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Traditional Military System: Religion, Ethics, and Warfare in Indian Knowledge System

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ABSTRACT

In ancient Indian political thought, the state was conceptualized through the Saptanga (seven-limb) theory, an organic framework that recognized the army (danda) as one of its essential constituent elements. This structural view, dating back to pre-Kautilyan traditions, treated the military as an axiomatic pillar of statecraft, though not as the absolute sovereign power. Kautilya's foundational text, the Arthashastra, explicitly prioritizes the treasury (kosa) over the army, arguing that financial stability is the primary engine for implementing virtuous acts and fulfilling societal desires, whereas an unbacked military carries inherent risks of rebellion or defection. However, this study traces a significant ideological shift in post-Kautilyan political treatises. Later thinkers, such as Kamandaka and Sukra, moved toward a more pronounced valorization of military might, framing the army and the treasury in a symbiotic relationship where financial reserves nourish military strength, and a powerful standing army in turn protects and expands state wealth. By exploring these shifting paradigms, this paper analyzes how ancient Indian theorists balanced fiscal prudence with militarization to ensure unhampered sovereignty and political survival.

Keywords: *Saptanga Theory, Ancient Indian Political Thought, Kautilya's Arthashastra, Danda (Army), Kosa (Treasury), Statecraft, Kamandakiya Nitisara, Sukraniti*

Ancient political thinkers of India conceived the state as consisting of seven essential elements of which the army was one. The conception dates from pre-Kautilyan times, and was accepted as an axiomatic truth by all later writers. The army was thus accorded a recognised position in the state-organism. But it is nowhere held up as the supreme element. In contemporary thought it usually takes rank as sixth in the order of gradation. There is a discussion in the *Arthasastra* as to the relative importance of the army (danda) and the treasury (kosa), and Kautilya pronounces himself definitely in favour of the latter. ''The army", he says, "may go to the enemy, or murder the king himself, and bring about every kind of trouble. But finance is the chief means of observing virtuous acts and of enjoying desires." Later writers, though adhering to the general principles of Kautilya, show a more positive inclination to idolise the army. Kamandaka, for instance, says that "even the foes of a king, possessing an efficient army, are turned into a king with a strong army rules the earth unhampered." The treasury is the root of the army, and the army is the root of the treasury. It is by maintaining the

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army that the treasury and the kingdom prosper, and the enemy is destroyed." Sukra writes, "there is neither kingdom, nor wealth, nor prowess.

FOUR-FOLD DIVISION OF THE ARMY

In the Vedic period the army appears to have consisted of two divisions, viz. foot-soldiers (*patti*) and car-warriors (*rathin*). During the post-Vedic period, however, the horse and the elephant were incorporated in the fighting corps. Hence from the time of the Jatakas there came into vogue a new category in Hindu politico-military thought. It is the 'four-foId army *caturanga bala* or *caturanga-camu*. This 'four-fold' division of the army is a common feature throughout ancient literature. In course of time, it was transformed into a literary convention, and the convention outlasted the extinction of one of the arms. As will be shown later, war chariots fell into total disuse about the 7th century A.D. But long after their abandonment as instruments of war, and long after the four-fold army had in actual practice become three-fold, the convention of *caturanga-bala* continued intact, and is referred to both in later literature and inscriptions. It should be noted here that the relative position of the four arms differed from age to age- Both Vedic and epic testimony prove that in the earliest period of our history, as in that of Greece, the chariots constituted the most important arm. The knights and nobles drove in chariots to the front line, and from them showered their missiles on the opposing knights and their masses of followers. But from the 4th century B.C. onwards, as already stated, the elephant occupied the first rank in the military service. The infantry and the cavalry seem to have always remained in a subsidiary position in the Hindu military system.

'SIXFOLD' DIVISION OF THE ARMY

Besides the above classification of the army into four arms, there was also in vogue a six-fold division, presumably based on the area or source of recruitment. According to this conception, the army was supposed to consist of six 'limbs' (sadanga) these being the hereditary troops (maula) gild levies (sreni), mercenaries (bhrta), soldiers supplied by feudatory chiefs or allies (*Shurd Balam*), troops captured or won over from the enemy (*dvisad balam*), and forest tribes (atavi-balam). The earliest references to this six-fold division occur in the epics and the Arthasastra; but they may be traced in such late works as the *Kamandakiya* and *Manasollasa*, and in inscriptions ranging from the 6th to the llth century.

Of the different classes of troops mentioned above, ancient military opinion appears to have attached the greatest importance to the manias or hereditary troops. Graded qualitatively, the mercenaries came after the manias, next came the gild levies, next the allied troops, while the forest tribes were placed at the bottom of the scale. In the *Arthasastra*, Kautilya gives elaborate reasons in support of the above gradation. "A *maula force,*" he says, "is more important than the *bhrta force* in as much as it is dependent on the king for its existence, and is the recipient of constant favour from the latter." Mercenaries are better than gild levies because they are obedient to the king, stationed near at hand, and always ready to march. Similarly gild levies are better than allied troops on the ground that they belong to the same country as the king, have the same objects in view, the "same expectations of loss and gain," and are actuated by the same feelings of rivalry and anger. Kautilya proceeds in the same strain to show why he considers the allied troops superior to renegades from the hostile country, and the latter again to forest tribes. With regard to the two last, he says: "Both these are anxious for plunder. In the absence of plunder and in times of difficulty, they prove as dangerous as a lurking snake." These views of Kautilya have been faithfully reproduced in the Niti sara of Kamandaka but they do not appear to have been universally shared. In the passage from the Mahabharata, already referred to, the gild levies are considered as important as the mercenaries. In the

Manasollasa, again, the hereditary, mercenary and allied troops are estimated as the best, the gild levies as of medium quality/and the forest tribes as the worst, while troops from the hostile country (*amitraja-balam*) are declared to be absolutely untrustworthy. The *maulas* appear to have resembled the personal retainers of the early German chieftains. Professor P- W. Thomas suggests that they were probably "connected by caste, and ultimately by race, with the king himself, such as in later times we find in the quasi-feudal states of Rajputana. Most ancient writers emphasise their unfaltering loyalty to the king. In the *Arthasastra*, Kautilya speaks of villages which were exempted from taxation in lieu of the military services which they rendered to the state. It seems reasonable to believe that the *maulas* were endowed with rent-free lands, besides cash wages when on active service. Elsewhere, the author outlines the circumstances under which this class of troops should be mobilised against the enemy. "When the king," he writes, "thinks that the number of his mania troops is more than is necessary for the defence of his kingdom, or when he apprehends that his mania force is disaffected and may cause disturbance when he is away, or when the enemy has under command a large and loyal body of hereditary troops, and is therefore to be fought out with much skill on his part, or when it is expected that the journey would be so tedious and the duration of fight so long that a mania force can alone endure the wear and tear, or when the enemy is known to be in possession of a powerful secret service, in which case the mercenary and other kinds of troops cannot be relied upon lest they may lend their ears to the intrigues of the enemy, or when the king thinks that other kinds of troops are wanting in strength, then is the time for mobilising the *maula* force. It is thus clear that this class of troops was not only considered as the most reliable (for they alone could be trusted in the face of a powerful secret service of the enemy), but as possessed of the greatest skill and fortitude. And this, in part, accounts for and perhaps justifies the special privileges which the state bestowed upon them. The Chinese pilgrim, Hiuen Tsiang, had perhaps these *maulas* in view, when he v/rote about the so-called National Guard of India, This National Guard, lie says, "are heroes of choice valour, and, as the profession is hereditary, they become adepts in military tactics. In peace they guard the sovereign's residence, and in war they become the intrepid van guard. Two other classes of troops which require some explanations are the gild levies and the forest tribes. The former have provided the basis for a considerable amount of historical speculation in recent years. In his translation of the *Arthasastra*, Dr. Shamasastry renders the term *sreni-balam* as the "corporation of soldiers." Professor D. R. Bhandarkar takes it to mean "tribal bands of mercenaries." In the opinion of Dr. R. C. Majumdar, again, the term refers to "a class of guilds which followed some industrial arts and carried on military profession at one and the same time." On the other hand, Mr. Monahan makes the following observation on the point: "Probably the military *srenis* were special troops, composed of men of different fighting races, who enlisted in the royaI army under their own chiefs. They would be called *sreni* from analogy to trade guilds, and, no doubt, served for pay, perhaps under a contract made between the king and the sreni-mukhya. Lastly, Professor Thomas, writing in the Cambridge History of India, says that the *srenis* probably refer to "ordinary trade-guilds, as an organisation for calling out the people for service in time of invasion, a sort of militia or *landwehr*.

There was however a second class of guilds which., as Dr. R C. Majiimdar says, "followed some industrial arts and carried on military profession at one and the same time." Kautilya refers to guilds of this nature. In the relevant passage, he speaks of Ksatriya *srenis*, "who lived by agriculture, trade and wielding weapons" in Kamboja and Surastra countries. Obviously, these were trade and craft guilds, which, like the Arti Maggiori of Florence or the more well-known Hanseatic League of Northern Europe, had occasionally to resort to arms in defence of their commerce and industry. The conditions which brought these commercial-cum-military societies into being appear to have been the same in India as in Europe, Briefly, these conditions

were the constant need of protection and the inability of the stale to afford it to its citizens. The weakness of the central government, the internecine strife, the still more dreadful barbarian invasions, and, last but not least, the frequency of brigandage on the highways and along river-routes —all these tended to create an atmosphere of insecurity, in which the industrial and commercial communities, being thrown on their private and local resources for protection, developed a defensive power of their own, which became at once a source of weakness and of strength to the state.

THE LAWS OF WAR

War was inevitable in primitive communities as there was neither a social organization nor a pronounced political status. In the earlier stages of civilisation war was regarded as a normal feature of life. But with the growth of civilisation, war came to be looked upon as a serious business, which should not be entered into recklessly and ruthlessly but should be governed by ethical and moral codes. Prom the earliest times the warrior was a robber and a pillager, as we see in the Eiynar tribe described in the *Silappadikaram*. But when society became organised and a warrior caste came into being, it was felt that the members of this caste should be governed by certain humane laws, the observance of which, it was believed, would take them to heaven, while their non-observance would lead them into hell. In the Vedic age we have no evidence to indicate the existence of an accepted code of fighting. Political society was just then emerging from the tribal community. But in the post-Vedic epoch, and especially before the epics were reduced to writing, lawless war had been sup planted, and a code had begun to govern the waging of wars. The ancient law-givers, the reputed authors of the Dharmashastras and the Dharmashastras, codified the then existing customs and usages for the betterment of mankind. Thus, the law books and the epics contain special sections on royal duties and the duties of common warriors. The seers and the legists thought that the high road to peace lay in the consummation of a social order guided by a code of humane laws, moral and ethical in character.

Army on the March

As Army on the march to the nature and time of march of the army, the Epic and Puranic literature recommends two kinds, viz. slow and rapid. When the offensive equipment is inadequate or when negotiations for peace are in progress, the march should be slow; on all other occasions it should be rapid. Winter (December) for long marches and summer (March-April) for short marches are generally favoured. War music to the accompaniment of the drum was a regular feature of the Hindu army on the march. A picture of the army on the march is obtained from the *Udyogaparva* (Chapter 151) of the Mahabharata.

Military Department

The *Arthasastra* acquaints us with the different types of spies to be employed, the kinds of battles to be fought the various categories of battle-arrays to be arranged, the time of march to be in view, and the carrying on of the inter-state relations to be done for the adoption of six-fold policy in endless details. It has laid stress on the holding of military exercises and maintenance of discipline in the army.

Ambulance Corps:

Ambulance corps with physicians and surgeons and nurses also accompanied the Pandava army. Thus, in point of order, arrangement, equipment and other details, the Epic army on the

march looks very much like the army of any age, ancient and modern, minus the firearms, armoured cars, machineguns and aeroplanes.

Encampment and Fortification

Encampment and Fortification The internal evidence of our national epics shows that the people were not ignorant of the rules of encampment and of the various necessities of maintaining and provisioning forts and armours with some degree of perfection. These have received great attention in the later works on the Niti- sastra. The compiler of the Agni Purana points out the necessity of a good and well-furnished armoury. An empty arsenal is, according to him, an indication of the weak system of defence. With regard to the pitching of a royal camp the first preference was given to the selection of a suitable site. The Santi parva considered a region near a forest as the best place for camping. was their extensive use in military operations in those days. Forts and camps and armouries have not escaped the attention of the writers of the Epic, Puranic and *Arthasastra* literature.

Espionage

The system of collecting information by employing spies and diplomatic agents, (Duta) envoys and ambassadors in times of peace and war, — civil and military espionage in modern phraseology, was known and widely practised. Civil espionage is as old as the Vedas. We hear of spies (spasa) employed by Vedic king to keep watch over the people. The earliest traces of military espionage arc to be found in the Epics and the Puranas. The Ramayana mentions three kinds of envoys. Rama sent Angad as an envoy to Ravana with the message. 'Give up Sita or fight.' Qualifications of an ambassador have been catalogued by Bhisma in the Mahabharata. The employment, qualifications, marching and stationing of spies have been elaborately discussed. Duryodhana's spies were busy submitting reports on neighbouring countries to their king. Spies were sent in search of the Pandavas while they were living in the country of Virata. Duhsasana went to the length of making advance payments to these secret and trusted agents. When the war was on, the services of spies and diplomatic agents as informers of the enemy's plans, movements and resources were considered essential. Such instances are found in abundance in the Epic literature.

War Music

War music rousing the spirit of combatants, invoking God's gifts and wishing victories and striking terror played an important part. The Great Epic mentions Mridanga, Bheri, Panava and Anaka

Banners

The use of flags and banners in all wars of ancient India is an old custom. The term "dhvaja" occurs in the Rigveda. "Indra (is) ours when the banners meet (in conflict; let the arrows that are ours conquer, let our heroes be superior;

Offensive and Defensive Weapons

The number of offensive and defensive weapons used by the Epic heroes and their lieutenants is simply overwhelming. From the Markandeya Purana we learn that the march of Sumbha began with 86 different weapons and 84 different clubs. The same work mentions arms, clubs, saktis, swords, daggers and clubs of many thorns. Dr. Chakravarty has given a critical account of ancient India's arms and armours, tracing their origin, whenever possible, to the Vedic times.

Military Formations

Some difficulty presents itself when one tries to state precisely, on the strength of the epic materials, the units of the army and the rule of military formations as they existed in the age of the Epics. Statements relating to this important branch of military organisation are often conflicting and make generalisations an uphill task. Generally speaking, no uniform method of military formations can be inferred from the Epic literature. The Santi parva reveals the formation of troops into units of 10, 20, 30 and so on.

EPIC MILITARY CODE

The Vedic literature contains no reference to any accepted code of fighting. But the Epic and Puranic literature holds before us an excellent military code, making a near approach to the laws of war as laid down in modern International Law. It puts emphasis on the abstention from striking down an unarmed, unequalled and fallen foe, on showing quarter, giving punishment for indiscipline and betrayal, and reward for meritorious service, on humane treatment of prisoners of war, on non-seizure of enemy property on certain condition and distinction between combatants and non-combatants, etc. Some of these rules deserve mention.

(a) A warrior in armour should not fight a Kshatriya without a coat of mail.
(b) A cavalryman should not attack a car warrior
(c) Poisoned arrows and barbed arrows should not be used. No helpless, benumbed or defeated person should be pierced with an arrow
(d) Non-combatants who hide themselves in fear or who are mere spectators should not be killed.
(e) The sick and the wounded should be looked after. In case of an insufficient supply of numbers in a particular division or divisions of the army substitute may be used. The Puranic literature forbids clearly seizure or destruction of enemy's property except under grave necessity. Temples and temple treasures, properties of non-combatants and private individuals enjoyed immunity from seizure and destruction in war
(f) The Sastras do not allow striking below the belt

CONCLUSION

The Epic and Puranic account of the military organisation and art of warfare of the Hindus makes a distinct improvement on that given in the Vedic literature. We hear a good deal of theoretical discussion about political expedients and diplomacy. But it should be borne in mind that it is by additions and interpolations that the Mahabharata has become what it is now. It is a great work dealing with almost everything about India and its glorious past, being 'the creation and expression not of a single individual mind, but of the mind of a nation, — it is the poem of itself written by a whole people.' As the original portions were composed long ago and are posterior to the Vedic literature and anterior to the Age of Alexander, some of the interesting military matters which the Great Epic reveals are genuine traditions nearly as old as the fifth century B.C. These were carried forward and perfected in the age of Magadhan imperialism, when, following the country's political unification, a policy of national defence had to be evolved and acted upon to protect the land from foreign invasion. From the days of King Divodasa in the Rigveda till the closing years of the twelfth century, when the Turkish tempest swept down upon the plains of northern India, the country passed through an endless series of battles, wars and revolutions. Kingdoms rose and fell in never ending succession. Mighty conquerors sped across the land from one end to another in search of wealth, territory, glory and adventure. Digvijaya (conquest of regions) was held up as a righteous ideal, and

empires were built up through the same mechanism of bloody strife and diplomacy as the later-day empires of the Moghuls, the Marathas and the British.

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