

Historicity of the Non-Expansionist Indian Strategic Culture

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Abstract

In their history, Indians have never undertaken conquest of foreign lands. Even the spread of Hindu kingdoms to Indonesia and Indochina was a consequence of merchant associations spreading influence through trade. The Chola punitive expeditions against Hindu states in South East Asia were more to keep trade routes safe. Why Indian states limited foreign conquests is an important idea to probe today. In contrast, India is the origin of war elephants. It has also contributed to a high-quality literature on statecraft, warcraft and strategy. But the crowning glory is contribution and export of Indian intellectual traditions on scientific and cultural matters. The article deliberates on these enduring values and concepts.

Introduction

This article examines the underlying reason as to why Indian

kings and rulers never resorted to out of area conquests in its history. The need for it, apparently, never arose as the Indian subcontinent was endowed with vast productive geographic area rich in natural and mineral resources. This fact got internalised and institutionalised in thinking and actions over the ages. Yet, India never lacked behind in the hardware or software of statecraft and warcraft. The sections that follow to expand on this topic are given as Chakravartikshetra; the Greek Accounts; export of War Elephants and a few soldiers to foreign countries; Indian Export of 'Hardware' and 'Software' and lastly, Cultural Spread.

***Chakravartikshetra*: Political Unification**

Historians such as P.C. Chakravarti shed light on the underlying idea behind *Chakravartikshetra*: “From very early times in India, men longed to set up a common political organisation for the whole country. The aim was to unify a culturally cohesive but a politically fragmented India. This longing gave birth to the concept of *chakravartin* or *sarvabhauma* (paramount sovereign)”.¹ This idea has over 2,000 years of history in the 4th century BCE text of Kautilya’s Arthashastra. It is a consolidated manual on statecraft with this normative end-state or aim of political unification. The geographic area of this region is well defined in the text. The *vijigishu* (would-be-conqueror) in the text is expected to ‘conquer the world’, which implies the conquest of the whole of India, designated as *chakravartikshetra*. The passages or sutras in support of this aim are found in Book Nine ‘The Activity of the King About to March’ at 9.1.17-18: “In that, the region of the sovereign ruler extends northwards between the Himavat and the sea, one thousand *yojanas* in extent across”.² The great Sanskritist and historian Prof RP Kangle in his explanatory notes converts one thousand *yojanas* as a little more than nine thousand miles which defines broadly the region from the sea in the south to the Himalayas in the north and between the eastern and the western ocean. Further Kangle notes that, “The *chakravartiksetra* does not seem to intend to include regions beyond the borders of India”.⁴

The continuity is best captured by Chakravarti who argues that, “Whether they consciously believed it or not, most of the great war lords of ancient India seem to have acted in pursuance of this ideal of a *chakravartiksetra*. The motive force behind the endless campaigns and expeditions of the *Mauryas* and the *Guptas*, of *Gurjara-Pratiharas*, the *Palas* and the *Rastrakutas* does not seem to have been mere ambition, a passion for conquest for the sake of conquering, but a conscious or unconscious urge to bring the whole country under one single hegemony”⁵ This provides sufficient evidence as to why India has never projected power abroad beyond this specified region.

The Greek Accounts

Even the Greeks noticed this Indian behaviour more than 2,000 years ago. Upinder Singh in her *Political Violence in Ancient India* states:

“The Greeks refer to certain peculiarities of India’s military history. Strabo reports that the Indians had never sent an army outside, and no army from outside had ever succeeding in conquering them, except for the Greek gods Dionysus and Herakles, and more recently Alexander. Arrian reports that Indians never went outside their homeland in order to wage wars on account of their laws. The Greeks must have been surprised by this stay-at-home policy of Indian kings, which contrasted their own far-flung military adventures, and perhaps could explain it only as the result of laws and prohibitions”.⁵

The arguments for India’s behaviour are:

“The clearly demarcated geographical circumscription of the subcontinent and, the fact, that it offered a vast sphere of military and political expansion as well as abundant economic resources of various kinds may have been responsible for this. Another intriguing aspect of Indian warfare is that in spite of the long coastline and history of maritime trade, Indian rulers rarely made incursions across the sea. The only exceptions are Samudragupta’s claim in the Allahabad prasasti to have subdued the island dwellers. In later times, there was conflict between the southern kingdoms and those of Sri Lanka and the Chola expeditions against Srivijaya. But generally, Indian imperial fantasies and campaigns remained land-locked”.⁶

Export of War Elephants and Soldiers to Foreign Countries

There was no colonial expedition for conquest mounted by India but a related and interesting aspect is about export of the institution of war

elephants and trained and skilled elephant drivers (mahouts) and infantry soldiers fighting outside the country for foreign powers. After encounters of Chandragupta Maurya with Seleucus, in the treaty Seleucus acquired 500 elephants and ceded his eastern satrapies to the Mauryas⁷. The American historian Thomas Roger Trautmann has, through painstaking research, shown that that during the time of Bindusar (son of Chandragupta Maurya and father of Ashoka) or more possibly Ashoka, Ptolemy II Philadelphus, in conflict with Seleucids, who had Indian war elephants, was cut off from overland access to the elephants of India. As an alternative to catch up in the arms race, he planned to acquire and train African elephants with Indian expertise. Ptolemy II Philadelphos deputed Dionysus as an ambassador to India who sought hunters and trainers from India “much as Alexander in India had taken on Indian elephant hunters to round up the wandering elephants of Assakenoi”.⁸ Later, in the post-Alexander period in West Asia, North Africa or Europe, ‘The Indian’ became a regular term for mahouts indicating employment of Indians’ in combat role. Even locals trained as mahouts later carried the name Indians.⁹ As to Indian soldiers fighting outside the country, Herodotus records a detachment of Indians against the Greeks in the Persian army at Plataea. A hundred years later, the army of Darius, the Persian king had a small Indian contingent from west of the Indus, with fifteen elephants against Alexander in the battle of Gaugamela.¹¹ In the middle ages, “fierce mercenaries of Kerala (Malabar) and Karnata (Mysore) found ready employment in the armies of many Indian and Sinhalese kings”.¹²

Indian Export of ‘Hardware’ and ‘Software’

This export of few mercenaries was an exception. But export of war elephants and its conception and underlying logistics of its use was no exception. It was rather a signal contribution from India. However, the larger issue of the absence of the urge for colonial expansion

outside the Indian subcontinent does not mean absence of military science and strategic statecraft. Rather, as we shall see, India exported both, the 'hardware' and 'software'. In other words, India did export both, intellectual work on statecraft, diplomacy and warcraft as also 'hardware' such as war elephants — an original copyright contribution or gift of India to the entire ancient world, like the battle tank of 20th and 21st centuries. Trautmann in his painstaking and rigorous research has shown that there was an Indian model of kingship within which, elephant capture and use were essential components. This model spread to the Southeast Asian kingdoms that are called 'Indianised', and it influenced the military practice of ancient peoples to the west, including the Persians, the Hellenistic kingdoms of Syria and Egypt, and Greeks, Carthaginians, Numidians, and Romans. Over thousands of years, from about 1000 BCE to the nineteenth century, this development took the Indian idea of war elephant as far as Spain and Java.¹²

In the intellectual domain or 'software', to the West and elsewhere, India exported Panchatantra, a condensed and simplified version of concepts and vocabulary of the Arthashastra, as a text book of statecraft and diplomacy.¹³ This text in its journey of transmission mutated into many languages with regional variations like the Kalila wa Dimna. In this regard, Amartya Sen writes:

"George Ifrah quotes a medieval Arab poet from Baghdad called al-Sabhadi, who said that there were "three things on which Indian nation prided itself: its method of reckoning, the game of chess, and the book titled Kalila wa Dimna [a collection of legends and fables]".¹⁴

Likewise, "Al-Adil of Baghdad, in his treatise on chess, praised the Indians for three original contributions to the word: the game of chess, the animal fables of the Kalia wa Dimna collection (from the

Sanskrit collections called Pancatantra), and the place-notation of numbers using zero as place-holder".¹⁵

Nitishastra of Kamandaka is a Gupta period successor text derived from the Arthashastra. Its transmission to south east is recorded as: "In the Sanskrit literature of Bali, it appears that the most popular work in the Island on polity is Kamandakiya Nitishastra, and all the Sanskrit books there extant are acknowledged to be the counterparts of purely Indian origin".¹⁶

Cultural Spread

Notwithstanding the export of the institution of war elephants and political cum strategic texts, what India did indeed achieve was an enduring spread to its east and west with cultural and philosophical ideas. Besides the Jataka tales of Buddha's life, India also transmitted algebra, zero, mathematics and astronomy. Further, Sheldon Pollock has coined the term 'Sanskrit cosmopolis' referring to the enormous geographic sweep of Indic culture for centuries spreading not as movement of conquerors, but as 'dharmic power' (the closest English equivalent may be the popular slang 'soft power'). Sheldon Pollock shows how ancient ideas in Sanskrit from India influenced regions beyond the subcontinental boundaries, but not by conquest.¹⁷

Thus, one can notice that there was no desire for conquest outside of India. Yet, Indian culture spread far and wide. This was not the case for the Europeans. Tagore and Aurobindo had mentioned this difference in their work. Tagore had warned India not to imitate the West. Tagore argued:

"We have to remember that in Europe, where peoples had their racial unity from the beginning and where natural resources were insufficient for the inhabitants, the civilisation has naturally taken the character of political and commercial

*aggressiveness. In former days, they organised and plundered, in the present age the same spirit continues — and they organise and exploit the whole world”.*¹⁸

Likewise, Aurobindo Ghose wrote:

*“At no time does India seem to have moved towards an aggressive military and political expansion beyond her own borders; no epic of world dominion, no great tale of far-borne invasion or expanding colonial empire has ever been written in the tale of Indian achievements. The sole great endeavour of expansion, of conquest, of invasion she attempted was the expansion of her culture, the invasion and conquest of the Eastern world by the Buddhistic idea and the penetration of her spirituality, art, and thought-force. And this was an invasion of peace... The idea of empire and even of world empire was not absent from the Indian mind, but its world was the Indian world and the object, the foundation of the imperial unity of its people”.*¹⁹

Conclusion

It is clear that in Indian history there was no need and desire for colonial expansion either for resources or to settle excess population. This could be called the dharmic tradition of India. This is one main reason as to why in Indian strategic culture today, ‘out of area operations’ are not the norm, except for humanitarian reasons like evacuation of Indian citizens or disaster relief or short military intervention in a troubled neighbourhood like liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 or intervention in Sri Lanka in 1987-1990. The Indian state has consciously chosen to send its military in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions. It ensures, through maritime cooperation and diplomacy, that the oceans and passages are free for use as a common heritage of mankind as per international law.

However, this does not mean that India punches below its weight or finds 'power and strategy hard to handle' or 'uses power merely as one means to demonstrate status rather than a tool to pursue interests' as some Western scholars seem to suggest as a veiled advice to behave like them.²⁰ Bhikhu Parekh in an article in the Indian Express of 10 January 2015, titled "Bapu and the Pravasi", argues, in the living spirit and tradition of MK Gandhi, that Indians living abroad tend to ignore the reality of India and only want India to mimic the West.²¹ Importantly, "India has its own rhythm, its own way of thinking and doing things. While it should learn from the advanced countries of the West, it cannot and should not mimic them. You should not try to shape it in the image of the country in which you are settled, a temptation Indian Americans sometimes find particularly difficult to resist [...] long-distance nationalism is a dangerous sentiment".²² The message is that let us build up and improve upon the rich Indic traditions.

It was not considered righteous to undertake colonial conquest. This continues to be the underlying principle and ethics of Indian foreign policy behaviour. In a globalised world, with rapid advances in world consciousness and institutions, technology and conventional, nuclear, chemical, biological weapons, and disruptive technologies, wars, especially wars for conquest, are futile institutions of the past. It is, thus, that the future of the world is best served by the contribution of historically and culturally derived Indian dharmic strategic culture.

Endnotes

¹ P.C. Chakravarti, *The Art of War in Ancient India*, Delhi, Karan Publications, First Indian edition, 1987, pp.182-183.

² R.P. Kangle, *The Kautiliya Arthasastra*, Part II: Translation with Critical and Explanatory Notes, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, Second Edition, Bombay University, 1972, 7th Reprint, 2010.p.407.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Chakravarti, *op cit*, note 1.

⁵ Upinder Singh, *Political Violence in Ancient India*, Cambridge, Massachusetts/ London, Harvard University Press, 2017, p.265. Interestingly, Upinder Singh points out that there are no known Indian texts on military history of Alexander's invasion of India.

⁶ Ibid, p.364.

⁷ Thomas R. Trautmann, *Elephants and Kings: An Environmental History*, Ranikhet, Permanent Black, 2015, p.196.

⁸ Ibid., pp.236-238.

⁹ Ibid., p.238-239.

¹⁰ A. L. Basham, *The Wonder that Was India*, London, Picador, 2004, p.49.

¹¹ Ibid., p.129.

¹² Trautmann, *op cit*, note 7, p.45.

¹³ Pradeep Kumar Gautam, "Understanding Kautilya's *Arthashastra*: Origination, Migration and Diffusion", in Michael Liebig and Saurabh Mishra(eds), *The Arthauâstra in a Transcultural Perspective: Comparing Kautilya with Sun-Zi, Nizam al-Mulk, Barani and Machiavelli*. New Delhi, IDSA/Pentagon Press, 2017, pp. 90 – 97.

¹⁴ Amartya Sen, "Indian Traditions and the Western Imagination", *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences*, Spring, Issue 26, Number 2, 1997, p.22. This quote is of George Ifrah, *From One to Zero*, p.434.

¹⁵ Trautmann, *op cit*, note 7, p.252.

¹⁶ Rajendralala Mitra(ed), *The Nitisara of the Elements of Polity by Kamandaki*, Calcutta, Baptist Mission Press, 1861, reprinted Calcutta, The Asiatic Society, 1982, p.i.

¹⁷ Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*, Ranikhet, Permanent Black, 2006, p. 16.

¹⁸ Rabindra Nath Tagore, "Nationalism", Chapter IX The True Freedom: Tagore, in D. Mackenzie Brown, *White Umbrella: Indian*

Political Thought from Manu to Gandhi, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1964(first published 1953), p.108.

¹⁹ Aurobindo Ghose, "The Spirit and Form of Indian Polity", Chapter X Government and Man: Aurobindo, in D. Mackenzie Brown, *White Umbrella: Indian Political Thought from Manu to Gandhi*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1964(first published 1953), p.125.

²⁰ See John Ferris, "Conventional Power and Contemporary Warfare", in John Baylis, James J. Wirtz, Colin Gray(eds.), *Strategy in the Contemporary World*, 4th edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp.230-246.

²¹ <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/bapu-and-the-pravasi/>(accessed on 22 March 2020)

²² Ibid.

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