ANCIENT INDO-EUROPEAN WARFARE

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No ex-serviceman can read Homer without being impressed by the realism of much of what he describes. Indeed, one of the most interesting comments on Homer that I have heard was made by an experienced British Regular Officer who found in the Doloneia a realistic account of a night raid.

It is not only points like this that impress, but also the characterisation of the Homeric heroes living by the heroic code of military honour which survives in modern armies and produces men similar to those praised by Homer. Admittedly, this is a code that has been discredited by its extreme manifestations in our century, but at least it formed a defence for civilisation that permitted its development to its present capacity for self-destruction.

Even the variety of weapons and equipment that puzzled scholars is familiar enough to anyone with service in a modern army for all the mass-production of its industrial backing. It is not only that it takes time to produce and issue new equipment, but those senior enough to assert their individuality may for personal reasons prefer to use an antiquated weapon with family associations, just as the grandson of the Peter Lalor who led the insurrection at the Eureka stockade, Capt. P.J. Lalor, although an officer of the Australian Permanent Forces and in spite of regulations, carried a family sword into action at Anzac.1

There is of course formalism in Homer’s account of individual combat,2 but inevitably such combat will conform to a pattern and realism is not seriously affected if for artistic purposes the warrior doomed to win throws the last spear or, if he is comparatively important, throws two spears rather than one. A battle with Homeric tactics and weapons could hardly have developed in any other way.

But it is the tactics themselves that surprised Greeks of the classical period familiar with the hoplite tactics of their own period in which uniformity of arms and equipment was essential at least within a given line of hoplites. There is no hoplite line, but a series of individual combats between champions normally equipped with spear and shield, but even this is varied by the intrusion of archers, not firing from the flank or rear from which one might expect supporting fire,3 but mixed up with the spearmen and relying on their unsporting long-range weapon until the enemy’s presence made it prudent to take refuge behind a shield like a tower managed by some long-suffering

infantryman who surely had enough to do to manage his own cumbersome weapons without sheltering an unmanly archer. It would seem that for all his realism Homer has preserved traditions of ancient methods of warfare that he did not fully understand himself.

Prof. Trypanis has recently drawn attention to the numerous pairs of brothers, half-brothers, first cousins, or other members of the same γένος, found fighting together in the Iliad, either on foot or in chariot-fighting. He suggests ‘that this was part of the early organisation of the Achaean armies based on the solemn duty of the blood relatives to protect, and, failing that, to avenge and to secure a proper burial for the killed kinsman.’

This institution and others belonging to an early stage of Indo-European warfare are found not as mere survivals but dominating the situation in warfare as described in the great epics of India. As for brothers fighting together, one thinks at once of Rāma and Laksmana, who form as famous a pair in the Rāmāyaṇa as Achilles and Patroclus in Homer ... and as Trypanis has argued we should see in the latter pair two members of the same γένος rather than ἔταιροι as the Greeks of the classical period understood the relationship. Of the four sons of Daśaratha, that leaves two, Bharata and Śatrughna, who naturally form another pair, associated in the epic, but from the nature of the story much less prominent than Rāma and Laksmana.

However, this institution of ancient warfare is naturally more prominent in the Mahābhārata with its detailed account of the fighting on each of the eighteen days of the battle of Kuruksetra. The historical event on which this great epic in 100,000 ślokas, or couplets, is based, has been dated to about 900 B.C., and whatever its immediate effects, has undoubtedly had its most important effect in producing the world’s longest poem which dominates the culture of India, Indonesia and South-East Asia.

Quite apart from the eighteen-day battle itself there is no lack of passages dealing with war in this epic, including even a passing reference to the conquest of Alexandria, Antioch and Rome. In some respects then the Indian epic has less regard for historical truth, but in describing a battle fought nearly three centuries after the siege of Troy it is interesting to find a method of warfare applying that was already archaic in the Homeric tradition.

So we find the Indian heroes fighting in pairs from chariots. The chariots are used primarily like a modern carrier to move the warrior swiftly about the

4. Δ113; Θ 266-7, 330-1; Λ385-7.
6. For the tactical improvement effected by the Hittites, whereby three men fought from one chariot thus giving all-round protection to the tactical unit, see O.R. Gurney, The Hittites, pp.105-6 and Plate 3.
7. A.L. Basham, The Wonder that was India, p.39.
8. MBh. ii 28.49.
ANCIENT INDO-EUROPEAN WARFARE

battlefield, and it was essential that the warrior when fighting dismounted should be able to rely absolutely on the loyalty and skill of his charioteer. Hence, Trypanis’ stressing of the fact that so many Greek pairs were the closest possible relations or at least members of the same γένος. The outstanding pair in the *Mahābhārata*, Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, are at any rate brothers-in-law, but as Kṛṣṇa was the 8th incarnation of Viṣṇu (on one count, as Rāma had been the 7th), and Arjuna was a son of Indra, it was hardly necessary to seek the normal sanctions for human behaviour in their case. Their heroic friendship was to form an example for all to follow.

It is significant that Arjuna is a supreme archer. Other weapons are used, and we find the club quite prominent as the favoured weapon of Bhīma who was to conclude the great war in single combat with clubs with Duryodhana, the leader of the Kauravas, when of the 18 aksauhinis (1 a. = 21,870 elephants, 21,870 chariots, 65,610 horse and 109,350 foot) involved in the battle all but a handful of leaders on either side had been killed. According to tradition there were already rules and conventions for war with clubs, which were by no means an archaic survival, known for instance to the Greeks mainly as the characteristic weapon of Herakles. But all trained warriors were archers and, if the Persian could boast that their arrows would hide the sun, the Indian hero produced such rapid fire that the eye could not distinguish his movements and yet his opponent would match his skill by shooting down his arrows while still in flight.

It is not surprising to find recorded some incredible feats of marksmanship. Perhaps the outstanding one, naturally attributed to Arjuna in view of his supremacy as an archer, is his slaying of Jayadratha. Arjuna had rashly put a curse upon himself if he failed to kill Jayadratha by sunset on the day in question. The enemy heard his oath and naturally did everything possible to keep Jayadratha out of range, not so much for his sake as to rid themselves of the invincible champion of the Pāṇḍavas by his own curse since they could not achieve anything against him themselves. However, just as the sun was sinking below the horizon, Arjuna seized his opportunity and shot an arrow that cut off Jayadratha’s head. But that was not enough, since Jayadratha’s father had laid a curse on anyone who brought his son’s head to the ground to the effect that the head of the offender should burst into a hundred pieces. So Arjuna promptly shot again to direct the head into the father’s lap, who was not himself involved in the fight. He sprang up in surprise, and his head duly burst into a hundred pieces as his son’s head rolled to the ground.

Not even Odysseus was clever enough for anything quite like this, but it

10. Herodotus vii 226.1
11. *MBh.* vii 121. The scene is vividly illustrated in a plate facing the text in the new Poona Critical Edition.
would be a mistake to underestimate the effectiveness of archery in ancient war. While the Greeks were mainly engaged in fighting each other with the same weapons and tactics, they could affect a Spartan disdain for 'spindles', but the Romans were to receive a rude shock from Parthian archers, just as French cavalry were to be defeated by the English longbow.

Manu puts the point well:

One bowman, placed on a wall is a match in war for a hundred enemies; and a hundred, for ten thousand; therefore is a fort recommended. (Transl. Sir William Jones).

But it was not just that volleys of arrows were bound to have some effect on an army fighting in close order, there is clear evidence for accurate and effective marksmanship at ranges now recognised as the limit for the individual rifleman. So Vegetius, in the late 4th century A.D., lays it down that an archer must be trained to hit a figure target at a range of 600 feet. As late as 1600 A.D. the Japanese Army was still able to use archery effectively in this way. To quote two passages from Sansom's *History of Japan*:

By 1600 the most important weapons were firearms, followed by spears and next by bows. The sword came last . . .

Cannon at that time were not efficient. They fired a shot of not more than two or three pounds, their range was short, and they were unreliable . . .

Archers were in action at Sekigahara (1600) though not in great numbers. The principal use of the bow was for sharp-shooting by skilled marksmen, and it was especially useful for picking off enemies during a siege.

And compare:

The muskets were still rudimentary weapons, muzzle-loaded and fired by a tinder, effective up to about eighty yards (at the end of the 16th century).

Before leaving this early form of warfare which relied on the skill and courage of

12. Thuc. iv 40.2.
13. vii 74.
individual champions, we may look at one of its later manifestations in Western Europe in the superlative skill in weapon handling and courage in single combat of the typical hero of the Icelandic sagas.

An outstanding example is Gunnar of Hliðarendi as described in Njál's Saga:

He could strike or shoot with both hands, if he wished, and he was so swift with the sword, that one seemed to see three in the air. He was the best of men in shooting with the bow and hit everything at which he aimed. He jumped more than his own height with all his armour and no less backwards than forwards. He was able to swim like a seal — and there was no sport at which it was any use for anyone to contend with him, and it has been said that no one was his equal.17

A man with these qualities would be invincible in Indian tradition even if single-handed against a host, just as Aja after the complete rout of his own army single-handed completely routed the combined forces of his rivals.18

However much virtue might deserve such a victory, and Gunnar was virtuous as well as being an outstanding fighting man, there is a grim reality about his single-handed fight against the group who attacked his house at night when he was known to be alone and eventually managed to put an end to him when his wounds made him too weak to stand, but only after he had killed two and wounded sixteen of his assailants.19

Individual prowess of this sort played its part in the battle of Clontarf in 1014, when Brian Boru after his long rule of nearly forty years in which he unified Ireland, lost his life in inflicting one more defeat, the twenty-fifth, on the Norsemen;20 and in the actions fought by the Varangian Guard of the Emperor of Constantinople, which was increasingly recruited from Englishmen who migrated in protest against the Norman Conquest and its effects.21

In the meantime Greece and India had developed a more organized form of warfare. The Greek developments are well enough known, but a Greek view of the Indian art of war may well be quoted here. Megasthenes during his visit to the court of Candragupta at the end of the 4th century B.C. noted the warrior caste and its monopoly of warlike activities. He is at pains to point out that the Indians are a peaceful people who do not fight aggressive wars, but if attacked know how to defend themselves. Their methods he describes as follows:

17. Njál's Saga, 19.
20. Ibid. 157.
The military equipment of the Indians is not of one and the same kind, but their infantry have the bow, equal in length to its bearer, and putting this down on the ground and resting their left foot against it, they shoot thus drawing the string back a long way. For their arrow is a little short of three cubits, nor does anything stand up to a shot from an Indian archer, neither shield nor breastplate nor anything however strong. On their left arms they have light shields of rawhide, narrower than the bearers, but not much shorter. Some have javelins instead of bows. All carry a sword, broad and not less than three cubits long; and with this, whenever a hand to hand conflict develops for them — but this does not readily happen for Indians against each other — they strike down with both hands to make the blow powerful. Their cavalry have two small javelins, like oavuua, and a light shield smaller than that of the infantry. Their horses do not have horse-cloths, nor do they have bridles like those of the Greeks or Celts, but around the end of the horse’s nose they have a circular stitched rawhide thong suspended, and in this bronze or iron studs, not very sharp, but turned inwards. The rich have ivory studs. In their mouths their horses have a kind of iron spit; to it are attached their reins. Whenever therefore they draw back the reins, the spit controls the horse, and the studs, as being attached to it, by pricking do not permit anything but obedience to the reins.22

Let us turn from the prowess of individual fighting men and consider the organization necessary to put a line of battle in the field.

Already we find references in the Mahābhārata to ‘formations’ of various patterns used at different stages of the great battles, but some of these are so fanciful that we may rather see in them a theoretical elaboration of tactical realities than an element of realism.23 There is after all only a limited number of ways in which a given number of men or tactical sub-units can be disposed on the ground so as to use their weapons effectively and remain under control of

22. Arrian, Ind. 16.6-12. For the Indian sword, cf. A.L. Basham, The Wonder that was India, Plates xxiv, xxx and lii.

23. So at different stages of the first ten days of the battle described in MBh vi, we find the following formations (vyūha) mentioned:

-vajravyūha (19.7, 76.5) ‘thunderbolt formation’;
-śkruncā or krauncārunavyūha (46.39, 71.14) ‘curlew formation’;
-ardhacandrayūha (52.10) ‘half-moon formation’;
-gāruda vyūha (52.2) ‘Garuda formation’;
-mahāvyūha (46.55, 83.5, 95.38) ‘great formation’;
-śyenavyūha (65.7) ‘hawk formation’;
-makaravyūha (65.4), 71.4) ‘sea-monster formation’;
-mandalavyūha (77.12) ‘circle formation’;
-śrīgātakavyūha (83.17) ‘śrīgātaka — (plant) formation’;
-sarvatobhadravyūha (95.26) ‘formation good in every direction’.
the commander. Indeed the inevitability of such dispositions applies not only to warfare among men to judge from the recent experience of an Oxford expedition to Spitzbergen whose approach to a herd of musk ox was met by a natural grouping of the animals for all round defence, no doubt the _ardhacandravyūha._

At the lowest tactical level we have what we know as section formations, and we find all those familiar in British armies in Manu’s advice on the deployment of an army on the march:

> On his march let him form his troops, either like a staff (our file, or column); like a wain (our arrowhead); like a boar (our diamond); like a _makara_ or a sea-monster (that is, in a double triangle with apices joined); like a needle (our line); or like the bird of Visnu (that is, _garuda_, a diamond formation with extended flank guards). (Transl. Sir William Jones).

Obviously the last of these would not apply at section level, but the inevitability of certain simple formations at any tactical level is clear enough. Most of them would also have some use in battle, but I suggest that ‘The Compiler’, if we may so call those responsible for the _Mahābhārata_, was so eager to refer to all possible _vyūhas_, that he included some that no one would use in battle.

There is much in this short section of Manu, dating from about 200 A.D., that sounds familiar to anyone with experience of modern warfare, and there are further parallels with Greek and Roman experience. For instance, the king is advised ‘to bring over to his party all such as he can safely bring over,’ and that experienced Greek officer of the 4th century B.C., Aeneas Tacticus, was fully aware of the constantly present threat of political subversion from within to any Greek city-state’s war effort. Further, ‘having conquered a country . . . let him . . . cause a full exemption from terror to be loudly proclaimed,’ and that was a point that had been well taken at least by Caesar among those involved in the Roman Revolution.

Indeed, any student of military history can hardly fail to note the dreary monotony of the inevitable working out of a few simple principles determined by the nature of ground and men. At least it means that any period of military

25. vii 187.
26. In Indian tradition the author of the _Mahābhārata_, all 100,000 couplets of it, apart from other early Sanskrit works, was Vyāsa. The name means ‘Compiler, or Arranger’.
27. A.L. Basham, _The Wonder that was India_, 112.
30. Mn. vii 201.
history has its value in military training, although professional soldiers tend to think of 20th century experience alone as relevant.

The battle between Alexander and Porus would seem a fair test of Ancient India’s military science. We know the result, but does this reflect on the military skill of the Indian? Did he exploit fully the resources at his disposal?

His whole army was mobilised and camped on the River Hydaspes (Jhelum) to oppose Alexander’s crossing at the point where Alexander camped, and he sent guards to all other likely points for a crossing. Alexander conceded that he could not force a crossing where both armies were encamped, largely because the sight and sound of the elephants would make his horses uncontrollable. Instead he made a series of feint night attacks with his cavalry at various points with much shouting of war cries, and at first Porus opposed each move with his elephants but then realising that these were not genuine attacks, he left his elephants in the camp and was content to send patrols to watch Alexander’s movements. Alexander then selected his point for the river-crossing some 18 miles upstream from the main position, where there was much natural cover. The interval he filled with standing patrols each within sight and hearing of those on its flanks, with orders to keep up camp-fires and shouting at night. He then made open preparations in his camp and left Craterus in command of this operation with orders not to cross until Porus left the main position or took to flight; while if Porus split his force, Craterus was still to remain in his position; unless Porus took all his elephants with him, in which case Craterus was to force the crossing, since only the elephants were a threat to the horses. Mid-way between his chosen point and his main camp Alexander stationed another force with orders to cross in detachments as soon as they saw the Indians committed to battle.32

Alexander himself with a picked force made a secret move to his chosen point, where the boats used to cross the Indus had been re-assembled under cover opposite an island in mid-stream. Heavy rain helped to cover the noise of the final preparations, and the island gave cover from view until the attacking force was half-way across since at this point there was a large bend in the river.33

Alexander’s force was thus almost across the river before it was observed by Porus’ patrol, and however swift their horses they had to get the news back

nearly 18 miles. Alexander thus had time to organize his troops as they came ashore, but he had not realized that he was on another island separated from the firm land by a narrow arm of the stream, which had however been swollen by the heavy rain that had seemed providential. It was not easy to find a ford and when found the water was up to the shoulders of the infantry and heads of the horses. However, this obstacle was overcome, and Alexander drew up his cavalry with his mounted archers ahead of them, and the infantry behind them. His flanks were covered by archers and javelin-men.34

The 6,000 infantry were ordered to advance at normal pace, while with the 5,000 cavalry in which his tactical advantage lay he advanced rapidly. The archers were to conform to the cavalry advance. Alexander’s plan was that if he met Porus in full strength he would either defeat him in a cavalry action35 or hold him until the infantry came up; while if the Indians were bewildered and fled, his cavalry would be close behind the fugitives.36

One account had it that Porus’ son with a force of 60 chariots had arrived at the crossing point before Alexander had crossed from the island, and could have prevented the crossing by dismounted action, but drove past the critical point leaving it safe for Alexander; who then sent mounted archers after the Indians. The archers inflicted some casualties and routed the chariot force. Greek accounts of this incident varied on the number, purpose and action of the force.37 Perhaps they all make the mistake of assuming that it was the first reaction to Alexander’s crossing. There seems hardly time for this. It was rather a mounted force large enough to protect the king’s son on a routine visit to outlying patrols, which might have proved accidentally as disastrous to the attackers as did Kemal Pasha’s accidental presence with his best regiment where the Anzacs chose to land.38

Whatever happened in this first skirmish, the varying accounts of which show how difficult it is to reconstruct the development of any battle, Porus eventually learned of his son’s death and Alexander’s advance, while the purpose of Craterus’ force was obvious. It was not an easy decision to make. However, Porus chose to advance with his whole force against the main body of the Macedonians and their king, but left a small detachment of elephants and cavalry to contain Craterus. Porus, with 4,000 cavalry, 300 chariots, 200 elephants and

34. Ibid. 13.
35. J.R. Hamilton, The Letters in Plutarch’s Alexander. PACA iv 1961 9-20, at p.17 has pointed out that there is no evidence for cavalry unsupported defeating infantry in line, let alone elephants. Arrian (or Ptolemy) must be mistaken about Alexander’s intentions. It remains orthodox tactical doctrine that cavalry unsupported cannot defeat disciplined infantry in prepared positions.
37. Ibid. 14.3-15.2.
30,000 infantry marched against Alexander. On reaching a position free from mud and providing a sandy level plain suitable for cavalry, (exactly the kind of ground recommended by Manu as ideal for chariot and cavalry operations\(^39\)), he drew up his force with the elephants first in line at intervals of 100 feet, too small an interval for penetration by cavalry or infantry to be likely. Behind the elephants was the line of infantry, while infantry guards also protected the flanks of the elephants; on the flanks of the main infantry line were his mounted troops, chariots in front, cavalry behind.\(^40\)

It is difficult to see how Porus could have improved his handling of his forces. He had refused to be misled by Alexander’s ruses, he had posted patrols and arranged for them to be visited, or alternatively had communications good enough to permit early intervention by his son’s force; he had refused to split up his elephant force as British armour was split up in the Desert,\(^41\) he drew up his main body in such a way that Alexander declined to attempt a frontal attack, and only after using his larger and more efficient cavalry force to draw away the Indian left flank cavalry and then take them in front and rear when Coenus’ feint attack on the Indian right flank was directed against the rear of the force engaged by Alexander himself, was a general action possible in which the elephants and their riders were a priority target for javelins until the beasts through exhaustion, wounds and the loss of riders to control them became more of a threat to their own infantry than to the Macedonians. Then Alexander’s cavalry was almost able to encircle the whole Indian force, and those who did break out were met by the fresh troops of Craterus who, as ordered, crossed when it was clear that Alexander’s victory was assured.\(^42\)

41. B. Maughan, Tobruk and El Alamein (vol. iii in the Army Series of Australia in the War of 1939-45), pp.429, 599.
42. Arr. An. v 16-18.1. Once again Arrian appears to have misunderstood his source, or to have left out some details essential to our understanding of the battle. Coenus was sent towards the Indian right flank (16.3), but at 17.3 we find all the Indian cavalry concentrated against Alexander and exposed to Coenus’ attack from the rear.

If Coenus’ move was in fact a feint attack it must have been visible to Porus to have any effect at all, and that effect would have been the retention of the Indian right flank cavalry in position until Coenus’ intention became clear. If his change of direction was to be tactically effective in helping Alexander it must have occurred before he had moved very far to the Indian right: in that case having perhaps less than half the front (which extended for some miles if the disposition of the elephants is correctly reported) to ride, he was bound to join in Alexander’s action long before Porus could move his right-wing cavalry into action on the extreme left. In this case, there cannot have been an effective concentration of all Indian cavalry on the left.

If there was in fact such a concentration, it can only have been because Porus was not aware of the existence of the force with Coenus, and believed he had an opportunity to get a numerical superiority over Alexander’s force by concentrating all his cavalry against what
In no respect did Porus fail in his military duty. The Greeks acknowledged this: ‘Porus after distinguishing himself in the battle not only as a general but as a brave soldier . . . did not like Darius the Great King lead the flight, but as long as any of the Indians remained in the battle, he fought on, then wounded in the right shoulder . . . (the rest of his body was protected from missiles by a breastplate outstanding for strength and fit . . .) and only then did he turn his elephant and withdraw.’ When Alexander sent a renegade Indian after him to call on him to surrender, Porus turned to kill the man, who fled. Alexander made several attempts, and eventually another Indian, who was an old friend of Porus, persuaded him, now distressed by thirst, to dismount and appear before his conqueror. His proud bearing there confirmed Alexander’s recognition of him as a great and noble man in the battle.43

But it was not merely in the strictly military virtues that Ancient India excelled. In the West in this century the enormity of two unnecessary world wars has shocked us into a realisation of the moral aspects of warfare: in this India was hundreds, indeed thousands of years ahead of us.

Already in the *Rgveda* we find a hymn to be chanted as a king arms himself for battle, among other stanzas invoking divine protection it includes the following:

Protect us, O Brahmans, *soma*-offering fathers, fosterers of truth, may Heaven and Earth, the incomparable ones, favour us, may Pūṣan protect us from danger, let no evil-wisher be master of us.44

The *Mahābhārata* is full of references to the rules and conventions of war,45 appeared to be the whole of the Macedonian cavalry force. This interpretation is only possible on General Fuller’s suggestion that Coenus was moving under cover from view to mislead Porus as to the strength of the Macedonian cavalry. We are told that there was much cover at the crossing-point (11.1) and perhaps this was true not only of the headland. Coenus advanced *κατά τὰ ἐπιθεωρεῖν*, which may merely give his direction not his intention. In this case, Arrian does not make it clear that Coenus’ move was under cover, but this may have seemed an obvious requirement for the success of the move and so was not mentioned.

General Fuller’s reconstruction of the cavalry movements makes good tactical sense and involves no interference with the Greek text. Archaeology may some day determine the site of the battle, and whether cover from view was available. One may however doubt whether a cavalry force of about 2000 moving on what we are told was a sandy plain free from mud (15.5) could be concealed: even if trees or a depression in the ground concealed the horses and men, a cloud of dust would surely have revealed their presence and movement and prevented Porus from moving his own right-wing cavalry. We are therefore left with Coenus’ move as a feint attack intended to be seen, and an error in Arrian’s report of a concentration of the Indian cavalry.

43. *Ibid.* 18.4 – 19.3
44. *RV* vi 75.10
45. E.g. *MBh* v 169.19-21.
so that it is the sadder that the winners of that epic contest did so on a foul, however much that awkward fact has been justified by their apologists.

Manu is more consistent in his precepts on war:

88 Never to recede from combat, to protect the people, and to honour the priests, is the highest duty of kings and ensures their felicity.

89 Those rulers of the earth, who, desirous of defeating each other, exert their utmost strength in battle, without ever averting their faces, ascend after death directly to heaven.

90 Let no man, engaged in combat, smite his foe with sharp weapons concealed in wood, nor with arrows mischievously barbed, nor with poisoned arrows, nor with darts blazing with fire.

91 Nor let him in a car or on horseback strike his enemy alighted on the ground; nor an effeminate man; nor one, who sues for life with closed palms; nor one, whose hair is loose and obstructs his sight; nor one, who sits down fatigued; nor one, who says, 'I am thy captive.'

92 Nor one, who sleeps; nor one, who has lost his coat of mail; nor one, who is naked; nor one, who is disarmed; nor one, who is a spectator, but not a combatant; nor one, who is fighting with another man.

93 Calling to mind the duty of honourable men, let him never slay one, who has broken his weapons; nor one, who is afflicted with private sorrow; nor one, who has been grievously wounded; nor one, who is terrified; nor one, who turns his back.

144 The highest duty of a military man is the defence of his people, and the king . . . is bound to discharge that duty.46 (Transl. Sir William Jones).

That the Indians in fact practised what Manu preaches is amply attested by the reports of the early Greek visitors to India, who obviously found it difficult to reconcile the military efficiency which they observed with a reluctance to fight aggressive wars, however determined the Indians were in defence. These observations were made in a century when Alexander dreamed of world conquest, and long before the Romans had sufficient strength even to dream of universal dominion, although that dream was to be cherished later by the Romans, even in an age as sophisticated as the Augustan era and for more than a 46. Mn. vii 88-93, 144.
century later, and then to be abandoned not through any recognition of the rights of others but simply through the recognition that their resources did not match their ambitions. And yet this Western dream has lingered on into our own times.

As for the Indians, they were to go even further in their realisation of the moral aspects of warfare than the stage shown in the passages just quoted from Manu, although the Geneva Conventions hardly go as far as those Indian standards.

The battle with Porus has been described and something like that brilliant scene is illustrated in the volume of the Poona edition of the *Mahābhārata* which describes the opening of the battle of Kurukṣetra. In the text and in the illustration the two battle-lines are represented as drawn up and ready for battle. At this stage Arjuna requests the Lord Kṛṣṇa, serving as his charioteer, to drive forward of the battle line so that he can observe the other side’s dispositions. The tragedy of this conflict was that Arjuna and his brothers were opposed to their first cousins, and this unhappy situation meant not only that they would be fighting against close relatives but also against the revered tutors who had taught both princely families in their youth.

It is precisely at this critical point that Arjuna realises the full horror of the war and exclaims to Kṛṣṇa:

29 Seeing, O Kṛṣṇa, these my kinsmen gathered here eager for fight, my limbs fail me, and my mouth is parched up. I shiver all over, and my hair stands on end. The bow Gāndīva slips from my hand, and my skin burns.

30 Neither, O Keśava, can I stand upright. My mind is in a whirl. And I see adverse omens.

31 Neither, O Kṛṣṇa, do I see any good in killing these my own people in battle. I desire neither victory nor empire, nor yet pleasure.

32-3 Of what avail is dominion to us, of what avail are pleasures and even life, if these, O Govinda! for whose sake it is desired that empire, enjoyment, and pleasure should be ours, themselves stand here in battle, having renounced life and wealth.

35 Even though these were here to kill me, O Slayer of Madhu, I could not wish to kill them — not even for the sake of dominion over the three worlds, how much less for the sake of the earth!

47. *The Mahābhārata*, ed. V.S. Sukthankar and S.K. Belvalkar, vol. vii, plate facing p.120.
36 What pleasure indeed could be ours, O Janârdana, from killing these sons of Dhrtarâstra? Sin only would take hold of us by the slaying of these felons.

37 Therefore we ought not to kill our kindred, the sons of Dhrtarâstra. For how could we, O Mâdhava, gain happiness by the slaying of our own kinsmen?

38-9 Though these, with understanding over-powered by greed, see no evil due to the decay of families, and no sin in hostility to friends, why should we, O Janârdana, who see clearly the evil due to the decay of families, not turn away from this sin?

45 Alas, we are involved in a great sin, in that we are prepared to slay our kinsmen, from greed of the pleasures of a kingdom!

46 Verily, if the sons of Dhrtarâstra, weapons in hand, were to slay me, unresisting and unarmed, in the battle, that would be better for me. 

Thus India’s greatest hero facing the prospect of a just fight against men who while kinsmen had outraged some of the most sacred obligations in Indian life, turns with characteristic Hindu self-sacrifice to renunciation even of his own life rather than to asserting his rights by violence. How unlike the wrath of Achilles!

But Arjuna must learn that Dharma, the moral law, required even more than this, that there are stern duties than renunciation. For Krsna rebukes him:

2 In such a crisis, whence comes upon thee, O Arjuna, this dejection, un-Ārya-like, disgraceful, and contrary to the attainment of heaven?

3 Yield not to unmanliness, O son of Prtha! Ill doth it become thee. Cast off this mean faint-heartedness and arise, O scorcher of thine enemies!

But Arjuna is not yet convinced:

4 But how can I, in battle, O slayer of Madhu, fight with arrows against

48. Bhag. i 28-33, 35-9, 45-6 = MBh. vi 23.28-33, 35-9, 45-6.
49. Bhag. ii 2-3 = MBh. vi 24 2-3.
Bhisma and Drona, who are rather worthy to be worshipped, O destroyer of foes!\(^5\) (Transl. Swami Swarupananda).

This was indeed more of a problem, since these two were the tutors of the young princes on both sides and were not themselves involved in the sins of the usurpers. As Arjuna puts it:

5 Surely it would be better even to eat the bread of beggary in this life than to slay these great-souled masters. But if I kill them, even in this world, all my enjoyment of wealth and desires will be stained with blood.

6 And indeed I can scarcely tell which will be better, that we should conquer them, or that they should conquer us. The very sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra — after slaying whom we should not care to live — stand facing us.

7 With my nature overpowered by weak commiseration, with a mind in confusion about duty, I supplicate Thee. Say definitely what is good for me. I am Thy disciple. Instruct me who have taken refuge in Thee.

8 I do not see anything to remove this sorrow which blasts my senses, even were I to obtain unrivalled and flourishing dominion over the earth, and mastery over the gods.\(^1\) (Transl. Swami Swarupananda).

The Lord Kṛṣṇa was an incarnation of Viṣṇu, and his reply, the Bhagavad-Gītā, is one of the world’s most sublime statements of ethical values. Among other things it resolves Megasthenes’ puzzle: how can a people dedicated to non-violence resort to war?

The answer is that a people, dedicated to peace, or at least its military caste, has a right, or rather an obligation to accept without flinching — the soldier’s task, not as χάρμη, as a Homeric hero might see it, nor even as a rana on an earlier Indian view, but as a distasteful duty that must be done in defense of civilised values. That the Indians continue to practise what they have preached for so long has been shown most recently by the courage and skill of their intervention in Bengal.\(^2\)

\(^5\) Bhag. ii 4 = MBh. vi 24.4.

\(^1\) Bhag. ii 5-8 = MBh. vi 24.5-8.

\(^2\) The original version of this article was read as a public lecture at the Australian National University in September 1970.