

In the Army, Religion Unites and Not Divides

Major General Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd)

Introduction

On 25 Nov 2025, a Supreme Court bench of Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi declined to interfere with the Delhi High Court's order dated 30 May 2025 that upheld the dismissal of Lieutenant Samuel Kamalesan, stating that the officer kept his religion above a lawful command from a superior, which was 'Clearly an act of indiscipline'. The officer had reportedly argued that participating in religious rituals went against his Christian beliefs.¹

The Supreme Court ruling upheld the dismissal of Lieutenant Kamalesan, a Christian officer, for refusing to participate in religious rituals at his regiment's mandir and gurdwara. Describing him as a 'Misfit', the top court backed the Indian Army's decision to terminate him in 2021.

Commissioned in 2017, the dismissed officer was posted with Sikh Squadron of 3 Cavalry. He faced disciplinary proceedings for declining to enter the inner sanctum of the regiment's mandir and gurudwara during mandatory parades.

Apparently, Lieutenant Kamalesan claimed that his objection stemmed not only as a sign of respect for his Christian faith, but also out of respect for the sentiments of his troops, so as not to offend their religious sentiments with his non-participation in rituals. He also argued that his troops did not take offence, nor did it impact his strong bond with them.²

The Indian Army, however, said that the officer refused to change his stance even after counselling by senior officers and Christian clergy. He was eventually terminated in 2021.

There is no doubt that his attitude vitiated the atmosphere in his regiment and undermined unit cohesion and troop morale. Hence, his dismissal was the only logical option.

Unbecoming Conduct

Senior Advocate Gopal Sankaranarayanan, who appeared for Lieutenant Kamalesan, argued that the officer had committed only a 'Single Infraction' by refusing to enter the sanctum at his place of posting.

He went on to state that "Entering the sanctum sanctorum is a violation of my faith... It's not that when you join the Indian Army, you lose the vestiges of your faith", adding, "No one had a problem. Only one person".³

That 'One' person happened to be the Commandant of the Regiment, who is entrusted with the responsibility of command and control and upholding the honour and traditions of the regiment, apart from looking into the welfare of the men he commands. Command of a unit is undoubtedly the most significant responsibility entrusted to an officer. He is not 'One Person' but 'The Person', as far as a unit is concerned.

Apart from that, it can be said with certainty that this was not a solitary decision but has been supported and upheld by the Colonel of the Regiment and the Commanders in the chain till the highest level, who would have also been given legal advice by the Judge Advocate General.

Justice Bagchi noted that Lieutenant Kamalesan was counselled by a pastor, who said that there was no issue in entering the sanctum sanctorum. "But even then, he has his own personal interpretation. If the pastor, the head of your faith, says it does not affect the essential features of your faith, will the personal understanding of the believer be unique, or will the pastor's view override?"

To this, Sankaranarayan said, "The conversation with the pastor was limited to the Sarva Dharma Sthal, not Temple or Gurdwara".

CJI Kant said the leaders of troops must 'Lead by Example'. "You are the group leader. In your team, there are Sikh soldiers, and because of them, there is a Sikh gurudwara... A gurudwara is one of the most secular places to visit. The tone and tenor and way he is acting, is he not insulting his own soldiers? ... We are surprised he does not even follow the advice of the Pastor", he said.

The Supreme Court chided Lieutenant Kamalesan's conduct. "What kind of message is he sending? Gross indiscipline by an army officer. He should have been

terminated. He may be an outstanding officer, but he is a misfit for the Indian Army. The number of responsibilities our forces have at this time... this is not what we want to entertain”, the Court added.

Third Cavalry

One of the oldest and distinguished armoured regiments of the Indian Army, the 3rd Cavalry owes its origin to two older regiments—the 7th Irregular Cavalry, which was raised in 1841 at Bareilly, and the 17th Cavalry, which was raised at Sultanpur in 1846.

The 3rd Cavalry earned the sobriquet of ‘Patton Wreckers’ during the 1965 War, when their Centurion tanks stopped the advance of Pakistan’s Armoured Division in the battle of Asal Uttar in Punjab. The Regiment was then commanded by Lieutenant Colonel (later Major General) Salim Caleb, who himself was a Christian and led his troops valiantly to victory, earning for the Regiment the Battle Honour, ‘Asal Uttar’ and a Theatre Honour, ‘Punjab 71’, and was personally awarded with the Maha Vir Chakra.

Its soldiers are Jats, Rajputs, and Sikhs, and in its history has been commanded by officers who were Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, and Christian. In fact, Colonel (later Brigadier) Kutab Hai, a Muslim officer, who commanded the regiment, had earlier commanded the Sikh Squadron. As a Squadron Commander, he was at the forefront of all religious activities at the gurdwara.

At the regiment level, the officer would have been guided and schooled regarding the rich traditions, history, and ethos of the regiment as well as about the culture and religious beliefs of its troops. But Lieutenant Kamalesan chose to put his own faith and belief above the considerations of the Regiment. The act of dismissing him would also have been well thought out and was resorted to only after all counselling had failed.

The Ethos of the Army

The Indian Army is defined by its values, ethos, and traditions. While the army is a large organisation, its core is a unit, which can be termed as the ‘Soul of the Army’. There are units which are based on one class or community, such as the Sikh, Jat, Rajput, Dogra, and Gorkha Regiments. These maintain the places of worship of their troops and have religious reachers posted as per the religion of their men. Then

there are those that have a mix of communities but belong to a particular area, such as the JAK Light Infantry, which maintains a Mandir, Masjid and Gurdwara, and JAK RIF, where the men mainly belong to Jammu and Kashmir.

The older armoured regiments such as 3rd Cavalry are fixed class, with each Sabre Squadron belonging to a particular class composition. Meanwhile, the newer ones are mixed and have a Sarv Dharm Sthan.

The Armoured Corps today has a healthy mix of fixed-class composition regiments and mixed-class composition regiments. This affords one to learn from the other with distinct benefits in operations. The strength of both is leveraged by the field Commander when the operational grouping is ordained for operations.

Religion in the Indian Armed Forces is a binding force, which is visible during operations and this needs to be clearly understood. The basic function of all military units is to undertake operational tasks in war and train for that day during peace. During war, the situation is extremely fluid and tense. It is the faith of the troops in their religion and their training that affords the strength to press home against a well-entrenched adversary at such times. The life altering experience then finds solace in the regiment's war cry and the troops' religious affinity, often with battle-winning outcomes, at times against all odds. Faith is used to strengthen the fraternity, which in turn has faith in each other.

Though the army has a structured way of judging an individual by means of the Services Selection Board (SSB) before he is found fit to be trained as an officer, Lieutenant Kamalesan's rigidity, regarding his belief overriding that of the organisation, seems to have been overlooked. There definitely needs to be an examination of his reports, including those of the psychologist at the SSB and while he was in his training academy.

Conclusion

While all officers in the Indian Army are free to practice their own beliefs and religion in private; publicly, they adopt the religion of the men they command. It is this practice that results in officers attending and partaking in the various religious rituals of their troops irrespective of their own faith.

The fundamental right to practice religion cannot be applied in such circumstances as the individual's interpretation of religious right is not offended. In

fact, in the Indian Army, religion is seen as a uniting factor and cannot divide communities.

The Indian Army rests on this foundation of secularism. Regimental places of worship nurture a sense of belonging and are symbols of identity, tradition, morale, and shared purpose. They nurture a sense of belonging, not just worship. More than faith, they represent fraternity. To quote Lieutenant General Hasnain⁴, “In uniform, personal belief cannot be allowed to overshadow institutional duty.”

It is these values and ethos of the Indian Army that were upheld when the bench of CJI Kant and Justice Bagchi said that the officer’s actions were the “Grossest kind of indiscipline by an army officer”.

The fact is that the Indian Army is completely secular in its functioning; an officer, irrespective of his faith, upholds the religion, culture, and traditions of the troops. Anyone who insults the beliefs and rituals of the men he commands is unfit to hold his position or to serve in that unit.

An officer distancing himself from the religion of his troops would adversely affect the morale of his troops and undermine regimentation, which is the soul of the army. Actions of such an officer can be termed as dereliction of duty.

It is the religion of the men that is paramount for an officer and not his own. That is why it is often said that the Indian Army has its own religion, and an officer assumes the identity of his unit. It is this tradition that was upheld in the case of Lieutenant Kamalesan.

Endnotes

¹ FP Explainers, “Why Supreme Court Upheld Dismissal of a Christian Army Officer for Refusing to Enter Gurdwara”, *Firstpost*, 25 Nov 2025, accessed 27 Nov 2025, <https://www.firstpost.com/explainers/why-supreme-court-upheld-dismissal-of-a-christian-army-officer-for-refusing-to-enter-gurdwara-13953998.html>

² Debayan Roy, “Supreme Court Upholds Dismissal of Christian Army Officer for Refusing to Join Regiment’s Religious Rituals”, *Bar and Bench*, 25 Nov 2025, accessed 27 Nov 2025, <https://www.barandbench.com/news/litigation/supreme-court-upholds-dismissal-of-christian-army-officer-for-refusing-to-join-regiments-religious-rituals>

³ G Ananthakrishnan, “‘Definitely a Misfit’: Supreme Court Upholds Dismissal of Christian Army Officer for Refusal to Enter Sarva Dharma Sthal”, *The Indian Express*, 25 Nov 2025, accessed 27 Nov 2025, <https://indianexpress.com/article/legal-news/definitely-misfit-for-the-army-supreme-court-upholds-dismissal-of-christian-army-officer-for-refusal-to-enter-sarva-dharma-sthal-10385070/>

⁴ Syed Ata Hasnain, "An Officer or a Believer? What I Learnt about Faith and Duty in 40 Years in the Indian Army", *The Indian Express*, 27 Nov 2025, accessed 27 Nov 2025, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/samuel-kamalesan-army-termination-supreme-court-christian-sarv-dharm-sthal-10387681/>

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