Chapter XXI

ARMY OF THE MUGHAL EMPERORS

The military organisation of the Emperors of Delhi came in time to be imitated, more or less, by all the other Powers in India with local variations due to race, terrain and State income. It was Turkish in its origin and retained the Turkish character and words to the end, though a rapid decline overtook it on the Indian soil.

Its most remarkable characteristic was that in its pristine purity it harnessed the rude vigour of the nomads of the prairies to a highly intellectual organisation, guided at the top by the most civilised of the Asiatic races, the Persians. India’s wealth enabled the Delhi Emperors to expand the civil side of the Army so vastly as in the end to smother the fighting force under its weight and turn the State bankrupt. Non-combatants outnumbered the actual fighters as ten to one. The necessary presence of spies, news-writers, clerks, account-keepers, suppliers of provisions and comforts, and transport agents, besides moving bazars and owners of hired carts and camels, as well as money-lenders accompanying their debtors, at last brought the army to a standstill, but it was a machine worked by educated men.

In its best days the imperial army proved its efficiency against Asiatic foes by its superior organisation and discipline. The troops did not form a wild multitude like a herd of 10,000 or 20,000 bisons rushing through the American prairies. They were divided into distinct groups, each under its separate commander, holding its allotted place in a duly graded series of ranks from a company to an army division. When led by a strong and able sovereign personally present in the field, this habit of discipline and co-operation with other parts, gave the imperial army an inestimable advantage, when compared with the hordes of clan levies of the Hindus; each little platoon of it could silently take up its position in the line and it could be shifted to a new place in the field with any change in the
tide of combat, smoothly and promptly like the pawns on a chess-board. Indeed, the Persian historians are fond of calling war a game of chess!

**Battle formation**

The battle formation of the Turks, brought to India by the dynasty of Babur, was scientific, clear-cut and effective till in later days luxury and excessive numbers ruined the entire machine. There was first, a strong vanguard of specially selected brave and well-equipped troops, with artillery, before whom spread a loose screen of skirmishers (horse-archers) without fire arms, advancing and falling back, without disordering the vanguard, but skirting its flanks to the rear, if driven hard. Behind the vanguard came the main army,—Left Wing, Centre (the strongest in number of men and officers, and inspired by the supreme commander’s presence), and Right Wing. And finally stood the rear-guard or more correctly Reserve (which was distinct from the baggage-guard). This simple arrangement was later on further improved by adding detached flank corps to each Wing and the Centre, when the total rose to unmanageable numbers.

From the first, the Turks had two smaller and very mobile bodies, called the iltmish (which I translate as the advanced reserve or commando troops). These were stationed just at the shoulders of the Centre and could be pushed very promptly to the support of any hard-pressed section of the front. In the early days of Central Asian warfare, these two select cavalry corps acted as the enveloping agent; they were employed in turning the enemy’s flanks and closing in his rear "like the horns of a crescent."

A good distance behind the line of battle lay the camp, with an escort, who did not join in the fight, unless the enemy made a detour and attacked the camp.

It should be remembered that in the 17th century the big artillery was too unwieldy to be moved during a battle, and it could fire only once in half an hour; so that it lay inactive on the ground after the first discharge (from a distance) was over and the men clashed together.
For a picture of the miserable condition of the Mughal army in its last days and its causes, the best source is William Irvine’s Army of the Indian Moghuls, (Luzac & Co. 1903), pp. 296-300.

*Army personnel vastly expanded*

Akbar’s reign as Emperor of India (1556-1605) introduced a revolutionary change in the character and organization of the Delhi armies and its effect was to give a new shape to Indian warfare. The end of Shah Jahan’s reign (1657) shows the new-system in its fully developed and universal form. The change followed two lines,—first the State armies became vaster in size and more complicated in their organization than before, because they were now the agents of very large and rich empires, commanding boundless resources of men and money; and secondly, gunpowder began to dominate the field.

A necessary corollary of the second factor was the large-scale employment of a foreign element,—at first pure-blooded Europeans and latterly Indo-European half breeds,—who ultimately dominated the fire-arms department, degrading the Indian artillerymen to a subordinate position and influence in battles.

The change in the character of the Mughal Army showed itself fully in the reign of Shah Jahan (1628-1658), though its seed was sown by Akbar. The Empire of Delhi had now become a very vast dominion, covering more than half the Indian continent and embracing its richest lands and ports and yielding a revenue of more than 12 crores of rupees a year. Thus, the twelve thousand horsemen with whom Babur had conquered the throne of Delhi in 1526 were a century after him replaced by a fighting force five or six times as large. Taking fort-garrisons, provincial troops, and sehbandi (or militia for helping revenue collectors) along with the regular army, Shah Jahan did not exaggerate when he mourned on his fall from the throne (in 1658), “Yesterday I was the master of nine-lakhs of troopers”. The commissioned officers (called mansabdars) on his army-roll numbered 8,000 in the year 1647.
Causes of decline

This vast and costly army naturally became a cumbrous machine moving very slowly. The fighting force was followed by a horde of civilians, clerks, accountants, spies, news reporters, couriers, contractors, shop-keepers, dancing girls and even fagirs, till the non-combatants out-numbered the soldiers by ten to one. The imperial army became incapable of making lightning raids, night attacks or ambuscades, such as Babur’s Turks had so well carried out and Ahmad Shah Durrani’s troops were to do in the 18th century. We can easily see why the Delhi Army failed against the Marathas in the Deccan and Nadir Shah in Hindustan under the later Mughals.

The countless departments under which the military administration was divided only increased red tape and delay in the execution of any order, while the vast amount of material and comforts which had become necessary caused the transport to break down in the midst of a campaign. In its best days the Imperial Army could not be defeated in a pitched battle, it could only be starved out of a post. It moved like a huge road-roller, which was sure to be bogged in the marshes of Assam or the broken rocky soil of the Deccan, where it could not move or even survive for want of food. The imperial camp has been aptly described by a European traveller as a moving city, it could not live off the country like Babur’s swift hardy horsemen.

A sickening picture of the degeneracy of the Mughal Army, 143 years after Akbar’s death, is presented by the story of the march of the Emperor Muhammad Shah’s army from Delhi to oppose Ahmad Shah Durrani at Manapur (1748). For a full description based on the eye-witness Anandram’s reports, see my Fall of the Mughal Empire, Vol. I, Ch. 5 & 12. This vast assembly of more than two lakhs of men was in effect a city of tents, which advanced two miles in one day, then halted for two or three days to take breath! This was not war.

This inflation of the Imperial Army sapped its vigour in another way also. Such vast numbers of men and transport animals and enormous quantities of material ate up a year’s
revenue of the State. Hence the soldiers' pay fell into arrears, which in the last days accumulated for three years or even longer, and the starving soldiers were in a chronic state of mutiny, imprisoning or assaulting their officers and refusing to make a start when a campaign was ordered, unless their dues were paid and a bounty advanced for feeding their families during their absence. Our national fighting machine lost all its efficiency.

Artillery improvements in 17th Century

Babur's fire-arms were worked by Asiatic Muslims who had been trained in the service of the Sultans of Turkey (whence their title of Rumi, from Constantinople which was called the Eastern Rome). He and his successors also employed Shias of Persia, who had learned this art at second hand through war with the Turks of Asia Minor. In Akbar's reign a radical change was effected in this arm. His conquest of Gujrat brought him into direct contact with the Portuguese of Goa and his religious toleration and kindness to Catholic monks created a link between him and the Government of Portugal, by which many Portuguese and more half-caste gunners were induced to enter his service. His conquest of Bengal increased his artillery personnel by the enrolment of Feringi mercenaries who had formerly served the independent Bengal Sultans and now joined him for a livelihood. Thus the Rumi and Persian gunners were gradually replaced by Feringis.

In the middle of the 17th century came a still greater change. Military adventurers of pure European blood from France and England began to flock directly to the Mughal Court, and not through Goa as before. The Thirty Years' War on the Continent (1618-1648) in its closing years threw vast number of European soldiers into the streets as paupers. And the growth of the seaborne trade with India in consequence of the establishment of the Dutch, English and French East India Companies, made it easy for European adventurers to come to our fabled land of gold, as sailors or soldiers on board the India-bound merchant vessels, desert their ships at some Indian port and proceed to the court of some Indian
prince to make their fortune in his military service. Thus, Niccolao Manucci, an Italian lad of fourteen, came to India in 1656 as a stow-away. In the 18th century the Frenchmen Rene Madec and C. Perron and the Irishman George Thomas were examples of such run-away sailors who rose to be Nabobs.

Another channel of recruitment for Europeans was also opened. The Safavi dynasty of Persian Shahs, early in the 17th century, welcomed and patronised Europeans (mostly French and English), and many adventurers of these two races found in Persia a very convenient halfway house to India. Thus Goa fell into neglect as a supply-centre of European gunners for the Mughal service.

The result of this foreign recruitment was that the technical leadership of the Mughal artillery department passed into Christian hands,—a few pure-blooded and trained Europeans at the top, many mestizos under them, and a long tail of pure Indian Christians at the bottom. These last were called *topases* (a corruption of the Turki word *top-chi* or gunner) and were held in deserved contempt.

The development of the firearms themselves was also remarkable. The first artillery consisted of tubes clamped to short wooden beams; these beams were transported by being loaded like logs in ordinary carts, unloaded on the battle field and placed immovable each in its appointed position. Guns mounted each on a wheeled carriage of its own, were later introduced from Europe, and this convenient device was adopted in the Mughal Army by Akbar. Wheels made the ordnance lighter and more mobile, and thus the element of surprise in the concentration and shifting of fire-power became possible. The improved range and accuracy of musket-fire since Babur’s time and also the greater mobility of wheeled cannon, greatly increased the danger to the commanders who used to ride to battle on the tallest elephants in order to be able to survey the whole field and also cheer their troops by making themselves visible to them. The deadly effect of the improved cannon was clearly proved at the battle of Jajau (1707), where all the leaders on one side, Prince Muhammad Azam, his son Bidar Bakht, his Rajput general Dalpat Rao Bundela, were shot down and a crushing defeat inflicted. So also, at Shakar Khera
(1724), Mubariz Khan and his two sons and at Gheria (1740) the Nawab Sarfaraz Khan were brought down by the enemy's gunners, and the defeat of their side was the immediate result.

With the increase in the mobility and range of artillery, it became necessary for the generals to use telescopes for learning the exact situation of their troops. But the first use of a field-glass by an Indian commander recorded in history is that of Najib-ud-daula during Jawahir Singh Jat's attack on Delhi in 1764, and the next that of Mahadji Sindhia during the Lalsot campaign of 1787. (See my *Fall of the Mughal Empire*, Vol. II Ch. 23 and Vol. III Ch. 35).

Muskets were also greatly improved as the result of the constant care of the Emperor Akbar and imitation of the latest models imported from Europe. In consequence of this, increase in the power of hand-guns, musketeers (*barqandazes*) began to dominate the infantry arm and ultimately displaced the foot soldiery armed with sword and spear, in the Mughal army.

*Races employed in the artillery arm*

Europeans were preferred in the artillery department on account of their proved superiority in marksmanship and alertness. Our cannon-founders at first were ex-servants of the Osmanli Turks from Asia Minor, but in the late 18th century a superior kind of artillery was cast for our Mughal and Maratha rulers only by Frenchmen and Britons, such as Le Vassoult, Sangster, Perron and others. The Indian gun-founders could produce only clumsy primitive ordnance. But the clever Indian smiths could successfully imitate the best European muskets, and this industry remained in Indian hands, till the invention of rifled breech-loaders in the middle of the 19th century. These Agra and Mungir gunsmiths of Indian race excited the admiration of British officers by their clever imitation of European models as late as the age of Waterloo.

All the firearms of the Mughal army formed a separate department under one chief, styled the *Mir Atish* or *Daroghai-Top-Khanah*, and no part of it was under any infantry colonel. The department was divided into two branches, each with its separate arsenal and administrative staff, but a common head.
One was called the Jinsi-topkhanah and comprised the wheeled artillery, the fort-guns and the swivel-guns; the other was called the Dasti-topkhanah and dealt with the muskets or hand-guns. In the artillery proper, Europeans, mestizoes and black Christians predominated, the low-caste Hindus and Muslims supplying only the gun lascars, though dignified with the title of Golandaz. In the hand-gun branch most of the captains (called hazaris) and men were Hindus of Oudh and Buxar, but many were foreign Muslims from Persia (hence called Mughalia) and some Indo-Muslims of the Ruhela and other Afghan clans (especially from Malwa and Sindh).

Thus, the Hindus were totally eliminated from the main artillery department of the Mughal Army, which was officered and manned mostly by foreigners.

In the Indian armies the cavalry did not carry carabines, but only swords and lances, all the musketeers were unmounted infantry. But in the late 18th century, the Sikh misls and the Durrani troops used fire-arms from horseback and camelback as a rule, and thus restored the element of mobility to Indian warfare. Still later, this tendency was counteracted by the increased importance of European-trained infantry or “campoo paltans” which necessarily robbed the “regular” armies of swiftness of movement.

We should bear in mind that in the Mughal artillery guns were drawn by bullocks, with an elephant in some cases to push big ordnance from behind on broken roads. This was also the practice of the E. I. Co. to the end of the 18th century, though in Europe wheeled artillery was drawn by horses from about 1600. It was only in 1793 that De Boigne attached four light pieces (three pounders, called gallopers) each drawn by two horses to the regular Cavalry Regiment raised by him for Mahadji Sindhia, while the bigger pieces of the force were ox-drawn. The munition for each galopper was carried by four camels into the field. The British used “the Flying Artillery” or horse-drawn galloper guns (6 lbs.) for the first time in General Lake’s North Indian campaign against the Marathas in 1803, with great success. (See Fall of The Mughal Empire, IV, 117, 269, 283, 293).

J. Forbes wrote in 1775,—“The war-rocket used by the
Marathas is composed of an iron tube eight or ten inches long; and near two inches in diameter; this destructive weapon is sometimes fixed to a rod of iron, sometimes to a straight two-edged sword, but most commonly to a strong bamboocane, four or five feet long, with an iron spike projecting beyond the tube: to this rod or staff, the tube filled with combustible materials is fastened, and on the lighted match setting fire to the fuze, is projected with great velocity; if well directed, which is an uncertain operation, it causes much confusion and dismay among the enemy.” (Oriental Memoirs, 2nd ed., i. 359-360).