

Brigadier Grant's Article : A Response

LT GENERAL S N SHARMA, PVSM, AVSM (RETD)

Brig N B Grant writes on the loss of "IZZAT" in the Defence Forces over our years of independence, and of its consequences on the indomitable fighting spirit for which the Indian Soldier was (and is) reputed. He quotes the incredible shortage of officers, their wide choice of soft options rather than risks and dangerous assignments, the creeping corruption in the armed forces, all of which reflect much lowered esteem for the defence in the eyes of Indian people. He has several comments on men, Junior Commissioned Officers and officers, right upto the status of the Chiefs themselves; he implies that the forces are not performing as they should when compared to the past, unable to compete with a society changing from feudal to a market economy, where the accepted norm is "each man for himself".

I cannot but agree with his views on "Izzat" as it affects the Indian Soldier, and we, within and outside the defence, should take heed of his warning before our country again pays a high price for denigrating the man behind the gun. But I do disagree with other aspects, and specifically with his implications that the much reduced prestige of our volunteer defence forces in public perception, judged by intake and support, has so lowered the quality of officers and men, that performance in operations is suspect. Possibly the best way to present this counter view is to compare actual performance when the army (representing the services as a whole), was led by the cream of Indian Society, with the successive performance as the bulk of men progressively came from lower, and yet lower, strata of society. We may find different view points on the concept of Izzat, which so deeply affects our combatants in battle, and reassess how to maintain the quality of men our country needs for volunteer armed forces.

Possibly Brig Grant sets his standards too high, linked to our freedom in 1947, and war soon after. A tropical jungle oriented Army, in cotton clothing, with ridiculously insufficient logistics, fought ferociously in mountains and snow against tribal invaders, and then the Pakistan army itself; equally matched, equally trained, old comrades cheerfully willing to kill each other, but possibly to lose more casualties to the physical environment of mountain and weather. A minuscule IAF threw its all into air support, taking risks well beyond

Lt. General SN Sharma is a former Engineer-in-Chief Army Headquarters, New Delhi, and a frequent contributor to the *USI Journal*.

specified performance of man and machine, accepting its casualties from a total lack of infrastructure and inexperienced ground support. Today's Army, IAF and Navy, would surely refuse to fight in those conditions; but equally surely they would perform with better skills and much better resources. Our days of "Jai Hind", meaning "we give you nothing, but you get on with it somehow" have gone. A good thing too. No amount of armament and material can substitute for quality of fighting men; but the best fighting men will falter under political and military leadership which ignores, and so tends to deprive them of the means to fight.

In our country, transiting from colony to parliamentary democracy, the rules are self seeking, falling values, short term gains preferred to future returns, party before nation, self before party: none of this is new or strange in the growth of democratic countries. What is strange in India is how the Defence Forces, Army in particular, have remained apolitical. All around them, within the nation, and in surrounding countries, the ethos has been self seeking, along with politicians. Management gurus rate the defence as "the one supreme management success" of our government: almost without exception all other government organisations, National democratic institutions, Non-Government Organisations, involved in aid, have failed to achieve rated performance; sadly, many vital elements, such as the key administrative services and police forces, have deliberately and steadily led the way to political patronage; governors, and even presidents, have sometimes lost their impartiality; the total government performance has not yet reached the levels of quality and efficiency which "We, the People", are rightfully entitled to receive and to demand. In this melting pot of a growing democracy, struggling to stand erect, much credit is due but not given to the fighting men and their immediate leaders, who try to remain strictly "national", meaning as per our democratic constitution. And this in spite of repeated efforts of political leaders to change them from their inherited impartial ethos: the most infamous was the patriotic but misguided combination of Krishna Menon and Kaul, supported by Nehru himself; the country paid a heavy price for this in 1962 and after, with defence expenditure at the cost of development. A comparison of what Brig Grant experienced at that time in army performance, to what was has been the performance over later years to now, will show our Defence having steadily lowered status, but yet striving to perform well, not only by Indian standards of government, but even by the more ideal British standards of old soldiers, Brig Grant and myself included.

In 1947-48 we learnt fast, fought on morale and spirit rather than material, but lost out on a politically evolved ceasefire forced on a winning team. Today our men at Siachen, well trained, well equipped, fight a physically impossible battle, unmatched for its dogged courage (on both sides), but mil-

tarily quite unnecessary: the politicians (on both sides) seem unable or unwilling to settle the matter. Fighting men do not question this; governments and public of both sides pay patronising lip service, but essentially look the other way at a constant drain of casualties. This sacrifice is more to the Izzat of their Regiments, remembered and commemorated by them alone, but casually forgotten by their fellow countrymen. Brig Grant can rest assured our Army still has fighting spirit in ample measure where it counts most, though we must take heed of his warning to sustain it.

In the 1950s, the Army suffered by neglect and deprivation of essentials, even though led by the cream of Indian Society. Kaul, described by Nehru as his best Army Officer, and Menon played politics: where their politics led, men broke and ran, mainly unbeaten in actual battle. Where fighting men had the opportunity, they fought to the death, despite the arctic environment and dithering high commanders. Our chiefs in this decade were officers and gentlemen of high standing in every sense, Rajendra-Singhji a battle decorated hero, and Thimmaya a combat commander of international repute; but they were patriots, democrats, disciplined, and so lost out in growing politics of our country; they were not allowed or able to help us lowly soldiers.

We had in 1962 quality military leaders, right down to the junior officer, with high social status, public esteem, tough selection and training, hardened by war, and the toughest environment; but professional competence and demonstrated performance came second to political and social favouritism, creating commanders who could not and would not lead in war, their credo fixed on faith that politics would avoid any real combat, that unlimited "Jai Hind" as a slogan would substitute for material, including modern armament and vital battle equipment. As one of the ex-lowly, give me today's professional army any day - even with lowered status we would have clear orders, reasonable equipment and arms, and certainly not be expected to keep the arctic out with fur of stray cats and dogs, supplied by Srinagar traders. (that too on "Jai Hind" basis). The Izzat of fighting men and most did fight to the limits of endurance and resources - lay in the Regiments, where it always has been. No status of Chiefs and highly placed commanders, remote from the combat soldier and his immediate officers, really worries men - they sense the regard and respect given to them by their peers, lowly fellow Indians, which is what Brig Grant very rightly wants to sustain.

In 1965 the Army and IAF fought as well as they could, strengthened by young officer volunteers from all social strata; and even more by Shastri, a pillar of strength and political confidence in war. "Jai Jawan - Jai Kissan" was more than a slogan: it reflected a new unity between fighting men and the common people, a boost for Izzat, a new confidence of the Jawan and his

junior leader. It was these junior officers who led from the front, fought hardest and best, feeling the restraint of their cautious seniors, the veterans of the Second World War, and the wars of 1948 and 1962. In 1971 there was a repeat of this high morale and performance from junior leaders; with the odd marked exception, a repeat of cautious seniors chastened with experience of political leaders, willing to shed their "last drop of blood" on the floor of Parliament, but certainly not outside it.

It seemed the Izzat of the soldier rested in good hands, the young men who today are the top military leaders. There was also a change from the past in bureaucratic attitudes: earlier death and disability in war deserved no more than workmen's compensation, specially since there was no publicity or labour union to push for it. For once war widows and disabled were recognised; aid to them was good political publicity. Yet that nebulous "Izzat", so talked of by combatants, carried no political payoff, and so could well be ignored - afterall, a volunteer in the armed forces was just another paid government servant; and if he was foolish enough to accept risk, hardship, separation, lack of Union support, and an Army Act depriving him of free speech, that was his look out; so why this vague complaint about Izzat? Chowkidars were paid to do a job; the soldier was just another paid hightech guard; even if he became the chief, he deserved no greater attention than any other government servant. Brig Grant is right to warn us - pat your watch dog with love, make much of your horse, they will unhesitantly die for you: just house and feed them, and they live only to feed again.

The ultimate combat stress is that against insurgency, terrorism and the like; what we have, and continue to experience, in Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Assam, Punjab (and specially Blue Star), Kashmir, Sir Lanka. Always the army is called to restore order when high minded noble leaders and their followers use violence as the last resort to gain their political ends. The civil government and endless resources of para military, the BSF, the Armed Police, and others seem to be unwilling and incapable of sorting out problems of their own political making. Why should the Army be considered the final answer, the last resort, when the para-military and Police are as well equipped, better trained, better paid in such operations, with better resources of close intelligence, liaison with local authority and concerned politicians. Yet without Army backing they seem unable to progress; a strange situation when the same "little Indians" fill all the forces, with perhaps an even lower social strata in the army than in the Police. When enemies, friends, legitimate and illegal protest, killing of opponents, the very law itself, all lose their clearcut boundaries, normal peace keepers evade their responsibilities for decision and action. The modern world and public opinion treat crimes against humanity as the direct responsibility of the individuals perpetrating them, and expect even

soldiers to refuse direct orders, which may be a crime: but this leaves open the not so obvious future. When blood has cooled, when near normality blankets violent disturbance, emergency, and even self-defence, those who stayed away, those who avoided responsibility, come back to judge those who do their jobs as best they can under pressure and personal risk. The Army does just this in emergency, each man accepting that he must act alone when circumstances leave him without timely superior orders - his Izzat and that of his Regiment demand he will not run away or shirk what faces him. So we find the Indian Army backing up, and in the extreme even replacing, an equally well armed police, recruited from Indians with more local knowledge and political skills, but also wisdom and ethos to evade what can have adverse repercussions.

And finally, Izzat itself. A very Indian element in the ethos of our fighting men, dating back centuries. It parallels several ancient fighting cultures in the Orient; it has no exact parallel in the West, a near approximation being what Philip Mason calls "A matter of Honour". All these fade under the impact of Western culture and modern management. A market economy and society can have the best managed defence forces, impersonal, pushing buttons, zero defect culture (no risk - no error), all filling desirable career slots, polishing service records, keeping updated, alert, and above all, keeping alive to reach the ambitious top. These are the very elements prized in our competitive computer world, so easily absorbed and pursued as "excellence in management." Yet these were the very elements which led one of the finest armies to virtual defeat in Viet Nam: these very elements do not face the final level of "excellence" in military management: which is not merely to send a man, cheerful and willing, to this death, but to go with him to your own death with equal good cheer. Experts will find the solution to this last requirement lies not in "Management" but in "Izzat" (for the Indian), and comparably ill defined concepts for organised fighting men of any democracy, any where.

But let us and Brig Grant, take hope. Demonstrated performance of our Army, IAF, and Navy, shows forces still deeply committed to their duties and to democratic ideals. Creeping corruption, evasion of hard duty, searching for soft options lowered intake standards, better quality of men not volunteering, whatever the ills Brig Grant has correctly foreseen, have not yet affected the willingness of our defence to function without politics and in the national interest. Commanders of today, at various levels, have refused to obey orders from civilian and military higher authority, and have got away with it because they were right; very different to our high level commanders when the Menons, the Kauls, and their successors, held sway. The lowest levels, the men who hold the "barrel of the gun", still sustain their past cultural binders in the Izzat of their regiments, their squadrons, and their ships. We still have the reputation of being amongst the finest fighting men in this world, traditionally unwilling

to kill, reluctant to die, but happily still able to do both for our country.

Demonstrated performance is the main and most critical criteria to assess any body of people or organisation; by this standard the Defence Forces were at their lowest ebb when led by the most reputed and highest levels of Indian Society, politicians and military officers included. In contrast, the Forces were at their best when led by young "little Indians", drawn from every corner of our country out of those who do not count in our society, with a handful of those who see the services as a vocation rather than a mere profession. Common Indians have always been stronger than their masters: it is amongst them that we have to find the Izzat of the man behind the gun.

JOIN

**UNITED SERVICE INSTITUTION
OF INDIA**

Founded 1870

For the furtherance of

INTEREST AND KNOWLEDGE IN THE ART
SCIENCE AND LITERATURE OF THE
DEFENCE SERVICES

For particulars, write to

Director U.S.I.

Rao Tula Ram Marg, (opposite Signals Enclave)

Post Bag No. 8, Vasant Vihar PO

New Delhi - 110057