

The Rajput Way of War: Lessons from the Battle of Tarain

Dr Alok Yadav[®]

Abstract

This article examines the Rajput military system and combat methods, and the socio-political context that shaped its development. It analyses the strategic and tactical elements of Rajput warfare, primarily through the lens of the Battles of Tarain. The analysis also offers comparative insights with other military systems to highlight the distinctiveness of Rajput tactics. By tracing both the strengths and limitations of their approach, the article provides valuable lessons for contemporary military thought and a deeper understanding of India's martial traditions.

Introduction:

The period from the 7th Century to the 12th Century, after the death of Harshvardhan, is called the period of the Rajputs in the history of India. Who were the Rajputs? Historians have many opinions in this regard. Since ancient times, the word Rajputra has been used for the Kshatriyas, associated with royal power. Some historians believe that the term Rajput is the corrupted form of Rajputra. It is also said that the Kshatriyas living in the Rajputana region call themselves Rajputs. Notable dynasties associated with this lineage include the Tomars in Delhi, the Gurjar Pratiharas in Kanauj, the Parmars in Malwa, the Chandelas in Mahoba and Kalinjar, the Solankis in Gujarat, and the Pals in Bengal. Rajput kings established powerful kingdoms in Rajasthan, Gujarat, and the Ganga plains. Rajput warfare exemplifies a distinguished tradition in Indian history, marked by a unique blend of valour, courage, and adherence to moral principles. The major Rajputs of the Indian subcontinent, such as Chauhan, Kachwaha, and Sisodia Rajputs, have set an example of a great legacy of renunciation, sacrifice, and valour.¹

[®]Dr Alok Yadav is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, Hindu College, Moradabad.

Military Structure:

The Rajput military system was largely feudal, with numerous minor lords serving under a paramount king. Each lord was obliged to provide a specified number of soldiers when called upon, and failure to comply was met with punishment. The Rajputs were known for their immense pride and deep affinity for warfare. The rugged terrain of Rajputana nurtured both bravery and resilience among its people. Despite this, the Rajputs were frequently engaged in internal conflicts. Being born into a Rajput family was often regarded as a destiny for warfare, with each Rajput inherently a warrior. They developed a distinctive martial tradition, while the feudal system comprised numerous minor lords serving under a dominant king. They were required to present themselves before the king, accompanied by a specified number of warriors. Failure to comply resulted in punishment and the loss of their estate.²

The importance of cavalry grew significantly during the Rajput era, with most Rajputs excelling as mounted warriors. Horses enhanced the mobility of the army, while elephants gained prominence despite the arid terrain. Camels were employed to transport water, troops, and supplies efficiently. The community that used to support the Rajput rulers of Rajasthan's arid region when needed was known as Rabari. When needed, they used to help in war-like situations by providing logistics and supplies of materials through camels.³ Although the importance of elephants declined after the Harsha period, they were still used to breach fortifications and overpower enemies. The infantry comprised the largest segment of the army, with all Rajputs acquiring weapons upon the declaration of war. Those without horses were integrated into the infantry. During this era, numerous forts of varying sizes were constructed across the Rajputana region. The army of Kannauj had its forward contingent engaged in battle while the rear remained in the encampment. Jai Chandra's army had 80,000 armoured soldiers and 30,000 cavalrymen clad in cloth armour.⁴

The Rajput Way of War: Honour and Chivalry

The rugged terrain of Rajputana fostered bravery and resilience among its inhabitants. The Rajputs often engaged in continuous internal conflicts, and being born into a Rajput family was widely regarded as a destiny for warfare. Renowned for their fierce independence and martial skills, Rajput soldiers adhered to a strict

code of honour and chivalry that guided their conduct in battle. This code underscored personal valour, fidelity to sovereignty, and a readiness to combat death rather than concede loss or disgrace. Rajput monarchs and aristocrats were expected to command their forces in combat, exhibiting valour and leadership that motivated their soldiers. The notion of *Dharmayuddha* (Righteous War) was fundamental to the Rajput martial ethos, wherein conflicts were committed to moral obligation and compliance with specific ethical standards.⁵

This principle is reflected in the behaviour of Rajput soldiers in combat. They adhered to stringent rules of engagement, which frequently encompassed a contempt for deception and a desire for a transparent, honourable battle. For example, it was deemed dishonourable to assault an adversary at night or during religious observances. Their focus on individual valour occasionally resulted in insufficient cooperation in broader strategic planning, as warriors pursued personal glory on the battlefield.⁶

The Battles of Tarain: Context and Tactics

The Battles of Tarain, taking place between 1191 and 1192 CE between Prithviraj Chauhan, a Rajput king, and Mohammad Gori, were a pivotal moment in Indian history. Due to the unity and bravery of the Rajputs in the first battle of Tarain, they achieved a one-sided victory over the army of Mohamad Gori, primarily due to the archers and fierce warriors of Prithviraj's army. In Rajput warfare, a warrior's sacrifice on the battlefield was regarded as the highest expression of valour, especially when giving one's life to protect the motherland. The Rajput Army comprised both infantry and cavalry and was largely feudal in structure, with clan-based forces loyal to their chieftains and allied to the Rajput rulers. Their primary strategy was to utilise strong cavalry attacks to smash through the opposing lines by sheer force. Minhaj-i-Siraj Juzjani's *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* says that the Rajputs used heavy cavalry and infantry to assault the Ghurid lines head-on and win.⁷ Indian armies were known for their war elephants, which they employed to scare and mess up the enemy's light cavalry. The Rajputs' code of chivalry emphasised open and honorable combat, forbidding the use of trickery or night attacks. The Ghurids, unprepared for such a disciplined and forceful assault, suffered heavy losses, forcing Muhammad of Ghor to retreat. While these victories highlighted

the Rajputs' mastery of traditional warfare, they also revealed their vulnerability to more adaptable strategies in future conflicts.

On the contrary, the result of the second battle of Tarain in 1192 CE was completely different. This time, Mohammad Ghori used better war tactics. He left behind his heavy equipment and non-combatants and advanced with light equipment and warriors. He divided his army into five parts. He kept four for attacking the Rajputs and one as a reserve group. These reserve horsemen were ordered to advance and attack the Rajput Army and then retreat, so that a ladder battle could be avoided. This time, Muhammad Ghori learned from his past mistakes and devised a strategy that accounted for the Rajputs' previous strengths and shortcomings. Ghori assembled a formidable force of skilled horsemen and archers, and the superior quality of his horses enhanced the army's mobility, giving him a decisive advantage in battle. Additionally, internal conflicts among the Rajputs weakened their military strength. Ghori, having studied their tactics closely, planned his attack with careful precision. Mohammad Ghori first provoked the Rajput Army to attack by sending small contingents, which disrupted the Rajput Army's military coordination. Mohammad Ghori was leading under a centralised command, which made it easy to make the right decision at the right time. At the same time, the Rajput Army was feudal and relied more on individual bravery, which led to a lack of coordination.⁸

These clashes highlight the limitations of traditional Rajput warfare in the face of evolving military tactics. They underscore the necessity of adaptability in battle and the risks of relying more on symbolic gestures than on practical, effective strategies. The loss at the Second Battle of Tarain signified the onset of the decline of Rajput dominance over northern India. It made it easier for Muslims to take over the subcontinent.⁹

Lessons from the Battle of Tarain

Both the battles of Tarain brought out the strengths and weaknesses of Rajput warfare. These battles made it clear that there was a need for improvement in the leadership and tactical structure of the Rajput Army. New tactics were also required according to the new threats on the strategic front. Only individual bravery and numerical superiority could not be relied upon. Always fighting with the same tactics even in the face of a new enemy

showed a lack of tactical flexibility. A major lesson from these wars was to change military plans according to time and the enemy's plans. Fighting with the same strategy and combination could be detrimental to your army.¹⁰

In the First Battle of Tarain, Prithviraj Chauhan's army won using the traditional Rajput military strategy of massive cavalry attacks and the valour of infantry. On the other hand, in the Second Battle of Tarain, Mohammad Ghori employed mobility and hit-and-run tactics to weaken the strong points of the Rajput Army, allowing Ghori's army to avoid a direct battle with the Rajputs. The primary reason for the Rajput Army's defeat in this war was their complacency after previously defeating Ghori, leading them to underestimate his capabilities. While Ghori spent a year preparing for the war and fought the war with a complete plan, he forced the Rajputs to fight at the place and time of his choosing. Additionally, they had no reserve forces and were easily deceived. This war was the result of the efficient leadership of Mohammad Ghori.

The Rajputs matched the Turks in courage and bravery, yet their approach to war was guided by the highest moral standards. For them, war was almost a religion, and even in battle, they prioritised honour and valour over mere outcomes. Their unparalleled bravery and disregard for death made them truly distinctive warriors. They considered the sacrifice of the army in war as service to the motherland, which made them incapable of achieving practical success in war. On the other hand, the goal of the Turks was to achieve victory, no matter what the means.¹¹

The Rajputs lost the second battle, highlighting their inability to adapt strategies to match those of their enemies. While formidable in conventional warfare, they were unprepared for the swift and flexible tactics employed by Ghori's forces. This lack of adaptability is a recurring theme in Rajput military history, stemming from their strict adherence to established codes of combat, which limited their effectiveness against more innovative opponents. The Rajputs were just as strong and courageous as the Turks, but their ideas about battle and their goals were based on the highest moral standards. For them, fighting was like a religion or a hobby; even in the middle of a fight, they did things that did not have any real effects.

By contrast, the Turks were determined to achieve victory at any cost, whereas the Rajputs were renowned for their courage and fearlessness in battle. They were driven by an idealistic notion of a warrior and military honor, which often hindered their ability to achieve genuine victory in conflict.¹²

The Turks possessed a more advanced military than the Rajputs. The Rajput Army was organised along feudal lines, with troops serving under their respective lords. It is difficult to imagine such a fragmented force fighting cohesively under a unified plan, clear objective, and single commander. Moreover, the Rajput Army was often fatigued from internal conflicts. In contrast, the Turkish Army was made up of soldiers from different castes and nationalities and worked together under the same leadership, discipline, strategy, and goal. The primary factors contributing to the dominance of the Turkish Army in warfare were horses, bows, and arrows. During that period, mobility became the primary foundation of the Turkish military structure. This period was characterised by cavalry.¹³

Lessons for Today from the Rajput Way of War and the Battle of Tarain: Impact and Relevance:

The Rajputs' defeat at the Second Battle of Tarain had significant repercussions for the Indian subcontinent. This signified the onset of Muslim supremacy in northern India and the formation of the Delhi Sultanate. The Rajputs, formerly the preeminent military force in the region, were diminished to a subordinate status. However, they opposed foreign domination and upheld their martial traditions throughout the subsequent centuries.¹⁴

The Battles of Tarain represent how the Rajput warrior strategy teaches numerous principles that are still important for current military strategy and leadership. A key lesson is the need to be adaptable and plan. The Rajputs' reliance on traditional tactics, such as frontal cavalry charges and individual valour, proved insufficient against Mohammad Ghori's more flexible and systematic approach at the Second Battle of Tarain in 1192. This highlights the modern lesson that military success depends not on traditional or previous achievements but on the ability to adjust to changing circumstances and the capabilities of the enemy. Modern military and political leaders should put innovative thinking and versatility first when dealing with new technologies and unusual problems, such as cyber warfare and asymmetric wars.

A crucial lesson is the significance of unity when confronted with external dangers. The Rajput kingdoms were politically disunited, with internal conflicts undermining their collective defence. The absence of coherence enabled Mohammad Ghori to capitalise on divisions and achieve victory. In the current global landscape, when countries confront transnational challenges like terrorism, climate change, and pandemics, the necessity for unity and collaboration across various groups is paramount. The modern lesson for geopolitical and military strategy is that regional or national differences may undermine the collective response to global crises. Like the Rajputs, nations that do not cultivate unity and collaboration are susceptible to foreign threats.¹⁵

Additionally, these battles demonstrate the limitations of a strategy centered on valour. Despite culturally placing valour and expenditure at the forefront, the Rajput Army was defeated in the second battle of Tarain. This teaches that strategy in war should be practical. Even today, at the international level, such examples can be seen when global powers take sides in war by prioritising their interests rather than theory. The formation of an integrated theatre command by the Indian Army will enable the taking of appropriate decisions in war-like situations.

In conclusion, the Rajput approach to warfare and the Battles of Tarain provide enduring insights into the significance of flexibility, cohesion, and pragmatic military strategy. The results of these conflicts remind contemporary leaders that adaptability, collaboration, and strategic foresight are crucial not just in military engagements but also in confronting any substantial problem, whether political, economic, or technical. The battles of Tarain are the best example of what lessons can be learnt from Indian warfare and history. History is often marked by mistakes, as exemplified by the second battle of Tarain. The result of the infighting among the Rajput rulers paved the way for the downfall of the Rajputs and the beginning of Muslim rule in India. The security of a nation can be ensured only through national unity, and the Battle of Tarain serves as a lesson in this regard.

The lesson of the Second Battle of Tarain is that leadership should be centralised. Furthermore, Mohammad Ghori's activities, including gathering information through espionage on the Rajput Army and its growing complacency, teach us that preparation for war should always continue for peace. Along with this, to win any

war, the nation must always have the latest technology available to the army. Battles highlight how cultural values and strategic innovation must be balanced. This is a lesson that modern forces may learn from as they deal with new technologies and complicated geopolitics. Contemporary strategists could benefit from the Rajput style of fighting, which emphasises the importance of being united, flexible, and able to think on the ground to win on a battlefield that is constantly changing.

Endnotes

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² Ibid.

³ Tanuja Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives: A History of Mobility and Identity in the Great Indian Desert.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁴ R.C. Majumdar, ed., *The History and Culture of the Indian People, Volume V: The Struggle for Empire* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1957), 135–137.

⁵ B. D. Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 32–36.

⁶ Dasharatha Sharma, *Early Chauhan Dynasties: A Study of Chauhan Political History, Chauhan Political Institutions, and Life in the Chauhan Dominions, from 800 to 1316 A.D.* 2nd ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975), 105–107.

⁷ Minhaj-i-Siraj Juzjani, *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, Trans H. G. Raverty. vol. 1. (1881; repr., New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1970), 465–467.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Peter Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Jadunath Sarkar, *Military History of India* (Bhopal: Madhya Pradesh Hindi Granth Academy, 1971).

¹¹ Tandon Singh and Agarwal. *Indian Art of War* (Allahabad: Sharada Publication, 2018), 120–131.

¹² B. N. Majumdar, *A Short History of the Indian Army.* (Lucknow: Rashtriya Prakashan, 1971), 81–88.

¹³ Ram Gopal Mishra, *Resistance of Early Muslim Invaders.* (Meerut: Anubooks, 1983), 142–146.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ R. Singh, “Rethinking Rajput Warfare: An Analysis of Rajput Military Tactics in the Early Medieval Period.” *Indian Historical Review*, 2006.