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The Military Success of the West in the East in Pre-modern Times: the Colonial Experience

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The so-called De Gama period (an expression used by K.M. Panikkar in his *Asia and Western Dominance*) of Asian history that began with the 16th century was marked essentially by Western expansion into and supremacy over the entire region from the Indus to the Yangtse. Of course, it was not a story of un-interrupted march of Western flags. Rather, what started as intrusions by western powers gradually developed into local ascendancies and then into Western occupation of entire regions. Even in this period Western arms were often defeated but, by and large, wherever they were seriously interested they always managed to win in the end, till most of South-east Asia had come under their direct or indirect control. This created the myth of Western superiority in the affairs of arms conveniently forgetting that for most of the millennium, from the 5th to the 15th century, Christian Europeans were almost every where in retreat in the face of the heathen Huns, Arabs, Mongols and the Turks.

Then wherein lay the evident superiority of Western arms in pre-modern times, i.e. from the 17th to the early 19th century? Was it in their 'true faith' or in the superior morale and physical virility of the meat-eating white man, or in their superior technology, tactics and training? No doubt, the Spaniards and the Portuguese were zealous proselytisers and sincerely believed that their victories were due to vindications of their 'true faith[1], but the records of wars till the end of the 17th century (the Turks were again at the gates of Vienna in 1683) demolish any such presumption about the much touted martial powers of the Christians. As regards the second presumption, there is, of course some truth when the coastal and deltaic population of south and south-east Asia are under reference. Inhabitants of warm humid regions, where nature is bountiful and living relatively cheap and easy, are in most cases physically weaker and temperamentally unaggressive and easy-going, compared to those from cold inhospitable regions who, for generations, had to depend on trade and plunder for their very survival.

However, when one takes into account the very small number of European sailors and soldiers who could be sent and effectively maintained in Asia across thousands of miles, in those days of sailing ships, the decisive 'superiority of quality over quantity'[2] does not appear to be a very satisfactory explanation. The third presumption, however, is more widely believed and calls for a thorough examination.

Writing only forty years ago Carlo Cipolla ascribes[3] European successes to the undisputed superiority of their guns and ships. True, artillery was not so much in use in Asia, except in China, Turkey and parts of Western India, when Europeans appeared in Asian waters and the latter did enjoy certain initial advantages[4].

But the Asians were not slow in mastering the new arts and their skilful use. As early as in 1513 Albuquerque wrote about an Indian crafts-man who "could make guns as good as those

of Bohemia"[5]. Later, the Europeans acknowledged the excellence of Sinhales musketeers,[6] also. Then, in course of the 16th century, the use of cannon spread across Asia and the Mughals supplemented their cavalry with musketeers, and maintained a siege train of seventy heavy guns.[7] The artillery of the major Indonesian states, like Bantam, Mataram and Macassar, were also considered superior to those of even the Dutch[8] and, after the middle of the 17th century, no one talked of the evident superiority of Western gun and cannon.

Initially, it was believed, the Europeans had two definite advantages at sea. Unlike the bigger sailing ships with bigger guns of the Europeans the fleets of the Asian powers consisted mostly of oar-driven galleys. Nor was it possible for Asian Vessels – whose plankings, except in the case of the Chinese, were sewn together and not nailed as in the West – to carry and fire heavy guns. However, the indigenous craftsmen soon became experts in new techniques and were building in western India as good ships as the Portuguese, even in the early years of the 16th century.[9] True the Asians still depended more on galleys but, as Guilmartin points out, those could carry heavy guns on their prows and, when properly used near the coast, could be very effective, especially in view of their superior mobility. For instance, at Jedda in 1517 the Turkish galley fleet successfully kept the Portuguese at bay.[10] In fact, by the middle of the 16th century, the Portuguese at Malacca were being constantly harassed by the ships of Johore, Japara and Ache, and most Asian vessels could evade or brush aside the Europeans to carry on their trade independently.[11]

When, in the 17th century, the Dutch introduced bigger ships Asian response too was not inadequate. According to the English surgeon Fryer, ships carrying thirty to forty cannons were being built at Surat.[12] We hear of ships weighing around 600 tonnes visiting Masulipatam[13] on the Bay of Bengal, while many Chinese junks were, reportedly, as big as the Dutch ones.[14] Since the last years of the 17th century even the Omanis and, later, Iran under the redoubtable Nadir Shah started operating fleets having ships that carried over fifty guns and sailors, who were 'skilful, bold and adventurous'.[15] Further east, in 1661, a fleet of 100 Chinese junks commanded by the dreaded sea-dog Coxinga captured the fort of Zeelandia in Taiwan,[16] while a century later the successor states of Mataram were no longer afraid of the Dutch. Raja Haji of Johore actually beat off the Dutch and besieged them at Malacca in 1784.[17] Already in the second quarter of the 18th century the Angrias of Western India had proved themselves more than a match for the British. In 1737 and 1739 the Portuguese lost Salsette and Bassein, respectively, to the Marathas, while in 1741 the Dutch were defeated by the forces of Travancore. In the forty years that followed, the Marathas and Mysore were the leading powers on western and southern India and the East India Company's forces were repeatedly defeated by them. Haidar Ali of Mysore was the first to use rockets in battle and, according to a perceptive observer, like Sir Arthur Wellesley (later the Duke of Wellengton), the mysore light cavalry was "the best in the world".[18] The Scindhias and later other powers, like the Sikhs, appointed European trainers to modernize their armies on Western lines and for them the British had a wholesome respect. Mahadji Scindhia created a formidable force of sappers and gunners and, by 1785, had his own ordnance factory near Agra.[19] But there was never any concerted effort to ward off the vaguely visible Western threat. The Ottomans were busy in the Balkans and the North African littoral, the Chinese remained cocooned in their xenophobic isolation, and the Mughals in their days of glory welcomed the profits of trading with European companies. None has asserted so far that the latter had any chance of success against the full force of any of the powers.

True, between Gustav Adolphus of Sweden in the 17th century and Frederick the Great in the 18th something like a 'Military revolution' had taken place in Europe and, in terms of

training and skill in battle, her armies were usually superior to their Asian counterparts. European soldiers were better disciplined on modern lines, they could charge and face a charge with greater determination, and manouvre more effectively in larger groups; their command structure was more suitable to the needs of war, and they had devised ways of maintaining and operating large armies at a distance from home.[20] In comparison, most Asian armies resembled assemblies of armed men guided by obsolete ideas about tactics and strategy. These, to a great extent, explain the success of Europeans against the Turks, since the end of the 17th century. There, however, they were fighting on European soil virtually across their national frontiers and could deploy large forces while enjoying the active support of the local Christian population. But how many European sailors and soldiers could be maintained in southern Asia across thousands of miles of water? Obviously, it posed serious problems of organisaitn, communication and resource3s. The easiest solution was to enlist the natives as soliders under European flags and any number of them were available to fight and die for these aliens as for any other master. The Portuguese were the first to experiment with Asian soliders, and the Dutch the French and the British followed them soon.[21] Initially, the Europeans did not have any good opinion about their fighting quality, but they were so cheap and easily available. So, at first, they wre employed as auxillaries under their own officers, fighting in their own way with their own traditional weapons.[22] However, it was during the Carnatic Wars that the efficacy of Asian soliders trained on European lines and led by European officers was first discovered. A handful of them under Clive could defend Arcot for months, and under Popham could storm the so-called unassailable fort of Gwalior, against much superior odds. In fact, it was with the help of these Asian soldiers (sepoys) that the Europeans established and ruled their empires in the East.[23]

Still, it has to be admitted that militarily the Europeans enjoyed certain qualitative superiority over Asian forces even when trained and led by Europeans. European companies not only had brilliant leaders of men, but also loyal, well-trained and motivated colleagues and subordinates to work with determination and dexterity. But, considering the huge distances involved, these could be contributory causes of their ultimate success but never the decisive ones. Then why did the Asian fail in the long run to meet the Western Challenge?

The explanation has to be sought not just in the differences in their military training, tactics and technology, but in the widely different socio-political milieu of the West and the East. By the end of the Middle Ages some form of a socio-institutional revolution had swept across most of Western Europe. The states there, however small, were no longer mere power structures erected by individuals or dynasties, but were something like modern states inspired and united by the post-renaissance spirit of nationalism that gave them inner cohesion and civil discipline, and continuity and reliability to their policies. The renaissance had released their energy, ambition and inquisitiveness, and had broken many of their mental barriers. There was a new rapport between the rulers and the ruled based on an awareness of their common national interests of which the state was the most accepted vehicle. The vision of the individual now transcended the traditional limits and came to be focused on the interests and the role of the state from which stemmed the long-term policies of their government. Policies got increasingly separated from individuals, and the leadership, interested and integrated in the affairs of the state, could pursue their national interest with all available resources and patience. Loyalties became institutionalized and habitual, pay regular, and promotions increasingly dependent on merit. European companies, in varying degrees, possessed officials habitually disciplined and dependant on them, proud of their profession and infused with a strong espirit d'corp. This all pervading social cohesion and discipline and a

collective urge to achieve certain agreed goals were based not just on regularity of pay and rules of promotion, but on a broad consensus on policies and patriotism.[24] Agents of such a dynamic society could be both aggressive and adaptive, and they employed the arts of diplomacy with courage and calculation. As masters of superior statecraft they could see through the weaknesses latent in the ideals, attitudes and institutions of their Oriental opponents a and achieved their objectives by hiring their services, purchasing their loyalties, and exploiting their personal rivalries – "which had been the epiphenomenon of even the strongest Indian state" – as well as "the deeper fissures between the different social groups".[25] What their so-called qualitative superiority could not do for the numerically inferior Westerners their Oriental allies, in different forms, did.

Moreover, while post-renaissance Europe was inquisitive and inventive, adaptive and acquisitive the East, by the end of the Middle Ages, had reached a state of rigidity and stagnation where their leaders were no longer in a position to appreciate the nature of their challenges and to introduce the desired structural changes for meeting those. They might import foreign cannon or cast similar ones at home and employ European instructors for their armies, but these alone do not make a state strong. The capacity to use new weapons and tactics has a social explanation and, in the words of Carlo Cipolla, "In order to fight against the West" the Asians had "to absorb Western ways of thinking and doing".[26] The army after all is an arm of the society, and a modern army cannot be expected in a medieval society. According to V.J. Parry, for the Turks in 17th and 18th centuries to absorb and to use Western tactics it was necessary "to reshape the Ottoman Army in a rational manner and indeed to refashion the Ottoman state itself".[27] Unfortunately, none in Asia, before the Meiji Restoration in Japan, had seriously tried to modernize his army together with major areas of the country's society and economy. None sent their princes abroad for military and other trainings, none cared to set up Western type general staffs and military academies or to throw open the higher echelone of the bureaucracy and the armed forces to merit. Higher posts usually went by birth, rulers or their sons led their armies into battles, the cavalry retained the pride of place by tradition, the gunners had a low professional status,[28] and neither new ideas not debates over possible changes were welcome.[29] None seriously thought of re-invigorating the society with liberal rationalism or secular nationalism of the West or through techno-economic changes. Asia faced the forward-looking fighters of the West with blinkers in their eyes and hands tied by tradition. Modern skin grafted on medieval skeleton and decomposed flesh was no match for the modern man from the West.

Even in the field of economy the East in this period was at a disadvantage. Western Europe, since the geographical explorations and commercial revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries was the home of vigorous economic activity, and was getting perceptively richer than before. The policies of their trading companies and governments aimed at profit, and profits enabled them to fight new wars and to take defeats in their stride. Their coffers were full and their leaders knew how to use their wealth and power for furthering the same. The salaries of their soldiers and sailors were seldom in arrears.

Opposed to them were the Asian states in various stages of decadent feudalism and social ossification. Their per capita incomes were low and were often falling, and their governments, almost chronically, suffered from shortage of resources. Many, like the Marathas, were rapacious because their resources were meagre, Armies of most Asian rulers, especially of India, were usually busier collecting revenue and forestalling or fighting revolts than in facing foes. There was indeed a vicious circle lack of resources caused non-payment of salaries to soldiers, which made them mutinous compelling the rulers to exploit the peasantry who then rebelled leaving the

rulers with no option but to despatch troops for suppressing the rebels and to spend more on his army to keep it strong and satisfied. Lack of resources and dependence on mercenaries reduced the Asian rulers' capacity to sustain a war, and encouraged them, in most cause, either to risk everything in one battle or to seek accommodation with Western aggressors. Stagnation[30] followed by insecurity and internecine wars left the Asian landscape, both economically and intellectually, parched and exhausted, lacking the will and ability to meet any serious secular challenge.

Reference to will, ability and secular challenges, however, brings out the central point of this East-West conflict. There was, in fact, no real confrontation between these two they met each other at different planes. In the East the effective concern of the people usually centred around socio-religious considerations. They might prefer their own people as rulers, but would seldom choose to die for them as for some socio-religious issues or symbols. Hence popular resistance to invaders after the defeat or death of the ruler is virtually unheard of in the East. The state there was not to interfere in the affairs of the people, but was to ensure their protection so that they could pursue their socio-religious objectives undisturbed. A non-interfering Akbar was popular with the Hindu majority, while an intolerant Aurangjeb forfeited their support. The Portuguese failed primarily because they antagonized both the Hindus and the Muslims, while the relatively non-interfering Dutch and the British fared better, mainly because the dominant local groups usually preferred them to one another. In fact, there was seldom any strong anti-European feeling as long as the local population were left undisturbed in their traditional pursuits. The European conquered most of Asia without actually attacking the real citadels or resistance. The former knew that they were conquering, but the Asian seldom felt that they were being conquered, at least not till it was too late. For them Western successes were similar to changes in political rulers and trading partners they were familiar with and deserved no more attention then the usual revolts and dynastic changes that, in the past, had affected them only peripherally. The following four lines from Mathew Arnold's 'Light of Asia' put in a nutshell the age old Eastern reaction to external challenges:

> "The East bowed before the blast in patient deep disdain,
> And let the thundering legions pass and plunged into
> thought again".

Absence of modern outlook in the East and non-interference in socio-religious affairs by the West contributed more to the latter's success than superior technology or tactics in War.

End Notes

1. N. M. Person, *Merchants and Rulers in Gujrat,* (Calif. U.P. 1976), p.40.
2. This point of qualitative superiority of the Western man has been very spiritedly made by H. and P. Channu in *Seville et L'Atalntique, 1504 – 1650,* 8 vols. 9Paris, 1955 – 59).
3. C. M. Cipolla, *Guns and Sails in the Early Phase of European Expansion, 1400-1700,* (London.1965).
4. G.V. Scamell, "Indigenous Assistance in the Establishment of Portuguese Power in Asia in the Sixteenth Century", *Modern Asian Studies* (Cambridge) Vol.14, Pt.1, Feb. 1979, p.3.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*

7. R.B. Sergeant, *The Portuguese off the South Arabian Coast,* (Oxford, 1963), p.3 Also confirmed by the 17th century trveller F.B. Bernier in his *Hisotry of the Late Revolution in the Empire of the Great Mogol,* Vol.II.
8. P. J. Marshal, "Western arms in Maritime Asia in the Early Phases of Expansion," *Modern Asian Studies,* Op.cit., p.20.
9. M.A.P. Meilink Roelofsz, *Asian Tradeand European Influence in the Indonesian Archipelago,* (The Hague, 1962), p. 134.
10. J.F. Guilmertin, *Gunpowder and Galleys,* Lond., 1974), pp. 10-12.
11. Meilink Roelofsz, op.cit.
12. W. Cooke (Ed.), *A New Account of India and Persia,* (Lond., 1947), Vol. 1, p.267.
13. W.H. Morelamd, (Ed.) *Relations of Golconda in the Early Seventeenth Century,* (London, 1931), Vol.I, p. 267.
14. J.E. Willis, Pepper, Guns and Parley: *The Dutch East India Company and China,* 1622-1687, (Cambridge, MSS, 1974), p. 23.
15. J. Ovington, *A Voyage to Surat in the Year* 1689, (London, 1929) p. 208 Also, L. Lochart, :Nadir Shah's Navy", (*Progs. of the Iran Society,* Vol.1 (1936), pp.13-14.
16. P.J. Marshal,, op.cit. p.23.
17. R. Winstedt, *A History of Johore,* (Lond. 1932), p. 63.
18. "... its harrying of Cornwallis's army in 1792 is one of the reason the Governor-General had to come to terms with Tipu...", C.A. Bayly, *The New Cambridge History of India, II.I: Indian Society and the Makking of the British Empire,* (Hyderabad, 1988) pp. 96-97.
19. *Ibid.,* p. 100.
20. V. J. Parry and M.E. Yapp, *War, Technology and Society in the Middle East,* (Lond., 1975), pp. 18-19.
21. C.P. De Silva, *The Portuguese in Ceylon,* 1617-1638, (Colmbo, 1972), p. 188.
22. C. de Bruin, *Travels into Muscovy,* Persia and parts of East Indies, (Lond. 1937) Vol. II, pp. 101-102.
23. Major Munro's Evidence, dated 3-4-1767, cited in P. J. Marshall, op.cit., p.26.
24. The records of the English and the Dutch East India Companies are virtually silent about any serious dereliction of duty or betrayal of their masters' interest by their European officials in Asia.
25. C.A. Bayly, op.cit., p. 101.
26. *European Culture and Oversea Expansion,* (Harmonds worth 1970), p. 109.
27. Parry and Yapp, op.cit., p. 256.
28. David Ayalon, *Gunpowder and Firearms in the Mamluk Kingdom,* (London, 1956).