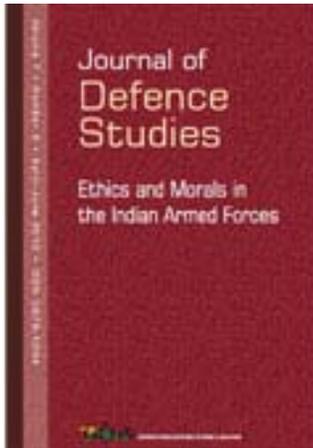


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## Professional Ethics for the Armed Forces in War and Peace

*Ian Cardozo\**

*This article looks at the current situation in the armed forces, which has been in the news for all wrong reasons recently. The author undertakes an analysis of the causes of this state of affairs and suggests that the armed forces, which were well known for their ethics and code of conduct, need to review the situation and take radical steps to ensure a return to their ethics, values and traditions.*

In recent times, the armed forces have been in the news for all the wrong reasons. A proliferation of scams involving senior officers suggests that somewhere along the way, some officers have lost their sense of right and wrong and have compromised on the ethics and values that the armed forces stand for. The armed forces are known for their very high value system and, even today, are respected for their code of conduct and the manner in which they work. Yet, some members of the armed forces, by their failure to live up to these high standards, have tarnished its image and reputation. Why has this happened? There are many reasons, with the primary ones being: fall in the values of a society of which personnel of the armed forces are a part; greed for wealth; and the thirst for power that money can buy.

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### THE CHETWODE MOTTO AND CHARACTER BUILDING

Whereas we may blame the British for many of the wrongs they inflicted on this country, they did leave behind an excellent legacy of attitude and behaviour in the armed forces that have stood the test of time. The Chetwode motto enunciated by Sir Philip Chetwode at the first passing out parade held at the Indian Military Academy after independence is an example. This motto sets the tone for the conduct of officers of the Indian Army and is worth repeating. It says:

*The safety, honour and welfare of your country come first always and every time,  
The honour, welfare and comfort of the men your command come next,  
Your own ease, comfort and safety come last always and every time.*

In short, the Chetwode motto places country first, the men we command next, and self last.

The conduct of a person is influenced by his character. Lord Moran in his 1945 book, *Anatomy of Courage*, says:

I contend that fortitude in war has its roots in morality; that selection is a search for character and that war itself is but one more test—the supreme and final test if you will—of character. Courage can be judged apart from danger only if the social significance and meaning of courage is known to us; namely that a man of character in peace becomes a man of courage in war. He cannot be selfish in peace and yet be unselfish in war. Character, as Aristotle taught, is a habit, the daily choice of right and wrong; it is a moral quality which grows to maturity in peace and is not suddenly developed on the outbreak of war. For war, in spite of what we have heard to the contrary, has no power to transform, it merely exaggerates the good and evil that are in us, till it is plain for all to read; it cannot change; it exposes. Man's fate in battle is worked out before the battle begins. For his acts in war are dictated not by courage nor by fear, but by conscience of which war is the final test. The man whose quick conscience is the secret of his success in battle has the same clear-cut feelings of right and wrong before war makes them obvious to all. If you know a man in peace, you know him in war.<sup>1</sup>

It is character, therefore, that determines the conduct of soldiers in peace and in war. And one of the prime determinants of character is ethics which, in a way, is a set of principles that helps an individual to do what is right in the larger interests of country and society. The Chetwode motto says this beautifully. Nothing could convey the conduct of an officer in

a better way. Thus, character building must be given due importance in the armed forces so as to ensure good ethics, values and morals. The next section clarifies the importance of leadership in achieving this, followed by a discussion on the ways it can be achieved.

#### LEADERSHIP

Good leadership is the driving force that motivates soldiers in war and peace. Whereas Service academies are credited with being cradles of military leadership, the teaching of leadership at the academies is only theoretical. Officers here are in a supervisory capacity rather than in a leadership role. The crucible for the training of junior leaders, therefore, shifts to the unit where young officers learn 'hands-on' from the examples of their seniors.

Leadership in the Army, particularly in the fighting arms, is crucial. The soldier and the officer both know that the whole focus of their being in uniform is that there will be a moment in their lives when they will go to war and face the possibility of death. It is, therefore, of utmost importance that the bond between officers and their men is built on a strong value system. Men will not follow a leader who lies to them or who puts his own personal interests before his country and his men. Officers are meant to lead and in war, it means leading from the front. In the 1971 Indo-Pak War, a unit, the 4th Battalion of the 5 Gorkha Rifles (FF), commenced the war with a strength of 18 officers. At the end of the 13-day war, four officers were killed and seven wounded. This high rate of officer casualties occurred because officers led from the front. The time-honoured motto of the infantry is 'Follow Me', and infantry officers live and die by this motto. If soldiers have faith in the officer and accept his competence and have trust in his judgement, they will follow him to hell and back—that too without question.

This same battalion conducted the Indian Army's first heliborne operation and were landed over a 100 km behind the Pakistan Army's front line. They fought for 10 days against two Pakistani infantry brigades, and finally accepted the surrender of over 7,000 Pakistani troops. The Pakistani officers, and there were over a 100 of them, found it difficult to accept that they were fighting an understrength infantry battalion.

It was winter and bitterly cold. The Gorkhas had carried only their rain capes with them against rain and cold. The men slept, when they could, in pairs, with one *barsati* (rain cape) under them and one as a cover. After the surrender, the second-in-command of the battalion

noticed a Pakistani military truck full of blankets. He asked the Pakistani Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) incharge, if those blankets were spare, and if so, could they be distributed to his troops and he would be given a receipt. The JCO expressed surprise that the Indian troops had come without their blankets. The officer of the Gorkha battalion said with a smile, 'We have come here to fight, not to sleep. Now that the war is over, I would like my men to sleep in comfort.' After a while the officer added: 'And if any blankets are left over, could you please have them given to my officers?' The Pakistani JCO seemed floored and asked in surprise, 'How is it that even your officers are without blankets?' The second-in-command answered, 'How can officers have blankets when the men do not have them?' The Pakistani JCO drew himself to his full height, saluted and said, '*Janab*, if we had officers like yours in our army, we would not have seen this fateful day!' This tribute paid by a Pakistani JCO to the code of conduct and ethics of officers of the Indian Army is worth remembering.<sup>2</sup> This incident showcases the importance that the Chetwode motto plays in the manner in which officers lead their troops.

#### RECRUITMENT SYSTEMS

Notwithstanding the importance of instilling ethics in young officers during their formative years, it would be useful to include ethics as part of recruitment policies of both officers and men. Nations that recruit their officers and soldiers through systems that analyse character, sense of duty, commitment, integrity, sacrifice and self-discipline are likely to get ethical leaders, particularly if they are able to weed out those with character defects, rather than nations which recruit personnel who may not measure up to the exacting demands that war imposes on individuals. In this, the important question would be: is it possible to evaluate ethical qualities in a potential recruit or cadet? If psychological tests can predict how persons are likely to behave in threatening situations, the armed forces may be able to evolve suitable selection systems that can be introduced not only to weed out the unsuitable but also to institute procedures that can identify persons with qualities of integrity, honour, courage, self-discipline, self-sacrifice and decisiveness—qualities that would make them think and act beyond self for the good of larger causes and institutions like regiment and country.<sup>3</sup>

If recruitment systems can identify the right type of personnel for the armed forces, then the next logical step would be to introduce ethics in

the curriculum of Service academies and training institutions. Meaningful training can improve not only the physical attributes of individuals but can also initiate and reinforce changes in attitude, behaviour and conduct. It would, therefore, be reasonable to conclude that the curriculum at the training academies and courses of instruction need to include ethics as part of training.

#### **EMPHASIS ON TRAINING IN SERVICE ACADEMIES AND TRAINING INSTITUTIONS**

As mentioned earlier, the Service academies are supposed to be the cradles of military leadership. Whereas this may well be the case, it is my personal opinion that not enough emphasis is given to ethics and morals. More needs to be done because these are the foundation years that shape the attitude and behaviour of officers of the three services. The 'Honour Code' was adopted from 'West Point', in the United States (US), at the National Defence Academy. However, the cadets found it difficult to follow a code of behaviour that encouraged them to report on fellow cadets who had violated the rules and failed to own up. Cadets found it abhorrent to sneak on their colleagues and so, the honour code never worked. The answer, in my opinion, is to include ethics, morals and code of conduct as part of the curriculum. Also, interactive sessions and discussions must be held on case studies so that the cadets fully understand the outcomes of good and bad behaviour. The case studies need to be relevant, practical and meaningful, and should include cases of good and bad conduct of life in the academy itself.

#### **Training Institutions**

Similar case studies need to be carried out at training institutions at the appropriate level of officers, JCOs and Non-commissioned Officers (NCOs), and their equivalents, in the three Services. However, the code of ethics and conduct 'lived' by the institution must be exemplary as it would otherwise be meaningless. Officers also need to give talks to students doing the courses giving examples of incidents in war and peace. Offences like lying, stealing and cheating that violate basic ethics need to be punished severely.

#### **REGIMENTS AS CRUCIBLES FOR CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT**

Regiments have always been repositories of ethics and good values. However, these have been more in the nature of the oral tradition.

Considering the needs of the hour, it would be more fruitful if these values could be adapted to the present scenario as both the social and military environments have undergone significant changes. Commanding officers (COs) are key figures who can play a huge part in ensuring the absorption of good ethics by young officers in their formative years. Whereas training directorates of the respective services could give broad guidelines on what COs need to do to nurture good ethics and codes of conduct, it should be left to the genius of COs and the excellent customs and traditions of each regiment, corps or service to find the best way to take this forward.

#### **LEADING THROUGH PERSONAL EXAMPLE**

The morale of the men and officers during war and peace depends on the leaders. High morale is the outcome of ethical leadership and ensures dynamic performance in war. Also, during peacetime, ethical behaviour and good values can be inculcated through example. For example, an officer who indulges in correct behaviour will encourage the men to follow his example. After all, the strength of the armed forces lies not only in its weapons but also in the conduct of its officers and men. The 4th Battalion of the 5 Gorkha Rifles (FF), which was heli-lifted behind enemy lines for the capture of Sylhet airfield during the 1971 war, was unfazed when surrounded by more than two Pakistani brigades. Not only were they able to defend the airfield that they had captured but they continued to expand their defensive position and to ambush Pakistani patrols. The unit was to be linked up within 48 hours but this was not achieved for 10 days. Undaunted, they fought on without food or water. When ammunition ran low, they sharpened their Gorkha khukries, drank water from muddy ponds and foraged for food from abandoned huts.

Such was the ferocity of the defenders that when the two Pakistani brigades surrendered to this gallant battalion, they could not believe that they were opposed by an understrength battalion. This same battalion had earlier captured a battalion-sized objective without artillery support. It launched a khukri attack at night, probably the last khukri attack in the history of warfare. Khukris were used with abandon and this struck terror in the hearts of the defenders, so much so that the reputation of this battalion preceded them making it easier for them to secure victories in subsequent battles. All this was possible because the officers, led by their CO, were right in the front leading the assaults.

The Kargil War is a recent example of officers who repeatedly led their troops into battle from the front and wrested victory from a well-

entrenched enemy. The price they paid was exorbitant, but they did so willingly and without regret. The code of conduct of these young officers was recognized by the men they led, who saw what they were doing and followed them without hesitation.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRITY

One of the important characteristics of ethical leadership is integrity. In situations involving conflict of interests, officers are required to do what is right irrespective of how such actions could affect their personal careers. In earlier years, one saw a number of upright officers who lived by their values and who refused to do the wrong thing to please their superiors. The good part was that the system appreciated and supported such officers. These officers were respected because they lived the values they believed in. They were generally well-off financially and higher ranks were not something they hankered after. Today, the situation is somewhat different. Sycophancy, undeserved ambition and lack of character appear to have become common. Some people have reached the top with these undesirable qualities and, having reached there, facilitate the promotion of officers who have the same undesirable qualities. This sends a wrong message to the young officers and to the rank and file, and the rot proliferates.

What the military hierarchy needs to understand is that at the unit level, ethical values still hold good. While junior officers are meant to be 'seen and not heard', they do have minds of their own; and although they may not openly express their distaste, disillusionment and disgust, they still have very strong opinions about what makes a good leader and are dismayed at the conduct of some of their seniors. Senior officers need to be reminded that the young officers think very poorly of such conduct and that they want to see the head of the Service as 'Lion King' and not 'King Rat'! Like the king in the story of 'Emperor's New Clothes', such undeserving officers are unable to see themselves as they actually are.

It would be a gross injustice to say that all senior officers have poor ethics. However, the continuing run of scams does show some of them in poor light. Unethical behaviour continues because the so-called good officers in higher ranks have a warped sense of loyalty to the Service. They feel discussions or the written word about the present state of affairs is uncalled for. They fail to appreciate that wrongdoing will continue because the good remain silent. The definition of lack of integrity cannot be restricted to money matters alone. What is the integrity of senior

commanders who have huge retinues of soldiers in their official residences whereas they are not enough men in the sections and platoons to carry out meaningful training?

Students of military leadership would remember the book, *Crisis in Command*, written by two young officers of the US Army where they laid bare the rot that had set in in the US Army which resulted in their defeat in Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> We, in fact, need to take a lesson from the experience of the Americans. Unfortunately, we are afraid—afraid of what people will say, what the media will write—afraid that people will see the weaknesses and inconsistencies that have seeped into the life blood of what was a glorious profession. In effect, we are prepared to let a few corrupt officers off the hook and let the excellent reputation of the armed forces go down the drain. We need to understand and accept that the media will publish the peccadilloes of the armed forces that come to light, but it will also publish the good that we do. The armed forces are still held in high respect both by the media and every Indian. So, let the media know that the armed forces reject with all its might the wrongdoing by certain officers and men in the recent past and that we are working to set things right. Let us therefore, as a first step, ostracize those who have let us down, instead of blindly trying to defend the indefensible in the media.

Wrongdoing has seeped into the armed forces from a society that itself has given up on past codes of behaviour and conduct, and it will not get eradicated till the 'so-called' good officers introspect, speak up and set things right. We need to remember that it is up to the high command to see the true picture and initiate corrective measures.

#### CODE OF CONDUCT

The current perceptions of morality, the acceptance of venality and the helpless attitude that corruption is inevitable need to be turned around. This can only happen when the 'men at the top' decide that it is time to 'clean the Augean stables'! Not only does the hierarchy need to evolve a strategy, plan and policy, but it has to first listen to the views of their subordinates. They need to listen to the unit commanders who face unacceptable situations in their daily battle of trying to train their commands, half of whom are missing, of orders from higher headquarters which interfere in the execution of their commands and of interference by senior officers' wives who have illegally been given authority without responsibility. The list is endless. After they 'get the picture', they need to introspect, divest themselves of unauthorized perks and set about making

the armed forces a better place to work and live. Some seniors swear by the Chetwode motto, yet they stand the motto on its head.

Having done the above, Service headquarters need to issue a 'code of conduct' covering all aspects of Service life in war and peace. There will be detractors who will say that such a code already exists and that a written code of conduct is not required. If such a code of conduct exists, then it is ineffective. There would be vested interests against publishing such a document because, first, they would be forced to live by it and, second, they would be forced to implement it.

A good 'code of conduct' would not only motivate the rank and file but would also be a model for them to follow. Hopefully, it would also be a model which the civil society could emulate.

#### **THE ARMED FORCES AND CIVIL SOCIETY**

Over a period of time, there has been a radical fall in the values of society as a whole. In other words, the fabric of society has become corroded. From this fabric, one has to fashion a politician's kurta, a bureaucrat's coat or an army officer's uniform. Service officers are recruited from a society that accepts that corruption is endemic and inevitable, and therefore acceptable. The armed forces, however, do not accept that corruption is inevitable and mete out severe punishment when necessary. People need to recall that the senior officers involved in the Sukhna scam have not only been court-martialled but have also been cashiered, which means forfeiture of pension and also going to jail. The civil judiciary who try to intervene and reduce such punishments must be clearly told that in doing so, they will compromise the legal system within the armed forces and will therefore be responsible and accountable for the drop in morality within the Services.

#### **INTEGRITY, VALUES AND NATIONAL SECURITY**

The necessity of integrity and a high sense of values in the armed forces is critically important for the security of the country because it makes all the difference between success and failure in war. The armed forces must never forget that the abject defeat of India in the Sino-Indian War of 1962 was basically due to the failure of a supine military hierarchy that allowed India's political bosses to degrade the armed forces to a deplorable zero. Over a period of a few years, after the retirement of General Thimayya and General Thorat, lack of uprightness of the military hierarchy caused

the Army to become a toothless image of its former self. The Indian Army was forced into a 'no-win' situation as a result of the failure of its generals to stand up to the country's political bosses. Some of the Army's finest units were placed in situations where they were outmanned, outgunned and outmanoeuvred even before the war began. The result was a foregone conclusion, and India has yet to get over that humiliating defeat. This, then, is the enormity of the failure of a military hierarchy that lacked character.

The country should, however, also remember that the scintillating victory of the 1971 Indo-Pak War was due, in part, to a strong Army chief who, as Head of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, refused to take the Army into a war for which it was not prepared. He stood up to the government, threatened to resign, and asked for and obtained the support of the government to meet the Army's needs; and also obtained the government's permission to take offensive action on a time table that met the Army's strategic and tactical requirements. Faced with a strong and capable chief who knew his job, India's political leaders had no option but to listen to his advice. As a result, the Indian armed forces fashioned an unprecedented victory. More than 93,000 Pakistani prisoners of war were taken, a region liberated and a new nation—Bangladesh—was born.

#### **CAUSES OF DROP IN CODE OF CONDUCT IN THE ARMED FORCES**

Before ending the article, let us take a look at the reasons for a fall in the professional ethics in the armed forces. The basic causes of most scams in the Services are: the insatiable greed for money, unreasonable hunger for promotion, and craving for power. Unfortunately, in their desire for greater opportunity for promotion within the Services, some officers have tried to equate themselves with the bureaucrats. The military hierarchy is itself responsible for allowing the bureaucrats and the politicians to downgrade the equation of ranks between the armed forces and the civil service. Having failed to stem the downsizing of the armed forces, they have tried to equate Service ranks with the bureaucrats where most retire as secretaries of the Government of India. In order to enlarge the pyramid at the top, they have created more appointments in higher ranks and interfered with a sound rank structure by increasing appointments at all levels. As a consequence, the importance of appointments has been downgraded and we have high-ranking officers holding appointments that were held by one rank and sometimes two ranks lower. We thus have the unedifying spectacle of two to three subedar majors in a unit. Brigade

commanders command their brigades for 14–16 months and divisional and corps commanders do just a year in command. This makes a mockery of the ethics that ours is a ‘command-oriented army’. Worse still, officers feel that they need to ‘prove’ their worth during these short command tenures. Each of them looks for ways and means to secure the approval of their ‘bosses’ for promotion to next rank and will cut corners to please them. This gives unfettered power to the ‘bossman’ who extracts whatever he can from compliant subordinates. As a result, we have a promotion system in the Service that breeds sycophancy, obsequiousness and servility with all the ills that this generates.

These degrading qualities not only destroy self-respect but also the respect and regard that subordinates have for their seniors. Worse still, senior officers have no compunction in working for their own self-interest at the expense of their commands. As a result, COs are found to be more with the brigade and divisional headquarters working on papers and presentations for their brigade and division commanders rather than commanding their units. This has resulted in many instances of indiscipline, but the Army has not learnt. Except for pious resolutions, this state of affairs continues. This makes a mockery of ethics and values and the rank and file continues to be disillusioned.

### CONCLUSION

In the corporate sector, persons gravitate towards good leaders because they know that their team will be successful in meeting all its objectives, and also that their personal needs will be looked after; that is, they feel safe with their team leaders. The same holds true of the Army, except that there is a difference. In the corporate sector, persons can resign, move to the other jobs, etc. In the armed forces, these options do not exist. In the armed forces, you are ‘lumped’ with the leaders that you have. That is why, in the armed forces, it is so important to have good leaders. There needs to be ‘zero tolerance’ to bad leaders. The armed forces cannot compromise with leadership, of which ethics and integrity of character form an important part. Team spirit evolves from the manner in which the leader leads his team. Some regiments have excellent traditions in the building of team spirit at the battalion level. Young officers of some Gorkha battalions do not go home on their first leave. They go instead to the homes of their men in the mountains of Nepal, learning their language and their dialects, absorbing the problems that their men face in the difficult environment of the mountains. The endeavour is to ensure

that the young officer learns all that he needs to know about his men so that he can lead them better. The men, on their part, feel happy that their officer knows their families and the way they live. Bonding between the men and the officer, therefore, starts early in the career of these young officers and lasts a life time. With such bonding, the men will follow their officers into battle without hesitation and success in battle is ensured even before the war starts.

The moral force of an army draws its ethos from the philosophy of the society that it serves. No people or race, however, can remain unchanged with the passage of time. Sometimes society changes for the better and sometimes, its ethos deteriorates and gets worse. Great rulers and military leaders like Chandragupta Maurya, Ashoka, Samudragupta, Shivaji, Ranjit Singh and Krishna Devaraya, to name a few, recognized that change must always be for the better, for the building of the inner strength of the people—morally, spiritually, politically, economically and militarily. These leaders, however, combined both military and political power. Today, the armed forces face a different situation. The ills of society have seeped into the military fabric and it is only the military leader who must now effect change for the betterment of the armed forces.

The ethos of the Indian armed forces has evolved over a long period of time. The armed forces need to focus on its strengths. Religious beliefs; lofty traditions; stories of bravery, chivalry and courage; the high premium put on truth, integrity and discipline; the personal bond between the officer and his men; the traditions of a regiment and the emphasis it places on honour, *izzat* and pride; love of adventure; and devotion to his comrades are some of the factors that motivate the rank and file to fight spiritually and willingly for the cause of country and the regiment.<sup>5</sup>

#### NOTES

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