

King Saturjit and Kuvalya

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No question can be more interesting in the present circumstances of the world than India's contribution to the science of aeronautics. There are numerous illustrations in our vast *Puranic* and epic literature to show how well and wonderfully the ancient Indians conquered the air.

To glibly characterise every thing found in this literature as imaginary and summarily dismissing it as unreal has been the practice of both western and eastern scholars until very recently. The very idea indeed was ridiculed and people went so far as to assert that it was physically impossible for a man to use flying machines. But today, what with balloons, aeroplanes and other flying machines a great change has come about.

The ancient writers could certainly make distinction between the mythical which they designated *daiva* and the actual aerial wars designated *manusa*.

King *Saturjit* was presented by a brahman *Gjalava* with a horse named *Kuvalaya* which had the power of conveying him to any place on the earth. If this had any basis, in fact, it must have been a flying horse. The king and the horse has been symbolised and mentioned in ancient literature as one flying body (Figure 1).



Figure 1

Lieutenant General ML Tuli, PVSM is a former Vice Chief of the Army Staff. He had conceived and designed the formation sign of a parachute brigade King Saturjit and Kuvalya in 1951 as a Young Captain.

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There are numerous references both in the *Vishnu Purana* and the *Mahabhatta* where *Krishna* is said to have navigated the air on the *Garuda*. Either the accounts are imaginary or they are a reference to an eagle shaped machine flying in the air.

Subrahmanya used a peacock as his vehicle and *Brahma* a swan. In the battle between the *Devas* and *Asuras* in which *Maya* took a leading part, several warriors are represented as riding birds.

Dhanur Veda has four classifications of the weapons of offence and defence – the *mukta*, the *amukta*, the *mukta-mukta* and the *yantramukta*. The *Nitiprakasika* on the other hand divides them into three broad classes, the *mukta* (thrown), the *amukta* (not thrown) and the *mantra-mukta* (discharged by *mantras*). The bows (*dhanus*) and arrows (*isu*) are the chief weapons of the *mukta* group.

The very fact that our military science was named *Dhanur Veda* proves sufficiently clearly that the bow and arrow were the principal weapons of war known to Hindus.

It is said that the archer who uses bows as described in the *Sastras* attains great glory. For example *Bhism*a used a bow six cubits long against *Sankha*, a diocesan. *Kalidasa* is acquainted with the use of the bow as seen from the *Raghu Vasma*. He refers to the twang of the bow string of both *Rama* and *Laksmana* heard by *Tataka*. Also in *Sakuntalam* there are several references in which *Dusyanta* is credited with high skill in archery as well as the great warrior *Arjuna*.

Thus the chief weapon of war from the primitive days was the bow and arrow. Its use is not altogether extinct even now. The *Khasas* or the hill tribes of Assam have a simple bow, while the Western Nagas have a bullet bow.

In Wilson's words, the Hindu cultivated archery most assiduously and were proficient like the Parthians in the use of bows and arrows on the horse back. One feature of this weapon was that it could be handled by all the four classes of warriors.

A man who could pierce through metal plates half the thickness of a finger or 24 layers of leather was considered proficient.