

An Elegy for India's Military History

Major General VK Singh (Retd)*

India's military history is presently comatose. Like a terminally ill patient, who can do little more than wait for a miracle, it is slowly sinking. It is only a matter of time before it passes into oblivion, followed by certain death. Unless it receives urgent attention and aid, the end is inevitable. Can nothing be done to reverse the course, and revive it?

The last major war fought by the Indian Army was in 1971, exactly 40 years ago. In the first 25 years after Independence, there were no less than four major wars – the Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) operations in 1947-48; the Sino-Indian conflict in 1962; the Indo-Pak war in 1965 and the Indo-Pak war in 1971 which resulted in the liberation of Bangladesh. In addition there were several smaller conflicts such as the police action in Hyderabad in 1948; the liberation of Goa in 1961; the clashes at Nathu La in 1967 and Kargil in 1999. Some books describing the four major wars were written by officers who took part in the operations. There are also some regimental histories, which describe the role of certain units which participated in various conflicts. Expectedly, these are confined to local actions at battalion or regimental level. A comprehensive historical account is available only in respect of the J&K operations in 1947-48, in the form of an official history published by the History Division of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) in 1987, almost 40 years after the operations were conducted. Strange as it may seem, there are no official accounts or histories of the major wars fought by the Indian Army in 1962, 1965 and 1971.

What is the reason for this drought in recording the post Independence military history of India? Surely, it is not lack of information or data. During operations, all units maintain war diaries, which form an authentic record of actions and activities during battle. These are the primary documents for military historians and research scholars, which are relied upon in case of discrepancies in accounts of the participants and between different levels of command. They also form the basis for gallantry awards as well as disciplinary action, if necessary. Along with after-action reports, war diaries are the source documents for official histories of military operations. Supplemented by personal accounts of the participants, they are also used for compilation of regimental histories. After compilation, units and formation headquarters forward copies of war diaries to Army Headquarters (AHQ), regimental centres and the archives maintained in the History Division of the MoD, which is also responsible for production of the official history of the Armed Forces. After a certain period of time, these are transferred to the National Archives of India.

If the data is readily available, why has the History Division not brought out the official histories of the 1962, 1965 and 1971 wars? Actually, the accounts have been written, but not made public. This conundrum needs to be explained. The History Division submitted the official history of the 1971 war to the Government in 1988, followed by those of the 1962 and 1965 wars in 1990 and 1992 respectively. However, their publication was stopped by the MoD, reportedly at the instance of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). In September 2000, *The Times of India* put the 1965 and 1971 histories on its website after a terse comment: “Official military histories of the 1962, 1965 and 1971 wars exist, but successive governments, obsessed with secrecy, have refused to make them public”.¹ Subsequently, the official histories of 1962, 1965 and 1971 wars were also put on the website of Bharat Rakshak. The title given on the first page clearly shows that it is the ‘Official History’ with the copyright held by the History Division, MoD, Government of India (GoI). The histories of the 1962 and 1965 wars are graded ‘Restricted’ while that of 1971 does not bear any security classification.²

It would be interesting to dwell on the reasons for the reluctance of the GoI to clear the publication of the official war histories in book form, even after they have already been ‘published’ on the Internet and are thus available to the public. As is well known, a committee comprising Lieutenant General Henderson-Brooks and Brigadier PS Bhagat, VC was constituted by the Chief of Army Staff to enquire into various aspects of the 1962 war with China. The Enquiry Report was submitted to the Army Chief who in turn forwarded it to the Defence Minister in July 1963. The MoD decided that its contents should not be made public, and it was graded as Top Secret. This was probably because it showed certain failings on the part of political leadership and the higher echelons of the military. However, the Defence Minister, YB Chavan, made a statement in Parliament on 2 September 1963, in which he referred to certain portions of the Report, and its recommendations. Though the Report was never made public, Neville Maxwell was somehow able to read it, and he has written about it in his book ‘*India's China War*’. Some idea of the contents of the report can be gleaned from General Bhagat's book, ‘*Forging the Shield: A Study of the Defence of India and South East Asia*.’ Though he did not refer to the findings of the NEFA Enquiry, his views on the subject of civilian control over the military, and the division of responsibility between the political and the military leadership are said to be based on the report, which he had drafted in 1963.³

Returning to the war histories of 1962, 1965 and 1971, the MoD, after giving the go ahead for their publication in 1991, back tracked after objections from the MEA, which felt that making the 1962 war history public would “damage relations with China”, with which the GoI was negotiating a border tranquility agreement. The Home Ministry added their bit by opining that publication of the war histories would have security implications. Of course, the military which should have been the one to worry the most about security did not raise any objection. So a total of 75 copies of the history were typed out and distributed to senior government departmental heads, such as the home secretary, the foreign secretary, and a few instructional establishments in India. It did not take long for complaints to start coming in; the Air Force felt that it had not received its due and the MEA made its displeasure known again. So the 75 copies were treated as highly classified documents and clapped into cupboards and forgotten.⁴

Based on the Kargil Review Committee report, the Government constituted a Group of Minister (GoM) on National Security in April 2000. Among the various issues considered by the GoM in the Chapter dealing with Management of Defence was the publication of war histories. The GoM Report stated:

The Ministries of Defence and External Affairs may review the issue of publication of the official histories of the 1962 Sino-Indian war, the 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pak wars and a history of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) operations and finalise the decision within a period of three months. While preparing the historical account of the 1965 Indo-Pak

war, the events relating to Kutch should be included.⁵

In accordance with the recommendations of the GoM, the MoD constituted a committee to formulate recommendations on publishing the history of the 1962, 1965 and 1971 wars. The committee was headed by ex defence secretary NN Vohra, the other two members being Lieutenant General Satish Nambiar and historian SN Prasad. The committee recommended that the three war histories should be published. However, the MEA again threw a spanner in the works, raising fears about China's sensibilities.

On 26 November 2007, replying a question on the publication of the war histories, Defence Minister, AK Antony told the Parliament, *"A committee to review the publication of war histories, constituted by the Government, has given its recommendations. The recommendations of the committee are being considered for arriving at a final decision on the issue."* This was five years after the committee had submitted its recommendations. Another four years have elapsed, but the GoI is still 'considering' the recommendations.

It is interesting to reflect on the situation that prevails in other democracies, and the manner in which they have dealt with the problem. In keeping with its liberal attitude that places public interest uppermost, the USA has been the leader in enacting laws that give unrestricted access to the citizen about public affairs. The Freedom of Information Act was signed into law by the President, Lyndon Johnson in 1966. Britain enacted a similar law with the same name in 2000, while the Right to Information Act (RTI) in India was enacted only recently in 2005. However, in some respects, the British have overtaken their American cousins in matter of public disclosure. In 2009, historian Christopher Andrew's *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorised History of MI5* was published in Britain. This was followed a year later by the official history of MI 6, which is the official title of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service. Titled *MI6: The History of the Secret Intelligence Service 1909-1949*, the book was authored by Keith Jeffery, Professor of History at Belfast University, who was given access to the top secret archives at MI 6 to enable him to write the history. Though India was only five years behind the UK in enacting the RTI Act, it is difficult to imagine an official history of the Intelligence Bureau (IB) or the Research & Analysis Wing (R&AW) coming out during the next 10 to 20 years.

India has enacted laws to regulate the classification and disclosure of public records, but these are vague and full of contradictions. Section 12 (1) of the Public Records Act 1993 mandates that: *All unclassified public records as are more than **thirty** years old and are transferred to the National Archives of India or the Archives of the Union Territory may be, subject to such exceptions and restrictions as may be prescribed, made available to any bona fide research scholar.*⁶

According to the Rule 5 of the Public Records Rules (1997), *The Director General or Head of the Archives, as the case may be shall accept for deposit and preservation public records of permanent nature which have been retained after recording by the records creating agency in its records room for the last **twenty five** years or more.*⁷ So, what is the time limit for transfer of public records to the Archives, 25 or 30 years?

The RTI Act in 2005 was an empowering piece of legislation that has rattled the Indian bureaucracy, which considers it an encroachment in their domain. Information about the manner in which the government functions has always been a source of power, and making it accessible to the public has begun to reveal not only the deficiencies in the system but also the dismal performance of the people who run it. Not surprisingly, measures have been instituted to reverse the trend, and move back a few paces. One such step is the ban that the GoI has placed on publication of books and articles by officers who have served in intelligence and security agencies, even after they retire from service. Before they retire, the affected officers have to give an undertaking that they will not write anything based on their experiences while in service, and those who violate the law will forfeit their pensions. The order was published in the Gazette of India on 31 March 2008.

The legality of the order will no doubt be challenged in the courts, which in all likelihood will strike it down. However, until it remains, it will have far reaching implications. As it stands, officers from organisations such as R&AW, IB, CBI, and the Para Military Forces are covered by the ban, but not bureaucrats. Surely, officers who have held the appointments of Cabinet Secretary, Defence Secretary and Home Secretary are privy to much more than most officers in these organisations. After publication of the Gazette, it was realised that it does not cover the Armed Forces, whose gazettes are published by the MoD. It is learnt that the Home Ministry has now asked the MoD to publish a similar gazette in respect of the Armed Forces.

An important aspect that seems to have been missed is the far reaching effects this will have on our military history. As is well known, military history forms an important ingredient of military training of officers. It is from past campaigns that present day military leaders draw important lessons in tactics and strategy. There is a paper on the subject in promotion examinations and entrance examinations for prestigious institutions like the Defence Services Staff College. A ban on retired officers from writing about past campaigns will virtually throttle discussion of military affairs in all forms. Books written by Clausewitz, Mahan, Liddel Hart, Eisenhower and Slim are like Bibles for officers of all the armies and navies. In India, books written by DK Palit, Harbaksh Singh, RD Palsokar, KC Praval, SK Sinha, PS Bhagat, SL Menezes and Satyindra Singh form essential reading for all military officers. If they had not written these books, would India have a military history?

The latest twist in the tale is the recent publication of the book titled *'The India Pakistan War of 1965 - A History'*. The book is in fact a verbatim reproduction of the official 1965 history produced by the History Division in 1992, which is available on the website of Bharat Rakshak. There are some cosmetic changes - the 'Foreword' written by NN Vohra and the 'Preface' written by SN Prasad has been omitted, as also the name of the author, Dr BC Chakravorty - instead, SN Prasad is shown as the 'Chief Editor' and UP Thapliyal as the 'General Editor'. The text and appendices are exactly the same as in the original book. The copyright is still in the name of the Ministry of Defence.⁸

Strangely enough, the new book contains references to classified material which were not cited even in the original book. The 'Notes' and 'References' at the end of each chapter list a large number of official documents, including Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) papers and war diaries of formations and units, which were earlier not

cited; or mentioned only as 'official records'. How did this come about? Apparently, fed up with the delay in publication of the 'official history' on which they had worked so hard, the concerned officials in the History Division prevailed on the MoD to declassify certain documents. This was done by a board of officers, which comprised one representative each from the History Division, and the directorates of Military Operations and Military Intelligence. The board was asked to examine only the documents that were intended to be cited for production of the 1965 war history in printed form. This was promptly done in 2005. As result, the book was published in 2011, without any hitch. A similar board has been conducted for documents pertaining to the 1971 war, so one can hope that another book will soon see the light of day.

A pertinent sidelight is the compilation of regimental histories. These are published by respective regimental officers associations or regimental centres, which provide the funds. In most cases, the author is a retired officer from the regiment, who is given access to regimental records, secretarial assistance and a suitable honorarium. According to the present guidelines, the draft regimental history is submitted to the intelligence directorate of the service headquarters for clearance. In keeping with the decision of the MoD not to declassify war records of 1962, 1965 and 1971, the regimental history is cleared for publication with the security classification 'Restricted' or 'Confidential'. As a result, veterans who have taken part in these wars cannot purchase copies. In fact, even the author cannot keep a copy! (The author of this article is one of those affected). Isn't it time, someone woke up to the Alice in Wonderland situation? If military history is to remain classified, what is the point in writing it? As it stands, India has no post Independence military history worth the name, in printed form. Everyone agrees that something needs to be done and quickly. Here are some suggestions.

The GoI should permit the publication of the war histories of 1962, 1965 and 1971 wars in printed form. This should be done after a deliberate decision to declassify all the war records pertaining to these operations and not selectively as has been done for the 1965 war. According to the Public Records Act and the Public Records Rules, every 'records' creating agency is required to evaluate and downgrade the classified records held by it after every five years. It is also required to submit a bi-annual report to the Director General of the National Archives on the action taken for evaluation and downgrading the classified records. This procedure, mandated by law, is not being followed, a lapse for which the service headquarters, MoD as well as the Director General of the National Archives cannot escape responsibility. The three Services headquarters must fulfill their part of the bargain, by regularly de-classifying records and transferring them to the History Division and the National Archives.

There is also a need to review the rules for publication of regimental histories. Books written by retired officers or civilians do not require clearance by military intelligence. Of course, if any classified information is disclosed, the authors face prosecution under the Official Secrets Act. Regimental histories should also be treated in the same manner, since they are authored by retired officers and published by regimental officers associations. There are cases when regimental histories have been published either without obtaining clearance or ignoring the instructions of military intelligence to grade them as 'restricted'. Interestingly, the Indian Navy follows a system different from the Indian Army. Instead of the history being screened by Naval Intelligence, it is cleared by a board of admirals, constituted by the Vice Chief of Naval Staff. As a result, several volumes of the history of the Indian Navy authored by a retired officer have been published, including one that covers the 1965 and 1971 wars, not to speak of several sensitive warship development projects.⁹ Surely, the operations of land forces cannot be considered classified, when those of naval forces are not, during the same period or in the same war or conflict. Perhaps the Army can take a cue from the Navy, to get around the problem until the MoD gets its head out of the sand.

An important point that is missed out is the long term impact of military history on national security. There can be no dispute about the fact that the most important ingredient of national security is the defence of territory against external aggression, which is the primary task of the defence forces. To carry out this task effectively and efficiently, viz. with minimum loss of life and in the shortest possible time frame, military leaders need to be highly trained. An important ingredient of training is the study of past campaigns, which brings out the reasons for victory and defeat. Without the benefit of access to accounts of campaigns in similar terrain and against known or expected adversaries, it is unfair to expect today's leaders to deliver. Military history is thus a vital contributor to national security, a fact that needs to be brought home to the political leadership and the bureaucracy.

As the mandated system does not seem to be working, perhaps it is for the top brass of the three services to take a call, since the matter directly affects training and morale. The bureaucracy, which does not have any recorded 'history', cannot comprehend the importance of the subject for the military. In fact, nobody else has any stake or interest in the preservation of military history. If security is a concern, surely those in uniform are better placed to keep this in mind, by virtue of their training and experience.

Endnotes

1. *The Times of India*; 6 September 2000.
2. <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com>
3. PS Bhagat, *Forging the Shield: A Study of the Defence of India and South East Asia*, (Dehradun), 1967.
4. Ajai Shukla, "History....or Mystery", *Business Standard*, 4 December 2007
5. Report of the Group of Ministers on National Security (2001), p. 117
6. The Public Records Act, 1993 No.69 of 1993
7. The Public Records Rules, 1997.
8. SN Prasad & UP Thapliyal, *The India-Pakistan War of 1965: A History*, Natraj Publishers, Dehradun, 2011

9. Vice Adm GM Hiranandani, *Transition to Triumph – History of the Indian Navy 1965-1975*, Lancer Publishers, New Delhi, 1999

***Major General VK Singh (Retd)** was commissioned in the Corps of Signals on 27 Jun 1965. His last appointment in the Army was Chief Signal Officer (CSO), Western Army. He also served in the Cabinet as Joint Secretary from Nov 2000 to Jun 2004. He writes regularly for military journals and has published 'History of the Corps of Signals' besides other books.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLI, No. 585, July-September 2011.