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Does caste impact wars? Caste system and Indian defeat in ancient and medieval wars

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Abstract
No aspect of Indian history has aroused more controversy than India's history of social relations. All nations have divisive elements. They can be ethnic, religious, linguistic regional or caste-based. In some societies caste-like divisions are relatively simple. But nowhere the social divisions were made perpetually relevant by cleverly being crafted into the religious scriptures and nowhere were these divisions so intricately mixed with the concept of purity and pollution thereby condemning a section of the population into degraded existence for thousands of years. While many societies got over these unequal social divisions over long periods of their existence, the continuation of the Indian cultural traditions all through the last four to five thousands of years, has not only baffled many observers, it has also forced them to view the caste system as an integral part of the Indian culture.

The present paper tries to explore the possibility of looking into the causes of Indian defeat in the pre-modern wars and to analyse if unequal social divisions (caste system) contributed in any way to the defeat of the Indian armies in these wars. Despite having developed sound basis of warfare, Indians suffered defeat at the hands of foreign invaders, repeatedly. Indians failed to learn anything from their failures in the battle-field and therefore, had to suffer defeat again and again. It should also be taken into account that invaders managed to snatch victories with relatively very small armies when compared with the vast Indian armies they were pitied with. The invaders greatly influenced the system of warfare as they managed to rule over large territories. Hence one is compelled to validate the fact that socio-cultural factors were definitely at play in influencing results of many Indian wars throughout its long history.

Keywords: Civilizational Continuity, Spiritual Elation, Shudra, Internal Colonisation, Kshatriya, Fissiparous tendency, Factionalism. Marginalized.

1. Introduction

All nations have divisive elements. They can be ethnic, religious, linguistic regional or caste-based. When a nation is confronted with an external coloniser, there is a process of internal decolonisation. In simple terms, the forces of internal domination and discrimination tend to disappear or at least, for the time being, get marginalised. However, as soon as the external threat is removed, the process of internal colonization reasserts itself. The fissiparous tendencies which had, for the time being, pressed under the mat, once again become prominent. Eminent historian, Prof Bipan Chandra calls this process the subsuming of internal contradictions. Secondary contradictions disappear when they are confronted with the primary contradiction. He cites the example of socio-economic, racial, regional and religious differences among Indians getting temporarily overlooked when they were pitied against an over-bearing external enemy in form of the British Imperial power. Percival Spear in his book, History of India [1], also subscribes to the same logic, albeit in an indirect manner. One of the reasons that brought the Indians together against the British was an emotional one. The emotion was dislike of the foreigner which in India for many ages had gone along with a tolerance of his presence.

In its history of five thousand years, India has had to encounter external invaders both on land and sea. In spite of its long civilizational continuity, what is however, baffling is that it has often displayed a lack of unity and exposed the country to easy colonization by invading powers. Factors behind these humiliating episodes might have been many but probably, the single most significant cause behind these could have been its divisive social structure which

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could never enthuse people to remain loyal to bigger units beyond their castes and made them averse to team work[2].Historian Bimal Kanti Majumdar also ascribes the same cause for Indian's dismal show while confronting the foreign invaders when he says that the subjugation of such a vast country with age-long civilization could not be have been affected and the stately fabric crumbled unless some forces other than political and military were at work, slowly but surely shaking the foundation[3]. This would lead us to consider the social causes for the fall of the Hindu kingdoms in the 12th and 13th centuries.

Jagdish Narayan Sarkar in his work *Art of War in Medieval India* [4], carries forward the same argument and explains that war is a sociological phenomenon. It is therefore, natural to attribute failure of the Hindus to resist the Muslims to some socio-cultural factors, which tended to produce stagnation in the life of the people on the eve of the Muslim conquest and undermine the complex social structure of this vast country.

Even though native Indian armies were numerically far superior to the invading armies, lack of cohesion proved a stumbling block in the way of their joint and collaborative efforts. Looking for a plausible explanation for Purus's defeat in his battle with Alexander, Professor Stephen Rosen from Harvard, has found the answer in the divisions in the Indian society, which resulted in poor coordination in Puru's army [5].His cavalry refused to aid the infantry. On the soggy banks of Jhelum that morning, the Greek historian Arrian observed, Puru's chariots got stuck and the charioteers were unwilling to double up as infantry. Later in the day, cohesion in the Indian army broke down as the Macedonian phalanx put pressure on Puru's infantry, and the elephants pushed back and began to trample their own men. In this crisis, Rosen notes, "The Indian cavalry ...did not assist the Indian infantry against the enemy phalanx but dealt as best as it could with the Macedonian cavalry."

Indian military historians also noted this aspect. Rosen attributes the lack of solidarity partially to the caste system, although he correctly points out that caste structures were not yet fully developed. Caste, he hypothesizes, divides society, encourages loyalty within sub-group, and discourages it across caste lines. Puru's upper caste mounted cavalry did not sufficiently support the lower-caste soldier who was on foot. Jadunath Sarkar, an authority on ancient and medieval military affairs, said that although "the Indian defenders of the Punjab were brave, each man fought to death in isolation." The soldiers were "Unable to make a mass movement in concert with their brethren of other crops [6]." The people of Punjab were disunited and narrowly self-centred, with the net effect that "divided we fell."

Puru may have lost to the greatest general of his times, but the theme of the poor teamwork runs throughout Indian history. Babur's victories at Panipat against Ibrahim Lodi and at Khanua (against the Rajput confederacy led by Rana Sanga) were partly a result of the same deficiencies [7]. Although the Marathas had more cohesive armies they too suffered because some sub-castes armed themselves against the others. The British Empire professionalised the Indian armies, however, and after 1947, the Indian military has been "an island of discipline". Despite that, there have been problems between generals in the battle field. In the 1962 Indo-Chinese war, the Commander of the fourth division at Se-la confessed that "private animosities, personal weakness and in many cases lack of mutual confidence among the commanders ...led to disaster." Even in the victorious war

against Pakistan in 1965 and 1971, there were major failures of coordination, according to generals Harbaksh Singh and Sukhwant Singh [8].

Gurcharan Das laments the absence of teamwork in all spheres of life in India. He writes, "Poor teamwork is pervasive in India. Take any institution, scratch its surface and one finds factionalism ...what is the cause of our divisiveness? Is it our diversity? Is it the caste system [9]?"People everywhere want to feel superior to others, and all societies have some sort of hierarchy. But this does not mean that they have a caste system. In India hierarchy has been institutionalised, carried much further and lasted much longer. The question is whether India's deep-rooted obsession with ranking has suppressed our capacity to grow and develop. The caste system seems to fragment India's social and political life [10]. Everyone within the caste was a brother and outside it a stranger. Caste varied by region, and the relative position of the castes differed from village to village. But everywhere caste rules were rigid, and there was little room for individuality.

Some writers like C V Vaidya, are disposed to regard the caste system as one of the contributory causes of the downfall of Hindu independence. Nobody can deny that the caste system, the bedrock of the Brahmanical social organisation divided the country into separate compartments, made unity difficult and exercised an unwholesome influence on the life of the people [11].

Mahabharat is the story of a futile and terrible war of annihilation between the children of two brothers of the Bharata clan. Karna is the most exciting figure in the epic, and his tragic struggle over his identity makes us think beyond questions of status to our common notions of inequality, caste, fidelity and even generosity. 'Son of a charioteer, you don't have the right to die in a fight with Arjuna! Better stick to the whip which suits your family,' [12] jeers Bhima when Karna challenges Arjuna for a match.

As the people had no share in the government and as there was a frequent change of dynasties of autocratic rulers, it was but natural that they would grow indifferent to political revolutions in the country [13]. The feudal character of the Rajput government and army from which the masses were completely divorced was an additional reason why the people refused to be interested in such matters as the names and antecedents of persons occupying the thrones of Delhi, Kanauj, Varanasi or Gaud. The apathy of the common man to the political fortunes of his country was much in evidence. At the Second Battle of Tarain, Prithviraj's vast forces fought with empty stomachs and became exhausted by the afternoon because they had been surprised by Muhammad Ghuri in the last part of the previous night before they could take their cooked food and would not, in conformity with their caste rules take any food during the fight [14].

Leela Karunyakara puts forward the view that in a "...catastrophe like war, society must mobilize all its resources for militarization. Indeed, the destiny of a defeat, which has been the lot of Indian History, is due to caste. Caste prevented general mobilization. Indian wars have been mostly wars of single battles or single campaigns. This was due to the fact that once the Kshatriyas fell, everything fell [15]." Shudras (backward castes) who formed the large majority of the country were disarmed. This was also a major cause for the failure of Indian Mutiny against British rule in 1857.

Instances were not rare in the period under review when Indian fatalism served to a large extent to enfeeble the will to resist in the face of a danger of the gravest magnitude. We meet with cases where consultations were held with astrologers to ascertain the inevitable. Two such instances are on record [16].

Caste sanctioned by Bhagavad Gita with utmost propagandist fervour, might be seen as part of the older Indian pragmatism, the 'life' of classical India. It has decayed and ossified with the society, and its corollary, function has become all: the sweeper's inefficiency and the merchant's short-sighted ruthlessness are inevitable. Bravery, the willingness to risk one's life, is the function of the soldier (Kshatriya) and no one else. Indians are known to go on picnicking on a river bank while a stranger drowned. Everyman is an island; each man to his function, his private contract with God. This is the realization of Gita's selfless action. This is caste. In the beginning, a no doubt, useful division of labour in a rural society, it has now divorced function from social obligation, position from duties. It is inefficient and destructive; it has created a psychology which will frustrate all improving plans. It has led to the Indian passion for speech-making, for gestures and for symbolic action...when actions are symbolic, labels are important, for things, for places and for people [17].

Hinduism hasn't been good for millions. It has exposed us to a thousand years of defeat and stagnation. It has given men no idea of a contract with other men, no idea of the state. It has enslaved one quarter of the population and always left the whole fragmented and vulnerable. Its philosophy of withdrawal has diminished men intellectually and not equipped them to respond to challenge; it has stifled growth [18]. So that again and again Indian history has repeated itself: vulnerability, defeat and withdrawal.

Nobel laureate Naipaul makes damning remarks about the caste system and its role in keeping the people divided and backward. He is very critical of the Indian indifference to everything happening around him. "Life goes on, the past continues. After conquest and devastation past simply reasserts itself [19]." In the same vein he continues, "...madness or sanity, suffering or happiness seemed all the same...in the rush of humanity nothing mattered. 'Life and the world and all this is passing-why bother about anything? The perfect and the imperfect are all the same. Why really bother? Even madness passes....In spiritual elation..' only existence asserts itself'....out of a superficial reading of the past, then, out of sentimental conviction that the India is eternal and forever revives, comes not a fear of further defeat and destruction, but an indifference to it. India will somehow look after itself; the individual is freed of all responsibility."

And within this larger indifference there is the indifference to the fate of a friend: it is madness. ....Acceptance of karma, the Hindu Killer, the Hindu calm, which tells us that we pay in this life for what we have done in past lives: so that everything we see is just and balanced, and the distress we see is to be relished as religious theatre, a reminder of our duty to ourselves, our future lives...It needs the world, but it surrenders the organisation of the world to others. It is a religious response to worldly defeat [20].

The ancient laws of Manu, which set down the caste duties in detail, teach that each caste must rigidly stick to its own dharma: 'It is better to do one's own duty badly than another man's well.' One text states that a shudra who' arrogantly teaches Brahmins their duty shall have boiling oil poured into his mouth and ears [21].' However, the last hundred years have seen a great increase in caste solidarity, though there has been a proportional decrease of interdependence between different castes living in the same region. President Dr Radhakrishnan's remarks on caste system remains relevant even today. "Though caste is today ceasing to be a social evil, it has become a political evil; it has become an administrative evil. We are utilising these caste loyalties for the purpose of winning our elections or getting people into jobs, exercising some kind of favouritism or nepotism." [22]

Despite having developed sound basis of warfare Indians suffered defeat at the hands of foreign invaders, repeatedly. Indians failed to learn anything from their failures in the battle-field and therefore, had to suffer defeat again and again [23]. The invaders greatly influenced the system of warfare as they managed to rule over large territories. Hence one is compelled to validate the fact that socio-cultural factors were definitely at play in influencing results of many Indian wars throughout its long history.

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3. ibid., p.153.
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5. Gursharan Das. India Unbound, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2000, p.41.
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10. In Hindu society the Brahmin is at the top of the four-caste hierarchy, followed by the Kshatriya. The Vaishya comes third and the shudra comes last. Below the four are the casteless "untouchables" and tribals. For all its aversion to the strange and the external the Hindu system did not easily lend itself to united action. The system of castes was inward looking and divisive, of cults competing and often conflicting. It naturally expressed itself in a medley of religious movements, social castes and political kingdoms so that united action against the foreigners was rare and difficult. Percival Spear, op. Cit., p. 159.
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12. Leiden E, BrillJ. The Sanskrit Hero: Karna in the Epic Mahabharata, 2004, 31, cited in Gurcharan Das, The Difficulty of Being Good, Allen Lane, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2009, p. 154.
13. The Brahmins resisted if at all, to protect the temples. The traders were primarily interested in settled conditions for their commerce than resistance, and often came to understanding with the conquerors. The so-called depressed classes, constituting the majority of the population, having duties without rights, were

disinterested in change of government. Jagdish Narayan Sarkar, op. Cit., p. 315.

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