common academy for both the soldier and the officer. For officers Indian Military Academy was established and for soldiers Regimental centres at various locations were opened.

### Kalari and Physical Education

Kalari was one of the most important educational institutions of South India. It was a military school where general education was imparted through a rigorous course of physical training and the study of the science of offence and defence. The Rajas of Kerala were great patrons of learning and to them are credited the establishment of Kalaris in Military Schools. It was presided over by the Panikkar or Kurup. The youth of the land were taught the use of weapons as well as marital arts such as fencing, boxing and wrestling. Even the Namboothiri youths received military training in the Kalari during the wars of the 11th century when the Kalari system came into vogue. The training received in the Kalaris was called Kalaripayattu. It was a regular and full-fledged scheme of physical education intended for the youth of the land. The

most promising of the trainees were taught the marmas, viz, the vulnerable parts of the body. Kalaris were intended to foster martial spirit of the Nairs and to keep them fit for war.

During ancient times, physical fitness was given prime importance, especially by the kings and the higher-class warriors. Physical education consisted of strength training; running; swimming; weight lifting. Along with physical education games formed an important curriculum of training. Ancient India had a rich tradition of games that were played and passed on through generations and cultures. Games were not only meant for leisure but also to develop mental capabilities and maintain physical fitness. Games played in ancient India were related to military tactics and strategy. Popular games played by soldiers include Chaturanga, Chess called Ashatapada or 64 squares, Wrestling and Archery.

Before learning about military studies, it is important to know about the education system of ancient India. First was the system of Gurukul. It was basically a residential school where all children including the children of the king were sent to learn. Important points to know about the Gurukul system are as follows:

- It was a residential school where the Guru or teacher had a house. The teacher and the student stayed together in the Gurukul.
- Students stayed in the school for about 10 years to learn many subjects.
- The subjects taught included language, grammar, science, mathematics and Vedas.
- The Guru also taught Military subjects such as use of weapons, physical training and art of warfare.
- Military subjects were compulsory for all students including sons of kings.
- Life in a Gurukul was tough and a strict disciplined routine was followed.
- Education was free and it included boarding and lodging at the Gurukul. It was possible to give free education in those days because the king and other wealthy people gave money to run Gurukuls.
- The concept of Gurukul was living with the teacher and helping the teacher with daily activities. This included farming, cleaning, woodcutting etc. The students therefore learnt practical aspects of living. By doing this, students learnt theory and practicals together so that every student could become a person with good character.

## **Administration of the Army Units**

Apart from training the soldiers and the army units, there were departments looking after administration of the army units. The officers, men and handlers were taught subjects specific to their job. For example an elephant handler learnt about animal behaviour, controlling the animal, what to feed and when to feed the animal, etc. Officers such as the Senapathi were required to have knowledge about law and justice, in order to keep the soldiers disciplined. The curriculum for the princes was Dhanurveda, Nitishastra, Siksha (lore) of elephants and chariots, Alekhya and Lekhya (Painting and Writing). Langhana (jumping) and Tairana (swimming). Military education is very different from other form of education. The training of leaders and soldiers is as per their role & task in a battle.

### ***Military Education:***

Military science was generally called Dhanurveda. In Ashrams or Gurukuls there were several departments. The department that dealt with military studies was called Mahendrasthana. You may have learnt in History about how armies were formed and what weapons were used by soldiers. All armies in India had chariots, elephants, cavalry and

infantry. It was called Chaturangabala. So how did the soldiers learn to fight? Military education was organised into two types of teaching. First was the individual training of the soldiers. The second was training the army in fighting as a combat unit.

### ***Individual Training:***

All soldiers and sons of kings had to attend Gurukul with all others. All students were treated as equal. Only those students who had the skills to handle weapons were taught Dhanurveda or the art of fighting with weapons. In other words Gurukul was the first step in learning the art of fighting. In ancient times, military education was not only organized by the State, but also by individual teachers too who would undertake this duty. In every village, there were military training camps where villagers were given military education for self-defence.

### ***Collective Training:***

After their basic education in the Gurukulam, individuals were enrolled as soldiers and organised into various units of the army. Each unit had a specific role in war. The soldiers in the cavalry were experts in horse riding and fighting on horseback. Similarly, the charioteer was a good driver who could take the chariot with speed to the given place. The elephant army was different from the cavalry. All these separate units of the army needed specialised teaching in handling the horses, elephants, etc. and also skilfully managing them in battle. You must have heard of Chanakya, who was a renowned philosopher, scholar and teacher under Chandragupta Maurya. His famous work is 'Arthashastra'. In his book he mentions that army used to assemble at one place every day in the morning and start their training. Typically the training started with physical training followed by use of individual weapons. Soldiers handling animals had to spend time with their animals and train with them. The leaders would also train the soldiers to fight as a team and follow the tactics. 2.2.3 Administration of the Army Units Apart from training the soldiers and the army units, there were departments looking after administration of the army units. The officers, men and handlers were taught subjects specific to their job. For example an elephant handler learnt about animal behaviour, controlling the animal, what to feed and when to feed the animal, etc. Officers such as the Senapathi were required to have knowledge about law and justice, in order to keep the soldiers disciplined. The curriculum for the princes was Dhanurveda, Nitishastra, Siksha (lore) of elephants and chariots, Alekhya and Lekhya (Painting and Writing). Langhana (jumping) and Tairana (swimming). Military education is very different from other form of education. The training of leaders and soldiers is as per their role & task in a battle.

### ***Military Organizations:***

The sena / bala or the army is one of the most important constituent of any state. Shukryacharya defined the sena/bala as an organized group of men well provided with offensive and defensive weapons. For the proper conduct of war armies were organized in various classes, arms and units. Commanders were appointed to lead the army in the battlefield, which was supported by a coordinated logistics system in order to meet the necessary requirements.

This system which was very prevalent in the ancient India was a crude form of Military Science and the Science of warfare, as time went on it got evolved and today we have professional institutions such as the Indian Military Academy in Dehradun, the United States Military Academy in WestPoint, etc. which are known to produce warriors which are good in both administration and warfare techniques.

## **Classification of Military Arms and Crops**

In the Vedic age the classification of the division of the armed forces was not very precise. The King maintained some of his personal guards and during war time he raised an ***Res Militaris***, vol.13, n°2, January Issue 2023

army based on volunteers. Since we are talking about the Vedic age, most of the wars and battles were fought among tribes so voluntary participation in war in order to save the tribe, which was their only identity, can act as a driving force to join the armed forces. The King also called the village contingents from different villages. So in total the army during the Vedic age comprised of three components viz. King's bodyguards, Voluntary people and Village Contingents. This was also a reason why the Aryans demanded Shurveeras or boys from Lord Indra in their prayers as it would strengthen their position and to meet the needs of their military. Ancient Epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata mention the division of the ground infantry into various arms.

## Conclusion

After analysing all the important facts mentioned in various authentic sources like the Arthashastra, the Rig Veda, etc., one can say that though the in the Indian Subcontinent, the concept of War was never in that much discussion while resolving a problem, due to which the empires existing in this area were not able to modernise or improve the conditions of their military or their strategies, the invasions which took place in the Indian Subcontinent did shape the military strategy and developed a rudimentary form of military science, which can also be proved on the basis of the ancient literary works like the Agni Purana and the Arthashastra which actually approached this concept though not in much depth but still moderately. One more thing which can be pointed out is that this rudimentary form of military science which included military administration and other various heads which have been highlighted in this project, all of this also provided a base for the evolution of an efficient administrative structure and machinery.

The history of ancient India is full of instances which demonstrate that military practices were well-regulated. The Varna system of the ancient Hindus implied the fourfold division of society into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. The Brahmins formed the group of philosophers and teachers, the Kshatriyas the group of rulers and warriors, the Vaisyas the group of agriculturists and traders, and the Sudras the group of men engaged in different menial services. The idea gained ground that to follow one's own Dharma and to sacrifice one's own life, if need be, in the following of that Dharma, was the highest duty expected of every citizen, to whatever caste he belonged.

Given the perspective of this book, what questions can we ask about ancient India that might lead us to some conclusions about the impact of that society on the military organizations of that time and place? In general, we want to know, How divisive were the dominant social structures of the period, and to what extent were the armies of the time separated from their society? In terms of ancient India, this means we would like to know about the nature and strength of the caste system in the ancient period in South Asia, after the Aryan conquest of the north Gangetic plain had been consolidated but before other foreign conquests by Arabs, Afghans, Turkish peoples, and others had an impact on Indian social structures. Most particularly, we would like to know if the caste structures of ancient, agrarian India were significantly more or less divisive than the social structures of other ancient, agrarian societies, in Europe or elsewhere. As for relations between society and the armies of ancient time, we know from a variety of sources that European armies of ancient times sometimes, but not always, took the form of aristocratic mounted soldiers supplemented by an infantry that was composed of farmers serving temporarily as soldiers as the need arose. The internal structure of such armies tended to mirror the structures of their host societies. But this was not always the case. Some ancient European armies were in various ways divorced from their societies.

What was the case in India? Finally, we would like to know how well Indian armies performed in ancient times, preferably against non-Indian armies that either came from societies that had less divisive social structures or had a different relation to their own host societies.

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After the Greeks, the Huns and Arabs tried to invade India.

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