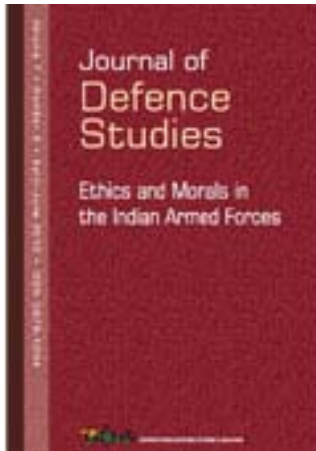


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Changing Socio-economic Norms and its Impact on India's Armed Forces

*Nitin A. Gokhale**

The Indian Army remains rooted in an outdated, British-inherited system that is struggling to cope with the combination of challenges posed by demands of modern warfare and a society that is undergoing a great churn. The greatest challenge has been to the famous officer–men relationship in the Indian armed forces. In the past decade, the armed forces have faced a new problem: increasing incidents of indiscipline, suicides and fratricide. Are these incidents happening because the traditional bond between officers and men, the bedrock on which the military functions, is fraying at the edges? Are there other external factors impinging upon the armed forces' functioning and eroding some of its admirable values? The article attempts to focus on these issues and provide some basic answers.

It is the soldier, not the reporter, who has given us the freedom of the press. It is the soldier, not the poet, who has given us the freedom of speech. It is the soldier, not the campus organizer, who gives us the freedom to demonstrate. It is the soldier who salutes the flag, who serves beneath the flag, and whose coffin is draped by the flag, who allows the protester to burn the flag.¹

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The last time the Indian soldier featured prominently in the collective consciousness of the nation was when the Kargil skirmish broke out in the summer of 1999. As images of the conflict were beamed directly into our bedrooms for the first time, a patriotic fervour swept the nation.

As the body bags came home, a grateful nation paid rich tribute to the Indian Army and the ordinary soldier.² For a while, names like Captain Vikram Batra, Havaldar Yogendra Yadav and Captain Anuj Nayyar became household names for their acts of bravery and ultimate sacrifice for the nation.³

Nearly 14 years after that skirmish, Kargil is but a distant memory, an annual ritual to be observed only by the Army at Drass. Since then, the nation has moved on. A generation has grown up in the new, prosperous India full of gleaming glass and chrome buildings that dot our burgeoning cities. New employment avenues have opened up.

There are more people involved in the service sector, working in malls, hospitality industry, restaurants, information technology (IT)-enabled services than ever before. Most of the jobs in India have been created in the service sector in the past decade. Economists say that the fastest employment creation has happened in sectors like financial intermediation, computer services, business services, communications and legal and technical services, followed by education, health and social work, hotels, restaurants, and other community, social and personal services.⁴

With a visible shift in the nature of India's economic activity has come the inevitable change in the composition of the society. While the size of the Indian middle class is variously estimated between 200 and 300 million, a new, 'aspiring middle class' is fast emerging on the periphery of the 'Great Indian Middle Class'. This class of people (with an annual income in the range of Rs 90,000 to Rs 2 lakh) is now estimated to be roughly 34 per cent of the population, according to one study.⁵

This rise in the aspiring middle class has brought about change in the age-old structure of the Indian rural and semi-urban society. Aspirations have undergone tremendous changes too. The youth, even from the rural areas, have higher ambitions, sometimes even way beyond their capacity. The hitherto underprivileged class has been politically empowered. Joint large families have mutated to become nuclear. Politics has become the new short cut to material success and power. The economic and political transformation of India over a decade-and-a-half has brought in its wake a much wider basket of career options. Soldiering as the first-choice career is being pushed down the priority list in many areas.

Although the numbers in Army recruitment rallies have not declined so far despite these alternate choices (on the contrary, the participation in the recruitment rallies in far-flung areas seems to have risen), the quality of intake is certainly deteriorating.⁶ It is against this great ferment in Indian society, triggered by massive socio-economic upheaval, that this article attempts to focus on its impact on the Indian armed forces.

THE INDIAN SOLDIER

Jawan as he is affectionately called, India's soldier...represents all of India...he is a microcosmic model of India.

General S. Padmanabhan, Former Army Chief⁷

When the former Army Chief wrote this, the Indian Army was fresh out of the Kargil experience. Caught on the wrong foot by the intrusion by Pakistani forces disguised as irregulars in the Kargil–Batalik–Mushkoh sectors in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), Indian Army troops fought valiantly and wrested the control of many heights occupied by the Pakistani Army. The victory came at a great cost though: 524 killed and 1,363 wounded.⁸ But the fading pride in the armed forces was restored. Kargil helped cement the bond between the Indian public and the Indian soldier.

Traditionally, the Indian Army has never found itself facing a shortage of manpower in the lower ranks since many young men from agrarian societies took up the profession of arms as a means of self-actualization. The post-independence era offered very satisfactory terms and conditions of service to fulfil these needs. The monetary benefits were higher than most other professions. A military uniform guaranteed higher status in the largely feudal society. Social support for the soldier's family was assured. The Indian soldier had the *izzat* that gave him more satisfaction than mere monetary benefits. Soldering meant the assurance of an early pension and long-term medical support which was unique to the military among other government services.

Even in the officer rank, the young men found recognition and approval. With proper training, the Services groomed them to become effective leaders. The pride of wearing the uniform, notions of chivalry, patriotism and national service attracted many young men from educated, well-to-do families to the officer cadre in the early years of independence. Since India was not industrialized, the band of career choices was narrow.

You either became a lawyer, a doctor, a professor or joined the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) or Indian Administrative Service (IAS). But all these professions demanded a long gestation period or higher academic qualifications. The military, on the other hand, promised early returns and decent social security by virtue of perks and pension. So, finding volunteers for India's officer corps was never a big problem in the early years of independence.

General Padmanabhan has famously written a pen portrait of a satisfied, proud soldier. Describing a soldier's journey from recruitment to his retirement and beyond, the former Army Chief writes through his fictional character Raj, who is now 75:

I joined the Army when I was 16 years of age. Since then, the Army has been my life and my soul. It gave me a full life, comradeship, action, adventurous life and a fair pay. It taught me all that I know and today, though I am retired and perhaps no use to my battalion, they still reach out to me...from the time I retired, till date, I have been given affection and respect by all sorts of people—government officials, politicians, fellow citizens—everyone. If a soldier serves his country and returns to this kind of affectionate warmth and enjoys it for nearly 37–38 years, what else can he possibly want? If the people remember their soldiers in normal days and are friendly with them, that is about all that I think we need...⁹

The General was surely writing about the days gone by. More than a decade after that famous military triumph in Kargil, the Indian Army is once again at the crossroads.

Although from disaster relief in floods, tsunami and earthquakes to rescuing the infant 'Prince' from a deep tube well, and from quelling rioters in communal strife to being the last resort in internal counter-insurgency operations, the Indian Army is omnipresent, as an instrument of the state, the Army's effectiveness is being blunted through a series of ill-advised and ill-thought out decisions.

IMPACT OF CHANGING SOCIETY

The Army remains rooted in an outdated, British-inherited system that is struggling to cope with the combination of challenges posed by the demands of modern warfare and a society that is undergoing a great churn.

This has posed a great challenge to the famous officer–men relationship in the Indian armed forces. In the past decade, the armed forces have had

to face a new problem: increasing incidents of indiscipline, suicides and fratricide. Are these incidents happening because the traditional bond between officers and men, the bedrock on which the military functions, is fraying at the edges? Are there other external factors impinging upon the armed forces functioning and eroding some of its admirable values?

Some studies have been initiated to get to the root of the problem after it was noticed that more than 90 soldiers were committing suicide every year since 2003, going up to an alarming 150 in 2008.¹⁰ Adding to the worry are the growing cases of indiscipline and intolerance. In 2012 alone, there were at least three cases of showdown between men and officers. At least 50–60 soldiers of an artillery unit clashed with a group of officers after a young officer allegedly beat up a jawan, leading to near mutiny among the soldiers.¹¹ There were a couple of other instances where tension between jawans and officers boiled over, both the incidents happening in two different armoured regiments, one following suicide by a soldier. This set the alarm bells ringing in the Army Headquarters, and although the top brass publicly maintained the issue was not as serious as it was made out to be, Defence Minister A.K. Antony in a written answer to the Lok Sabha said: ‘The incident of suicide by an army personnel on 8th August 2012 in the Samba sector of Jammu and Kashmir led to unrest.’¹²

A former Vice Chief of the Army Staff, Lieutenant General Vijay Oberoi, also says it is a matter of concern and it is time to take note. In a recent article, General Oberoi stated: ‘Three incidents of collective indiscipline by jawans in the last few months, reflecting a breakdown in the traditionally close officer–man relationship, are a cause for concern, especially as all three of them are related to combat units, where a stable and healthy officer–man relationship is an article of faith.’¹³

Some others, however, maintain that these are isolated incidents and they should not be taken as an indication of a trend in as large an army as India’s with 1.1 million soldiers. But for a force that prides itself on its standards of training and discipline, these incidents should certainly serve as timely warnings. As I wrote in the immediate aftermath of these acts of indiscipline: ‘It’s time to ask the question—Is the Indian Army feeling the heat of being in perpetual operations? Are our soldiers’ stress levels peaking dangerously? Making them prone to acts of indiscriminate violence?’¹⁴

There are no straight answers.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Yes, there is a problem. But the problem is an outcome of a combination of factors: erosion in the soldiers' status in the society; prolonged deployment in monotonous and thankless counter-insurgency jobs; crippling shortage of officers in combat units; and, ironically, easier communication between families and soldiers!

A psychiatric study by Army doctors a couple of years ago on 'Evolving Medical Strategies for Low Intensity Conflicts' revealed the huge range of issues soldiers in such situations have to confront, contradictions between war and low-intensity conflict situations, and, particularly, the concepts of 'enemy', 'objective' and 'minimum force'.¹⁵ Some other findings were:

- In general war, the nation looks upon the soldier as a saviour, but here he is at the receiving end of public hostility.
- A hostile vernacular press keeps badgering the security forces, projecting them as perpetrators of oppression.
- Continuous operations affect rest, sleep and body clocks, leading to mental and physical exhaustion.
- Monotony, the lure of the number game, and low manning strength of units lead to overuse and fast burnout.

Operating in a tension-ridden counter-insurgency environment does lead to certain stress among the jawans, but that is only one of the factors. The main worries are the problems back home: land disputes; tensions within the family; rising aspirations; lack of good pay and allowances; and also the falling standards of supervision from some officers. All these factors have led to major stress.

But there are many non-combat reasons that lead to stress. During my travels in counter-insurgency areas, I have often come across company commanders telling me how, for many soldiers, tensions at home create unbearable stress. Often, a land dispute back home or a family feud weighs heavily on the soldier's mind. For the ordinary soldier, the smallest patch of land back home is the most precious property. Again, I have frequently come across a common thread where soldiers say there is no tension in the actual work of counter-insurgency. The main problem for the *fauji* comes from his domestic situation.

Add to it the fact that the society no longer respects the soldier and his work in protecting the nation. A local politician, a *thanedar*, etc., seem to command more clout in the society today. This has often led to

loss of self-esteem among ordinary soldiers. A recent movie—Paan Singh Tomar—depicted, in some measure, the humiliation that a soldier faces in the civilian environment, both while serving and after retirement from the armed forces.

As a former army commander had once pointed out to me: ‘You see he (soldier [*sic*]) comes from a society where he compares himself with others and when he realises that he is at a disadvantage since, acceptance wise, the kind of respect that his predecessors had, is no longer there.’¹⁶

Senior officers point out that most suicide and fratricide cases take place after soldiers return from a spot of leave. It is precisely this concern that had prompted Defence Minister A.K. Antony to write to all chief ministers some years ago asking them to sensitize district administrations in their states to the needs of the soldiers. State governments were asked to set up a mechanism at district and state levels to address soldiers’ grievances.

And yet, the Army must look within too.

REFORMING THE ORGANIZATION

Soldiers these days are better educated and, consequently, better aware of their rights. This, coupled with falling standards of command and control among some of the undeserving officers who have risen to command units, is becoming a major cause for worry.

As the armed forces are in themselves a microcosm of India, the rising education and awareness levels in recruits is easily perceived. A sea change from yesteryears is now visible in the hordes of young men who crowd recruitment rallies across the country. Most hopefuls are the educated unemployed youth who turn towards the military for acquiring early financial and social security. Their educational qualification is Class XII on the average, many being graduates too. The stereotype of an innocent, less educated but hardy soldier is now a thing of the past. The officer base has also shifted predominantly to the middle class. This has further narrowed the gap between the ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’.

An acute shortage of officers at the cutting-edge level is the other big factor contributing to an increasing gap between soldiers and officers. Against an authorized strength of over 22 officers for a combat battalion, there are at best eight or nine officers available to the commanding officer these days.

Very often, young officers with less than two years of service are commanding companies! Even in the battalion headquarters, one officer ends up doing the job of three, given the shortage. There is no time to interact with soldiers. In the old days, a game of football or hockey was the best way to get to know each other. Not any longer.

What, then, is the way forward?

EMBRACING CHANGE

The average Indian soldier remains as hardy as before but he is certainly confused with the pace of change occurring all around him. It is here that the leaders—the officers—will have to adapt themselves to the new reality. The age-old system of regimental traditions and values is robust, and serves to develop camaraderie and loyalty between the led and the leader even now. The new fashion to dismiss them as outdated ideas must be arrested. Military ethos is not developed overnight and is certainly not imbibed by pandering blindly to the changes in society.

What, however, must be done is to eliminate the overwhelming trend to be a ‘careerist’. The desire to advance one’s career at any cost, to strive for promotion even by cutting corners, and crave for awards as a means to boost chances of attaining the next rank has become a rampant practice amongst the officer class. Preservation of self has exaggerated that tendency and the advancement of career at any cost seems to have become a *sine qua non* for most officers.

That must change. And that change must come from the top.

A former Army Commander, Lt. Gen. C.S.K. Sabu, had encapsulated the desired change in view of altered socio-economic conditions at a seminar on ‘Leadership Challenges in an Era of Turbulence’ at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi, in June 2010. He said: ‘Such a change needs to be top-down, and be backed by the force of institutional ethics, tradition, peer pressure and group dynamics. While the Chetwode motto of the Army is everlasting, it loses focus once a soldier is beyond his CO—it lacks the guiderail required for a codified, value-based ethical conduct on the part of senior officers, which must be set right.’

Certain changes which can be considered and deliberated are:

- 360 degree assessments in the context of Annual Confidential Reports (ACRs).
- Inculcate the warrior ethos in the Army.

- Embrace the soldier's code—Veer Senani must be codified.
- Encourage scholar-warrior ethos for the officers.
- Promoting ethics and probity in military life.
- Norms for conducting welfare activities must change—it is a command function and must be restored to the same.

Finally, if the led are to believe the leader, the leader must walk the talk. Officers must believe in themselves and the system that they work in. They must take pride in the fact that the military is essentially different in its work culture, ethos, traditions and values from any other entity.

The Indian military, despite its recent problems, remains a very fine institution. To remain relevant and effective, it must, however, embrace change with discretion. Therein lies the trick in meeting the increasing challenge posed to the military leadership.

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