

Ethical Code of War in Ancient India

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ABSTRACT

In this present paper we will try to discuss the ancient Indic or Hindu doctrine of war and how the laws which were formulated in Indian subcontinent were helpful in maintaining the peace and harmony in society in broader context. The concept of warfare in India is as old as the Vedic civilization but when we compare the ramifications of Indian wars with that of graeco-Romans and other civilizations of ancient times we find a remarkable contrast. In India there were laws which clearly mentioned that no civilian should be harmed in battles whereas warriors of other nations rejoiced in plundering massacring the defeated foes. Even in Iliad of Odyssey we see that how after Greeks defeated Troy the people of the city were mercilessly killed while they were sleeping and entire city was put to flames.

KEYWORDS: Indian sub-continent, Manu, Kutayudha, Dharm-yudha Krishna

When we talk about Indian subcontinent, in Modern terminology or connotation it would include the like of modern countries as India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Afghnaistan because this geographical entity engulfed all of these modern nations. The importance of war was known to the Indians right from the beginning and if we will trace the origin of war then we will have to look no beyond than the age of Rigveda itself. Rigveda gives us ample evidence regarding the battles that were fought for wealth, cattle, fertile lands and the areas which were closer to the rivers; because for every civilization to flourish control over the water was paramount. There were two important wars about which Rigveda informs us largely, one was the battle fought between the Panchala king Divodasa and the other Dasa king Sambara and the other was Dasarajana war between king Sudasa and his enemies which was an alliance of ten kings¹. It were these wars which later become the sources of stories and later legends were interwoven around them and certain special powers were attributed to these war heroes including the god Indra who was given the epithet of Purandhara, i.e., the destroyer of forts. Although wars and battles were common in Ancient India but almost all the lawmakers including Kautiliya and Manu were of the opinion that it should be the last resort even the Mahabharata war began after all the negotiations by Krishna failed and it became inevitable.

Ancient Indians fought battles for extending their boundaries and they legitimized war by carving out a separate section of men called Kshatriyas whose entire focus was pointed towards war. When we talk about Kshatriyas it is pertinent also to discuss the Varna system into which Rigvedic or Hindu society was divided into, there was fourfold division of the society and they were classified as

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Brahmans whose duty was to study Vedas and spread knowledge, Kshatriyas whose sole duty was to fight and protect his clan, vaishyas who possessed the keys of finance and finally shudras who were the serving class. But this varna system back the was not rigid as it became latter, it was quite flexible and was defined according to the attributes or qualities of a man. Now since the society had been divided and it were the Kshatriyas on whom the responsibility of the protection of his people was bestowed upon so it was natural for the lawmakers to encode some dictums for them. During the vedic and post vedic age there were no written codes for war and it was felt by seers of that age to supplant these lawless wars and formulate a code to scrutinize the proceedings of war. The Kshatriyas were, thus, put through some rigorous physical, mental and ethical traning but were also taught that following the laws will lead them to a highest position in heaven and failing them will send them in darkest and deepest gallows of hell.

The laws which were encoded in the Indian subcontinent by the way of different Vedic, epic or Samriti texts were based entirely on the principles of humanity. There were two types of wars described in the texts one was **Dharmayudha** and other was **Kutayudha**. Dharmayudha was the kind of war which was fought on idealistic principles of warriors and it was very chivalorous and humane and Kutayudha was contrary to that. It was mostly Dharmayudha which was fought in the Indian subcontinent even ages after these laws were encoded. The lawbooks contained in them some special set of rules and duties which had to be followed by all warriors. Even the monarch was not exempted from following these rules and as he was the head of the state the entire onus of following these duties fell upon him. The rule of the war was very clear and whenever a monarch felt that

he was in the position to wage a war against the other king he would send his ambassador to his country with a message either yield or submit. Now here comes the humane aspect of the war fought in India. The messenger or ambassador who used to come with message was inviolable, he was not to be harmed. Although we know that in any civilization of the world harming messenger was considered as most wileful act but in ancient Greece and Rome this rule was violated by will. In the Peloponnesian war King Leonidas mercilessly kills the messengers of Persian king Xerxes and in another instance queen Teuta of Illyria got one messenger of Roman Empire executed because she felt that he disrespected her and other was put behind bars. But in India this rule was never violated. Mahabharata laid very clear rule regarding the safety of the messenger or Duta that any king who killed an envoy will alongside his entire ministers will rot in hell for eternity.

The warfare in Indian subcontinent was quite contrary to the wars fought in western traditions and one of the eminent scholar of Oriental studies H.H. Wilson remarked "The Hindu laws of war are very humane and chivalorous, and prohibit the slaying of the unarmed, of women, of the old and of the conquered". When we make an in depth analysis of Wilson's remarks we will find the statement true to the core because whenever two neighboring states were at war in India the common populace was not harmed or harassed in any way. We have the statement of Hieun T-sang to confirm this who said that although there were enough battles fought between different kingdoms in seventh century A.D. yet the country at large was hardly affected by it. At the very time when a battle was ongoing one could see a cultivator sowing his seeds or painting his trees and reaping his harvest. The ancient lawmakers had ensured his safety by encoding laws through various dharmic traditions and he was quite sure of his safety and that is why he kept on with his daily work irrespective of the war being fought between two monarchs. When we see the warfare in Greece and Rome in ancient times we will see the armies destroying the fields on the way to the war. In case of their victory the soldiers were entitled to share the spoils of the war which were based on looting and plundering the houses of common folks. Women were also considered as commodities and after the fall of one state they were also shared or sold as slaves like other war booty. Julius Caesar after defeating Gauls took as many as 60000 slaves from defeated nation to work for Romans. After the death of Julius Caesar Marcus Antony reminds Roman people that it was due to the Caesar that every household in Rome had as many as 15 slaves each. Even the Islamist invasions on India witnessed tremendous loot from common people and temples. Thus, the people who came to India were awestruck by the humane nature of the war here. Whereas in the entire world war meant tremendous suffering for the common man in India the same common man was protected by the law encoded by Vedas and shastras. The testimony of Megasthenes is in itself a proof of the peace that prevailed during the time of war in Ancient India. He says "Whereas among other nations it is usual, in the context of war to ravage the soil and thus to reduce it to an uncultivated waste, among the Indians, on the contrary, the tillers of the soil, even when the battle is raging in their neighborhood, are undisturbed by any sense of danger, for combatants on either side in waging the conflict make carnage of each other, but allow those engaged in husbandry to remain quite unmolested. Besides, they never ravage an

enemy's land with fire, nor cut down its trees". It was quite spectacular for Megasthenes to see this benevolent trait of Indian warfare because it was entirely in contrast with the culture from where he came from.

In Mahabharata there are various instances of Kshatradharma where clear emphasis is laid upon the warrior code. There are various passages which say that a soldier whose armor has been broken, or one who is lying on the ground or one who has folded his hands or thrown down his weapons must be taken prisoner but they are not to be killed. The aged, the women, the children must not be harmed. One must not kill those who are thirsty, those who are on move, one who is walking, drinking or eating, one who has been struck or one who has been weakened. The moral discussions in Mahabharata are full with certain noble features like a warrior who is fighting on feet must fight with the person who is on feet, a warrior with sword will fight with the warrior who has same kind of weapon likewise a knight fighting with bows and arrows must fight with a person who uses the very weapon he is using. Chariot warriors are not supposed to attack cavalry and infantry, those on elephants were not supposed to attack infantry.

In Manu Samriti it is clearly stated for the king that when he fights with his foes in battle, let him not strike with weapons concealed, nor with barbed, poisoned or the points of which are blazing with fire. Whether a king is going to fight for himself or let others fight for him it is the responsibility of the king that the battle should be in accordance with law and should uphold honesty. Manu clearly states that when a war is fought between two kingdoms the common population should not be targeted. A common ground for battle should be found and it should be away from dwelling place of the common citizens. The armies of the state should not cross the fields of the cultivators and if they do so the victim must be compensated appropriately.

Kautaliya in his Arthashastra asserts that the king must wage war only against unjust king and who is not popular within his subjects and it is very wise to not fight with a just king because his subjects will fight whole heartedly for their king, that is why it is important for a king to wage war only against king whose rule is oppressive and whose subjects are weary of injustice. Kautaliya discussed three types of wars;

1. open war
2. Concealed war
3. Silent war

He acknowledged that open warfare is the best form of battle as it is in cognizance with the Dharmic traditions.

he advocated humanitarian treatment towards conquered people and citizens. he pointed that a humanitarian attitude toward these people was practical because if a king indulges in massacre of these subjects he will ultimately end up in frightening his own people and ministers. But he will gain the trust of all when he treats the defeated people with magnanimous attitude and will end up in getting more land and loyal subjects. He advised the conquering king to give immunity to all the war prisoners and give help to those who are sick and wounded. A conquering king's duty is to give assurance to the defeated people that not much has changed except for their rulers. He must adopt a pattern and live life which is in accordance with the customs of defeated people

so that they may consider him as one of their own. He should participate in their festivals and honor their deities and give respect to the people with wisdom and art.

Even long time after these laws had been encoded they were practically used by Indian kings. In early medieval India we see different regional kingdoms like Chalukyas, Rashtrakutas, Pratiharas, Pals and many others fighting amongst themselves but it was very rare to see the indulging in massacre or looting the wealth of common citizens. Thus it would be quite apt to write that laws which were in accordance with war in Ancient India were more progressive and humane. The belligerent parties, most of the times, tried to avoid conflict initially but when war started they did everything to ensure the safety of common people so that

they can live in peace which was hardly seen in any contemporary civilization of that age.

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