

Local Community First: India's Enduring Peacekeeping Ethos

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*If thou hast no sympathy for the troubles of others
Thou art unworthy to be called by the name of a human.¹*

Abstract

India's peacekeepers' contributions to the United Nations Peace Operations (UNPOs) are well recognised due to their professionalism, time-tested ethos of openness, respect for diversity, coexistence, and cooperation. The core ethics of the Indian Army rest on three pillars, viz; spirit of comradeship regardless of caste, creed, or religion; 'One for all and all for one' with no discrimination; and discipline and integrity under all circumstances. Indian peacekeepers at all levels have negotiated peace with the trust and respect of the local communities by making them equal partners in their endeavours, provided extensive medical and veterinary assistance and worked tirelessly to restore damaged infrastructure in the host countries. The reputation of the Indian soldier as a motivated peacekeeper has been amply established in the last 49 UNPOs, where they have excelled in working for the local communities, even when they were under shelling due to an ongoing conflict. They have

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helped local communities in conflict zones, by building their lives and infrastructure, through engineering, medical and veterinary support. In the UNPO environment, every Indian peacekeeper believes in the 'Local Community First' principle, because it flows out of India's enduring peacekeeping ethos.

Introduction

India is proud of its long-standing contributions to the United Nations Peace Operations (UNPOs), which commenced with the United Nations (UN)-mandated Neutral Nations' Repatriation Commission (NNRC) in Korea in 1953. It has grown to more than 2,80,000 troops by Jun 2024, deploying in more than 49 UN missions² out of 71. As many as 179 Indian peacekeepers have made the supreme sacrifice while serving in these missions. Indian diplomats, soldiers from the armed forces, police personnel and civilian peacekeepers have taken part in some of the most complex and intractable operations spanning the four continents. The ancient Indian wisdom of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* or 'World is One Family', echoes in these endeavours, with its time-tested ethos of openness, respect for diversity, coexistence, and cooperation.

India's approach to peacekeeping is characterised by its emphasis on impartiality and non-use of force except in self-defence or defence of the mandate. The bedrock of operations remains respect for the culture, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the host country. India has also provided humanitarian assistance operations where India's teams of rescuers, doctors, and paramedics continued to save lives.

The motto of India's first UNPO was 'For the Honours of India', given by General KS Thimayya, the Chairman of the NNRC in 1953. Indian contingents on various UNPOs are at the forefront of rescue operations in even in any natural disaster. When Mount Nyiragongo erupted in Eastern Congo in May 2021, Indian peacekeepers from the 301 Infantry Brigade were the first responders to saving thousands of lives. Similarly, the role of army doctors during the COVID-19 and Ebola crises was recognised by the international community in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Since Jul 2022, an estimated one million people have been affected by severe flooding

in 36 counties across South Sudan and Indian battalions were at the forefront to save the civilians from the ravages. Indian engineers and humanitarian partners managed to repair flooding-induced breaches in Bentiu, the capital of Unity State.³ The core ethics of the Indian Army⁴ rest on the following three pillars:

- The spirit of comradeship and brotherhood of the brave, regardless of caste, creed, or religion.
- The motto 'One for all and all for one' with no discrimination on account of caste, race, creed, or religion where each one is a soldier first and anything else later.
- Discipline and integrity impart the feeling of patriotism, honesty, and courage under all circumstances, however strong the provocation otherwise.

The article brings together varied experiences and applications of humanitarian actions by the Indian peacekeepers in the past 73 years of commitment to the UNPOs. This paper is a review-based collation and analyses of different UN missions, with direct or indirect impacts on the local communities. It is based on the open-source literature and personal experiences of many Indian peacekeepers. The limited scope of the paper is as follows:

- Negotiations with trust and respect.
- Community outreach.
- Medical and veterinary assistance.
- Restoration of infrastructure.

Negotiations with Trust and Respect

India has extensive experience in using dialogue to manage and resolve conflicts internally, regionally and internationally. While Indian diplomats have excelled at the multilateral levels, military leaders have been equally articulate and doused many a fire in their assignments across the globe. As an example, the Custodian Force from India (CFI) in Korea was holding Chinese and North Korean prisoners of war for their repatriation.⁵ Some of the Chinese soldiers did not want to go back to China, creating an agitation in a camp. In one such event, the tense atmosphere prompted Major General SPP Thorat, Commander CFI, with a small party to visit the camp and as they were returning, one of the Indian officers

was surrounded and held back by the Chinese prisoners. Not ready to leave a brother officer behind, the Commander and a few soldiers went back to negotiate. The CFI Commander engaged with one of the prisoners who spoke some English. After some time, he took out his cigarette case and asked that prisoner, "What sort of Chinese are you? I and my men have been your guests for almost an hour but you have not seen it fit to offer a cup of tea or even a cigarette. Where is your traditional hospitality and where are your good manners for which your race is renowned"?⁶ A true exhibition of patience and a simple approach in a tense situation amazed the prisoners and compelled them to bring tea and cigarettes. Much can be achieved even in a tense situation with the presence of mind, rather than the brutal use of force.

After the elections in Cambodia [United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), 1992-93], the results of the elections declared on 10 Jun 1993 were contested by a splinter group, under Prince Norodom Chakrapong, the governor of Kampong Cham and the stepson of Prince Sihanouk. He declared an autonomous zone comprising the provinces east of the Mekong River and asked the UN forces to vacate the areas. All three provinces were part of the Indian battalion area. Colonel AN Bahuguna, the sector commander negotiated with the governor and informed him about the inherent capacity of the UN contingent to act in self-defence. Lieutenant General John Sanderson spoke about the secession and Indian response. Colonel Bahuguna told him that he was afraid that he might have to arrest the governors and take forceful actions in the capitals of all three provinces. In the end, all governors relented their move. Peacekeeping operations can be moved forward by a determined exposition of intent to the spoilers – something which the Indian battalion did at this crucial juncture and changed the course of events for UNTAC.⁷

India's defence and police leaders have played their part in the strategic leadership role at the United Nations Headquarters (UN HQ). After NNRC, the roles of General KS Thimayya, Lieutenant General PS Gyani, and Lieutenant General Dewan Prem Chand in Cyprus and the Middle East stand out as true negotiators of peace. Major General Indarjit Rikhye and Lieutenant General Dewan Prem Chand negotiated many critical moments in several UN missions and brought peace to those areas. India has

provided numerous senior officials for the UN HQ and UNPOs, where they continue to negotiate peace with all the stakeholders. They were either diplomat negotiators or military diplomats engaged in intense negotiations and peacekeeping at the strategic and operational levels of UNPOs.

Community Outreach

The Indian Army's cultural sensitivity to the local communities is respected all over the country. Keeping community first with utmost respect for the local traditions, Indian peacekeepers have provided medical services, veterinary support and engineering services required by the local communities. These activities have contributed to sustaining the livelihood of conflict-impacted areas and acted as a catalyst, thus initiating peace-building in the strife-torn areas.⁸

India with its varied weather patterns, vast extent and rugged terrain, continuously faces many natural disasters. Indian Armed Forces are invariably the first responders. Therefore, working in the UNPOs is usually a replication of the home situations. When the First UN Emergency Force was deployed in Gaza during 1956-57, the locals welcomed the Indian peacekeepers with open arms. The units over the next 11 years, till Jun 1967, displayed a community-first attitude and took many initiatives by involving local youths in various productive and positive activities. The Indian contingent took up positions in various population centres and was constantly involved in assisting local administration.

While the 99 (Independent) Brigade Group in Congo (UN Operation in the Congo, 1960-64) was primarily involved in the operational missions, it still looked after the civil population around its locations and had a limited policy on the protection of civilians. Nearly 30 years later, 66 (Independent) Infantry Brigade Group was deployed in Somalia (UN Operations in Somalia-II, 1993-95). The brigade laid down the basic fundamentals for all peacekeepers - local traditions and customs must be scrupulously respected. To evolve the community-first approach, a civil affairs cell was set up to collate the humanitarian needs of the locals. As a novel experiment, the cordon and search operations were conducted transparently by involving village elders and the local police. This innovative *modus operandi* (method) of conducting operations in front of the village elders and clan chiefs paid rich dividends as the locals became the prime stakeholders in their security. The

brigade had identified humanitarian actions as one of the most important components of its operational activity.⁹

After ten years, the 301 (Independent) Brigade Group was deployed to the UN Mission in the DRC in 2005 and continued to operate for the next mission – the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). The brigade has been involved in some of the most complex operations against many rebel groups. Despite the major focus being on the maintenance of peace and protection of civilians, the units of the brigade did not lose sight of the community welfare. The activities of the brigade related to winning the hearts and minds have been well-recorded over the last 19 years. All units have their strategies for Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) affecting the local population.

At the Indian contingents (Battalion) level, the emphasis has always been on the secondary mission of humanitarian activities. The battalions deployed in Gaza in 1956-67, Cambodia in 1992-93, Rwanda in 1994, Angola in 1995, Sierra Leone in 1999 and all other components, prepared community-first policies for their operations. India deployed its first contingent (2/4 GORKHA RIFFLES) in Lebanon (UN Interim Force in Lebanon, 1978-TD) in Sep 1999 and made a conscious effort to bring normality to peacekeepers' dealings with the Lebanese citizens. Checkpoints were remodelled where women teachers and children going to schools were subjected to only random checks in a separate queue.¹⁰ During the 34-day operation by Israeli Defence Forces in Lebanon in 2006, Indian Battalion, 4 SIKH stayed put at the blue line and looked after hundreds of civilians. Exceptional humanitarian assistance was provided even when shells were landing all around.

Similarly, immediately after their induction in 2004, the Indian battalions of the UN Mission in Ethiopia-Eritrea (2000-2008) developed a comprehensive policy on the secondary tasks of Civil-Military Coordination and Cooperation (CIMIC) activities. This policy formed the basis of all CIMIC activities in the Indian Sector. The guiding principles as per the policy included community consent, impartiality in dealing; improving community relations with the peacekeepers; executing QIPs; and helping civil administration to bring back normalcy.

Medical and Veterinary Assistance

Intra-state conflicts or civil wars bring untold miseries to the hapless civil population, which is uprooted from its villages and made to stay in temporary shelters. Besides food and shelter, they need medical attention on priority. Indian Army's medical contribution to the international cause started on 20 Nov 1950, with the landing of 60 Para Field Ambulance unit in the Port of Pusan, on the southern tip of Korea. Lieutenant Colonel AG Rangaraj and his paratroopers served in the battle zone with the Commonwealth troops, while a part of the unit under Major NB Banerjee worked in the field hospitals in Taegu. They also trained local doctors and nurses so that they could take care of the wounded soldiers.¹¹ Thus, the very start of the Indian participation in UN-mandated operations and UNPOs was with the medical services and relief to the affected people.

Indian field ambulance units, hospitals and medical personnel with the units on UNPO duty have treated the local population with great care and without any hesitation. The bigger medical contributions came in the form of these units. A decade after the Korean experience, 152 General Hospital was diverted from Leh for the UN peacekeeping duty in Congo. Lieutenant Colonel NB Banerjee of Korean fame used his experience to set up medical facilities under the most adverse situations. The Indian UN Hospital was set up in Leopoldville (now Kinshasa) in Sep 1960. Two other medical facilities were also set up in Lulubourg (Kananga) and Coquilhatville (Mbandaka). The hospital provided the medical facility to 20 countries and also treated several local Congolese.

After 30 years of Congo experience, a reinforced 402 Field Ambulance proved a valuable asset to the UN Mission and local community in Cambodia in 1992. It also provided two smaller hospitals in Siem Riep and on the Vietnamese border at Mandolkiri. As a humanitarian gesture, the Field Ambulance provided medical relief to thousands of civilians around their location. 320 Field Ambulance Unit under the Indian 66 (I) Brigade Group in Somalia proved to be one of the most important components. It not only provided medical cover to the Infantry Brigade but also carried out many humanitarian activities. Over two lakh patients were treated during its one-year stay in Somalia. An Indian Field Hospital was inducted in Sierra Leone (UN Mission in Sierra Leone, 1999-2005)

in the building of Chatham Memorial Trust Hospital. Medical assistance was provided to the patients admitted to the hospital and locals of Kailahun. The Indian battalions organised a 'Kick Polio out of Sierra Leone' campaign in Daru and Kailahun. A free medical clinic was opened at Daru by the battalion to provide medical aid to the poor and needy.

In DRC (MONUC/MONUSCO, 1999-TD), India deployed a Level-II hospital at Goma in Jan 2005 and handled many civilian cases ranging from malaria to gunshot wounds and even treated airline passengers for severe stress and injuries after their Congolese carrier over-shot the runway at Goma International Airport.¹² In 2020, on UN request the hospitals were scaled up to Level III to mitigate and contain the COVID-19 outbreak.¹³ Similarly, South Sudan (UN Mission in South Sudan, 2005-TD) has Level I, II and II Plus Indian Field hospitals located in different sectors. After the fighting in Dec 2013, the hospitals also treated internally displaced persons living at the nearby sites and residents of the larger community.

While the larger Indian peacekeeping forces have been deployed with well-equipped medical hospitals, Indian contingents of battalion size have also been running medical facilities with their inherent medical resources. Indian women doctors have been very effective for the locals, as local women in traditional societies are not comfortable with the male doctors.¹⁴

The local economy of the rural countryside is highly dependent on the well-being of their animals. The Indian brigade group deployed in Somalia was the first to deploy medical teams with veterinarian doctors. Livestock remains the backbone of the Somali and most other African economies. The veterinary detachments of Indian peacekeeping contingents have provided services to revive the livestock, badly affected due to civil wars. The veterinary personnel also train locals in rendering basic veterinary treatment. All units deployed in Lebanon since 1999, have provided the services of vet teams. Similarly, the veterinary support in South Sudan was very rewarding for the local communities. A veterinarian doctor was assigned with a dedicated office and support team to cater to the 'Wealth in Cattle' that is a reality in South Sudan.¹⁵ The Indian contingent is well known and respected for their frequent mobile veterinary clinics in different parts of Upper Nile State.

Restoration of Infrastructure

When 66 (I) Infantry Brigade Group started its QIPs, then called humanitarian activities, much resistance came from the international Non-Governmental Organisations and humanitarian agencies, as they considered it stepping onto their exclusive turfs. Ironically, the UN has accepted the same term as a best practice now, and all present missions have QIPs in the areas of deployment. Besides the Indian battalions doing their bit for the local communities from their resources, the Indian Field Engineer companies in Somalia, Angola, Rwanda, Eritrea, Sierra Leone, South Sudan and DRC played a major role. The field engineers have worked tirelessly and proved to be one of the most productive and effective elements in the execution of humanitarian operations. One of the major tasks performed by the engineers in all missions was to enhance mobility by improving, repairing and even laying new roads and repairing broken bridges in the countryside.

Restoration of drinking water facilities has been a much-admired effort by Indian peacekeepers in the parched landscapes of Somalia, Eritrea, Mozambique and Angola. The installation of hand pumps in the Wajid and Oddur areas of Somalia touched the very hearts of every citizen. Water management by digging hundreds of shallow and deep wells was exceptional work done by the Corps of Engineers in Eritrea. A longstanding project of a water pipeline to the village of Bulele was revived and executed in record time. In Lebanon, a project to supply water to a dozen villages by lifting water from the Litani River was achieved by the engineer platoon of an Indian battalion in 2000.

The Field Company (Engineers) have played a pivotal role in giving shape to Sector III in South Sudan. The sappers created ablution units, laid pipelines for water supply, electrified the camps, arranged sewage disposal, erected prefabricated shelters, constructed roads for access and managed water supply. In Rwanda, the Indian battalion had carried out well-coordinated humanitarian aid programmes with its limited resources. Force Commander Major General G C Tousignant of Canada visited the Battalion headquarters and in his farewell address, paid rich tributes to the Indian contingent: "You brought to UNAMIR, to the UN, to Rwanda a sense of pride.... You came in and you demonstrated what it is to be a good soldier and you brought respectability to the mission. You brought also a sense of professionalism in

everything that we have to do for the Rwandese. I say this without any reservation; you are probably one of the best soldiers in the world at this time”.

Activities of successive Indian battalions of 301(I) Brigade in DRC have also centred on youth development, public awareness, public welfare and QIPs. Youth exchange programs included sports and cultural activities. The peacekeeping contingents in Lebanon, South Sudan and Abeyi continue with their humanitarian activities which include public awareness, symposia, seminars, vocational training workshops, public development programs, medical care, construction of roads and bridges, ensuring water supply and various other programs. The successful completion of many projects generated a great deal of goodwill and trust among the local population towards the Indian contingent and the UN mission.¹⁶

Conclusion

The Indian troops in the Mozambique UN mission in 1993-1995 conducted many humanitarian and construction activities by keeping the requirements of the local communities in mind. The then UN Secretary-General Mr Boutros Boutros Ghali, applauded their role and in an interview with BBC, he acknowledged the untiring efforts and dedication of Indian Army officers and troops. He said, “The Indian troops, by their superior training and high standard of discipline and sense of responsibility, have had a significant contribution in ensuring the early return of peace in Mozambique”.¹⁷

The reputation of the Indian soldier as a motivated and fearsome fighter was amply established by the end of World War II. It was only after the Independence that the Indian soldier came to be recognised as a peacekeeper or peacemaker. Participation in over 49 UNPOs has reinforced this reputation of an Indian peacekeeper. “Give me an Indian battalion...”, “I wish all my battalions were from the Indian Army ...” or “Get me more Indian officers...” are requests often heard from the UN mission commanders of other countries. The obvious reason for this high acceptance remains - the ethos of the armed forces, the plural nature of India, and growing up in a multicultural society. In the UNPO environment, every Indian peacekeeper believes in the ‘Local community first’ principle, because it flows out of India’s enduring peacekeeping ethos.

Endnotes

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