

INDIAN MILITARY HISTORY – Ancient 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.

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.