Challenges of Leadership, Morals and Ethics in the Armed Forces and the Way Ahead*
Lieutenant (IN) Ankush Banerjee@

Introduction

In the last few years, changes of an overwhelming nature have taken place in the economic and social spheres of our Country. The culture of consumerism is an inevitable by-product of 'India's success story' accompanied by a robust growth rate, booming economy and emergence of a huge middle class with considerable purchasing power. All these factors cast an indelible mark on the collective psyche of the society. With regard to the Armed Forces, on one hand these economic changes have assisted in the modernisation of the forces, but on the other, it has radically shifted the values of the society, which has created complex challenges, as the men in uniform are deeply intertwined with the society.1

The first question that arises is, whether there has been any real erosion of value systems within the Armed forces? If one were to go by the media reports about sex scandals, the Adarsh Society scam, Sukhna land case etc., the answer is a disappointing 'yes'. Indeed such acts have brought about criticism towards the military as an Institution. However, this essay attempts to argue otherwise. The main premise of this essay is that, 'no, there hasn't been any deep erosion of military values in view of changes in society'. The incidences which have come to light, albeit unfortunate, ought to be treated as aberrations, rather than the norm. Such an assumption ensures one doesn't judge an honourable institution based on a few dishonourable acts.2 More importantly, incidences ought to be seen as manifestations of individual moral turpitude rather than as Organisational shortcomings.

The second question the essay raises is: what should today's leaders do to address such aberrations? This essay attempts to analyse the reasons for depletion of military values, highlighting the challenges facing the military leadership, suggested corrective measures, a comparative study of military training in India vis-à-vis some other countries and attempts to define the ingredients of an Honour Code for the officer cadre.

Factors Impacting Value System in the Armed Forces

Some of the major factors that have impacted the value system in the Armed forces are elaborated in the susequent paras.

Internal Factors

(a)   **Changes in Individual Mindset.** Changed priorities of the younger generation and absence of enough role models, coupled with reluctance on the part of senior officers to assume serious mentoring roles have given rise to a generation of younger officers whose value system is at variance from that of the armed forces.

(b)   **Lack of Substantial Training in Ethics.** Training in ethics and leadership-based subjects is weakly prioritised as compared to combat/operations related subjects.

(c)   **Opaque Assessment System.** Closed system of performance evaluation and an absence of fair in-house redressal system have compelled some personnel to go to court which has tarnished the image3 of the armed force.4

(d)   **Zero Error Syndrome.** The armed forces have a steep pyramid therefore, leaders at various levels are intolerant towards ambiguity and expect all the tasks to be performed without any errors. At times, these lead to fudging of reports, rendering inflated inputs, maintaining the 'feel good factor' etc.

(e)   **Sycophancy.** Instances of subordinates 'apple polishing' their way to desired ends, and seniors reciprocating to such behaviour has also affected morale of officers and men in an adverse manner. It has also created a perception that 'professionalism' as a core competence has taken a back seat.

External Factors

(a)   **Economic Growth and Rising Disparity.** The Nation has grown economically but the disparity in incomes between the military and other professions has widened causing dissatisfaction. The implications of this have been discussed later in the essay.

(b)   **Role of the Media.** The media plays an important role today and it has both, positives and negatives. At times, to remain relevant, the media digs out stories that may have grave security concerns or negatively affect the morale of the forces.

(c)   **Lack of Adequate Institutionalised Sensitisation.** Increased involvement of the armed forces in internal security/ peace-keeping duties without adequate institutionalised sensitisation has also given rise to incidences bringing embarrassment to the Organisation.5

(d)   **Changing Nature of Warfare.** Earlier, the function of military was, in general terms, to undertake Defence of the Realm.6 The moral justification for engaging in such a conflict could be found in the Just War theory.7 Asymmetric warfare, anti-piracy operations, humanitarian assistance etc. have made the military's job more complex, especially in the ethical realm. This calls for introspection in the way personnel are trained in military ethics.

The above factors have given rise to challenges for military leaders in the realm of morals and ethics. These challenges and suggested corrective measures are discussed in the ensuing paras.

Emerging Challenges

Shifting of Values in Society. As mentioned earlier, many changes have occurred in the economic and social spheres in our society, that have deeply impacted collective value system and has caused shift in the way 'values' are perceived. In an increasingly materialistic world the good old values of kindness, generosity and even patriotism are seen as weaknesses while traits like cleverness, greed, acquisitiveness and aggressiveness are encouraged and even discreetly admired.8 This transition of values is neither consistent, nor compatible with the core values of the Armed Forces. Hence, one of the major challenges confronting military leaders is mitigating the ill effects of such changes on personnel through setting personal examples and adherence to laid down norms and regulations.

Ethical Relativism. Ethical relativism, which propagates the view that all morality is relative to the norms of ones culture, has been taking root among military personnel. This has blurred the boundaries between 'right' and 'wrong'. Military leaders must recognise and be watchful of such seemingly ambiguous, but extremely unethical practices and nip them in the bud as and when the situation comes to light. The collective attitude towards such practices, of justifying them by telling ourselves that 'everyone does it', or to brush it under the carpet could be a very dangerous trend. Thus, there is a strong need to reinforce value systems.

Where Do the Fault Lines Lie?

Would it be prudent to suppose that the major fault lines lie within the Organisation? Irrespective of the social background from where personnel are presently being recruited, they undergo training in various training institutions where they learn wrong things e.g. the term "Beg, borrow or steal". A cadet who tells lies and escapes punishment is said to be smart and the one who tells truth is called a dope. This trend continues till an officer is half ripe to become a 'leader'. When he joins the Unit he is instructed to be in good books of the Commanding Officer and to do well in professional courses to achieve success. This officer smoothes his way through by using unethical methods to earn a good grading which he knows would be the stepping stone in moving up the pyramidal hierarchy. When he becomes a senior he expects his subordinates to do the same. Over a period of time when this officer goes up in the ladder he starts accepting small indirect favours from his subordinates in the name of perks and privileges and makes it a habit till he goes all the way up. This does not imply that this is the only way to be successful and that such behavior is universal.

The influence of societal trends ought to be gleaned from this phenomenon. The first requirement of military leaders in such an environment is to 'set the right example'. It is only by setting right examples and imbibing the right values in themselves that they can expect their subordinates to emulate them.

The 'Just a Job' Syndrome. Modernisation of armed forces has led to increased focus on imbibing technical and military skills at the expense of developing moral and ethical reflection. The 'civilianisation' of functions in the military is gradually creating the outlook that this is 'just a job'. The idea of armed forces being a 'way of life' has weakened. Moreover, with promotions being the standard determinants of success, rather than service and contribution, the age old concept of 'Nishkama Karma,9 which means work performed without any expectation of fruits as against work for personal reward, has diminished.

Admiral Arun Prakash (Retd), in his article A Matter of Honour says something worth mentioning in regard to ambition. He agrees that ambition is a highly desirable trait in a human being. But he cautions against harbouring overweening ambition. Ambition becomes 'overweening' when one starts putting one's personal advancement above all other considerations. Nothing remains sacred before such an all-consuming passion; friends can be stabbed in the back, the Service can be shown in a poor light etc.10

Reinforcing the importance of the Chetwode motto becomes extremely relevant here. It reads, "The safety, honour and welfare of your country come first - always and every time. The honour, welfare and comfort of the men you command come next. Your own ease, comfort and safety come last - always and every time."

Corrective Measures

Creating Ethically Oriented Culture. There is a need to create an ethical climate. Every leader is charged with building an ethical climate in his or her unit that demands and rewards behaviour consistent with Services values. The health of the ethical climate is based on a soldier's perception of how leadership functions. Permitting vacuum between what leaders practice and preach would obviously cause a dilution in authority. Leaders must exhibit the decision making skills, knowledge and competencies to make ethically sound decisions. As an example, it could imply creating a culture where resorting to unfair means to win a competition/exercise is anathema; resorting to illegal means to create funds is abhorred even if such funds are meant for a good cause. In operations, such a culture could translate into honest reporting, not fudging records to make the unit look better than what it actually is etc. In short, it implies doing the right things and not just doing things right.11

Inculcating Moral Courage in Self and Subordinates. Moral courage is the ability of a person to stand by what he thinks is right, against any pressure which may manifest itself in a variety of ways ranging from simple advice to threat and coercion. It implies admitting one's mistakes, giving honest professional inputs and saying 'no' when the situation demands. It also means disagreeing without being disagreeable. This precious character trait must be inculcated in all military leaders from their formative years.12

Emphasis on Integrity. As mentioned earlier, with modernisation, there is far too much emphasis on professional training, as compared to ethical education. The selection process for promotions too seems to give more weightage to the same. This mindset needs introspection. Judging a person's integrity is far more important than evaluating his

professional skills. When primacy is given to this aspect, we can expect higher standards of ethical behaviour from personnel, right from their initial years in service.

Resisting Groupthink. Groupthink is a psychological phenomenon that occurs within a group of people, in which the desire for harmony or conformity in the group results in an irrational or dysfunctional decision-making outcome.13 In an organisational set-up, it has to be understood that contrary to the popular notion, neither age nor rank invests a senior officer with any special Solomon-like wisdom. They give him only experience. To ensure that gaps in his experience are plugged, and the best advice is always available to a commander, a complete staff hierarchy is placed at his disposal. In order to give himself the maximum benefit of their expertise the commander needs to have an open mind, to welcome new ideas, and even to accept occasionally that he may be wrong. The catch here is that leaders make it known deliberately or unconsciously that bad news is unwelcome. This breeds a set of courtiers who always bring good news and never contradict the boss. Even in an undemocratic set-up like the armed forces, seeking a consensus, and taking people along (in policy making) is not a bad thing. It may prevent the senior officer from making a serious error of judgment.

Establishing Credibility. There is a need for leaders to get extra- ordinary things done by their subordinates. This can be achieved only when one knows what the followers expect from their leaders.14 There is thus, a need to establish credibility. The actions of the ethical leader should also be transparent without any partiality or favouritism. There is also a need to make ethical behaviour more conspicuous for subordinates to follow.

Shared Values. Shared values encourage ethical behaviour and foster teamwork and esprit de corps. They promote higher levels of loyalty and foster pride in their unit/establishment/formation. Once people are clear about the leader's values, about their own values and about shared values, they know what is expected of them.

Fostering Humility. It is imperative that a culture of humility be fostered wherein leaders at all levels do not take the privileges extended to them for granted. Such behaviour transcends to unethical domain as the underlying thought-process behind them is 'but it is my due'.15 Offences such as filing inflated claims, abusing government resources for personal use etc. can be countered by fostering such a mindset from an early stage.

Motivation. One must realise that primary reasons one joins armed forces are patriotism and motivation. Leaders must keep this spirit of motivation, 'josh' and patriotism intact.16 This can be accomplished by harbouring faith, sense of duty, respect for each other, esprit de corps, adhering to giving lawful orders and following right procedures.17

Teaching Military Ethics

Lawrence Kohlberg developed a famous (though disputed) model of moral development18 which includes three levels: the pre-conventional level, in which individuals act correctly primarily in order to avoid punishment; a conventional level, where they respond to peer pressure, and are driven by a concern for reputation; and a post-conventional level, during which individuals use their own reasoning to determine "universal ethical principles" of right and wrong, and then abide by them because they have seen the validity of principles and become committed to them. The objective should be to train soldiers who act ethically, not because they've been told to, or because they think it will make them look good, but because they themselves have determined that it is the right thing to do. Otherwise, they may acquiesce to unethical orders or peer pressure.19

The approach adopted in Indian Armed Forces is that of teaching personnel "virtue ethics". Essentially, virtue ethics seeks to ensure moral behaviour by instilling certain virtues (loyalty, honesty, and courage) to create good character and thereby bringing a holistic, deeper change in the individual.20

A few methods in which ethics education can be strengthened and made more effective across the ranks of military leaders are given below :-

(a) **At Training Academies.** The cadets must be given lessons in inculcating moral judgment. The training institutions presently focus on social conduct rather than moral virtues because it is assumed that ethical values are already ingrained in them.

(b) **During Courses**. An officer has to undergo a large number of courses through various stages of his career. It should be necessary to put them through a capsule of ethical training in each of these courses right from ab-initio courses to National Defence College. Emphasis should be on teaching ethical leadership in practical military context and situations rather than on theory.21

(c) **Countering Bathsheba Syndrome.** The Bathsheba Syndrome postulates that more often than not, ethical failures are not a result of an individual's low morals, but are a by-product of success. It brings to light certain disturbing issues such as the fact that success often allows leaders to become complacent and to lose focus, diverting attention to things other than their primary roles. Moreover, since success leads to privileged access to information and organisational resources, it makes successful individuals more prone to ethical transgressions. In the recent past, many ethical failures have occurred in the higher ranks. There is thus, a need to sensitise military leaders about such psychological vulnerabilities that they are exposed towards in view of their rank and stature.

(d) **Workshops and Seminars.** Workshop and seminars should be conducted on ethical conduct at various levels from unit level to Command Headquarters for officers and troops from time to time.

(e) **Negative Reinforcement.** It is necessary that the organisation should not be seen to be weak in taking action against those who compromise their ethical values. Rather than sweeping the cases of moral turpitude under the carpet of secrecy, the punishments given should be highlighted so as to strengthen the image of the Organisation as one where moral failings are not only unpardonable but invite strong negative

reinforcements as well.

Having discussed some of the ways through which education in ethics can be strengthened, a brief discussion regarding the ethics training at The Royal Military Academy Sandhurst (RMAS) ensues. The objective of the discussion is to describe how ethics training is carried out in other militaries, and considering the same for introduction in our own institutions, if found feasible.

The RMAS is regarded as one of the world's leading military academies. The current mission statement of the Academy is, 'Through military training and education, to develop the qualities of leadership, character and intellect demanded of an Army Officer on first appointment.22 The syllabus is exhaustive. Civilian academic staff and service personnel impart classroom-based education on issues such as institutional ethics, treatment of prisoners of war, laws of armed conflict, avoiding civilian casualties etc. These sessions include numerous practical case studies where students place themselves in situations which they might face on leaving the Academy.23 This classroom based education is followed by a two weeks field-exercise where students face complex situations. They have to deal with refugees, prisoners of war, terrorists, pirates and rioters. Besides being exercised as soldiers, students find themselves role-playing as hostages, negotiators and NGO staff. Here, they have to show maturity, knowledge and appreciation of rules and regulations.24 Similar exercises are carried out to teach institutional ethics, gender sensitisation, financial probity etc. The chief take-away is that trainee officers are pushed into thinking maturely from the formative years. They are given exposure to sensitive situations concerning ethical conduct like gender sensitisation, laws of armed conflict etc. in a context-centric, practical fashion. Unlike learning by rote, the emphasis is on inculcating values through imaginative and practical training in ethics.

Towards an Honour Code

It is opined that the constituents of an honour code can already be found in the Chetwode motto. However, it is also opined that having an honour code with concrete thought-to-action amalgamation would go a long way in giving a necessary sense of direction to the officer cadre. Such a code could involve the following :-

(a)   Setting an example with highest moral character, professional excellence and competence.

(b)   Undertaking moral responsibility for one's actions.

(c)   Conducting oneself in an ethical manner towards subordinates, superiors and peers.

(d)   Encouraging new ideas and reporting bad news promptly.

(e)   Making decisions in the best interests of the Service.

(f)   Handling organisational assets with utmost care and efficiency.

(g)   Treating mission as sacred.

(h)   Inculcating a deep sense of duty, resolve and fighting spirit.

(j)   Placing the interests of the Service before that of the Unit and that of the Unit before the Self.

Conclusion

In an age witnessing a rapid transition, especially in the domain of value systems, the onerous responsibility of preserving and inculcating military values befalls on the military leaders. The approach undoubtedly has be to 'top-down'. This ought to be achieved through setting of personal examples, reforming institutional methods which impede honest conduct and through proper training.

The most important responsibility however is to counter the perception that military values have eroded over the times; as it is not the values, but people's perception of these (values) that has changed. Hence, courage is still courage, commitment is still commitment but distorted perceptions make one see courage manifesting in flouting rules or commitment to Self being stronger than commitment to Service. Ironing these distortions forms the most important objective of military leadership. No matter, how many submarines, aircraft and tanks that we may have, the primary factor that wins – is the man behind the machine. And more importantly, how they are commanded! In the words of Field Marshal Manekshaw, 'The real test of leadership is not if your men will follow you in success, but if they will stick by you in defeat. They won't do that unless they believe you to be honest and to have care for them.'25

Endnotes

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@Lieutenant (IN) Ankush Banerjee is presently serving at the Centre for Leadership and Behavioural Studies, Naval Base, Kochi.