

Project Udbhav: Promoting Indigenous Discourse in The Army by Integrating India's Ancient Strategic



Introduction

Project Udbhav which means evolution, is a significant collaboration between the Indian Army and the United Service Institution of India (USI), India's oldest think tank which was established in 1870. The project is a study into the evolution of Indian strategic thought, military systems, strategy, operational art with an aim of developing a vocabulary rooted in India's ancient texts and rich military heritage.

After months of ground work, the Project was formally launched during the USI held inaugural Military Heritage Festival on 21 October 2023 by the Defence Minister, Shri Rajnath Singh, in the presence of General Manoj Pande, the Chief of Army Staff, Air Marshal VR Chaudhari, the Chief of the Indian Air Force, Vice Admiral SJ Singh, the then Vice Chief of Naval Staff, Lieutenant General JP Matthews, the Chief of Integrated Defence Staff to the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee(CISC) and Major General BK Sharma (Retd), Director General of the USI, in the presence of senior serving armed forces personnel, veterans and scholars.



Revisiting India's Ancient Military Thoughts

Speaking at the inaugural event Lieutenant General Tarun Kumar Aich, the Deputy Chief of Army Staff (Strategy) highlighted that Project Udbhav, is an endeavour to revisit the roots of India's ancient military thoughts. He stated that the essence of the Project lay in synthesising the timeless wisdom of the past with contemporary military practices, thereby, crafting a comprehensive approach to address modern security challenges.

He saw it as a visionary initiative aimed at integrating age-old wisdom into the modern military pedagogy. He said the legacy was characterised by a profound reverence for knowledge which was evident in the vast repository of intellectual texts and scholarship across diverse domains. He also mentioned that the groundwork for Project Udbhav had been laid through previous research initiatives by the Indian Army such as compilation of the 75 Stratagems by the Army Training Command and a study on the linkages between Indian culture and strategic thinking by the College of Defence Management.

Major Events

The Centre for Military History and Conflict Studies at the USI, headed by Squadron Leader Rana Chinna (Retd) assisted very ably by Dr Archana Tyagi, visualised, conceptualised and conducted the events with the guidance and support of the Indian Army.

These events included workshops, seminars, discussions and research papers. The first being the workshop 'Thematic Commonalities in Hellenic and Indo - Aryan Mythic, Epic and other Narrative Material' which had scholars such as Dr Adil Rasheed, Prof Vasileious Syros and Colonel PK Gautam (Retd) and Dr Saurabh Mishra amongst others participating.

Thereafter, there was a panel discussion on 'Evolution of Indian Military Systems, Warfighting & Strategic Thought: Current Research in the Field and Way Forward' which had Lieutenant

General Raju Baijal, Lieutenant General VG Khandare (Retd), Brigadier Gaurav Sharma and Colonel Saikat Bose, Colonel S Ravi Prakash and Dr Kajari Kamal; a diverse set of experts giving out their views. In his opening remarks, Maj Gen BK Sharma had highlighted the importance of harnessing traditional thought on warcraft in contemporary operational environments.

The discussion during the Indian Military Heritage Festival moderated by Dr Deepshika Shahi had panellists such Brigadier Nick Sawyer the British Defence Attache to India, who had studied Kautilyan strategies while attending the National Defence College, Prof Vasileios Syros who said that project extended beyond academic enquiry and has broader implication for India's strategic culture, Colonel Vivek Chadha (Retd) who discussed the Mahabharata and said it stands amongst the foundational texts for understanding India's strategic thought. Colonel PK Gautam, a highly respected scholar on ancient Indian texts, said the annals of India's antiquity are ripe with wisdom of global relevance. Whereas, Rohit Kumar focused on the Panchatantra and how its teachings are relevant to understand the challenges in the contemporary era.

The findings on a paper on Kautilya's Arthashastra 'Kamandaka's Nitishastra and the Kural by Thiruvalluvar' had Brigadier Manoj Kharkwal stating that heritage and culture is essential for comprehension, framing and application of strategy and that documents as these were fertile grounds for extracting inputs for a broad spectrum of state priorities including defence, diplomacy and economy.

There was also a talk by Dr Kajari Kamal who while discussing the Arthashastra, said doubts are raised on India's strategic culture, its precise principles and the extent of its roots due to the continued dearth of dedicated works that clearly trace its historical ideational legacy.

The panel discussion on 'Ancient Indian Traditions on Military Ethics and Culture' held at the National Museum saw a packed house. It was moderated by Major General Jagatbir Singh (Retd), who stated that human beings have been fighting each other since prehistoric times, and people have been discussing the rights and wrongs of it for almost as long. The question that needed to be asked concerned the ethics as protagonists describe it as a 'Just War' but are the means always ethical and are wars more 'Justified' than 'Just' and this is in context to India's two ongoing conflicts. Amongst the distinguished speakers were Dr Kajari Kamal, Professor Mala Sinha, KS Nair and Wing Commander UC Jha (Retd). Multiple issues were raised and very pertinent questions were posed by the informed audience.

Historical Patterns of Indian Strategic Culture

As part of Project Udbhav, a seminar-cum-exhibition on 'Historical Patterns of Indian Strategic Culture' was held at the National Museum in New Delhi on 21 May 2024. Apart from the inauguration of the Exhibition there was the release of the 'Udbhav Compendium' and a book 'Alha Udal- Ballad Rendition of Western Uttar Pradesh'. This was followed by Panel Discussion on 'Ancient Indian Traditions on Military Ethics and Culture'.

The Event was graced by Shri Ajay Bhatt, Raksha Rajya Mantri, as the chief guest, who commended the Indian Army and the USI for their efforts in exploring the country's ancient texts and oral traditions to unearth invaluable insights into its strategic culture.

The Raksha Rajya Mantri while speaking on the occasion said that the geopolitical landscape is ever-evolving, and it is imperative for the armed forces to be adaptive and innovative in their approach. He underlined the importance of recognising the strength of the nation's defence

which lies not only in its military might but also in the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and leverage the cultural heritage as a source of power.

He described initiatives like Project Udbhav as a guiding light for a future where India is self-reliant, and deeply rooted in its cultural heritage. He also emphasised, that the spirit of *Aatmanirbhar Bharat* (Self-reliant India) is not limited to merely production and consumption of Indian goods, but also to make sincere endeavours to imbibe the essence of Indian thought and values in the current actions and decisions.

Speaking on the occasion, General Manoj Pande said Project Udbhav has revealed substantial intellectual convergences between eminent Indian and Western scholars, highlighting the resonance between their thoughts, philosophies and perspectives. He added that the endeavour has catalysed exploration into new areas by unveiling India's tribal traditions, the Maratha Naval legacy, and the individual heroic exploits of military figures, particularly women.

General Pande also stated, "The Project has delved deep into ancient texts such as Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads and Arthashastra, which are rooted in inter-connectedness, righteousness and ethical values. Furthermore, it has explored the epic battles of the Mahabharata and the strategic brilliance practiced during the reigns of Mauryas, Guptas and Marathas, which has shaped India's rich military heritage. The project aims to promote indigenous discourse in the Army by integrating India's ancient strategic acumen into contemporary military domain with a focus on making the force future-ready".

General Pande further emphasised that such collective efforts broaden the scope of study of ancient India's defence and governance, enriching the nation's strategic outlook. The project has fostered civil-military collaboration among academia, scholars, practitioners, and military experts, strengthening the whole-of-nation approach. Adding to that, he said, "As we explore more into our military heritage, we understand that undertaking such projects remains a continuous endeavour". He expressed confidence that the project's findings in the form of 'Udbhav Compendium' shall benefit the Indian Armed Forces to remain progressive and future-ready, by drawing insights from the nation's historical military wisdom.

Conclusion

India's ancient civilisational treasures contained both in the written and oral forms have revealed invaluable wisdom for the values, tactics, strategies and practices of warcraft in particular and statecraft in general. This wisdom has been found to be extensive not just in its quantum but also its richness and relevance. The prescriptions contained in these manuscripts and oral renditions are invaluable. Though they reveal the dynamics of their time, they need to be applied to the current times as per contextual suitability.

There is no doubt that there's a growing interest and new found enthusiasm towards India's strategic wisdom on both military and governance issues, the evidence of which lies in the increasing number of research works by students, academia, veterans and serving officers. This is also giving a renewed impetus to deepening civil-military collaborations at the intellectual level.

Project Udbhav has proven to be a catalyst in this endeavour by encouraging India's strategic community to link its past ideals, present discourses and future visions. There is an undeniable correlation between ancient and modern strategic cultures which we need to draw upon.

Major General Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd) is a Distinguished Fellow at the USI of India. Commissioned in 1981 into the 18 Cavalry, he has held various important command and Staff appointments including command of an Armoured Division.

Article uploaded on 27-05-2024

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