

INDIAN MILITARY HISTORY

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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.

Indus Valley Civilisation

Although the Indus people made copper and bronze weapons, these were probably used to control internal violence. Despite extensive archaeological material, researchers have as yet found no evidence of war, soldiers or military organisation in the Indus Valley civilisation (c. 3000-1500 BCE).

Indo-Aryan Civilisation

The early Indo-Aryans, however, arrived in the subcontinent (around 1200 BCE) with the horse and chariot, which gave them superiority in warfare over the indigenous people. Judging from the Vedas, the early Indo-Aryans were often engaged in war or raiding. The battle of the 'Ten Kings' (mentioned in the Rig Veda) was decided when one ruler broke the dam of another and conquered his land.

Mahabharata war The war at the centre of the epic Mahabharata (a conflict that possibly occurred sometime in the 9th or 8th c. BCE) featured several battle formations, such as the 'wheel', 'needle' and 'fish.' Texts also mention the four sections of an army: archers, chariots, infantry and elephants. The weapons mentioned include bows, axes, swords, javelins and several other more fanciful, divine weapons. The four-wheeled chariots, drawn by four to six horses, had a high firing platform for bowmen to rain down arrows on their opponents. Texts in the 5th century BCE also describe a new kind of chariot, with curved blades attached to the wooden wheels, designed to literally cut a path through the enemy.

Classical Period

Mauryan Empire The Mauryan Empire (322-187 BCE) produced the first large, standing army, which was formed of a wide diversity of ethnic groups. Texts claim that at one point the army of Chandragupta Maurya contained 600,000 infantry, 30,000 cavalry, and 9,000 elephants. Leather armour appears to have been used until Alexander's invasion, after which metal armour, for both men and animals became widespread. The helmet was not used until the early centuries of the Common Era. One distinctive weapon of the Mauryan army was a long spear carried by a soldier on top of the elephants and used to attack enemy infantry trying to attack the animal itself. Another defining feature of Mauryan warfare was the use of siege and artillery equipment, such as battering rams and siege engines. These ancient armies also relied on fire as a weapon of war, launching fire arrows and fireballs.

Gupta Empire The flowering of Indian culture during the Gupta Empire (320 to 550 CE) was, in part at least, the result of a powerful military machine. The imperial army retained the traditional four sections, although the chariot was replaced by mounted cavalry. Curiously, while their Central Asian enemies, such as the Scythians and Parthians used horse-mounted bowmen, the Guptas did not and instead preferred cavalry with lances or swords. Their reliance on infantry archers, however, led them to invent the steel bow, which had greater range and velocity than its wooden counterpart. They also invented a unique double-bladed sword. Most scholars believe that the Gupta's military success is attributable to coordination between this well-supplied infantry, cavalry and extensive use of elephants.

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.

Early Modern Period

Mughal Empire Although the Mughal Empire was born in war and was sustained by war, by the end of its rule, the military was the weakest part of its government. When Babur, the first emperor, won his decisive battle in 1526, his matchlock men and mobile field guns were no match for his enemy, whose idea of battle etiquette did not include firearms. But when Aurangzeb, the last emperor, went into battle he commanded an inferior force. The problem was not lack of numbers. Historians estimate that the Mughal army consisted of 440,000 infantry, musketeers, and artillery men, and 185,000 cavalry. The main problem was a fragmented structure. The Mughal army comprised four different types of soldiers (those paid for and supplied by the *mansabdars*; those paid for by the state but commanded by *mansabdars*; those paid for by the state but of a higher grade; and those provided by provincial elites, such as the *zamindars*). The Mughal artillery was also of poor quality, and Akbar's efforts to procure new guns from the Portuguese failed. In addition, there was a shortage of trained officers, discipline was lacking and the huge number of camp followers (families of soldiers and courtiers, etc.) meant that the army was cumbersome and slow-footed.

East India Company When the British, in the form of the East India Company, first came to India in the 17th century, it maintained a small cadre of guards. By 1750, however, they maintained an army of 3,000 regular soldiers, which grew to 67,000 by 1778. Most were Indians, recruited from the so-called 'martial' castes (Sikhs, Rajputs, etc.) and trained by British officers. By 1800, it was the most powerful army on the subcontinent, defeating the Mahrattas, the Mughals and the French.

The 19th Century

Presidency armies By the early 19th century, the East India Army was reorganised into three separate armies, one for each of the presidencies of Madras, Bombay and Calcutta. Each of these large armies had its own infantry, cavalry, artillery and horse artillery sections, plus a growing navy of armed merchant vessels (East Indiamen) and proper warships. Each of the three presidencies (Bengal, Madras and Bombay) had its own army and its own Commander-in-Chief. All three armies contained British units, with British soldiers and officers, as well as Indian units, with British officers and Indian soldiers recruited from the so-called 'martial races' (for example, the Sikhs and Gurkhas).

Mutiny/Revolt 1857-58 After 1857-58, the three separate armies retained their independent status and their own command structure, although they were increasingly under the control of the Commander-in-Chief in Calcutta, who was now a member of the Governor-General's Executive Council. In 1858, the three separate armies were amalgamated into the British Indian Army.

Campaigns These well-funded armies were in constant action throughout the long 19th century, fighting a series of campaigns across the subcontinent that resulted in the conquest of India. The major campaigns include three against the Ahom/Burmese in Assam, two against the Mahrattas in the west, two against Mysore in the south and two (stalemated) against Pashtuns in Afghanistan. However, small-scale warfare was carried out against Indian populations in nearly every part of the country.

Early 20th Century

Kitchener reforms When Lord Kitchener (famous for the defence of Khartoum) was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Army of India in 1903, he first had to complete the integration of the three Presidency armies into one command. Kitchener reorganised the Army of India to include both Indian units permanently based in India and British Army units temporarily based in India.

World War I More than 1 million Indian soldiers of the British Army served in the First World War, mainly in Mesopotamia. Nearly 75,000 died and another 67,000 were wounded. The India Gate built in Delhi is a memorial to the Indians killed during the war. At the beginning of the war, the British Indian Army consisted of only 150,000 men, but by the end it was nearly 500,000. In the 1920s, it was reduced to about 200,000, the great majority being Indians.

Kashmir The princely state of Jammu-Kashmir, with a Muslim majority population ruled by a Hindu maharaja, was always going to be a problem in an Independent India. At Independence in August 1947, the Maharaja had not agreed to join India. In October, Pakistani troops and local Muslim militia began military action to secure Kashmir for Pakistan, initiating the first of four wars between Pakistan and India. Facing occupation by Pakistan, the Maharaja called on India, who only responded when the Maharaja committed Kashmir to join India. The war rumbled on until 1 January 1949, when both sides accepted a UN ceasefire and a disputed Line of Control, which gave India two-thirds of Kashmir and Pakistan one-third. The UN resolution also called for a plebiscite to determine the future of Kashmir, but that vote has never taken place. A second war was fought in 1965, and the issue remains unresolved, with sporadic military action and fatalities almost every year.

Late 20th Century

1962 war with China The fledgling Indian state also faced a threat on its northern and northeast frontiers with China. This Himalayan border (the McMahon Line) between India and China had been proposed in 1913 by Henry McMahon at a conference in Simla between British, Tibetan and Chinese officials. The Tibetans accepted the line drawn on a map, but the Chinese did not. The unratified border, lying in distant, unpopulated terrain, did not cause problems until the Tibetan uprising in 1959, when India gave the Dalai Lama refuge and began to extend its military presence up to the Himalayas. China responded to this 'cartographic' aggression by sending troops over the Himalayas and down into what is now Ladakh in the west and Arunachal Pradesh in the east. Armed conflict was minimal, however, and China unilaterally withdrew after one month. Nevertheless, the border remains unresolved, and although both countries have agreed to a peaceful settlement, there is now a 'water war.' North India's major rivers have their source in China, and Beijing is planning a series of dams that would restrict their flow into India.

1971 war with Pakistan India fought another war with Pakistan as part of the Bangladesh war of liberation. When East Pakistan decided to break away from West Pakistan in March 1971, the Pakistani army (from the west) began to attack East Pakistan. As the civilian casualties and reported atrocities mounted, millions of people, including many Hindus, fled East Pakistan and crossed the border into India. India finally entered the war in December, with air, ground and naval attacks in both east and west Pakistan. A short 13 days later, Pakistan surrendered, and Bangladesh became an independent nation. This was a major diplomatic victory for India, and perhaps the high point of Indira Gandhi's

Intervention in Sri Lanka India also intervened in a civil war in the late 1980s fought between the Sri Lankan government and an armed group fighting for the independence of the Tamil northern part of the island. Although the Indian army was officially a 'peace-keeping force,' it was drawn into battles with the Tamil guerrilla army. The perception that India had fought on the side of the government against the Tamils led to a suicide bomber killing Rajiv Gandhi (PM at the time of the intervention) two years later.

Questions/discussion

1. No archaeological evidence has been found to suggest that the Indus Valley civilisation had an army or experienced warfare. How is it possible for a large, complex civilisation to have existed for so long (15 centuries) without an army?
2. The Indo-Aryans, who came to India about the same time that the Indus cities declined, are said to have 'conquered' the indigenous people. The Indo-Aryans did possess military skills and tools, but is there any evidence of a war or battles between them and the people they encountered when they entered the subcontinent?
3. The historicity of the Mahabharata war is not just an academic debate in India. It is central to the Hindu nationalist revision of history, which has recently gained more political and scholarly support. Why is it important that this ancient battle be seen as a true event?
4. The Muslim conquest of India, from about 1000 CE onward, might be said to be the most influential event in its entire history. To what extent is this conquest the result of the superior military might of the newcomers? What role was played by economic collaboration and cultural assimilation?
5. A little-known episode of Indian military history is the armed conflict between the Mughals, the Vijayanagar Empire and the Portuguese in the 16th century. This would be an excellent topic for a Ph.D.
6. The Mutiny/Revolt of 1857-58 was a massive shock to the colonial authorities and resulted in major administrative reforms. An equally important, but less well-studied, event was an earlier revolt in Vellore in 1806. Study these two revolts and decide if there is cause and effect between them.
7. The Great War (1914-1918) had a profound effect on India and its soldiers serving abroad. The soldiers wrote thousands of letters home, and some soldiers later wrote memoirs of their experiences. Some of these writings are archived in the British Library and available online. Those documents, plus photographs and books (see Basu below, for example), offer us a chance to understand this forgotten story.
8. The Indo-China War of 1962, though very brief and with very few casualties, marks an important border dispute. Modern India has invested a large number of soldiers to the disputed border, and has lost more soldiers in its defence than were lost in the original 1962 conflict. Why is this border so central to India's concept of itself?

Reading

Mark Kenoyer, *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley* (OUP, Karachi, 2010, 2nd ed.)
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Noboru Karashima, *A Concise History of South India* (Oxford, 2014)
Burton Stein, *A History of India* (Blackwell, 1998)
Barbara Metcalf, *Islam in South Asia in Practice* (Princeton, 2009)

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John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge, 1993)

C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1990)

Shrasbasni Basu, *For King and Another Country: Indian Soldiers on the Western Front 1914-18* (Bloomsbury, 2015)

Ramchandra Guha, *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Biggest Democracy* (Harper, 2008)