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## ARMIES IN ANCIENT AGE

In the previous lesson you have learnt that ancient Indians had evolved a modern society and had advanced thoughts about the need for army and the weapons of war. The Janapada concept was expanded to Mahajanapada, which essentially meant that the King conquered neighbouring land to enlarge his Kingdom. With it came the idea of Bharatavarsh. Regular armies were created and rules of war including warrior codes were written. The warrior was respected and given a high place in society.

In this lesson we will learn how armies were organized to fight. Large armies required controlling organization and rank structure to maintain efficiency of the fighting force.



### Objectives

After studying this lesson you will be able to:

- describe the organization of armies into various groups such as Chariots, Elephants, Cavalry, Infantry and etc;
- differentiate between a 'Regular Army' and a 'Mercenary force';
- differentiate between the words Strategy and Tactics and
- describe in brief the aspects of Naval Warfare, as our ancients knew it.

#### 2.1 Organisation of the Army

- Our ancestors used two terms - "Regular Army" and "Proper Army". What is the difference between these two words? The word Regular means a permanent army composed of soldiers who are dedicated and devoted to the task of protecting the nation and its people. A Proper army means an efficient fighting machine. An army, which is well trained and always ready for battle, can be called a Proper army.
- All armies of the world are required to fight in all types of terrain and are accordingly equipped. India has vast and diverse terrain features ranging from mountains, deserts, plains and forests. The army had to be mobile to cover great distances and therefore chariots and cavalry formed the core strength along with



- infantry. The ancient armies were made of the Chariots, Elephants, Horses and Infantry. Collectively it was called Chaturangabala.
- The four fold Chaturangabala was the traditional force. A King had a number of chariots, horses and elephants. All these required a minister or department of state to look after and also required money to feed the animals, pay the soldiers and provide accommodation for the soldiers and their handlers. Therefore, to control and administer large armies new organisations were created such as a ministry called Mantra, the force of counsel and Kosha, the power of the treasury. Thus it became a six fold force. As societies progressed the organization of the army was further strengthened, due to its deployment in different situations of war. It became an eight fold force to include, cara or spies, commissariat and transport, navy or Admiralty and Desika or elders and advisors.
  - **Chariots :** In Vedic times, the chariot was considered the most important to fight a war. It could maneuver through the fighting forces thus suddenly occupying positions of advantage, break through ranks and threaten enemy from the flank or the rear. Each chariot had a charioteer and the warrior. A flag decorated it with an image called dhvaja and an umbrella. The use of the chariots declined by 650A.D and no mention of its use is made in any historical texts in later years.
  - **Elephants :** The next important force of war was the elephant. In peacetime it was used as a vehicle to carry men and material. In war it became a combatant. Mention of elephants in battle is found in Rig Veda. The Arthashastra describes in great detail the role and tasks of a special officer to take care of the elephant division. It also mentions the area required to house one elephant in designated areas called elephant forest and its food and training requirements. The importance of elephants as a powerful means for battle can be seen from Gajasiksa or hastisastra, was a special science of elephants and formed an important part of military studies.
  - **Cavalry :** The third division of the army, was the cavalry. Again, in Arthashastra, detailed descriptions are given of cavalry division. There was a Superintendent called as vadyaksa who was responsible to maintain the horses. A cavalry unit was the fastest moving force of an army and it could be employed to gain surprise and it played an important role in battles.
  - **Infantry :** Infantry was the next important division of the army. Infantry gave the army its numbers, which became the factor for many victories. The Arthashastra talks of the Infantry as a separate department of the army, under the charge of a special officer of the state. All infantry soldiers carried a sword or a dagger and



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- a shield. In addition they were equipped with a bow and arrow and some with firearms or javelins (long spears).
- **Commissariat :** The chaturanga or the four-fold division of the army was initial organisation of the army which was later improved to an eight fold division which included the Commissariat and the Admiralty. The Commissariat can be traced to the Mahabharata armies. It was basically an organization responsible to provide logistic support. That is to say, armies marched to the battlefield and the support in the form of extra weapons, rations and camping stores followed the marching army. This also included medical support and repair items for broken chariots etc.
  - **The Admiralty :** The use of ships and boats were known to the vedic people but the idea of creating a separate department to coordinate and control the war ships was done by Chanakya. We find reference of ships in the Rig Veda, Dharmashastra and the Puranas. Tamils and people of the East coast of India, used ships as early as the vedic period, extensively for trade and conquest of neighbouring lands. There were three classifications of war ships. The first was ships with compartments to carry soldiers, the second carried the King, treasures, animals, etc., and the third was a ship used for long distance sailing and sea-fights.

**Intext Questions****2.1**

1. Name any three divisions of the Army.
2. What is a Regular Army?

**2.2 A Regular Army and Mercenary Force**

What do you understand by a Regular Army? The foremost characteristic of a regular army is the soldiers who form the basic unit. We can define a good army by:-

- **The Regular Army :** It comprises of the troops who volunteers to fight for the state. They are recruited from the different state. The modern day Indian army has soldiers from Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and all other states.
- **Mercenary Force :** A mercenary force is a temporary recruitment done for a specific purpose. Once the task is carried out the mercenary force is disbanded. The soldiers fight only for the money and therefore less motivated. As compared to Regular Army they are not well trained, motivated and disciplined.
- How well a soldier is trained? Soldiers who are well trained always perform well. It gives them added confidence in doing their task. A well-trained regular army enjoyed the confidence of the King because of their loyalty, their skills with weapons and their motivation.



- How well an army is organized and how well it is disciplined.

In the *Varna* system followed by ancient Indians, a Kshatriya was considered as the best warrior. There was however no restriction on hiring soldiers from any of the other castes. According to Kautilya, a body of troops who are of the same region and caste become a great asset. Sukraniti describes the characteristics of a good army.. Thiruvalluvar, the author of *Thirukkural*, says that homogeneity, tradition and valour were the most important characteristics of a good army. The Tanjore inscriptions are testimonial to the recording of 31 regiments of regular units in the Chola army. It is interesting to note that some regiments were assigned duties such as guarding the temple or being temple musicians. Even today the army has units which perform other national building tools tasks like afforestation, building roads & bridges etc.

Armies are organized as per the weapons they carry and their role in the battle. In the ancient age, one chariot, one elephant, three horses and three infantry soldiers formed the basic unit and was called Patti. This was the smallest unit of the army. Such a unit was complimentary to each other. For example, the three infantry soldiers protected the elephants and the three horses could scout ahead as sentries to look out for enemy. This smallest unit was then grouped with similar units to form larger forces. The largest such unit formation was called Aksauhini and was considered to represent the complete army. Large armies had hundreds of chariots, elephants and foot soldiers. A well-organized army became a cohesive fighting unit and thus constituted a good army.

### 2.3 Strategy and Tactics in War

It is not enough to only have a good regular army, which is well trained and well equipped with weapons. All good armies should have good tactics and strategy.

The word Tactics means the use of fixed drills in an intelligent manner so as to destroy the enemy in battle.

Strategy on the other hand is about deployment of all resources of a King, in peace and war to be victorious at all times. It is about ways and means to win a war.

Planning for war involves making good strategy while actual fighting in battle is done by sound tactics. What were the tactics and strategy followed by the ancient Indian armies?

Any war is preceded by a number of actions to be taken by the King and the army. The actions required to be undertaken by armies have been very well documented from ancient times. Let us see these one by one.

- (a) **Marching** - Armies have to march from one place to another. Before a battle takes place, they have to march to the war front and camp. The strategic considerations for a march will require detailed planning for the route to be taken, protection of the route against invaders, weather and climate, how far the army is required to march etc. Accordingly the route will be reconnoitered



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including locations of camps en-route. The terrain or geography of the area will also be studied to see good battlegrounds, local agriculture and other resources for feeding the troops. While marching, armies follow a battle order or tactical order of march-single line i.e one soldier behind another, was a marching order followed when going through forests. Similarly, different marching orders were followed depending upon the terrain. Drills were rehearsed for areas such as crossing a river or mountain where enemy can surprise the marching army by attacking from flanks. The various marching orders have been well described in Agnipurana. Agnipurana is a sanskrit text and is one of the Puranas.

- (b) **Camping** - The next strategic point for consideration was the camping site to rest the soldiers after a long march. The camp site should be big enough to house the entire army and must have dry and level ground for all animals, chariots etc. to enter and exit the campsite. It must offer protection from all sides. Campsite must be near a water source such as pond or river. The camp also served as a place for resting the troops, treating the wounded and replenishing the units.
- (c) **Selection of Battlefield** - Strategy in selection of battleground was based on the ease of movements of chariots, cavalry and elephants. The ground should not be marshy or have clay soil because the wheels of the chariots could get stuck. The ground must be big open land with soft mud to enable the army to use the tactics of encirclement and flanking maneuvers. There was also a consideration of space available for formations such as half-moon, arrow etc.



*Fig. 2.1 Half-moon Formation*

'Tactics' concerns the method of use of the army units in actual battle. The formation that you see above (in Fig.2.1) expects the enemy to attack in the centre and the formation will then surround the attacking enemy from all sides. The method to be adopted to break this formation and defeat the enemy is called tactics of attack. An army in attack mode adopts speed, flanking manoeuvre, etc., to defeat the enemy. An army in defence adopts various formations such as the one shown above and is called tactics in defence.



### 2.4 Naval Warfare

The creation of Admiralty by Kautilya during the period of Magadh Empire is evidence enough of the existence of Naval force. Ships and boats along with their design characteristics have been well written. Ships have been used for commercial purposes during the vedic period and also by empires of South India. The ancient Tamils used ships for expeditions and conquests especially in South East Asia. The Kings of Southern India undertook expeditions to establish their supremacy in Lanka as well as Indonesia, Malaysia and Myanmar. The Cholas, Pandyas, Pallavas, Cheras and the Chalukyas maintained strong fleet of naval war ships.



#### Intext Questions

2.2

1. How will you describe the word 'Strategy'?
2. Name any three aspects of strategy for a marching army in ancient age.



#### Activity 2.1

Look up the internet and write down the tactical formations adopted by the Indian army, while marching for battle.



#### What You Have Learnt

- The units of the army had to be deployed tactically and the King and his ministers had to plan a strategy to win wars.
- The difference between strategy and tactics has been clearly shown.
- The knowledge of the ancients in aeronautics and naval warfare is praiseworthy.
- The ancient scriptures had beautifully written description of how to make an aircraft and how to use it in war and peace. Similarly, exact details are available on shipbuilding. Ancient Indians had mastered the art of naval warfare.



#### Terminal Exercises

1. What is Admiralty and why was it needed?
2. Explain Chaturangabala.
3. Name any three characteristics of a Good Army.
4. Name any three considerations in selecting a camping site.



### Answers to Intext Questions

- 2.1** 1. Chariot, Cavalry and Elephants  
2. The Regular Army comprises of the troops who volunteers to fight for the state.
- 2.2** 1. Strategy means to plan and prepare using all resources of the Kingdom, in peace and war, so as to be victorious always.  
2. Route to be taken, Protection of the route, Weather and Climate.

Military History  
of Ancient India



Note

