

India's Strategic Outlook: Glimpses from History & Way Ahead

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ABSTRACT

India's history has largely been perceived as a story of conquest, subjugation & oppression by external invaders. It is perceived that the primary reason for the same is lack of strategic culture. It is however clear that this perception has been built by undue focus on one millennium of suffering & subjugation over three millennia of growth & prosperity. More than one millennia of the latter period is recorded & the remainder inferences emerge from excavations & literature. The Golden Age of Cholas, their strategic seaward vision, military conquests & multidimensional influence over the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) & SE Asia is elucidated as one of the lesser known yet arguably the best examples of our strategic vision & expeditionary capabilities. The millennium of subjugation was the result of complacency, misplaced priorities & lack of synergy between local rulers when not under a powerful central rule. This facet needs to address in today's context. India needs to assume larger obligations & responsibilities with its increasing stature in the world order. Expeditionary capability to influence events & activities in India's strategic space is therefore a mandatory requirement. This kind of capability is not indicative of hegemonistic or expansionist intent, but demonstrative of a power of deterrence & gives multiple options between complacency & total war. The second largest Armed Force in the world has the capability to meet its aspirations but these would have to be harnessed, integrated & synergized from existing resources & those being inducted as part of the Long Term Perspective Plans. The world will welcome India's willingness & propensity to assume its rightful place as guardians of IOR, bastion against terror in South Asia & have a sobering impact on a belligerent China.

Keywords: India, Strategic Culture, vision, outlook, history, obligations, expeditionary capability.

INTRODUCTION:

'Benign State', 'Soft State', 'sans Strategic Culture'. These are some of the sobriquets that our country has earned in the recent past. Many analysts & strategic think tanks have commented adversely on our defence & foreign policies as being reactionary, short sighted & apprehensive. Many amongst them attribute this 'weakness' to lack of 'Strategic culture' (George Tanham, 1992, pp. 129-130). History seems to support this theory as hordes of invaders either looted or plundered the country or settled down to rule it for centuries. Greeks, Huns, Arabs, Turks, Mongols & Afghans have left their imprint on history & psyche of the country. Then came the Europeans from the sea, who exploited our fault lines to complete almost a millennium of subjugation (Nehru, 1946)

Well, there is another school of thought that India's Strategic outlook is evident from its history. It absorbed & amalgamated its conquerors, drawing from their best practices & yet preserving our culture, religion & identity over the ages (Jones, p. 117 to 136). Post independence it captured / seized most contentious areas

Junagad, Hyderabad & a major portion of J&K. Later despite several odds it merged Goa & Sikkim into the union. It adopted nonalignment as a strategy to draw the best from both sides of cold war affiliations. India have successfully doused the fires of insurgency in Punjab & most parts of NE, achieved good progress in J&K and the Red Corridor. All this by a slow & steady approach absorbing causalities, learning from mistakes & without doing a 'Tiananmen', 'Kosovo', 'Grozny' or a 'Mullaithivu' intentionally. We made one mistake i.e. about China & paid the price. But then paradoxically today we are well poised in the IOR with no dearth of partners to contain a belligerent China.

Is our present situation a fortunate stroke of serendipity or is it a natural fallout of the strategic culture embedded in our psyche. How come then we lived under subjugation for centuries, as per historical records? Well, may be we are turning to the wrong pages of history for inspiration!

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The literature reviewed for the purposes of study range from conventional history as laid down in NCERT curriculum, history as obtained from other sources, military history of India, books on strategy, books on India's Strategic Culture i.e. geo – political scenario from the time of India's Independence in 1947 to present times in 2019. The specific books referred to are mentioned in the text & listed in the bibliography at the end of the paper. The salient aspects that emerged from the literature review are outlined in analysis & evaluation of inputs. However it would be pertinent to highlight certain aspects, which would have been reiterated subsequently.

- ✓ Indian history focuses on the 2nd Millennium BCE in most of the recorded texts.
- ✓ Indian history focusses on the history of North, Western & Central India with the South & East coming in brief periods in between. Hence Indian history focusses on its land borders & assigns less than a chapter to its maritime history.
- ✓ There are two authors who have brought India's Strategic Culture in focus. George Tanham who opines that India has no strategic culture, & Jones who feels that India has a strong strategic culture. Both have based their opinions on limited periods of Indian History.
- ✓ There seems to be belief amongst many prominent authors including Mr. Henry Kissinger that strategic culture implies building influences around the globe. Countries like Sweden & Switzerland who are economic powerhouses & high HDI countries would appear without strategic culture by this evaluation. Ensuring 200 years of peace for their countries is not seen as sound strategy by these authors.
- ✓ There is an attempt to portray India as a clueless simpleton who is always the victim of foreign powers. This creation of a virtue out of victimhood seems to glorify lack of strategic culture.

Research Design & Methods:

This research is Exploratory & Qualitative in nature. It involves an analytical & critical study of Indian History to establish whether India has a Strategic Culture. It followed the key concepts of the Inductive View i.e. the relationship between theory & research where the former is generated out of the latter & to an extent the Interpretive Position wherein the stress is on understanding the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by the authors.

The steps followed in this qualitative research were as follows:-

- ✓ **Identification of the general question** – Does India have a Strategic Culture?
- ✓ **Selection of Relevant Material for Analysis**
- ✓ **Process of Analysis** – Reading of Prescribed Indian History (Indian History - Classes 10 to 12) – Interpretation – correlation of history from curriculum at State level – Interpretation – evaluation with generic views by experts – interpretation – evaluation with specific views of Jawaharlal Nehru (Nehru, 1946), Shashi Tharoor (Tharoor, 2012), George Tanham (George Tanham, 1992), Jones (Jones, 2009), Nilakanta Sastri (Sastri M. M., 1991) & Henry Kissinger (Kissinger, 2014). – Interpretation – analysis of views on Indian Military Strategy – Interpretation.
- ✓ **Discussion with Experts** - Discussions with four experts on Strategy from College of Defence Management, on the interpretations made.
- ✓ **Final Analysis by the Author.**

RESULTS & INTERPRETATION:

Indus Valley Civilization & Advent of Aryans:

Although we do not have recorded history of this age, it has been gleaned out from coins, artifacts, & inscriptions by experts that a very advanced civilization existed in this period. There was contact, trade & interaction with most of the other great civilizations of the world i.e. Greek, Roman, Sumerian, Mesopotamian, Egyptian & Persian in different stages of the period between 3000 BC & 1500 BC (Wheeler, 1979, p. 79 to 85) (Posshel, 2003). The period between 1500BC & 300 BC has found elucidation in the Vedas & epics. Although there are bound to be exaggerations as part of poetic license, we can obtain fair amount of information from these texts. Whether the Aryans defeated & expelled the Indus Valley inhabitants South of Vindhya or the races merged over a period of time is for historians to decide, but we are sure of a martial culture, strategic vision, technological development & emphasis on growth & security as conjoint twins, in India at that point in time. There is a perfect blend of morals, ethics & values & practical application of statecraft. Historical evidence also exists of strong sea faring empires in South India which had links with several European, African & SE Asian civilisations. The bottom line is that we were strong & engaged with the world for centuries.

300 BC to 12th Century AD:

The period from 300 BC to 300 AD is well recorded, with the highlights being defeat of the Greeks & unification of a major portion of India in the era of Mauryas, Ashoka the Great & his efforts to spread Buddhism world over, Kushan Empire especially under Kanishka & finally the 'Golden Age' under the Guptas. India then fragmented under strong regional satraps until Harshavardhana once again united most portions of East, Central & Western India in the 7th CE. In 8th CE the Arabs invaded undivided India through the Makran Coast & after series of battles assumed control over Sindh, portions of Baluchistan & Punjab. However the Hindu rulers of present day Pakistan & Afghanistan continued to hold them in a series of battles at the Indus Valley for over 300 years. In the early 10th Century AD the Turks from Central Asia established themselves in Afghanistan which was then ruled by Hindu kings. They subsequently defeated the Arabs & made forays into Sind. The onslaught into India, East of Indus began with Md Ghazni & continued thereafter, with one invader replacing the other. Thus in the period between 3 BCE & 10CE India was strong, stable & prosperous; attributes of a sound strategic vision.

India's Influence in IOR & SE Asia:

India's recorded links with SE Asia dates back to 200 BC (wikipedia) although some historians claim that it could have existed since around 500 BC (Britanica). The Pandyas (Tamil), Cheras (Kerala), Pallavas (Northern Tamilnadu & Andhra), Kalingas (Oriya), Palas (Bengali) & Sinhalas (Sri Lankans) had a strong & established relationship with most islands in IOR, SE Asia including erstwhile Indochina & China per se. Recorded history & Sangam literature talks of trade links between the Pandyas & other civilisations including Greece, Egypt & China in 400 BC (Hall, 1985) & (Curton, 2010). The demography of the island states of IOR & SE Asia was a mix of Chinese, Bengalis, Oriya, Tamils & Malayalis (limited to Maldives & Lakshadweep). Most of the rulers had names originating from the sub continent probably because the Middle kingdom was still in the shackles of being a land power while Indian influence was stronger. The Arabs entered the region first in Maldives & Lakshadweep in 7th CE before they mounted the invasion into India from the Makran Coast as discussed earlier. Buddhism also helped spread Indian influence into SE Asia & China, post 200 BC. It is but obvious that the influence of India in Indian Ocean Region (IOR) & SE Asia was not limited to 'Ramayana, Buddhism, Kuchipudi or Bharatnatyam'. For people of Indian origin to rule most of these places, strong expeditionary forces should have existed. As a result we can see a well entrenched & established Indian culture in erstwhile Indo China, Malayan Peninsula, Thailand & Indonesia. The trade & religious links with China are well recorded in this period and several Indian nobles visited China as part of SE Asian delegations. The Zen patriarch who finds a prominent place in Chinese history of these times is said to be a Prince from Kanchipuram in Tamilnadu (Saran, 2017). If all this multifaceted influence over IOR & SE Asia does not imply strategic culture, what would?

Expansion by the Cholas:

The Chola dynasty existed from 3rd CE to 13th CE. It was however during the reign of Raja Raja Chola & Rajendra Chola that the dynasty achieved greatness comparable only with Maurya & Gupta Era.

Raja Raja Chola was a ruler with strategic vision & unbounded energy. After having conquered most of peninsular India he turned his attention seawards. The three facets that caught his attention were, firstly the immense wealth & prospects of enhanced trade on his terms, with SE Asia. Secondly, control over the Straits of Malacca, Sundo & Lombok were required for unhindered trade with China (the piracy menace existed in a major way then). Thirdly, Sri Lanka & Maldives were potential launch pads or bases for an enemy to threaten his Eastern & Western Coasts & needed to be secured. Raja Raja's conquest of the Chera kingdom also gave him suzerainty over Lakshadweep, which was the third likely enemy base. His expeditions to Sri Lanka & Maldives were successful. He established bases in Northern Lanka, Maldives & in Aceh in Indonesia in conjunction with Srivijaya which was then the most powerful empire in SE Asia. He deployed his powerful Navy to dominate the Malacca & crush piracy (Sastri N. , 1935) (Wikipedia Chola Dynasty, Chola Expeditions).

Rajendra Chola carried forward the legacy of his father to even greater heights. Having established his land empire upto the Ganges (he defeated the Pala Army), Rajendra's attention also turned seawards where he saw wealth & prosperity. His first action was to conquer rest of Sri Lanka which his father had not ventured into. The Tamil classic 'Poniyin Selvan' which would soon be made into a movie, talks of the maturity & magnanimity of Cholas as conquerors as against the ruthless massacre which North India was subjected to by invaders from across the Hindu Kush subsequently. Rajendra then annexed Andaman & Nicobar Islands & established a base here in addition to one at Aceh for easy access to the Malacca Strait. The souring relations between the Chola & Srivijayan Empires gave Rajendra the reason to exercise control over SE Asia & remove piracy that was effecting his trade with China. At that time Khmer Regime which ruled over most parts of Laos & Vietnam had major feud with Tambralinga Empire of Malaysia & parts of Thailand. Since Tambralinga approached Srivijaya for assistance the Khmer turned to the Cholas. Rajendra grabbed this opportunity & set sail with a mighty expeditionary force. It avoided the usual ports of call at Aceh & Kedah (Malayan Coast) & sailed along the West Coast of Sumatra straight for Palembang the capital of Srivijaya. Catching the Srivijayan Navy by surprise the expeditionary forces launched a land offensive on the fort, ravaged the city and took the Srivijayan King Sangrama Vijaytungavarman (note the name), a prisoner. They plundered the hinterland & carried immense wealth with them. Taking assistance of the monsoon winds Rajendra then raided the ports of Malayu, Turasaik, Pannai & Kedah in modern day Malaysia, Thailand & Indonesia. Rajendra then forged a matrimonial alliance with the daughter of the Srivijayan king & established several hubs & bases in the region. Substantial Tamil population then settled in these places (Sastri N. , 1949)(Wikipedia Chola Dynasty, Chola Expeditions). The influence of the Cholas were such that they thereafter had nobles in the courts of Srivijaya & Khmer who regularly paid visits to China for trade & goodwill.

The Second Millennium BCE:

India's strategic seaward outlook diminished with the weakening of the Chola Empire & the establishment of the Mughal Empire in most parts of India. Moghuls undoubtedly consolidated their empire in India and took measures to ward off land threat through the Hindu Kush & Karakoram ranges. However they could not envisage the seaward threat from the Europeans, having believed them in their avatar as traders. The Western & South Indian Kings looked up to the Europeans to help them in their internal conflicts, lacking any feeling of unity or common cause.

One exception to the rule were the Zamorins, rulers of Northern Kerala. They saw through the Portuguese & their intentions and gave them a good fight in early 16th CE. Zamorin's Naval Chief Kunjali Marakkar was great naval tactician & defeated the Portuguese Navy initially. For over 100 years the Zamorins & Marakkars held the Portuguese at bay. However technological advancements resulted in the Portuguese Navy become stronger due to better maneuverability of ships & sea based firepower (Das, 2007). Here the Strategic Vision on seaward threat was found lacking in the Moghul & Maratha Empires that could have shaped a Blue Water Navy to meet the European threat.

Moghul Era:

India under Muslim rule i.e. Khiljis, Tuqlaqs, Lodhis & Moghuls were either busy fighting invaders or consolidation of their empires from within. It was Akbar who had the strategic vision to bind India together not only by military means but by human bonds, social & religious outreach. It was, in a sense, the rebirth of India as a Nation. Jahangir & Shah Jahan tried to emulate Akbar & managed to hold large parts of the Nation together. It is to their credit that they stopped India from suffering the ravages of further invasion for at least three centuries. It took one religious bigot in the form of Aurangzeb to spell the doom for the

Moghul Empire & help the Europeans to consolidate.

Reigniting Indian Strategic Culture – British Era:

The British will continue to be seen as our conquerors & colonizers by generations to come, in India. However amongst many of the institutions they created in this country, the British Indian Army, the Indian Civil Service & an educated political class are their greatest contribution in reigniting the 8 strategic culture of India. The exposure we gained in their conquest of Tibet & Afghanistan & subsequently in World War 1 & 2 enabled our politicians, military strategists & bureaucrats to develop a strategic vision for Independent India.

Results & Initial Analysis: Miscued Focus of Military History:

It is unfortunate but true that Indian History available as recorded material being passed down the ages & part of our school education syllabus is grossly inadequate, incomplete & focusses more on North, Central & Western India (Maharashtra). This is not due to intentional bias but due lack of acceptable written material. Local historians & history through literature is not being given the credibility of foreign historians or scholars like Megasthenes, Fa Hien, Huen Tsang or an Alberuni, presumably since most of the indigenous works are not based on primary inputs. However a lot can be gleaned out from Sangam literature, literary work during the Gupta period & regional history.

The focus of Indian history has sadly been on places & times of subjugation, betrayal of each other & defeat in war. There is little effort to draw out the implications from ancient history & understand our real contribution & consequent stature in world, since times immemorial. For e.g. the emphasis of our study on Indus Valley is about the cities, the construction, administration, political awareness, religion, society & trade. Analysis of merchant ships trading with the most advanced civilizations of those times will tell us about the level of overall awareness, strategic vision, geography, navigation, astronomy, ship building (including woodwork & metallurgy) & the economy. We should also not be naïve enough to believe that merchant ships could circumvent the globe without a powerful military escort. If this was the picture of our country for 1500 years from 3000 to 1500 BC, where is the lack of strategic culture? The period of the early Aryans & of our epics has been deliberately left out in this article, since any effort to draw inspiration from these times is popularly seen as religious or political propaganda. Perhaps if a Chinese scholar had written of those times it would be more credible in our perception.

So we have three millennia of unrecorded but discernable greatness, one century of recorded growth, security & prosperity & yet we choose to dwell upon the history of one millennium of subjugation to lament our lack of strategic culture.

We may not have an Alexander who conquered half the world (as they knew it) & died stretching himself logistically. But we have an Ashoka & a Rajendra who spread their influence to their strategic spaces by different methods. Indian influence in IOR & SE Asia is still vibrant & visible. Greek influence in Indus Valley has to be excavated & fragments displayed to remind the world. Please decide who had the strategic vision.

The wars that form most of our ballads are the ones we lost fighting. Our most loved & respected war heroes are not conquerors or successful defenders but the ones who were martyred fighting losing battles which at times opened doors for further exploitation by enemy. The likes of Porus, Prithviraj Chauhan, Rana Sanga, Maharana Pratap & Rani Lakshmi Bai all deserved to be revered, but major contributors to our military history & National objectives such as Chandragupta Maurya, Samudragupta, Kanishka, Harsha, Raja Raja & Rajendra Chola and even the great Zorawar Singh whose conquests extended 500kms into Tibet are certainly not given their due. Is our history to be blamed or our miscued focus in not recognizing our strategic thinkers & giving their vision adequate appraisal & recognition?

The empires that ruled the IOR for ages were from Bengal, Orissa, Tamilnadu, Kerala & Sri Lanka. The most successful dynasties of India, the Mauryas & Guptas were not necessarily Kshatriyas (Saran, 2017). Yet while discussing Indian military history we accept the martial class theory propagated by the British and discuss their tactical battles the most. These fine warriors were somehow bound by self-imposed ethics & believed in a 6 am to 6 pm war. The students of history are led to believe that actions by the enemy in the ambit of surprise, deception or what is today known as 4th generation warfare (as if it was not supposed to exist then), was an act of treachery or unfair means by the enemy. Alexander, Md Ghoris, Babur & Clive were all considered treacherous humans who defeated our otherwise unbeatable martial class warriors by deceit. Typically in 1962 while we should have used the IAF to interdict & destroy Chinese ingress, we shifted the blame onto treachery & lack of everything & encouraged our soldiers to a disgraceful retreat.

There were of course, exceptions who held ground & fought, but by that time the leadership was busy bidding goodbye to those sectors. One mistake or one defeat doesn't obliterate centuries of strategic gains by us. It is our self-criticism & self degradation that prompted the likes of George Tanham to espouse that we had no strategic culture. Perhaps nobody had told him of independent India's efforts such as Operation Polo to liberate Goa, liberation of Bangladesh, amalgamation of Sikkim & the occupation of the highest battlefield in the world, Siachen.

Our response to obligations that are a fallout of our enhanced stature in the world order **today**, has been guarded & ambivalent (Kissenger, 2014). We are unable to accept responsibility for security of the IOR, unable to increase our footprint (read bootstrap) in Afghanistan, reluctant to repeat an Operation Cactus in Maldives or exploit fault lines in TAR, due to this very ambivalence. Our reluctant entry into South China Sea (SCS) seemed almost apologetic while People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) submarines are 'gallivanting' in IOR. If Cholas could influence politics, economics, military & society in SE Asia as far back as 10th Century AD, it is certainly not beyond the second biggest Armed Forces in the world to secure our legitimate rights & aspirations in IOR, including avenues into it. PLAN may be powerful in their backyard, but in IOR they would be as effective as the mighty Indian cricket team of today, playing in England. The situation of the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) over the mighty Himalayas is no different. These are the advantages bestowed on us by geography. For inspiration from history, if the Chola expeditionary force could cover 2400nm sailing along the monsoon winds, our powerful aircraft carriers & Landing Ship Docks/ Helicopters should be capable of much more.

Results by Subsequent Analysis:

One major aspect in judging the Strategic Culture of an era was by equating this culture with wars waged & extent of the empire. A self-sufficient India blessed with mighty river basins, could sustain civilizations within itself. Why would it intend to extend towards a bleak & barren Central Asia or Tibet? Its strategy was that of defending itself while dominating the seas around. This was well achieved for over two millennium. Ashoka spread Indian culture all across SE Asia, China & Japan while he consolidated his empire back home. The result was economic progress & prosperity for generations to follow. He could have conquered the whole of Asia & yet not achieved the same to achieve the same. That is an example of Strategic Culture. We often feel that lack of strategic culture cost us 2/3rds of Kashmir, caused our loss in the Sino – Indian War, stunted our economic growth story & allowed China to encircle us. However all these would have happened in any case as the legacy of partition & choice of democracy when Pakistan chose dictatorship & the Chinese a closed regime in the name of communism. Non Alignment established an international stature for India, a protected economy had its advantages in the first two decades after independence. Our prompt action to assimilate Princely States victory, victory in 65 war with Pakistan, keeping the Tibetan Issue alive, liberation of Bangladesh, occupation of Sikkim & establishing a hold in IOR are glimpses of our strategic culture.

CONCLUSION:

It has been established that India has long & strong Strategic Culture that ensured its survival, progress & relevance over the ages. Any ambiguity regarding India's Strategic Vision, Culture or its manifestations are due to inadequate & biased interpretation of historical facts. It is primarily due to our focus on history of certain periods, certain dynasties & certain locations rather than a holistic interpretation of our 5000 plus years of existence.

Self Assurance:

We must be aware & proud of our strategic culture that existed since the Indus Valley Civilization. Today our armed forces are amongst the best in the world, both in quality & quantum. Despite all bureaucratic tangles & interdepartmental imbroglio our defence procurement is progressing as per our needs. A combat ready & combat experienced Army, 175 Ship Navy & a 37 Squadron Air Force is a reality by 2025.

Comprehend Our Stature & Obligations:

As the second most populous country in the world, the world's largest democracy, the third largest economy (in PPP), amongst the largest contributors to UN Peace Keeping missions, now a responsible member of the Quad, we have our obligations. With 31 million expats & rising investment in other countries our diaspora, NRIs & private sector will look up to the country for security of their interests. There is no point burying

our heads like the proverbial ostrich or preaching from a moral high ground regarding peaceful coexistence. World will respect strength and this not only includes the capacities but the will & propensity to act.

Strategic Space:

We should understand the significance of South Asia, Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), IOR, SCS, SE Asia & Afghanistan as our strategic spaces and develop capabilities to influence actions/ events in these spaces as & when required. We have wherewithal to implement the same, however the capability needs to be harnessed from existing resources including those under procurement. The world is aware that we neither have an offensive or an expansionist intent, but they will also understand that the subtle aspect of influencing circumstances in our strategic space, without permanent hegemonistic intent, is either a defensive action or an international obligation.

Expeditionary Capability:

The capability to influence activities/ events in the strategic space is not about numbers & not entirely about effects. It is the ability to mobilise earmarked troops, concentrate, induct, land & maneuver men & material to the intended places of application in the shortest possible timeframe. The size & composition of such a force is based on the objectives & differs in requirement from country to country. In our case with the identification of strategic spaces, scenario building & arriving at objectives should be carried out, post which tailor made tri service Task Forces could be nominated for each objective. The Naval & Air assets nominated could be common for more than one Task Force. The strength of each Task Force lies in the integration & consequent synergy which would come about only through sustained training & rehearsals. Additional forces to augment the Task Force or consolidate the gains can be build up from within our conventional capability. Rather than nominate conventional forces as Task Forces for various contingencies, the primary role of these Task Forces should be expeditionary & they be dual tasked for conventional role. This is keeping in view both the probability of occurrence of a full scale war & to give political leadership wider options in the spectrum of warfare to achieve objectives.

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