

## **Territorial Army: Time to Consider Citizen Soldier's Relevance**

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**I**ndia's Citizen Volunteer Force will be 43 years old this year. There is a justifiable impression, that we in India have not only hesitated but have failed to exploit its optimum potential. The cardinal reason for this is lack of information and the prevalent ignorance about TA's usefulness, in political, military and civil circles. It is, therefore, time that we took a critical look at India's 'second line of defence' which was raised with much fanfare by an act of Parliament on 9 October 1949. To consider, as to whether the TA concept retains its validity and is it relevant in the present context or has it diminished or even become obsolete with the availability of a large number of para military forces which have been raised in the last 30 years-after the TA? One aspect which is certain and more than clear is that, with a strength of 16,000 infantry (nearly 25 TA battalions) and approximately 24,000 personnel from departmental units, TA cannot but only be of peripheral assistance to an army of over a million. Such a small number, in any case, can hardly be representative of India's population of over 84 crores?

In its earlier history, besides various capitals, TA Raising days at Delhi were celebrated by its citizens at an at-home at the Red Fort after a parade that day-in the presence of the Prime Minister, his cabinet colleagues, the Chief of Army Staff alongwith his Principal Staff Officers. This enthusiasm to nurture the force acted as a tonic and inspiration to those citizens who wanted to join the TA. However, last year, it is for the third year in succession that the TA did not even have a ceremonial parade at the capital on its Raising Day in the name of economy. Although the amount spent on this parade, which usually comprises of selected contingents from various states and seldom exceeds a strength of six coys and which is so essential for a force of this nature, is peanuts when compared to the amount being spent elsewhere.

Also, one needs to consider as to whether the Army itself has been prejudiced in its approach to the TA? Many drawbacks have been cited now and then such as the inordinately long time taken to mobilise TA units-followed with their move to operational areas; their inadequate functional ability, lack of support weapons and shortages in the TA officer corps. While reflecting on these issues one need not forget that the regular army not only

provides commanding officers to all TA units (except railway and medical departmental units), but also provides a hard corps of nearly 80-100 all ranks who are posted to each TA battalion or a unit for the purposes of training, administration and recruitment. The reigns of the TA are therefore entirely in the hands of the Army which includes the issue of call-up notices, embodiment and operational deployment.

Another aspect worth taking note of is, as to whether, the politicians are sufficiently well informed or have they, as little information as the public? Unless the politician is well advised by the bureaucracy and the professional, the TA will remain where it is and only evoke a mild response from the public. But before that, the TA concept.

### THE CONCEPT

TA is basically designed to supplement the regular army in various ways. In our context the limited role which we have prescribed for ourselves for utilising the TA is, to relieve the regular army from static duties like convoy protection, guards, ceremonial functions and escort duties etc. So that the regular units when relieved from these commitments can concentrate on their operational assignments. Further, to make up deficiencies of regular units at the commencement of hostilities, to aid civil authority in times of calamity (floods, train disaster and famine) and for running essential services (railways, oil and gas installations). Note, that an important role, that of assisting civil authorities in maintenance of law and order has been left out for some reason or the other. This is one area, if delegated to the TA, would absolve the army to a large extent, from getting so frequently involved in internal security situations.

Further, TA which consists of non-departmental (infantry) and departmental units is a part-time concept. There are separate training schedules to suit rural and urban areas. The departmental units are entirely funded by the concerned departments, like the railways, ONGC and the Ministry of Forests and Environment for its ecological task forces. The TA regulations provide sufficient protection to the civil volunteers as regards their jobs in the civil, retention of seniority while serving and embodied for the TA, family accommodation and other administrative matters.

Today, a serious debate is going on in the erstwhile USSR by its republics whether to keep a united or a unified armed forces structure. Whichever pattern finally emerges, a federal army at the centre or one with each republic, one thing is certain that each of the republics will have its own TA defence force under the respective Presidents, very much on the lines obtaining in the US for their National Guard.

This speaks much for the concept which originated after the Second World War that is, to have a small, well equipped and highly mobile standing army supported by a large citizen's forces which trains part-time and can be mobilised at short notice. US provides a typical example of the effectiveness of this concept when its National Guard units were mobilised and took part in the Gulf War last year as they had done so successfully earlier on also, when nearly eight divisions of National Guard fought alongwith regular formations. In our case, one or two TA units took part in operations in Sri Lanka as part of the IPKF and are supposed to have done well from available reports.

It is of interest to note that although in the past, countries all over the world were laying a great deal of stress on volunteer militias, this emphasis has considerably increased and would increase further as we move towards the twenty-first century for four good reasons: First, no country can afford to maintain a large standing army, located next to its borders for a 'push button' type deployment, because of the colossal expenditure which a nation will have to incur. And with high technology induction and man-machine mix this expenditure could be exhorbitant. Second, with improved surveillance facilities including satellites, gadgets for electronic interception, aircraft reconnaissance and international pressures, the Second World War type of surprise attacks are over. As sufficient warning and notice -- say, 3-4 days atleast would be available in which the citizen's forces would be able to mobilise. Israel, surrounded with hostile neighbours provides a good example of quick mobilisation wherein its volunteer forces are ready for combat within 48-96 hours.

Third, educated youth is now decidedly reluctant to take up a full time military career. They would, however, not hesitate to take up part-time soldiering so that they can pursue or retain lien on their civil vocations. And last and perhaps the most important reason is, that this concept enables a citizen to participate and share responsibilities not only towards the defence of his country but also to restore law and order in his own district, his state and his country in internal security situations.

All these reasons are equally applicable to India. The last one in particular is of considerable relevance because of the secessionist movements which have raised their ugly head in various parts of the country. The central forces like the CRP, BSF or for that matter the army, when sent to restore law and order are looked upon as supressors. But TA will enable the citizens to put their own home in order-in the first instance.

Unlike the Army and the para military forces, TA does not provide a

full time career. When in uniform TA personnel are entitled to all those facilities which are admissible to the regular army including medals and decorations besides a secure civil job to which to return to. TA rules are most flexible and innovative and somehow ahead of their times. In spite of this, not more than three politicians and not a single bureaucrat are part of the TA. The combat units - as stated, are confined to 25 infantry battalions. It is indeed ironic that in the 1950s when the army strength did not exceed 4.5 lacs, it was contemplated to raise a TA force of approximately 6 lacs. Now when the army strength has gone over a million, the strength of combat elements of TA has gone down to approximately 16,000? Admittedly, a large number of TA units which included armour, artillery, engineers, signal and transport units were converted into regular army units immediately after the 1962 debacle, but what has prevented us from raising replacements?

It is felt that the Ministry of Defence should consider raising TA units for four distinct requirements: First, TA units for front line tasks which should be able to take part in active operations as part of regular brigades and divisions or to relieve the regular army units which are deployed in less sensitive areas. TA units for this purpose should not be confined to the infantry only but should include tank, artillery, signals, engineer and all those units which the army would require in battle. Such units would need to be equipped and organised on the same pattern as the regular army units. During peace time they must participate in routine army manoeuvres. In fact, the army may go a step further and raise TA brigades and even divisions as happens in UK, USA and Germany.

Second, TA units for a variety of tasks which fall in the rear areas and for which they are currently organised but with slight modification to improve their mobility, to include more transport, more automatics and certainly more officers. Third, specialised and dedicated units for the protection of airfields - both civil and military, industrial, nuclear, space establishments; and provision of ceremonial guards at the Rashtrapati Bhawan. Such units would need to be available in the vicinity of their assignment areas and as such, must be recruited from the region concerned. For Example, a TA unit required for the protection of Jaisalmer airfield should be recruited from amongst the locals of Jodhpur and areas around it and should not have to move from Pune or Orissa - the type of situation which is prevailing at present. It is because of this reason that the units take too long to move to their operational areas.

And last, departmental units - entirely financed by the departments or the ministries concerned as is happening now. TA Ecological Task forces have proved to be most successful. The three Task forces, that is one working

on the Indira Gandhi Canal in Rajasthan and the other two in J&K and UP respectively have done commendable job. There is no reason as to why each state should not raise atleast one such task force for environmental purposes. Besides, like the railways and ONGC, other departments like the electric and water supply, important industries, national archives and so on can consider raising such units, which need only be mobilised during strikes and natural calamities so that the citizen is not held to ransom.

The present shortcomings in the TA are of a minor nature and unnecessarily made much of. These can be completely removed by concentrating on regional recruitment and deployment in the first instance. To repeat, the two TA battalions located at Calcutta would be most happy to move to the Farraka Barrage or the Siliguri airfield, but would find it most inconvenient and take a lot of time to move to Ludhiana or Jullundur. This is an issue which the military operations directorate at Army Headquarters should have resolved long ago. Alternately, additional units could have been raised if the existing numbers were insufficient to go around.

The cost of raising a TA unit is 1/4th or even less than that of a regular unit. With no pension liability or a commitment to provide permanent accommodation, education or medical facilities except during the period when a TA unit is mobilised, the expenditure is reduced even further. If we are failing to exploit TA's potential, then we alone are to be blamed. TA concept is very much applicable to India and its relevance would increase in future because of the need for the citizen to participate in the type of situations like internal security as well as those involving external threats. TA is here to stay and it is time that we took positive steps to revive this important instrument of security instead of thinking of new ones.