

The Mischievous Anonymous Author

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Introduction

The changing socio-economic environment has ushered in high levels of awareness, rise in individual aspirations, expanded needs, hope and to a large extent greed as well, resulting in growth of envy and jealousy in the society. Personnel of the Indian Armed Forces are drawn from the society at large and hence cannot remain immune to the degenerating value system and host of other ills of modern societies.

One of the immediate negative fallouts of the societal changes on the Indian armed forces has been the rise in insidious practice of anonymous reporting. An anonymous communication is one wherein the author does not disclose his/ her identity deliberately and hence the recipient cannot easily identify the originator with any degree of certainty. A letter initiated under a fake identity is categorised as 'pseudo anonymous'. The practice of anonymous reporting is also known to be rampant in the government departments, corporate houses, police and paramilitary forces as also reportedly within political organisations. During the past decade or so, the Indian Armed Forces have experienced an increasing trend of this malaise. While, this is a matter of grave concern for commanders, it is yet to be recognised as a professional hazard. There is, therefore, an imperative need to focus on the increasing trend of anonymous complaints in the Indian Armed Forces, its deleterious effect on the organisation, the dilemmas for commanders at all levels and evolve ways to tackle this growing menace.

Modus Operandi

Anonymous letters usually contain allegations of misuse of power or financial impropriety in official capacity or even aimed at character assassination. Generally meant to be an expose, anonymous letters could also take the form of threats, obscene messages, slurs etc. Anonymous letters initiated within the Indian Armed Forces are written generally for the following identifiable reasons:-

- (a) **Whistle Blower.** The aim is to surreptitiously allege wrong doings of a superior officer or bring to fore perceived malpractices existing in the organisation. Experience indicates that anonymous complaints that are initiated with intent to blow the whistle are usually bereft of verifiable information or reliable documentary evidence supporting the allegations. Enquiry in such cases whether open or discreet are generally inconclusive.
- (b) **Intent to Slander.** Here the intention is to target the reputation of professionally successful individuals. To this end an anonymous complaint is generated by a jealous colleague to assault the reputation or merely to create a doubt in the mind of superiors about the credibility of the targeted individual. Such a salvo is fired just before a report is due to be initiated or a promotion board is to be held where the individual is being considered or in some cases when the targeted individual has just assumed a new appointment. In essence, it is a devious onslaught by an ambitious but incompetent individual on an unsuspecting competent victim to undermine the latter's capability and position.
- (c) **Malicious Gossip.** It is carried out by disgruntled individuals to spread malicious gossip with the intent of mischief or merely to put a superior or colleague off balance. At times, it is also done as a pastime essentially to keep the heads of the organisation disoriented and detracted from their real focus. For instance, if an officer is honest and upright but very strict, demanding and harsh in his conduct towards his subordinates, there is a possibility that some amongst the subordinates may be triggered to react with an anonymous complaint to discredit the leadership of such a superior and keep him under pressure with an antagonistic propaganda campaign. When there is no evidence of corruption, the individual may resort to 'character assassination'. There is lot of gossip and entertainment value for even bystanders, who might by and large be neutral.
- (d) **Intent to Shatter Family Life.** This is done mostly due to animosity or vengeance where one perceives having been wronged with no hope or possibility of redress.

The anonymous communication may be handwritten or typed on a typewriter or on a computer and a printout sent via post. Thereafter, the letter may be deleted or the computer may even be formatted to avoid detection. The letter could also be e-mailed from a fictitious ID under a false name. Of late, such communication is being directed to a wide range of addressees ranging from the immediate superior to the Supreme Commander, as well as to the political hierarchy.

Whatever be the modus operandi, an anonymous complaint can be a tormenting experience for the targeted individual, both on the professional and domestic front, adversely affecting motivation levels. Fortunately, in a high profile case involving a senior officer, the Delhi High Court ruled that anonymous allegations could not be the basis for prosecution¹. Strange as it may sound, there have also been cases, though rare, of superiors initiating anonymous letters against their own subordinates selectively with the aim to harass, embarrass or blackmail.

Dilemma and Challenges

Dealing with anonymous complaints is usually a difficult proposition and sometimes very tricky. As per the existing policy on the disposal of anonymous letters, investigation, open or closed door, may be ordered depending on whether the contents and allegations made by the author are verifiable. While the irregularities brought out should be investigated; the problem arises when anonymous complaints are sent merely as an act of vengeance or with the intent of mischief to tarnish the image of an individual. All it takes for a person is to use his imagination and write an anonymous complaint containing nothing but falsehood. Ready acceptance of anonymous complaints, therefore, can also open the floodgates for slanderous and libellous writing, a tide that may be difficult to stem.

Notwithstanding the aforesaid, one view is that follow-up of anonymous letters also acts as a barometer to judge prevailing levels of morale and motivation in an organisation like the Armed Forces which are so pyramidically structured and the organisation is characterised by layers of hierarchy. For some it is an effective tool to draw the attention of higher commanders to the alleged misdemeanour of seniors without prejudice to their own self. Not all authors of anonymous letters use indecent language and not all are hostile to the system either.² They could be individuals overwhelmed by a feeling of isolation from the mainstream and are thus dissatisfied with the administration and decision making styles. It is, therefore, important that truth must prevail.

It is all right to say that a whistle blower must have the courage to get recognised but it is equally important to accept that not all can. The line dividing courage and bravado is thin and not everyone would risk his position to become a messiah of change. However, if the said tool is used for mischief or with malice in order to demolish ones reputation, defame or mount an assault on ones honour, integrity and character, it has the potential to create havoc in the social fabric of the organisation. If a senior officer is seeking an opportunity to harass the subordinate targeted by the anonymous author, he would order an enquiry into the allegations. An enquiry is a convenient tool to harass and embarrass. Unfortunately, a lie told repeatedly becomes the truth. The more one tries to defend his/her position, especially against the ‘character assassination’, the dirtier it gets. Who can understand better the agony and ordeal the targeted individual and his family suffer than the victim himself, especially so when all the allegations levelled eventually turn out to be false. The goodwill earned by the victim in his entire career is dissipated and even after being cleared by the investigation, the damage done is irreparable. After all the society is influenced by “no smoke without fire” syndrome.

Unfortunately, the policy makers in the Armed Forces have overlooked this fact which has become a part of uniformed existence wherein personal and professional differences are often seen to surface through anonymous letters. If we act on them with gossipy glee - what example are we setting for others to follow? That, it is right to put in an anonymous complaint? Are we looking for honest men with integrity and loyalty, who do not have the courage to pen down their names with the complaint? If convictions are acute, the wrong so harsh, the offence so grave, the love for protecting the values and ethos of the organisation you venerate is so powerful, then 100 times out of 100, the complaints are not anonymous. When the issues are personally motivated, frivolous, done out of sheer spite and are non issues in nature, then 100 times out of 100 the complaints are anonymous. Now by acting on anonymous complaints, what do we as the organisation demonstrate? Apart from setting precedence, it is also a message of mistrust and lack of faith. Moreover, at times an anonymous letter is accompanied with a threat of making the complaint public by going to the media. With the present trend of sting operations on the rise the media would be happier do to an expose on the armed forces for all the wrong reasons.

Response Methodology

How then do we curb this menace? Many instructions have been written on the subject that is fair and open. It will be fair to assume that today a senior formation commander receives at an average of sixty to seventy anonymous communications during his tenure. At the Service headquarters the number could be higher. Is it, therefore, possible to order an enquiry, open or discreet in every case? Is it correct to seek comments of all the targeted individuals as a matter of routine? Is it ethical or practical to instruct the intelligence units or the neighbouring formation commander/ commanding officer to check the veracity of the contents every time an anonymous letter is received? It goes without saying that the answer is a big ‘NO’. Many well intentioned senior commanders are wary of anonymous letters which do not contain verifiable information or reliable documentary evidence to support the allegations levelled. They consign such letters to the waste paper basket. Even the Central Vigilance Commissioner (CVC) has issued a circular stating that all anonymous letters should just be filed with ‘No Action’ endorsement.³

The age old practice of complaints box is an effective back channel communication for the commanders at all levels. These, however, remain largely empty today having been replaced by mischievous anonymous letters whose number is increasing with each passing day. Moral courage is a fundamental quality, amongst others, that all the Armed Forces personnel must embrace. If the menace is allowed to persist then it would undermine the foundation of the Armed Forces. Appropriate checks and balances in an organisation may help track the defaulter.

Notwithstanding the existing instructions and standing operating procedures on the subject, the approach to the problem needs to be redefined. More often than not, the problem lies in the approach to the issue. The anonymous writer who enjoys a free reign with the content and breaks through all norms of propriety with the intent of mischief must be checked. He has no fear as he is assured of his anonymity and thus he goes on a rampage. This malaise, therefore, needs to be confronted head on by adopting the policy of ‘catching the bull by horns’. Where no enquiry is warranted, commanders must take measures to disseminate the contents of such letters periodically to the environment at an appropriate level and time. A quarterly ‘No Action Taken’ news bulletin by respective Service headquarters indicating total number of anonymous complaints received during the period may be published. This would not only tire out and deny undue attention to the mischievous anonymous writers which they desperately seek but will also help stunt the spread of rumours and gossip that generally follow the receipt of an anonymous letter. Apart from the aforesaid, necessary effort must also be directed towards identifying the authors of those anonymous letters which do not contain any verifiable information or reliable evidence supporting the allegations. This proactive approach will instil

fear in the minds of mischievous anonymous writers and in turn would contribute towards reducing the frequency at which these are received today. What is needed is a scientific process to address the problem.

Proactive Approach. Every individual has a motive and literary fingerprint that seeps into his/her expression or style of writing.⁴ Analysis of the contents reveal the motive behind writing the anonymous complaint. This helps the investigators to identify the potential writer or a group of suspects who could be from within the same organisation or outside, directly or indirectly connected with the targeted individual. There are telltale signs that lead to the author such as repetitive errors of spelling and grammar. Some words are only used in certain areas and some physical ascents are easily noticeable in the text. The grammar and sentence structure may also suggest the general age, education and demeanour of the author. In this era of scientific advancement wherein highly effective and collaborative methods of investigation are available with Forensic Science Laboratories, it is time that this expertise and knowledge be used to deal with the malaise.

Involving the Experts. Once the search has been narrowed down, then experts must examine the document for information that may lead to close in on the identity of the writer. Such examinations involve unusual aspects of paper or envelope, watermarks, detection of indented impressions and comparison with previous anonymous submissions. Based on the contents of the letter, psychological profile of the writer is then prepared by a psychiatrist or a psychologist. Joe Jalbert and Associates – an International Document Examiner Associates says that good writing samples are essential for proper investigation.⁵ The investigations even examine the glue used; pick up finger prints, carryout sniffer test to check presence of cologne or perfume besides studying the handwriting samples of the suspects. Having narrowed down on the possible suspects one can generally home on to the author by a process of elimination. The process will entail looking into the following:-

(a) **Handwritten Letters.** In so far as the hand written notes are concerned, the experts examine the document in question for sequential and pictorial similarities with available hand writing samples of the suspects. However the same may require furnishing of adequate hand writing samples.

(b) **Typewritten or Computer Printed Communication.** Every typewriter / printer has a distinct signature that it invariably leaves on all the documents it produces. Typically, different printers imprint ink in distinct bands that can be spotted by image processing software. Such software is highly advanced and is commercially available. The pattern recognition techniques are used to identify the printers. There is thus, a requirement to prepare a data bank of all computers and peripherals available in the target offices.

(c) **Data Recovery.** Those who think that after deleting the file or formatted the hard disk, they can no longer be traced and accused of anything, may be in for a shock. Data recovery is easier than ever before. Today freely available data recovery software on the internet enables an intermediate computer user to recover lost or deleted files even from a formatted hard drive.

(d) **E-mails.** Only a novice would want to send an anonymous letter through an email for it is possible to quickly and accurately track the origins of the mail through the unique number called the Internet Protocol (IP) address. This method is widely used to track cyber criminals.

Recommendation

Creation of a Task Force. A different approach is required to tackle the problem of anonymous letters which are written as an act of personal vendetta maliciously or with the intent of mischief containing complete falsehood. It erodes the very foundation of military ethos and discipline. There is a case for creation of an establishment to deal with this challenge head on. Many may not agree with this recommendation at this stage, however, in the present era of specialisation it may become a necessity soon. Once biometric cards cover all personnel of the Armed Forces including families and those retired as well, it would become much easier for experts to reach the anonymous writer through the help of all available data and technology.

Conclusion

Functions of command in the Indian Armed Forces have had a curious pattern of proliferation in the 21st Century. When adverse media reports became intolerable, “Media Management” became a command function. The latest addition to the list of command functions now perhaps could be “Management of Anonymous Complaints.” Though more often than not, anonymous letters that appear motivated are outrightly rejected but this trend cannot be eradicated with any degree of assurance, unless the approach to the problem is redefined. Commanders at all levels need to be sensitive to the problem of anonymous complaints. There is a need to evolve a Standing Operating Procedure (SOP) on anonymous letters beyond the existing advisory in the Army Order, to crumple the letter and throw it into the waste paper basket or pass it through a shredder. A more aggressive approach is needed to expose the mischievous and shady anonymous figure through modern forensic techniques. When there is no concrete or a prima facie evidence to support the allegations contained in the anonymous letter, all resources available with the organisation must be employed to establish the identity of the originator of such communication. The anonymous writers who seek to establish a reign of

fear among the leadership to stifle innovation and forward movement must be defeated. Creation of a Specialised Task Force with experts from within the organisation or the responsibility outsourced to an external agency to deal with this menace may be the next step in this direction.

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