



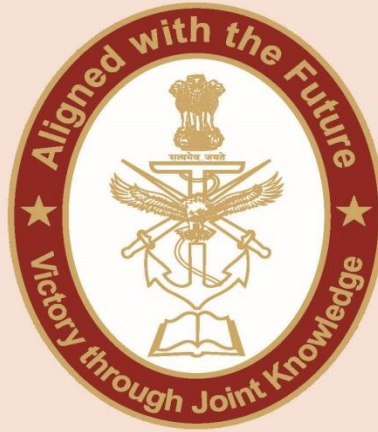
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ISSUE BRIEF

INDIANISATION OF MILITARY THOUGHT AND CULTURE IN THE INDIAN ARMED FORCES

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THOUGHT AND CULTURE IN THE
INDIAN ARMED FORCES**



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“They Cannot Make History Who Forget History.”

—Dr BR Ambedkar

The Richness of Bharat Varsha (Indian Subcontinent)

Despite India’s richness of culture and longevity of civilisation, its incredible history is often diffusely perceived, poorly recorded and rarely comprehended in depth. Rabindra Nath Tagore in his address to the students and teachers of the Shanti Niketan in 1903 titled, “The History of Bharat Varsha” said: *“By not viewing Bharatvarsha from Bharatvarsha’s own perspective...we get demeaned ourselves...; what our ancestors did, this we do not know; therefore, we do not know what we ought to aim for.”*¹ India needs to look into its vast storehouse of civilisational wisdom and culture. Germane ideas must be studied, analysed, modified if necessary and adapted to strengthen all pillars of national security. That is why it is necessary to study Indian civilisation, geography, and history.

The richness of India’s ancient strategic military thoughts by Kautilya and his treatise, *Arthashastra* and many other such works and writings, including the Bhagavad Gita

and Vedas, lie largely unexplored. A dispassionate and objective study of the same will not only lead to becoming self-aware but also overcome the deeply embedded British Raj defensive military mindsets and imported Western military culture. Ironically, the lack of developing focus on literature and languages led to Sanskrit—the mother of all languages being neglected, giving rise to several (mis) interpretations of the richness of Indian strategic culture and military thought. Contemporary India is transforming all sectors with a focus on Indianisation and indigenisation as it evolves from being a spectator to a player in the global arena. The military must not lag in this transformation imbibing the relevant threads and lessons in the future Indian PME construct.

Military Education in Ancient India

Since time immemorial, the emphasis on military training embedded in education has been foundational in the evolution of Indian civilisation. There are traces of military weapons and soldier training since the Indus Valley Civilisation era lasting from 3300 BCE to 1300 BCE and in its mature form from 2600 BC to 1900 BC. Archaeological excavations have yielded copper swords, helmets and chariots, dating from 2000 to 1800 BC, which suggests the presence of a warrior class of people in the region during the Copper- Bronze Age (3300 BC–1200 BC). Then came the Vedic period (1500 BC–500 BC) and the ‘*Gurukul system*’. The ancient education system in ancient India was based on Gurukul funded by Kings. It was primarily a residential school where students, essentially from the affluent class, were imparted free education. The ‘*Shishya*’ (student) and the ‘*Guru*’ (Teacher) stayed together in the Gurukul. The subjects taught were language, particularly Sanskrit, social science, science, mathematics and Vedas. The Gurus also taught military subjects like the use of a weapon, martial arts, physical fitness and the art of war which were compulsory. Military science was called *Dhanurveda* (treatise on warfare in Sanskrit) and was one among the four Upavedas to Vedas. It covered military science and was aimed at Vedic Rajarsis (kings who were also great sages) and warriors. The department that dealt with military studies was called *Mahendrasthanana*.² Life in Gurukul was disciplined and tough. The Gurukul concept was to live with the teacher and assist the teacher with all daily activities; thus, students learned practical aspects of living as part of character development.

Apart from Gurukuls, particularly in South India, there were schools and colleges called 'Salais' in important temples. These were again residential schools, where scholars received free education, boarding and lodging, clothing and all other amenities till they completed their studies. Chera King Ay first established the system of 'Salais' in Kerala around AD 8.³ The syllabus and method of teaching were similar to the Gurukul system. Along with the Salais was the 'Kalari' (battlefield) School which specialised in martial arts and the training of soldiers. Kalari was an Indian martial art entailing a rigorous course of physical training and the study of the art and science of offence and defence. The Kings of Kerala were great patrons of learning and to them is credited the establishment of Kalaris in Military Schools. It is believed to be the oldest surviving martial art in India, with a history spanning over 3,000 years. Like most Indian martial arts, *Kalaripayattu* (Practice in the arts of the battlefield) contains rituals and philosophies inspired by Hinduism. Kalaripayattu was a martial art designed for the ancient battlefield, with weapons and combative techniques that are unique to India. It entailed a blend of training in weapon expertise and education on the conduct of warfare and its dimensions. Kalaripayattu is mentioned in the *Vadakkan Pattukal*, a collection of ballads written about the Chekavar of the Malabar region of Kerala. In the *Vadakkan Pattukal*, it is stated that the cardinal principle of Kalaripayattu was that knowledge of the art is used to further worthy causes, and not for the advancement of one's selfish interests. It was presided over by the Panikkar or Kurup.⁴ Yoga science and its asanas as well as finger movements in the traditional dances were incorporated into Kalaripayattu. The most promising of the trainees were taught the 'Marmas' (Marma in Sanskrit means hidden or secret), namely, striking the vital parts of the body. It is claimed that experienced Kalari warriors could disable or kill their opponents by merely striking the correct marmas on their opponent's body. The earliest mention of marmas is found in the Rig Veda, where Indra is said to have defeated Vritra by attacking his marmas with a vajra. References to marmas are also found in the Atharva Veda. In ancient times, military education was not only organised by the State in residential schools but also by individual teachers in village military training camps where villagers were imparted military education in the science and art of war.

Women in Keralite society also underwent training in Kalaripayattu,⁵ and still do so to this day. Keralite women such as Unniyarcha are mentioned in a collection of ballads from Kerala called the '*Vadakkan Pattukal*' and are praised for their martial prowess. Even the Namboothiri youths received military training in the Kalari during the wars of

the 11th century when the Kalari system came into vogue. In 1804, the British banned Kalaripayattu in Kerala in response to the Kottayathu War, a rebellion against British rule in Kerala led by the Keralite king, Pazhassi Raja.

Another Indian ancient treasure trove in military education and statecraft is Arthashastra. Kautilya's Arthashastra, believed to have been written in about 300 BC, teaches various complexities of statecraft and politics. It is a voluminous and comprehensive collection, comprising 15 books, 150 chapters, 180 sections and 6,000 slokas. Chanakya (Kautilya) comes across as one of the world's greatest strategic thinkers. His holistic intellectual skills as a diplomat, a military strategist, an economist, an administrator and a man of wisdom and unfailing strategies are recognised globally. In particular, Chanakya's art of diplomacy is contemporarily practised in the areas of defence, strategy formation and foreign relations. Chanakya is renowned for his written works on '*Arthashastra*', '*Neetishastra*' and '*Neeti Sutras*'. It is believed that he was inspired by Vidur who was known to be the wise man in Mahabharata and had written '*Vidur Sanhita*' from which Chanakya Neeti is said to be derived. In his famous work '*Arthashastra*', he mentions in detail the nuances of military training, leadership traits and the art of warfighting. Emphasising the cognitive domain of military education, Chanakya stated that a "*great general is the one who has great imaginative power*". Chanakya believed that wars are based on three pillars and there should be a harmonious balance among these pillars for success in war. These three pillars are the Defence Forces, the Government and the People. In contemporary times these pillars have increasingly become relevant when multi-domain wars are directly impacting society and people, demanding greater intellectual and informational military-civil fusion. Arthashastra articulates that victory on the battlefield is not the final remedy but rather the acceptance of the outcome by the defeated side. He stressed physiological warfare to target and destroy the enemy's will as the centre of gravity. Today, winning the peace is more challenging than winning wars with the former requiring a whole-of-nation approach based on the foundational constructs of defence, diplomacy and development. Wisely, Chanakya also does not make much distinction between military strategy and statecraft. He believed that warfare is an extension and an integral part of statecraft. Thus, his teachings have contemporary thoughts that need to be imbibed into Indian military education.

The Prussian Model of Professional Military Education

After the catastrophic defeat of Prussia in 1806 by Napoleon, Prussian senior military leadership created a programme to educate a small group of officers who could provide a systematic and coherent approach to war. This was the genesis of the term PME and harnessing its potential. The creation of the Prussian General Staff was a profoundly administrative innovation that had virtually nothing to do with technology and was born of a Prussian desire for self-preservation in the face of asymmetric advantages of the Grand Army based on the reforms brought about by the French Revolution and Napoleon. The system aimed to create a more independent, intellectual and critically thinking professional military officer at the junior and mid-level. Thus, creating a sort of central nervous system for strategic planning and operational control that would harness the collective wisdom of the best minds the army could recruit.⁶ Beyond the creation of the General Staff, however, Prussian military culture subsequently experienced a profound shift in educational norms, harnessing meritocracy rather than aristocracy and mediocrity. Prussian system proved its worth in 1866 and 1870 under Helmuth von Moltke, Chief of the General Staff when Austria and France were defeated. The Prussian model was copied by all major European Armies, Staff Colleges proliferated across the continent. One of the contributing factors to the creation of the Prussian General Staff was the concept of professional military education, something that Scharnhorst himself personally exemplified with his publications and efforts as the chief of the *'Militärakademie'*. The idea of cultivating thinking combatants honed by systematic professional study and the cultivation of decision-making skills was a concept that Scharnhorst and many of his successors fully understood and instilled in the Prussian military. By the outbreak of World War I, every major power had adopted education as a major component of military professionalism.

After World War I, General Hans von Seeckt, as Chief of the German General Staff, was under severe restrictions imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. To maintain a high level of officer education von Seeckt instituted a ruthless selection process that tested applicants on not only military sciences but also languages, political science, history, sociology, communications and several other subjects. Reading, writing and communication as professional military education were part of the transformation process of the German Army during the Inter-War period. As the Germans encouraged

debate, study and honest experimentation in their preparations for war, the British and French armies often stifled innovative thought by frustrating the progression and education of some officers and outright ignoring the thoughts and writing of others. This flaw got passed down from British India as a military culture to Independent India which only magnified the civil-military distrust and divide.

The Prussian model has many lessons for the contemporary Indian PME model. In a quest to focus more on technological hardware than intellectual skin-ware in military dominance, the military has often neglected or misconstrued the necessity of continued professional and intellectual development among All Ranks. Contemporary military leaders, as Bernard Brodie points out in his book, *War and Politics*, have always cherished the image of themselves as men of action rather than as intellectuals, and they have not been very much given to writing analytical inquiries into their own art.⁷ In a sense, then, recent appearances of military “anti-intellectualism” might be traced to “the cognitive demands of the modern technology-based force.”⁸ This is the root cause of the pervasive sense of anti-intellectualism. The culture of young officers finding the time and opportunity to attain the broad spectrum of knowledge beyond the military training that the 21st-century demands are virtually absent. After all, H. G. Wells is quoted to have said, “*The professional military mind is by necessity an inferior and unimaginative mind; no man of high intellectual quality would willingly imprison his gifts in such a calling.*”⁹ This is not to say that intellectual uniformed thinkers have been absent but they are far and few in the long military history of Independent India. Critical thinking and intellectual capital might hurt, but it is something that must be done, and not just by a select few.

Military Education in the Mughal and British Era

In the medieval era, with the Mughal invaders came the Islamic system of learning in Maktabas and Madrassas which blended religious teaching with military training. Then came the British method of teaching and organising schools and colleges. While both, the Muslims and the British encouraged higher education, the concept of educating soldiers and officers of the military changed with time. The British set up specialised Academies for training officers and Regimental Training Centres for soldiers. From 1774 to 1785 British East India Company opened several regimental centres for British and European troops. After the 1857 mutiny, the Queen took over the reins from the

East India Company as the new ruler of India, and far-reaching reforms took place in army education under the Crown. While the British invested heavily in training the Indian Army into an excellent tactical force, they retained valuable education and grooming to that end as a preserve of the colonial masters. As the military historian, Hamid Hussain has written, *“Ninety per cent of officers of (the) Indian Army, both British and Indian, were groomed for regimental service. It was envisioned that the highest rank an Indian could achieve was the command of a battalion. In 1947, only a handful of Indians were at colonel and brigadier ranks. What else describes the anomalies of that period than the fact that the first Indian C-in-C jumped six ranks from Major to four-star General in six years while the first Pakistani C-in-C accomplished this feat in five short years?”*¹⁰

India’s Strategic Culture and Indianisation of Contemporary Military Education

As India’s standing on the global canvas grows, it needs to be conscious of the values, its rich culture and civilisation ethos represent, and about protecting a set of values from threats, embedded in its cultural context. Thus, while a study of Thucydides, Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, Mahan, Jomini and Liddel Hart is significant, the holistic knowledge of our ancient Indian texts, Arthashastra, Bhagavad Gita and Thirukkural in the modern context of warfare and its relevance remains priceless to contemporary times. The study of Indian strategic culture is the essence of the Indian way of warfighting and overcoming challenges to national security.

India’s strategic culture is complex, yet composite, coherent and distinct in itself. The teachings of mythological epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata, values and education imbibed by ancient Hindu Vedic civilisations, statecraft with threads from Kautilya’s Arthashastra and braving over 200 years of repeated invasions from the time of Alexander the Great in 321 BC to the British, only reinforced the idea of India. The secular threads and unity of the nation stood firm and deeply engrained, never severed or completely submerged by repeated challenges to its survival.¹¹ This was a result of an over 5,000-year- old time-tested system based on *“Dharma-Artha-Kama-Moksha”*. The idea of India embraces the Upanishad’s world view of *“Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam”*, a Sanskrit phrase, which means “the world is one family”. *“Satyameva Jayate”* (Sanskrit: “Truth alone Triumphs”) a mantra from the ancient Indian scripture, symbolised the deep cultural ethos and values. India was indeed a strong nation, with a strong economy and a glorious culture that possessed the power and strength of

knowledge and character. From 1857 onwards to 1947, all castes and communities of this diverse yet united nation fought for freedom and a unique bonding took birth. India's geopolitical options and threat environment were profoundly altered by the partition of India, giving birth to an anti-India revisionist Pakistan with terrorism as its state policy and the belligerence of an expansionist China. India's strategic culture thus theorises the defence of India as a geographical expression with turbulent threats from the physical domains of land, sea, air and space, besides the newly emerging non-kinetic domains of cyber and information.

The essence of a nation's culture resides in its rich mythology, glorious ancient history, the character of its civilisation and the geography of the country. Indian mythology is a rich mosaic of epic battles like the Mahabharata with embedded strategic thoughts on national security and warfare. Yet, ironically, they remain woefully dormant in the Indian PME system. Ancient India, the land of creative innovation for mankind, critical thinking and strategic thoughts must be the roots of the PME construct. Equally important is to study our own military leaders of the past like Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, whose strategic thoughts, comprehension of civil-military fusion and military genius have many lessons for today's security challenges to the nation.

India has developed a predominantly defensive and protective strategic orientation deeply embedded in the experience of the British Raj, although some leaders now seek a more offensive-oriented strategy. Unfortunately, Indian military education remains embedded in and fashioned by Western thought, personalities and doctrines irrespective of their relevance or lessons. Thus, the Indianisation of future thought gets blurred in the rainbow of the West. As a nation, as we correct this grave anomaly in our national education system through NEP 2020, the military cannot be found wanting or waiting.

As the lexicon of war and peace transforms and increasingly impacts society directly, the need to bring about cultural and spiritual rootedness is potentially critical for a harmonised vision of India's national security calculus. The Armed Forces need to tap their strategic roots and imbibe the essentials of socialism for a holistic PME. A state's military cannot afford to be divorced from the cultural, spiritual and political norms of the society from which it draws its people. The armed forces as an important

component of the national security structure thus need to be adequately socialised. The primary approach to conflict prevention and resolution in the 21st century needs a wide-horizon understanding of all elements of national power. Thus, conflict resolution entails the employment of a mix of 'politico-diplomatic initiatives' backed by military hard power, with the pillars of capability, credibility and communication interwoven in all elements of comprehensive national power as a deterrent. This was the essence of the writings in the Arthashastra.

Any scholar in this field would advise that Arthashastra reveals stark similarities between the problems faced by Chanakya and the modern scourge of terrorism, insurgencies and multi-domain conflicts in the grey zone. As the treatise is a compilation of precepts and principles of India's larger strategic and philosophical tradition, it is eminently representative of the ancient tradition of statecraft. Simultaneously, it is, perhaps, India's most historic military text signifying the role of the military and its complementarity with other dimensions of national power. Kautilya penned in the Arthashastra that a state could face risk from four different kinds of threats—internal threat, external threat, externally abetted internal threat and internally abetted external threat. Today, India faces them all in different measures. The solution lies in understanding these strategic challenges and addressing them with a whole-of-nation approach.

Atmanirbharta in Indian Military Education

The Indian PM's clarion call for 'Atmanirbharta' in the Defence, not just in hardware procurements but also in the doctrines, warfighting philosophies and customs, is a reaffirmation of the resolve to integrate indigenous sources of knowledge within the framework of national security architecture. The realisation to include Kautilya's Arthashastra and Bhagavad Gita as part of India's military education appears to have gained traction with projects to study, evaluate and harness their enduring wisdom in all facets of national security.

Over the years, several seminars and studies on the subject have been undertaken. In 2008 CENJOWS (Centre of Joint Warfare Studies) organised a seminar on the "Indian Way of Warfighting". In 2016, the Army War College, Mhow, also published a combat paper, which drew instances from the Mahabharata and Arthashastra and stated that

the strategic thoughts and art of war found in the texts were immensely relevant in today's context as well. In 2021, a seminar on the Headquarter Integrated Defence Staff Project, "Attributes of Ancient Indian Culture and Warfare Techniques and its Incorporation in Present-day Strategic Thinking and Training" was also held. It called Kautilya's Arthashastra a "treasure trove" for the Armed Forces and stated that it is relevant in the current context and contains lessons for All Ranks in the Armed Forces. Ironically, there has been little 'walk the talk' to translate thoughts into deeds.

It's time for an institutional mechanism to be established to implement the relevant recommendations from numerous studies on the subject, integrating them into the Indian PME foundation. These must find a continuum in our training culture and content, as a rich online repository on "**Indian Thought on National Security**", and part of the promotion exams and training curriculum from pre-commissioning to the National Defence College. The Defence Service Staff College and Service War Colleges, in particular, must comprehensively study Arthashastra and explore its innovative solutions and strategic thoughts to address national security threats and future challenges. The Arthashastra should not be subjected to only comprehensive study but also find doctrinal edifice with future concepts and strategies relating to national security. Similarly, Indian history, geography, sociology and biographical study of Indian Military Leaders of national repute must find greater traction. The key remains a cultural change to imbibe the rich Indian culture and its military heritage, so deeply offset otherwise by Western influences and their fancy military jargon.

Military training in ancient India also imbibed the strength of spirituality which is beyond just religion for character building and igniting the soul in pursuit of the mission. A spiritual person looks within to do the right thing and a religious person looks to the outside for guidance. Spirituality is a solitary experience of the Divine that builds character. Spirituality is the journey to discovering self-realisation and higher-order aspirations. Thus, the importance of spiritual resilience is to maintain a healthy body, mind and soul in the face of adversity. Indian Military training system must build on the strength of spirituality as an Indian cultural core. While individual spirituality and religious practices are a constitutional right, the military places little emphasis on spirituality for its psychological resilience and potential benefit to military readiness beyond the unit level. Yoga, meditation and the art of silent introspection would not

only ignite the intellectual mind in a disciplined manner but also bring in resilience to operate under uncertainties and take decisions.

Recommendations

- Military education is embedded in India's rich ancient history of Vedic sciences and ancient history. Indian mythology is a rich mosaic of epic battles like the Mahabharata with embedded strategic thoughts on national security and warfare. Yet, ironically, they remain woefully dormant in the Indian PME system. ***The inclusion of relevant attributes of ancient Indian culture and warfare in present-day strategic thinking in PME needs greater traction.***
- ***The caution lies in the political euphoria which must not dilute Regimental ethos, traditions and culture which have stood the test of time in the face of adversity.*** Peripheral or superficial Indianisation like changing formal Mess Dresses, names and ethos/procedures will only be skin deep. ***Thus the military must dwell deeper and base its decisions on solely operational and professional growth imbibed by the Indian strategic thought and rich culture.***
- Another Indian ancient treasure trove in military education and statecraft is ***Arthashastra. Its powerful thoughts need to be imbibed in Indian Military Education to ignite the culture of intellectual pursuit, strategic thinking and creativity.***
- The Prussian model has many lessons for the contemporary Indian PME. ***Among the major learnings of the Prussian model are the directive style of command, bold risk-taking ability under uncertainty, and the professional confidence to take decisions without looking over the shoulders. This gains increasing relevance in the present operational environment.***
- ***An institutional mechanism to imbibe the wisdom and instil the relevant 'Indianisation of Military Thoughts' into the PME construct must be examined.*** These must manifest as a rich online repository and be part of the promotion exams and training curriculum from pre-commissioning to National

Defence College. The Defence Service Staff College and Service War College, in particular, must study Arthashastra and its relevance to contemporary warfare. ***Similarly, the study of Indian history, geography, area studies, sociology, battle studies, including ancient Indian battles like Mahabharata and the biographical study of Indian Military Leaders both past and contemporary must find greater traction for their relevance and values.*** However, the call for Indianising of PME should not become self-fulfilling as knowledge in any field is universal and the legacy of the past must not blindly dictate the future construct. ***Identifying the essence and its relevance in the present and future context in contributing to furthering military effectiveness in the overall national security construct is thus the key.***

- ***Spirituality as a Vedic science of harmonising the body, mind and soul for moral and psychological ascendancy must also be integrated into the Indian PME curriculum.*** Spirituality is not related to any religion but more of an individual practice to do with having a sense of peace and purpose in mission accomplishment.

Conclusion

The soul of a nation's culture is vitally connected with its historic past and the natives of the country. While the character of war has undergone a tectonic transformation, the nature of war remains enduring in its soul. The study of ancient Indian strategic culture and its rich military education system, therefore, is the key to India's search for unravelling the soul of this treasure trove, especially when military leaders are required to be socialised and exhibit heuristics in the present complex operational environment.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS. 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.

Endnotes

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