CHAPTER 4

MILITARY ETHICS THROUGH AGES
4. Military Ethics Through Ages

4.1 The Indian Society has an ancient history which has evolved through centuries of existence and continuous transformation. The large canvas of the Indian subcontinent represented peace and tranquillity which was disturbed by belligerent Aryan groups around 1500 BC. History proves through the ruins of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa that modern civilisation did exist along with tribal groups. These were peace loving civilisations whose basic occupation was trade and commerce and where little importance was given to the defence of such civilisations which was left to nondescript groups. The outcome was suppression of the people by the Aryans.

The Indian Society and Culture

4.2 The subjugation of the people of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa was carried out by the Aryans who were primarily bucolic in nature. It was the clash of culture between Aryans and the local inhabitants in the Indian subcontinent. This clash of civilisation has been considered as the chief cause of emergence of social stratification which spread the ascendancy of Aryans and their descendants over other groups. The chief characteristic of this stratification was dominance of a powerful group though small in number over a large number of people in other stratum later labelled as belonging to a lower group. The exploitation of this lower stratum which evolved during this period exists till date. The foundation of this trend was that of a feeling of superiority amongst the dominant group. The dominant group further enhanced their ‘upper-class social status’ by formation of certain practices which was beyond the reach of lower castes. The dominance of this group was further cemented by propagation to the masses that the belonging to the lower stratum was due to the inevitable outcome of karma in previous existence on earth. Due to continuous suppression of the masses by the dominant group the social stratification got institutionalised in the society. Thus the mistreatment by the higher castes was considered as a matter of fate.

4.3 Indian civilisation as the historians put it, ‘is the most ancient in existence for the last 4000 years’. The Indian subcontinent is unique in its geographic and natural splendour as also the culture which has remained largely intact for centuries. The pattern and hues of the Indian Society might have changed but the basic social and cultural fabric has maintained its continuity. The diversity of Indian culture is as unique as the diverse terrain configuration.
prevalent in the country. The uniqueness of the vital elements of Indian culture was also seen in various armies. People from diverse ethnic background fought battles under the same banner.

4.4 The characteristic spirit of the Indian Society is represented by ancient scriptures which still are a source of inspiration and guidance. History has proved that a healthy mix of ingredients from other religions has also cast its impression on the value systems of the Indian Society through ages. The earliest references to moral codes of soldiering are found in the Indian epic Mahabharat. Lord Krishna propagated Kshatriya dharma to his disciple Arjun. The Lord teaches to his disciple his duties as a warrior and leader of his community as also the intricacies of value system. The sterling quality of Indian soldiery today has its roots in the teachings of the Lord. It would be pertinent at this stage to highlight important facets of the discourse between Lord Krishna and his disciple which are highlighted below:

4.4.1 Duty is to be done for the sake of duty wherein emphasis is on the course of action and not of the outcome. The prime responsibility of a soldier on battlefield is towards its duty without thinking of admiration or retribution. In performance of one's duty a soldier brings onto himself a feeling of inner satisfaction.

4.4.2 The ultimate duty of the soldier is making the supreme sacrifice for the cause (Source: Shrimad Bhagwat Gita 47/2).

4.5 The Indian Society has been synonymous with traditions of quality of character. Resolve, modesty and generosity of spirit have been the hallmarks of Indian character. The sturdiness of Indian character has exhibited itself to invaders such as Alexander, Mahumad Gauri and the colonial empire of the British. Asceticism, self-control and abandonment of unrighteous courses have been the key elements of Indian kingdoms. The value systems have guided many a rulers in this country though aberrations in the form of religious bigots have also taking place. The Upanishads have truly represented the Indian value systems which have been aptly described through the example of chariot and its master. The chariot has been shown as representative of the human body and the master to its psyche. The driver is representative of the intellect of the human being, the reins are a representative of the mind, their senses to the horses and sense objects to the roads. The chariot can take the driver to his objective if it is sturdy in the first place, if the driver can differentiate between
the right and wrong road, if the reins are strong, the horses efficiently controlled and if the roads are well selected.

**Ethics and Culture: Social Obligations**

4.6 Ethics are a set of beliefs in moral principles which controls the activities of an individual, group, community or a society. It makes one decide the righteous course of conduct in pursuance of one’s aims and objectives. Each society has its own culture and tradition wherein it has its own norms and guidelines for code of conduct of its members. In bygone days directives from the heavenly were generally considered to be synonymous with the righteousness in human conduct. The field of ethics has evolved from this state to a state of minute human scrutiny. Today issues such as the right and wrong, commitment of society, accountability, definition of duty, rights and privileges, relevance of conscience, virtuous conduct and character are being increasingly debated upon. Can the code of conduct be standardised? What is the relevance of laws of the State, traditional customs and practices and public opinion in regulation of behaviour of individuals? There are different levels of morality in private and public life and which require different types of approach. Do all problems in society relate to issues of morality? Is the code of ethics in one country the same as code of ethics in another country?

4.7 The cultural ethos of particular society has a direct bearing on the code of conduct of its denizens. The definition of rightness, responsibility, duties and privileges, virtue and vices need to be seen in context of the development of norms in that particular society or community. If a particular society encourages cannibalism then the value systems of that particular group will flow from such a practice.

**Implications on Indian Military System**

4.8 The characteristics of Indian Society as enunciated in this Chapter have shaped its ethical patterns. The ethical patterns of the parent society through ages have had its influence in the Indian Armies. As mentioned earlier Indian civilisation has been characterised by tolerance to different cultures, religions and ethnic groups. The Indian Constitution too is truly representative of this characteristic.

4.9 *Conflict between individuals is as old as the mankind although more organised warfare between groups probably followed the establishment of semi permanent*
settlements on reaching the food gathering stage\textsuperscript{11}. Indian military history is replete with examples of military traditions and methods of fighting. Indigenous armies are known to have given the enemy fight before laying down own arms. History of science of warfare in India is old and known to have been formerly documented in Kautiliyas’ Arthashashtra. There are many examples of large-scale operations undertaken in ancient times backed by a definite military science on strategy and tactics\textsuperscript{12}.

One base factor which stands out is the high standard of ethical code and constant emphasis on upholding of dharma through ages.

- Leena Parmar

4.10 The ancient times was depicted by high levels of frequency of wars. Wars were fought not only for dominance over others but also for establishment of good over malevolence. A major emphasis on those times was placed on righteous war as found in Ramayana, Mahabharat and the Mauriyan Empire. Kautiliyas’ Arthashashtra laid down specific rules for warfare and administration. Apart from basic emphasis on physical development and ruggedness of the soldier due attention was also paid to development of personality traits of the soldier also. Discipline and training were the watchwords to achieve a high standard of commitment in the Army\textsuperscript{13}.

4.11 The Indian Society has tradition of sending young men to the Army as a matter of pride. It was not so long ago that certain communities in the country were known to have sent at least one son to the Army in case there were two or more male children in the family. Apart from agriculture, military service was the only other profession which the society particularly in the villages thought of. Generations after generation sent their children to the Armed Forces wherein it was considered a matter of commitment to the nation. The Armed Forces were considered synonymous with highest value systems as it entailed making the supreme sacrifice for the nation.

Warfare - An Evolutionary Process

4.12 Warfare has been a part of the evolutionary process in the progress of mankind

\textsuperscript{11} Sandhu, Maj Gen G S (Retd). A Military History of Ancient India.

\textsuperscript{12} Parmar, Leena. Ethics and the Indian Armed Forces - Principles and a Recent Ethical Dilemma. University of Rajasthan, Jaipur.

\textsuperscript{13} Parmar, Leena. Ethics and the Indian Armed Forces - Principles and a Recent Ethical Dilemma. University of Rajasthan, Jaipur.
and an agent for the advancement of civilisation”\textsuperscript{14}. Prehistoric civilisation talks of actions of human beings chiefly related to existence. It is only in the Neolithic era that some sort of ordered way of living began to evolve. Signs of this sort of a change are evident from the remains of the Indus Valley civilisation which extended from 3300 BC to about 1500 BC. The economy began to develop wherein trade and commerce flourished. This resulted in setting of norms in the society which included self restraint and code of conduct. The Indus Valley people were known to have lived in a state of harmony with very little emphasis in matters pertaining to defence of their areas. Though they did possess an Armed Force, it did not have sufficient wherewithal and did not have the position of eminence in the society. There are references in history which make the mention of some form of code of behaviour in their Army.

4.13 The ascendancy of Aryans brought about a change in the social fabric of the society with an increased emphasis on defence systems. The imperialistic tendencies of the Aryans to increase their empire made it mandatory for their citizens to send their male force to the Army. The tribe of Aryans had a long history of participating in warfare and were well acquainted in the science of warfare. “The early Aryans observed no code of conduct in warfare nor is there any evidence of the existence of any type of restrictive rules. On the contrary they considered victory as an end in itself and the means employed to achieve it were of no consequence”\textsuperscript{15}. The local community had not seen such a ruthless form of warfare which the Aryans waged on them. The system gradually began to evolve after the Vedic era where the science of warfare took some shape. As mentioned earlier there is no evidence of Aryans having ethics on the battlefield. The ultimate aim was conquest at any cost and the defeated enemy did not possess any human rights as is existing today. In fact it is said that it was a practice which existed all over the world at that period of time. It is only during later stages that some form of regulated behavioural patterns started evolving in warfare. Warfare became a more humanitarian activity. Historians acknowledge that it is in the Indian subcontinent for the first time some amount of regulatory behaviour was introduced during conduct of warfare. History also though acknowledges large-scale aberrations and violations of the code of conduct.

4.14 The Aryan approach to warfare saw a sweeping change which was brought about by

\textsuperscript{14} Sandhu, Maj Gen G S (Retd), \textit{A Military History of Ancient India}.
\textsuperscript{15} Sandhu, Maj Gen G S (Retd), \textit{A Military History of Ancient India}.
the Upanishads. There are references to the concept of self-control, empathy, and non-violence. Warfare began to be restricted to two warring factions wherein non-combatants were left unarmed. Later on the concept of dharma-yudh began to take root. Laws of natural justice started getting recognition over blatant acquisition of power. The conduct of soldiers on battlefield was codified and regulated by law. It was understood that the duty of soldier was to kill or injure enemy in battle whereas the same was not true of communities not connected with the battlefield. There were rules which ensured imperviousness for non-combatants, minimum casualties and least harm to belongings. The soldier was asked to perform duty unto death and not run away in the face of danger and defeat. Orders were in place which restricted the soldiers to kill the following category of personnel:

*Woman and children, old men, Brahmins, messengers, envoys, the insane, intoxicated or terrified persons, an enemy without weapons, unhorsed riders, chariot warriors off their vehicles, those seeking quarter, those running away, those sitting with their faces averted, persons who had climbed trees during flight from battle, those who lay down arms were declared themselves to be Brahmins.*

4.15 The Kshatriya dharma of the soldier community laid down emphasis on acquisition of skills of warfare, sacrifices, accept challenges on the battlefield and relentlessly endeavour to look for victory over the enemy. Neither moderation nor satisfaction was a Kshatriya way of living for the soldier. As mentioned by Lord Krishna that those who die in the battlefield find a place in heaven, those who win and survive enjoy the fruits of the earth but those who died in bed found no respectable place anywhere.

**Ethics of Warfare**

4.16 As stated earlier the growth of principles of warfare was conspicuous during that time of the Upanishads. This marked a change from the state of early Aryans where there were no scruples in war. Referring to Upanishads once again the stress on values, asceticism, truth, dharma and non-violence is all too evident. It also spoke of empathy and self-control.

4.17 The ethics of those times did mention ideals of code of conduct or righteous behaviour. The onus was thereafter on the kings to follow them in true spirit on the battlefield. It was considered the sacred duty of soldiers to wage war and as Mahabharat mentioned that the *path of righteous purpose leads to victory*. Incidentally belligerence without sufficient reason was acceptable but that the war must be fought according to a set

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16 Sandhu, Maj Gen G S (Retd), A Military History of Ancient India.
of laws. Later on powerful kings used the method of coercion to intimidate weaker kingdoms. This minimised the possibility of waging war against other kingdoms. The code of conduct on the battlefield went through various phases and changes but most of the kings were not known to implement them wherein lapses occurred quite frequently. Interestingly endeavour was made by the kings to rationalize these lapses which were an indication that conscience was alive. The vicious nature of warfare did change to an extent whereupon some semblance of order was noticed.

4.18 As mentioned earlier there are a number of instances in Mahabharat wherein leaders are known to have exhorted their soldiers to fight on to death. It was an assured way for a gateway to heaven. It reminded the soldiers of their duty as also was an attempt to raise their sagging self-confidence. Fleeing from battle brought disgrace to the soldier and his community.

4.19 Reversion of old form of system of inhumanity in battlefield took place when Alexander invaded India. The warfare was characterised by cruelty, indiscriminate annihilation and subjugation of the general populace. Even women and children were not spared. Historians have unfolded stories of horror wherein large-scale destruction and killings took place. The same trend continued in the early Mauryan dynasty. This later changed to Emperor Ashokas’ repudiation of war and practice of non-violence.

4.20 The commencement of first millennium BC saw a code of conduct being formulated and observed in the battlefield. Fair treatment of prisoners, use of fair means in the waging war, treatment of wounded prisoners and prevention of annihilation of property were some of the new trends seen during that period.

4.21 The Mogul empire brought with it from Central Asia once again dominance, subjugation and ruthlessness in combat. The main focus of Mogul rulers was plunder of wealth and in the process carried out number of inhuman activities. It goes without saying that barbarism once again replaced laid down codes of conduct in warfare. It is only in the later period of Mogul domination in India that some sort of orderliness was brought into their armies. Akbar introduced into his army, Cdr and soldiers of other religions as also brought about structural changes in his army wherein rank structure was introduced. Ordered form of warfare was again seen in the country. This again saw a decline during the rule of Aurangzeb who was a religious bigot. The decline of the Mogul empire took place
during the reins of Bahadur Shah Zafar wherein the Army of East India Company finally took control which was later converted to dominance of the entire Indian subcontinent by the British Army.

**British Indian Army**

4.22  *British military domination of the subcontinent was possible because Indians joined the Colonial Army and remained loyal to it*  

A majority of the soldiers in the British Army were local inhabitants of the country. The command structure of the officer cadre initially comprised purely British officers. These officers effectively handled the Indian soldiers by adopting Indian customs and traditions which were later made an intrinsic part of the core value system of the Army. To command the Indian troops in an efficacious manner the British officers introduced the cadre of JCO. Loyalty was extracted from the JCO and soldiers by reminding them of the core values which were Naam, Namak, Nishan and Zuban. These core values are very much Indian in nature and represented the fabric of Indian society. Naam represented fighting on the battlefield for one's honour, Namak represented loyalty to superior and the cause, Nishan represented safeguarding the battalion's colours and Zuban or Vachan meant commitment to death. The British took keen interest in the welfare of soldiers both during service and after retirement. This won admiration and loyalty from the Indian soldiers. A series of incentives were provided to the soldiers. The welfare apparatus of the British Indian Army was well thought of and effectual. The British related qualities of courage and faithfulness to the system of rewards. It was during the British Indian Army that one noticed that the main reason for soldiers' supreme sacrifice was not only for material and monetary benefits but for the need for recognition and self-esteem. *Incentives were tools of command as they were applied to the soldiers with the aim of encouraging good behaviour.*  

Good conduct was introduced in 1837 to encourage long-term loyalty. The longer the soldiers remained loyal the greater was the scope of good conduct pay. Interestingly the British officers were wary of the influence of civilians on the soldiers. That is the sole reason that they segregated themselves in military cantonments to prevent external influences affecting them. They were of the belief that constant interaction with civilians would affect troop morale and discipline. A lot of

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17 Gupta and Deshpande, *The British Raj and the Indian Armed forces.*

18 Gupta and Deshpande, *The British Raj and the Indian Armed forces.*
importance was given to another important aspect of man management and that was the health care of troops. It was seen that improvement in living conditions had corresponding positive effect on the behaviour pattern of soldiers. Disciplinary infrastructure existed side by side with the policy of caring for men. The British control over soldiers was mainly hegemonic rather than coercive. Another important aspect was that the British officers ensured that the soldiers enjoyed a special status in the society. This ensured a high level of satisfaction of the soldiers which correspondingly resulted in high levels of loyalty and commitment to the cause.

4.23 The Indian Army has bright traditions of valour, leadership, restraint, respect to authority and esprit-de-corps. The soldiers and officers of the British Indian Army contributed immensely in developing traditions and core values. The Indian element of the British Indian Army have left an indelible mark in the Indian society on character qualities such as courage, devotion, consideration for men, fearlessness and deep sense of regimental honour. This traditional runs like thread of gold into the fabric and mosaic of the culture and ethos of the Indian Army.