

Aspirations and Career Management of Non-empanelled Officers*
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Introduction

An Army career in India like all militaries has a steep pyramidal structure. Of a total cadre strength of 45000 officers, only 85 are Lieutenant Generals implying that only 0.02 per cent can aspire to reach the highest rank. Even the first selection grade rank of Colonel is available to only 35 per cent officers resulting in stiff competition and the related stress at a younger service bracket starting at 8 -10 years of service wherein sifting starts by selection on career courses.

Every officer who has cleared his Service Selection Board (SSB) interview and joined the Services has the potential and equal opportunity to rise in ranks. Then why do some officers continue to perform well consistently and others falter along the way? Their level of motivation and to some extent the organisational climate available to the officer varies with the length of service. In addition, there is no formal counselling or a feedback system in the Army which prepares a young man to face the feeling of failure on non-empanelment (NE) in the first selection board (SB). Though this is not an ideal philosophy in any organisation but being a 'Command Oriented Army', we have to live with this phenomenon.

Many psychologists have tried to analyse the aspiration quotient of human beings. The modern day managers even try to link it heavily to financial gratification, but sadly it is far from the truth in the case of a soldier. After a few years of service, the salary package is less important than his psychological and social needs, with the most important aspect being your standing, importance, job satisfaction and social recognition within the organisation. Hence, it is felt that this aspect needs to be managed first while dealing with the subject of 'Aspirations and Career Management of NE Officers'.

Aim

To analyse the aspect of aspirations and career management of NE officers and recommend options to improve the present status of such officers.

Scope

It is assumed that the present system of career management of officers would continue in the future also and any options considered or recommended for improvement in the system remain within the ambit of the present cadre structure. It is also assumed that there is no dilution of ranks in the future.

Preview

The paper has been covered in three parts :-

- (a) **Part 1.** Issues affecting aspirations and career management of NE officers.
- (b) **Part 2.** Comparison with other organisations/armies.
- (c) **Part 3.** Options to improve the present management of NE officers.

Part 1 : Issues Affecting Aspirations and Career Management of NE Officers

Genesis of the Problem

Prior to implementation of Ajay Vikram Singh Committee (AVSC) Report in December 2004, we had upto 2000 NE officers and the Army had nearly 3800 appointments in the system to accommodate them. Secondly, the NE percentages and rank structure was different. We had No 4 Selection Board (SB) which made approximately 40 per cent officers NE at 15-16 years of service and No 3 SB at 19-20 years which made another 40 per cent lieutenant colonels NE. In this system also only 35-40 per cent officers reach the colonel's rank.

Though one of the aims of AVSC was to improve the aspirations of the officer cadre for promotion, we ended up creating a set of new problems:-

- (a) Having nearly 6200 NE officers in the system against lesser number of appointments available for them to be posted to.
- (b) These figures would rise to nearly 11000 NE officers when we are able to cut down on officers' shortage (nearly 11000) in junior ranks.
- (c) An officer becomes NE at 15-16 years of service where as he is required to be managed in the system for another 17-18 years, till he retires at 54 years of age.

Though the Army is trying to implement a system where the ratio of intake of support cadre is higher than regular officers to overcome this phenomenon, it would take nearly 20 years for the system to stabilise. Again, this is based on the presumption that such a system will succeed. Depending on such a system to succeed in the long run is a gamble. In the Indian male psyche job assurance plays a major role in selecting careers. For a young man to join the

Indian Army would be a risky career option, knowing fully well, that nearly 80 per cent of them would be retired (or forced out of a job) compulsorily at the age of 32-34 years. Hence, we need to be pragmatic and consider this increase in support cadre model as one of the options and not the only option for cutting down NE officers in the system. We need to take the present figures of approximately 6200 NE officers as a benchmark for future also and plan ahead for their career management.

Aspirations of NE Officers (Felt Need)

Why is it that the efficiency and motivation levels of NE officers are questioned when they have gone through the same basic military training and have grown up in the same environment? It is felt that the system is more at fault than the officer himself and the treatment meted out to NE officers is itself questionable. In an intense competitive environment most of the officers who miss the cut are borderline cases, then why are they written off totally after the first SB itself?

One has to empathise with the pressures which a NE officer goes through. The most important is the loss of self-esteem due to the sense of failure which he feels at such an early stage in service. Peer and family pressures add to his woes. Many of them lose interest in their jobs but, due to financial insecurities, continue serving as their job and pension are secure. Under these circumstances it is very difficult to keep such a man motivated for long.

Another problem of the NE officer is that he is not prepared for such an outcome. We neither have a system of mid-course career counselling for an officer nor are we able to make him aware of his standing within his batch. Hence, irrespective of the performance of the officer, he feels he stands an equal chance of promotion till the first SB. The narrow bracketing of ACR grading further compounds the confusion in his mind. Thus we need to address the problem of maintaining the self-esteem and motivation of the officer till the end of his service. It is reiterated that financial compensation by way of regular increases in salary is only a minor comfort and not the ultimate solution.

Career Management of NE Officers

Presently, the appointments tenable by the NE officers are considered as less important and it is difficult for them to get a sense of achievement or actually make a difference to the organisation. Most of these appointments are of routine nature; and even though some of them require specialisation, no effort is made by the organisation to provide specialised training for them. We devote tremendous amount of effort at IMA or OTA for training of officers prior to commissioning but fail to recognise the need to retrain them after they have fallen off the main stream. We need to have a similar effort in training our NE officers as they still have another 15-17 years to serve post NE in the Army and prior to retirement.

So the real challenge is not only to motivate the NE officers but also to train them for residual service and provide them:-

- (a) A job content that gives them a sense of achievement.
- (b) Enhance their self-esteem.
- (c) Maintain their dignity within and outside the organisation.

We may possibly have to look at redesigning our appointments at Station Headquarters (HQ), higher formation HQ, NCC HQ, Intelligence and employment in organisations like Border Roads Organisation, Military Engineering Service, Married Accommodation Project and Army Welfare Housing Organisation. The most suitable situation would be if we can mix up these appointments with both NE and high profile officers to maintain the importance (or popularity) of such appointments.

Part 2 : Comparison with Other Organisations / Armies

Government Organisations within India

Post-Independence there has been a trend to compare the status of the Armed Forces with Civil Services. Earlier the comparison was based on rank structure but post 1970s we went in for rank equivalence based on comparative salaries. The Civil Services over a time went in for Assured Career Progression (ACP) model and also quietly introduced the Non Functional Upgrade (NFU) component in their salaries. This created a disparity in the rank equivalence. The Civil Services also went in for dilution of their rank structure over a period of time. With this they were able to provide promotion to an officer to the equivalent rank of Brigadier and Major General with 14 and 18 years of service respectively and with higher percentages of promotion. In addition, by deftly employing the deputation vacancies available to them they could manage their cadre perfectly. Such options are not available to the Army. The main factors are :-

- (a) There was a limit to dilution of ranks acceptable within the Army. Even though we went in for colonels as commanding officers in 1980s, it was a small step compared to civilians.
- (b) Further dilution to match the civilians implied upgrading command and staff appointments. This would force upgrading the commanding officer to a brigadier and brigade commander to a major general. In addition, the erstwhile staff appointment equivalent to Brigade Major could be a brigadier/colonel. Such a model is not acceptable as it does not exist in any Army of the world. In fact, even a Colonel as a commanding officer is somewhat unique to the Indian Army.
- (c) The deputation appointments are held by IAS and IPS in large numbers. They refuse to increase the share of the Army in this. The IAS and IPS hold 45 per cent and 22 per cent of all deputation appointments respectively against only one per cent being held by the Army.

Hence, trying to compete with the Civil Services on this aspect is not possible. Most of our NE officers are lieutenant colonels or colonel time scale (TS). We need to give them a stature based on service bracket rather than the rank structure as presently NFU is not applicable to Army officers. In case, if we are able to achieve NFU for the Indian Armed Forces it would provide some relief on this issue.

Comparison with Other Armies

Though we tend to compare our structure with other armies of South Asia, our standing is more akin to armies of the Western world or developed countries. For armies of South Asia like Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka the problem is less as they have better stature than their Civil Service counterparts having a say in shaping their nation's policies. Thus they are able to control their salaries, perks and lateral absorption or deputation into other services. Even East Asia militaries like Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, etc have control over national policy formulation and do not face such a problem.

If we were to compare our situation with militaries of developed countries like the UK, the USA, Germany, etc. then we need to consider their system of promotion and job opportunities available to Ex-service personnel. Most of these countries have an 'Up or Out' model post pensionable service. For example, in the French Army you get to face a promotion board for lieutenant colonel (commanding officer in their case) at 13, 15 and 18 years of service. Should an officer still be NE, he is given time to prepare for a second career and forcibly retired after 20 years of service. Hence, the number of NE officers in the system are restricted by way of:-

- (a) Keeping aspiration for promotion alive till nearly 18 years of service. Officers are not considered NE till last SB.
- (b) Thereafter within two years the officer is asked to quit with pension thereby; ensuring that the number of NE officers in the system are minimal.

Though such a system exists in the Indian Army for soldiers, it is not applicable for officers. Such a model would also not be acceptable within our country where it would be seen as social injustice to one service. Another reason for this model being not suitable is that assured second career to an officer (at 42 years of age) is not available in India unlike developed countries where the conditions and respect for Ex-service personnel is better with reservations in private industry, para military and police force.

Hence, we need to recognise the realities of our present service terms and conditions for officers. We need to accept that NE will occur, the numbers will remain somewhat similar as of today and we have to design a unique system of management for NE officers in the framework of present service terms for Indian Services.

Part 3 : Options to Improve the Present Management of NE Officers

Having listed out major issues pertaining to the existing system, there is a need to consider options available to improve the situation. Some of the options considered are:-

- (a) Increase in deputation appointments and lateral absorption into other uniformed services.
- (b) Granting of NFU on priority to Service officers.
- (c) Reduce service for TS promotions and possibly extend the TS rank to Brigadier level.
- (d) Retirement at a particular service with Severance Pay (Golden Handshake).
- (e) Training of NE officers afresh to hold suitable administrative jobs within the Services.
- (f) Creation of a Corps of Logistics Officers for employment of NE officers.

Increase in Deputation Appointments. This is an ongoing battle at Military Secretary Branch and Army HQ. Though we have been able to achieve some additional vacancies in DRDO, DGQA, NHAI, etc, we still have scope for additional vacancies in Public Sector Undertakings and lateral move to para military forces. Even if approximately 2000 vacancies can be increased (which is a meagre increase of 4-5 per cent of deputation appointments) it would go a long way in ameliorating the present situation.

Grant of NFU to Service Officers. On this issue it is felt that the Service HQs have been making good headway and it is a matter of time before we win our case. Introduction of this for Service officers will have a major impact on meeting aspirations of NE officers in times to come. The financial security as well as protection of perks and privileges would definitely take the sting out of the embarrassment of NE.

Reduction in Service for TS Promotions. This issue is a delicate one and needs deliberate analysis. On one hand it may improve the aspiration level of NE officers, but it has the danger of raising challenges to career management as well as adversely affecting the motivation of achievers in the system. Suitable differential must be maintained between the selection grade and TS promotions.

We may even consider raising the bar and extending TS promotions to brigadier rank also. A suggested model is as follows:-

- (a) Colonel TS to be granted at 22 years of service.
- (b) Brigadier TS to be granted at 30 years of service.

The issues of brigadier TS needs more deliberation at the Military Secretary's Branch level with reference to

their numbers arising in the system and providing suitable appointments to be filled by them. However, the issue is not insurmountable and adequate brigadier level appointments do exist within National Cadet Corps. We could also consider upgrading Administration Commandants at Station HQ and certain appointments in other Non-Fighting Force HQ to brigadier rank.

Retirement with Severance Pay. This issue has been brought out in Bagga Committee Report and subsequently in AVSC report also. The option of giving full salary for residual service subject to maximum 60 months' salary has been recommended. Such an option is likely to encourage NE officers to quit the service and attempt a second career in the private industry. However, the IAS lobby has been opposing this option on the plea that such an option will have to be given to all Civil Services uniformly. It needs to be appreciated that the Services merit different dispensation because of their pyramidal structure and early retirement ages.

Training of NE Officers for Further Employment. As brought out earlier, the residual service length of NE officers has increased to over 15 years which has to be utilised fruitfully by the organisation. For this, we first need to identify the appointments wherein we need specialisation. Secondly we need to provide an option to the NE officer for selection to this specialisation based on what is most suited for their aptitude. Some of these specialisations could be in :-

- (a) Financial planning.
- (b) Logistics and supply chain management.
- (c) Cyber warfare.
- (d) Project management.
- (e) Human rights.
- (f) Legal services.
- (g) Nuclear, Biological and Chemical protection.
- (h) Foreign languages.
- (j) Defence production.

With the establishment of Indian National Defence University we could start planning and designing one year specialisation courses on the subjects listed above. Till that is achieved, we could outsource the training. This training has to be paid out of the defence budget. There are adequate appointments in staff at various formation HQs which could utilise the skill of these officers. The Army could also consider opening of Consultancy Services with posting of these NE officers and could also provide services to the Private Sector and State Governments.

Creation of Corps of Logistics Officers. This model is being suggested on the lines of Administration and Logistics Branch of the Indian Air Force. For this option, once an officer is NE, he is given training as suggested in the above option and thereafter his Arm/Service is changed to 'Logistics' with change in service conditions as follows:-

- (a) Separate cadre management and promotion prospects up to the rank of major general.
- (b) A different rank structure with separate nomenclature of Logistic Officer Grade I, Grade II and so on. Rank equivalence could be based on service length at a differential of approximately four years from selection grade officers.
- (c) A separate uniform, if required.
- (d) Employment only on staff appointments at various HQs.

The above could be examined further with reference to retirement ages and subsequently we could also look at trimming down the cadre strength in senior ranks of services like Army Service Corps, Army Ordnance Corps, Corps of Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, Judge Advocate General, Army Education Corps, etc. The trimming could be only non-specified appointments that are held by these service officers. This model would give a new identity and resultant fresh aspirations to NE officers. In addition, it would reduce the embarrassment of supersession as he would now belong to a separate stream altogether within the Services, drawing similar pay and allowances.

Conclusion

The large number of NE officers available within the system must be seen as an asset to be exploited by the organisation rather than a liability to be managed till they superannuate. Any person who has joined the Services after evaluation of his capabilities by the SSB and completed basic military training has the potential which must be nurtured and utilised within the organisation.

Though granting NFU to Service officers, providing higher TS promotion and introduction of severance pay may meet the needs of a few NE officers; but in reality, most of them seek job satisfaction at their age to keep them motivated within the system. Hence, as an organisation our emphasis should be more on the option recommended for further training and fruitfully employing them subsequently.

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