

Welfare of Armed Forces Personnel

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Introduction

Many brave soldiers from the Armed Forces have made the supreme sacrifice while defending the Country during various wars and conflicts since 1947. These wars and operations have left many broken homes without a bread winner. A large number of Armed Forces personnel have become disabled, imposing severe handicaps on their capacity to maintain themselves and to support their families. Soldiers render yeomen service not only in times of conflict and calamities but also in peace time. They guard our land, sea and air frontiers round the clock under extremely hazardous conditions. They also undertake valuable service in aid to civil authorities to restore law and order and also render help in the event of natural disasters. On numerous occasions, Indian Armed Forces have played an effective role in the UN Peacekeeping operations around the world. It is, therefore, mandatory for the Government to ensure that the Armed Forces personnel and their families are well taken care of.

The requirement of keeping our Armed Forces young and active necessitates their release / retirement at a comparatively young age. Each year about 55,000 soldiers, sailors and airmen, between the ages 35-40, are released or transferred to the Reserve List. These men are young, physically fit and mentally alert, and have qualities of leadership, drive and discipline. Since compulsory retirement is affected in the interest of the Service, resettlement of Ex-servicemen (ESM) becomes a moral responsibility of the Government. Befitting rehabilitation of the released Armed Forces personnel contributes to a large extent towards the maintenance of high morale of serving personnel. It also motivates young men to get attracted towards a career in the Armed Forces when they become aware that the terms and conditions of service are favourable, in comparison to other professions, and that the nation takes care of its ESM and their families.

Welfare within the Armed Forces

Besides the Flag Day collections every year, numerous funds (created through contribution from soldiers or donated by public and industrial houses/institutions) running into crores of rupees are lying in the control of various authorities at Services Headquarters, Central Governments, State Governments and District Headquarters which has resulted in multiple welfare schemes on the one hand and very high overhead expenditure on the other, yet they are unable to deliver the benefits of various schemes to entitled soldiers, ESM, war widows, disabled and their dependents. It had been reported a few years back that about 7000 petitions from ESM were pending with the Ministry of Defence and another 350 are being received by the Prime Minister's office (PMO) every month from the Armed Forces personnel. In addition, another 6000 cases of serving Armed Forces personnel were reported to be pending in various courts in the country. However, Wing Commander UC Jha (Retd) in his article (in USI Journal June, 2008)¹ states that overall 100,000 cases related to the Armed forces are pending in various courts in the Country. The existing laws, structure, role and functioning of the departments/authorities responsible for the welfare and resettlement need review in the light of changes that have taken place over a period of time after Independence.

“Administration and Maintenance of Morale” are considered two important subjects of the *“Principles of War”*. Much stress is laid on teaching these subjects while training the Armed Forces personnel; and also when they perform their duties, to ensure that essential needs of *“men and machines”* are met to achieve victory in war.

Before Independence, the colonial British government took great care for the welfare of their Indian soldiers and succeeded in getting the best out of them in the two world wars. The role and responsibilities of the Indian Armed Forces have undergone significant changes since Independence. They are now primarily required to safeguard the territorial integrity and internal security of their own country. To fulfil these duties/responsibilities, the Armed Forces personnel are motivated to serve and fight, and go to the extent of making the supreme sacrifice.

Due to gradual democratisation of the polity, control and direction of matters related to welfare of the Armed Forces personnel (serving and ESM) have gone into the hands of far too many agencies – not all of whom are either altruistic or accountable. This has resulted in steady decline and degradation of serving soldiers' and ESM's welfare, thus causing frustration and lowering of their morale.

In case soldiers fail to get their legal entitlements during service and after release/ retirement, the welfare schemes become totally irrelevant. It is, therefore, necessary to examine the following issues related to welfare and resettlement of ESM and their dependents:-

- (a) After all, why there are so many authorities/agencies/organisations/funds resulting in wastage in terms of manpower/money/buildings/stationery etc. without sufficient accountability?
- (b) To what extent badly planned/organised departments, schemes, rules and procedures are responsible for inefficiency and corruption in the organisations created for the welfare of defence personnel?
- (c) To what extent, multiplicity of organisation / agencies/funds have resulted in more expenditure being incurred by the Government on the employees of the department responsible to manage/execute welfare funds/schemes than the concessions/funds actually reaching to the beneficiaries?
- (d) What is the aim of inventing new welfare schemes/funds by Government/private agencies independently – which are neither known to the officers incharge at the grass root level nor to the beneficiaries?
- (e) What action is to be taken if employees entrusted with the management, misuse / misappropriate the facilities and funds released or designated for the welfare of ESM and entitled dependent?

Civil Administration and the Armed Forces

Earlier it was said that the Military - Civil Service interaction constitutes a vital relationship pattern in any modern society. This may have been true when the Armed Forces enjoyed sufficient powers and autonomy to deal with civil matters affecting Armed Forces Personnel. But today in the democratic society and polity, the Armed Forces personnel are totally dependent on the civil administration, for all matters affecting their living. This interaction is said to have been conducive to favourable action in the early 1950's. But ever since, there started a trend towards a gradual erosion in this harmonious interaction. As a result, there has been a change in the perception of the 'jawan', he feels that he is now not getting due consideration by the civil administration. Hence, it has become necessary to review and analyse the substantial dilution in the Armed Forces - Civil Service interaction. The change has manifested in several spheres. According to a paper published by United Service Institution of India in 1986,² the following four major indicators had been identified then to support this contention:-

- (a) The lack of adequate and ready response from the civil administration is the first major indicator of the substantial erosion in the Military-Civil Service interaction. The 'jawan' has a growing feeling that he is not being attended to with much care. His pressing grievances are generally being ignored, or looked into belatedly and in a slipshod fashion. Whenever the 'jawan' has some problem, he puts up his petition through the "command channel". The Commanding Officer normally sends a demi-official letter to the concerned civil authorities to look into the problem. Earlier, every such letter invoked a courteous and prompt response from the civil administration. But both are dismally lacking today. And if a reply comes after repeated reminders, it is usually not positive in its content. Hence, weakness in effectiveness of grievance redressal system is clearly discernible.
- (b) Secondly, there has been a fall in the prestige and value of the Armed Forces services' – except during war, when soldiers are hero worshipped and thereafter forgotten. Such decline in the social estimation and ranking has reduced this once "premier occupation" into a "job of the last resort category". Therefore, vacancies exist at some levels in the hierarchy of the Armed Forces.
- (c) Thirdly, the degree of erosion in the interaction pattern is also discernible from the persistent family problems of the soldiers. The social process of nuclearisation, coupled with the lack of adequate co-operation from the civil administration, has heightened the insecurity in the soldier's family. Marriages have frequently broken; divorce and desertion have become widespread; and marital discords have eaten into the vitals of a happy family life.
- (d) The fourth indicator is the mounting frustration among the jawans. In an age of controls, quotas, permits and reservations, they do not get the kind of attention they used to get in the past. Since they neither have the money nor the time, either to bribe their way through or patiently await their turn, they feel anguished, angered and let down. Individually, when a jawan's needs and problems remain unresolved for a long time, a feeling of resentment, relative deprivation and despondency builds up in his psyche. In extreme cases, this mental state leads to desperation and may even culminate, either in his suicide or fratricide.

Changing Milieu

With social change, the socio-cultural milieu of the Indian society witnesses two contradictory social processes at two different levels. At the normative level there is a trend towards "levelling" or "equalising"; while at the existential level, the "inequality" structure is further reinforced. This social structure is conveniently twisted by the bureaucracy to

suit its own motives. It denies special privilege and preferential treatment to an honest and sincere jawan by taking refuge in the normative order, while it resorts to all sorts of manipulations so as to favour particular parties or persons who have the resources to keep them in good humour.

The jawan has neither enough 'dough' to grease the palms with "speed money", as it is called, nor sufficient political clout to exert significant pressure on the officials. He is an hapless victim of the system, much worse than a common man who may have either one or both of these requisites.

Again, the failing of the civil administration can be attributed to low level of professionalism; inept handling of the major problems faced by the nation; inability to innovate and come up with imaginative solutions; lack of cost-consciousness, extreme reluctance to take decisions and, above all, the unpardonable neglect of routine administration. It has miserably failed even in discharging its age-old regulatory function. The administrative machinery has come to a grinding halt in some areas, while in a few places it is on the verge of collapse. The bureaucrats have arrogated to themselves an ivory-tower syndrome, losing touch with the reality at the grass-root level of administration. Added to it is the peculiar caste-class bias of particular narrow-minded administrators. All these have converged on to project a public image of the civil administration as, what Mr Appu has dubbed, "a thoroughly demoralised, spineless, inefficient, dilatory and corrupt body."³

Further, as a result of the tremendous proliferation of State's activities in the present welfare era, the volume of work has increased manifold for the Collector and the Superintendent of Police at the district level. The number of soldiers from most of the districts have also increased, thereby increasing the possibility of paying lesser personal attention to individual cases. In addition, civil administration is faced with other pressing problems, like those of Backward Classes, the SCs and STs, linguistic and religious minorities, landless labourers, etc. And above all, the rigorous pursuit of "procedure" by the civil administration, and the unusual interest of the courts in quick disposal of the pending cases without bothering about the convenience of the soldiers who are far away from their native places, make the administration unresponsive to the needs of the soldiers.

Another pertinent causal factor is the "dirty politicking" by the local politicians and rural leadership. Because of numerous permutations and combinations of group alignments, they exert pressure on the civil administration to look after the interests of their members only. In most cases, the civil administration does succumb to these political pressures. But the soldiers, being apolitical and absent from rural scenario, cannot identify themselves with any of the groups. Or, if his family is identified with a particular group, he is treated almost like a 'sleeping partner' and is given the last place in the order of preference within the group; thereby, his interest suffers.

Civil-Military Interaction

High aspirations among the soldiers is another factor which contributes to their frustration. Due to our traditional and historical legacy, the soldiers have inherited a view of themselves as deserving something more than the common man. And it does have a good and justifiable rationale behind it. He defends the country and is prepared to sacrifice his life in doing so. Thus, his performance is extraordinary, and expects some special attention in return. Some extra consideration has been shown to the soldiers down the ages world-wide. But in India, there exists a wide gap between their high expectations and low satisfaction, and this causes mounting frustration in them. Except cash awards and land grants, petrol pump agencies etc, given to decorated soldiers and war widows, there are many instances when the soldiers feel frustrated and deprived of their legitimate benefits due to apathy of civil administration.

These indeed are a few pertinent factors contributing to the erosion in the interaction between the Armed Forces and the Civil Administration. There is still time to make amends and take corrective measures to restore the high degree of credibility which once prevailed in their pattern of interaction. But such measures shall necessarily be based on the premise that: what is needed is not any revolutionary change or systemic overhaul, but an optimum combination of both preventive and curative approaches at the sub-systemic and micro-systemic levels. Such restorative measures can be analysed in the five broadly identified areas : security of the family, security of land and property, disposal of litigations, general welfare and rehabilitation, and reform within the domain of civil administration.

Social Security and Welfare of Soldiers

Bureaucracy is the interface between the Government and the people. It provides informational inputs and feed-backs to the former, and conveys the decisional outputs to the latter. Thus, it significantly contributes to the formulation and implementation of public policies. An ordinary citizen depends on the bureaucracy for fulfilment of his needs and

aspirations, redressal of grievances. The Armed Forces are an integral and important part of the civil society. Therefore, they are also dependent on the civil administration. This study attempts to assess the degree of dependence of the Armed Forces personnel on civil administration for the following vital aspects, which affect their welfare and morale:-

- (a) **Security of Family :** Due to changes in the society and modern living trends, the traditional Indian joint family system has broken down. Consequently, the responsibilities of the soldiers towards their nuclear families are far more enhanced and complex as compared to their civilian counterparts – mainly, because they are away from their families for prolonged periods, due to their service commitments. In this situation it is the responsibility of the civil administration to provide preferential security to the soldiers families back at home. Failure to do so, has begun to seriously affect the mind and morale of the soldiers and also the security and well being of the Nation. Since both are interdependent, it is the direct responsibility of the civil administration to meet the security and administrative needs of soldiers' families in close coordination with military authorities. In a society today when civil administration remains fully occupied with the security of the public at large, the security of jawans' families requires special attention and arrangement. In this context, the role of the civil administration needs to be defined clearly to facilitate mandatory guidelines and provisions to ensure their implementation by concerned authorities.
- (b) **Security of Property:** Security of property is the second issue for which a soldier is dependent on civil administration. Here, property mostly means jawans land in rural areas. As part of planned economic development of rural areas, the Government has undertaken various land reform programmes which have also affected soldiers interest from time to time in varying degrees in different states. Besides land in rural areas, properties in urban areas both rented or self occupied are also to be protected from all kinds of illegal action taken by dubious elements. It is therefore necessary for civil administration to address this problem also, conscientiously.
- (c) **Security of Profession:** It is the duty of the Services' Headquarters to ensure that a soldier gets all his due entitlements of pay and allowances, postings and promotion etc up to the date of his retirement. This aspect is not being attended to promptly and efficiently. Large number of grievances including court cases continue to rise not only from personnel below officers rank (PBOR) but also from officers. To what extent Service Headquarters and Defence Services Regulations have failed to address this problem, directly affecting the morale of soldiers also needs examination. Due to early release / retirement, the problem of job security for PBOR after retirement has been a serious problem that has been affecting the morale of soldiers who continue to be on the Reserve list of the Armed Forces. It is necessary to examine the efforts made by the civil administration to ensure re-employment of ESM, both in Government and private sector and to what extent various schemes have benefited the ESM. The worse part of rehabilitation is that after re-employment of ESM, the issues related to pay fixation, seniority, promotions and pension for civil service are placed under litigation due to insensitivity and inefficiency in civil administration.
- (d) **Security of War Casualties:** The next important issue before the Services' Headquarters, Central Government and State Governments has been the care and rehabilitation of war-widows, disabled soldiers and their dependents. large number of schemes are there to help the affected casualties but the rules and procedures laid down by the civil administration fail to produce desired results due to absence of accountability. Normally, help is rendered in a discretionary manner and on charitable basis. It is, therefore, necessary that each scheme, both for monetary benefits and rehabilitation drawn by the Government for war casualties, is examined and remedial measures are undertaken to protect war widows, disabled soldiers and their dependents from further exploitation by unscrupulous people.

Except for the Seminars held at the united service Institution of India, New Delhi and students undertaking research projects for obtaining a Ph.D. degree on 'Welfare of ESM' as part of Military Science, no comprehensive study has been undertaken by experts on all matters connected with legal rights of soldiers as citizens of India, and privileges, facilities and concessions available to Defence Services personnel during service and after retirement. Besides large number of grievances published in various newspapers, views expressed on problems faced by serving soldiers and ESM, conveyed through print and electronic media, including feature films made to highlight the problems of soldiers (like allotment of petrol pump to family members of martyrs), no worthwhile study has been carried out to address the increasing number of grievances of serving soldiers and ESM in the larger interest of national security. publicity of grievances through print and electronic media is not good for the morale of Armed Forces. It is therefore, necessary to identify all issues affecting the Armed Forces personnel connected with their legal rights, privileges and concessions available to Armed Forces personnel as citizens of India both during war and peace. Even though Armed Forces Tribunal Bill, 2007 has been passed by the Parliament as an appellate authority for serving and retired soldiers, the

importance of updating the Army Act, rules and regulations that are in existence to regulate service conditions cannot be over emphasised. The specific areas/subjects affecting Armed Forces personnel are as follows :-

- (a) Conditions of service and privileges under Military Law.
- (b) Armed Forces and Civil Liberties.
- (c) Indian Soldiers (Litigation) Act, 1925.
- (d) Pay and Allowances of Armed Forces personnel.
- (e) Pensionary and monetary benefits for Armed Forces personnel.
- (f) Concessions and benefits available under state laws.
- (g) Welfare and resettlement of ESM.
- (h) Jurisprudence affecting Armed Forces personnel.
- (j) Civil Service Regulations and Armed Forces personnel.
- (k) Civic governance, corruption in society and how it impacts the Armed Forces.

Conclusion

Indeed, the Armed Forces occupy a pivotal and pre-eminent position in the country. The very existence and survival of the Country as a Nation primarily depends on the quality of its man power and strength of the Armed Forces. history is a witness to the fact that from the days of Chandragupta Maurya right upto the advent of the British Raj, and even beyond, the military was the prime cementing force, which maintained the unity and integrity of the empires/country. It would not be an exaggeration to opine that the rise and fall of the major empires in the world depended mainly on the strength, efficiency and functioning of their existing military machine.

In the present context, the Indian Armed Forces have a dual responsibility. Besides protecting the national borders (15,168 kms of land and 5,689 kms of maritime boundary) and acting as a deterrent against any form of real or anticipated foreign aggression, it maintains internal unity and integrity of the nation by coming to the aid of the civil administration in emergency situations. The peacetime functions have become more pronounced now than they were in the past. The jawan (soldier, sailor and airman) is an important human element behind the grand military machine. He has the great honour to wear the country's military uniform; and in return, he is willing to lay down his life for the defence of the country. But like every human being, he does have his own problems, frustrations and inclinations, which need to be cared for by the nation. His problems have to be attended to with sincerity, sympathy and urgency.

Considering the magnitude of a jawan's immense responsibility, it is logical to conclude that it is in the interests of the nation to accord a preferential treatment to him. Indeed, no human life carries a price tag, and the least of all the jawan's. So the person who is willing to die while serving the nation, certainly deserves some extra consideration. Therefore, it is the sacrosanct duty of the bureaucracy, the executive arm of the Government, to look after the interests of the jawan.

In a transitional society, bureaucracy as an initiator of change, has an important role. It must respond to the perceptions and problems being faced by the Armed Forces personnel positively. Its present unresponsiveness, marked by red tapism and corruption, are affecting the well being of soldiers adversely. It is felt that there is an urgent need for the bureaucracy to sharpen its professional ethics and performance. This will restore its credibility and strengthen the will of the country's fighting forces to fulfill their assigned roles and responsibilities enthusiastically. If the present down slide continues, the responses and performance of the Armed Forces are likely to get degraded, which would not be acceptable to the country. It must be realised that frustration and demoralisation of the soldiers, ultimately leads to a gradual covert unwillingness on their part to either take risks (while performing their arduous duties) or to make the supreme sacrifice while fighting the enemy on the borders, or within the country. It has therefore become necessary to streamline the existing organisations and civil administrative set-up, to ensure that welfare needs of the Armed Forces personnel are met with perceptible sincerity for the maintenance of their high morale.

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