

Big Business Versus The Army— The Myth and The Reality

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THE human mind is a peculiar thing. Even when it knows better, it persists in deluding itself. Who does not dream of becoming a hero, a filmstar, a millionaire, a sports champion or suchlike. We homo sapiens specialise in day dreams of grandeur, in far-out beliefs and in perpetuation of legends. These dreams and beliefs are extended by our social groups to create myths and folklore. This done mainly to give grandiose versions of ordinary incidents or to glorify and cover up defeats and humiliations, so that coming generations would be suitably impressed with our wonderful deeds and, as a result thereof, continue the tradition of ancestor-worship. I will illustrate what I mean by a few randomly chosen examples.

Let us start with the Trojan War. This war was fought between the Greeks and the Trojans and a detailed account of it has come down to us through the Greek poet, Homer. The tale is indeed a wonderful one, full of valorous deeds, glorious fights, interference by the Gods and Goddesses and so on, something like our own epic, the Mahabharata. The Greeks eventually won the war through trickery and sacked and burned Troy. The War was ostensibly started when a Trojan prince persuaded the Greek queen Helen, to run away with him. Since she was the most beautiful woman on Earth, her husband and his fellow kings declared war on Troy, in an effort to get her back. Much as I hate to disappoint the fans of Helen—she of the face that launched a thousand ships—I still have to say, that the truth about the start of the war is much more mundane and much less romantic. The facts are as follows.

The Trojans, whose capital Troy lay on the Western portion of the Turkish peninsula, controlled the entry into the Black Sea. The Greeks, who have been traders for centuries, used to trade extensively with areas along the Turkish and Black Sea coasts. The Trojans, having the opportunity, started taxing and harrassing the Greek trading ships. At first the Greeks accepted this minor irritant and paid the Trojans, to let them trade peacefully. But the Trojans grew greedy and increased their taxes exorbitantly. When the Greeks

refused to pay, the Trojans raided their ships and sank some of them. The Greeks were thus just itching for a fight and were looking round for an excuse to start one. That excuse was provided by Helen, and the war started.

Next we come to another myth—the Origins of the First World War. This was supposed to have been started because a Serbian student assassinated the Archduke Ferdinand of Austria, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and because Serbia refused to atone for the crime. The facts tell a different story. The Archduke Ferdinand had married a commoner and had almost been disinherited. Serbia had accepted most of the Austrian conditions and was willing to make amends. But unfortunately none of these things really mattered. The fact was that Germany, under the Kaiser, had built up a mighty Army and a tremendous Navy. The Germans were most anxious to try out their Army against the Russians and the French, whom they considered to be pushovers, and their Navy against the British, who they thought had ruled the waves for too long. On the other side, the French were still smarting from their defeat by the Germans in 1870 and were just dying to take revenge. The Germans prodded the Austrians, the French egged on the Serbians and the war started.

Coming nearer home for my third and final example, let us examine the myth of Parsuram. As per the story that is current, Parsuram's father accused his wife of infidelity and asked his sons to cut off her i.e. their mother's head. All refused, except Parsuram, who carried out his father's wishes and chopped off his mother's head. He then asked his father what reward (vardan) he could ask for, for carrying out his father's orders. His father replied that he could ask for anything; where upon Parsuram asked for his mother, alive and well. So the father was forced to bring his wife back to life, through supernatural means. The truth however is slightly different, as pointed out by K.M. Munshi. Parsuram's father did ask his sons to kill their mother, and all did refuse, except Parsuram. But before he took any action he asked his father what reward he would get for carrying out the latter's orders. His father replied "You can ask for anything you wish". Parsuram then retorted "Father, at the moment you are angry. Suppose I do what you ask and cut off my mother's head, and then ask for her life back—can you grant me my wish?" This calmed the old man down and all ended happily.

Thus it can be seen that myths, though generally based on real-life incidents, must be examined closely, in order that the truth may be

ascertained, which truth may be quite different to the substance of the myth.

The above examples will; I think, amply prove my contention. We now come to the myth that is the reason *detre* for this article. This is the myth that Big Business is far more efficient, well-run and better managed than the Army. Unfortunately this myth has gained wide currency and even we Army officers, who should know better, believe in it. We have a tendency to denigrate our management techniques and praise those of business houses. We somehow feel our methods are old and out-dated and that modernisation has passed us by, thus making us constantly strive to catch up. Is this the truth? Let us examine the facts.

In the following paragraphs I will restrict myself to the officer level, though what I State, is applicable almost as fully to the rank and file.

We start by examining the procedure for selection. The procedure in the Army is a tough and long drawn-out one. First of all we have a written test, consisting of many papers, on various subjects, over a period of several days. Those who manage to cross the first hurdle, are then faced with a tougher one—the Services Selection Board. They are tested again over a period of several days, and every facet of their personality is literally put under a microscope. They undergo test after test, mental, physical and psychological. They then face an interview board, which grills them thoroughly once more. And finally, if they succeed in getting through that, they face a medical board which examines every inch and every organ of their bodies. Even now, those who make the grade, are not assured of getting in. Instead, the successful few are put in a merit list, and only the top required few, are taken. I think it can be agreed that the above method, which passes candidates through screen after screen, each one finer than the last, is certainly an excellent one, and assures that only the best and purest emerge at the other end—the very cream of the crop.

Now let us see the selection procedure in vogue with the Business Houses. They put in an advertisement in the papers, calling for biographical data or mark sheets in case they want trainees. Candidates with suitable credentials (writing of which is an art) are then called for an interview, which may last an hour, at the outside. And that is all.

Granted that Business Houses cannot afford to maintain selection centres like the Army does; but at least they can test would be entrants more thoroughly. They can have aptitude tests, group discussions

and so on, apart from the interview. It is further granted that businessmen need not be as fit as Army officers, but all the same, I am sure no Business House wants to take on someone who is diabetic, has high blood pressure or heart trouble. Yet almost no Business House carried out a medical check up of its potential employees.

Thus it is amply clear that, in selection procedures, the Army has far superior methods and thus most likely gets far better candidates, on an average, than Big Business does. That the latter can throw out a man in less time than his selection book, is accepted. But frequent changes of staff is not conducive to efficiency, and we all know of lemons who not only manage to show a surface glitter (which only deep probing can penetrate) but also manage to hide their defects till they have inflicted considerable damage on the organisation of which they are a part.

Next let us come to training. To start with, the Army trains its future officers for periods ranging from six months to four years, depending on the mode of entry and the type of commission desired. During this period, the candidates are put through a rigorous schedule and are taught a wide variety of subjects with emphasis on practical training. These include academic subjects like maths, science, literature, geography and so on. Then there are military subjects ranging from principles of war to study of campaigns, including man management, human psychology and law. The practical side includes the complete gamut of military training—drill, weapon training, field craft, physical training and games. To round it all off, trainees are encouraged to learn a foreign language, take part in debates and take up hobbies; the latter ranging from aeromodelling and amateur dramatics to wireless telegraphy.

I know that there are many who say that the above extensive basic training is essential because the Army recruits its personnel at a rather young age and who have somewhat lower educational qualifications. Granted that this is correct, but now the Army is putting much more emphasis on "graduate entry", and I do not think that there has been any reduction proposed or carried out in the standard of basic training.

The fact is that the Army insists on having officers with well-rounded personalities, who not only know their job, but will make good and useful members of society and, in addition, be capable of taking on almost any general task or cope with any emergency that may arise. I do not think that anyone can say that the above are not good goals to aim for. But can any business house confidently state that it trains its officers to even remotely approach the above goals?

Let us continue on the subject of training. After the officers get their commissions, the Army does not stop their training. In fact training continues throughout their careers. First come the young officers courses ranging from four to six months, in which the general training of the academies is supplemented by specialist training for the arm or service the officer has joined. After that officers have a choice of scores of courses so that their knowledge and training constantly improve. Most officers do from six to ten or more courses on a wide variety of subjects. The courses are spread out throughout their life, all the way to the National Defence College, where they go after more than a quarter of a century of commissioned service.

Apart from the military courses, officers of the technical arms and services are also encouraged to do post-graduate studies in civil universities and a number of them avail this opportunity. In this context, it is pertinent to point out that Army officers who do post-graduation, generally stand at the head of their classes, a telling commentary on the background training that they have received in the Army.

In addition to all the above, officers can take study leave for doing courses, to improve their professional knowledge. During this period, as during this post-graduate studies, the Army keeps on paying the officers their emoluments, freeing them from any financial worries.

Thus it can be clearly seen that the Army provides professional training which is constantly updated and refreshed. This continuous training is a part of life in the Army. Officers are therefore not placed in managerial positions of responsibility without being trained for the job. Thus their chances of carrying out the tasks assigned to them professionally and competently, are high.

Now let us see what business organisations do in the way of training. Several organisations do take on graduates as trainee officers and keep them on probation for a year or so. And after that? To examine the record I have taken figures from six companies/organisations chosen entirely at random, from the big business houses of India. The figures I have taken are for 1979-80 and 1980-81, since the figures for 1981-82 were not available, but they are representative all right. These figures have been taken from the reports to the share holders and hence can be considered fairly authentic. They are tabulated below. All figures are in crores of rupees :

<i>S. Company/ No. Organization</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Sales/ Turnover</i>	<i>Profits Before Tax</i>	<i>Amount Spent/ set aside for training</i>
1. I.T.C.	1970-80	455.65	13.61	0.18
	1980-81	429.78	13.75	0.22
2. The Gramo- phone Co of India	1979-80	12.87	1.45	—
	1980-81	19.65	1.93	—
3. G.E.C.	1979-80	43.56	3.66	—
	1980-81	53.64	4.95	—
4. Tata Chemi- cals	1979-80	55.75	9.26	—
	1980-81	74.49	12.29	—
5. B.E.S.T.	1979-80	66.05	6.59	—
	1980-81	75.06	5.26	—
6. Indian Hotels Co Ltd.	1979-80	26.49	3.26	—
	1980-81	31.54	4.00	—

A glance at the above figures shows that, except one company, which spent approximately one and a half percent of its profits on training, no other company has shown any money at all being expended on training. It may be argued that one does not need training to sell records or cigarettes, but surely training, refresher or otherwise, is needed in the hotel business, electrical industry and chemical production. In fact production and sales techniques are being revolutionised throughout the World and there is almost no business, be it in a manufacturing or in a service line, which will not profit from imparting updated training to its personnel. The sad fact is that, out of the six organisations whose figures have been given, two are headed by as shrewd and progressive a personality as J R D Tata. And yet, both these have shown no expenditure on training whatsoever.

This makes it clear that big business can certainly learn a lot from the Army in yet another field i.e. training. In order that they stay abreast of the latest developments, stay internationally competitive—which they will have to eventually do, if we are to survive without foreign aid and keep their heads above water in a buyers market (towards which our economy is hopefully inching), they will have to train their officers, their supervisory staff, their labour force and even their sales agents. This is an absolute sine qua non as far as business houses go, and all such organisations in the OECD and other progressive countries ensure that they are never left behind in this respect.

We now come to the third aspect in which business can learn a trick or two from the Army. This is in the matter of personnel policy for promotions and placements.

The promotion system in the Army is based on an objective review of the performance and potential of an individual. Placement is also based on the performance and potential of individuals tempered by organisational and personal requirements. Whatever people may say about the confidential report system, it is the one that is universally followed—in the Army, the civil government and in most big businesses. The current computerised system in the Army has been made almost as fool proof as possible and, if a few boot-lickers do get through, we can point to a similar cases in business where, the man who does shopping for the boss' wife, get accelerated promotion.

In the Army, every officer gets a confidential report once a year—oftener if his boss changes. In addition, he is evaluated on every course he does. He is graded on various essential qualities and his potential is constantly evaluated. Based on these evaluations and reports, his placement in various jobs is done. When his turn for promotion comes, a board of senior officers, who do not know who they are assessing, evaluate his performance and recommend whether he is to be promoted or not.

In business, confidential reports are given, as in the Army, though they might not be as detailed in their scope. But, as far as placement goes, this depends mainly on vacancies rather than on suitability. The Army believes in rotating people every few years, to give them a wide variety of experience. This means that if a job suitable to the genius of a particular officer is not available today, it is likely to be available tomorrow.

On the other hand, businessmen stay in the same post year after year and thus placement of a suitable man in a suitable post is more difficult. Not that the Army does not have square pegs in round holes but, since it emphasises career planning, job rotation and experience of both command and staff, its placement opportunities are definitely superior.

With regard to promotion, since business promotions are done with definite people in mind, they are bound to be less objective than those done via the impersonal Army system. In the Army, there is strong competition for promotion, the heirachial pyramid is narrow

and so, generally, only the best squeeze through. In business, promotion is easier, the pyramid flatter and the criteria less rigidly applied.

We thus come to the end of my article, and I do hope that by now I have convinced my readers that it really is a myth that big business is more efficient, well-run or better managed than the Army. To conclude or sum up, the Army believes in recruiting the best people, spending a lot of care and money in developing their talent and matching abilities to job requirements. It believes in progressive and formal training designed to supply a steady stream of professionally competent officers, who think clearly and logically. In other words the Army has a total commitment to management development and this is where big business can learn a lot from us.