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WARRIOR SYSTEM IN ANCIENT INDIA

Our ancient texts say that a nation can progress only when its people are protected. This means that every citizen must feel secure and protected. It is the security forces of a nation that provides this protection. An army is necessary not only to defend a nation against invaders but also to maintain a stable administration and discipline in the society.

The history of ancient India is largely a history of culture. Tribes forms societies and societies became civilizations with rich Cultural Heritage and a well organised system of governance. Pastoral society of the early vedic age got transformed into settled Agrarian society in the later vedic period. The 'King' or the leader of the tribe was called "Gopati" (lord of cattle) and later as "Bhupati" (lord of the land). Bows and arrows used for hunting became weapons of war. As societies changed so did the armies and the weapons they used.

Objectives

After studying this lesson you will be able to:

* explain the need for nations to have boundaries and fight wars;

* trace the formation of armies and the change they underwent with time; and

* explain the concept of a united India along with a detailed account of the warrior system and warrior code followed by our ancestors.

1.1 How Boundaries were formed

The life of people is conditioned by the geography of their habitat. Let us now understand how the idea of boundaries came about. For this, we need to know the early history of our oldest civilization. Indian history mentions Harappan civilization to be around 2600 B.C-1900 B.C, based on excavations and other evidences. The people of Harappa and Mohanjodaro settled around the 'Indus' river and did not have any boundaries around their land. But after its decline and disappearance, settlers from the West and North West started settling Tribes, being agriculturists, started cultivating land for crops and these lands were marked with boundaries called 'Janapadas'.

The family was the basic unit of the Rig Vedic society. The group consisting of families was called 'Clan' and one or more Clans were called 'Jana' or tribe. As the tribes became bigger with more population the requirement of land became larger and bigger boundaries were formed. This was the first boundary created and the tribes protected their land from animals and other tribes. Some tribes migrated to different parts of India and in this process came in contact with other tribes thus resulting in conflicts and wars.

1.2 Formation of Army

1.2.1 Why were Armies Created?

What happens when tribes migrate to other places and want to live with those already settled in those areas? It results in rivalry, conflicts and ultimately wars. The expanding and migrating tribes created larger boundaries of their land and needed separate men to protect their land, livestock and people. They formed armies from among physically strong and capable men to protect it. As tribes became bigger, they settled down and formed societies and created laws of marriage and property. They chose a leader who was named a 'Bhupati' and later called a King.

Societies faced threat from burglars and others who would steal cattle amongst other things. It was also a custom to seek the hand of a princess in marriage by proving one's strength or ability to be superior. If marriage was denied it resulted in fights. People generally fought with each other on three major issues; of capture of territory and wealth, in retaliation to cattle lifting and on refusal of marriage with the woman of another tribe.

Activity 1.1

You must have realized that mankind evolved with time and adjusted, changed and formed rules as per their needs. Trace the extent of the Harappan and Mohanjodaro civilization on a map. Also identify villages along major rivers in Punjab and Haryana and compare that with the villages in the deserts of Rajasthan. This will help you to realize the importance of water as a source of life and why in later years wars were fought to conquer such territory.

We have seen how tribes formed societies and created boundaries. The tribes migrated and became larger leading to fights over cattle, territory etc. They had to create armies to protect them. Let us now see how they selected soldiers and invented weapons to fight.

1.2.2 The Society

The early vedic society did not have any caste system. Occupation was not based on birth but based on skills and natural flair for a particular activity. However, chiefs,

Note

priests and warriors existed. In early vedic period, the 'sena' or army was not a permanent fighting group but consisted of able bodied tribesmen who were mobilized at the time of conflict with others. Migration and pressures of population made them change from a peace loving agri-society to being warlike.

As societies settled into larger groups they formed laws of marriage, property, etc. A settled society also witnessed a transformation of how people were assigned specific work within the society, as per their capability. To ensure social harmony the people of a Clan were divided into communities based on the work they were doing. For e.g. a farmer, carpenter, trader became Vaisyas, while a priest became a brahmin.

Similarly, a man selected to be a warrior became a Kshatriya. This was called the "Varna System" of society. As laws became stricter and population grew, there was a need to have one central authority to enforce discipline. Thus was framed 'Dandaniti"- laws for the society. The enforcer was the Dandadara or the King who was assisted by the army.

1.2.3 How Armies were Formed

We saw the need for stricter laws as society became larger. It was logical that with Stringent laws there was a need for enforcement of the law. As you have seen, in the Varna system the Kshatriyas became the rulers and warriors. Our ancestors understood the value and importance of the army. Wars were fought for many reasons which were psychological in nature such as showing heroism, seeking glory on, being martyred etc. History is full of examples of war between the strong and the weak. Therefore, the expansion of societies created conditions for fighting between tribes which in turn required the need for creation of a separate caste to be soldiers. This dual condition necessitated the thought process that even during peace time, an army had to be maintained. Thus we came across the term called 'standing army'. This standing army consisted of the 'Kshatriya' or the warrior community and fighting and dying for the King became their "swadharma".

The warriors soon emerged as a special class within the society which looked upon this community as the protectors and saviours of their land. The people did not mind the high position in society for the warrior class.

Intext Questions   1.1

1.   What is a Clan?

2.   Name any three reasons why wars were fought.

3.   Name the three castes in the Varna System.

1.3 A United India

You have learnt how small groups of families formed societies' The tribal chief or a King always desired to expand his power and have large empires. This desire of

conquest was also for personal glory and was also encouraged by the people. The advantages of a large empire under a King were as follows:-

- It created a sense of unity and brought people of different clans, with different customs and traditions together under a King.

- A large empire also meant larger armies. Therefore, for an outside invader it was always a difficult task to go for a battle.

- A large empire under one King unified the people and ensured all round development of the society, both economically as well as culturally.

Our scriptures talk of the Aswamedha Yagna and Rajasuya Yagna, wherein the emperor's horse was let loose to roam freely. Anyone who stopped the horse was duty bound to wage a war against the emperor. If it was allowed to roam freely all that land then the people were required to obey the laws, rules set by the emperor. This was also a method to expand one's Kingdom. More importantly it was an idea of obtaining glory and distinction. The performance of the sacrifice, Asvamedha and Rajasuya, established supremacy of the ruler over a territory.

1.3.1 Weapons of War

Have you wondered what types of weapons were used by our ancestors? Dhanurveda and Nitiprakaska are ancient scriptures which describe in detail, the types and classification of weapons of war. Weapons were classified as per their use- those ones that are thrown (bow and arrow), those ones that are not thrown (sword) and those, which are used by mantra. Essentially, the sword, bow and arrow and the spear were the main weapons.

Our ancient scriptures describe in vivid details the making of a bow and arrow as well as the methods to use it correctly. The term Astra means a missile, which is thrown at the enemy. There were other weapons such as gada (long handle and a spherical head), parasu (battle axe) etc. Agneya Astra means a missile, which carries fire. The arrow of an Agneya Astra also called an Agni Bana consisted of a heated head or an arrow with fire on its tip. Such an arrow was more potent than a normal arrow.

Shukraniti (book on warfare by Shukracharya, an ancient guru) describes weapons of fire. Ancient Indians knew how to make an explosive and firearms were used extensively in battle. Ancient texts reveal that while gunpowder was known as 'Agnicurna', the guns were called 'Nalastra'. The 'Shukraniti' describes how gun powder can be prepared using saltpetre, sulphur and charcoal in different ratios for the use of different types of guns. Such a gunpowder was used to project missiles and rockets at the enemy.

1.3.2 Laws of War

Indian military science recognizes two kinds of warfare - the dharmayuddha and the Kutayuddha. Dharmayuddha is war carried on the principles of dharma, meaning here the Ksatradharma 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, Kutayuddha was unrighteous war. It was a crafty fight carried on secretly. The Hindu science of warfare values both niti and shaurya i.e. ethical principles and valor. It was therefore realized that the waging war without any cause was not acceptable to the society.

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 Dharmasutras and Dharmasastras, the epics (Ramayana and Mahabharata), the Arthasastra (treatise of Kautilya), Kamandaka, and Sukra. Of particular interest was the rule that no army will destroy crops or houses of civilians. In fact the farmer and the general public were not affected by war and their lives were not disturbed. This ethos of the ancient army is practised by the Indian Army even today.

1.3.3 The Warrior Code

The ancient lawgivers, the reputed authors of "Dharmasutras" and "Dharmasastras" wrote the laws as per existing customs and usage for the betterment of mankind. The law books contain special sections on rules for the King and the warriors. A Kshatriya was required to perform three basic duties, learning, sacrificing and making gifts. The warrior was expected to learn all subjects that a King was taught. They also learnt the art of "Dhanurveda". Much importance was attached to discipline and obedience. Even now a soldier is disciplined and obedient as a habit and virtue. The warrior was recognized by the dress he wore. The attire of a warrior was same for a Clear and each part of the dress was codified. He was expected to wear appropriate dress including jewels as per the occasion.

The warrior code enjoined that a soldier must die in the battlefield. Thus among the laws of war, we find that,

- a warrior (Kshatriya) in armour must not fight with one who is not wearing armour.

- one should fight only one enemy and cease fighting if the opponent is disabled.

- aged men, women and children, the retreating, or one who held a straw in his lips as a sign of unconditional surrender should not be killed.

It is of particular interest to note that one of the laws enjoins the army to leave the fruit and flower gardens, temples and other places of public worship unharmed. The Ramayana describes how Ravana exhausted his arrows when fighting with Rama and Rama telling him to return the next day for battle with more arrows to fight. This incident was the highest form of Dharma yuddha practised.

Module - I

Military History of Ancient India

Intext Questions 1.2

1. Who was a Kshatriya?

2. Name any one law of war practiced by ancient Indians.

What You Have Learnt

- Ancient Indians had evolved the art of warfare as early as 3000 B.C in the Harappan age and refined it in the vedic age.

- As societies progressed, the art of fighting also changed and newer weapons were made for war.

- Indian military science has been well documented in the form of ancient scriptures of Rig Veda, Atharva Veda, Dharmasutras and Dharmasastras.

- The need for a regular army was felt as early as the Vedic age and the warriors were treated as separate class in society. They were respected and cared for since they were the protectors of the land.

- Ancient Indians also knew the art of making firearms. The making of gun powder and other fire arms has been written in various texts such as Sukraniti.

Terminal Exercises

1. Describe how boundaries were formed.

2. Give an account of the concept of `One India' as practiced in ancient times.

3. Name any four warrior codes practiced by ancient armies of India.

4. Do you think the Warrior Code that was practiced in ancient India is relevant today?

5. What is the difference between an `Agni Ban` and a `Fire Arm' ?

Answers to Intext Questions

1.1 1. The family was the basic unit of a society and more than one family was called a Clan.

2. Wars were fought basically to protect one's land from invaders. Other reasons why wars were fought include, protection of cattle and women.

3. (i) Brahmin (ii) Vaisyas (iii) Kshatriya

1.2 1. Caste of the solider or warrior was called Kshatriya.

2. One should fight only one enemy and cease fighting if the opponent is disabled.