

USI of India: An Epitome of Professional Learning of Indian Military for Last 150 Years

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“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

---Nelson Mandela

Backdrop

The United Service Institution (USI) of India as an institution of

learning in all aspects of military life has been part of the professional journey of India's military, even before its formal inception in 1895 when an 'Indian Army' was created along with the three Presidency armies which then became informal 'Commands'. In 1903 all three were amalgamated into a British Indian Army. For any professional military, Professional Military Education (PME) of its leaders is synonymous to its effectiveness in employment, as late President John F Kennedy remarked '*Leadership and Learning are indispensable to each other*'. Accordingly, in the British Indian army PME was given due importance.

As USI celebrates 150th Anniversary this year, it proudly unwinds the memories of its glorious past with the soldier-scholar Field Marshal WJ Slim, MC, who as a mid-rung officer headed the USI in the early thirties and whose memoirs 'Defeat into Victory' is a must read for every military leader in the world. A flagship of the USI's contribution to PME is the USI journal, which is the oldest uninterrupted defence publication in Asia. It was started with an aim of enriching professional awareness of military officers, as well as to provide an opportunity to them to write articles, and book reviews, to enhance their writing skill. Interestingly, 1948 issues of the institution's journal (total four) were published jointly for the Indian and Pakistani military as the USI of India & Pakistan, before Pakistan conveyed that it did not want to be associated

with the Indian military. This was no surprise because for the whole of 1948, India and Pakistan had been at war. The Institution moved from Shimla to Delhi in 1953 and it continues to contribute as a strategic think tank, tri-service institution for professional development and training of officers, helping them in career progression through education programs.

Epitome of Professional Learning of Indian Military

As mentioned, professional learning and career progression of officers has always been an important activity of the USI since its inception. This activity continued as we saw through the transformation of British Indian Defence Forces into Indian Defence Forces. Thus the USI played a key role, in pre and post-independence era, in the arena of professional learning. It realigned its PME programmes accordingly, being the only such institution for military officers at that time. The Institution has rendered yeoman service to thousands of officers and the history of legends of Indian military is synonymous to history of USI of India, as most of them had been members of this institution, and grew up in their career reading professional material from this institution.

As part of its educational activities, the USI started holding military war games in mid-1880s. In 1903, it began assisting officers to prepare for examinations in tactical fitness for command and for promotion. In 1910, it began its programme to assist officers in preparation for the Staff College and by 1914, there were 23 programmes offered to interested officers. The institution had continued with its learning programmes even during various conflicts, with exception of short interruptions during World War II, partition of the country and move of the Institution to Delhi.

From 1958 onwards, promotion of educational activities has remained a major area of focus at the USI and it has been regularly conducting courses for promotion as well as competitive examinations for the Indian military including entrance examinations for Defence Services Staff College and Defence Services Technical Staff College (DSSC/DSTSC). In 1999, in the wake of the Kargil conflict, USI undertook evaluation of the answer books of all promotion examinations in order to reduce the load on

serving officers. Besides conducting courses for career progression, USI prepares study material for benefit of officers in various subjects in tactical to strategic domain, including specialised subjects like analysis of military history, law, technological applications in military domain, leadership and management issues. Being a tri-service organisation, adequate emphasis is being given to joint warfare, cyber, information warfare and other subjects crucial for warfare in 21st century.

USI undertakes professional learning activities in strategic domain also, like scenario building exercises and Net Assessment, for institutes like National Defence College, Indian Institute of Public Administration, Foreign Service Institute, IAS Academy and Army/Air Force war colleges. Specific researches in military subjects are also undertaken by various officers, which add value to professional enrichment of Indian Military as well as institutional memory to be disseminated to future generation of officers. USI also conducts conceptual level courses for selected future senior military commanders.

Modalities of Professional Military Learning

Professional education of military officers is an on-going process in which units, formations, training institutions, Directorate General of Military Training, Department of Naval Education etc. and institutions like the USI have an important role to play. Due to shortage of officers in units/formations and pressure of work, a large number of officers find it difficult to do much study work, especially under suitable guidance. Considering the challenges of deployment and awkward locations of officers in many areas, due to operational compulsions, it is difficult for them to access the latest study material online or even through regular conventional means. That is where the USI correspondence courses/distant learning programmes help out officers.

The Institution runs regular correspondence courses for officers of the Armed Forces to assist them in preparing for promotion exams, and DSSC/DSTSC, and PME exam for Indian Navy. The study material and question papers are sent to officers to answer the same advisably under timed conditions, and send it back to USI. The answers are carefully evaluated and sent back to them along with guidance remarks by experienced Directing Staff

(DS) for improvement, which helps them in performing better in examinations. All such courses are interactive; wherein the officers can speak to DS/Chief Instructor or clarify things through internet or phone. The interactive courses are very popular as officers regularly ask questions during their preparations throughout the year and receive answers.

USI courses have evolved over five decades and continue to enjoy the patronage of serving officers, who benefit from these courses in their career progression by passing promotion exams and qualifying in large numbers in competitive exams. These programmes are continuously evolving through interactions with the Service Headquarters and with the mentors, and officers participating in USI courses. Besides distant learning, USI conducts contact programmes for officers, wherein the officers come to the USI for short duration, are put through crash course involving classes, mock examinations, panel discussions by experts on the subject, correction of their written work and discussions on areas of improvement in respect of each individual officer. USI maintains a large pool of experts, who are veteran and serving military officers in Delhi, for such interactions.

USI also undertakes lectures in military units and formations and various organisations for PME and preparing officers for promotion and competitive exams. The lectures can be organised by specialist DS/ Chief Instructor in person or electronically through video conferencing tools as per the requirement of military formations. The institute adopted online model for conduct of all courses even during the COVID-19 pandemic and ensured that PME is not disrupted.

Faculty and Resources

USI continues to excel in many fields beyond the realm of a think tank, with over 13000 members and experts in various subjects including United Nations Peace Operations. With diversification and modernisation, and varying experiences of its members, USI also has the expertise and resource faculty to undertake professional education, leadership, management and motivational courses of various professionals in other fields, including various government/commercial sectors and institutions. A large number of lectures are being taken by Chief Instructor and the faculty in

various universities in India, and abroad, in person or through video conferencing tools. Joint seminars with various universities, organisations like Confederation of Educational Excellence are part of such contact educational activities.

Colonel Pyara Lal Memorial Library (Information Resource Centre) of USI is a knowledge hub in the areas of relevance to all Services, defence studies, strategic perspectives, warfare, military history, United Nations Peace Operations, international relations/Diplomacy, country studies, security, insurgency/naxalism/terrorism, nuclear issues, other academic subjects, historical studies and autobiography/biography/memoires. The library has an enormous collection of military study material. It is a highly specialised library for enhancing and enriching knowledge while concurrently facilitating education, research, training, self-development, well-being, and lifelong learning. A full spectrum of ever-expanding body of worldwide knowledge and information superiority is maintained by acquiring, and furthering ease of access to books, manuscripts, and other print and non-print materials and preserving these for the benefit of the members. It has a unique collection of historical records and study material, with large collection of rare books befitting the age of the organisation. USI has enough knowledge resource for any syllabus on strategic and military courses, to suit various programmes for professionals.

Conclusion

In this 150th year of its raising, the USI of India can say with pride that it has been the teacher and mentor of the officer cadre initially from the army and then from all the three Services. From writing essays to appearing in exams which help them in career progression, the USI has played a yeoman role. After independence, in close coordination with the training directorates of the three Services, the USI has conducted coaching, provided speakers, and conducted war games. The USI has proved the fact that military education is valuable because it provides an intellectual architecture for battlefield success. It contributes to stable civil-military relation. The USI faculty and resource persons have the challenging and profound responsibility to conduct and

promote educational activities, which they have rendered successfully. Having all type of high-quality collections, USI library has been reflective of the paradigm shift that defence and security studies have undergone in the last one century. The USI has provided a culture of reflection, and a capacity for critical analysis. Lastly, military education matters because it cultivates an aspiration to excellence.

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