

Media Policies of the Defence Forces and the Way Ahead*

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Introduction

A peculiar drift in the working relationship between the Defence Forces and the media is notable today. Unlike previous wars, including Kargil, where the forces earned accolades, the good work being done today are passé, and defence image is at its nadir. Such a situation can definitely be arrested through some soul searching, reviewing of policies and rejuvenation of the defence Public Relations (PR).

This article covers issues such as basic ground realities related to the media and the Defence Forces; existing defence PR set-up; analysis of current defence - media policies; present shortcomings; some foreign defence PR examples; measures required to improve India's PR set-up and finally the idyllic way ahead.

Ground Realities - Media and Defence Forces Media

The media has made tremendous strides in communications, works 24/7, reporting in real time. However, between the media there prevails stiff competition; hence a proportionate rise in unethical reporting practices. The media also lacks awareness about the Defence Forces, apart from being ignorant of national security objectives. India has a free press but no National Media Policy; as such the media is having a free run and is not accountable to anyone, unless it violates provisions of the National Security Act or is accused of defamation. The Press Council of India functions as the media watch dog, but has no penal powers, hence is toothless. As such, no one is insulated from the media, and the more exposed one is to public glare, the more vulnerable.

Defence Forces

Post Kargil, the Defence Forces once again came into the public glare due to numerous scams, rapid expansion, acquisition, increased deployment in natural calamities and counter insurgency (CI) operations. That apart, materialism, perceptible decline in moral values, stiff internal competition, vying for awards, promotional cum posting heartburns and greater dependency on civil courts have also provided cannon fodder to the news - hungry media. Defence Forces could have counter balanced negative reporting, on aberrations by a miniscule minority, by regular projection of the good work being done by majority of men in uniform – but it missed out the opportunity to do so. The situation was better till the early 1990s when Defence Public Relations (PR) had maintained a good working relationship with the media which, at that time, comprised of a more cooperative print media, news agencies and Government run All India Radio (AIR) and Doordarshan (DD) TV channels only. Today the defence - media scenario is totally different.

EXISTING DEFENCE PR SET-UP

Handling of the media by Defence Forces is the prerogative of a few inter service and intra service PR organisations. Their structure and role, commencing with the Ministry of Defence (MOD), are as given in the succeeding paras.

MOD – DPR (Now APIO)

The Directorate of Public Relations (DPR), headed by a Director who has been recently upgraded and re-designated as the Additional Principal Information Officer (APIO), is based at South Block, New Delhi. It handles the entire PR of MOD, the forces, defence establishments and tri-service organisations throughout India. Although under the MOD, it is headed and mainly staffed by officers belonging to the India Information Service (IIS), an organ of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (I&B). All the service PROs and IIS officials are posted on tenure bases to this nerve centre of defence image - projection. While its Army, Navy and Air Force PROs look after their respective services, the PRO (Defence), an IIS officer, looks after inter service organisations, defence institutions and the MOD. The

Directorate also comprises various administrative sections, a Photo Unit, a Broadcast and News Analysis Section and 'Sainik Samachar' - the official in-house journal of MOD. The DPR also controls 25 Regional PROs spread all over India. They are a mix of officers of the rank of Major/Lieutenant Colonel and equivalent, though some in larger media centres are Colonels and equivalent. A large majority comprises IIS officials. They provide PR cover to all the formations, defence units and organisations located within their respective zones. Throughout India, fair amount of interface exists between PROs and PIB (DW), DD, AIR and some regional media, but negligible over national / autonomous media.

Army

Recently the Military Intelligence (MI) Directorate of Army HQ created the Army Liaison Cell (ALC), now upgraded and known as the Additional Directorate General (ADG) Public Information (PI). It handles both PR and Psychological Operations (Psy Ops), apart from bringing out the in-house Army newsletter 'Baat Cheet'. Operational commands have created an Information Warfare (IW) set up, while some corps and divisions have media cells to handle media and Psy Ops. They all function under respective MI branches.

Navy

Naval HQ has recently created a Media & PR (MPR) Cell based at Kotah House, New Delhi. It assists PRO Navy in scripting / compiling answers to fairly lengthy media questionnaires, background checks for interviews and also looks after foreign coordination and intelligence. No similar organisation has been created at Naval Commands or below.

IAF

Except for DPR's PRO IAF, no other PR set up exists with the IAF.

ANALYSIS OF CURRENT POLICIES PRACTICED BY the DEFENCE FORCES

General

The current MOD media policy permits Defence-Media interaction through nominated Defence PROs. However, many existing service rules, regulations and special orders on the subject tend to be confusing.

Rules, Regulations and Orders Specific to the Armed Forces

These are restrictive in nature; give out limited guidelines for communicating with the press, including lectures and broadcasts. It is categorically stated in them that 'Central Government' clearance is required for media interaction, through proper channels, except for regimental and service journals so long as they remain apolitical and non-controversial. Some go into details by stating subjects debarred for publication /lectures, such as operations, deployment, class composition, morale, equipping pattern of troops, classified documents, maps, photographs etc. In short they prohibit the publication of material 'prejudicial to security' or likely to 'embarrass' the Government of India (GOI). 1, 2 &3 Some of these rules and regulations are given below.

Defence Technical Publicity Rules (DTPR) 2004.4 Updated after 'Op Parakram'. It is based on its after action reports.⁵ Highlights are as under :-

- (a) Totally Binding.** Being a MOD document it is totally binding. It states that nominated PROs will act as official spokespersons and interact with the media on daily basis.
- (b) Basic Guidelines.** Apart from structure and tasks of Defence PR setup, it lists comprehensive guidelines related to functioning of DPR, media interaction / visits and regional publicity. It also states all levels of service clearance, but at Army HQ it rests with DGMI. (Earlier it used to be VCOAS / DGMO, but change has been made at the behest of Army HQ in conformity with its 'Army Media Policy 2005'). It states that the lowest level is a Brigade, and equivalent Formation / Station Commander with regard to Air Force. The Navy is restricted to Command level only.
- (c) CI Operations.** It states that CI Operations will be treated at par with Aid to Civil Authority, and media to be constantly informed of all operational aspects, without jeopardising operations, so as to prevent exploiting of the situation by the adversary.

- (d) **Operations and Emergencies.** It lays down policies for media coverage through the setting up of an 'Operational Policy Group' (OPG) under the DGMO (Army), DCNS and VCAS. The OPG will lay down parameters for media briefings, forward area visits, setting up and staffing of Mobile PR Units and Press Camps at suitable locations. Provisions exist for 'embedded journalists' to accompany troops on 'dangerous missions'. These guidelines are based on 'Regulations of Press Censorship in War -1973' issued by the Ministry of I&B.6
- (e) **Defence Correspondence Course (DCC).** It lays down comprehensive guidelines for running the DCC. Army Media Policy 20057

Army Media Policy 20057

This document has not been approved by the GOI, since it is quite similar to the DPTR. However, it states PRO Army and Regional PROs will be single point entities with the ALC to assist / coordinate / disseminate information and conduct Psy Ops. It stipulates the lowest level of media interaction / service clearance at Divisional level only.

PRESENT SHORTCOMINGS

DPR (MOD)

Headquartered at a prestigious part of South Block, image projection should actually start from here. The DPR should look like a show piece of the Defence Forces and MOD alike, and not like today's faceless, cramped corridors, sticky offices where media has to interact on a daily basis. Other deficiencies include a media centre, readily available photo / video banks, fact files, reference library, integral video recording cum editing facilities etc. With regard to staffing, IIS officers have strengths and drawbacks. Though media savvy, but many are uninformed and inexperienced on matters military. Also lacking is inter - service coordination at the macro level. To cite an example, the IAF felt sidelined during the Kargil war. HQ Integrated Defence Staff (IDS), meant to oversee this crucial aspect, has yet to formulate even its basic media doctrine. The DPR, ultimately, is supposed to function under the Chief of HQ IDS.

Defence Forces

The DPR set-up is a workable model but the forces need to improve upon it, ensure quality PROs and streamline their functioning. Some of the shortcomings are mentioned below:-

- (a) **Policy Voids and Conflicting Rules.** The services lack respective PR visions and policies. Without these, gaping voids exist in their PR plans. The plethora of service rules / regulations on media interaction are also confusing.
- (b) **Service PROs.** Seeing the sheer size of our defence forces, most PROs are too junior, lack aptitude and experience. PR is a sensitive issue and problem lies in faulty selection system, lack of education at each command level on the making of ideal PROs and also on endorsing key qualities in ACRs of potential PROs. Often the media gets disappointed due to lack of proper and timely response from the force PROs. It invariably expects a one point contact / spokesman. In cases of inordinate delay or stonewalling of information, the media files its own version, even if it may not be accurate. Seldom does it correct inaccuracies, which leaves the public misinformed. Knee jerk reactions by the services PROs or late rebuttals and denials also prove futile, if not more damaging.
- (c) **Lack of Basic Awareness about Media.** Most officers, including senior officers, are unaware of complexities and nuances of both regional and national media. Some tend to be indiscreet while interacting with media.
- (d) **ALC / ADG (PI) Duplication.** Raising of ALC / ADG (PI), except for Psy Ops, is redundant apart from adding yet another media processing channel. In any case, response to all operational or logistics based media queries are still being processed by respective operations / logistics branches. It also denies media interaction at brigade level, thus creating abnormal caution amongst commanders in dealing with the media, particularly in CI operations.
- (e) **Army PR Ensnared in MI Façade.** Except for DPR, all Army PR set-ups are based on MI / IW facades. Even service matters out in public domain are being handled by the MI, which is primarily meant for quality intelligence acquisition / collation, vetting of sensitive publication material like books etc. Throughout the world, media is chary of intelligence based media reports / handouts since they consider these to be doctored, as in countries where freedom of press is curtailed or censorship rules apply.

- (f) One Point Contact. Till date no 'one point' contact or popular spokesperson exists within the Army or even the services, quite unlike the MEA or even the Inter Service Public Relations (ISPR) set-up of Pakistan.
- (g) No Dedicated Print & Electronic Media Avenues. Barring a couple of in house publications, the forces are devoid of any dedicated space in the print media or electronic channels which can air their views objectively. This is creating a vast information gap amid the general public on matters military, apart from leaving tremendous scope for disinformation.

SOME FOREIGN DEFENCE PR EXAMPLES

USA

Defence PI comes directly under the Defence Secretary, and is headed by a senior service officer on a rotation basis. He also coordinates inter-service publicity. Under him are placed respective defence and service spokesmen. A sound PR Policy exists, and media is taken into confidence in all operational endeavours. All operational commands have dedicated PI officers, while lesser formations / task forces are represented by nominated (and qualified) spokespersons. Brigade Commanders and above are authorised to interact with the media on respective subject matters only.

Pakistan

The Inter Service Public Relations (ISPR) is responsible for all defence PR. The ISPR head is hand picked by the Army Chief, and also acts as the Chief Spokesman for all sensitive military issues. His rank has been upgraded recently to Major General. Its organisation is similar to our DPR, and PROs are posted at every Corps and selected defence establishments. The Army has a strong influence over it, and the Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) has a subtle interface with the ISPR, particularly in POK, NWFP, other troubled spots and in all overseas / UN Peacekeeping operations.

Australia

Its PI Directorate has an organisation quite similar to what we have in India, except that the Navy plays a major role in its policies. Although each Service is represented by nominated spokespersons, Army Corps, Air Force Commands and Naval Fleets have dedicated PI Officers, as do mission oriented special task forces headed by officers of the rank of Major General or equivalent. Inter-service coordination is maintained by the head of its PI Directorate at all times, and a fairly good interface exists with their media.

MEASURES TO IMPROVE INDIA'S DEFENCE PR SET-UP The GOI

In order to curb the media from resorting to scurrilous and unethical practices, a National Media Policy must be framed. It will also provide the frame work for other government and non government bodies to prepare their own policies, apart from providing suitable penal powers to the Press Council of India. The War Reports of 1962, '65 and '71 should be declassified by the GOI, earliest. Even the Henderson Brooks Report on the Sino - Indian war of 1962 is still under wraps. With the Right to Information (RTI) Act gaining momentum, and seeing the mood of the public, stonewalling of information has always proved to be counter productive. The forces have fought well and enough material is already available in public domain, but such anomalous situations are most embarrassing to the forces and GOI itself.

An Empowered and Reorganised DPR Set-Up

DPR / ADG PIO must be upgraded to a proper, vibrant and well equipped Directorate under HQ IDS. It should be headed by a Director General (DG), holding the rank of Lieutenant General or equivalent. That apart, based on the vision of MOD and the three Services Chiefs, respective PR Policies must be formulated. The functioning of the three service PROs should be ensured by a senior serving officer of the rank of Major General / equivalent, designated as ADG (PI), who will also coordinate inter-service publicity. He should be posted to the DPR on rotation basis, should be media savvy and NDC qualified. Routine 'special to service' PR requirements should be best left to respective PROs, but the ADG (PI) should give impetus to the DG, fine tune functioning and oversee media visits and tours. The rank of service PROs at Delhi should be upgraded to that of a Brigadier or equivalent. They, including Regional PROs should be hand picked, held accountable and form the 'single point' service contact at all times. With regard to

staffing, an ideal mix would be IIS officials and qualified and experienced defence personnel, both serving and retired, whose quality domain knowledge could be put to optimal use.

Educating Officers on Media and Proper Code of Conduct

This should begin at the entry level itself, i.e. NDA / IMA / OTA. Thereafter, periodic education through courses of instruction / seminars / cross attachment to media establishments will be necessary. It must be emphasised that there's no such thing as 'off the record' statements, of being 'misquoted' or quoted 'out of context' if media interaction is based on domain knowledge and hard facts, supported by handouts. Major breaches in code of conduct should be dealt with in an exemplary manner.

Improving 'In House' Justice

All service related redresses must be addressed judiciously and expeditiously by the Services, and promotion cum posting procedures streamlined in a fool proof manner. Once this is done, fewer service personnel will take recourse to civil courts which are frequented by the 'sensational news' hungry media.

Educating Media on Defence Matters

Media also needs to be continuously educated on defence matters through more wide based and frequent seminars, workshops, forward area cum regional tours apart from well conducted Defence Correspondents Courses. Territorial Army should be programmed to conduct special training and operational packages for selected media personnel, and thereafter they be permitted to operate with nominated units in operational areas.

Dedicated Defence Mouthpieces

The Defence Forces must have their own dedicated print and electronic media, including FM channels, even if they have to buy news space, as is being done by many nations worldwide. This will enable them to reach out methodically and to regularly 'air' Armed Forces related features, updates and programmes. The overall benefits accrued will far outweigh the cost involved.

THE WAY AHEAD

Once the GOI, MOD, HQ IDS and the three Services set their respective houses in order, the image, morale and prestige of the three Services will see an upswing. These measures will contribute to a number of positive developments such as:-

- (a) The emergence of a pragmatic National Media Policy
- (b) A legally empowered Press Council of India
- (c) A suitably modernised, well equipped and empowered DPR headed by a DG (PI) functioning under HQ IDS
- (d) Proactive annual PR plans prepared imaginatively but based on sound PR vision
- (e) Media related rules and regulations streamlined
- (f) Services represented by relatively senior, specially selected and accountable 'one point contact' PROs at both the national and regional level
- (g) Lowest media interaction level – a Brigadier and equivalent
- (h) MI facade dissolved to restore media trust
- (i) Availability of dedicated space at national and regional print and electronic media for airing defence views, news and programmes
- (j) An efficient tri service judicial system
- (k) A concerted awareness drive and
- (l) An highly improved 'code of conduct' amongst service personnel.

With increased public awareness of the role, responsibilities and functioning of the Defence Forces, a large percentage of youth will start opting for the Services as a challenging career, thereby arresting further shortfall in the intake of quality manpower.

CONCLUSION

Most of the problems related to an efficient defence-media interface are self created and can be resolved. I am reminded of a statement made by General K Sundarji, the former Chief of the Army Staff, at a media seminar at Delhi. He said, “when commanders fail to respond to the media, the field is left open to the critics of the armed forces, then speculation and misleading stories abound”.

*Based on the text of a talk delivered at the USI on 07 May 2008.

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