

INDIAN MILITARY HISTORY - Postclassical Period

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Overview As a large land mass, India has been ruled throughout its history by a series of powerful empires with substantial standing armies. The traditional Indian army, from the ancient period, consisted of four divisions: archers, chariots, infantry and war elephants. Chariots were replaced by mounted cavalry during the Gupta Empire about 400 CE. A full navy first appeared under the Cholas about 1000 CE, and guns were first used in the 15th century CE. The British conquest of India brought a modern, mechanised army to the subcontinent, and its more recent incarnations have fought in world wars.

Early Postclassical Period

Harsha Harsha, who ruled most of north India in the first half of the 7th century CE, also maintained a large standing army. His plan to conquer central and south India was thwarted with defeat at the hands of the Chalukya ruler Pulakeshin II.

Chola Empire More impressive military exploits were achieved by the rulers of the Chola Empire (9th-12th c. CE) in south India. After defeating the Cheras, Pallavas and Pandyas, their rivals in south India, Rajaraja Chola turned his armies against other kingdoms in central and north India. His son, Rajendra Chola, then completed the campaign by marching to the heart of north India, crossing the Ganges and entering Bengal. Later, he sailed across the Palk Strait and conquered most of Sri Lanka (Ceylon). Perhaps his most outstanding campaign was the naval expedition to southeast Asia, when his army fought and occupied parts of Java, Malaya and Sumatra. The military success of the Cholas relied on the wealth of the capital at Tanjore, which supplied soldiers with sophisticated metal coats of armour and fitted its ships with mounted guns. Another reason was the efficient structure, including a commander-in-chief, three ranks of officers and regiments.

Late Postclassical Period

Delhi Sultanate The rapid and near-total conquest of India by the Delhi Sultanate emphasises the role of warfare as a factor in shaping Indian history. The military superiority of the Turkic and Afghan armies was considerable. Unlike their Hindu opponents, these soldiers could shoot arrows while riding a horse. It was said that a good horseman could shoot six arrows a minute. Some of them also used a cross bar to launch arrows that could penetrate metal armour. These skills came naturally to the warriors from Central Asia, where (unlike in India) the climate and topography was conducive to horse breeding. Muslim armies also used war-elephants, to batter down fortifications and to scatter soldiers on a battlefield. The sultans owned thousands of these animals, which also became a symbol of royal power. The horse-riding skills of the Sultanate's army also enable them to repel repeated attacks by the Mongols.

Vijayanagar Empire The rulers of the Vijayanagar Empire (1336-1646 CE), with its capital at Hampi in the Deccan, devoted a large portion of their resources to maintain an army. Some contemporaneous estimates put the numbers at 200,000 foot soldiers, 24,000 cavalry and 1,200 elephants. For the most part, the army replicated that of their predecessors, although it included a regiment of men with a matchlock, a gun that first appeared in the late 15th century in Europe. The Vijayanagar army incorporated this gun into their arsenal after their battles with the Portuguese, who had arrived on the west coast of India in 1498. Another aspect of Vijayanagar military tactics, shared by all armies of the period, was the use of hill forts.

Reading

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