

Warfare and War Strategies in Purananooru

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Introduction

War is a structured aggression aimed at defending against or vanquishing an opponent utilising the resources at one's command. It is defined as an organised and often prolonged conflict that is carried out by states and/or non-state actors. War is an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will. Scholars who advocate views against war condemn it as licensed crime against humanity. Aggressive or warlike qualities are fruitful for a human being to survive and succeed in a competitive environment. Even apostles of peace like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King (Jr) and Nelson Mandela were men of steel in their relentless fight. Charles Darwin underlined evolution as the survival of the fittest and not necessarily the best. This Biblical remark is indeed interesting: "The life of man upon earth is warfare." Against this background, an examination of warfare and war strategies enshrined in the ancient compilation Purananooru throws engaging light in understanding the bravery, tactics and ethics of ancient Tamil heritage. The objective of this booklet is to bring out a few aspects highlighting warfare and war strategies in this masterpiece. The English translations used in this essay have been taken from The Four Hundred Songs of War and Wisdom by George L Hart and Hank Heifetz. The main aim of this effort is to arouse in the somewhat apathetic Tamil youth of today, some interest and pride in their glorious past.

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Significance of Purananooru

History of Southern India had over centuries been a victim of benign neglect of vicious misrepresentation. Even Herodotus and Greek historian Arrian perpetuated such purblindness. However, the Italian traveller Marco Polo found that 'the great province of South India is the best of all Indies...the finest and noblest in the world.' Tamil Nadu did not form a province of Asoka, the Great and ascertained its independence. Literature, art, agriculture, polity and trade flourished in Tamil kingdoms even before the start of the Christian era. The arrival of European scholars exposed the great lineage of the Tamils to the western world. Works like Thirukkural were translated into

English and were widely admired by great litterateurs. Leo Tolstoy, George Bernard Shaw, Albert Schweitzer and Robert Green Ingersoll were a few.

Purananooru has four hundred poems meticulously gleaned from Sangam literature that deal with kings, wars and conventional values of ancient Tamil culture. ‘It is one of the earliest works in Tamil that we possess. It was written before Aryan influence.’ The anthology means literally “the four hundred (poems) about the exterior.” The exterior poems deal with life outside the family. The poems depict sceneries from war, instances of greatness of the king, generosity of the people, ethics prevailing in the period and the bravery of the warriors. The king played a pivotal role in the life of all the citizens in his

*Rice is not the life of the world nor is water the life!
The king is the life of this world with its wide expanses!
And so it is incumbent upon a king who maintains an army
wielding many spears to know of himself: “I am this world’s life”*

Abraham Eraly observes that the political system of Cholas was a highly efficient decentralised system that ‘combined vigourous central control with a very large measure of local autonomy,’ and he quotes Nilakanta Sastri for his countenance. Purananooru has reference to proper taxation policy. Indiscriminate taxation will lead to impoverished coffers. Effective collection will make the treasury overflow with funds for carrying out various welfare measures.

*If you reap ripe paddy and mash it into balls for the feeding
of your elephants, less than what grows on a ma (one unit of land) will be enough
for many days. But an elephant let loose to feed by itself
will trample a thousand mas of grain that will never touch its mouth!*

Thus, Purananooru offers invaluable wisdom for today’s leaders and administrators. It acts as a manual for rulers to absorb, assimilate and observe to refer to it in their governance. It will never outlive its utility by virtue of its eternity and everlasting utility.

Warfare in Purananooru

Purananooru has got many poems on various facets of warfare. In the ancient society, war was a regular phenomenon. Though they had conventional weapons, the battles were frequent. Vegetius, a scholar of 4th century A.D. observed, “Let him who wants peace prepare for war”. It has become the standard maxim in armed forces and in many army camps, it finds a place. There were no international agencies to intervene or negotiate. “Trench warfare, machine guns, napalm, atomic bombs, artillery and submarine torpedoes produce time-averaged war-related death tolls so much lower than those from spears, arrows and clubs”. Therefore, poems to motivate and songs to kindle the youth were essential in order to make them eager to face their enemies. Sangam literature depicts scenes where musicians accompanied soldiers to sing war songs to keep their spirit high. Purananooru has songs on bravery, ethics, leadership and battle scenes which present the word painting

Practical Tips

Purananooru is not mere imagination of the poets. It has not blossomed out of vacuum. It is not an epic weaving a tapestry of impossible imaginations in verbose verses. The anthology has the contribution of many poets from various walks of life. A few poets are found to have come very heavily on the kings sans moral base. “Purananooru is a great work of literature, accurately and profoundly reflecting the life of Tamilnad 2000 years ago. Its appeal is universal.” In his introduction to his English translation, George L Hart remarks “The LTTE (Tamil Tigers) of Sri Lanka, a guerrilla group fighting for a separate Tamil homeland, have taken some of their practices and ideology from the Purananooru. One example is the funeral for young men who have fallen in fighting at which the mother is urged to express joy and is not supposed to cry. In addition, many of the phrases and terms they use to glorify war are drawn directly from the anthology.” The reasons for avoiding unnecessary war and the ecological consequences of frequent battles have been well expressed in Purananooru. Hence, it is not only ideal but also highly practicable in nature.

Ethics in Warfare

Warfare in ancient India had certain rigid martial codes. They are a) A warrior in armour should not fight a Kshatriya without a coat of mail. b) A cavalryman should not attack a car-warrior. The principle behind it is that fight should be between equals. c) Poisoned arrows and barbed arrows should not be used. No helpless, benumbed or defeated person should be pierced with an arrow. d) Non-combatants who hide themselves in fear or who are mere spectators should not be killed. e) A suppliant enemy after he has laid down his arms should not be killed. Courteous treatment should be accorded to maidens made prisoners of war till they were sent back home after a year. f) One who has one’s hair unlocked, one who has turned one’s face against one’s opponent, who is in folded palm, without arrow, without armour and one whose weapon is broken and a Brahmana should not be killed. The list of persons to be spared in battles is also found in Manu Samhita, Chap.VII, Sl.91-93. g) The sick and the wounded should be looked after. h) In case of an insufficient supply of numbers in a particular division or divisions of the army substitutes may be used. The Puranic literature forbids clearly seizure or destruction of enemy’s property except under grave necessity. Temples and temple treasures, properties of non-combatants and private individuals enjoyed immunity from seizure and destruction in war. i) The Sastras do not allow the liberty in warfare of striking below the belt. Manu Samhita forbids the use of certain weapons in warfare. j) Resort to war is not recommended unless political expedients like Sama, Dana, etc. fail.

The rigid code was ‘more honoured in the breach than in the observance’ in Mahabaratha and Ramayana. Instances like killing of Duryodana and Vaali prove the point. However, one of the reasons for various alien invasions was due to the scrupulous observance of these rules.

In Purananooru, all these prescriptions are found to have been followed without any deviation. In ancient Tamil culture, the vanquished will starve to death to efface his defeat. It was entirely specific to Tamil Nadu and is praised in the verses. Karikalan, the Chola king defeated Cheraladan. The latter suffered injuries on his back. He deemed it as a dishonour for a warrior and sat in the battle field facing north till he breathed his last.

*Karikal Valavan, you who master rutting elephants!
You did march off and you did win the victory and you displayed
your power, since you were the one who triumphed in combat but yet
on the battlefield of wealth Venni didn't he surpass you,
gaining great fame across the world when ashamed
at a wound in the back, he sat turned northward and starved himself to death?*

Against Civil War

Civil War is unwarranted and causes unnecessary hardships to citizens. Shakespeare says, “civil blood makes civil hands unclean” Chola kings Nalankilli and Nedunkilli belong to the same clan. The civil war between them is condemned by Kovur Kilar. Nalankilli was besieging Uraiyur, the fortress of Nedunkilli.

*.....if one of you is defeated,
your lineage is defeated and it is not possible that both
of you can win! So what you do is no good thing
for your lineage!...*

Against Inhuman Treatment

The poets who contributed Purananooru never blindly supported the victor. Though they hailed bravery, abrogation of martial rules was despised by them openly in their verses. Chola king, Kulamutrathu Thunjiya Killi Valavan defeated Malayaman and ordered for the children of the vanquished to be trampled by an elephant. It was openly criticised by Kovur Kilar.

*They are children, still wearing their hair
unoiled, and when they see the elephant they forger their tears!*

Similarly, when the King of Karuvur was timid to come with arms and fight against Killi Valavan, Alathur Kilar advises the aggressor to spare the former lest it may bring disgrace to the Chola.

*To bother fighting against him
to the sound of your drum with its garland like a rainbow would be shameful.*

No Deception

In warfare, winning becomes the sole goal. Resorting to all types of malpractices is found in history. The acknowledged heroes like Alexander, Napoleon, etc. are not exceptions. The set of techniques used by a group to forge war is generally known as warfare. Sun Tzu's The Art of War is probably the earliest known treatise on war and military science. It is certainly the most influential. He says, “Attack your enemy when he is unprepared, appear where you are not expected.” He further states, “All warfare is based on

Purananooru makes a clear distinction between total war and limited war. It subscribes to overt warfare and not for sudden ambush. Ancient Tamils were not for butchering anyone who comes on the way. Nettimaiyar praises Pandyan Mudukudumi Peruvazhuti as

an exemplar for his straight forward warfare.

“Cows, and men who are Brahmins and share the holiness of cows, and women, and you who are sick, and you who have had no sons, precious as gold, to perform the demanding rituals which protect the dead who are alive in the Southern Land, take refuge! We are ready to shoot rapid volleys of arrows!” he announces, since he is a champion of Righteousness.

Bravery Hailed

No man will be prepared to lose his life. Preparing the youth to sacrifice their lives is essential either by inculcating patriotic fervour or by eulogising bravery. A commendable practice in India was that the families of those who fell in battle were usually taken care of. Purananooru picturises a brave mother. She takes pride for having sent her son to the battle field. She compares her womb to a cave where a tiger inhabited. Incidentally, it was contributed by a poetess. Another poet in Purananooru writes, “It was only the day before yesterday that her father cut down an elephant on the battle field and fell bravely fighting with foes, and yesterday her husband routed a whole army of elephants and was slaughtered on the same field. And yet today, when she hears the war drum, she seemed to be filled with joy and gave her only son a white cloth to wear, combed his hair and, putting a lance into his ha □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ d.”

Sacrifice Celebrated

The Chinese were instrumental for inventing paper, printing, compass and gun powder. Due to the early availability of paper, they were able to document their history vividly. Various strategies adopted by them were enlisted. They have made a detailed analysis of their history and ferreted out a list of 36 strategies. Out of them, the last strategy is, ‘Running away as the best choice.’ It says, “Evade the enemy to preserve the troupes. The army retreats. No blame. It does not violate the normal practice of war.” Tamils never hold this view. For them, death in battle field is hall ticket to heaven and running away is a sacrilege. Avvaiyar appreciates Adiyaman when he fought and received a wound. She talks about the glorious death of brave warriors, “those who have died in a great battle and kept faith in th □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

A young boy of an age old mother pervades the enemy’s army as if he were a few drops of curd young herder women flick into a part of milk with their sharp nails. Age does not matter in annihilating the opponents.

Memorial stones

Tamil culture remembered the gallant youth who fought for the nation and lost their lives by erecting a stone to commemorate their memory. This is a unique feature peculiar to ancient Tamil society. The memorial stone was worshipped by the people. Many references are found in Purananooru regarding this honour conferred posthumously on an individual. All modern gallantry awards cannot equalise this feat. The memorial stone will stand as a testimony in his native village arousing the youth to do similar immortal deeds. One of the 400 songs written by an anonymous poet epitomises the importance of this s+

*Do not fail to bow down when you pass the memorial stone! Then
for sure this desolate path will turn fertile, and attract the bees!
He was the man who won back a huge herd of cows that had been
seized and when his ignorant young men fled, he did not,
but like the shore of a river in flood time
he drove the enemy back and sank among fierce arrows loosed from their bows.*

War Strategies in Purananooru

Sheer number does not always decide the success in any field. In war, there are five factors which decide the outcome. They are: 1) The Moral Law; 2) Heaven; 3) Earth; 4) the Commander; and 5) Method and Discipline. Heaven signifies seasons. Earth denotes terrain. The general is responsible for strategies, method and discipline. The word ‘strategy’ comes from the ancient Greek word strategos meaning literally ‘the leader of the army.’ Strategy in this sense was the art of generalship, of commanding the entire war effort, deciding what formation to deploy, what terrain to fight on, what manoeuvres to use to gain an edge. We can elicit many strategies from the war songs of Purananooru, which were documented by the Chinese, Japanese and the West. Even the strategies of Mongols and

Blitzkrieg Strategy

Sun Tzu remarked, “War is such that the supreme consideration is speed.” Striking first with utmost speed will not allow the opponents to prepare and make them prone to error. The term ‘Blitzkrieg’ was used by Germany as a new form of warfare when they invaded France. Advancing with incredible speed is the strategy. In Purananooru, Pandaran Kannanar describes the strategy of Cholan Perunar Killi which resembles blitzkrieg.

*Destroying the land, your limitless army advances,
with its swift horses peerless in battle,
and it spreads out its shields like so many clouds,
moving forward, destroying the vanguard,
ravaging the rich fields, bathing elephants
in the waters of the reservoirs that had been guarded,
as the glare that rises up from the blazing fires
fuelled by the wood of houses seems the red glow
of the sun when its rays are dwindling down!*

Offensive Strategy

Napoleon’s axiom, “Offence is the best form of defence” is applicable both in war and business. At one point of time Mongols were able to strike terror in the western minds by the offensive strategies. Shakespeare talks of them in his comedy A Midsummer Night’s Dream, “Swifter than arrow from the Tartar’s bow.” The Europeans, were long to remember the dreadful period of Mongols as demons from Tartarus. The genius of Genghis Khan transformed the chaotic Mongol speed into something organised, disciplined and strategic. It was akin to slow – slow – quick – quick strategy of Chinese. It could also be

Purananooru mentions about the strategy of Pandiyan Nedunchezhan, who is known for striking such planned, forceful attacks on his enemies and win decisive victories. Mongols were known for terrorising the enemy troupes. The word would spread and no one dare oppose them. They will unleash unprecedented injury on their rivals. Pandiyan used to do this ceremoniously to intimidate. Poet Mangudi Kilar talks of his terrorising techniques.

You quickened the battle
so that kings fell, and you captured
their royal chums and spread your fame!
and then, with food you had created, you sacrificed on the killing field,
using an oven of crowned heads after pouring out a torrent of blood
into the cooking pot and stirring it with the ladle of an arm still
braceleted

Deterrence Strategy

Avoiding the aggressors is a key tactics to remain triumph without unnecessary bloodshed. It is often observed in animal kingdom. To accomplish this, it is essential to create the impression of being more powerful than a person actually is. Avvaiyar employs this strategy against the enemies of Adhiyaman.

*You, our enemies! Think twice before you come on to the field
We have a warrior among us who will go against you in battle
He is like a wheel fashioned with great care
over a month by a craftsman who creates eight chariots a day!*

Forcing Strategy

Indoctrinating the youth by constantly hypnotizing them about bravery is an effective psychological tool to make them remain undaunted in facing their enemies. The Huns were noted for their indomitable spirit and they spread the impression of being very powerful. When a child is born, they will inflict wounds on its cheeks so that it learns to bear pain before it takes the milk. In ancient Tamil Nadu, if a child was still born, there was a custom to inflict wounds with a sword and then burry it. The lineage of martial race is symbolised in such a gesture. This was sung by Cheraman Kanakal Irumborai. He fought with Cholan Chenkannan and was captured. In the prison, he asked for water, but did not receive in

*If a child was stillborn or what emerged was only a mass of flesh,
though they thought it not yet human my ancestors treated it as such
and as they should, they cut it with a sword!*

Strike the Shepherd Strategy

In war field, general is the most important person. By decimating him, the war is easily won. In China, they call it, "To catch bandits, first catch the ring leader." Crush the enemy's main force and capture its chief to disintegrate the body. When we strike the sheep, it becomes difficult to subdue. Once we strike the shepherd, the sheep will automatically scatter. When Babur fought with Ibrahim Lodi in the First Battle of Panipat, he had only

8,000 men. Lodi had more than a lakh. The strategy adopted by Babur was to finish off Lodi at the earliest point of time. When it was done, the Afghan army scattered in all directions. The battle was over in a few hours . In Purananooru, Viriyur Nakkannar appreciates the warrior who always aims at the elephant of the enemy king.

*Should the spear do that,
then it never stops thrusting into the faces
of the massive elephants of kings with their armies like the vast ocean!*

Hit First; Hit Hard Strategy

Samurais, the Japanese warriors strike with enormous power to render their opponents totally lifeless. They use this strategy in combats and duals. Mongols go for ‘Great Hunt’ to prepare the soldiers for warfare. It is to develop cohesion and trust among the soldiers in the army. The concept of hitting hard and great hunt have been stressed in narrating the archery skill of Valvil Ori.

*I spoke of the man with the great bow, master of the hunt, who aimed
his arrows with the utmost precision, bringing down an elephant, slaying
a tiger with gaping jaws, dropping a hollow horned spotted stag,
felling a boat with a head heavy as a mortar, burying
his point in a lizard that had taken refuge near him in a deep hole,
he who was widely famed for his skill at killing consummate in the art
of archery*

The Central Position Strategy

Bevin Alexander has mentioned the central position strategy as one of the thirteen rules of war. “A commander has always faced an extreme challenge than confronting an enemy decidedly stronger than he is. Although a few generals have used the central position, it remains one of the most effective strategies to employ against a stronger enemy.” Chitor Fort was offering enormous resistance despite the efforts of Akbar to penetrate it. Akbar always took the central position and lead from the front. Akbar, who was a crack shot, happen to notice in the light “of the flashing of the fire of the cannon and the guns”, a Rajput of commanding presence at a breach in the supervising repairs. Akbar lifted his favourite gun, Sangram and shot him down. Chitor fell. Purananooru talks of the central position and leading from the front. Kaviripoompattinathu Kaarikannanar describes the a

*When your army moves forward, you advance before the army
opposing you as they brandish arms and fling their missiles but when
their army advances, you shift to the rear of your army, supporting it,
taking your stand there like a mountain damming up a broad river.*

Overwhelming Strategy

When the enemy is powerful, it is essential to pre-empt his moves and to take proactive steps. The secret is to envelop the opponents – create relentless pressure on them from all sides, dominate their attention and close off their access to outside world. The Americans were following the rule of landing an overwhelming blow after 2001 Twin Tower episode

on Afghanistan. The force should be heavy to do this attack. Nalankilli had such a massive army that he can annihilate the enemies totally. Alathur Kilar describes his army which seems to be mind boggling.

*Listen if you want to know what has become of the majesty
that led an army of raised spears which destroyed the power
of kings, which circled the wide world in the proper direction
and was so vast that the front of the army ate Palmyra seeds,
the centre the ripe fruit and the rear ate the tuber
matured so that it split open with its fibres and was cooked
on a fire!*

Conclusion

War cannot be totally dismissed as a futile exercise. Many scientific advances like radio, radar, internet, LASIK (Laser-Assisted In-situ Keratomileusis), horse shoes, medical technology, discovery of blood group, antibiotics, advances in metallurgy, discovery of ammonia, advances in communication skill, sophistication in aeroplanes, etc. were contributed because of wars. The most famous contribution, the internet was designed specifically for the Pentagon which wanted a communication network that could survive a

Warlike qualities are essential for a human being even to fight against his own ailments. Purananooru is one such literature which will inspire all human beings to develop will power and make them constantly strive for their cause. Achievement motivation, over reaching goal, creative visualisation, leadership qualities, stress management, self confidence, self-esteem, decision making and meritorious recruitment are a few things that could be learnt by perusing this great anthology with an eye for details. There are a few poems which advise the kings to avoid unnecessary warfare. Avvaiyar acts as an envoy for Adhiyaman and convinces Thondaiman to eschew the ensuing battle. A few poems reflect ecological intelligence stressing the damage caused by ruthless warfare. Thus, Purananooru is a balanced piece of literature covering all nuances of warfare. There are tremendous advances in military technology. Still, the fundamental concepts in Purananooru are applicable even today despite the passage of time. Vaiyapuri Pillai correctly said that it should be read by the youth to become courageous. Purananooru will be ever cherished by the Tamils with ethnic fervour and historical pride.

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