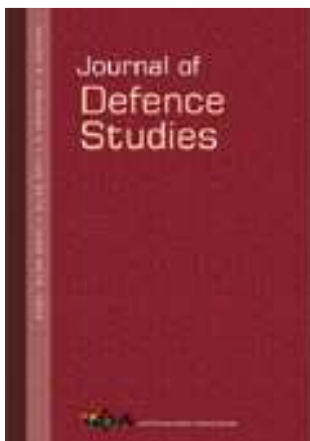


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Conceptualising Stress in the Armed Forces

A Public Health Perspective

*Yasir Hamid Bhat**

In recent years, the frequent reports of suicide and fragging cases among armed forces personnel have prompted several questions about the negative effects of stressful life experiences on the well-being of soldiers. The narrow conception of mental health is not enough to understand and explain the status of mental health and well-being of a soldier, which eclipses the interwoven nature of various social determinants of health at workplace, such as the complexity of social categories reflected in class, power and caste structures. These work jointly to produce vulnerability to stress and affect the mental health and well-being of the armed forces personnel. With the aim of conceptualising stress in military settings and its effects on soldier's mental well-being, the present article explores the complex interrelationships between a soldier's mental well-being and his/her work, the organisational structures, processes and the environment within which they operate.

There is an increasing understanding of the close interrelation between 'intrinsic value of work to the health and life satisfaction of the worker'.¹ Work not only helps us to fulfil our basic needs but also provides us means by which we achieve higher-level needs, such as need for competence, meaning and social engagement.² It also plays a major role in our lives and wields an important influence on our sense of well-being and identity.³ As noted by Kielhofner,⁴ 'a person's identity is a function of his or her validated social roles, particularly those associated with occupation. Consequently, the loss of such valued roles can lead to psychological

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distress and subsequent loss of function.’ Workplace stress is estimated to be a huge occupational health problem.⁵ Work often interferes with the accomplishment of family duties, such as caregiving for aged parents and young children, because of the time demand.⁶ Thomas and Ganster⁷ have also found that more interference is associated with less job satisfaction and more mental health problems and health complaints.

Given the nature of work and the amount of time spent at work by soldiers, it is not surprising that both work and workplace environment are potential sources of significant stress, wielding a significant influence on the health and mental well-being of the soldiers. Although an increasing number of studies have focused on the long-term health consequences of conflicts on the armed forces,⁸ relatively few studies have focused on the impact of armed conflicts on relationships, work and other aspects of soldiers’ life. Moreover, the frequent reports of suicide and fragging⁹ cases among the military and paramilitary personnel have prompted several questions about the consequences of armed conflicts (see Tables 1 and 2).

The bulk of existing literature on mental health among the armed forces personnel theorises stress as an individual problem, specifically focusing on the pathological part of it. This prescriptive understanding of mental health and stress leads to nowhere but ‘blaming the victims’ by ‘personalising the stress’ and ‘individualising the interventions’. This appears to hold true when we look at it in the Indian context.

Table 1 Rank-wise Suicide Cases in Paramilitary Forces (PMF) in India

<i>PMF</i>	<i>2004–06</i>	<i>2007–08</i>	<i>2009–10</i>	<i>2011–February 2012</i>
Border Security Force	122	17	55	45
Central Reserve Police Force	77	26	56	48
Central Industrial Security Force	27	4	33	16
Indo-Tibetan Border Police Force	11	3	11	4
Assam Rifles	45	7	18	10
Sashastra Seema Bal	13	-	24	12
National Security Guard	1	-	0	3
Total	296	57	197	138

Source: Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha unstarred questions (relevant years).¹⁰

Table 2 Fragging Cases in PMF in India

<i>PMF</i>	<i>2007–08</i>	<i>2009</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2011</i>
Border Security Force	–	1	2	2
Central Reserve Police Force	6	5	15	5
Central Industrial Security Force	–	2	–	2
Indo-Tibetan Border Police Force	–	–	–	–
Assam Rifles	–	–	–	–
Sashastra Seema Bal	–	1	–	2
National Security Guard	–	–	–	–
Total	6	9	17	11

Source: Rajya Sabha unstarred questions (relevant years).¹¹

In general, stress among personnel in the armed forces is considered a malfunctioned behavioural pattern, and more specifically a ‘contagious psychiatric disorder’, that needs to be deeply probed to detect and screen out dissidents. This narrow conception of mental health is not only inadequate to understand and explain the status of mental health and well-being of a soldier, but, in fact, eclipses the interwoven nature of various social determinants of health at workplace. Thus, the concentration of literature on mental health of armed forces personnel does point to the possibility that structural and systematic problems have been individualised and thereby *pathologised*.

Moreover, the prescriptive and myopic understanding of mental health¹² and well-being progressively undermines the complexity of the social categories reflected in class, power and caste structures, which work together to produce vulnerability to stress and affect the mental health and well-being of the armed forces. Therefore, stress and its effect on soldier’s mental well-being cannot be studied in isolation from the influence of the processes (material, non-material as well as psychosocial) fashioned by them. Their importance lies in the fact that they serve as markers of different experiences. These social categories are therefore to be understood as constitutive of their identity within the workplace and impacting relationships of power and thereby impacting health. As a matter of fact, improving the health status is not possible unless the structural issues which sustain inequality are addressed. The interest of the present study stems from this recognition. With the aim of conceptualising stress in military settings and its effects on soldier’s mental well-being, this article attempts to explore the complex interrelationships between a soldier’s mental well-being and his/her work,

organisational structures, processes and the environment within which he/she operates.

This article draws on a larger study on Border Security Force (BSF) carried out in 2008–09. The BSF, as an organisation, can be studied in any context in any state. The reason for studying it in relation to Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) is that it has a historical significance both in terms of the conflict as well as the military presence there. The extreme climatic conditions and the topography of the place make it one of the toughest terrains to work in. Working in a conflict-affected region with a unique set of stressors, along with the transformation of the role from border policing (border guarding) to a counter-insurgency (CI)¹³ agency, the BSF's role in Kashmir conflict offers an opportunity to understand and construe the complexity of a soldier's life.

PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH

Contrary to the biomedical model,¹⁴ which leaves no room within its framework for the socio-economic and political forces that fashion and determine the health of populations, public health adopts an approach which, by and large, acknowledges that health is multidimensional. This approach not only accounts for behavioural, biological and genetic factors but also a range of economic, environmental and social forces that determine one's access to public health. On the one hand, it offers us a window into the micro-level processes by which social structures lead to individual health or illness and, on the other, it provides an opportunity to consider the macro-level processes by which power relationships and political ideologies shape the quality of these social structures. It also offers us numerous vantage points not only to analyse and understand this complex matrix but also to enquire about how power, politics and economic relations shape the organisation of society, and the distribution of wealth and other resources, the values that determine the type of society we live in. For instance, adequate work, secure housing, food availability, adequate income, meaningful roles in society, higher level of education, social support within communities and political human rights are associated with better mental health and well-being.¹⁵ While analysing the factors (in the organisation realm) affecting mental health and well-being of BSF personnel, the present study does not limit itself to merely material conditions such as infrequent rest breaks, long working hours, and heavy workload, among others. It also addresses other important and crucial issues like social relation reflected in caste, communal and regional

affiliations; organisation power position reflected in rank hierarchy and interpersonal relations; fairness/justice at work; dignity/respect; and workplace harassments and discrimination, which profoundly influence the mental health and well-being of soldiers.

SOCIAL GRADIENT AND STRESS

The occupational setting provides unique opportunities to experience rewards, success and satisfaction, and thus to promote health and well-being by eliciting strong positive emotions. At the same time, exposure to stressful job conditions, particularly among the lower range of workers, carries a potential risk of ill health by virtue of the amount of time spent and the quality of demands faced at work. In their study, 'Health Inequalities and the Psychosocial Environment: Two Scientific Challenges', Siegrist and Marmot¹⁶ note that those in lower strata of the social hierarchy are more likely to be exposed to adverse psychosocial environment defined by high demands and low control, as well as experience jobs with high demands for effort coupled with low rewards. There are, in fact, marked differences in a number of characteristics across the different social class groups.

Social class position has been found to be a strong predictor of the degree of control at work and social support at work.¹⁷ Social class position outside of the workplace gets reflected as class within the workplace. This is due to the fact that access to social goods like education is only possible along class lines. There is an interrelation between social class position of individuals both within and outside the armed forces. Along with less control and less support at work, other exposures tend to be much more present in certain groups than others. For instance, hazardous work exposures and heavy physical job demands are often present in lower-level working-class jobs and manual labour, which tend to be considerably monotonous in nature as compared to those in a managerial/professional class, 'who tend to have high psychological job demands, high levels of work control, and very low levels of physical demands and low levels of hazardous exposure'.¹⁸

WORKPLACE HARASSMENT, HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Research carried out on occupational health and safety of workers has shown that there is a direct relation between harassment and workplace illness, injuries or assaults as compared to other job stressors.¹⁹ Workplace

harassment has been defined as negative workplace interactions that 'create a hostile, intimidating, or offensive working environment'.²⁰ Harassment can be defined in various ways, for example, emotional abuse,²¹ bullying²² and aggression²³; one thing that is common to all is the phenomenological experience. To analyse it in the Indian context, harassment has the potential to be more nuanced owing to the factoring in of differences based on caste, religion, ethnicity, region, etc. One of the most delicate and complex structures of stratification that evolved through a gradual process of social development is the caste structure, which has historically exploited and marginalised certain communities for thousands of years. Caste stratification is experienced by individuals and groups mostly through the trope of dignity/indignity. Thus, all these factors explain the sum and substance of socio-economic inequalities which have a causal effect on mental and physical health, which then go on to perpetuate further social inequalities in health.²⁴

DIGNITY AND FAIRNESS

The workplace is the setting for multiple encounters between individuals and collectives within an organisation. In the tussle for resources, spaces and places, dignity is mostly violated through social processes like caste, class, gender, religion and legitimacy, manifested in the form of discrimination, rudeness, disregard, contempt and exclusion and physical and psychological violence. The physical and social environment of the workplace reinforces individual and collective asymmetries and the inequalities of the broader social order, leading those who live on the social and spatial margins to feel that they are less worthy or valuable than their fellow workers. These absolute and relative deprivations create demoralisation and stress, thereby making dignity a crucial determinant of workers' health.²⁵

METHODOLOGY

We opted to use an 'exploratory' research design to gain an in-depth understanding of how the individual experiences of workplace and its associated issues affect the lives of soldiers. As it was not practically possible to include all the strategic areas of BSF in the study, the study was restricted to one specific region which offers a 'unique' blend of diversity. J&K provides an example of this amalgamation. It is a place where one can find a lot of assorted functions which the BSF is performing.

For sample selection, we opted for ‘non-proportional quota sampling’ of ‘purposive sampling’. In this method, we specify the minimum number of sampled units we want in each category. Here, we are not concerned with having numbers that match the proportions in the population. Instead, we simply want to have enough to ensure that we will be able to talk about even small groups in the population. A total sample of 177 respondents was selected for the quantitative part of the study. This included 131 (that is, 74.01 per cent) respondents from Jammu Frontier and 46 (that is, 25.98 per cent) participants from Kashmir Frontier. For qualitative part of the research, a total of 155 respondents participated, out of which 114 (that is, 73.54 per cent) were selected from Jammu Frontier and 41 respondents (that is, 26.45 per cent) were from Kashmir Frontier. The sample for the study was identified through a two-stage procedure (for further details, see Table 3).

Stage 1: Selection According to the Nature of Duty

The sample was divided into four broad categories based on the soldier’s job description (assigned to ‘units’):

1. Soldiers presently deployed at static locations providing security to the training centres and frontier/sector headquarters, including Governor House (Raj Bawan), residences of present and former chief ministers and other important places.

Table 3 Description of Respondents Based on Rank Order

<i>Ranks (top-down)</i>	<i>Jammu</i>		<i>Kashmir</i>		<i>J&K</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Commandant	6	3.3	2	4.3	8	4.5
Second-in-Command	8	3.3	3	6.5	11	6.2
Deputy Commandant	8	10.0	3	6.5	11	6.2
Assistant Commandant	8	6.7	3	6.5	11	6.2
Inspector	11	6.7	4	8.7	15	8.5
Sub-inspector	19	16.7	5	10.9	24	13.6
Assistant Sub-inspector	11	6.7	4	8.7	15	8.5
Head Constable	26	16.7	7	15.2	33	18.6
Constable	19	13.3	9	19.6	28	15.8
Class IV	15	16.7	6	13.0	21	11.9
Total	131	100	46	100	177	100

Source: Author.

2. Soldiers presently deployed on Line of Control (LoC), which also includes the places/posts at high altitude (up to 18,000 feet above the sea level).
3. Soldiers presently involved in counter-insurgency operations and internal security matters.
4. Soldiers presently deployed on international border (IB).

Stage 2: Selection According to the Ranks

At the unit level, the whole battalion was divided into four broad categories:

1. *Enrolled Followers (Class IV)*: This category is the lowest in the chain of command and includes 'sweepers', 'cooks', 'barbers', 'washermen', 'water carriers', etc.
2. *Other Ranks (ORs)*: This category is the nucleus of the battalion and constitutes the major portion of it (in terms of numbers). It includes 'constables' and 'head constables'.
3. *Subordinate Officers (SOs)*: This category consists of 'Assistant Sub-Inspectors' (ASIs), 'Sub-Inspectors' (SIs) and 'Inspectors'.
4. *Officers*: Officers (also known as commissioned officers) in this category include 'Assistant Commandants' (ACs), 'Deputy Commandants' (DCs), 'Second-in-Command' (2ICs) and 'Commandants' (COs).

The same categorisation was used for the qualitative part of the study. Due to disputes with neighbouring countries of Pakistan and China, Kashmir Frontier does not have an IB. Therefore, for both qualitative and quantitative data, samples respondent stationed at international broader were taken from Jammu Frontier only.

For data collection, a self-administered questionnaire was developed. As quantitative data was insufficient for in-depth exploration of issues concerning the BSF personnel, interview technique was also used, for which an interview guide was made. But before initiating the data collection process, tools were translated into Hindi from English and both the versions were pre-tested to ensure that the developed questions were congruent with the proposed research objectives. The data collection was done in two phases. In the first phase, data was collected from the Kashmir Frontier (from 15 December 2008 to 17 January 2009). In the second phase of data collection, the researcher visited the Jammu Frontier (from 12 February 2009 to 2 March 2009). During both the

phases of data collection, to make respondents comfortable, each rank category was called separately for gathering data. Data collection was carried out without the presence of any other senior or junior ranks, so that the respondents would feel free to answer without any disturbance or external pressure. For analysis, simple descriptive statistics, as well as cross-tabulation, was used to interpret the data.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

In this section, based on recurrent themes and broad patterns, the major findings of the study have been analysed and are discussed under three major headings, which are further divided into various sub-themes. Further analysis is done keeping in mind the specificity of each rank group, their work profile (office work, field work), interpersonal relations (with officers, peer groups), caste, regional affiliation, rank affiliation, and support mechanisms—family, peer groups, superiors, etc.

Work Structure

Comfortable and safe environment is one of the primary requirements for a healthy workplace. Work structures or task designs are the crucial determinants in this matter. Work structure is about the ways to organise a set of tasks, or an entire job. It improves workers' motivation and dedication to work. However, poor work structures, including heavy workload, infrequent rest breaks, long hours and shift work, can lead to unhealthy work environment. Moreover, working in jobs in which workers have little control over their daily tasks, that is, having no control over the job they do in the workplace, is likely to put a person under stress. Therefore, the unpredictability of task given, which is reflective of loss/lack of control over one's own work, has a major role in stress.

Long Working Hours

Across J&K frontiers and rank categories, 56 per cent of the respondents reported that they work for more than 15 hours a day²⁶ (this includes 37 per cent of 'Officers', 52 per cent of 'SOs', 67 per cent of 'ORs' and 76 per cent of 'Class IV'), whereas 35 per cent of respondents revealed that *sometimes* they are pressurised by their superiors to work for longer durations. Among the different rank groups, 38 per cent of 'Class IV' category reported that they are *often* being pressurised to work for longer durations and 38 per cent of 'ORs' reported being *always* pressurised by

their superiors. This may be quite detrimental for a soldier who is already burdened by his work.

We are working for 24 hours as there is no fixed time...you can be called at any time even when you are sleeping. (Head Constable, IB, Jammu)

Normally how many hours one can perform his duty...may be 8 hours, 10 hours at most but we are doing it day and night. There is no standard.... (Constable, CI Ops, Jammu)

Although there is a specific timing for breakfast, lunch and dinner but who cares, officers are masters of their own will. Whenever they like they can come. Most of them ask for tea during middle of the night and I have to prepare it. I can't sleep properly. (Cook, Static Duty, posting anonymous)

Following the normal trend of working hours, if the number of working hours are too long, it is quite likely to affect the health as well as the work itself. While analysing the data, it has been found that because of the existing situation in the region, even the 'Officer' group reported experiencing excessive workload. This was further substantiated by the variation found between 'Officers' from Jammu Frontier (where 47 per cent reported working 9–11 hours per day) and 'Officers' from Kashmir Frontier (64 per cent said that they worked more than 15 hours a day).

Infrequent Rest Breaks

Across sample, 44 per cent of the respondents reported that despite their busy working schedule, *sometimes* they take short breaks in between their long working hours, and 59 per cent respondents (except 'ORs') said that they are *never* allowed to do so.

Where, generally, the rest breaks tend to give us strength and refresh our attention, in case of the BSF, rest periods themselves are stressful. The nature of duties of constables (generally includes standing duty) and Class IV (physical labour) is physically taxing. The constables across frontiers complained that even after finishing their duties, they do not get time for rest.

After you finish your job you will be called for 'working' (term referring to work that one has to do apart from his assigned usual work). When will you wash your clothes, eat food, or do other things? There is no time for so called recreation. You don't even get time to get proper sleep. (Constable, LoC, Kashmir)

Increasing work demands and little tolerance for less-than-optimal performance and for making mistakes also contribute to increase the stress levels among soldiers. Moreover, among all the respondents, particularly among the lower ranks, there has been little openness to speak about the organisation, and in part they may be in a state of denial with respect to this condition.

Heavy Workload

The demands placed on armed forces personnel vary according to their job classification. The lower ranks are more involved in physical work than the other ranks. This has been substantiated by the qualitative as well as quantitative findings. The data on nature of jobs reveals that 86 per cent of 'ORs' and 95 per cent of 'Class IV' are exclusively involved in physical labour (including standing duty, patrolling, cooking, cleaning, etc.) compared to 54 per cent of 'Officers' and 40 per cent of 'ORs' who reported being involved in both office and field work (field is quite different from physical labour as field work may not necessarily involve physical labour).

There is no Sunday [holiday], every day is a work day. For my rank particularly it is an unending process. (Constable, CI Ops, Kashmir)

Our day starts with preparing food and ends with it. There are no shifts; you have to do it from morning and evening, Sunday to Saturday. (Cook, Static Duty, Kashmir)

Lack of Control over the Work and Workplace

Another important issue related to soldiers' work is that of control, that is, the amount of control a soldier has over his work, or the extent to which a soldier can participate in the process which governs his work, or to what extent a soldier is free to ask questions about the reason if there has been a change in his work. These issues are very important as they are crucial and important indicators of individual freedom, which is essential for an individual's identity. It gives meaning to one's life and the things he or she does. However, from data analysis, it has been found that 56 per cent of the respondents (which includes 37 per cent of 'Officers', 54 per cent of 'SOs', 68 per cent 'ORs', and 67 per cent of 'Class IV' across J&K frontiers) *never* had an opportunity to question their superiors about change at work which directly influences them, while 48 per cent of respondents (including 24 per cent of 'Officers', 40 per cent of 'SOs', 57 per cent 'ORs' and 86 per cent of 'Class IV' across

J&K frontiers) reported that they were *never* consulted about change at work.

I cannot question my superior; I just follow orders. I can't do anything of my own. (Constable, LoC, Kashmir)

I am doing what they (superiors) want me to do. My decisions are just the expressions of my superiors. (Inspector, LoC, Kashmir)

We are just mere working machines. If you really want to understand a soldier, Gandhi Ji's three monkeys are the best to describe him. (2IC, place and posting anonymous)

We are just like computers; both cannot do things without command. (AC, place & posting anonymous)

Management and the Justice at Workplace

Efficient management is not restricted only to the ways for smooth functioning of the organisation, but is also a source of dignity and respect for all workers. It introduces changes in an organisational culture; and improves the physical and emotional well-being of workers, that is, providing equal opportunities for growth and development. Autonomy, respect and appreciation and justice at workplace are few of the factors which are critical for effective management, and also contribute to the overall working environment. Since BSF invariably uses the 'top-down command and control' management style, which makes it highly bureaucratic and hierarchical in structure, it is essential to consider the potential of these factors at the workplace to increase well-being, and the conditions necessary for healthy working environment. Although these certainly are not the only influencing factors that translate into better well-being, but, undoubtedly, they have an indispensable influence on the health and well-being of the soldiers.

Autonomy

The data shows that 41 per cent of the respondents (which includes 15 per cent of 'Officers', 37 per cent of 'SOs', 57 per cent 'ORs' and 57 per cent of 'Class IV' across J&K frontiers) *never* had a choice to take decisions or plan their work, whereas 59 per cent of respondents (which includes 20 per cent of 'Officers', 52 per cent of 'SOs', 86 per cent 'ORs' and 76 per cent of 'Class IV' across J&K frontiers) stated that they had *never* been given the opportunity to work the way they want to.

...we just follow the orders; you cannot do anything of your own. Everything is decided by our seniors, we have to follow what comes to us. (Constable, LoC, Kashmir)

Everything in this job is pre-decided. There is no scope for any change and by chance if someone attempts to do so, he is prosecuted for disciplinary action. (AC, Static Location, Jammu)

Among the various rank groups, only 'Officer', with a significant proportion of 39 per cent, reported having full control over their work, with an equal amount (39 per cent) saying that they always have freedom to execute their duties at their own speed. On the other hand, the lower rank categories were neither able to influence nor say anything in the organisational planning or other decision-making processes that directly or indirectly influences them or their work. This disparity indicates the degree to which the organisation is segregated on the lines of power hierarchy and control. Although the planning is to be done by the top authorities, allowing the workers to have a say in the manner or the nature of the work would be an effective strategy for creating a better work environment.

Respect and Appreciation

In addition to control over work schedules, dignity, fairness, respect and appreciation from the significant others at workplace (which in the present case are officers and colleagues) are crucial factors which have a profound effect on the individual psyche. The data reveals that 32 per cent respondents across J&K frontiers reported *sometimes* receiving respect that they deserve from their superiors, while 47 per cent of respondents across ranks and frontiers reported *sometimes* being appreciated by their senior officers for their work. However, a significant variation has been observed among the different rank groups. For instance, 38 per cent of 'Class IV' employees reported *never* getting respect from their superiors, whereas 37 per cent the 'Officers' reported getting it *always*.

...if you're doing wrong, they (pointing towards superiors) will point out that. But if you do something right they will never say 'You've done right'. So you always are on the fence and uncertain about your work. (Cook, Static Duty, Jammu)

Interestingly, rank seems to play a crucial role in every aspect of the job as 49 per cent 'Officers' reported that their superiors often give them

supportive feedback for their work, while the rest of the ranks experienced this only *sometimes*.

Similarly, recognition and respect from colleagues with whom soldiers probably spend more time than their own family can be an answer to many workplace problems. The study shows that across sample, 35 per cent of respondents reported being on good terms and *always* getting along with their colleagues, which includes 37 per cent of 'Officers', 33 per cent of 'SOs'; and 33 per cent of 'Class IV' reported they have *always* been respected by their colleagues. Whereas 37 per cent of 'ORs' reported *sometimes* being respected by their colleagues.

Despite some differences, we respect each other. (Inspector, Static Duty, Kashmir)

This is more than a job; this is a way of life. We live like a family.
(DC, Static Duty, Jammu)

Justice at Work

The attitude of the top officials towards junior ranks, or superiors towards their subordinates, matters the most. An indicator of justice at work is whether people believe that their supervisor considers their viewpoints, shares information concerning decision making and treats individuals in a genuine and fair manner. In the BSF, which is a closed organisation and strictly hierarchal in nature, inter-rank coordination, trust and dependency of lower ranks on their higher ones, and the nature of it, can become an important source of stress.

According to the lower rank respondents (particularly those in 'OR' and 'Class IV' categories), their superiors should have an understanding of their personal and professional needs and various other concerns. But contrary to this, 46 per cent of the respondents (including 37 per cent of 'Officers', 44 per cent of 'SOs', 59 per cent of 'ORs' and 29 per cent of 'Class IV') reported that they are *sometimes* being personally harassed either with unkind words or behaviour by their officers. In addition, 24 per cent of 'Class IV' reported that they are *often* personally harassed either with unkind words or behaviour by their officers.

They always use abusive language. (Constable, LoC, Kashmir)

Use of abusive language is common in BSF. (Inspector, LoC, Kashmir)

You don't have any self-respect or dignity. (Commandant, frontier and posting anonymous)

Harassing behaviour can range from extreme forms such as intimidation or actual violence to less obvious actions like passing indirect comments or ignoring someone at workplace. However, one-off incidents can be constitutive of harassment and can undermine the standard of conduct within a work area, which may erode the well-being of the soldier or group of soldiers being targeted and may lead to dejection and exclusion. The data collected on workplace harassment shows that 10 per cent of the 'Officers' reported *seldom* being harassed because of their religion, whereas 13 per cent of 'SOs' and 10 per cent of 'ORs' reported *sometimes* being harassed because of their religion. Only 'Class IV' (14 per cent) reported that they are *often* harassed because of their religion. Similarly, 15 per cent of the 'Officers', 15 per cent of 'SOs', 11 per cent of 'ORs' reported *sometimes* being harassed because of their caste. Only 'Class IV' (24 per cent) reported that they are *often* personally harassed because of their caste. About regional affiliation and workplace harassment, 12 per cent of the 'Officers', 17 per cent of 'SOs' and 16 per cent of 'ORs' reported *sometimes* being harassed because of their affiliation to some specific region. Here also, only 'Class IV' (29 per cent) reported *often* being harassed.

Many Kashmiris [people living in the valley of Kashmir] are in my unit...no two Kashmiris are allowed to go on leave together. Even at naka's duties [night duties] you wouldn't find two Kashmiri's at one post. We are always been suspected. If some incident happen in any part of Kashmir, my senior officers will ask me about the incident...as if I know who has done it. (Constable, frontier and posting anonymous)

Many a time I was harassed because of my caste. Many a times they (superiors) called me either Chamar or Chuda. (Sweeper, IB, Jammu)

Similarly, during the interviews with respondents from religious minority groups, astounding facts have come up; for instance, Muslims are not being allowed to keep beards and this offended them.

We are not being allowed to keep beard though there is no rule against it. Moreover, you can't go against your officers. (Constable, frontier and posting anonymous)

One year I was on leave for two months, that time it was month of Ramadan [sacred month of fasting in Islamic calendar], so I had kept beard. When I returned to my unit, my officer told me that I am looking like a terrorist, and he ordered me to shave first before I join. I felt so bad. Why Muslims should not keep beard. Is this a crime? If

Sikhs can keep it, why cannot we. (Constable, frontier and posting anonymous)

In every battalion you will find a Mandir (Hindu temple) and a Gurdwara (Sikh temple) with their priests (who are among the troops) but nowhere you will find a Mosque. Every day they pray and we just watch them. It really hurts. (Constable, frontier and posting anonymous)

Apparently, the data collected on workplace harassment on particular variables, such as religion, caste and regional affiliation, does not show statistically significant figures. However, it should be understood that the absence of complaints is not necessarily an indication that harassment or discrimination does not occur, or that the act is deemed too trivial to complain. Given the autocratic nature and culture of the organisation and minority status arising out of a combination of the above-mentioned variables along with (lower) rank, it is more possible to argue that many of the respondents felt too intimidated or embarrassed to speak up on their own or to say anything against their superiors.

Interpersonal Relationship

Socially supportive relationships can have a powerful and long-lasting effect on our lives. They have the potential to shape our day-to-day lives and help us to grow. As work is an important part of an individual's social life, workplace experiences become one of the major sources and basis of these varied interactions. Most of our perceptions related to work are determined by the relationship we share with the persons under whom we work, as well as the people with whom we work. That is to say, our work relationships are influenced by our seniors, peers and juniors alike. If positive, they can work as buffers to tide over hard times in one's life. They help in reducing psychological strain associated with the workplace by helping soldiers tackle their problems, as well as simultaneously providing emotional support. Problems in such relations not only leave a soldier helpless but could also become the cause of his distress.

Support Mechanism

Despite the fact that most of the respondents are well aware of the fact that they are on a non-family posting, the majority of BSF respondents (36.36 per cent of 'Officers', 41.46 per cent of 'SOs', 26.67 per cent of 'ORs' from Jammu Frontier and 36.36 per cent of 'SOs' from Kashmir

Frontier) have stated that they look upon their family members for support in times of crises, rather than depend upon their superiors at work or the BSF department. Only 18 per cent of the total placed their colleagues as their most important source of help in times of need, of which 39.02 per cent are 'Officers' posted across J&K frontiers. From the interviews with officers, it was clear that they usually try to sort out issues without involving their family and perhaps, as colleagues are more accessible, they are looked upon as the first option.

I placed my trust more on my family...Most of the time they come to my help but sometimes I take help from colleagues also. For instance, last year my wife met with an accident in Delhi but I was in Kashmir. As my other family members live in Gujarat it was no use calling them. At that time I called one of my colleagues in Delhi...he took care of my wife as she was in hospital for two days...I was very relieved. I visited her after two days. Till that time my other family members had reached.
(DC, Age 41, Static Duty, Kashmir)

A difference was also found between the two frontiers wherein most of the respondents who rely on their families for support were from Jammu Frontier (33 per cent), as compared to 28 per cent from Kashmir Frontier. This variation could be because of the fact that most of the soldiers in Jammu Frontier have the privilege to keep their families even outside the campus premises (families normally resided in local houses). On the other hand, given the security conditions in Kashmir, soldiers posted in Kashmir Frontier are restricted to campus boundaries and are not allowed to move beyond the camp premises, that is, residences at battalion headquarters. Living with their families gives them support and strength to face the hard times at their workplaces. Family works as a buffer and they (soldiers) look at their families for support when they are in trouble.

Living among family members gives me joy. I feel safe and secure. I do share my problems with my wife. Moreover, when I look at my children, it gives me immense pleasure and peace of mind, I forget every problem. Officers cannot understand my problems. They only know to command you. Even if you share your problem, you have to give hundreds of explanation to them understand. (Inspector, Static Location, Kashmir)

Among the different rank groups, 66.67 per cent 'Class IV' from Kashmir Frontier look upon their relatives as a major source of help

and 33.33 per cent of 'ORs' from Kashmir Frontier rely more on their friends than their superiors, whereas only 36.36 per cent of 'Class IV' from Jammu Frontier see superiors as the source of help. However, the analysis of qualitative data reveals that it is because of helplessness that 'Class IV' respondents look upon their superiors as source of help, though they have never felt satisfied with the actions taken by their superiors to redress their problems (52.38 per cent of 'Class IV' reported *total* dissatisfaction). Moreover, 'Class IV' employees are mostly from lower socio-economic backgrounds and keeping in mind the fact that they have access to limited resources and that higher officers have the power to help them out in difficult situations, these respondents' dependence on their superiors is well justified.

Expectation

The failure of different rank groups to reconcile to the BSF department or superiors as a source of support reflects the kind of dissatisfaction that prevails among the ranks towards the organisation. However, the qualitative analysis of interview data and observation from the field reflects that there is a lack of trust from both sides (superiors as well as subordinates), which further strains their relationship. This discontentment results in decreased motivation and helplessness. As soldiers spend most of their lifetime at their workplaces, interpersonal relations play a crucial role in the way they perceive their work environment and relationships.

I was posted in Kishan Jung in 2003. My brother informed me in August about my father's illness. I talked to my coy-commander and asked him about leave. He replied, 'so far nothing has happen. Let's wait what will happen'...as if I was lying and when my father died he sent me to the Headquarter but it was too late. I couldn't see my father. Next year my mother also died. That time also I talked to my senior officer but nothing happened. After these events I have decided to leave this job as soon as possible. (Head Constable, Static Duty, Kashmir)

On the other hand, organisational policies seem to be the major concern for officers. For example, Annual Confidential Report (ACR)—which is written by the immediate superior and influences an officer's promotion—is perceived to be unjust as it constrains the development of open and fair relations. They have also highlighted that due to such policies, at times they are being pressurised to do the things against their will, ultimately reducing the trust and confidence in their superiors: *We*

are at the disposal of the whims and fancies of our officers... (AC, Static Duty, Jammu).

Surprisingly, the data (cutting across the ranks from both frontiers) reveals that most of the respondents (38 per cent) can easily approach their (immediate or senior) officers to address their problems. In fact, 36.59 per cent of 'Officers' and 36.54 per cent of 'ORs' reported that they *sometimes* felt satisfied by the action taken by their senior officer, which is in contrast to 52 per cent of 'Class IV' and 40 per cent of 'ORs' who reported that they are *never* satisfied with the action taken by their superiors to redress their problems; rather 'they exacerbate the situation' (Head Constable, CI Ops, Jammu).

As a link between the higher officers and Jawans my job is to supervise the Jawans (soldiers) and also to ensure that every work has been done properly. This is not possible unless you are on good terms with your Jawans... (Head Constable, Static Duty, Kashmir)

Moreover, across all sample, 52 per cent of the respondents rate their interpersonal relations with their immediate officers as 'fair' (that is, superficially good). Only 37 per cent of officers perceive it as 'good' compared to other rank categories. This could possibly be out of helplessness where every lower rank is bound to maintain, willing or unwillingly, good relations with their immediate as well as superior rank. However, lower ranks ('ORs' and 'Class IV') did complain about their superiors using harsh and bad language. They also said that they are not treated in a dignified way by their superiors.

CONCLUSION

The state of J&K gives a unique example of the blend of conflicts or, for that matter, chaotic conditions which pose many challenges to the armed forces deployed in the area. In light of the findings of the present study, the researcher has attempted to explain how the proximity of conflict adversely affects the mental as well as the physical health of the armed forces by increasing the magnitude of their mental strain and stress. The vicious cycle of conflict reciprocates (gets resonated) on those people who are engaged in activities of armed conflict. Of particular concern to present research is the indiscriminate harm done to military personnel. Along with the risks and exposures associated with their job, military personnel deployed in conflict areas are often exposed to extreme stress and trauma. Working in a such an area with a unique set of stressors—a

heightened level of physical danger, lengthy exposures to hazardous environments (both natural and man-made), long and stressful working hours, separation from regular social support, reduced standards of living and increased physical, cognitive and emotion exertion—is likely to have long-term implications on readjustment to home life, social interaction, physical and mental health and overall well-being of military personnel.

The findings of the present study provide new insights about soldiers' life. The data has highlighted a wide range of issues, both organisational specific, which are intrinsic to the organisational structures, and job specific. Organisation-specific issues include poor development environment—in terms rigid promotion policies, lack of control over work and workplace and lack of autonomy—and more importantly, lack of social support and appreciation, bullying/harassment, etc. Job-specific issues include task design, ill-defined work, workload, long or unsociable work hours and continual exposure to stressful situations, for example, high altitude areas and conflict areas, that have a negative impact on the soldiers mental health and well-being. The data also describes the nature of working environment within which a soldier performs his duties. Contrary to the narrow understanding of mental health, the findings clearly show that mental health in general, and mental health and well-being of BSF personnel in particular, is not just determined by material conditions within which a soldier lives, works and ages, but to a great extent, it is an outcome of those non-material conditions (includes respect, appreciation, support from senior ranks; justice and dignity at workplace; harassment and discrimination because of caste, region or religion, etc.) which are largely ignored. These non-material factors not only influence mental health and well-being of the soldiers but also define and determine their perception of stressful conditions. Complexities of social identities, reflected through exploitative structures of value-added social as well as organisational stratification, seem to affect lower strata more than those of privileged class. The data clearly depicts a demarcation of stressful experiences on a daily basis between the higher officials and those of lower ranks. Control over work and the power to influence stressful conditions seems to be the privilege of higher officials, while for the lower ranks, struggle for daily living and concerns for better future are more prevalent.

In the recent years, armed forces have featured centrally as both the perpetrators and the targets of violence, especially in the context of

Kashmir conflict. The number of soldiers who are being directly affected by it is enormous and unprecedented; however, their health and well-being merits special attention. While there is growing political will to address these issues, the real impact of Kashmir conflict on the armed forces in Kashmir is hobbled in part by significant gaps in our knowledge. In this context, the present research is of particular importance as it tries to address some critical areas that have received less research attention in the military studies up till now, especially in India. It lays the groundwork for future research. While the empirical part of the study exclusively deals with the BSF deployed in J&K, the results of the analysis have a broader reach in that they may provide lessons for other armed forces organisations and security agencies involved in armed conflicts. Although it is premature to draw any direct links between the findings of present study and the increasing number of suicide and fragging cases among various paramilitary and military forces, nonetheless the risks and exposures associated with the armed forces accumulate to produce conditions that may evoke or provoke a soldier to take his/her life or the life of others.

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9. Fragging is a term from the Vietnam War, most commonly meaning to assassinate or to kill an unpopular or inept member of one's own fighting unit (particularly officers). The extreme outburst of frustration is seemingly

to ameliorate the situation of humiliation without thinking of the possibility of long term repercussion. It serves as a warning to the junior officers to avoid earning the ire of the enlisted men being commanded through recklessness, lack of leadership or unjust ways. 'Fragging', n.d, available at <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Fragging>, accessed on 22 May 2009.

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11. For 2007–08, see Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No. 1310, 'Force-wise Number of Suicides and Fragging Cases in India (2007 to 2008)', n. 10; for 2009, 2010 and 2011, see Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No. 79, 'Number of Cases of Fragging/Suicides in Central Forces in India (2009–2011)', 8 August 2012, available at <http://www.indiastat.com/table/crimeandlaw/6/causilitiesofparamilitaryarmedforces/86334/714045/data.aspx>, accessed on 28 August 2016.
12. Mental health has been usually understood in terms of a continuum between 'stronger minds' and 'weaker minds'—an equilibrium that one has to maintain and a slight deviation from which traps one in a mire of suffering, pain and discrimination. This prescriptive approach to mental health,

and more specifically to mental problems, has not only increased people's sufferings but also 'victimised' and 'stigmatised' people to the extent of socially excluding them and treating them as outliers and dissidents.

13. Counter-insurgency or CI refers to comprehensive military/paramilitary efforts taken to simultaneously defeat and contain any insurgency incidents.
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