

The Indian Army : A Brief History*

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The book is an overview of the Indian Army, its evolution and contribution to national development. The narratives of wars, written by eminent retired service officers have a distinct advantage in that they are factual accounts analysed in the backdrop of broad strategic and national perspectives, without unduly infected by nationalistic fervour.

The genesis and evolution of the armies in India have been briefly traced from the ancient times to the present. The overview of the evolution of the military in the sub continent is objective. Chapter one attempts to trace the evolution of the Indian Army from the Mauryan period to the British era. The first recorded fact in Indian political history is the invasion by Alexander the Great in 327-5 BC. The military developments in the Maurya period were substantial, but the author laments that even great kings like Chandragupta Maurya lacked strategic vision. The Islamic invasions were brutal and devastating; not only wealth was looted, even more damaging was the grinding down of Hindu India. In the words of VS Naipaul: "The Muslim view of their conquest is a true one. They speak of the triumph of faith, the destruction of idols and temples, the loot, the carting away of local people as slaves... There are no Hindu records for this period. Defeated people never write their history."

Refreshingly, the events of 1857 have been recorded in the book with candour. The causes have been analysed objectively. Historians are divided in their view of the uprising; whether it was due to patriotic upsurge or an unplanned violent resentment of the British. However, there can be little doubt that this event gave birth to widespread arousal of national awareness.

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Western writers have not adequately acknowledged the Indian Army's contribution in the two World Wars. The chapter on the World Wars fills the gap by recounting the sacrifices made by the Indian soldiers. The authors have covered all major campaigns in which Indian soldiers played a sterling role. At the end of the chapter on World Wars, mention is made of the Indian National Army (INA). The INA achieved very little in military terms, but it did invoke widespread sympathy amongst Indians.

The partition of the country was a traumatic experience. With the partition came the division of the Armed Forces between India and Pakistan. The princely states had army units of their own, which had to be integrated into the Indian Army. This was a prodigious task; the author has made a brief mention of it. But a little more detail about the Armed Forces Reconstitution Committee would have added value to the book since little is known about the problems of reconstitution by the present generation at whom the book is targeted.

Of great interest are the accounts of wars fought by the Indian Army since independence. Each war has important lessons for the future; and yet the official accounts of these wars except the 1947 India-Pakistan War are yet to be published. We have thus denied ourselves the benefit of learning from our past mistakes. It is ironic that the accounts of post-independence wars including India-China war of 1962 are available on the web site of *The Times of India* but the Government of India has yet to acknowledge these as official.

The greatest challenges faced by the Army were in the 1980s. The occupation of Siachen Glacier in April 1984, *Operation Blue Star* in Golden Temple at Amritsar in June 1984, *Operation Pawan* in Sri Lanka (July 1987 - March 1990) and *Operation Cactus* in Maldives in November 1988 point to the type of threats and challenges that will confront the Army in the future. The author has recounted these operations adequately, but has refrained from pointing out past military mistakes. For example, notwithstanding the confused political direction, why was the military command and control chain lack lustre in *Operation Pawan* in Sri Lanka? The way the chain of command functioned was unworthy of a professional army, which had only in the previous decade notched

a decisive victory against Pakistan and had decades of experience in fighting insurgencies.

Kargil 1999 was won by the infantry led by young officers; this is not to undermine the performance of other arms and services. Over the years, it has been reported that the quality of intake in our Officers Training Academies (OTA) was not up to the mark. How then did the young officers, barely out of training academies, perform so well in Kargil?

The chapter on counter-insurgency operations gives a detailed account of Indian Army's involvement in fighting insurgencies in the Northeast and Jammu and Kashmir. The narratives are well documented; the progression of insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir to proxy war and then to terrorism backed by Islamic fundamentalists based in Pakistan has been traced with clarity. A brief analysis on the evolution of counter-insurgency strategy over the years would have added to the value of the narratives.

India's role in the UN Peacekeeping Operations has a long and distinctive history- from our participation in Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission in Korea to the present commitments in nine of the sixteen UN missions. But the mandates of peacekeepers have changed over the years and so has the environment in which peacekeeping operations are being mounted.

The last four chapters focus on the Indian Army's significant contribution to nation building; this is acknowledged by the general public but the powerful bureaucracy has wittingly or unwittingly been reluctant to give it due recognition. Unfortunately, the political class, though appreciative of the role of the Armed Forces, has fallen in the bureaucrats' trap. For example, the Armed Forces hierarchy has been kept out of the decision-making loop, even on matters concerning national security. Significantly, this mindset is now changing.

The Indian Army nurtures sports, particularly adventure sports enthusiastically. Its record in mountaineering is world class. The encouragement that the Army gives to adventure and sports should inspire young men and women to join the Army.

Besides being a chronicle of the evolution of the Indian Army, this book is also a celebration of honour, courage and fidelity of the Indian soldier. This is best exemplified in the regimental spirit - the name and *izzat* of the regiment - for which soldiers are prepared to lay down their lives. The criticism of the regimental ethos by some on the ground that it goes against national integration is misplaced. The regimental ethos lead to bonding; in a broader sense it is inclusive of national identity. Any attempt to weaken this will be an invitation to doom and calamity, as Field Marshall Manekshaw warns; "In the name of God, desist from such folly. Neither God nor future generations will forgive the perpetrators of such misplaced nationalism, which will lead to the destabilisation of the famous Indian Army."

The Indian Army: A Brief History is a worthy effort to place the Indian Army where it deserves to stand - among the finest in the world.