

CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



CENJOWS

ABSENCE OF STRATEGIC THOUGHT IN INDIA



Lt Gen Ashok Joshi, PVSM, AVSM
Retired as Director General of Military Training in 1994

Indigenous kings in the Indian Subcontinent suffered innumerable military defeats at the hands of the aggressors. What can possibly explain these defeats? A brief historical exploration to ascertain if the then prevailing culture predisposed the Indian potentates to military defeats; and what are the remedies.

The Continent of Circe

The late Nirad C. Choudhary published an essay titled 'The Continent of Circe' in mid 1960s. The title was arcane, derived from the Greek legend of Circe who was a female witch, who could convert humans into animals at will. The thesis is that the Subcontinent is Circe and she has converted its population into lesser human beings. After pointing out the many shortcomings of Indians themselves, he came down heavily on the British for reneging on their self-ordained commitment to civilize India. He was an admirer of the empire builders and wrote an adulatory biography of Lord Clive. He held that the British were superb administrators but after a long enough stay in India they too turned into lesser beings. India was hopeless, he concluded, and he too left India to live at Oxford.

Oswald Spengler, who wrote 'Decline of the West' early in the 20th Century chose to survey all the cultures starting with the Classical or Greek because he held that 'Culture is the prime phenomenon of all past and future world-

history'¹. He held that a culture, when it loses vigour 'mortifies' into Civilization. According to him 'Buddhism, Stoicism, and Socialism, are morphologically equivalent as an end phenomenon.'² According to him India had already been fossilized six centuries before the CE.

Early in 1990s, George K. Tanham had been commissioned by the US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy to explore and interpret Indian strategic thinking. Tanham, a former Artillery officer, and a counter-insurgency expert, had a Ph D from Stanford; he was an old hand from the Rand Corporation, the Govt funded think tank. At the time there were rumours that India was working on its nuclear programme and the US certainly had their own intelligence inputs but they must have been of dubious quality. The study was a prognostication based purely on cultural factors. This was a novel idea, but not unreasonable if we accept what Spengler had opined. Will India get its bomb ready, and will it be prepared to use it without hesitation when circumstances warranted such a use? These were the actual but unstated questions that he was trying to seek answers to. Tanham felt that no conclusions could be drawn about India's intentions by reviewing its forces and/ or the equipment it buys or acquires. On basis of his observations, he however, inferred that there was an absence of strategic thought in India. Indirectly, Tanham has suggested that India may not actually use or employ what it possessed, and it would seem that he has cast doubts on the ability of the Indian leadership to take hard strategic decisions. The reader may like to come to his own conclusions in this regard³.

The Strategic Domain

The domain of Military Strategy has two broad divisions: (1) The raising, manning, equipping, training, and maintaining of the armed forces; and (2) the employment of armed forces for achieving political goals, or in other words, the matching of means and ends. Of these two, the former lies squarely in the domain of the political leadership where sound decision making requires foresight and a proper understanding of the military instrument as also the type(s) of warfare the nation would have to face or prepare for.

The provisioning of necessary resources, both human and material, and their long-term commitment towards war-preparedness is however, a hard decision to take especially in the face of competing claims on those

¹ Oswald Spengler, 'The Decline of the West, An Abridged Edition' OUP, NY, 1991. First Volume had been published in 1926, Page 72.

² Ibid, Page 183.

³ The document in question is titled 'Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay'.

resources. It is easier to wish away the possibility of war than to prepare for one. At the end of the First World War, England restricted the force planning horizon to five years. A time span that made it possible to declare that there would be no war in that period and at the same time make the long-term commitment of resources for war preparedness impossible. The consequences of this approach were terrible when England was caught off guard in 1939. While there is a great temptation to defer the allocation of resources for war-preparedness bad judgment can prove disastrous and it could take several years to correct the errors committed in this regard.

All democracies face this problem; many will recall the well recorded incident in the oval office of President Franklin D. Roosevelt when General McArthur offered to resign in protest against the inadequate allocation of resources to the Department of War. India has suffered from this malady and may well continue to do so for reasons that will be touched upon later.

Strategic thought, or the lack of it, in the present context straddles both the divisions.

Ultima Ratio Regum [The Final Argument of the Kings]

Sir George McMinn narrates an amusing anecdote in his book 'Always into Battle'. Around 1912, the Principal of the College of Science that had just been established in Pune, possibly the present College of Engineering, wrote to the military head at Kirkee, and said that he wanted to know his authority for drilling his artillery so close to his college. Colonel Holbertson sent a laconic reply: "Authority, Battle of Kirkee, 5th November, 1817⁴."

The principle that remained unstated was that the victorious in war has an inherent and absolute right to rule.

One interpretation of history is that it comprises cycles of deconstruction and reconstruction to bring about a more favourable redistribution of assets and liabilities. At any point in time, there are status quoists who resist deconstruction, and anti-status quoists who desire reconstruction. Force or counter force is used along with other means in pursuit of the desired results. This being the case, unless there is a mutation in human nature, force is always likely to be used, and resisted, as it has been since time immemorial. War has been a constant of history and will remain so.

⁴ Lt Gen Sir George MacMunn, 'Always into Battle', Aldershot, Gale and Polden Ltd., 1952, p.69.

Strategic Thought

Strategic thought revolves around the use of force as the principal means of bringing about the desired changes. Strategic thought is more about war than peace, although all the contestants vociferously claim that they want nothing but peace, of course, on their terms. This happens because, the distribution of all assets, including power, is so very uneven in all regions of the world.

No polity can survive for long without creative strategic thought; the system within is immaterial. The communist Russian Federation does not behave differently from the democratic US. British Empire, mother of all democracies, had used force to acquire its empire. PRC is in a hurry, as of now, to accumulate more assets. North Korea feels threatened and chooses to exhibit its counter-force capability. Foreign policy and strategic thought are inseparable; both have common objectives.

But there is a counter-view too: our first Prime Minister did believe that Independence had been 'secured with suffering and sacrifice', and possibly based on this experience, he expected, nay wanted, India to make 'her full and willing contribution to the promotion of world peace and the welfare of mankind'.⁵

It is quite likely that he also thought as Mahatma Gandhi had during World War 2. In the spring of 1940, Mahatma Gandhi had written to the British viceroy of India and advised surrender to the Germans, whose tanks were rolling over Western Europe: "This manslaughter must be stopped. You are losing; if you persist, it will only result in greater bloodshed. Hitler is not a bad man...." Then, on July 4, 1940, he wrote an open letter to the British people: "Let them take possession of your beautiful island with your many beautiful buildings. You will give all these, but neither your souls, nor your minds⁶."

Coming soon after the evacuation from Dunkirk from 27 May to 4 June, 1940, this advice could not have been welcome by the British.

No matter what the above counter- view looks like to the present generation, many Indians were inclined to endorse it at the time.

The Present Perspective

⁵ <http://nehrumemorial.nic.in/en/gift-gallery.html?id=214&tmpl=component>

⁶ http://frankwarner.typepad.com/free_frank_warner/2007/03/ghandi_urged_br.html

In 1947 and thereafter most Indians sincerely believed that the Civil Disobedience and the Quit India movement had brought independence to India⁷. They remained blithely unaware of the more likely reasons for it: (1) India as part of the British Empire was no longer an economic proposition; no less a person than Keynes had come to that conclusion. (2) The Army in India, the Navy, or the Air Force for that matter, was no longer reliable. This was disclosed by Prime Minister Attlee⁸. But even as they were 'quitting, they did split the sub-continent to subserve the British interest. The indirect control of Britain over the most sensitive area in the North West of the subcontinent was the real motive for the partition of India. The departing British had correctly gauged that the newly emerging Pakistan would be more obliging than India. The British continued to play the 'Great Game' for as long as possible, and later handed over the baton to the United States. But the euphoria of having wrested freedom from the hands of the unwilling British without fighting pitched battles, made the Indian leadership blind to the consequences and the strategic impact of the partition. Pakistan leveraged its geostrategic location to India's disadvantage and continues to do so while India keeps on talking about a 'stable and friendly' Pakistan being in the best interest of India.

We got a bloody nose from China in October 1962. In 1965 we just about held our own on the field of battle but yielded at Tashkent in February 1966 what had been secured militarily in 1965.

In 1971, Indian military gave an excellent account of itself at the strategic and tactical levels, but the Prime Minister gave away at the negotiating table at Shimla in 1972 a great deal of what had been secured militarily. The wages of trusting the enemy were terrible. After securing the release of some 90, 000 prisoners, Mr. Bhutto reneged on every promise that he had made.

Our intervention in Sri Lanka ended without any gains. India was caught napping in 1999, but later the performance at the brigade level and below was very good.

⁷ The following is attributed to the first Prime Minister by General Sir Robert Lockhart: "We do not need a defence policy. Our policy is ahimsa (non violence). We foresee no military threats. As far as I am concerned, you can scrap the army". Quoted on Page 20 by Major D K Palit in his book 'War in High Himalaya: The Indian Army in crisis'.

⁸ Toward the end of our discussion I asked Attlee what was the extent of Gandhi's influence upon the British decision to quit India. Hearing this question, Attlee's lips became twisted in a sarcastic smile as he slowly chewed out the word, "m-i-n-i-m-a-l!"

<http://blog.tnsatish.com/2012/09/clement-atlees-response-on-gandhis-role.html>

Overall, India's military performance, or strategic thought guiding it, since Independence in 1947 have been no better than average. This report card of performance in the past 74 years does not suffice to engender confidence in a nation that had been under a foreign yoke for nearly a millennium or more before that.

It may be a good idea to dwell on the subject of causes that have led to this rather indifferent record and the major Indian weaknesses that they point to.

Rare Victories

The rich Subcontinent has always been an attractive destination for aggressors and migrants. The Greeks, the Scythians (shakas) from central Asia, and the Huns of Turkic or Mongolian origin, have been amongst them. They invaded the Subcontinent, overcame the resistance of the residents in large and small battles, and settled down here forever. Demetrius and Menander, established kingdoms in India. It is believed that Menander became a Buddhist and adopted the name Milind. They were foreign rulers to start with but did not remain so. They do not attract attention as invaders in our times possibly because they did not resist cultural assimilation by India. They found a niche for themselves and today none of us can locate a Bactrian, a Scythian, or a Hun in India. Some of them did cause annoyance though, otherwise Samudragupta would not have fought battles against the Shakas, and defeated them.

The picture suddenly changed after the seventh and eighth century of the CE. The battles that Indians lost to the Muslim invaders, and later to the Portuguese and the British, brought slavery to the nation for centuries.

The victories of Indians against invaders are so rare that in spite of a deliberate effort none can be located against the British except for the Battle of Wadgaon in 1779 which did not prove to be decisive in any case. A battle is decisive to the extent that it contributes to a lasting change in rulers.

In that sense, the first battle of Panipat in 1526 was decisive because the Afghans who lost were replaced by Babur, a Central Asian Turk. He defeated Ibrahim Khan Lodhi, the Afghan Sultan of Delhi. The Mughals continued to rule huge tracts of India for next three centuries.

The battles lost to Muslim invaders have done more lasting damage than all battles lost to other invaders. Ultimately, those lost battles have yielded Pakistan, which has brought about a perennial state of insecurity to the entire Subcontinent. India has lost far too many battles to the aggressors.

We will briefly look at two major battles that Indians lost because there is a lot to learn from these two lost battles.

Two Battles, Separated by Two Millennia, that Indians Lost

Alexander the Great fought Indian king Porus on the bank of Hydaspes, or Vitasta, or Jhelum, in the year 326 BC at a point some hundred miles from Taxila. Alexander had travelled 2,500 miles from home. His infantry and cavalry totaled around 32,000; Indian king Porus had comparable infantry and cavalry; additionally, he also had 300 chariots and 200 elephants. Elephants were unique to Porus and mounted archers were special to Alexander. Alexander tricked Porus into believing that he would rather wait than cross the swollen river by spreading the rumors that he had ordered stocks of wheat. At a time of his choice, before the onset of summer, he divided his force into three lots. He kept one opposite Porus on his side of the river, and moved 17 miles upstream, with the balance of troops, on a stormy and rainy night. Then, he crossed the river. He had lulled Porus by carrying out similar movements earlier and then reverting to his own position without crossing the river. This beguiled Porus into believing that he was not capable of swiftly crossing the river. Thereafter, Alexander used his cavalry to outflank Porus from both the sides while advancing with his infantry in the center as a phalanx. His cavalry attacked both the flanks of Porus. As Porus moved forward to take on the advancing Greeks, the third part of Alexander's army, which he had held back as a reserve opposite Porus' original location until then, crossed the river and appeared in the rear of Porus' contingent. Thus, Porus was virtually encircled. Heavy fighting took place and Porus lost the battle. He sued for peace. Greek losses were under 1,000, whereas Porus lost 12,000 killed and 9,000 taken prisoners⁹. In today's terminology the Greek force had a better combination of mobility and firepower both. In fact, Porus carried a liability into battle in the form of elephants, because once frightened by the arrows of the mounted cavalry, the elephants posed a greater danger to own troops than the enemy¹⁰.

We will now turn to the third battle of Panipat fought on 14 January 1761 between the Marathas and Ahmed shah Durrani, or Abdali. Incidentally, distance between Pune and Panipat is more than between Kabul and Panipat. After having captured the fort at Kunjpura which was held by Abdali, the Marathas commanded by Sadashiv Bhau, a cousin of the ruling Peshwa, decided to turn back towards Delhi while keeping River Yamuna on their left. Abdali was on the other side of Yamuna and busy looking for a ford across the river so that he could locate himself South of the Marathas

⁹<http://www.historynet.com/what-we-learned-from-the-hydaspes-river.htm>

¹⁰ <http://www.ancient.eu/article/660/>

and block their homeward passage. Heavy artillery commanded by Ibrahim Khan, a skilled gunner, was part of the army of the Marathas. Abdali had mounted swivel guns carried by camels. Abdali had been joined by Shuja of Awadh, and Najib Khan Rohilla, both of Afghan ethnicity.

Notwithstanding the effort of Marathas, Abdali managed to hoodwink them and succeeded in carrying out, almost, an unopposed crossing of River Yamuna even whilst it was running full.

The Maratha camp was large almost one hundred thousand strong but the combatants did not exceed 70,000. Abdali on the other hand, had close to 100,000 combatants. His cavalry and infantry both were qualitatively superior. Abdali successfully attacked the logistic trains of the Marathas and effectively isolated them. Starved out of their positions, Marathas had no choice but to attempt a break out towards Delhi. They mounted a fierce assault that almost broke the center of Abdali's line of battle. In their impatience, however, some Marathas rushed forward and blocked the field of fire of their own guns while Abdali had held back a substantive reserve which he employed at this critical juncture to pierce the Maratha line at its weakest. They succeeded and started to slaughter the non-combatants in the rear. The Marathas never recovered; they had no reserves to employ and the commander had no way of influencing the battle.

To make the matters worse, Vishwas, the son of the ruling Peshwa, who was riding an elephant, was struck by a bullet and died on the spot. Thereafter, in an act of desperation, Sadashiv Bhaugot out of the howdah on the back of the elephant, and rode his horse into the thick of the battle. He fought valiantly but to no effect. Even his body was never recovered. Forty thousand Maratha prisoners were slaughtered the next day and thousands of prisoners including women and children were taken as slaves, many of them of the 'highest rank'.

There are striking similarities between the two defeats, outlined above, separated by over 2000 years. Except for the introduction of the gunpowder in the intervening period, little seemed to have changed. The weaknesses displayed by Indians in both battles are startlingly similar.

Defending a water obstacle is just as difficult as fighting across it. It is difficult to say which of the two alternatives is more challenging. But an opposed river crossing poses special challenges because there is every possibility of being defeated in detail while actually crossing the obstacle. Porus, on home ground, should have known existing fords on the Jhelum River better. He could have covered them with small detachments and held his main force intact. By not doing so, he had committed an unforced error.

He also had the opportunity to rush the infantry with his cavalry but he did not do so as it would have been *infra dig*—it is believed the cavalry did not rush the ‘lowly’ infantry due to caste considerations.

The story of Abdali crossing the Yamuna is astoundingly similar. Abdali employed local guides to locate the ford site, set an example by crossing the Yamuna ahead of his main body, and had a boat bridge to follow in due course. Sadashiv Bhau had lost his best chance when he did not catch Abdali as he was getting across. He had the artillery to achieve his purpose, but he allowed the opportunity to slip. It was almost sinful to have allowed an unopposed crossing to the attacker: thereby the defender lost his best chance of overcoming the attacker when he was in a disadvantageous position to fight.

The preoccupation with and fascination for elephants was another undoing of the Indian defenders in both the cases. The king or the Commander, by locating himself in a howdah mounted on the back of the tallest elephant, attracted the enemy’s attention. The punishment wasn’t long in coming. Incidentally, Kautilya in his *Arthashastra* specifically emphasizes this point and recommends that the Commander should place his dummy, someone who looks like him, in a prominent position visible to the enemy in the battle, and he himself should remain a good distance behind the frontline from where he can control the battle¹¹. Porus could not have known of the *Arthashastra*, because it was only after observing the downfall of the Indians at the hands of Greeks that Kautilya had decided to write his treatise. It is believed that he had been a student at Taxila, around 160 km from the site of the battle on Jhelum. But Sadashiv Bhau must have been aware of the teaching of the *Arthashastra*; there are references in old documents that mention the treatise being part of the curriculum for aspiring administrators and commanders. We will revert to the *Arthashastra* again later.

Elephants were useful for so long as they could be trained to charge at cavalry, or the infantry. Horses bolted when they confronted animals weighing two to five tons coming at them. But circumstances changed when Alexander’s mounted archers could hurt elephants by arrows from safe distance. Elephants would not charge at them. After gun powder was introduced, this was even more so. A rider can control a horse, but a mahout cannot control a frightened elephant. Indians were generally blind to the advances in technology and could not correctly assess their impact.

¹¹ ‘Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*’, translated by Shri RP Kangle, Volume 2, Page 441.

In the first two battles of Panipat, in 1526 and 1556, elephants had proved singularly disadvantageous: Ibrahim Lodi had 100 of them, and Hemu had 500. Obviously, the right conclusions were not drawn.

Undoubtedly there were a few militarily competent indigenous rulers in the Subcontinent as in Vijaynagaram, Maharashtra, Punjab, or Mysore but the total area that they ruled over, and the duration for which they held sway, cumulatively do not materially change the fact that India had been under a foreign yoke for nearly a thousand years.

It is worthwhile to examine the causes of the enslavement of India.

Absence of Records due to the 'Illiteracy' of Indians?

Indians had developed memorizing into an art form. All the Vedas were passed down the generations by word of mouth. Great care was taken to ensure that not a single syllable was missed out or added, or mispronounced. Similarly, over 3,900 rules in 'sutra' form of Panini's grammar were learnt by heart. The need for writing was just not felt by them, and even when scripts were developed around beginning of the CE, many of these learned advisors, and wise men, did not care to write down anything. Such was the reliability of memory that none doubted it. Indians were highly educated in grammar, Ayurveda and astronomy but when it came to maintaining records of military campaigns, they were singularly remiss. It does appear that memories of so many defeats were willfully erased from the collective memory by our forefathers.

The causes that led to so many defeats were never analyzed with a view to deriving the right lessons. Instead, Indians learnt to cope with defeats by a denial of the consequences.

Techniques for Coping with Defeats

Indian traditional narratives make a hero out of the defeated King Porus. After the battle, when he was the captive of Alexander, the latter asked him how he expected to be treated. Porus, reportedly told Alexander that he remained a king and that is exactly how he should be dealt with. Bold and fearless, yes, he was. But did he show any concern for 21, 000 casualties that his forces had suffered or the reasons for it? It seems that he showed no solidarity with his own, and thought only of himself. The Indian narrative never held him up as a terrible example. The fact was that Alexander made him a satrap, and Greek interests were taken care of. Indians maintained no record of the happenings from their point of view at any stage.

Very few Indians showed defiance in defeat. Instead, they learnt to admire spectacular mausoleums and forts built by the conquerors and by pretending that the consequences of defeat were actually beneficial. With the exception of the Sikhs and Marathas none others have put up a worthwhile fight against the aggressor.

The Sikhs fought six great and defiant battles against the British, and though they lost all of them they did not meekly surrender. The Anglo Maratha wars kept the British at bay for nearly half a century—from 1775 to 1819. Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Wellington, did count the Battle of Assaye in 1803 as ~~‘the best thing that he had done’~~ his finest accomplishment on the battle field. But for all that, the leadership in India in general accepted defeats with nonchalance. They learnt to admire Sleeman for having eliminated Thuggee; and Macaulay for having introduced education in English. They came to believe that defeats at the hands of the British brought the benefits of rule of law, a well-run administrative machinery, and freedom from crime. The humiliation of defeats in battles, and enslavement, were erased from public memory.

‘Defiance in defeat’, and rising up once again to contest the British in India militarily did not have any takers amongst the elites, except in 1857. Although the British called it the Sepoy mutiny, in point of fact it was an effort by most Rajas, big and small, in the North of India to shake off the British yoke. Veer Savarkar styled the uprising the First War of Independence. Incidentally, Marx and Engels archives contain a comparable interpretation of the revolt¹².

The British ruthlessly killed the rebels by blowing them from mouths of guns, and anyone even remotely connected with them were ruthlessly dealt with. The total death toll was in several hundreds of thousands. Thereafter, any thoughts of defiance in the minds of the ‘natives’ were effectively eliminated. The lesson was learnt by the Indians. Where was the need to resist the British by force of arms? The elites in the social hierarchy were joining the subordinate services; some got entry even into the coveted ICS. A chosen few made it into the Political Department and became Political Agents of the British. Was this enlightened self-interest, or was it a meek surrender? And if so, can we locate causes for this meekness.

¹²<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/09/16.htm>

The Attitude and Outlook of Indians—a Gradual Turning Away from this World, and Here and Now

It is obvious that Indians had led a vigorous life in Vedic times. The kings believed that they had an intrinsic right to expand their kingdoms to occupy the entire subcontinent by challenging the other contestants. Kalidas narrates how Raghu expanded his kingdom to cover most of India. Kautilyasays as much by addressing the young prince as 'Vijigishu', or the would-be conqueror, and tells him that his empire could well extend from sea to sea from east to west, and northwards to Himvat- the Himalayas.

The Vedas promised that a combination of 'all this and heaven too' was very possible. The Varna system had not deteriorated into the Jati system, and the Kshatriyas, or the warrior-class, took enormous pride in protecting their subjects. An elaborate system existed for absorbing and assimilating immigrants and occasional aggressors; and the system seemed to have worked. The prevailing culture was very accommodative, otherwise there could not have been the transformation of Menander into Milind.

In due course the best minds in India took to metaphysics. Their search for 'absolute reality' yielded six major schools of philosophy or 'darshans', Vedanta was one of the more largely followed 'darshans'; it manifested as the 'Upanishads'; many of them have held the interest of Indian philosophers for several millennia. The Upanishads also thrilled philosophers and intellectuals in Europe. The German philosopher Schopenhauer found the Vedanta most satisfying. He gave expression to his admiration by saying that—

“In the whole world there is no study so beneficial and so elevating as that of the Upanishads. It has been the solace of my life; it will be the solace of my death¹³.”

The followers of the Vedanta, as individuals, turned more and more to meditation and became indifferent to their worldly conditions. They sought to cast off their passions in an effort to merge their consciousness into the cosmic consciousness. And in all this they seemed to have forgotten about the here and now.

The intention is not to belittle the importance of metaphysics. Human curiosity brings up important questions about the purpose and meaning of life, and how to fulfill it. Neither physical nor social sciences can answer

¹³<https://www.google.com/search?q=Schopenhauer%27s+quote+on+upanishads&aq=Schopenhauer%27s+quote+on+upanishads&aqs=chrome..69i57j0i13.63419j0j7>

these questions. Metaphysics makes an effort to satisfy curiosity in this domain. It serves a purpose.

None of the great minds of those times showed concern for resisting aggression. They seem to have found solace in notions which pulled them further away from reality: All Indic religions except Sikhism showed this tendency sooner or later.

It is interesting that the 'metaphysical' Vedanta has lived down the ages, whereas the 'pragmatic' Arthashastra had almost vanished until it was re-discovered by Shyama Shastri around 1908. Siddhartha, before he became Buddha, was a kshatriya, but he preached non-violence and other worldliness. It is quite likely that a lot of kshatriyas followed suit, which cumulatively weakened the ability to resist invasions. As defeats piled up over centuries Indians developed defensive attitudes that helped them to cope with the subjugation without offering armed resistance. It is quite likely that the soothsayers found the concept of the Yuga system expedient since it gave good excuses for explaining conquests by the aggressors as ordained or inevitable.

- The concept of Yuga does not look upon time as an arrow, but a cyclical phenomenon in which the cycle of the yugas is endlessly repeated. When military defeats were piling up, India was past the Satya, Treta, and Dwapar Yugas, and in the midst of Kali Yug; therefore, disorder and perversion was bound to be rampant. So, they told themselves. Until the next Yuga cycle recommenced inaction was unavoidable and appropriate. A natural lowering of standards, in public and private life was only to be expected.
- Since the past was better than the present, tomorrow might turn out to be worse. Recapturing the past in an imaginative way became more comforting. Original creative work came to an end. Memorizing ancient texts and passing them on became a satisfactory achievement.
- The karma theory brought determinism to the fore. Misfortunes had to be lived through rather than overcome.
- Belief in miracles became more pronounced and the oppressed looked forward to the coming of the tenth incarnation of Vishnu, or 'Kalki', and coped with the present in that hope.

- Victimhood, or 'bali-karma' as some like to describe it, was celebrated. The money-lender would sit at the door step of the borrower and observe a fast, so that the borrower was shamed, until he was repaid. This has now become a time honoured 'dharna' technique. Mahatma Gandhi developed this concept into civil disobedience, and invited the British to arrest and punish those who broke the law. He hoped to appeal to the good sense of the British and their Christian spirit.

Natural Expression of Strategic Culture

One can look upon culture as an expression of collective likes and dislikes, preferences and aversions, obsessions and hates. Its roots lie more in emotion than in thought, and its expression is in attitudes, arts, architecture, and beliefs. Reasoning plays a comparatively small part whereas cultural forces are operative the entire time at a subconscious level. Collective behavior of a people owes a lot to the prevailing culture.

Can we trace the indifferent record of strategic thought in India, at least over one thousand years, to the absence of a strategic culture? The answer seems to be, yes.

Indians down the ages have shown a remarkable unwillingness to search for the causes of so many defeats in so many battles. They seem to have turned away from the matter altogether like a bad student turns away from subjects that he dislikes. War has never occupied a significant place in the collective consciousness of the nation. Therefore, Indians never made the lost battles a part of collective generational memory. Instead, fibs were created to divert attention to inconsequential issues such as nobility in defeat, and the credulousness of the Indian kings was made into a virtue, as if believing an enemy is an act of nobility and wisdom.

Beyond that, Indians have come to believe that defence of borders suffices. They have never been persuaded that every nation uses the instrumentality of force to not only defend but to also promote national interests. For so long as other nations seek de-construction and/ or reconstruction to suit their interests, war in one form or the other cannot be avoided. As a consequence, Indians did not internalize the following realities:

- It takes two to tango, but not to make war.
- An adversary can always force war, or unpalatable compromises, unless he fears retaliation.
- Defence by itself will never suffice.
- Offensive action is a must to instill fear in mind of the adversary.
- War is terrible; but defeat is worse.

Conclusion

Right up to the sixth century AD, Indians were a vigorous people. Thereafter, they turned to individualism led by the most admired elites in the society, and collective identities became weak. The kshatriyas turned into khatriis or the mercantile class, and the kayasthas lost their warrior spirit; they turned into civil servants. Brahmins joined them. The varnas degenerated into the Jati system but the social structure held out. India had a strong social structure but a set of weak states¹⁴.

Sophistry of the intellectual has led the common man into believing that the Bhagwad Gita preaches non-violence. Ironically, it was a British officer, one Col Maude of the Royal Engineers, who early in Twentieth century concluded that Gita was the best inspiration for nations and individuals confronted with war. In his preface to his English translation of 'On War' by Clausewitz, he had this to say: "I know of no more inspiring advice than that given by Krishna to Arjuna ages ago, when the latter trembled before the awful responsibility of launching his Army against the hosts of the Pandav's¹⁵. Apparently, many Indians seem to have forgotten the teaching of the Gita.

A very determined and deliberate effort will have to go into cultivation of a robust strategic culture. Such an idea is likely to be condemned as war mongering, but this corrective is certainly essential for India. Whether it is hand to hand combat, or cyber war, the attitudes that contribute to a sound strategic culture do not vary. India needs to turn a new page. A good beginning may be made by political parties by getting their promising young leaders to study war and military history. The content of military history in the history curricula of schools and colleges may be augmented and even science students enabled to study military history. There is a case for focusing attention on the cultivation of strategic thought for which purpose an understanding of war across the entire society is essential.

CERTIFICATE

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication / web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct. The paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CENJOWS.

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¹⁴ Francis Fukuyama, 'The Origins of Political Order', Profile Books Ltd, Page 175.

¹⁵This is a quote and notwithstanding the apparent error—Arjun was facing up to the 'Kauravas', and not "Pandav's"—the relevance of the quotation remains untainted. Here was a Britisher who could link the 'On War' of Clausewitz with the Bhagwat Gita.