

Wars and War-Tactics in Ancient India

by Uma Prasad Thapliyal, New Delhi, Manohar Publishers,
2021, pp. 265, Rs 1350

*Narender Yadav**

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 (p. 18). 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. Unfortunately, the subject has attracted little attention of Indian academia, which is why there aren't many publications covering this vast subject.¹ Uma Prasad Thapliyal, a well-known scholar of military history, in his book *Wars and War-Tactics in Ancient India*, has made an attempt to explore the history of warfare and combat system in ancient India.

The book consists of six chapters, with a preface and a conclusion. Besides providing glimpses of some important battles, the first chapter also outlines a sketch of emerging dynasties, the extent of their territorial control and military prowess. The second chapter, titled 'Determining Factors', addresses statecraft. This chapter is based on an analysis of some important sources like *Niti Shastra*, *Manusmriti*, *Arthashastra*, *Puranas*, etc. The author has used historians' craft to the hilt while detailing this

* Dr Narender Yadav works as Deputy Director in the History Division, Ministry of Defence, Government of India. The views expressed here are his own.

ISSN 0976-1004 print

© 2023 Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

Journal of Defence Studies, Vol. 17, No. 1, January–March 2023, pp. 157–162



chapter. The concept of Mandalas, viz., knowledge of foes and friends, and so of the allies and enemy countries is discussed well in this chapter. However, the dictum was to seek peace with a powerful ruler, but can afford a war with the weaker (p. 66). In diplomacy of warfare, the ruler should guard his vulnerable points like a turtle but discover that of his enemies (p. 68).

The third chapter deliberates on different modes of combats and deployments of armies in the battle formations. The fourth and fifth chapters demonstrate various types of *vyuha* (array) in warfare based primarily on the epics and the *Arthashastra*. Finally, the arguments and deliberations of all five chapters are concluded in the sixth and the last chapter.

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 first battle that the author broach in this volume is the 'Battle of Sindh', which he describes as fought between people of the Indus Valley civilisation and the Aryans. However, the author does not provide material evidence to back up his narrative.

The author further elaborates that the Aryans introduced revolutionary changes in the military system. They crafted chariot and also introduced body armour and helmets in the battlefields (p. 20). Subsequently, the concept of *Chaturangini Sena* emerged in Indian warfare. This *Sena* comprised foot soldiers, chariots, horses and elephants. The chariot indeed enhanced the mobility of the army, but it had limitations in mountain warfare. Horses were instead put to better use in mountainous terrain. Elephants could be well utilised in swampy regions where other components of military arms were found to be difficult to engage.

It is evident that Thapliyal studied the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and ancient compilations like *Arthashastra*, *Niti Shastra*, *Puranas*, *Manusmriti*, etc., profoundly and thus has presented a significant analysis. He explains that the army is classified in *Mahabharata* in two categories—Open army and Secret army. The Open army meant the conventional troops while the Secret army comprised two limbs viz., moving and stationary. The moving army meant poisonous creatures like snakes, and the stationary included poisonous substances extracted

from plants and trees to kill the enemy (p. 86). The season and weather had a significant impact on the warfare too. Autumn and winter were considered the best seasons for campaigning. Appropriate time and place were also no less important factors while waging war against an opponent. *Arthashastra*, however, specifies that the enemy afflicted by calamity could be attacked any time (pp. 80–81).

In the epic age, the chariots were believed to have dominated the battleground. *Maya* (illusion) had come into vogue during the Vedic age (p. 147). Though the practical application of *maya* is first depicted in the epic battle of Kurukshetra, where by the application of it Lord Krishna created an opportunity for Arjuna to kill Jayadratha (pp. 22, 124–25, 194). A new dimension about the use of ‘reserve’ in the army during ancient period is also presented in the volume. The author argues that the study of *Agni Purana* stresses the importance of *pratigraba* (reserve) and emphasises that no ruler desirous of victory should enter a war without *pratigraba* (pp. 236–37). *Agni Purana* may perhaps be the earliest compilation which brought forth the philosophy of reserve on the battlefield, an integral part of any present-day army structure.

Thapliyal also explains an exciting account of invasion of Dwarka by King Salva. The narrative is based on *Kamandakiya Nitisara*. The preparations explained for the defence of Dwarka compares well with the present-day defence mechanism. Troops were deployed at strategic locations, and bridges on the way to Dwarka were destroyed. Further, ditches were dug to stop enemy movement. Routes to Dwarka were planted with iron thorns, and wells/ponds in surrounding areas were dried up to prevent access to water for the invader. Water bodies, if left out, were poisoned to make them unusable. The harvests were also destroyed to deny access to grain to the enemy. Further, adequate stock of grains and weapons for own use was ensured, tunnels were laid to facilitate escape from the fort if need be, and entry and exit to town were strictly regulated through passes (pp. 18–20, 131–32).

The volume further details the fierce ‘Battle of Jhelum’ between the Greek ruler Alexander and the great Indian King Porus in 326 BC. The Army of Porus fought valiantly, but the heavy rain of the previous night had made the ground slippery which disabled the Indian chariots and bowmen to apply their skill, and they ultimately lost the war. Besides the element of surprise, the better tactics and training of Macedonian troops also contributed to their victory. According to some scholars, the chariots started losing primacy in the Indian battlefields after this

war.² Thapliyal, however, refutes this assumption and stresses that the chariots continued to enjoy a respectable place in the Mauryan army. He asserts that *Arthashastra* also confirms this fact (pp. 27–28). Regardless, this invasion opened the gateway to India for foreigners, as noted by the military historian Kaushik Roy in his book *India's Historic Battles: From Alexander the Great to Kargil*. The trend was to continue in enveloping history.³ The Indian chariots and elephants further suffered a jolt when Kusanas' mounted bowmen raised the level of cavalry to a much higher pedestal, presenting a good combination of mobility and firepower (p. 37). According to Thapliyal, Indians were no less to their contemporaries worldwide in shaping the war tactics, but were slow in their application. This proved fatal in the major battles fought with the foreign invaders (p. 62).

While addressing the statecraft in early India, the author explains its four means of application—*sama* (conciliation), *dana* (gift), *bheda* (dissension), and *danda* (war). The weaker king of mandala could be subdued by applying *sama* and *dana* policy, while stronger by *bheda* and *danda*. However, *danda* always remained the last option. The author also mentions that *upeksha* (diplomatic neglect), *maya* (deception), and *Indrajala* (conjuring) were also added to statecraft during the epic and Puranas period (pp. 73–75). The volume compares the ancient military set-up with current units and formations of the army. But manpower presented from some of the ancient scriptures appears imaginary. To illustrate, *Sadasva Dhanurveda* mentions the strength of *mahaksauhini*, a formation of army as more than 10 million (p. 76), which indeed is far from logic. While examining the principles of war, the author aptly mentions that an honoured army always fights with complete will but dishonoured with burning indignation would never do that. Similarly, an army once besieged could fight back again with full vigour if re-equipped and led well by able military commanders (pp. 77–79). Many basic principles of war indeed appear to apply to the current military system. However, there are some which have become outdated with time and in context. To illustrate, citing *Kamandakiya Nitisara*, the book mentions that 'an army with women could also fight when the women are removed' (p. 79). The present experience has, however, proved that women are no less capable than their male counterparts and can adapt to any challenges when given the training and opportunity.

The book also presents a description of military camps in ancient India. The camps were well protected by guards, parapet, thorny bushes

and water ditches, and also amply stocked with water, eatables, weapons and fodder (pp. 87–88). A training area was marked to drill the soldiers. The military commanders were taught military tactics and concept of *Vyuha* (arrays). Formation of *Vyuha* was indeed an essential part of battle tactics. The *Vyuha* were formed according to the nature of the terrain, the strength of the enemy and his intentions. The military thinkers and strategists in ancient period were generally teachers and priests rather than the warriors themselves. To illustrate, Sukracharya, Bhraspati and Kautilya, the acclaimed strategists, were priests and philosophers. The author traces the origin of *Vyuha* science to the Vedic age, where hymns in four different Vedas indicate the formation of armies in *Vyuha* before launching operations. The decision on battle arrays (*vyuha*) was made after considerable deliberations amongst the military commanders and strategists (p. 152). The author discusses in detail the *Vyuh*s described in the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, Buddhist *Jatakas*, *Arthashastra* and *Smritis*. The victory and defeat in the battle largely depended on the knowledge of the science of *Vyuha* and the tactical deployment of the troops. Thapliyal postulates that the science of *Vyuha* had developed in India before Alexander's invasion (p. 189). He, however, does not delve into the theory as why Porus did not make use of this science in the battle of Jhelum. It also needs detailed examination whether he was not aware about the most recent art of warfare. The author indeed missed out the important aspect of the use of *Vyuha* by King Porus.

Finally, the book is primarily based on ancient compilations, including *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, *Arthashastra*, *Sukraniti*, *Samhitas*, *Puranas*, *Niti Shastra*, etc., which have rarely been explored to such an extent in military context earlier. The author clearly brings out that our ancient Indian literature is full of wisdom for warfare and statecraft. The Indians developed a sound military system and tactics of warfare comparable to any of their contemporaries. However, these tactics were not refined and advanced further to keep pace with the time, and thus could not prove to be of much value before the invading armies. The ancient Indian statecraft and principles of war perhaps need massive exploration to bring it to the forefront. The best part of the book is its second chapter, brilliantly crafted with complete historian's skill. The book suffers from digression in the second half of the first chapter, where the author delves into subjugation of power by different dynasties making this part a bit monotonous and taxing for the readers. The volume, however, again catches momentum from the second chapter

and keeps the reader engaged till the last, covering theories of tactics and warfare. The author has detailed his subject in an exemplary manner. The publisher also deserves applause for a good presentation. Besides intelligentsia and researchers, the book perhaps could be of some use to military leaders as well.

NOTES

1. Some books on ancient Indian warfare include: P.C. Chakravarti, *The Art of War in Ancient India*, Dacca, 1941, reprint 2020 (by ed. Kannan Krishnan); Bimal Kanti Majumdar, *The Military System in Ancient India*, 1955, reprint by Life Span Publisher, New Delhi, 2020; S.D. Singh, *Ancient Indian Warfare with Special Reference to Vedic Period*, Leiden, Brill, 1965; Kaushik Roy, *India's Historic Battles: From Alexander the Great to Kargil*, New Delhi: Primus, 2004, revised edition 2020.
2. P.C. Chakravarti, *The Art of War in Ancient India*, pp. 26–27; Kaushik Roy, *India's Historic Battles*, p. 25.
3. After the Greeks, the Huns and Arabs tried to invade India.