

Book Reviews

Military Musings: 150 Years of Indian Military Thought from the Journal of the United Service Institution of India. Edited by Sqn Ldr Rana T.S. Chhina, MBE; (*Speaking Tiger Books, New Delhi, February 2021*); Pages: 456; Price: Rs 899/-; ISBN 978-93-90477-38-8.

This is a remarkable anthology of articles published over 150 years, culled from the pages of Journal of the United Service Institution of India (USI). It is remarkable in the sense that articles cover a wide range of subjects from thoughts on strategy for national defence, changing nature of warfare, scientific and technological advancements, military campaigns, regimental histories, training and man management, customs, traditions and military ethics, personal reminiscences and even on ghosts in military stations.

There are a total of 50 articles; 25 were written by British officers before Independence, the balance was by Indians after India's Independence. While there is confluence of thought between British and Indian writers on many issues, for example, that India's defence was not confined to national borders but its strategic frontiers extended beyond to sea and buffer states. Reading through the articles it becomes evident that the British nurtured the Indian Army to serve imperial interests. The introduction of martial races theory was divisive; it kept other than those designated martial from enrolling in the army (Lt Col G Hunter Thompson 1871) but it served British interests. For better or for worse, groups once designated as 'martial races' still tend to carry that badge with pride. However, there are many articles by British Service officers and officials that point to their pragmatism and foresight in administration and study of racial and geographical characteristics of peoples - a few sample observations - 'they (Chinese) are stately and deliberate and will not be hurried' (Lt Young Husband 1889); 'as soldiers they (Dogras) are not remarkable for daring or impetuous bravery but they are valuable for quiet unflinching courage, patient endurance of fatigue' (Lt Col JJH Gordon 1874).

The regimental history is a unique record of the service and achievements of a regiment. The anthology includes an article titled 'Indian Regimental Histories' (Hyderabad 1929). The author went through the full collection of histories of Indian regiments; his

observation that despite a few exceptions most regimental histories were scanty and of little historical value is valid even today. Research before writing was lackadaisical then and is no better today but the main problem lay in 'astonishing unevenness' of digest of services; most were so sketchy as to be of any value as primary source for compiling regimental histories. The author lists the following essentials to be regarded as 'standard': good printing, adequate binding, bibliography, index, illustrations, maps and appendices. In the present context, authors of regimental histories are not free to include actual maps of unit /formation's operations because these have yet to be declassified by the Ministry, although more than 30 years may have elapsed since.

There is an interesting article (Maj Gen D Hunt 1967) in response to correspondence on 'Tradition' published in USI Journal. There were two opposing views: There were those who regard much of army's tradition as legacy of the British and as such alien, and ripe to be discarded, while there were others who argue that army's traditions are not made solely by officers but is built up over the years, revered by all ranks and for this reason it will be disaster to abandon them. The author goes on to argue that much of the conflicting views arise because the difference between customs and traditions is not understood. Tradition is handed down from ancestors to posterity while custom is usual practice of doing things. For example, customs followed in Officers' messes, such as, passing the port, not mentioning ladies' name in the mess, and so in and so forth, are hardly traditions. They are customs, which were created in the British image and therefore are discarded. Regimental tradition is quite different. The conduct of 36th Sikhs at Saragarhi or 13 Kumaon at Rezengla (1962) or 3 Jat in the Battle of Dograi (1965) has become cherished tradition of the Indian Army.

In recent years the celebration of anything associated with our colonial past or foreign rule or foreign origin is considered slavish. For example, Beating retreat ceremony, which marks the end of Republic day celebrations, concluded with the soulful rendition of Mahatma Gandhi's favorite Christian hymn 'Abide with Me'. There are many who attend the ceremony repeatedly for the joy of listening to its moving rendition. The hymn has now been replaced by a very popular emotional song by the legendary singer Lata Mangeshkar but hardly appropriate for the occasion.

Surprisingly, articles written by Indian military officers and others after independence are quite perceptive. 'Peace Making and War Making in the Twentieth Century' (KM Panikkar 1956) provides an insight into the transformation of war into 'total war' as opposed to wars in the previous century, which was essentially limited war. Despite strategic analysts like Panikkar and other service officers having analyzed the nature of future wars and transformation of interstate relations realistically, yet, the Indian State failed to foresee the consequences of China's occupation of Tibet and had to face an ignominious defeat in NEFA in 1962.

There are many articles of contemporary relevance; 'Religious Instruction in the Army' (1960), 'The Girls they left Behind' (1944), 'Tips from the Subedar Major' (1965): the Indian soldier has always been seeker of divine; for him religion is as important as physical and professional education. Guided by the past experience, religious instruction in the Indian Armed Forces is devoid of communalism and sectarianism. The thought that 'India's superb fighting men will be marching home again to the girls they left behind' is revealing. Separated families are no longer in 'pardah'; Family welfare Centre's of units have enlarged the scope of welfare; soldiers' wives have learnt that they are 'home makers' and have a great share in making a happy family and keeping their husbands on righteous path. 'Tips from a Subedar Major' (1965) — 'Roko Toko' —, is simple down to earth but is full of gravitas. The Subedar Major's prescription to his commanding officer to improve discipline is 'roko toko', implying that a leader has to be upright all the time to have the moral authority to tick off those who cut corners, disobey orders and treat unit's valued customs casually.

There are two articles on declining military ethics; An Officer and a Gentleman (Brig NB Grant 1978) and 'Passing It On' (Brig SC Sardeshpande 1982). Brig Grant laments that an officer still remains an officer but his image as a Gentleman is vastly eroded; he no longer placed on the same pedestal of trust that he once was. Of all the reasons, the most responsible for this is tolerance of lack of integrity, which is fast reaching epidemic proportion. Sardeshpande's article is personalised but is an honest appraisal of good and successful officer. He makes a very subtle difference between the two: 'The good officer contributes, but pays a price. The successful officer extracts and manipulates the price. The former is closer to the professional ethic and finds joy in doing his