CHAPTER V

INFANTRY
War is an art and has been equated with a tug-of-war whose result depends upon the relative strength of the contending hordes. Although elephantry and the cavalry constituted the 'Punch' of the ancient Indian armies, yet the infantry which was the most numerous arm, provided the often sought for strength of numbers greatly affecting the so called 'relative strength'. We are not then, amazed to note that Chandragupta Maurya had as many as 600,000 foot soldiers Harsa 50,000, Jayapāla Shāhi 30,000 and Chandella Vidyādhara 1,45,000. What surprises us is, that in spite of its vast superiority in numbers, it was not given its due importance.

They were termed as 'Conglomerate mass' with no individuality of their own and followed the knight as 'anucarab' follower or attendant and ran away halter and skelter upon his death or else suffered slaughter. They fell fighting in the largest numbers, yet the umbrella of honour was never regarded as their due. They formed base of the knightly pyramid, "always carrying the weapons to all places; and fighting,"

1. Egerton of Tatton, Indian and Oriental Armour, p. 11
2. Mookerjee, R.K., Harsha, p. 29
4. Gardizi and Nizamuddin quoted by Yogendra Mishra, The Hindu Shahis of Afghanistan and the Panjab, p. 201
5. Chakravarty, P.C., The Art of War in Ancient India, p. 16
6. Arthasastra, Bk X, Ch. IV
and yet retaining their inferior status. That solid and unassailable defensive as well offensive wall provided by the Greek Phalanx and the Roman legions, which were the kernal of the European armies were not known to India.\(^7\) Chakravarty's assertion that infantry "contributed little or nothing to the decision of battles..... and were not an arm, capable of offence and defence having its own special organisation, functions in the line of battle and tactical method,"\(^8\) is far fetched and un-corroborated by facts.

Infantry is an arm best suited for close combat. It meets the enemy at an arms' distance, puts him to the sword or captures him. The classic example of infantry in this role is provided by the battle of Waihind (1008-9 A.D.), "Inspite of the Sultān's precautions, during the heat of the battle, 30,000 infidel Oakkars, with their heads and feet bare and armed with spears and other weapons, penetrated on two sides into the Muhammadan lines, and forcing their way into the midst of the cavalry, they cut-down men and horse with their swords, daggers and spears, so that, in a few minutes, they slaughtered three or four thousand Muhammadans. They carried their success so far that the Sultān, observing the fury of these Oakkar footmen, withdrew himself from the thick of the fight, so that he might stop the battle for that day.....\(^9\)

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7. Chakravarty, p. 16
8. Ibid.
In the mountainous region the infantry with its light equipment and ease of movement rendered excellent services by affecting diversions, penetrating well defended areas and laying ambushes. During the reign of Didda 980/81 - 1002 A.D. a arrogant Prithvipala, ruler of Rajapuri, against whom the Kashmirian forces had marched out, laid a successful ambush near a defile and routed the Kashmiri soldiers. Whereupon, "The heroic Tunga, with his brothers, suddenly penetrated into Rajapuri by an other route and at once burnt it down entirely. By this diversion king Prithvipala was defeated, and the forces of the other ministers were extricated from the defile."10 A small body of determined foot soldiers could defend their position against a large hordes for considerable period and tactically opportune moments. Harṣa (1089-1101 A.D.) despatched Kandrapa to reduce Rājapuri (Rajauri). Kandrapa personally penetrated into the Royal palace with a small body of soldiers and "Three hundred of his foot stopped before Rājnuri thirty thousand of the enemy's soldiers...."11

Conversely, the most stoutly contested hill positions could only be reduced by infantry assaults. Nīdrar Bihīm alarmed at the sudden invasion by Mahmūd of Ghazna, advised by his war-council, took up defensive position in a narrow, precipitous and inaccessible pass. The sultan, after ascertaining, the intentions of Bihīm "advanced against him with his warriors who penetrated the pass like gimlets into wood, ascending the hills

10. Rājatarangini, VI 349-352
11. Ibid., VII 977-978
like mountain goats and descending them like torrents of water." As with the difficult and rugged mountainous positions so with the forts and fortifications. The forts were defended by the foot soldiers from battlements and parapets. And again, horses and elephants could not have climbed up the lofty walls of the forts, and it was escalade by the lowly footman which amongst others, proved most successful means of razing the fort to submission. The battlements of Sommat were manned by footmen at every point and Mahmūd had to bring forward his archers for clearing the walls of its defenders before he could order the general escalade.  

The digging of entrenchments, and the security of men and material of war like Manjniks and catapults deployed against the forts, was entrusted to the infantry spearmen.

The role of infantry in the execution of seiges was simply invaluable. They surrounded the forts, plugged in the routes of enemy ingress and egress and reduced the besieged garrison to unlimited extremities. The seiges of Multan by Mohammad Kasim, Taifand by Mahmūd of Ghazna are enough to prove the point. The services of infantry were immensely useful in a country "intersected by rivers, swamps and canals," where cavalry was of least avail. The security of the camp against

12. Elphinstone, The History of India, p. 335
13. Ibid.
14. Elliot & Dowson, Vol. I, p. 120,167,434
15. Ibid., p. 99, 123
16. Ibid., p. 435
sudden enemy onslaughts, was vital then as now, and night watches were detailed to thwart any surprise raids or full-fledged attacks. Infantry, for its adaptability, self-reliance and mobility came handy for this purpose. When Jayapida set out for the conquest of the 'World' second time, "Mummuni and other chiefs roamed with fierce candalas outside his army, and formed his guard at night." 17

Suitability of infantry for war in rugged and hilly terrain had been acclaimed by the ancient Hindu writers as well. "That which contains big stones, dry or green trees and ant-hill, is the ground for infantry." 18 "A region which is full of inaccessible spots and which is overgrown with large trees and cane bushes, is the ground for infantry." 19

This view is supported by the evidence of Al Masudi who wrote that "the troops of the 'Balhara Sovereign of the city of Menkir' (Rāṣṭrakūṭa king of Malkhed) were mostly infantry, because the seat of his government is among the mountains." 20

But that is not all. This most ancient arm of the army was pretty effective even in plain-warfare. "That which is free from thorns, not very uneven, but very expansive, is an excellent ground for infantry." 21 There was no match of Indian heavy-archers in pitched battles and although many of them (as

17. Rājataranginī, IV 516
18. Arthasāstra, Bk X, Ch. IV
19. The Mahābhārata, Sāntinārva, 100, 22; see also Agnipurāṇa, 236, 49
20. Elliot & Dowson, Vol. I, p. 21
21. Arthasāstra, Bk. X, Ch. IV
brought out in the chapter on elephantry), fired their arms from the back of the elephants, yet vast superiority in numbers was that of the foot-archers whose role could be equated with the modern gunners. As we shall see at the relevant place, they neutralized the target before the general assault, helped river-crossings by forcing the enemy to keep his head down, break up the enemy phalanx by irresistible fire, blinded the enemy elephants and downed chosen horsemen. By sheer weight of numbers, the infantry were at times, able to decide the fortune of the day.22

The rulers of Ghazni maintained infantry on permanent basis "consisting of Indians and Dailamis (mounted on mules and camels) often supplemented by local levies in Afghanistan and Khurasan, for being used in pitched battles and sieges."23

Inspite of all that we have said, we are sorry to note that the ancient Hindu writers never gave the infantry its due. All that they said about its role was, "carrying away the wounded and dead troops from the field of battle, offering resistance to elephants, supplying water and carrying arms and weapons."24 And again, "the proper task of the footmen, is to protect the granaries, arsenals and treasuries, and to make entrenchments for the army."25

25. Nitipraksika, VI, 57
To what, then we should ascribe this anachronism between the theory and practice of warfare pertaining to the major and most numerous body of foot soldiers? To us it appears that the later polity-writers were blind followers of Kautilya. They could never dare revolt against the preachings of the master craftsman. What could one expect from them when they went on harping on the utility of the chariot even centuries after its falling to dis-use? The ready availability of the lowlyfooter, the least cost of his maintenance, the comparative ease with which he could be trained and lack of splendour attached to his accoutrements, all conspired to deny him his rightful place. They even failed to take note of what Kautilya had said, "the best army is that which consists of strong infantry and of such elephants and horses as are noted for their breed, birth, strength, youth, vitality...."26

It appears from the accounts of the classical authors that bow was the principal weapon of the foot soldier, but he also had Javelin and sword (used for close combat and with both hands to land a powerful blow)."27 This is borne out by the bas-reliefs of Bharhut, and Sanchi, where majority of infantry soldiers have been depicted to possess bow and a few having swords and javelins. Those of them who carried swords or javelins were also in possession of the shields where as

26. Arthasastra, Bk. X, Ch. V  
27. Arrian, Indica, Ch. XVI  
28. Cunningham, The Stupa of Bharhut, Pl. XXVII  
29. Maisey, Sanchi and its Remains, Pl. XX
the archers were without them. In the Ajanta frescoes the foot soldiers have been painted with either swords or spears and shields.

According to Yuan Chwang "They carry a long spear and a great shield; sometime they hold a sword or sabre.... All their weapons are sharp and pointed. Some of them are these: spears, shields, bows, halberds, long javelins and various kinds of slings. These weapons they have used for ages." In the plastic art of the early mediaeval period depiction of the foot soldiers carrying swords, maces, javelins, shields are noticed at Khajurâho, Osia and other sites in Northern India. The Ghaznavid infantry carried bows, maces, short swords and spears.

As we proceed further along the history of warfare, we shall find that "next to the genius of the general the infantry arm is the most valuable instrument in gaining a victory," but there was a woeful lack of realization of this concept amongst the Indian rulers and thinkers alike down to the 18th century.

During the Sultanate period, the foot-soldiers called paiks, 'mostly Hindus, slaves or others, along with horses came to be included under animals, with the difference that the former were 'talking' the latter were 'neighing.' The infantry

30. Cunningham, Pl. XXXII
31. Lady Harringham, Ajanta Frescoes, Pl. XVIII & XXII
34. Hittel, Jominis Art of War, p. 148
continued to perform this servile role of "night watchman, and guardian over baggage, either in camp or on the line of march" until middle of the 18th century "when the French and English had demonstrated the vast superiority of disciplined infantry." 36

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36. Irvine, Army, pp. 57, 171 quoted Journal of Indian History, 1973, p. 466