

The Izzat of the Man Behind the Gun

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As soon as it became clear that, come what may, USA and China intend continuing supplying of arms to Pakistan, we rushed to the Russian camp to supply us with more fighter planes, and enter into a defence treaty for other military hardware to follow. Simultaneously, a large part of the Defence budget is now being channelled into updating our existing equipment and improving its effectiveness. This is as it should be, however, while doing this, we seem to have completely lost sight of correspondingly increasing the numbers and quality of the men to handle this hardware. In epitomising the gun, we have neglected the man behind the gun, and even more so in the officer class. The German blitzkrieg of 1940 in France, the Battle of Britain of 1941, the Arab-Israeli war of 1973 in the Golan Heights, and the Indian offensive in Bangladesh in 1971, are classic examples of the superiority of the man when pitted against the preponderance superiority of equipment. No amount of Russian planes, and stock piling of other military hardware, will ensure success in battle, unless we first make sure that, the quality of the officers and men who will command such hardware, matches it, in the way of high morale, motivation, and in an indomitable fighting spirit.

Addressing the conference of vice-chancellors, while inaugurating the Chhatrapati Shivaji Defence Chair at the Pune University, the late Gen B C Joshi, Chief of the Army Staff, had touched upon the quality of cadets entering the National Defence Academy (NDA), and the overall shortage of about 12,500 officers in the Army alone, not counting the other two Services. He went on to clarify that, even those who joined the NDA, preferred soft option units like the Army Service Corps (ASC) and the Army Ordnance Corps (AOC), to the fighting arms like Engineers, Artillery, Armour and Infantry, because of relatively comfortable life and perceived opportunities for making money. The fact that, the minimum standard of the NDA entrance exam and the passing out grade for commissioning have also been reduced, aggravates the quality of our officer corps even more so. To overcome this, it has been suggested to further dilute selection standards by promoting outright 13,000 JCOs to officer rank to make up the deficiency. Coming straight from the mouth of a Chief of Army Staff, this is a very serious and alarming situation.

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A recent survey conducted by a well known Marketing and Research Group, has put this down to the very low pay scales in the military when compared to those in industry, or for that matter, in the civil services. It also revealed that, 30 per cent of the cadets were sons of JCOs and NCOs, and of the balance, 20 per cent were sons of civilian parentages from Sainik Schools, 40 per cent were those who did not make the grade for a university education, and only 10 per cent were sons of Service Officers. Even of the latter 10 per cent, nine fell under the category of those who could not make the university, and only one per cent volunteered for the Services in spite of getting an entry into a University. Thus 99 per cent choose the Services for failure to get anything better, either socially or academically.

With the recent exponential increase in emoluments of managers in industry, and the consequential demand for a huge increase in pay and perks for government civil services, such as the suggested sum of Rs. 75,000/- pm to a Secretary to the Government, the military, not to be left out, has also started demanding a substantial enhancement in its present pay and allowances structure. This is the first sign of the aftermath of the free market economy bringing in its wake a spiral inflation of salaries, which would be difficult to contend within the civil services in general, and in the military organisation in particular.

No country in the world, can afford to pay its military personnel as much as they would earn in industry. However, the civilian society of those countries see to it that, the military officer, in spite of his meagre salary, is automatically accepted in the highest of society and best of clubs at a nominal subscription, and enjoys the top privileges which his country could afford. To give a recent example, during the Victory in Europe (VE) Day commemoration ceremonies at Hyde Park, London, the Prime Minister in Waiting of the British Conservative Party, paid our Indian Subedar (Hony Capt) Umarao Singh, VC, the ultimate respect, when he alighted from his car, saluted Umarao, and gave him the right of way, stating, quote "How can I drive my car ahead of a VC" unquote. During the commemoration week, separate ceremonies were held by individual countries, where Kings, Queens, Presidents and Prime Ministers rubbed shoulders with soldiers. President Jacques-Chirac decorated French commandos returning from Bosnia and President Bill Clinton congratulated US Marines for rescuing the downed US pilot in Bosnia.

Unfortunately, in our country, it was the reverse, as the Indian society has never accepted the honouring of its soldiers, and more so after Independence, as it is still suspicious of, and holds a subconscious grudge against the army, because of the 'preferential' treatment they enjoyed during the British regime. Again during the commemoration week, India was the only country that did

not celebrate its soldiers part in the World War II. The fact that, we had 2,50,000 men in the field, had suffered 1,06,843 killed and wounded and won 31 VCs, 131 MCs, 4GCs, 252 DSOs and 347 IOMs, the highest percentage of awards won by any Commonwealth country, did not rouse even the slightest emotion in our government and our civilian society.

Again in sharp contrast to the way all other countries honour their fighting men, when our IPKF boys returned from Sri Lanka, the Tamil Nadu CM, leave alone not making any attempt to ceremoniously receive them and give them a hero's welcome, went out of the way to insult them. It is unthinkable that even to date, the IPKF casualty list of honour has not been published or made public. Recently in our Central Hall of Parliament, its honourable members denigrated the Chief of Army Staff, for repeating what his Prime Minister and other ministers have been saying about fighting an undeclared war in Kashmir. Finally, if there is one event on which we must hang our heads in shame is, when last year, at the 49th anniversary of the founding of the UN, at a function held at Sapru House in New Delhi, after several Indian dignitaries had spoken, it was left to a UN British representative to ask the audience to stand in silence in tribute to the seven Indian soldiers killed in Somalia. There can be no greater shame, than for our erstwhile rulers to remind us to venerate our own soldiers.

While the relative importance of different motives for a man joining the armed forces is difficult if not impossible to reconstruct, a recent official questionnaire study of graduates of West Point, USA, and the Military Academy at Sandhurst, UK, concluded that, "relative to compelling factors for entering West Point, almost all indicated that honour and prestige was the most important reason." No amount of monetary inducement will make the better class of youth take to the profession of arms. The proposed huge increase in the existing emoluments by the Fifth Pay Commission may perhaps have a temporary affect for one or two years, but the graph will again plummet to the existing level very soon after.

Honour and prestige, which were of fundamental value to the soldier two decades ago, and I presume still are the most important dimensions of the self image of the present day military officer, have been over the years greatly strained. For example, after the 1947-48 war, the service chiefs were made junior to the judges of the Supreme Court.

They further dropped in their status after the 1962 war and became junior to the cabinet secretary. This decline continued unabated and the Service Chiefs were made junior to the Attorney-General after the 1965 war. Yet again, after the 1971 war, they were put next to the Comptroller and Auditor-

General. Even today, almost all the IAS and IPS Officers with about 10 to 15 years of service, reach a level which only a microscopic minority in the defence services, after a stiff selection and much longer service of even 20 to 25 years, can dream of reaching.

No amount of increased armaments from Russia, or an increase in the emoluments of the soldier, will make any difference in making the army more battle worthy as an efficient fighting machine, unless we ensure that, it is led by men who will put 'Country', 'Honour' and 'Glory' above all other considerations. If we want the better type of youth to take to the profession of arms in large numbers as he once used to, we must create conditions of honour and prestige as his most important forte. We have miserably failed in this.

In any emergency, the soldier will once again gladly make the supreme sacrifice to safeguard the security of the nation, as he did in the three wars with Pakistan and also in Sri Lanka. The nation in turn owes it to the soldier to give him not only a good career and security of service during peace, but much more than that, to enhance his sagging social prestige. Even after 200 years of the formation of the Indian Army in its present form, we still have not learnt that, economic models, no matter how attractive they may be, cannot be the basis of motivation and morale in the Armed Forces, where the stakes are life and death. Nothing will inspire men to make the supreme sacrifice, except leadership, both military and civil, which is prepared to place the 'izzat' of the soldier as the foremost battle winning factor. Whereas all other countries, including Pakistan, have gone out of their way to foster this, our country has still not grasped the significance of the word 'izzat'. In the ultimate analysis, it will always be the Izzat of the man behind the gun, and not the gun by itself, that will boom the sound of victory.