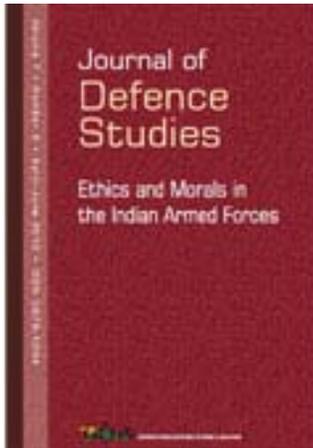


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## Journal of Defence Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.idsa.in/journalofdefencestudies>

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To cite this article: Rahul K. Bhonsle (2013): Ethics at the Grassroots: A Values-based Approach, Journal of Defence Studies, Vol-7, Issue-2. pp- 35-48

URL: [http://idsa.in/jds/7\\_2\\_2013\\_EthicsattheGrassroots\\_rkbhonsle](http://idsa.in/jds/7_2_2013_EthicsattheGrassroots_rkbhonsle)

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## Ethics at the Grassroots A Values-based Approach

*Rahul K. Bhonsle\**

*This article addresses the declining standards of morality in the armed forces and suggests measures to address it by undertaking appropriate interventions at the grassroots, unit or battalion. It traces the importance of ethics in the military, particularly in the context of the post-modern state, which grants exclusive authority to the armed forces for the use of violence. Further, it examines the state of ethics today and the challenges in codification to arrive at the basic ethical norms that need to be fostered in the military. Having established this, the article goes on to highlight the context of ethics at the unit level, outlining the challenges faced, including in counter-insurgency operations, normal administrative functioning, and the current approach to ethics training. The author proposes three options as suggestions for building an ethical culture in the unit—the Kohlberg model, the Values and Virtues Approach, and a Code of Conduct.*

Effective fighters are also ethical fighters,  
good soldiers in the one sense are also good soldiers in the other sense...  
Hence, good soldiers must in certain ways be good persons as well.

– Hilliard Aronovitch, *Canadian Professor of Philosophy*.<sup>1</sup>

### HOW IMPORTANT ARE ETHICS AT THE GRASSROOTS?

Ethics are the fountainhead of strength and resilience of a society. Traditionally evolved societies have had a very strong ethical code of

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conduct based on universal values. History, on the other hand, is replete with examples of the collapse of societies which have lost their moral compass. Ancient Greece and Rome are recorded instances of decadence. Medieval India provides many instances of the fall of kingdoms due to the vices of the rulers. While Akbar's *Ain-e-Akbari* established a vibrant empire, his grandson Aurangzeb set the foundations for its destruction with his immoral polity. The importance of ethics, particularly in the military in the Westphalian state, is underlined due to the legitimacy accorded to those in uniform for the use of force. The modern concept of 'just wars' emphasizes the conduct of wars for the right purpose in the rightful way. The post-modern, 'dharma *yoddha*' of today has to bear the moral burden of fighting 'dirty wars', counter-insurgency and terrorism campaigns that test his commitment to universal values of equality, justice and human rights.<sup>2</sup>

A frequently made argument is that as far as a military commander is proficient in the art of war, adherence to rigid peacetime ethical standards could be compromised. In Indian mythology, the Mahabharata largely sustains this, given the manner in which great warriors—Karna, Drona and Abhimanyu—were done in through subterfuge. The saying that 'everything is fair in war' is frequently used to justify ruse and deception which are acknowledged as principles of war; however, the same may not hold true of using unfair moral principles. Studies over a period have revealed that, in the long term, a commander's violation of ethical norms undermines the faith of society in the military.<sup>3</sup> Suffice to say, as militaries collapse, the survival of societies may also be in danger. On the other hand, where militaries are able to recover from the moral abyss, they effectively contribute to the revival of national power. The United States' (US) armed forces are a stellar example of diagnosis of the Vietnam moral ignominy and recovery to new norms of moral and professional conduct in the twenty-first century.

Military ethics are evolved at the apex but implemented at the grassroots. It is how a soldier conducts himself in and out of battle that determines the values espoused by the army.<sup>4</sup> These values are imparted in the core unit under the stern yet benevolent eye of the commanding officer (CO). Thus, cultivating ethical behaviour at the battalion or regiment level is important. Some issues relevant to the subject are outlined in this article by examining the problem of military ethics today; its codification; components; the challenges in units—operational as well as command

and administration; current approach to building an ethical culture; and, finally, recommendations for creating the same.

### **IS THERE A PROBLEM OF ETHICS?**

The military today is seen losing moral ground in society. The phenomenon is universal. The senior military hierarchy of the US was in the eye of the storm with multiple crises that erupted in October 2012 leading to the resignation of David Petraeus, a decorated commander with an impeccable record in Iraq and Afghanistan, who was director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The then commander in Afghanistan, Lieutenant General John Allen, was also under a shadow though he has since been cleared. Head of the US Africa Command, Army, General William Ward, was demoted for unaccounted for expenses and was forced to retire, while the commander of the US European Command, Admiral James Staviridis, was accused of accepting gifts from foreign governments in violation of service regulations. The crisis was so acute that General Martin E. Dempsey, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, recommended a review of the support staff being provided to flag officers. Former US Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, is quoted to have said that the 'sense of entitlement' and 'great power' wielded by the Generals can impact their sense of propriety.<sup>5</sup>

After an evaluation of these incidents, General Dempsey concluded that there was a requirement of not just ethics training programmes in the army but also that these should start earlier. 'While we have appropriate ethics training programs in place for senior leaders, we need to start earlier and reinforce that training more frequently in an officer's career,' Pentagon spokesman George Little was quoted in a Bloomberg report.<sup>6</sup>

In India, too, there has been extensive exposure to impropriety by military commanders at senior as well as the lower levels, with some instances leading to conviction and punishment. Many of these relate to the exercise of autonomous privilege of entitlement by commanders in the hierarchical ladder which commences at the unit level. The culture of assuming higher privileges with the rank seems to be prevailing over the age-old Chetwode motto of the welfare of men coming before one's own well-being. The debate on morality in the Indian military has not been as upfront as in the US. While a number of cases have been brought to light in the media, there is a lack of introspection within the Indian armed forces—at least no signs being evident in the

public domain. Taking a cue from the US and a general understanding of the functioning of the military, imparting the right values at the outset assumes importance and would be relevant in the Indian context as well.

#### CHALLENGE OF CODIFICATION OF MILITARY ETHICS

The main challenge of assessing ethics is what standards should be applied under the given circumstances. Should these be comparative with the overall prevailing environment or be related to the laid down code of honour. In comparison with the Indian society at large, the military may look like knights in shining armour. This is the general argument given in the case of the loss of integrity by selected individuals, as brought up in media debates from time to time. This premise, however, questions the very requirement of maintaining the highest standards of ethics in the profession of arms and, thus, ipso facto exclusive authority allotted by the state for violence in people's and national interest. When applied down the hierarchy, the dangers of this argument will be evident for it may lead to moral anarchy, with every unit commander free to adopt standards of his own choosing. Lowering the bar, therefore, is likely to set dangerous trends. Thus, codified standards which have been accepted in the military over the years need to be applied rigorously.

The other challenge, particularly in terms of financial and professional impropriety, is of the transformation in society with changing values, rising aspirations, a consumerist culture and an information explosion, all posing ethical dilemmas to military leaders. In some militaries, as in India, the apex of the hierarchical pyramid has been broadened. Correspondingly, this has led to rising aspirations to reach the higher rank, creating more rather than less competition.

In line with this is a call by some to change the very standards on which ethics and morality is judged in the military, to take a more lenient view, and as servicemen adjust to the changing reality of modern societies. Yet, as universal values and virtues of equality and truth remain unchanged, the contrary view is to accept the reality of a fall in standards and undertake measures to correct the same. There is a case, therefore, not as much to evaluate and review the ethical norms in the military but to examine ways and means to imbibe these in modern soldiers and leaders.<sup>7</sup> The need of the hour thus is, 'as the Red Queen said to Alice, "we need to run twice as fast just to remain in the same place"'.<sup>8</sup>

### COMPONENTS OF MILITARY ETHICS

Unlike in other professions, servicemen require the maintenance of ethical standards at two levels: first, what is considered as morally good in society; and second, professional standards to be enforced in the performance of military duties. In both of these, legal codification is contained in instruments of law, both civil and military, and is supplemented by moral injunctions through peer evaluation. This is epitomized in general terms by the West Point honour code, 'I will not lie, cheat or steal and nor tolerate those who do', or the Chetwode motto, 'the safety, honour and welfare of the country come first, always and every time...that of the men you command comes next, and your own ease, comfort and safety come last—always and every time'. The differences between the two are noticeable. While the West Point emphasis is on virtues, Chetwode established values. Both are equally important and are examined in detail subsequently.

The Indian Army doctrine also espouses moral values as one of the three sub-components of combat power, the other two being conceptual and physical. In the moral element, apart from leadership, management and motivation, basic morality is emphasized. The doctrine highlights importance of basic morality and also outlines the contents thus:

It is extremely important that the basic morality of individuals in the Indian Army is always above board. Professional honesty, courage of conviction, integrity, tolerance to accept reality and differing points of view are some of the essential qualities which should always be encouraged. The higher the position in the hierarchy, the greater should be the commitment to moral values. In addition, a commander should possess the courage to take hard decisions.<sup>9</sup>

The doctrine also highlights commitment to values increasing with each level of command, given the influence that the higher commander has over a larger organization, and also the greater ambiguity and ethical dilemmas that he faces.

In some ways, codification of moral values is done through the structured feedback on all commissioned and non-commissioned officers in the Army in the form of the Annual Confidential Report (ACR). Of the core character qualities, those that have been ascribed the star or higher gradation for officers relate to ethical conduct such as integrity and moral courage.<sup>10</sup> These are the virtues that the Army seeks to cultivate and

which the CO is expected to evaluate each year. Thus, a broad framework in which to cultivate ethical culture is now established.

#### CHALLENGE OF ETHICS IN UNITS

##### **Counter-insurgency and Proxy War**

Counterterrorism, insurgency and internal security pose a different challenge for ethics at the unit level. There are no formal rules or conventions, such as the Geneva Conventions dictating conduct of such conflicts between states and non-state actors, except those underlined by the military, such as the Chief of Army Staff's Ten Commandments.<sup>11</sup> The relationship between combatants and non-combatants is also defused and the possibility of causing harm to the latter results in necessity for exercising a high degree of restraint. These operations are also conducted at the small unit level of sections and platoons, yet they impact at the strategic level. The moral influence of higher leadership in operations conducted by the non-commissioned officers is important, which can only come about by inculcating the right ethics at the unit level and ensuring that these are followed without exception.

For instance, the excesses committed by US soldiers in Afghanistan, such as burning the Koran, led to President Obama apologizing publicly to avoid a strategic backlash.<sup>12</sup> In the Indian scenario, cases such as that of Manorama Devi in Manipur led to a major public outcry in 2004, resulting in the removal of Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) from selected areas of the Imphal Valley. The application of appropriate moral principles is seen more important in such cases than cultural training. A former US marine commander, Charles Krulak, has thus termed this phenomenon as the 'strategic corporal'.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, a moral dilemma is faced by the commander in the case of an incident of excess by his command, for which he may consider himself absolved either due to circumstances or lack of domain control. Instigating security forces to commit excesses is a frequent insurgent tactic that has to be faced in the course of such operations. There is a strong argument to seek an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth in the brutal environment.<sup>14</sup> The incentive to demonstrate professional achievement may also lead to excesses; sometimes, wilful use of the human shield is commonly alleged. Thus, operational procedures will not be sufficient to meet these challenges, which will necessitate supplementation by sound human values.

The ethical dilemma is also intense in a proxy war scenario. This is exemplified by January 2013 incident on the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir where two Indian soldiers lost their lives and their bodies were mutilated by Pakistani soldiers/terrorists. Pakistan uses irregulars in combat with regulars. These irregulars have a no-holds-barred approach committing inhuman acts, such as the mutilation of the dead. Staying within the rules of state on state combat under such circumstances requires strong institutional support as well as moral authority over the command, challenges that are unique at the unit level, and the CO's plight while handling the emotions of over a thousand men are thus understandable.

#### **Command and Administration**

Apart from operational challenges, the hierarchical order of the armed forces places heavy responsibility for command and administration on the unit commander, be it the captain of a ship, an air force squadron, or an infantry battalion commander. With authority comes almost the sole responsibility of the 'buck' stopping at the CO's table, if he is conscientious enough. Commanding officers are also nurtured by the environment as demigods denoting organizational trust. Internally, the CO is a role model for all ranks in the unit. The exclusive power of the CO denotes scope for exploitation of authority.

Environmental factors affecting units include the overall value system within the military and the local milieu. Personality orientation at various levels plays an important role in dictating ethical norms that are adopted Army-wide and in the local setting. This creates a wide permissive range within which the CO can choose to operate. He is thus responsible for setting the norms and adjustment with the environment. Where these are in congruence, the CO's ethical dilemma is minimal, but in a human environment, particularly with the overall shift in culture as outlined hitherto, rationalization and adjustment is the reality rather than an exception.

Peer pressure within the local environment is another challenge. In case norms are generally violated and accepted as such, the choice is to keep up with the general trend or be an outlier. Regimental pressure is part of another peer conformity dynamic that is unique to the Indian Army. A unit is frequently compared within the regiment with 15–20 peers on standards of performance determined by attainment of quantitative objectives. Mechanisms such as the Colonel of the Regiment ensure

value orientation from the top and supervision. Yet, given pressure of performance, 'not getting caught' may assume greater significance than sticking to the rule.

Under these circumstances, the CO will have to make his own choices in consultation with his command chain which stretches down to the junior command level, mainly the institution known as the subedar major. These are hard-worn, down-to-earth soldiers who have the experience to rationalize based on a long exposure to the military culture. In units with strong ethical culture, the challenges are greatly reduced, whereas in others there is a need for building up an environment of reducing moral choices by providing alternate standards for co-relation.

Another challenge is the ACR. As recorded in the issue brief, 'Officers' Promotion Policy in the Army', inflationary trends have crept in the Army due to the necessity of a CO having to push up reports of the performance of officers to keep up their level of motivation. This was mainly attributed to deficiency in officer strength; thus, objectivity and moral courage of the COs have been the first victims.<sup>15</sup> Conflict and/or compromise is therefore evident, which could be for fulfilment of personal ambition; organizational for name and fame of the unit; or human to ensure that the unit as a whole and the personnel individually are not professionally cast away.

#### **ETHICS CULTURE IN UNITS: THE CURRENT APPROACH**

In the Indian Army, ethical training is limited to short capsules and exposures in courses of instruction at the military training institutions for officers and for religious teachers. Officers training comprises of lectures by senior officers supplemented by case studies. At the unit level, there is no formal training on ethics, and sermons of religious teacher combined with injunctions and enforcement by the command chain are the main interventions. The Indian reliance on the oral narrative is part of this legacy.

This also follows the general British tradition where reliance is placed on institutional strength and regulations, and close peer and superior supervision to exert moral pressure on soldiers and commanders to sustain their performance, and no ethical training is deemed necessary.<sup>16</sup> In such a case, there is a requirement of the intimate process of socialization. The problem in the Indian Army at present is the acute deficiency of officers in units; thus, grooming of junior officers is the first casualty.

Under the circumstances, there is added pressure on the CO and given the time available, a structured programme of ethical training may need consideration.

This is standard practice in many militaries. The Canadian Department of National Defence has had a working programme on ethics as far back as 1997 known as the 'Defence Ethics Program'. The French military academy at St. Cyr is reported to have conducted ethics training since 2002.<sup>17</sup> The German Innere Führung system is another example.

At the unit level, the Canadian Army has the 'Army Ethics Programme' (AEP), which is 'an embedded, unit-level Professional Development (PD) training commitment by which the Army renews, refreshes, and revitalizes our (soldiers) values.'<sup>18</sup> Armies also link operational effectiveness with ethics. For instance, the Canadian Army ethics programme preamble states, 'A healthy ethical climate is a precondition to operational effectiveness.'<sup>19</sup>

Programmes are thus both top down and bottom up. Militaries have obviously drawn these programmes based on their legacy, structure and current requirements. For instance, the top-down programme will contribute to dissemination and supervision of uniform standards but would be seen by participants as forced from above, and thus their value may be reduced. Variation in the culture and composition is another reason due to which unit-level programmes may be more suitable.<sup>20</sup> Three suggestions for building ethical culture in units are discussed in the succeeding section.

## BUILDING ETHICAL CULTURE IN UNITS

### **The Kohlberg Model as a Guide**

For a structured approach to building ethical culture in a unit or even in the larger setting of the military as a whole, the Kohlberg model of moral development provides a viable option. Lawrence Kohlberg was a psychology professor at the University of Chicago and Harvard University, who created a new field within psychology known as moral development and is attributed to be amongst the first to have studied the phenomenon of growth of individuals as moral beings.<sup>21</sup>

Kohlberg identifies ethical choices made by people based on the dilemma that they face in making them and links psychology with ethics. He outlines the importance of training or persuading people to attain higher levels of moral behaviour to make it consistent and predictable in the long run. Since dilemmas are diverse in units, the Kohlberg model

may provide relevant options to a wide spectrum of situations. Kohlberg has suggested six stages of moral development that include obedience to a code of conduct attributable to: (a) avoidance of punishment; (b) self-interest; (c) conformity to social norms; (d) maintenance of authority; (e) execution of social contract; and (f) need to abide by universal ethical principles.<sup>22</sup> Each of these has unique importance and can be employed for maintaining high ethical standards at the unit level depending on the state in which an individual or a subunit is.

The first stage is primarily a response to avoid punishment. Stage two entails abiding by ethical principles based on self-interest. This is evident when individuals become more conscious of right behaviour, say, when they are on the verge of being considered for promotion. Stage three denotes compliance driven by necessity to conform to overall standards of ethics in the environment and avoid being a contrarian. This also impacts inter-personal relationships, wherein a person may conform to lower or higher standards only to sustain his association with another and avoid falling from grace. Stage four is driven by the need to obey rules, laws and conventions. In these stages, morality is driven by an outside force rather than inner urge and thus may not be as effective in the long term. Stages five and six are seen to be principled levels in the Kohlberg model where individuals will establish their own principles and will continue to adopt and adhere to these in their conduct. This is the self-actualized or evolved level. In stage five, moral obligations are seen as a social contract between the individual and society rather than obedience to laws. Stage six is the adoption of universal ethical principles by evolved reasoning and is conscience driven.

The Kohlberg model provides a benchmark for adoption in the units to evolve individuals from stage one to the higher stages. The application requires detailed categorization of each individual, particularly the leadership. This can be carried out by the CO and then applied practically as a tool for the moral development of the command. Detailed guidelines for the use of this model in the armed forces could be examined after an evaluation of its practical application.

### **Values and Virtues Approach**

Virtues such as loyalty, honesty and courage lead to building good character and, thus, ethical behaviour. This approach creates conditioned responses which provide the necessary impetus to the soldier, particularly in times of stress.<sup>23</sup> Values are larger goals and objectives that a society

cherishes, such as equity and freedom. These will be difficult to determine by persons who are not evolved and cannot be linked to actions that are required to be taken in times of stress. In other words, values are 'right things', while virtues are doing the right things in the 'right way'. Simplistically speaking, in military terms, right values can be termed as the grand strategy while virtues are tactics. Thus, within the overall strategy, the aim should be to use virtues as tools to achieve values where practicable. An integrated value-cum-virtues-based model is considered an effective way of imparting ethical training in the military at the unit level.

On the other hand, frequently in units, the focus is on efficiency rather than effectiveness. Here, the task of the CO is to provide the guiding light for selecting the right pathways and then doing these in the right manner. For instance, taking the incident of mutilation of bodies on the LoC as an example, the CO has the choice of allowing immediate retaliation to assuage emotions of the rank and file. This will be incongruent with the larger goals and objectives at the national level. The alternative is to await a suitable opportunity to strike back at a time and manner of one's own choosing and building up the capability for the same. It would require a commander with strong moral courage to adopt the second course. These values have to be build up for the many traumas that a well-groomed commander may have to undergo in the future. Thus, inculcating the right values is important while, at the same time, focusing on the right virtues.

Applying the values and virtues model to counter insurgency would be based on the sound human ideals of compassion for civilians, particularly women and children, restraint and also the acceptance of additional risk to one's own self while ensuring that these principles are maintained. Training the unit commanders in these facets is important so that they are able to make not just correct operational decisions but also moral ones. Scenario building and in box exercises<sup>24</sup> as well as case studies can be a powerful tool for exposing all ranks to such moral dilemmas that they may face in the course of the performance of their duty. Sharing of case studies across the armed forces is another way of ensuring that the right approach is adopted at the unit level.<sup>25</sup>

In normal times, right values imply not getting into the so-called 'rat race' of competitive one-upmanship. Seeking welfare of men through wrongful means is also taboo; here, again, in an environment of constrained resources such an approach may mean that at a given time,

the men may be lacking basic items of accoutrement or even rations for a short period of time. However, avoiding compromises from the very outset may be more beneficial in the long term. At the individual level, it would imply not 'keeping up with the Joneses'.

### **Traditional Way—Code of Conduct**

The traditional way of creating an ethical culture is by establishing a code of conduct, which is based on existing norms and the legacy of past experience. Some of these are codified in the 'Passing It On' series in regiments.<sup>26</sup> The CO will do well to establish a basic code of conduct, outline standards of probity and encourage transparency. This will insulate soldiers from unethical orders on the one hand, while, on the other, officers will not face the dilemma given their strong rooting in military values.<sup>27</sup> The emphasis is not as much on a code of conduct, as most norms of ethical conduct are well established, but on its effective application. For instance, there are elaborate orders in the military on the acceptance of gifts and their disposal. Implementing such rules, however, is dependent on personal choice, which poses a moral dilemma. Choosing to implement the code of conduct will overcome this dilemma. Also, the personal conduct of the CO will act as a great example for subordinates to implement the code of conduct. For instance, if the CO chooses to draw the right scale of rations from the quartermaster, it will send the correct message down the chain as a unit is an exclusive social organization with a high degree of lateral communication. Thus, the message will percolate to the levels desired. As the old saying goes, one act is better than a thousand words.

### **CONCLUSION—THE LARGER ETHICAL CHALLENGE**

The battalion or '*paltan*', as it is known in the Indian Army, is an optimum, socially cohesive, independent, composite task-oriented force under a single commander. Thus, an evaluation of ethics from this perspective has been attempted herein. The larger moral challenge is that while the military is required to follow different standards, this should not result in a feeling of being a force apart from society. There is a danger in such situations wherein an institution deems itself morally superior to the environment leading to justification of immoral acts even when these are not in keeping with the general standards of ethics, or the holier-than-thou approach.<sup>28</sup> The right way forward may be for the Indian military leadership to renew its role as the lodestar for larger society as Cariappa,

Thimayya and Manekshaw had been in their times, a space that has now been occupied by the Narayan Murthys and Azim Premjis of the information technology (IT) world.<sup>29</sup> Not surprisingly, India is regarded as a global leader in IT today.

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