



VĪRASARVASVAM AND THE INDIAN TRADITION OF WARFARE

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Among the luminous treasures of ancient Indian intellectual heritage, *Vīrasarvasvam* occupies a distinguished position as a profound treatise on warfare, military organization, heroism, and royal statecraft. Emerging from the rich and martial traditions of Sanskrit literature, this remarkable work reflects the strategic wisdom, political acumen, and chivalric ideals that shaped the military culture of ancient India. War in the Indian tradition was never regarded merely as an exercise in destruction; rather, it was conceived as a sacred duty undertaken for the preservation of dharma, sovereignty, and social order. The resonant echoes of conch shells, the thunderous march of armies, and the glittering splendour of royal banners together symbolized the valour and disciplined spirit of the warrior class.



Vīrasarvasvam stands as a mirror to this grand martial civilization, illuminating diverse dimensions of warfare such as battle formations, military ethics, espionage, weaponry, fortification, and kingship. The text embodies the synthesis of courage and wisdom, where physical prowess was harmoniously blended with moral responsibility and political foresight. Thus, the study of *Vīrasarvasvam* not only unveils the science of warfare in ancient India but also reveals the philosophical and cultural foundations upon which Indian military traditions flourished through the centuries.

Division of War

Hindu military science recognizes two kinds of warfare - the dharmayuddha and the kūōayuddha. Dharmayuddha is war carried on the principles of dharma, meaning here the Kñātradharmā or the law of Kings and Warriors. In other words, it was a just and righteous war which had the approval of society. On the other hand, kūōayuddha was unrighteous war. It was a crafty fight carried on in secret. The Hindu science of warfare values both niti and saurya i.e. ethical principles and valor. It was therefore realized that the waging of war without regard to moral standards degraded the institution into mere animal ferocity. A monarch desirous of dharma vijaya should conform to the code of ethics enjoined upon warriors. The principles regulating the two kinds of warfare are elaborately described in the Dharmasūtras and Dharmasūtras, the epics (Rāmāyāēa and Mahābhārata), the Arthaçāstra treatises of Kautilya, Kāmaēōaka, and Çukra. Hindu India possessed the classical fourfold force of chariots, elephants,

horsemen, and infantry, collectively known as the Caturaṅgabala. Students also know that the old game of chess also goes by the name of Caturaṅga. From the references to this game in the Rig Veda and the Atharva Veda and in the Buddhists and Jaina books, it must have been very popular in ancient India. The Persian term Catraṅg and the Arabic Shatraṅg are forms of the Sanskrit Caturaṅga.

In the days of the Mahābhārata the shooting war used to be broadly classified into two types-

- (i) 'Dharma Yuddha or 'Nyāya Yuddha'. i.e. honest war, and
- (ii) Kūōa yuddha i.e. unethical war.²⁸

Nyāya Yuddha was the honest trial of strength and military skill. Participants used to fight strictly maintaining the ethics of war and chivalry. No soldier would resort to any cunning method or a method not sanctified by the ethics of bravery for defeating his enemy. While in the Kūōa Yuddha or unethical war the guiding factor was that nothing was unfair in war, only the end should justify the means. And the end in a war is always complete victory. Any knave or inhumane method starting from hitting below the belt, duplicity, falsehood, even killing a person praying for shelter or any other non-soldierly act could constitute the tactics in this type of war. Normally both the saints (āñis) and soldiers used to hate the Kūōa Yuddha and those who participated in it. Generally the participants of the Kūōa Yuddha were considered by others as cowards and despicable as immoral (Çalya Parva)..²⁹ Roman law made a distinction between just and unjust war which had been developed and extended by the Christian theologians, and notably by St. Thomas Aquinas. Roman thought, Sorensen feels, possibly did not classify wars as just or unjust, but rather the causes (in sense of motives or occasions) of war. Success was not as a matter of religious belief, expected to attend Roman arms if they should be taken up without just cause. The mediaeval theologians likewise looked at the question of the justice or otherwise of the cause of a warring party purely subjectively. The activities of rebels were thus bellum injustum. Whereas the counter-measures of a legitimate prince in the same conflict were bellum justum.³⁰

However, in the Kurukṅetra war the Pāēōavas most often than not used to resort to the Kūōa Yuddha under the advice and pressure of Lord Kāñēa yet with utter reluctance. This is a striking feature of the Kurukṅetra War and stands in sharp contrast to the general sense of values prevailing then in the Indian society. The Kauravas also occasionally resorted to the Kuta Yuddha-the glaring example being the killing of Abhimanyu by seven great warriors attacking him at a time.³¹ Aswatthama also butchered Sikhāndi and the sons of Draupadi violating the ethics of war. Once Kāñēa (Pl. No. XII) was going to violate the ethics(vowed not to hold weapon in the Kurukṅetra) of war when he was stopped by Arjuna. But in final the Pāēōavas could win the Kurukṅetra War only through Kuta Yuddha.³² However, adherence to Nyāya Yuddha persisted in Indian character even after the Kurukṅetra War.³³ In the history of India perhaps only Shivaji stands as the outstanding participant of the Kuta Yuddha. But history of other civilized countries is full of Kuta Yuddha, the glaring example being the Trojan War. The method in which Mohammad Ghorī defeated Prithviraj was also based on the principle which could be allowed in the Kūōa Yuddha only.

Ethics of war during the days of the Mahābhārata

There were some established ethics of war during the days of the Mahābhārata. But in the war of Kurukṅetra and after, Bhēñma stands out as the greatest exponent of and an ardent adherent to the ethics of war, Nyāya Yuddha. After Yudhisthira won the Kurukṅetra War. Bhēñma told him that:

A King should always take the side of the Dharma' i.e. the truth and honesty. When the King fails to decide on which side the Dharma lies he should abstain from the war.³⁴ This may appear as a contradiction to his personally taking the side of Duryodhana.³⁵ But it may be argued that Bhisma was never the King,

and he himself was dependent on Duryodhana for his own sustenance. Therefore, Bhishma had no other option, rather he had the obligation to fight for his King in the Kurukñetra War.

- If the opponent is honest and religious then all attempts should be made by the King for amicable and honourable settlement war should be fought only when it is a must.
- The King should not attack anyone who is not in his armour.¹⁴
- The King should not kill a person whose weapon is broken or the carrier animal killed.
- A person defeated in the battle or stunned with fear should not be attacked by the King.
- Arrow, smeared with poison, should not be used-only dishonest persons resort to this heinous method. Be returned to the enemy's camp or brought to own camp for treatment; in the latter case the enemy should be repatriated with full honours after complete recovery.³⁶

However, on rare occasion a King may have the recourse to dishonesty, for the ultimate victory, in that case the King must confess his dishonest motives to some of his very truthful and honest friend (Sānti Parva). Bhéñma also told Duryodhana that a King should fight only Kings (Bhéñma Parva). It was at the instance of Bhéñma that both the Kauravas and Pāëðavas agreed to the following norms just before the Kurukñetra War was on:

- Fraternity and good relationship should be restored between the two parties after the cessation of the shooting war irrespective of its results.
- If one side starts the 'battle of words'(abuses and bravado), the other should retaliate only with words and not with weapons.³⁷
- Those who would run away from the fighting armies, should not be chased and/or killed.³⁸
- Battle should be fought between the equals i.e.-a charioteer should fight a charioteer. Cavalry man another cavalry man, foot-soldier another foot soldier. Warnings to enemy should precede the attacks.³⁹
- A person benumbed in war or trusting his enemy would not be attacked.
- A person fighting other person or asking for shelter or unwilling to fight or without any weapon or his armour, would not be killed.⁴⁰
- The porters, arms suppliers, trumpeters, drivers of the chariots, the ballad-singers, in fine the, noncombatants would never be attacked.⁴¹
- The battles should continue only during daytime and at the sunset would ring down the curtain till the next sunrise.

This may be considered as the precursor of the European Treve Dei (The Truce of God), which emerged in 1027 AD. According to Treva Dei all warfare used to be suspended from Saturday noon till Monday morning. Bhéñma, a staunch supporter of 'No-war', however, has maintained that for a Kñatriya:

- (i) there was nothing better than a Nyāya Yuddha;
- (ii) being killed in war by a weapon made of iron (steel) was preferable to simple dying from illness;
- (iii) fleeing from the battlefield was an irreligious act.

These ideas probably originated in India from the Vedic days-the Sadāçiva Dhanurveda also preached the same gospel. Indian soldiers in all the periods were imbued with these ideas. In addition to the above, Bhishma observed himself some more norms of ethics. He would not attack the people of the following categories:

- A person whose armour or the flagmast of the chariot was broken;
- A person fallen on the ground;
- A person not normal in all respect;
- A person having a bad omen on his flag mast;
- Father of one son; Woman or a man having the name of woman. (Bhéñma Parva)

Karna was an honest and very religious man. During his battle with Arjuna (Pl. No. XIII) he told the latter that an honest soldier should not attack his enemy when the latter was busy performing religious rites or when in bad shape for any reason whatsoever. (Karna Parva)

Importance of Time Principles laid down in Mahābhārata, Manu-Saḥhitā, and other texts

Bhisma lays down the general principles of time which could be followed at all seasons in those days by all the Kings. His principles are:

- The months from Āgrahāyāēa (Nov-Dec) to Caitra (March-April) form the best season for war or expedition. However, the enemy can be attacked on any time of the year, if the victory over the enemy seems to be certain, or if the enemy is in deep troubles. Similar principle was also laid down in Manu-Saḥhitā.⁴²
- A King should fight honestly with a honest enemy, but shrewdly with a cunning enemy.
- Chariots and Cavalry should be used more during the non-rainy seasons, while during the rains the foot-soldiers and elephantry are more useful. He further says, if the area of battle is not swampy and free of mud, water, stones and pebbles, and walls, the cavalry should be deployed. But if the ground is flat dry and covered with grasses the chariots should be used. If the battle-field is full of dwarf trees and small houses, the elephants are then the most effective. In hills, small forests, areas covered with thorn shrubs or beset with many small forts, foot soldiers are most effective. According to Bhisma, however, the best ground for battle is not a flat ground, but a level area near forest. In this case the foot-soldiers can be kept concealed within the forest and may be called into operation as and when required. But, Bhisma says, that for bringing the soldiers to the Assembly Area or the Concentration Area, the forests should be avoided, because the journey through forests normally tires out men. Soldiers should be conveyed through main roads which are properly covered and the security of which has been previously assessed with the aid of the spies, informers, and agents etc.
- Before employing the army of any particular clan, tribe or area, the King must assess the natural efficiency and military traditions of that army.
- According to Bhisma, the well-built and courageous soldiers of Gandhar, Sindhu and Saubir are exports in 'Nekhsre' and 'Prase', while the people of the eastern provinces though well conversant with all the manuals of war and diplomatic in nature are experts in fighting from elephants, but the Yavanas and the inhabitants of Kamboja and Mathura are experts in duel.
- The world can be conquered with a handful number of soldiers, if the soldiers are loyal and contended. This principle indicates that 'Bhisma realized the importance of 'Administration' in Armed Forces. Because it is only through good administration the loyalty and happiness of the soldiers can be maintained. This principle bears close similarity with the principle contained in the Ćlokas 212 & 213 of Sadasiva Dhanurveda, which tells that only 500 loyal soldiers can defeat very big armed forces.

II.viii Influence of Astronomy

Astronomy used to influence the thoughts of Kings and Senāpatis. From the positions of stars, planets and other astronomical bodies they used to read in advance the results of the battles. On the eve of Kurukṇetra War, Karēa told Kāñēa that the positions of Saturn, Mars, Moon, Sun, Rāhu, etc. were clearly indicative of the Kaurava's defeat. (Udyoga Parva, 141). There are many such references in the Mahābhārata. Before starting the march for Kurukṇetra, Duryodhana announced that the Pushya Star was influencing the day; therefore they should start on that particular day (Udyoga Parva, 148 Chap.).

In the Vedic days also the Indians had high esteem for astronomy. In the Dhanurveda some details have been elaborated. In the courts of Hindu and Muslim Kings of India astronomers and astrologers had distinguished positions. The monarchs used to take the advice of these scholars before proceeding for any expedition and war. Though the official decisions now-a-days are not influenced by either astrology or astronomy, most of the Indian soldiers and officers, like other Indians, have great regards or weakness for these.

The Kings, Senāpatis and others had many beliefs, which might be regarded as prejudices. If deer crossed by the right side of the advancing army, the soldiers thought the victory was theirs. Birds like peacock, duck, lyrebird, stork, etc. were considered to be good omens, while vultures, eagles, crows, honeybees were taken as evils. Jackel-cries were considered to be signals of dangers (U. P. 141 chap). There are many such references in the Mahābhārata.

Usually military operations were suspended in the summers and the rainy season. The best season was that of the autumn.⁴³ According to the Sānti-parva of the Mahābhārata,⁴⁴ it was neither cold nor hot and at the same time there was plenty of harvest. Rāma directed⁴⁵ Sugriva to prepare as the autumn approached. The Agni Purāṇa,⁴⁶ similarly, remarks that one should march either in the moon corresponding to the middle of November to the middle of December or during two moons from the middle of February to the middle of March. Important expeditions were embarked in the autumn season. At times kings had to undertake army movement in the other seasons as well. The region having deep valleys, thickets of trees and grass, had to be invaded in the summers. The deserts were covered in the rains. The type and size of the army, available at the king's disposal, also affected the decision at times. If the elephants dominated the contingent it was unwise, according to Kautilya, to move in the summer since the animal became not only obstinate and hard to control, but were attacked by leprosy. The army, with chariots predominating, was totally ineffective in the rainy season. Often, in surprise attacks, the armies marched in the rainy season."

After the preliminaries were finalized the royal Purohita along with his band of astrologers was asked to calculate the auspicious moment for the march. It has been mentioned in the Vérasarvasvam:

Prathamā vāṅ kumbhe kâtvā varuṇa pūjana
 Vācayet svasti devora viṇu strēṅcauccaran
 Adayāmukasya gotrasya çrémato amuka sarmana
 Mamādaya rājya vijayaṅ saāpādatayā bhavet
 Senādhyakṣaṅya varaṇa karmané svastibho dvijā.⁴⁷
 Vérasarvasvam, Çloka-73

It was a common belief, which still enjoys its sway, that action taken at an auspicious moment was sure to bring the success. Such a decision was based on the position and movement of the stars and the planets. The Mahābhārata makes a mention of the practice and is supported by Kautilya. In the Mudrārākṣasa the mendicant is asked to point out the auspicious moment of a march. Harṇacarita, Gauḍaviho, Rājatarāṅginé, Agni Purāṇa and the Jain literature bear out the practice.

It was customary in India to perform rituals before embarking on a dig-vijaya owing to the belief that divine powers will avert the calamities in the way. The Udyoga-parva of the Mahābhārata says that the Pāḍavas performed the fire service before moving to the Kurukṣetra. Corresponding references are found in the Arthaçāstra, the Agni Purāṇa and other works as well. Kalidas refers to the ceremony as Vajinirājana and Bāḍa mentions nirajana (moving with a legend in front of the forces) and puṅyaviṇeka rituals (a ceremonial bath with the royal insignia). Tutelary goddesses were even exhorted. Yasoverman had worshipped goddess Vindhyaṅciné before starting on his digvijaya. In South India also, such a tradition had existed. Kāṅṇa Rājā of Vijayanagar and Sena⁴⁸ kings had performed such rituals. Jain texts.⁴⁹ Yasastilaka, Candraprabhācarita and the Samarai-ca-Kāḍa, also confirm the practice. In art illustrations also, examples showing worshipping the deity by the kings along with their retinue probably remind us of

the same tradition. When the rituals were, thus over, the forces advanced towards the destination with the sound of the drums. Whether these moved in a regular order or in a haphazard fashion is a debatable point. From the description of army movement in- the Harñacarita and the çicupäyavadha, the scholars infer that the armies moved in disorder in the friendly zone. But the fact seems to be somewhat different. Kautilya⁵⁰ says that the armies moved in a regular order.

The king and his harem remained in the centre. The cavalry remained on the sides. The Agnipuräëa, similarly, says that all the six divisions, viz., maula (main body), bhüta (vanguard), shrouni (rear), surhid (auxiliary), viñäda (back) and äööavika(pioneer) followed each other in a specific order. The Jain literature categorically mentions that the armies moved in a regular order. There were prescribed rules for halts, crossings of rivers, etc. The speed of the armies depended upon the time. Usually, according to the Agnipuräëa⁵¹, the best forces moved two Yojanas a day. During an emergency the troops moved day and night; Alexander" crossed the river Indus in the thick of the night. Harña⁵² also had moved his armies, day and night on hearing that his sister is being deported by the Gauða king. The halts, as stated before, were preplanned. The objective of the king, the nature of the route, availability of the food-stuffs at nearby places and facility of drinking water guided the decision. The rivers were crossed by means of elephants, bridges, boats, mass of bamboos, big baskets covered with spines and rafts. Even fording was practised.⁵³ Two lines of mounted cavalry served the purpose. The one standing upstream broke the flow of the current and the other down stream recovered and transported the men and material carried over by the water. Every precaution to hide⁵⁴ the movement was taken during the secret march.

Thus, war has ever remained man's most despicable but unavoidable company. It might have been defined differently in various ages, but essentially it remained the same dastardly act of violence, killing men for their singular fault of belonging to the opponent's side. In modern times the war perhaps can be defined as a state of disturbed peace taking the shape of declared or undeclared hostility between two or more countries. In ancient times, different types of war were fought between the two sides of enemies. Some times they followed the rules and regulations and the general principles of war, buy most of the time, it was violated by both the sides. In the Mahäbhärata war, although there were persons like Bhéñma, Kãñëa, Arjuna, Karëa, Kâpücärya, Dronücärya, Yudhiñöira, Bhéma, etc, the rules and regulations of the war were violated. In warfare, timing is quite essential both in the battlefield and in the beginning of the war as it decides the war and winner of the war.

Reference:

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9. Ibid.,p.24.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.,p.25.
12. Ibid..
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Manu-Saähitã ,Chap.VII, slokas 181-183.

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16. Rāmāyaēa, Aranya-khaēda, sarga, XXVIII, 15.
 17. Mahābhārata, Sānti Parva, Sarga, 100, 10.
 18. Aranya-kaēda, sarga, XXVIII,
 19. Agni Purāēa, 242, pp.1-18.
 20. Gopinath Tuṅga, op.cit., Ćloka-73. Also see Mahābhārata., Virāōa-parva, (47, 23).
 21. N. R. Ray, Bangler Itihas, p. 425.
 22. Yaçastiyaka., Ch. III, p. 384; Candra Prabhā, XV, 30; Mahii-P., XXXII, 85; Samraichha Kahli, pp. 27-28.
 23. P. C. Chakravarti, The Art of War in Ancient India, p. 102.
 24. Agni Purāēa, 242, 9. For other references Karēa Parva., XIX, see 52 ; Manusaàhitā; VII, pp.187-88.
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 26. Ibid., pp.88-89.
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