

The Armed Forces : Career Aspirations and Expectations of Young Officers

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"So nigh is grandeur to our Dust
So near to God is man,
When duty whispers low, Thou must
The youth replies, I can."

- Emerson, *Voluntaries*

Introduction

The Armed Forces have always been considered as a respectable, prestigious and a satisfying profession. Despite the arduous life and the risk associated they have always managed to attract the youth of the country. Infact, defence used to be a profession favoured by the royalty and used to attract its share of princes and nobility. While the composition of the forces might have become much more egalitarian today, they undoubtedly continue to hold a charm of their own and attract their share of class and talent. But the past few years have seen some phenomenal changes happening in the country, which have thrown up many other avenues for the youngsters. At the same time, the Services have suffered from their own set of problems be it the restricted budgets or the growing shortages in manpower. There is thus a need to evaluate the attraction of the career in defence for today's youth and also to analyse the changes required to make a career in the Services that meets the expectations of its officers and satisfies their aspirations.

The Changing Scenario in the Civvy Street

There was a time when the Services offered a type of lifestyle and a set of facilities, which were just unthinkable in any other civil job. There was a certain glamour associated with the Services, which the others yearned for. But the rapid industrialisation of the

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXXXIV, No. 556, April-June 2004.

country in the past few years has definitely reduced, if not altogether removed, the edge, which the Services enjoyed. A job of equivalent responsibility in the corporate sector would fetch a young man a much higher pay packet, more attractive perks and most importantly, the flexibility to move on to another company if he doesn't like the job. Also, these companies are result-oriented and one's progression upwards is determined by performance rather than time bound guidelines. These companies seem to have picked up quite a few lessons from the Services but have equalled and even surpassed the Services in the quality of facilities that they are offering to their employees. Good clubs, foreign assignments (and foreign holidays), sports facilities and adventure activities are no longer the exclusive domain of the Services.

Services as a Career Option

Today's youngster has various options ahead of him. He is mature, more aware and smarter than his predecessors of earlier years. Thus, he is not just going to blindly jump into any career that appeals to him. He is going to weigh all the pros and cons carefully. He is going to be ready to give his youth for a profession only if he is sure that it will meet his expectations and give him what he is looking for. He wants a job that will pay him well and at the same time be professionally satisfying and challenging. He wants a job which will give him security and his family a good and a satisfying quality of life. Let us see where the Services fare in this regard.

The Strengths of the Services

The Services have never been monetarily very lucrative but have nonetheless attracted the cream of the youth. This has been possible only because the glamorous and clean image of the men in uniform has attracted the youth. Despite the pluses and the minuses, the overall package deal has never failed to attract the youth. In my opinion, the main strengths that the Services have in their favour are as under :-

- (a) **Pride and Honour.** Serving in the Armed Forces gives a person a fierce sense of pride in the fact that he has joined a noble profession. He has the proud privilege to be working in a profession in which he could get the privilege of laying down his life for the country when required. It is this sense of

pride and fulfilment, which enables a defence officer to stand tall and confident irrespective of whether he is on the streets or in some millionaire's plush bungalow.

(b) **Command and Responsibility.** A job in the Services is the only one where you are responsible not for company's annual turnover but for the lives of the men under command. Your decision could mean the difference between life or death for your men. Whether you are leading your men on a patrol, sailing a ship or flying an aircraft, this responsibility is immensely satisfying and at the same time sobering. This is a kind of responsibility, which perhaps no other job can offer.

(c) **Espirit de Corps.** The bond between comrades which develops in the face of danger gives the Services their fierce esprit de corps and loyalty to each other which perhaps is incomprehensible in normal circumstances or jobs.

(d) **Adventure and Excitement.** Life in the Services has long been associated with an active adventurous lifestyle. The very nature of the job is enough to get the adrenalin pumping in a young man. While our counterparts may be doing a nine to nine job in their respective airconditioned offices, we are driving tanks, leading troops on patrols, sailing ships or submarines or flying aircraft. Services give a young man adventurous opportunities which might not be so easily accessible in civvy street.

(e) **Quality of Life.** The Services have always offered a good quality of life to the officers and also to their families. Well organised cantonments, sports facilities, hospitals, canteens, clubs and other facilities combine to make for a systematic, organised and protected lifestyle.

(f) **The Social Fabric.** Perhaps, one of the greatest strengths of defence life is the presence of a well-knit, homogeneous community of like-minded people with the highest standards of morals and social coexistence. The social fabric of the defence forces is undoubtedly one of its greatest strengths.

(g) **Respect in Society.** A defence officer has always been respected in society for his clean and honest image. While

money no doubt can buy a lot of things in society, it probably would not be able to buy the kind of instinctive respect a defence officer evokes.

Problems Ailing the System

While the traditional strengths of the Services still exist, there has however been a certain dilution on some fronts in recent years. In comparison to the vibrant growth of the Indian economy and the civil sector, the Defence Services are coping with the challenge of ever reducing budgets and increasing monetary constraints. Keeping the morale of the officers high and giving them a satisfying career profile is a major challenge for the military planners. The main problems confronting the Services in this regard have two aspects as under :-

(a) Professional Aspects.

- (i) The steep pyramid of promotions is causing a stagnation at middle ranks fuelling increasing disillusionment and dismay. Out of a batch of say 70 officers joining a course, on an average only around 30 would reach the rank of Commander. Further, only 10 would reach Captain rank and only one or two would reach Flag rank. No other service in the government or the corporate sector would probably have such a steep pyramid in the rank structure.
- (ii) The promotion pattern is fixed and rather slow compared to the corporate sector which is more result oriented.
- (iii) The rather limited scope for academic and intellectual advancement tends to stifle the growth of the officers.
- (iv) The past few years have seen a drastic increase in the workload of the Defence Services due to problems of terrorism, infiltration, internal strife and the inadequacies of our police and paramilitary organisations. This in turn has a cascading effect leading to prolonged field deployments, leave curtailment and increasing tension.

(b) Social Aspects.

(i) The pay packet offered by the Indian Defence Services is one of the lowest in the world. The Fifth Pay Commission did improve the condition to some extent. But there is still a glaring disparity between what an officer gets in the Services and an equally qualified individual in the civvie street.

(ii) With the increasing strength of the Services and the number of ex-Servicemen, the load on the military facilities like hospitals and canteens is increasing while not enough is being done to augment the facilities.

(iii) The organisation has failed to cater to the growing housing needs of its officers. There is a severe shortage of accommodation in high density stations and often an officer finds himself in a tight predicament as to where to accommodate his luggage and his family in the new station.

(iv) The level of field deployments has increased considerably and has resulted in prolonged periods of separation from families.

(v) Due to frequent postings including remote areas the officer often has to make sacrifices with his wife's career and his children's education.

The Way Ahead

Thus, it is evident that there is an urgent need on the part of the military planners to try and meet the increasing aspirations of today's young generation and the young officers. In my opinion, the factors meriting attention are enumerated in the succeeding paragraphs.

Meeting Professional Aspirations.

(a) **Better Promotion Prospects.** The organisation has to ensure that everyone who joins the service gets a fair deal. Today's young officers are probably much more ambitious than their predecessors. While they may not really be "working

for a report", they definitely do expect to get what they deserve. Some of the options worth considering are as under :-

(i) The steep pyramid of the rank structure needs to be reassessed and flattened. Having no selection board till rank of Commander and equivalent rank in the Army and the Air Force may be considered as a suitable option. However, the requirement of maintaining the requisite hierarchical structure that is so vital for proper functioning of the Armed Forces also needs to be kept in mind.

(ii) Increasing the intake of short service officers will greatly help by meeting the requirements of additional officers at lower levels and at the same time reducing the stagnation at the higher ranks.

(iii) Instead of the present system of a 20 year bond for the permanent commissioned officers, the period could be reduced to 15 years or even 10 years with the option of a golden handshake. This would serve a dual purpose. It would enable the officer to leave early enough to pursue a fresh career outside. At the same time it would reduce the stagnation at middle levels. Of course, all this would involve a lot of planning to have a force structure where the maximum responsibilities are carried out by relatively junior officers (many of whom would leave after 10 to 15 years) and there are a relatively fewer number of middle-ranking career defence officers. Such a structure would ensure much greater satisfaction levels in the Services.

(b) **Stop the Rat Race.** The rather steep selection pyramid in the Services is leading to a growing trend of annual confidential report (ACR) oriented performance at all levels. Nothing can be more harmful for the health of a Service than this increasing obsession with reports and numbers. It is diluting the very essence of a Service officer who is supposed to have courage of conviction, be morally upright and truthful irrespective of the repercussions. If the trend is not checked soon, we could end up in a Service full of "yes-men" and paper tigers. Efforts need to be undertaken to encourage the

junior officers to be loyal and true to their men and to the Service and not to bother too much about their "career prospects" at the early stages of their careers. The recent move by the Army to discontinue ACRs on junior officers was a welcome move in this direction.

(c) **Greater Independence and Support.** An offshoot of the rat race mentioned above is the growing "zero-error syndrome". This trend also needs to be checked. Give the young officer greater independence and freedom of action and if he commits an error of judgment, hold his hand instead of making him a scapegoat. Unless leadership skills are fostered at the lower levels, the officers will be found wanting when higher levels of responsibility are placed on their shoulders.

(d) **Let the Spirit Stay.** The distinguishing factor of a Service is its customs, its regimental spirit, its fierce pride and esprit de corps. This rather vague and inexplicable and yet distinguishing spirit is our "*Pehchan*". Let not this spirit die, submerged in the ever-increasing competitiveness and one-upmanship. It is this spirit, which gives a Service officer that extra swagger. If we let this spirit die, there will be nothing distinguishing us from just another corporate office goer, climbing the ladder of success over other's shoulders.

The Monetary Aspect. Frankly, money is not much of an issue. It is unlikely that the Services can ever compete with the civil or corporate sector in the kinds of salaries that are paid to its officers. But as long as the organisation can ensure that the pay packet is enough to enable the officer to lead the expected lifestyle of an upper middle class individual, it should suffice. While he may not be able to afford the latest and most expensive car in the market, he should be able to maintain a standard of living in the society that befits the image of an officer.

Quality of Life. A young man joins the Services to lead a good life. A life that is satisfying, active, adventurous and respectable. Of late, however, the lifestyle in the Services also seems to be becoming increasingly like the corporate sector. Late working hours on ships and in offices are leaving no time for games or social interaction which is the hallmark of Service life.

Being spared to participate in an adventure activity has become a luxury. The Services need to make a conscious effort to check the trend of corporatisation of our lifestyles. While there is no denying the gradual change in the job profile of a young officer with the increasing levels of technology, a healthy balance needs to be struck between the increasing requirements and the necessity to retain our basic strengths.

A Roof over Every Head. The accommodation problem has emerged as a serious problem facing the Defence Services, especially in high concentration cities like Mumbai and Delhi. The Services have to undertake the task of ensuring 100 per cent accommodation for all officers. There would probably be nothing more distracting to an officer than the thought that his family does not have a place to stay while he is discharging his duty. The housing problem definitely needs to be tackled on a war footing, as it would have a severe effect on the officer's ability to discharge his duty. It has to be taken as a basic right of an officer and steps undertaken to ensure that he gets a house wherever he is posted.

The Social Aspects. The basic strength of the Defence Forces has been in its warm homogenous social fabric and the regular Services-brand of social interaction. Calling on senior officers, inviting junior officers over to a meal or tea, courtesies to ladies, helping each other in times of need and so on, have always combined to give the special warm flavour to service life. We have to ensure that this social fabric does not deteriorate. Providing a solid support system for the families even in the absence of the officer, insisting on continuing the old social traditions and the social etiquette will go a long way in maintaining the ethos of the Services.

Conclusion

In his lecture on leadership to the American Armed Forces, General Colin Powell said, "Organisation doesn't really achieve anything. Plans don't accomplish anything, either. Theories of management don't much matter. Endeavors succeed or fail because of the people involved. Only by attracting the best people will you accomplish great deeds." If the Services want to maintain their status as a lucrative and satisfying career option, they will need to

create an environment where the bright and creative youngsters are attracted and retained.

Today's youth is not all that gullible. Today's youngster would like to know what exactly he is getting into. He will carefully weigh his instinctive fascination for the profession of arms with the overall deal that the Services have to offer. If the Services want to continue to attract the youth, they have to capitalise on their traditional strengths and yet at the same time cater to the aspirations and the expectations of today's youngsters. They have to offer him a career that he will find satisfying and professionally challenging. At the same time they have to offer him and his family a safe, secure and a good life. The Services have to move with the times, keeping pace with the fast advancements in the world and yet retaining their old customs and value system. If the Services today fail to evolve with the times and cater to the increased aspirations of today's youngsters, they might soon find themselves being forced to accept the harsh reality that what they are getting is not the *fresh cream* that they want but scrappy remnants from the bottom of the barrel.

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