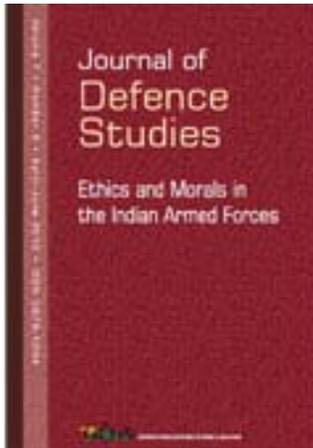


Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

No.1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg
Delhi Cantonment, New Delhi-110010



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: Vikram Taneja (2013): 'Strength One' on the Moral Highway, Journal of Defence Studies, Vol-7, Issue-2. pp- 163-174

URL http://idsa.in/jds/7_2_2013_StrengthOneontheMoralHighway_vtaneja

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'Strength One' on the Moral Highway

*Vikram Taneja**

The erosion in moral values in the armed forces over the past few decades has left India's political and military leadership bewildered and befuddled. No amount of preventive or curative measures appear to be succeeding in arresting this fall, as day after day dawns with news of fresh instances of impropriety and indecorum. This article attempts to examine the issues of morals and ethics as relevant to the profession of soldiering across the time continuum. It dwells further on the probable causes of the erosion of moral values and ethics in the Army. The article suggests certain fundamental approaches towards addressing this complex human issue albeit with immense prudence, as 'sometimes the remedy is more lethal than the disease'.¹

*We are the Pilgrims, master; we shall go
Always a little further: it may be
Beyond the last blue mountain barred with snow,
Across that angry or that glimmering sea,
White on a throne or guarded in a cave
There lives a prophet who can understand
Why men were born*

– James Elroy Flecker²

INTRODUCTION

Five thousand years ago, on the battlefield at Kurukshetra just before the start of the Mahabharata war, Krishna outlined to Arjuna, a system of ethics that is relevant even today. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna propounded two important lessons to Arjuna on character of a soldier.

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ISSN 0976-1004 print

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Journal of Defence Studies, Vol. 7, No. 2, April–June 2013, pp. 163–174



He exhorts that the key counsel for a soldier is 'duty for duty's sake' and 'duty unto death', thereby guiding him on how to build character and prevent ethical failure.

The Indian Army is today laying greater stress on ethics than ever before. Through the past decade, exponents at the Army educational institutions have increasingly included the study of ethics in their training curriculum. Events in the past two decades have reminded us that people in all walks of life are vulnerable to the travails of easy virtues, both professional and personal. Professionals, including lawyers, doctors, teachers, engineers, business managers, etc., are restructuring codes of ethics for their community in keeping with the changing times. The Indian Army website too lists out ethos primarily derived from the ancient wisdom of the scriptures matured over centuries.

While, on the one hand, it is easy to draw out a list of positive qualities that we can all agree upon, on the other hand, even though hundreds of trainers work day and night to teach people good character, when it really matters, people's character still fails. Why? What has led the Indian society at large to degenerate to an extent today that there has been a near-absolute erosion of our moral values? Is this fall in our morals a consequence of the influence brought about by centuries of foreign rule, which ended in 1947 after India's independence from the British? If the following commentary attributed to Lord Macaulay in the British Parliament in 1835 is to be believed, are we to understand that the British are responsible for the state in which the Indian society finds itself today?

I have travelled across the length and breadth of India and I have not seen one person who is a beggar, who is a thief. Such wealth I have seen in this country, such high moral values, people of such calibre, that I do not think we would ever conquer this country, unless we break the very backbone of this nation, which is her spiritual and cultural heritage, and therefore, I propose that we replace her old and ancient education system, her culture, for if the Indians think that all that is foreign and English is good and greater than their own, they will lose their self esteem, their native culture and they will become what we want them, a truly dominated nation.³

This brings us to the next question: whether it is the degradation of morality in the society that has led to an erosion of the moral values of the Indian armed forces who had stood firm for generations on the finest Indian and the Anglo-Saxon traditions epitomized so well in 'Flanders Fields' as follows:

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
*If ye break faith with us who die
we shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.*

– Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae

STATE OF THE NATION

Has the erosion of values in our society, especially in the past few decades, caused the values in the military to erode? The answers are not very hard to find. If we look around us, we find ourselves in a society where the moral boundaries have been blurred by the fog of materialism and corruption that has overtaken morality in public life spurred by a leadership with a low transparency index. We have started legitimizing a behaviour which was previously regarded as criminal or even anti-social. To suggest to people that their behaviour is reprehensible seems out of form as, in the present times, nothing is truly reprehensible. A deterioration of morality is indicated even in choice of words we use. Thus, 'wrong' becomes 'inappropriate' and 'bad habits' are called 'lifestyle choices'. Under the misplaced notion of freedom, anything and everything is permissible; and in the name of tolerance, we are told to give respect to actions and attitudes that are, in many cases, loathsome and unethical.

Mirroring this trend within the Army, we have ex-Generals who allegedly offered gratification to the Army Chief for awarding a deal for artillery prime movers to a certain manufacturer. We have Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) cases against former Generals for allegedly conspiring with builders to usurp defence land for personal benefit. A plethora of senior officers are found enacting Mumbai's Adarsh Housing and the Sukna land scandals. In view of the unpleasant chronicles featuring the infamous Ketchup Colonel and Booze Brigadier, and the growing trend of questionable interference in the matters of promotions, assignments and post-retirement jobs, the Army certainly needs to introspect on the moral front.

ARE FALLING VALUES ACCEPTABLE?

Is the above account too harsh or judgemental on our officers and soldiers? Are the virtues such as honour and high morals the exclusive preserve of the military? One of the great difficulties involved in study about military ethics is the tendency, particularly in the armchair specialists, to be unrealistic about the moral climate associated with the profession of arms. We maintain that cheating and stealing contravene the norm of professional military ethics. We declare our common allegiance to a membership of a self-proclaimed citadel of modern chivalry where the cases of corruption and misdemeanour are mere aberrations.

The military is meant to defend the country and its countrymen. It can deter as much as it can wage war. When all else fails, the armed forces are called upon to do what our soldiers, or sailors and airmen, have done throughout the ages: find, fight and finish their nation's enemies. The military has been recognized by intellectuals and statesmen alike to be a society by itself, yet one that is still part of the larger society. The law, the custom, and the ethos and training of military owe much to the recognition that the military requires a certain latitude forbidden to the civilians in return for certain hardships and constraints that the military service demands. To quote from James H. Toner:

If the Army is to execute all of its fearsome tasks, Private Jones US Army must be held to an account different from the expectations that we might have from Mr Smith. Private Jones can be ordered to risk his life and kill; Mr Smith of course is free to walk away from such liabilities. After teaching and training Private Jones how to kill, is it entirely rational to teach them not to lie, cheat or steal? Or can it not tolerate who do?⁴

Prisoners of wars have routinely lied to their captors. Soldiers stealing from the enemy's national treasury by affecting its destruction are rewarded handsomely. Can a basic premise hold well that lies and duplicities are sometimes required by—and are probably in the best interests of—the state or the military unit? Can there be no hierarchy of values? Do we really want a military organization which encourages preparation for destruction but is unable to tolerate a minor transgression of moral values?

The answer to this is an emphatic NO. We must be very clear that the profession of arms is the noblest of professions even though it may have suffered from certain deviations from the code of honour in the recent past. Even though the primary role of the Army may prepare it for destruction of the enemy, to imply that some degree of moral transgression should be permitted is a recipe for certain disaster. The codes and canons imbibed by

young officers are indeed the ethical essence of the profession. There is no substitute for a virtuous, valorous and vigorous leadership.

THE HONOUR CODE

So, if the above narrative is true and we agree that there can be no latitude as far as honour code is concerned, the issue remains that how have we come to accept moral degeneration as something 'new normal' which, until a few years back, was unimaginable and unacceptable in any self-respecting military. How have we deviated from our honour code? In order to get a perspective on this, let us examine why militaries have an 'honour code'. Norman Dixon in the *The Psychology of Military Incompetence* examines this aspect succinctly.⁵ According to him, the military code of honour is a set of rules for behaviour. The rules are observed because to break them provokes the distinct emotions of guilt or shame. Whereas guilt is a product of knowing that one has transgressed and, therefore, may be found out, shame results from actually being found out—in military circles, traditionally the greater crime. Military codes of honour are designed to ensure that threatening behaviour is met by 'fight' rather than 'flight'. The honour code does so by making the social consequences of flight rather more unpleasant than the physical consequences of fight. While the latter might lead to physical pain, even death, the former eventuates, with far greater certainty, in personal guilt and public shame.

When a soldier in action sees his life in danger, even the bravest will be seized by a moment of fear. If victory is to be won, this elementary physical sensation must somehow be suppressed by a contrary reflex of a moral kind. To ensure this, a soldier must be provided with a set of automatic inhibitions which will save him from the moment of danger. His one moral defence against internal weakness is the sense of honour. To arouse this sense of honour in the ordinary soldier, cultivate it and, above all, inspire it by personal example is an officer's highest duty; and to fulfil this duty, he must himself have a well-developed sense of honour and superiority.⁶

GENERALSHIP AND MORALS

This further takes us to the issue that how does this honour code get applied in a democracy such as India and its Army. Norman Dixon comments on the standing of a military career in a democracy thus:

A perceived decline in the attractiveness of a military career may deter those who might otherwise have opted for one. This is particularly so in case of democratic armies in the times of peace. When a military

spirit forsakes its people, the profession of arms ceases to be held in honour and military men fall to the lowest rank of public servants; they are little esteemed and no longer understood...hence arises a circle of causes and consequences from which it is difficult to escape—the best part of the nation shuns the military profession because that profession is not honoured because the best part of the nation has ceased to follow it. In short possibly less able people are being called upon to carry out a more difficult task with a heavier price to pay for error and at the highest levels, their responsibilities are staggering. In Vietnam War alone, military commanders were responsible for executing policies which cost the US 300 Billion dollars. These are great responsibilities. Errors of Generalship on this scale will be very costly.⁷

The above is applicable equally today in the Indian scenario, albeit to a greater degree. Take, for example, the onerous and unenviable mandate of the Eastern Army Commander. His area of operational responsibility spans West Bengal and all North-Eastern states. He is responsible for the deployment of lakhs of troops—officers and men, deployed along an international border spanning over five countries. He is accountable to the nation for India's defence at the icy altitudes of the Himalayas against an adversary who enjoys a disproportionate military superiority over India. Any error of generalship in his duties would be a catastrophe.

Military ethics is based upon the notions of honour, heroism and self-sacrifice and reasoned patriotism. It cannot survive, let alone flourish, in an atmosphere in which military is perceived as being devoid of pride and honour. In an environment of an all-round decline in moral standards, *the task of a military leader in keeping the officers and the men motivated to follow the honour code becomes difficult*. This is perhaps the main reason for erosion of our value system, though not the only one.

The second factor which has contributed to the fall in ethics is the perceived involvement of a large number of senior military officers in wrongdoing. The senior officers are expected to lead by personal example. When some of them rise in the hierarchy despite their moral failings being commonly known within the Services, then the moral compass for at least some of their subordinates gets misdirected. In an environment where sycophancy and parochialism are preferred over integrity and competence, partnership-in-guilt becomes a higher virtue than trust and the favourites are rewarded at the cost of more deserving, then inculcating military ethics into the rank and file becomes a little more than an absurd anachronism.

India is the biggest importer of arms in the world and resultantly, has had more than her fair share of so-called 'defence scams'. In the light of

repeated and persistent 'defence scams or arms scandals', we would do well to examine whether there is a vested interest in importing arms and equipment from abroad.

Elaborating on this aspect, Paul Yingling answers this question:

Armies do not fight wars; nations fight wars. War is not a military activity conducted by soldiers, but rather a social activity that involves entire nations. Any understanding of war which ignores this element is fundamentally flawed. To prepare forces for war, the general must visualize the conditions for future combat and the material requirements for future engagements. After visualizing the conditions of future combat, the general is responsible for explaining to the civilian policymakers the demands of future combat and the risks entailed in failing to meet those demands. Civilian policymakers have neither the expertise nor the inclination to think about the strategic probabilities in the distant future. Elected representatives face powerful incentives to focus on near term challenges that are of immediate concern to the public. Generating military capability is the labor of decades... The general who speaks too loudly of preparing for war while the nation is at peace places at risk his career. However the general who speaks too softly places at risk the security of his country. Failing to visualize future battlefield represents a lapse in professional competence, but seeing the future clearly and saying nothing is even a more serious lapse... A military professional must possess the physical courage to face the hazards of battle and the moral courage to withstand the barbs of public scorn [so often directed at the Indian military hierarchy as a result of so called 'Defence Scams'].⁸

The military leadership has to look within to see that only the essential requirements are projected for procurement and their recommendations are based on honest professional evaluation so that no 'scams' take place.

If we accept the acts of corruption and misdemeanour as minor deviation and do not mete out exemplary punishment to the wrongdoers, then such acts cease to have the desired shock effect and slowly gain a tacit acceptance—which has been the experience in the Indian capital acquisition scenario. *This is probably the reason why we have come to view corruption in the Army as normal and something that will occur.* The damage suffered by the country in the Rs 60 crore Bofors scandal was much more than the recent spectrum scam worth lakhs of crores, since lack of action in Bofors scandal emboldened others to indulge in even bigger scandals.

The third reason which has eroded the honour code is *careerism*. Implicit to the problem of integrity is the problem of placing career before honour. There is no denying that military professionals should be concerned

about their career. Achievement, after all, would rank high in any officer's aspirations. A fine line, however, separates genuine aspiration of one's success in the military from excessive, unhealthy careerism. Prevalence of excessive careerism is a major issue that the armed forces today are faced with. Whatever the profession, personal ambition can cloud ethical judgement. In the military, obsession with reaching the top can lead us to be mere 'yes men' for the commander instead of being an honest advisor and dependable subordinate. It can lead us to cover up for the flaws of higher hierarchy. It can lead us to keep unsavoury reports from reaching the top. In such situations, silence becomes a crime. It can lead us to cover for ourselves in our effort to look good at all costs. Reluctance of officers to render reports reflecting the true battle readiness of their units stems from the fact that they hold their positions for short periods, and they feel that even one poor report will reflect harshly upon their abilities. It can lead us to do what we know is morally wrong.

RECOMMENDATIONS

So, how long can a limb drained of life from a gangrenous carcass nurture itself and survive, leave alone give back life to the failing being of which it was once so vibrant a shadow? There is no quick-fix solution; neither is there any single one. If there is degeneration in the society and the armed forces, we need to arrest it through a nationwide effort to restore the value at the national level, and the Army will automatically follow. A number of studies and articles are available in the open domain that address the issue of moral health within the Services. Some of these are: closing the growing economic disparity between the military and corporate world; reducing the military's involvement in internal security duties and the associated dilemmas of protection of the soldiers vis-à-vis immunity, collateral damage and intense media scrutiny of matters military, etc. It is, however, felt that if certain major areas of concern, as given in the subsequent paragraphs, are addressed, it would cover, in totality, the moral reform canvas in the Services. Hence, the recommendations have been restricted towards addressing these major areas.

Engage the Armed Forces in the National Security Decision Loop

India follows a unique structure of higher defence management unparalleled anywhere in the world, which keeps the military out of the national security decision-making loop of the government. The Service chiefs have not been accorded adequate role in the decision-making process

and, therefore, remain 'non-persons' in the edifice of the government. As per the rules of business, issued under the constitutional powers of the President in 1961, which are the 'Bibles' for conduct of business by the government, the responsibility for the 'defence of India, and every part thereof, including preparation for defence', for the 'armed forces of the Union, namely, Army, Navy and Air Force', has been vested in the defence secretary. 'The three Service chiefs neither find mention nor are allocated any responsibilities under these rules. All these functionaries have a vital role to play in national security, but since they lack a status in the government, their views and recommendations are often ignored'.⁹ The stature and level of interaction of the Service chiefs has a direct bearing on the degree of esteem the Army is held within the government structure, which in the case of India is abysmally low, consequently making the task of a military leader in arousing the honour code in the rank and file impossible.¹⁰ This equation needs to be remedied and the rules of business need to be amended on the lines of other progressive democracies such as the United States.

Recruit and Promote Based on Moral Fibre

What can the Army do to maintain and improve its internal health about which the top military leadership talks about with such concern? Most of those who stray from the path of righteousness do so by degrees. They lie, cheat and steal for self-promotion and self-gratification. Hence, for a start, *it is absolutely vital that we improve our system and recruit and promote people based on integrity.* Without integrity, other leadership qualities such as motivation, capacity and knowledge are of little consequence. There should be no lowering of standards as far as moral fibre is concerned, even if shortages persist. Our code of behaviour must not tolerate shallowness, expediency or deception.

To talk of promotion, a number of studies have been undertaken within the Army which have brought out insightful results. The three major drawbacks of Indian military hierarchy that emerge from one of the surveys carried out in College of Defence Management (CDM) are: deterioration in values; self-promotion by leaders; and lack of visionary leadership.¹¹ Why is this so? We must realize that the system which produces our senior leadership is not based on rewarding moral courage or intellect. Officers rise to the senior ranks by following remarkably similar career patterns generated by a highly bureaucratic system akin to any other government service. Against all laid down canons of the trait principal theory of leadership, the military leader of today is neither born nor made; he is promoted!!

The promotion of an officer to the senior rank is determined by serving senior military hierarchy. The role of subordinates and peers plays no role in officer's advancement. To move up, he must only please his superiors. In such a system, the senior officers will choose officers like themselves and there are powerful incentives for conformity. *'It is unreasonable to expect an officer who has been conforming to institutional expectations for 30 years will emerge as an innovator in his late fifties.'*¹² If we desire moral courage in our leadership, a system of promotion which rewards these qualities must be put in place. Mild-mannered team players in the senior military hierarchy need to be replaced by creative and intelligent innovators.

Evolve a Workable Honour Code

The essence of the professional ethic needs no radical change. Yet, the ethic has never been laconically codified. There is some concern that a written code would push the profession towards a legalistic sense of itself. If the code were a list of punishable infractions written in legalese, then that concern would be valid. If the Army is to have a written code, it must focus on the moral and ethical, and not the legal, imperatives of the profession. It should be inspirational—an exhortation to better behaviour—rather than a list of offences. The Army should set for itself a goal of issuing a precise statement of professional ethics focusing on the roles of commissioned officers—soldier, servant of the nation, leader of character and member of a time-honoured profession. Before the Army accepts such a statement of its professional ethic, much debate is in order. Should we use hard phrases such as 'full accountability' and 'unlimited liability'? What are officers' core responsibilities as leaders, and how wide do they extend? The US Army has carried out extensive research in this field after their appalling experience in Vietnam. They have evolved a very workable military ethic for their Services, which is applied vigorously and to good effect. We could draw out a similar workable honour code while drawing from our scriptures for content. It could be suitably adapted to cater to our unique requirements and then applied on ground.

Formalize Large-scale Ethical Education

The need for intelligent and creative military leaders is self-evident. The concept of knowledge warriors has found wide support in the Indian military and there have been efforts to promote the Services as learning organizations. The promotion system must reward intellectual achievement. Moral and ethics education aimed at injecting ethical values into the decision-making mechanism and inculcating a sense of spirituality

to assist in ethical behaviour even under stress, should be provided. *The Services should set up a nodal agency for morals and ethics education in the form of a tri-service institution.* Education on morals and ethics needs to be given an independent entity and status, with officers at all levels required to attend the basic mandatory courses. Creation of a climate of a high ethical expectation is both morally and legally imperative.

CONCLUSION

It is felt best to conclude with a word of advice for the military as well as the society. The given account notwithstanding, over the last few decades, the military has still managed to remain an island of integrity and moral values in a degenerating society only through a functional system of punishment and reward. But, admittedly, there are also 'craters' on this island. Maybe, it is now time that the society learns from the Services. Those who suggest that there are no moral exemplars today are highly mistaken. Just as there are failed officers who deviate from the moral path and sully the uniform they wear, there are the heroes who have served their country at the cost of life and limb. All of those who dismiss the creed and disparage the military honour code as fatuous relic in these times should realize that to the members of the profession of arms, the idea of ethics and morals is their very soul, without which they would be mercenaries with guns.

For the senior leadership in the military, it is of utmost importance that they communicate their commitment to their fellow officers and they will be more likely to respect those standards in going about their business in the military. If it becomes necessary, the senior leadership may stand up and be counted by refusing to compromise on their standards and setting examples which their seniors, peers and subordinates can take lessons from. Undeniably, there are risks in such a course of action and if it fails, if none support this stance, one should be prepared to walk alone, take the road less travelled and make the difference. Standing firm ethically can certainly extract a cost, perhaps a steep one, and as professional soldiers, we must be willing to pay it. 'As we move along the path of career advancement, it is desirable that we make frequent azimuth checks with our ethical compass which would certainly encourage others who are seeking the same process.'¹³

As a last word, how does one face a moral predicament? *Manusmriti* gives a very apt answer. It says follow *Shruti* or the Vedas, which is the collective wisdom of mankind; *Smriti* or the Puranas, which enshrine the history of mankind; and *sadachara*, that is, good conduct, good practices and good usage. If none of them provide the answer to the dilemma, the

final answer is ‘*Swasyacha Priyam Aatmanah*’, meaning ‘follow the shrill voice of your conscience’.

NOTES

1. Virgil, ‘Aegrescitque medendo’, *Aeneid* 12:46, available at <http://www.umass.edu/wsp/reference/languages/latin/quotations/a.html>. Also quoted by Sir Francis Bacon in ‘Of Seditious and Troubles’, *Essays*, available at <http://www.bartleby.com/3/1/15.html>, accessed on 14 March 2013.
2. See James Elroy Flecker’s 1913 poem, ‘The Golden Journey to Samarkand’. The passage is entitled ‘The Pilgrims’.
3. This speech is usually referred together with his famous ‘Minutes on Indian Education’, which was indeed dated 2 February 1835, where Lord Macaulay was arguing in favour of using English as the medium of education in India and made his oft-quoted comment that ‘a single shelf of good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. Are we to keep the people of India ignorant in order that we may keep them submissive? Or do we think that we can give them knowledge without awakening ambition? Or do we mean to awaken ambition and to provide it with no legitimate vent? Who will answer any of these questions in the affirmative? Yet one of them must be answered in the affirmative, by every person who maintains that we Ought permanently to exclude the natives from high office’. Available at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1833macaulay-india.asp>, accessed on 16 February 2013.
4. Toner, James H., *Morals Under the Gun*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000, p. 2.
5. Dixon, Norman, *The Psychology of Military Incompetence*, Norfolk, England: Lowe and Brydone, 1976.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid, p. 21.
8. Yingling, Paul, ‘A Failure in Generalship’, *Armed Forces Journal*, 27 April 2007, p. 1, available at <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2007/05/2635198>, accessed on 20 February 2013.
9. Prakash, Arun, ‘Government, Military, Babu’, *The Indian Express*, 13 August 2012.
10. Dixon, *The Psychology of Military Incompetence*, n. 4.
11. College of Defence Management (CDM), ‘Morals and Ethics in the Army’, CDM, Secundrabad, 2005–06.
12. Yingling, ‘A Failure in Generalship’, n. 8, p. 4.
13. Aiyengar, S.R.R., ‘The Relevance of Ethical Leadership in the Process of Transformation’, *CDM Papers*, 2010, p. 19.