

# Image of the Armed Forces – Arresting Negative Trends

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*"The nation which forgets its defenders will be itself forgotten."*

– Calvin Coolidge, (1872-1933)

Since the genesis of civilisation, the profession of arms has received adulation within civil societies, both, during war and peace. As the *raison d'être* of a soldier's existence is itself the security of the state; it is only natural that his work, which often involves uncommon sacrifices, is held in high esteem by his countrymen. The military profession counts among very few other professions that have been traditionally regarded as 'honourable' by the society at large. This universal image is bolstered time and again when the society witnesses the relevance of soldiering in the face of external aggression, internal instability or natural calamities. Thus, the Armed Forces are looked upon as 'protectors' and 'saviours' – impressions that are laden with awe and admiration. This paternal image confers high responsibility upon the military and consequently the expectations from them in terms of conduct are proportionally exponential. An offshoot is that it is this very image of the Armed Forces, which attracts volunteers who wish to join the ranks in order to fulfil their aspirations based on the needs of self-actualisation. Thus, the 'larger than life' image of the military is intrinsic to its effective existence and functioning.

As much as the society desires its military to be incorrupt and disciplined, it is in the interest of the military to preserve its 'morally elitist' image. In a democracy like ours the military has to play an indispensable role in securing the country against threats and sustaining democracy itself. In a world that is in the throes of rapid transformation by information technology revolution and rising consciousness about rights and liberty, preserving their traditional ethos and insularity is emerging as a big challenge for the Armed Forces. Like never before, the Armed Forces face an unhappy

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prospect of witnessing their credibility being dented due to a variety of factors like growing media activism and public sensitivity to lapses.

### **The Classical Image**

The classical image of the Armed Forces in the society is intertwined with their reputation of upholding discipline. A military man is assumed to be disciplined apart from being patriotic, chivalrous etc. It is perhaps this image, which accords the 'morally elitist' image to the Services. Since early times when armies, navies and, later, air forces fought to defend and protect their societies, the man in uniform has been regarded as a hero and treated as such. In modern times, the trend has continued with the uniformed personnel having to deal with numerous armed conflicts, peacekeeping duties, and disaster management operations. In India this fact was particularly evident when the nation rallied behind the Armed Forces during Operation Vijay (Kargil War) of 1999 and profusely acclaimed the heroes who brought victory home. More recently, the Services earned the respect of the entire nation with their concerted humanitarian efforts in the aftermath of the devastating Tsunami of 25 December 2004 and flood relief in the inundated parts of Maharashtra during the monsoon of 2005.

Complementary to the positive public image are the ethos and culture of the Armed Forces that are distinct and, in a sense, conservative too. The secret of the efficiency of the Armed Forces as an organisation lies in their professionalism, discipline, hierarchical command structure, fairness and even ritualism. These attributes provide the military that decisive edge, which makes a difference during testing times when they have to venture by themselves in harm's way. The Armed Forces have, thus, earned the appellation as 'the last bastion of democracy' – a sentiment which is even reflected in the statutes where the involvement of the Armed Forces is provisioned as a final law enforcement measure to restore civic order and protect democracy. The aforesaid factors result in creating a halo around the Services, raising expectations in terms of conduct, efficiency, loyalty, probity and transparency.

### **Causes of Change**

The fears expressed about degeneration of the positive image of the Services are founded on growing public sensitivity to various

exposés and lapses *apropos* the military, which come to fore in the public domain. Let us try to analyse the factors, which contribute to the erosion of good reputation that military organisations have traditionally cherished with pride.

(a) **The Information Revolution.** "The pen is mightier than the sword", goes an old adage. The 20th Century was described by some as the Century of Information Technology. The digital revolution resulted in creation, sharing and transfer of information on an unprecedented scale. India in particular witnessed a deluge of technologies in the nineties, which revolutionised the way Indians accessed and assimilated information. The ushering of globalisation and liberalisation brought along many state of the art technologies from the West. Dozens of news channels mushroomed over the satellite waves and crept into Indian homes besides the Internet, which was already opening new vistas to global information. Images started getting beamed 'live' into the bedrooms even as the news rolled along. The definition of journalism gathered a new meaning as a large army of enterprising reporters and correspondents joined the race for providing the 'news that matters'. Investigative journalism became a new catchphrase. Driven by the ideals of free speech and socially responsive reportage, journalists started probing sources that traditionally remained averse to uninvited media scrutiny. The Armed Forces, wherein insularity and confidentiality is seen as a prerequisite to many functions, perfectly fitted into the media's prospect for sensation. Thenceforth, the Armed Forces have found it difficult to manage the scale of damaging stories, which the media routinely puts up in various forums, be it print, TV, radio or the Internet. In addition to bad publicity, the presence of preponderant media representatives in a conflict zone (as during the Kargil War) taught some lessons to the Armed Forces, especially the Army, in media management. While the 'Fourth Estate' is an essential pillar of a free society, it is also a manifestation of the freedom of expression and perhaps the only component of the democratic setup, which has the least amount of regulation. In today's age where commercial interests also play a vital role in gathering and disseminating information, the reality of overbearing media attention is here to stay with the Armed Forces.

**(b) Publicised Impropriety.** The public perception of professional organisations is a direct result of the positive or negative stories, which appear in the public domain or through contact with the members of the public in one way or the other. The hallowed image of the Armed Forces has often taken a beating due to a number of cases of indiscipline, which continue to crop up time and again. As discussed earlier, the sensationalism that is associated with news pertaining to military affairs can promptly attract public attention and become hot news all over. Cases of corruption involving well placed officials, capital offences including rape, treason, and incidents of public disorder are some examples of offences that have served to severely damage the reputation of the Armed Forces in the past. In addition, the increasing trend of publicised litigation by serving and retired personnel for addressing their resentment about career matters has created a contrived impression about the Armed Forces in the public mind. This impression strikes a highly incoherent note with the norms of fairness and discipline, which are closely identified with the Services. The Armed Forces have streamlined procedures for dispensation of justice and redressing grievances. They also have a very effective system of rewards. The Services are known to treat rather unkindly those individuals who bring disrepute to the organisation by their actions. Yet, aberrations do occur, earning notoriety for the accused as well as the organisation. Another cause of bad publicity is the accusations of human rights violations committed by Service personnel deployed for counter insurgency operations and law enforcement in Disturbed Areas.

*"Guard with jealous attention to the public liberty. Suspect everyone who approaches that jewel. Unfortunately, nothing will preserve it but downright force".*

- Patrick Henry

**(c) Involvement in Internal Security Duties.** The constitutionally defined principal role of the Armed Forces is to protect the country from external aggression and protect its territorial integrity. However, provision exists to employ the Armed Forces in Internal Security duties as and when deemed necessary by the Government. It goes without saying that the

latter is not the primary duty of the Armed Forces and their services are sought in rare cases where other security agencies prove inadequate to address the problem. However, the reality on ground today points towards a near permanent involvement of the Army in Internal Security duties. Elements within the Navy and the Air Force also form a part of this arrangement. Operations in Internal Security scenario may involve Counter Insurgency (CI) Operations or law enforcement in areas covered under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, Disturbed Areas Act, National Security Act and Defence of India Act and Rules<sup>1</sup>. The demands which are placed upon a soldier during such duties are varied and circumstantial. In a sense this kind of employment is in contrast to the soldier's classical role and also his training. The Army is trained to fight the 'enemy across', whereas its involvement in Internal Security duties is diffused. Operations in such open-ended scenarios run an innate risk of civilian attrition losses or perceived highhandedness by the military, which can lead to erosion of goodwill amongst the local populace. This phenomenon has occurred in a number of 'disturbed' locations in our country such as in the states of Jammu and Kashmir, Assam and, more recently, Manipur. This is the type of bad publicity, which the Army does not necessarily invite upon itself but is purely circumstantial with its nature of duties. Search and Cordon, road checks, frisking, interrogation etc are some of the measures, which almost become inseparable from the overall operational policy in the affected areas. These invariably bear great potential of antagonising the civilian community for whom it may become routine annoyance. Thus, the military is caught in a *Catch 22* situation wherein the efficient performance of its duties is fraught with the risk of damaging its reputation. On many occasions in the past, agencies such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, reactionary media groups and other freelancers have put the Army and the government on the back footing by raising a hue and cry about actual and alleged human rights violations, by security forces in affected areas. While the Army has its own internal checks and balances to minimise such incidents, odd aberrations subject to human frailties become fodder for the 'human rights bandwagon' to make an issue and project its humanitarian image with renewed zeal.

(d) **Propaganda Warfare.** Not all negative publicity originates as a result of cause and effect on ground. In fact, in the realm of international affairs, much of the damaging publicity can be attributed to purposeful information warfare by vested interests. Accusation of 'rights violations' and 'oppression' by security forces forms the central theme of the propaganda spread by myriad groups operating at the behest of the adversary. In regard to the insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir, a well orchestrated and sponsored misinformation campaign against the Indian Army is already in place using forums like the conventional media, internet, congressional lobbies and diplomatic links. Exaggerated accounts of civilian deaths, false stories about offences against women, gory and graphic images of the dead and injured – all serve to raise passions and create a prejudiced image about the activities of the Army. Such propaganda effectively exploits public sensitivity to factors such as religion, ethnicity and history. As an offshoot of such widespread campaign, many individuals and reactionary groups within the country too tend to be critical of the Armed Forces. In India, by and far the media have been appreciative of the role of the Armed Forces in critical situations. As seen earlier, the aggressive and inquisitive journalism we witness today is a clear shift from the past when the military was treated rather as a 'holy cow', to be left alone in its detached domain. With their technology driven influence, the pressmen and reporters are more objective and brazen than ever before. The adversary's propaganda machinery is, thus, indirectly benefited from the criticism within.

(e) **Low Self-Appraisal.** The image of an organisation also depends upon the confidence and satisfaction radiated by its members. Away from the spit and polish, pageantry and orderliness, what matters is the contentment of those who voluntarily preferred the service in uniform. A variety of factors leave many disillusioned about their job. Their opinions and impressions based on personal experiences, when expressed by word of mouth, may not exactly enhance the military's 'good image'. Serving members apart, the most effective ambassadors of the Armed Forces are the 23 lakh strong ex-servicemen who are spread across the panoramic mosaic of India.<sup>2</sup> With about 55,000 personnel being added to this pool

every year, the ex-servicemen have immense potential for shaping public opinion through their post retirement pursuits such as writing, interaction with students, training activities etc. Regrettably, the ex-servicemen themselves are not organised very cohesively, with the retirees in lower ranks almost left to restart earning a living. The long-standing demand of 'one rank one pension' remains unfulfilled till date. Many pledges and promises made by politicians regarding their resettlement are lost in the ravages of time. Ex-servicemen with little or no gratitude towards their 'uniformed past' could not be expected to further the positive image of the Armed Forces.

### **The Way Ahead**

Having seen the reasons for the erosion of the good reputation, which the Armed Forces have traditionally enjoyed, it could be of interest to probe for possible solutions, which could check the negative drift. Essentially, it is a feature of the working culture of the Armed Forces to undertake systemic in-house reviews and apply course corrections when the need is evident. In this case, however, the military is only one amongst the many parties that are involved and hence the methods of correction may not be simple. The following steps could lead to solutions:

**(a) Improving the Military-Media Relationship.** We have briefly dwelt earlier upon the complexities of the relationship between the military and the media. The ethos of the two institutions are diametrically opposite. The military likes to conduct most of its business huddled up in its own world whereas the media agencies reach out to the public and gain strength thereof. Exclusiveness comes natural to the military but the media look forward to bringing the former under public scrutiny. The peculiar relationship between the two entities is universal. In fact, in the West the media has increasingly gained prominence in military affairs including conduct of warfare. The entire world witnessed the Gulf War of 2003 through the images and commentaries provided real time by the 'embedded' reporters, who rubbed shoulders with the invading US led Coalition troops. It is still widely believed in the US military establishment that the Vietnam War was lost

due to the overweening attitude of the American media, who shaped the anti-war public opinion.<sup>3</sup> Through the history of conflict, the presence of media in the military's area of influence has only increased. Our own Operation Vijay was the first televised conflict that was beamed live into Indian homes albeit in bits and pieces. In India the military-media relationship has been generally positive. By and large, the media do give the Armed Forces their rightful space in reportage, especially with regard to the contribution made by the latter in Low Intensity Conflicts (LIC) and humanitarian operations. At the same time, the criticism, when regarded as due, is unequivocal. The media have a valid argument when they claim that as the Armed Forces are an organ of the Government, the citizenry has a bona fide right to know about its affairs through dispassionate observers. Easier said than done, the way towards working out an amicable methodology is difficult indeed. Let us see how.

*I have made arrangements for the correspondents to take to the field...and I have suggested that they should wear a white uniform to indicate the purity of their character.*

Union General Irvin McDowell <sup>4</sup>

(i) **Acknowledging the Media.** Like with the American and other Western militaries, the reality and magnitude of media influence took its time to sink into the military psyche in our country too. The Kargil War was an eye opener, especially for the Army, which found it difficult initially to manage the steady trickle of news hungry reporters, correspondents and cameramen into the battle zone that soon turned into a force to reckon with! Soon however, the situation was brought under control by dedicated efforts at highest levels albeit after learning some valuable lessons. Thence, the indispensable role of the media in military operations has been acknowledged by the Armed Forces. Post Kargil, the Army has carried out many reforms in this direction. These include creation of the post of Additional Director General of Public Information apart from the existing setup comprising the Army Liaison Cell, media centres and mobile press release units.

(ii) **Creating Awareness About the Media.** The next logical step towards building a healthy military-media relationship is increasing the awareness about the media within the rank and file. In fact, the Services have already taken concrete initiatives in this regard. Seminars have been conducted across the country by various Services formations to promote media interaction. Institutions of repute like the Indian Institute of Mass Communication now conduct regular courses for the officers of the Armed Forces. The process can be taken a step forward by dovetailing this subject in the *ab initio* professional training as well as in various promotion linked/mid-career courses of officers and JCOs.

(iii) **Media Sensitisation.** No interaction can be one way and, therefore, it is obligatory that the media have a correct and unprejudiced impression about the Armed Forces, their work culture, traditions and command structure. In a reciprocal measure, these aspects about the Armed Forces need to be communicated to the media personnel right at the training stage itself. Secondly, at the Government level a panel with representatives from the media houses, Armed Forces and the Government could be formed to enunciate a military-media policy or plan for the future. The underlying theme for such an endeavour should necessarily address the core question of how the Indian public can be kept informed about the facts regarding military operations while ensuring the safety of own forces and confidentiality of the military mission. The media can also be of immense help to the Armed Forces in countering the malicious propaganda by the adversary's terror infrastructure.

(b) **Increasing Transparency.** In the days of increasing public sensitivity to issues like human rights, corruption, fiscal accountability and social responsibility pertaining to the Armed Forces, reforms may be a necessity. Not to be remiss, the Armed Forces have initiated certain remedial measures to bring in more transparency in their affairs. After episodes like the Tehelka expose, the gallantry awards fiasco, growing accusations of human rights violations and other charges of

misuse of power, the Army has shown the way by demonstrating the swiftness and fairness of the military system of reform and refinement. The following steps could go a long way in perpetuating the responsible and humanitarian image of the Armed Forces to the society at large.

(i) **Human Rights.** The issue of alleged human rights violations by the Services personnel has featured on top of the list of concerns which harbour potential to undo the good work done. The Army, which bears the majority of brunt, has a formidable record in managing this problem to a fair degree of satisfaction. Establishment of 'Human Rights Cell' at different formation headquarters, issue of the Ten Commandments, systematic sensitisation of personnel etc are some of the measures that have been in place for sometime now. In addition, speedy trials leading to exemplary punishment to the guilty is a feature, which is unique to the Armed Forces. Recently, in an unprecedented gesture, the Army and the Air Force allowed the media to attend the trial by court martial of two of their officers facing serious charges of indiscipline. This approach towards demonstrating transparency has to be adopted *in extenso*. The Services should accord wide publicity to their fair and just policies and low tolerance to indiscipline in matters of human rights violations. Moreover, the training of all personnel should include the subject of human rights in a formal manner with adequate exposure to case studies and awareness of legal implications.

(ii) **Tackling Corruption.** The Services have traditionally been intolerant to corruption. As Defence procurements involve large sums of public money, the inquisitiveness about Defence deals and other contracts is high and hence these should be open to scrutiny. In a recent development, the Ministry of Defence have standardised a Defence Procurement Procedure to streamline the process of procurement. Going further with the same philosophy of standardisation, the fiscal management of public and non-public funds, stores and inventory should be reformed and streamlined across the Services. While

it goes without saying that penal retribution for offenders should be severe, the sincere and scrupulous should be motivated and rewarded.

**(c) Social Responsibility.** Another feature of reform pertains to the process of positive contact with the society through programmes that have mass appeal and wider reach. For many years Service organisations and formations have been proactive in organising health camps, environmental protection drives, charity, rehabilitation and literacy programmes in their areas. Such initiatives bring out the human face of the soldier. The success of Operation Sadbhavana in the Kashmir Valley serves as an example of the positive influence that the Armed Forces can exert in containing social strife and lending the much wanted healing touch to the people. Lessons drawn from these experiences could prompt more such initiatives in conflict prone areas where the social fabric needs mending to sustain nationalism and harmony.

**(d) Empowering the Ex-Servicemen.** The role of ex-servicemen in radiating the image of the Armed Forces has been touched upon earlier. The ex-servicemen often find themselves caught between the inconsistent responses by the State and Central governments. A number of committees have submitted recommendations towards improving their lot but many of these recommendations remain dishonoured. The Government needs to view the ex-servicemen as a trained pool of skilled manpower, which is available for a second innings in the service of the nation. This large human resource can be tapped for nation building activities. Apart from technical jobs, ex-servicemen can contribute to a variety of fields like vigilance, health, education, sports, physical training, adventure activities, police and paramilitary training. The recommendations of the KP Singh Deo Committee, the Sharad Pawar Committee and more recently the Khurana Committee have to be seriously considered for implementation. The financial objections to the implementation of 'one rank - one pension' also need to be removed at the earliest. It is in the interest of the Services and also the Government that the ex-servicemen, particularly the Personnel Below Officer Rank (PBOR), look back upon their yesteryears with pride and a sense of gratitude.

## Conclusion

The dynamics of social and economic change are bound to have their impact on the Armed Forces and their image. The causes for erosion in image of the Armed Forces are multifarious and complex. The Armed Forces have to adapt to the changing circumstances. Notwithstanding the unjust criticism and propaganda by vested interests, the Armed Forces, have enjoyed a privileged social status in our nation. While the society has to be appreciative of the intricacies of the soldier's job, the soldier also needs to be alive to the sensitivities of the society. As the nation moves from strength to strength, the Armed Forces should demonstrate their dexterity and flexibility in evolving with the changing times. Internal reforms, mutually beneficial partnerships with external agencies and unflinching support from the Government are the basic prerequisites for preserving the venerated image of the Armed Forces, which thrives on the essentials of public confidence and adherence to the values of democracy.

## References

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CHANGE OF ADDRESS ON OCCURENCE,  
INCLUDING TELEPHONE NUMBER AND E-MAIL**