

Module - I

Military History of Ancient India



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MAURYA AND GUPTA ARMIES

You have learnt how our ancients formed societies and developed into a great civilization. Their expansion, both geographically as well as by population caused a requirement of armed people to protect their land and people. They formed armies and built modern organisations around it for greater efficiency. The armies thus evolved were made to follow strict code of conduct and ethics in battlefield as well as in peacetime. In turn the soldier became a very respected person in society and was given extra care and privileges. The important aspect of ancient military history was that no caste system was followed in recruiting soldiers. It was capability of a soldier to fight that gave him place in the army. Armies were recognized by their flags and it became the most respected object for the entire country or Kingdom. This was the beginning of nationalism.

If you have studied Indian history at some point in your life, you would have surely known the mighty Mauryas and Gupta dynasties. Their kings were very powerful, and were able administrators who managed their huge empires. Let us find out how they were able to do to and what support they had from their armies.



Objectives

After studying this lesson you will be able to:

- describe the Mauryan empire and its army and
- explain the organization of Gupta's army

4.1 Mauryan Empire

As societies progressed, they formed larger groups and explored newer areas to prosper in agriculture, mining iron, copper, coal etc. Janapadas became Mahajanapadas. The Mahajanapadas were big settlements in Magadh, Kosala, Kasi, Saurasena (Mathura) and became centres of crafts and industry. Another major change in society was the advent of Jainism and Buddhism as centres of influence among the people. The earliest ruler of Magadh was Bimbisara in 544 B.C and thereafter the rule and expansion

of the Magadh continued in small measures in the Nanda dynasty. Subsequently, in 321 B.C, the Mauryan dynasty was established under Chandragupta Maurya.

**Activity****4.1**

Do some research on the internet or books on Ancient Indian History and collect pictures that show the extent of the Mauryan empire under Ashoka the Great. Paste the pictures in your notebook.

From the military point of view, it is important to know why Magadh became the centre of the Mauryan Empire from where they conquered most of India. The reasons were as follows:-

- The geography of the nearby areas had surrounding mountains (five hills surrounded the capital) gave it a natural protection.
- Secondly, the land was very fertile, being the Gangetic plains, giving it agricultural richness.
- Thirdly, forest in the southern areas gave it timber and elephants.
- Fourthly, Chandragupta inherited a vast army from the Nandas.

Mauryan empire was the turning point of Indian history. Kautilya or Chanakya as he was known, wrote the famous treatise of Arthashastra. He gave the world a practical way of governance including, art of diplomacy, war strategy, law and commerce.

The Mauryas maintained a large standing army. It was adequate for all its needs of controlling very large empire. The chariots, cavalry, elephants and infantry were the main composition of the force. There were six varieties of chariots according to their role in battle. They are as follow:

- Three types were used in the battlefield for actual fighting;
- One type was used only for training;
- One for marching towards the enemy;
- Two types for general duties in the war zone.

The chariots were two wheeled, four wheeled and eight wheeled. The Arthashastra mentions the organization for chariots, elephants and cavalry. It was considered important to have superintendents, animal trainers and well-organized areas to keep the animals. The infantry carried bows and arrows. The bow was made of the same height as that of the soldier who carried it. For its usage, he rested it on the ground and pressed with the left foot to fire the arrow. Some soldiers carried javelins and all of them, irrespective of what they carried, always had one sword with them.

There were six types of troops in the Mauryan imperial army: the Kshatriya, or troops of the hereditary warrior class who formed the majority of the army; mercenaries and

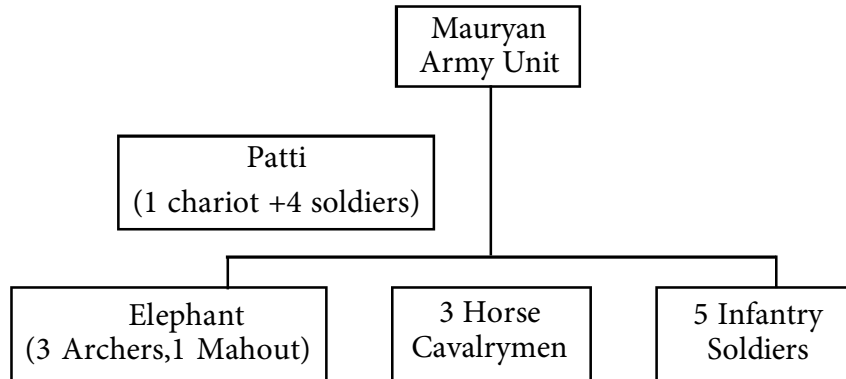
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freebooters hired as individuals seeking military adventure; troops provided by local zamindars and business men; troops supplied by allies; deserters from the enemy; and tribesmen from the wild forests and hills.

The tactical organization of the Mauryan army of this period had a basic unit called the patti, a mixed group, comprising one elephant carrying three archers or spearman and a mahout (the elephant trainer and handler) three horse cavalymen armed with javelins, round buckler and spear, and five infantry soldiers armed with shield and broadsword or bow. This is depicted diagrammatically for you.



In today's military terms it would be called an all arms team. This twelve-man unit when assembled in three units formed a senamukha, or "company." Three of these formed together comprised a gulma, or "battalion." Units were added in multiples of three, forming an aksauhini, or "army," comprising of 21,870 patti. The phrase 'combat arms' denotes cavalry/chariot/elephants combined with the infantry soldier either together or as a combination of two or more.



Intext Questions

4.1

1. Who was the founder of the Mauryan Empire?
2. How many types of chariots were maintained in the Mauryan army?
3. What is the name of the basic army unit?

4.1.1 The Kalinga War

Ashoka is considered as one of the greatest Kings in Indian history who ruled from 269 B.C to 232 B.C. He is praised not so much for his militaristic activities as for his policy of Dhamma. Dhamma was a code of conduct or ideal social behavior common to all religions of the world. It was a uniform civil code for the people of the empire.

The Kalinga War was fought between the Mauryan Empire under Ashoka and the state of Kalinga. Kalinga was a feudal republic located on the coast of the present-day Indian state of Odisha and northern parts of Andhra Pradesh. The Kalinga war, the only major war Ashoka fought after his accession to the throne, is one of the major and bloodiest battles in ancient world history. The main reasons for invading Kalinga

were both political and economic. Kalinga was then said to be a glorious and prosperous region consisting of freedom-loving and artistically skilled people.

People from the Kalinga Kingdom, also known as the "Utkala" were the first from Bharat (present day India) who traveled offshore to the South East for trade. For that reason, Kalinga had some important ports and powerful navy. They used to follow open culture and uniform civil code. This war resulted in the death of 200,000 soldiers on both the armies and was a turning point in the life of Ashoka. It is said that Daya river, flowing next to the battlefield had red coloured water due to the bloodshed in the battlefield. Ashoka gave up violence on seeing so much loss of life and established peace and harmony in his Kingdom and guided the people to lead a prosperous life. War always results in death and destruction and Ashoka realized this.

4.1.2 Arthashastra

The period of Mauryas is also known for the birth of Jainism and Buddhism as well as for the 'Arthashastra'. The word Arthashastra means the science of acquiring wealth and protection of the earth. 'Artha' also stood for material well being such as wealth, on which the prosperity of humans depended. Kautilya, also known by the name Chanakya, is said to have written the treatise on Arthashastra during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya. The treatise covers all subjects required by the King to rule over his Kingdom. It starts with how a King should conduct himself, subjects he should learn and the daily routine he has to follow to be a good ruler. The book covers the subjects of law, commerce, budget and accounts, foreign affairs and defence. For an efficient government and implementation of policies, Chanakya also mentions in detail, the administrative organization required.

Of specific interest to the study of military history is the section on Defence and War. As per Kautilya, the King had three responsibilities which were -

- Protection of the people from external aggression.
- Enlargement of territory by conquest and.
- Welfare of the people. Wars according to him were of four kinds : Mantrayuddha or war by counsel or diplomatic war. 'Prakasayuddha' or open warfare i.e, a set piece battle.
- 'Kutayuddha' is concealed war or secret war/psychological war.
- 'Gudayuddha' or Clandestine war. Clandestine war meant war by covert operations using agents, double agents etc.



Do you Know?

Kautilya given the final authority to the king in all matters of administration. Among the seven components of the state the king is given the primary position. The Saptangas (seven limbs) of the state are:



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King (Swami), Danda (Army), Janapada (Territory), Amatya (minister), Mitra (Friend), Durga (Fort), Kosa (Treasure)

Shatru (Enemy)— The 8th element added by Arthashastra.

Kautilya mentions that the king must undergo military training.

Kautilya also refers to Chaturangbala (Cavalry, Infantry, Chariot and Elephants) as the main components of Army. Each one of them was placed under a commander. He also mentions about medical service to the Army, the recruitment policy, war plans, fortification etc.

4.2 Gupta Empire

The Gupta empire ruled between A.D 300 to A.D 550. Between the Mauryan dynasty and the Gupta period, the large empire was broken into smaller Kingdoms under Kanishka, Satvahanas and the Kalinga rulers. The basic organization of the army and its employment in battle remained similar over the years. The military of the Gupta Empire remained based on the traditional four part armies or Chaturangabala. They, unlike other armies, included a mounted cavalry by this time. They modeled the dress and armor of their cavalry after the well-crafted and equipped soldiers of the Kushan empire.

The Guptas preferred armored cavalry forces that attacked with lances or swords. The weapons used such as bow and arrow were made of metal instead of bamboo or wood as in earlier times. The Guptas seem to have relied heavily on infantry archers, and the bow was the dominant weapon of their army. The version of the longbow was composed of metal, or more typically bamboo, and fired a long bamboo cane arrow with a metal head. The longbow was reputedly a powerful weapon capable of great range and penetration and provided an effective counter to invading horse archers.

Iron shafts were used against armored elephants. Fire arrows were not part of the bowmen's arsenal contrary to popular belief.

The era of the Gupta Empire in India was all about conquering. The rulers wanted to expand their reach across India. They did this by attacking the Kingdoms around them to gain land. Samudragupta, son of Chandragupta, was a King out for conquest. He desired to unite all of India under his rule and quickly set out to accomplish this dream by starting wars across much of the Indian region. During the reign of Chandragupta II, Gupta Empire maintained a large army consisting of 500,000 infantry, 50,000 cavalry, 20,000 charioteers and 10,000 elephants along with a powerful navy with more than 1200 ships. Chandragupta II controlled the whole of the Indian subcontinent; the Gupta Empire was the most powerful empire in the world during his reign. The reason for conquest and building a large empire was to protect the Kingdom from disintegrating into smaller ones thus dissipating power. The decline of Mauryan and Gupta period led to such a disintegration and weakening of the forces thus the invaders such as the Sultanates were able to overcome the later Kings and establish their control over India.



Intext Questions

4.2

1. When did Ashoka the Great rule?
2. What prompted Ashoka to renounce violence?
3. What subjects are written in the book Arthashastra? Name any three.



What You Have Learnt

- The Mauryan and later Gupta dynasties unified India into one large Kingdom, thus protecting its integrity from external aggression.
- The established empires ruled over entire India except the southern peninsular India. Both dynasties maintained large standing armies including naval ships.
- They had evolved a very detailed process of governance, art of warfare and organizational excellence as written in the Arthashastra.
- The basic army unit (Patti) was refined into an efficient fighting machine.
- The Kalinga war resulted in very large deaths of soldiers that caused considerable hurt in the mind of Ashoka the Great. He later renounced violence and practised peace and harmony, which led his people to lead a prosperous life.
- Science of war and weapons saw changes in the form of better metallurgy in designing the weapons.



Terminal Exercises

1. What factors contributed to the Mauryan empire becoming the largest empire in India?
2. What was the composition of the smallest army unit Patti in the Mauryan Army?
3. How many soldiers died in the Kalinga War?
4. What material was used in making weapons during the Gupta period?



Answers to Intext Questions

4.1

1. King Bimbisara.
2. Six.
3. Patti.

4.2

1. 269 to 232 B.C
2. Large scale destruction and loss of life during the Kalinga war prompted Ashoka to renounce violence.
3. Defense and War, Law, Diplomacy.

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