

## TRADITIONAL ARCHERY IN INDIA

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### Abstract

Traditional archery is the prehistoric version of archery worldwide. It is related to the cultural obligations of human kind and religious rituals. Archery in India has been an integral part of its cultural and martial heritage for centuries. From mythological references in epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana to its use in warfare and tribal practices, archery has played a significant role in shaping Indian history. This paper explores the origins, evolution, and contemporary relevance of traditional Indian archery, highlighting regional variations, materials used, and its decline with the advent of modern weaponry.

### INTRODUCTION:

Archery is one of the oldest weaponry art of defense, as well as war. Archery in India dates back to ancient times, with legendary warriors such as Arjuna, Ekalavya, and Karna being celebrated for their prowess. Traditionally, archery was a key component of warfare and hunting, as well as an essential skill for kings and soldiers. Over time, it also became a part of tribal traditions and folk sports.

#### Historical Development

Indian archery can be classified into three major phases:

1. Mythological and Ancient Era – Depicted in Hindu scriptures and Buddhist texts, archery was considered a divine skill. Dhanurveda, an ancient treatise on warfare, provided detailed instructions on archery techniques.
2. Medieval Period – Rajputs, Mughals, and Marathas extensively used bows and arrows in battle. The composite bow, introduced by the Mughals, improved accuracy and range.
3. Colonial and Modern Era – With the arrival of firearms, traditional archery declined as a

combat skill but persisted as a tribal and sporting practice.

#### Regional Variations

Different regions in India developed their own styles of archery:

- Naga and Bhil Tribes – Continued using bows for hunting and warfare.
- Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh – Practiced traditional bamboo archery as a recreational sport.
- Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh – Rajput warriors were known for their superior archery skills.

Traditional Indian bows were made from bamboo, horn, and wood, often reinforced with sinew for added strength. Arrows varied in design based on their use—war arrows were heavier, while hunting arrows had barbed tips for effectiveness.

#### Decline and Revival Efforts

The use of archery in warfare diminished with the advent of modern weapons. However, efforts have been made to preserve this heritage through cultural festivals, traditional

competitions, and government initiatives to promote indigenous sports.

**Ancient Archery (Historical view of archery):**

Archery has been an integral part of human civilization for thousands of years, serving as a crucial tool for hunting, warfare, and sport. The origins of archery date back to the Paleolithic era, around 20,000 BCE, when early humans crafted simple wooden bows reinforced with sinew or horn. Arrows initially had stone or bone tips, which later evolved into metal arrowheads, increasing their effectiveness. Ancient civilizations across the world embraced archery for various purposes. The Egyptians, as early as 3000 BCE, used archers in their military campaigns, hunting expeditions, and even sporting events. Similarly, Mesopotamian cultures like the Sumerians, Assyrians, and Babylonians developed composite bows, which provided greater power and range. In ancient China, archery played a significant role in both warfare and ceremonial traditions, with Confucius emphasizing its importance as a moral and disciplined art. India has a rich archery tradition, deeply rooted in mythology and history. The great epics Mahabharata and Ramayana highlight legendary archers such as Arjuna and Karna, whose skills were celebrated in warfare. The Indian text Dhanurveda detailed the science of archery, making it a vital part of military training. In contrast, Greek and Roman armies relied more on infantry and cavalry, using archers mainly as auxiliary forces. However, the Persian and Parthian armies were highly skilled in mounted archery, particularly known for the deadly "Parthian shot," in which a retreating archer could turn and shoot accurately. In Asia, Japanese archery, known as Kyudo, evolved from a samurai warfare technique into a refined spiritual discipline. Meanwhile, the Mongols, under Genghis Khan, became legendary for their horseback archery, using highly efficient composite bows that allowed them to dominate vast territories. In medieval Europe, the English longbow became a powerful weapon, playing a decisive role in battles like Agincourt (1415). Trained longbowmen could launch arrows with deadly

precision and force, making them formidable opponents in war. Additionally, the crossbow gained popularity in European warfare due to its armor-piercing capability and ease of use compared to traditional bows. However, with the advent of firearms in the 16th century, archery gradually lost its significance as a weapon of war. Despite its decline in military use, archery continued as a cultural and sporting tradition across the world, eventually becoming a competitive discipline in modern times. Ancient archery was more than just a means of survival or warfare; it was deeply intertwined with culture, religion, and social status in many civilizations. Across different regions, archery techniques and equipment evolved to suit the needs of the people using them. The materials for bows varied depending on geography—simple self-bows were common in regions with abundant wood, while composite bows, made from a combination of wood, horn, and sinew, were developed in arid regions like Central Asia and the Middle East to provide superior power and range. These composite bows were particularly effective for mounted archers, enabling civilizations like the Scythians, Parthians, and Mongols to dominate the battlefield. In ancient India, archery was not only a key military skill but also a sacred discipline.

**The Dhanurveda**

An ancient treatise on warfare, categorized archery as one of the key martial arts that warriors had to master. Hindu epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana depict archery as a divine skill, with heroes like Arjuna and Karna demonstrating near-superhuman abilities with their bows. The bow was often associated with deities—Lord Shiva wielded the Pinaka, while Lord Rama carried the Kodanda. Similarly, in Chinese tradition, archery was considered one of the Six Noble Arts that scholars and warriors had to learn. Confucius himself was an archery teacher, emphasizing the sport's role in character building, discipline, and moral development. One of the most significant developments in ancient archery was the use of archers in organized military formations.

The Egyptian and Assyrian armies fielded units of archers, sometimes mounted on chariots, to harass enemy troops from a distance. The Persians, under leaders like Cyrus the Great and Darius I, perfected the use of massed archers to weaken enemy ranks before engaging in close combat. The Greeks, although primarily focused on hoplite warfare, employed Cretan archers as auxiliary forces. The Romans, who initially relied on infantry, later integrated archers into their legions, often recruiting them from regions renowned for their archery skills, such as Syria and Crete. In East Asia, Japan developed its own distinct archery tradition known as Kyujutsu (the art of the bow), which later evolved into Kyudo (the way of the bow). Samurai warriors trained extensively in archery before the introduction of firearms in the 16th century. Japanese longbows, or Yumi, were unique in their asymmetrical design, which allowed archers to shoot while on horseback. Similarly, the Mongols perfected mounted archery, using short, powerful composite bows that allowed them to shoot accurately at full gallop. Their ability to rain arrows on their enemies while riding at high speeds was a key factor in their conquest of vast territories. In medieval Europe, archery became a crucial element of warfare, particularly with the rise of the English longbow. The longbow, often made from yew wood, could shoot arrows over great distances with remarkable force. It played a decisive role in battles like Crecy (1346) and Agincourt (1415), where English longbowmen devastated French knights. Meanwhile, the crossbow gained popularity in both Europe and China. Although slower to reload than a longbow, the crossbow was easier to use and could penetrate armor, making it a favored weapon among mercenaries and foot soldiers. Despite the decline of archery in warfare with the rise of gunpowder weapons, its legacy persisted in sport and tradition. Many ancient cultures, such as the Mongols, Japanese, and Native Americans, continued to practice archery for ceremonial and recreational purposes. Today, traditional archery is still celebrated worldwide, with many modern competitions drawing inspiration from these ancient techniques.

Archery's historical significance remains evident in literature, mythology, and cultural

traditions, proving that the bow and arrow were not just tools of war but symbols of skill, discipline, and heritage.

### **Vedic Archery**

Archery held a significant place in Vedic civilization, both as a practical skill for warfare and hunting, and as a spiritual and philosophical discipline. The Vedic period (1500–500 BCE) saw the development of Dhanurveda, the ancient Indian science of warfare, which classified archery as one of the key martial arts. The bow and arrow were not only tools of battle but were also closely associated with divine power and cosmic order. The Rigveda, the oldest of the Vedas, contains numerous hymns referencing bows and arrows, often depicting them as instruments of divine will. The warrior class, or Kshatriyas, was expected to master archery as a fundamental part of their training. Archers played a crucial role in Vedic warfare, engaging in long-range combat before engaging in hand-to-hand battle. The Atharvaveda also describes different types of arrows, some with magical or symbolic significance, used in rituals and warfare alike. Mythology and epic literature further solidified the importance of archery. In the Ramayana, Lord Rama, an avatar of Vishnu, wielded the divine bow Kodanda and displayed unparalleled archery skills. His breaking of Lord Shiva's bow during Sita's swayamvara (marriage contest) symbolized both his strength and his divine destiny. Similarly, in the Mahabharata, Arjuna was regarded as the greatest archer of his time, trained by Guru Dronacharya in the art of Dhanurveda. The legendary Brahmastra, a powerful celestial weapon, was invoked using specific mantras and could only be wielded by highly trained archers. Apart from warfare, archery was also considered a disciplined practice, closely linked with self-control and spiritual growth. Kings and warriors were expected to train rigorously in the use of bows and arrows, often practicing in gurukuls under the guidance of sages and masters. This emphasis on archery as both a

martial and moral discipline highlights its significance in Vedic culture.

Vedic Archery: The Ancient Science of Dhanurveda

Archery played a crucial role in Vedic civilization, both as a practical skill for warfare and hunting, and as a disciplined art connected

### 1. Archery in the Vedas

The Rigveda, the oldest of the four Vedas, contains numerous hymns referencing bows and arrows. These weapons were often described as instruments of divine justice, used by gods to defeat evil forces. The Atharvaveda also mentions different types of arrows, including those imbued with mystical powers. Bows were believed to have sacred energy, and their use was often accompanied by mantras and rituals to invoke divine blessings.

### 2. Dhanurveda: The Vedic Martial Art

The term Dhanurveda (literally, "knowledge of the bow") is an ancient text that served as a manual for warriors, covering archery techniques, weaponry, and battlefield strategies. It was part of a larger body of military knowledge that prepared Kshatriyas for combat. Training in Dhanurveda was rigorous and often began in childhood under the guidance of a guru. Disciples learned precision, speed, and control through structured exercises, including shooting arrows at moving targets and practicing from horseback or chariots.

### 3. Mythological and Epic Archers

Vedic and epic literature is filled with legendary archers whose skill and precision were unmatched. In the Ramayana, Lord Rama is depicted as the supreme archer, wielding the divine bow Kodanda. His act of breaking Lord Shiva's bow during Sita's swayamvara (marriage contest) symbolized his divine strength. The Mahabharata presents several renowned archers, most notably Arjuna, who was trained by Guru Dronacharya and displayed exceptional skill, even earning the celestial bow Gandiva. His rivalry with Karna, another expert archer, is one of the most dramatic elements of the epic. Additionally, warriors like Bhishma,

to spiritual and cosmic principles. The Vedic period (1500–500 BCE) saw the formalization of Dhanurveda, the science of archery and warfare, which was considered one of the key branches of knowledge for Kshatriyas (warrior class). The bow (dhanus) was more than just a weapon—it was a symbol of divine power, dharma (righteousness), and discipline.

Drona, and Ekalavya were known for their extraordinary archery skills.

### 4. Symbolism and Spiritual Aspects

In Vedic philosophy, archery was not just a martial skill but also a path to self-discipline and enlightenment. The Bhagavad Gita, which takes place on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, uses archery as a metaphor for focus and detachment. Lord Krishna instructs Arjuna to perform his duty as a warrior without attachment to the outcome, drawing parallels between a disciplined archer and a yogi who controls his mind and senses.

### 5. Weapons and Techniques

Vedic archery involved various types of bows and arrows, some of which were believed to be imbued with divine energy. The Brahmastra, for instance, was a celestial weapon that could destroy entire armies and was only accessible to highly trained warriors. Other specialized arrows included the Agneyastra (fire arrow), Varunastra (water arrow), and Vayavastra (wind arrow), which were invoked using sacred mantras.

### 6. Training and Warfare

Young Kshatriyas were trained in archery in gurukuls, under strict discipline. Training involved:

Practicing Shabdabhedhi (shooting by sound, without seeing the target)

Shooting multiple arrows at once (Bahubaan)

Firing arrows while riding horses or chariots (Ashwarohi and Ratharohi)

Long-range precision shooting (Durbhiksha)

### CONCLUSION

Archers played a crucial role in Vedic warfare, often positioned in chariots or on elephants to

dominate the battlefield from a distance before engaging in close combat.

With time, the advent of new weapons and warfare strategies led to the decline of traditional Vedic archery in battle. However, its principles continued to be revered in Indian culture. Even today, traditional archery is practiced in some regions, and the teachings of

Bhramari Pranayama is a simple and accessible breathing technique with significant potential in managing anxiety in preadolescents. Its psychological benefits, coupled with its ease of practice, make it a valuable addition to anxiety

Dhanurveda are reflected in modern martial arts. The legacy of Vedic archery is preserved in mythology, literature, and religious rituals, where the bow remains a symbol of power, discipline, and righteousness. Today, modern archery rules the nation as a world sport event. The scope for traditional archery is to regain its most valuable cultural values. The forgotten tradition can be remembered through archery.

management strategies. Future research should focus on large-scale clinical trials to validate its effectiveness and explore its integration into holistic mental health interventions for preadolescents.

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