

Research & Advocacy to Address Issues Faced by Families of Armed Forces Soldiers Killed in Action (KIA)

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Abstract

This article is based upon a study to investigate existing ground realities in accessing entitlements and benefits for families of soldiers who made the supreme sacrifice defending the nation. Results indicate that widows and parents of armed forces soldiers killed-in-action (KIA) often face tremendous problems and challenges because of apathy, denial, and insufficient support from the military and civilian bureaucracy, and bureaucratic rules. On the basis of findings of the study, the article advocates for a review of policies and implementation processes so as to ensure timely and equitable access for all affected families, to lead a life of dignity.

Introduction

Every young soldier who joins the armed forces does so with passion and courage to protect the nation and people. When families lose their pillar of strength and support for the greater cause of defending India, not only are their dreams and hopes for a happy future shattered, they face extremely tough challenges

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in continuing to live long lives with fortitude and dignity. It becomes the nation's responsibility to honour each courageous soldier's supreme sacrifice and also to support their families devastated by loss. India's commitment to ensure support to families of soldiers KIA has some good initiatives. However, on ground, many families are either unable to access the entitlements and benefits or the delays stretch into years, thereby adding to their pain and problems.

The Defence Minister, the Home Minister, and the armed forces Chiefs have voiced their gratitude to soldiers for their supreme sacrifices and spoken on the need to stand with martyr's families and systematically address their issues. Although the years 2019 and 2020 were dedicated as 'Year of Next of Kin', programmes which were initiated could not be completed and gaps in policy and implementation remain. This article aims to bring to notice of decision makers and authorities, the realities of families of soldiers who courageously gave their all to defend India and its people. The aim is also to advocate for addressing existing gaps in policies and implementation to facilitate access to entitlements and benefits.

'Research for Advocacy Initiative' by Primary Stakeholder Organisations

The Vasantharatna Foundation (VRF), Martyr Captain Tushar Mahajan Memorial Trust (MCTMMT) and Major Akshay Girish Memorial Trust (MAGMT), as primary stakeholder organisations, undertook a 'Joint Research for Advocacy Initiative' for families of soldiers designated 'fatal battle casualty' by armed forces. 'Fatal battle casualty' is used to refer to a soldier who is killed in action while defending the nation. The target group included widows (Veer Naris) and parents (Veer Mata/Pita) of armed forces personnel killed in action in last 20 years (1999-2019).

As per information in public domain, between January 2005 and December 2017, 1684 Indian Army soldiers lost their lives in ceasefire violations, anti-terrorist operations, counter-insurgency, offensive tactical missions and peacekeeping missions.¹ The table indicates number of soldiers killed in action over last 15 years as per data from multiple sources.

As per the government⁴, the number of defence personnel killed in different operations / encounters during the four calendar years between 2014 to 2017 are 183 from the Indian Army (including

15 officers), 11 from the Indian Navy (including 4 officers) and 43 from the Indian Air Force (including 17 officers). In the last war fought in Kargil in 1999, fatal battle casualties numbered 527. Data suggests that at a high average of 200-250 fatal battle casualties per year, between 4000 to 4500 soldiers and officers have been killed in the last 20 years (1999-2019), majority from the Indian Army.

Research Methodology

The research data was collected and compiled using the following tools and methods:

- **Quantitative Data.** Structured survey questionnaire tool for data collection from Veer Naris and Parents of soldiers KIA.
- **Qualitative Data.** One to one open ended interview, focus group discussions (FGDs), individual case studies.
- **Secondary Research.** Information in public domain including official websites (Indian Armed Forces, Department of Ex Servicemen Welfare and Veterans portal) and news media.
- **Sample Size Calculation.** Keeping confidence level at 95 per cent, sample size was calculated for 4500 soldiers KIA with 8.25 per cent margin of error. The sample size for the purpose of survey data is thus 131 families of soldiers KIA.⁵

Survey Respondents and Coverage

As elucidated below:

- **Adequate Representation.** Adequate representation of affected family members was ensured by taking a decision to survey at least 100 Veer Naris and 25 Parents (either mother/father) from different families.
- **Separate Survey Questionnaires.** Questionnaires were finalised as data collection tools for Veer Naris and Parents. The survey questionnaires were administered through volunteers to 131 respondents after informed consent.
- **Respondents.** The respondents included Veer Naris and Parents of 21 officers, 4 JCOs and 106 other ranks of soldiers KIA.

- **Geographical Coverage.** The survey data has been collected from 18 States and Union Territories of India namely Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Chandigarh, Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), Jharkhand, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Meghalaya, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and Uttar Pradesh.

Findings: Ground Realities of Families of Soldiers KIA

These are as given below:

- **Message to Bereaved Family.** There is a great deal of anguish that a soldier's supreme sacrifice beyond call of duty is not acknowledged by our national leadership with condolence message from President as Supreme Commander of Armed Forces and also from the Defence Minister.
- **No Official Recognition.** A major gap is that no medal has been instituted to officially recognise the supreme sacrifice of a soldier killed in action defending the nation. Although every soldier wounded in battle is awarded 'Wound Medal', (Parakram Padak; listed at number 29 in the Order of Precedence of Awards and Decorations determined by the President⁶), even 73 years after independence, a soldier who succumbs to injuries sustained while fighting to defend his nation is not honoured with a medal.
- **Broken Promises.** Leaders from their home state who make promises to duly honour the soldier by installing a statue or bust of the brave heart in the native village or naming of a school/road/park/bridge/station etc. in urban areas do not deliver what they promise, causing great anguish to the families.

Policy and Implementation Gaps in Access to Entitlements and Benefits for Veer Naris and Children

The findings are based on data from survey questionnaire administered to 103 Veer Naris in 17 States/Union Territories (UT). Eight of the Veer Naris are in their 20s; seven in their 50s; and 88 are between the ages of 30 and 49 years. 95 Veer Naris have at least 1 child while eight have no children.

Major Gaps affecting Veer Naris and Children

The details are contained in the following table:

Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Only 36 per cent Veer Naris reported awareness about the entitlements and benefits for families of soldiers KIA. ▶ 53 per cent said they were partially aware and 11 per cent reported being unaware.
Ex- gratia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Only 68 per cent Veer Naris received state government ex-gratia.
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 19 per cent received a flat at subsidised rate, housing site or fixed amount of money in lieu.
Land	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 31 per cent received varying areas of agricultural land.
Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 34 per cent of Veer Naris or family members were offered a job by respective state governments.
Agency Allotment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 4 per cent have been allotted a petrol pump or gas agency as a livelihood option.
Children's Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 38 per cent are still unable to claim the fee reimbursement for their children's education. ▶ 3 per cent received only partial fee reimbursement.
Medical Treatment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 31 per cent are still unable to access free medical treatment through ECHS.
Travel Concessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 39 per cent of Veer Naris have bus passes for travel within home state.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 41 per cent have been able to access train concession.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 15 per cent have been on a flight with concessional fare.
Support from Armed Forces Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Majority (53 per cent) said that the Armed Forces family is no longer in touch for their welfare or to help with access to entitlements and benefits.

Some Examples of Problems of Apathy and Denial Voiced by Veer Naris

It must be mentioned that despite these glaring shortcomings, Veer Naris said that they are proud of their husband's supreme sacrifice and 76 per cent said that they would like their children to join the armed forces to take forward a courageous legacy of service to the nation. The examples are:

- **Veer Nari, Arunachal Pradesh. W/o Hav KIA in 2016.** Promised housing not allotted. No ECHS card given yet. Daughter is in class 8 and son in class 4 but unable to claim fee reimbursement. Working in her old job as no better job has been offered. She stated that she can't keep going to city for paperwork as it is far and the kids are small.
- **Veer Nari, Maharashtra. W/o Hav KIA in 2015.** Veer Parivaar can retain the SF for 2 years. Where will we go after that? I applied for MHADA flat and my name is in the list. But flats which have been allotted at a subsidised rate of Rs Nine Lakh to police is not being given to Veer Naris of armed forces. Why?
- **Veer Nari, Jharkhand. W/o L/Nk KIA in 2004.** Zilla Sainik Board does not work properly. Complained that she has to struggle to repeatedly submit proof and documents. Children's fees never given on time and the high cost for books and stationery make it very difficult.
- **Veer Nari, J&K. W/o Nb Sub KIA in 2015.** She stated that it had been five years since her husband's martyrdom, but she had not received state ex-gratia, nor a government job, and not even travel concession in bus or train, despite writing even to Railway Minister.
- **Veer Nari, Maharashtra. W/o Maj KIA in 2016.** State government rejected sanctioned land in her name on the grounds of property being owned by in-laws.
- **Veer Nari, Punjab. W/o L/Nk KIA in 2017.** On martyrdom of my husband, renaming of school, stadium and gates in his honour were announced. Nothing has been done since. Broken promises hurt us a lot.

Policy and Implementation Gaps in Access to Entitlements and Benefits for Parents

The findings are based on data from survey questionnaire administered to 28 parents of unmarried and married soldiers KIA.

Equal numbers of 14 parents were surveyed in each category. Among respondents, the youngest parent is just 41 years of age and oldest is 79 years. Two respondents are in their 40s, five are in their 50s, and 21 are between 60 and 79 years of age.

Major Gaps Affecting Parents of Unmarried and Married Soldiers

The details are in the following table:

Support/ Benefit	Parent of Unmarried Soldier	Parent of Married Soldier
Central/ State Ex-gratia	► All except one parent received full central and state ex-gratia.	► 64 per cent did not receive even partial share in ex-gratia from state.
Liberalised Pension	► Receiving full liberalised pension, irrespective of their financial status.	► Only 21 per cent designated as 'dependents' receive part share in pension.
Housing / Livelihood	► 50 per cent received housing site, land or money in lieu from state government. ► 14 per cent allotted an agency (petrol pump).	► Not a single parent received any benefit like site/land/money in lieu. ► None were allotted any agency.
Medical Treatment	► 64 per cent parents access free medical treatment in armed forces hospitals as they have ECHS cards. ► Remaining pay for treatment in private hospitals (because they still do not have ECHS card or prefer nearby private hospital).	► 36 per cent parents get free treatment in armed forces hospitals as many fathers are ex-servicemen with ECHS card. ► Remaining have no choice but to pay for medical treatment in private hospitals.
Armed Forces Family Outreach	► 33 per cent said their soldier son's unit/armed forces family was not in touch. ► 67 per cent said they felt supported and were invited for felicitations/ functions by son's unit/armed forces.	► 86 per cent said their soldier son/daughter's unit/armed forces family was not in touch. ► Only 14 per cent said the unit/Service had been in touch and they were invited for felicitations / functions.

Parents Voice Pain at Neglect and Discrimination

Some of the points are given below:

- **79 years, Father of Major KIA, Tamil Nadu.** As our family member served the nation, the nation should take care of the families too, at least that much we can expect. If he would have been the only son, where would we go? We have never been contacted by anyone in forces and my wife died feeling sad about the fact.
- **41 years, Father of Sepoy KIA, Rajasthan.** We are being told younger sister cannot get a job. Wife or brother of martyr is eligible in Rajasthan but not sister. In other states, sister is also considered for job. Uniform policy change is needed.
- **73 years, mother of Captain KIA, Delhi.** I am invited to Regimental celebrations. There I meet wives but not parents. When I asked why, was told only NOK are invited. Does a parent cease to be a parent because their son got married? The armed forces and government must look at their needs too. Sending Raising Day message, medical treatment, and monetary support are basic essentials.
- **54 years, father of Sepoy KIA, Bihar.** Soon after my son's martyrdom, his mother who was NOK also fell ill and died. I live alone on my own pension and got nothing for my son's supreme sacrifice. An LIC policy of 75000 is also stuck. Can someone help me get this amount?
- **57 years, Mother of Major KIA, Maharashtra** Parent should get free medical treatment. If our son was serving, we could stay with him in old age. Forces need to acknowledge parents. They should call parents also for honours.
- **60 years, Father of Lieutenant (IN) KIA, Delhi** Now even women are being inducted in all the three forces even in combat. Parents raise and get children married. On martyrdom, all the benefits are going to the husband who is entitled as NOK. The husband gets married again and continues to get all benefits. The parents also must

receive entitlements so that they can live with dignity in old age and also fulfil goals of doing good for the society.

Differential Response by Authorities and Governments

In the aftermath of the Kargil conflict in 1999, most state governments supported families of soldiers KIA by proactively reaching out with ex-gratia, agricultural land, housing site, petrol pump or gas agency allotments, and government jobs to Veer Naris or soldier's sibling. Statues/busts of the soldier were installed in prominent public places and schools, parks, roads/bridges were named in their honour. The Delhi Government allotted a flat each to Veer Naris at subsidised rate and land was allotted by many states. However, in the years after Kargil, soldiers KIA and their families have not been extended the same honour.

Since January 2016, the Government of India has revised Ex Gratia compensation to NOK and enhanced other entitlements and benefits to widows and children of fatal battle casualties. Retention of government accommodation for 2 years (extendable by another 18 months), free medical treatment, reimbursement of tuition fee for children's education till first degree, and travel concessions are positive steps. A small one-time grant is also available towards marriage expenses for daughters and for widows to continue further studies or undertake a vocational course.⁷

Although every soldier wears the same uniform and fights to defend our nation and uphold the honour of the Indian flag, there is no uniformity in entitlements and benefits extended to martyr families by different state governments.⁸ While some state governments like Punjab, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand have been proactive in terms of upward revision of ex-gratia and share to parents of married soldier, job to family member, honour to soldier with a memorial/road etc. named after him, others are yet to announce a comprehensive policy in support of families of soldiers from their state.

Examples of Unfair Policies

Some glaring examples of unfair policies or meagre support are given herein:

- J&K has the most unjustified and insulting policy that denies Ex Gratia and all state benefits to NOK if soldier

was martyred outside the state! Worse, a surrendered militant gets state benefits including a job which a martyred soldier's family is deprived of. Even after abrogation of Article 370, the policy of denying benefits and entitlements to families of soldiers martyred outside the state of J&K remains unaltered.

- West Bengal Government's paltry Rs 2 Lakh Ex-Gratia was refused by a family as an insult to the soldier's supreme sacrifice in 2016.⁹ This led to an initiative of crowd funding support for the family. In 2018, same amount of Rs 2 Lakh was given as compensation to victims of boat capsized during Durga Puja idol immersion.¹⁰ Even in 2020, the Ex-Gratia to family of soldiers KIA is only Rs 5 Lakh in West Bengal.
- Punjab Government's policy of providing job to NOK has not been extended to children of soldiers KIA before 1999. This denial of job to the Veer Naris and also to a martyr's child just because of the date of martyrdom has caused great anguish to many NOK families.

Besides the above, ad-hoc announcements not in line with the state government's stated benefits cause confusion and also a feeling of discrimination amongst NOK families. While the Telangana Chief Minister took the lead in handing over high Ex-Gratia of Rs 5 Crore to Veer Nari and parents of Col Santhosh Babu MVC martyred in Galwan clash, as per the state policy Ex-Gratia is only Rs 5 Lakh for soldiers KIA.¹¹ Issues of access to entitlements and benefits are also linked to inadequate outreach on the part of government agencies. The Sainik Welfare Boards at state and district level are mandated to assist and ensure access to NOK of soldiers. However, many have been politicised or are being used for unrelated jobs by bureaucrat bosses. They need to be rejuvenated, sensitised, and made more accountable.

Prioritising Major Shortcomings with Recommendations for Way Forward

When a soldier makes the supreme sacrifice defending the nation, the lives of his wife and children are changed forever. The first shock is that they need to relocate to hometown or village but do not have a house they can call their own. Also, government job/

sustainable livelihood option for Veer Naris, particularly for widows of soldiers below officer rank, is a critical need.

A majority of the Veer Naris are mothers of very young children. Monetary benefits include pension but without a home, and a job, life becomes very tough. Further, if relationships with in-laws are strained, the Veer Naris must either return to their parents or live independently coping alone with multiple difficulties.

Every soldier in India joins the armed forces from his/her parent's home and being 'unmarried' is among important eligibility criteria for joining Army/Air Force/Navy. While the nation says it respects the martyrdom of soldiers and stands with their families, the most neglected category among family members are the parents of the married soldier KIA. No provision to support parents of the martyred soldier remains a big lacuna in the system. Parents who lose their child in service of the nation are not entitled to any monetary assistance or benefits in terms of ex-gratia and pension. They are also not covered for medical treatment. This glaring apathy has not been addressed by armed forces and successive governments.

Suggestions to Address Major Gaps and Challenges

The details are contained in the table below:

Target Group	Major Gaps/ Challenges	Suggested Solutions
Soldier KIA (Fatal Battle Casualty)	No official honour for supreme sacrifice. Wound Medal awarded to soldiers injured in battle but no medal for soldier's supreme sacrifice while fighting to defend the nation is a shocking apathy that needs to be corrected.	Institute 'Sarvoch Balidan' Medal for supreme sacrifice in battle akin to Parakram Padak as Wound Medal. (Similar to Purple Heart – USA, Desh Putra Sanmanaya – Sri Lanka, Sacrifice Medal – Canada, Dag Hammarskjöld medal – UN, the US Purple Heart is awarded to both injured and KIA)
	Broken promises – no recognition by home state.	Bestow local honour to soldier by naming road/school/public place.
Veer Naris and Children	Housing in SF accommodation is only for 2 years. Moving to expensive rental accommodation, changing schools etc. adds to trauma.	Extend SF accommodation. Also support independent living for Veer Naris with children through financial support and schemes to own home.

	Promised government job by state government not offered. Often, only class 4/class 3 jobs are offered irrespective of Veer Nari being qualified for better jobs.	Provide employment as per qualification within 2 years of soldier's supreme sacrifice. The AWWA/Sainik Welfare Board should assist.
	Children's education fee reimbursement does not cover Kindergarten nor Post graduation.	Fee reimbursement for children of soldier must extend from KG to PG (age 3 to 25).
	Getting ECHS Card, Canteen Card, Travel Pass, etc., involve tedious paperwork and multiple follow up efforts. Many do not have them even after years.	Should be given through single point of contact without delay. Veer Nari employed in Sainik Welfare Board can assist many to access entitlements/benefits.
Parents of Married Soldier	Not considered family – No communication even for official condolence message. Not invited to felicitations and functions by Unit/Regiment and by Government.	Must be considered family and receive official condolence messages, invitations to felicitations and functions from Armed Forces/ Government.
	No Ex-gratia share for parents by centre and in most states.	Must receive a share of Ex-gratia and insurance as moral obligation to parents for soldier's sacrifice.
	Also, not entitled to any other benefits extended to parents of unmarried soldier KIA.	Soldiers should also have option for nominating parents share in Pension (within limit).
	No free medical treatment in Armed Forces hospitals. Also not given any travel concessions.	All parents of soldiers KIA must be extended free medical treatment through ECHS and travel concessions in train/flight.

Conclusion

Families of soldiers KIA and concerned citizens expect the armed forces and their government, both at centre and in states, to bestow due honour to every soldier who gives his life defending India and to address the problems and challenges that their families are facing thereafter. In the light of research findings and suggested solutions that have emerged from the 'Research for Advocacy Initiative', efforts continue for decision makers to review the existing policies and implementation processes and take necessary steps

to enable widows, children, and parents of soldiers KIA to lead a life of dignity.

Endnotes

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