Customs and Traditions of the Indian Armed Forces

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Tradition [is] how the vitality of the past enriches the life of the present.

- TS Eliot

General

Customs and traditions are the foundation on which esprit de corps is built. It binds groups of people together. The purpose of military customs and traditions is to develop pride in military service and establish a strong foundation of professional and personal relations. These may appear strange and idiosyncratic to the civilian eye but are solemn to soldiers, sailors and airmen. Often, it is these customs and traditions that keep them focused during uncertain times, and fighting when everything appears lost. Indian Armed Forces – the Army, the Navy and the Air Force – have customs that are common, and yet some others which are distinctive, to each Service.

The Background

The Indian Armed Forces inherited many of its customs and traditions from the British Armed Forces, but have, since then, developed traditions characteristic to them. And yet, there is a view amongst a section of intellectuals, academics and politicians that our forces continue to display 'Brown Sahib' syndrome and retain a colonial mind-set. It may have been true up to the end of the 1960s; the leadership of the armed forces then was trained and groomed by the British, and with whom they had fought the Second World War. It was but natural for them to have imbibed the customs and traditions of the British Armed Forces. This influence wasn't restricted to the officers alone but had impacted JCOs and other ranks as well. The generations of leadership born

in the 1970s, and thereafter, do not carry the burden of the past and approach concerns in fundamentally different ways.

Both, Indian and British writers have noted that the British colonial rule left behind a nucleus of professional bureaucracy, military, and a government structure that emulated the British parliamentary system and which proved to be the primary stabilising factor in the aftermath of the partition of the country. 'The stability of the Indian Army may perhaps be the deciding factor in deciding the future of independent India', said Field Marshal Wavell in his farewell speech, on 21 March 1947, which proved prophetic. In military histories written after independence, the Indian Army has been described as secular, apolitical and professional, attributes that have defined our armed forces. The apolitical character of the Indian Army may, however, be ascribed mostly, but not entirely, to the character of the Indian nation-state, the nature of the Indian freedom struggle and the way in which the armed forces were built up in the years since independence.[1]

After the Second World War, a section of nationalist leaders held the view that the British Indian Army was a mercenary force, which was in sharp contrast to the legacy of the Indian National Army (INA) as the 'Peoples' Army'. During the trial of INA soldiers after the war, the leadership of the army held the view that the trial should continue as per military law. Field Marshal Cariappa's resistance to the rehabilitation of INA soldiers in the ranks of the Indian Army and his response that it would mean the 'end of the Indian Army' had forced Nehru to abandon the proposal.[2]

The transfer of refugees across the border in Punjab and their resettlement, the tribal invasion in Kashmir aided and abetted by Pakistan within months of Indian independence, and the role played by the Indian Army and the Air Force during the darkest months was to change the public opinion of the Indian Armed Forces as a nationalist force. The Indian political opinion of the army was that it had performed 'loyally, magnificently and effectively' in the period between the partition and the end of fighting in Kashmir.[3]

The evolution of the customs and traditions of the Indian Army, from its colonial past to the present times, must be seen

from the prism of the ground realities that existed in the wake of independence and the decades that followed. If the Army of independent India remained remarkably similar to the old British Indian Army, it was mainly 'because it was there.' The challenges facing the armed forces at the time of independence were daunting enough to leave no time for any disruptive changes in organisational heritage and the well-established traditions inherited from the British. The first 30 years after independence were the formative period in the history of the Indian Armed Forces that saw it fight four major wars, and two major insurgencies in Nagaland and Mizoram.

Field Marshal Cariappa's Influence on Customs and Traditions

Field Marshal Cariappa took pride in his 'Britishness', which he cultivated in his 'personality, language and habits'. Most British officers of the Indian Army spoke Hindustani and had acquired a working knowledge of the language. Field Marshal Cariappa, however, did not speak any Indian language and could hardly communicate with troops in Hindustani. However, credit must be given to Cariappa for preserving, and emphasising, military values that the army inherited from the British Indian Army but were worthy of emulation in themselves: for example, respect for the elderly, the ladies and the seniors; drill, discipline, 'spit and polish'; strict observance of dress code, financial integrity, sanitation and hygiene, and adult education. Had Field Marshal Cariappa, and leaders who followed him, not emphasised these values at a time when the army had officers from different social backgrounds with varying experiences of the war and 'idea of India', the army would have lost its inherited cohesiveness.

The Bogey of Martial Castes/Races

The concept, which originated after the *sepoy* mutiny of 1857, flowered when Field Marshal Roberts became the Commander-in-Chief in 1885. Field Marshal Robert's prejudices were formed under the shadow of the Russian threat. 'No comparison', he wrote 'can be made between the warlike races of northern India and the effeminate people of the south'. Field Marshal Cariappa rebelled against this horrible and nauseating practice. The

continuation of such a divisive practice would have been suicidal for a fledgling armed force. He created a new regiment, the 'Brigade of Guards' that recruited on an All-India basis, which became the official policy for future recruitment in the Services. For better or for worse, groups once designated by the British as 'martial races' still tend to carry that badge with pride. Yet, a spin-off of the regimental spirit has been the absence of prejudice against any group, regardless of the unit's caste or regional composition.

A Matter of Honour

It is sometimes argued that the British Indian Army was a mercenary army. If it was so, then the Indian Civil Service (ICS) and the Indian Imperial Police (IP) were also mercenary.[4] Even when serving a foreign master, the soldiers of the Indian Army were not mercenaries. Plunder and loot were not the motives that inspired the Indian soldiers in battle. What inspired them is encapsulated in the three words: *Naam* (honour of the regiment, army and the country); *Namak* (loyalty to the regiment and the country) and *Nishan* (upholding the honour of the regiment's flag). In the succession of wars over centuries, countless of our soldiers have died, their names forgotten, but their sacrifices gave our armed forces the 'tradition' — courage and the creed 'never to surrender'**.** The Sikhs in Saragarhi in 1897, the Dogras at Ypres in 1914, the Lancers at Bir Hacheim in 1942, the Gorkhas at Mortar Bluff in 1944, blazed a trail of indomitable courage that gained greater heights after independence. Major Somnath Sharma (1947), Havildar Abdul Hamid (1965), Lieutenant Colonel Ardeshir Tarapore (1965), Second Lieutenant Arun Khetrapal (1971), Flying Officer Nirmaljit Singh Sekhon (1971), Captain Vikram Batra (1999) and many others sacrificed their lives and set the highest standards of gallantry. The Battle of Rezang La (1962), where almost the entire company of 13 Kumaon literally fought till the last man and last round against hordes of Chinese attackers, has become a landmark in modern military history.

Officers' Mess and Officers' Behaviour

Customs and traditions in the army are mostly centred round the officers' mess and regimental life. Those who have read Manohar

Malgonkar's 'The Distant Drums'[5] would be surprised to notice both the similarity and the departure in the regimental life as it was in the years following independence and as it exists today. The outward appearance and ambience of officers' messes have been retained; the mess furniture, the display of mess silver, liveried waiters, the bugle calls, officers in their ceremonial dress, the protocol of sitting, drinking a toast to the President, and as a grand finale to the proceedings, a piper playing a regimental piece are still followed with justifiable pride during regimental dinner nights. Such elaborate mess ceremonials are seen by many critics as aping the traditions of the colonial era. While formal regimental dinner nights have been reduced to — in some cases — once in a few months due to many practical difficulties, the tradition has survived as it generates a sense of dignity and a touch of class to the proceedings. Why should critics grudge this if it helps to evoke a sense of pride and worth in the regiment?

In 'The Distant Drums', the Commanding Officer of 'Satpura Rifles' (a fictitious name) lists the conventions and traditions of the regiment for the benefit of a newly commissioned officer. One of the clear prescriptions of the code is that a 'Satpura' officer finishes off his tiger (meaning that an officer does not fire the gun over the shoulder of others); another is that when two officers have a bet, only one of them checks up the fact, the other always takes his word; and yet another is that they never say 'I don't know' but only 'I will find out'. When I was interviewed as a young officer in 1960, I was cautioned, by my Commanding Officer, not to bother about three 'Ps', pay, posting, and promotion, as Army Headquarters had staff to look after officers' career interests. In today's context, such advice would be considered impractical. Although officers today are better educated and professionally more competent, the level of trust and commitment to the regiment has declined. In the present socio-economic milieu, the value system has changed. Today, the self-image of officers is increasingly pegged to money and good life.[6]

Musical Traditions

Infantry regiments inherited a tradition for the band to play the regimental march at the end of regimental dinner nights in the officers' mess. The regimental marches like 'Cock o' the North' or

'Highland Laddie' evoked no emotion or association and were a carryover from the past; over time, Indian tunes have replaced these. The change, however, was not an act of parochialism but an assertion of our lost heritage; the musical extravaganza at the 'Beating Retreat' renders a medley of Indian and western marches – *'Sare Jahan se Accha'* and *'Kadam Kadam Barahai Ja'* interspersed with the famous 'Colonel Bogey March' – which draw spontaneous applause from the spectators. The Retreat ends with the soul-lifting rendering of the Christian Hymn 'Abide with Me', a tradition that draws inspiration from different sources.

Rank Consciousness and VIP Culture

Not long ago, an officer, whether a Subaltern or a General enjoyed the same privileges in the officers' mess (which was his second home) and Defence Services clubs. In many messes, it was customary to address each other by first name, the only exception being the Commanding Officer who was called 'Sir'. This custom is now extinct. It is common now to see separate tables and waiters for General Officers and other civilian VIPs during dinners or other mess functions. The emergence of such a custom goes against the fundamental concept of social equality which was sought to be engrained in the officer corps: 'In the Army, there are no differences in the social status amongst officers... A General and a Second Lieutenant have the same social status as officers. I do not want this point to be ever raised again'.[7] In recent years, rank consciousness has infected 'star' rank officers, both serving and retired, to an extent that they display stars even on the golf caps.

Service Dresses and Accoutrements

Regiments have idiosyncrasy and individual differences in dress. For example, the Brigade of the Guards wear buttons on their cuffs; others wear hackles and 'pompom' on their berets. Artillery regiments do not carry 'colours'; the gun is their 'colours'. Most such dress idiosyncrasies and differences have been carried over from the British Indian Army. If an idiosyncrasy in dress harks back to a past event in history, and its association brings a sense of pride, nostalgia, achievement or purpose, it has been retained. In some regiment, bass and tenor musicians of the regimental

band wear tiger or leopard skin, a relic of the past; the origin of the custom and its association with the present remains diffused. Whatever may have been the rationale for its retention, in the present context when hunting wild animals is a taboo all over the world, the public display of this custom raises concerns. Because of this, and also the ban on hunting, most military bands have 'faux' tiger and leopard skins.

The British Indian Army uniform changed from khaki to olive green when the theatre of operations shifted from the west to the east during the Second World War. The Indian Air Force changed theirs from khaki, which was worn by the police, to a combination of dark blue and sky blue. However, one of the reasons for the change was to preserve their unique identity which was reflected in the dress each service wore. The central paramilitary police forces have imitated army dresses ('add on' and embellishments) to a degree where it became difficult for the general public to distinguish between the army and paramilitary. Disruptive pattern combat dress has been adopted by almost all police forces on the ground of operational requirements, which are restricted to a specific area. The imitations have diminished the value of established dress customs of the Services and the pride in wearing the uniform.

Sanctity of Military Customs

The tradition of flying distinguishing flags in battle has been mentioned in our epics; in modern times, flying of flags, and display of star plates, on motor vehicles are in vogue in armies of most Commonwealth countries. However, every army has its own rules that regulate this privilege. In the case of the Indian Army, only commanders of troops and a few specified staff officers are entitled to the above privileges, which are laid down in Defence Services Regulations (Army).[8] However, in the 1970s there was a sudden proliferation of flag cars in the police and paramilitary forces which put Service officers at a great disadvantage when attending official functions. The Services were forced to allow all officers of the rank of Brigadier, and equivalent, to fly a flag and display a star plate. The virus has even infected the civil servants who took to displaying their designation in bold letters, and beacon lights, on their official cars.[9]

The process of introduction of a new medal and corresponding ribbon, particularly in the paramilitary forces, has lost its heraldic rigour. Before independence, the final authority for introduction and entitlement was vested in the 'sovereign' who had staff trained in heraldic matters to scrutinise armorial claims. In our Presidential system, this practice is non-existent. Consequently, the wearer himself is unaware of the significance of the medal. Another consequence has been that servicemen have retired without receiving their entitled medals, and officers without their commissioning parchments.

Inviting Officers to JCOs' Mess and JCOs to Officers' Mess

A unique tradition to invite officers to the JCOs' mess on Independence Day which was reciprocated by inviting JCOs to the officers' mess on Republic Day was introduced after independence. This tradition is followed by all the three Services, which has contributed to harmony and cohesiveness between officers and JCOs. An atmosphere of camaraderie prevails on such occasions, where the guests and hosts interact freely.[10]

Reverence for Dead Soldiers

America has its solemn ceremony of flag draped coffins and salutes from the President. Israel makes incredible efforts to retrieve the dead bodies of their soldiers from enemy territory. Yet, reverence for soldiers' bodies is a relatively new historical development. Generals and Admirals might be taken home for burial and commemoration, but few bothered for the troops. The Maharaja of Bikaner, who became the only non-Anglo member of the Imperial war cabinet, insisted during the First World War that Hindus be cremated, and Muslims be buried. During Op Pawan in Sri Lanka, the bodies of soldiers were cremated or buried *in situ.* It was only during the Kargil War that instructions were issued to transport the remains of martyrs by service aircraft to an airfield nearest to their hometown for last rites.[11]

Jai Hind: New Form of Salutation

'Jai Hind' was adopted by the Indian Army as the new form of greeting each other, civilian officials and those of the other two Services. The new rule pertains to only officers greeting each other. The *jawans* while saluting officers continue to use their

regimental salutation. *'Jai Hind'* virtually does away with the practice of wishing the time of the day – 'Good Morning or Good Evening'.[12] This is a welcome step but could pose difficulty while interacting with foreign armies.

Regimental Customs

Military customs in the Indian Army have developed primarily along regimental lines manifesting in long-established regimental colours, insignias, crests, mottos, war cries and distinctive features of the uniform. Some elements of regimental customs, for example, replacing the crown with the National Emblem, are in keeping with the republican character of the Indian Union. Over time, some customs have diluted, some have disappeared, while new customs have taken root. The Navy and the Air Force have their own Service traditions. Many naval customs are centred around the hoisting of the flag on the ship's deck.

After independence, recruitment in the army has been broad based; units have soldiers from different parts of the country professing different faiths. 'A unit could have a Muslim company, all other companies being Hindu with a sprinkling of Christians and Buddhists, and more Sikhs. Such a unit is bound to have 'Sarv Seva Sthal' or a place of worship for each faith, but all under one roof with display of flags of all four faiths'.[13]

There was a tradition in all Gorkha units, and in other regiments as well, which required newly commissioned officers to acquire working knowledge of the language of the troops. They were also required to have knowledge of their regimental history. Officers were required to pass retention examination within two years. This laudable tradition became extinct after the traumatic years following the 1962 war.[14]

Conclusion

Customs and traditions are not always established by regulations; for the most part they are unwritten practices that are obeyed just the same. It is possible to change certain aspects of traditions; over time some customs have been added while others have been modified or omitted based on experiences, and consultations, amongst stake holders. The tendency to change or introduce new

customs based on the whims of the Colonel of the regiments or Colonel Commandants or Service Chiefs must be avoided. Customs and traditions are the building blocks for fostering spirit de corps and are not influenced by the fashion of the time.

In the British era, the Indian Navy and the Indian Air Force were virtually at an embryonic stage and functioned as adjuncts of the Army. The two Services have come a long way since then and have developed their independent character and tradition. Naval customs were inherited from the British Navy because of their long historical association, but the Indian Navy has evolved based on practical experiences and country's cultural heritage. Though a young Service, the Indian Air Force already has the tradition of unmatched valour.

Postscript

This article has been written under the shadow of the COVID-19 Coronavirus pandemic. Lakhs have already died the world over and the numbers are rising. Millions are affected but a cure or a vaccine is nowhere in sight. Historical events like world wars, pandemics and development in technology (e.g. artificial intelligence) change the established order and human relations. It is too early to predict how warfare and armed forces may change in future. This article may have to be written differently a decade or two from now.

Endnotes

[1] K. Subrahmanyam, 'Indian Armed Forces: Its Ethos and Traditions', Indo-British Review, op.cit., n1, p.127.

[2] M.O. Mathai, *'My Days with Nehru',* (New Delhi, 1979), p.60.

[3] Statement of Defence Minister, Baldev Singh, in the Indian parliament. The Times of India, March 8, 1949, New Delhi, p. 9. Quoted by Fitch-McCullough, Robin James, "Imperial Influence on the post-Imperial Indian Army 1945-1973, Graduate College Dissertation Thesis. http://scholarworks.uvm.edngrades/763. Accessed on 24 April 2020

[4] Indian Imperial Police was rechristened Indian Police Service (IPS) in 1948.

[5] M. Malgonkar, *Distant Drums,* (New Delhi, 1960). Malgonkar was a Lt. Col. in the Maratha Light Infantry. He wrote both fiction and non-fiction. The book is unique for the presentation of transition from the British Indian Army to the Indian army.

[6] Brig. N.B. Grant, 'Value System and Officer Motivation', *Indo-British Review,* op. cit., n1, p. 71. A survey carried out by DSSC, Wellington (Tamil Nadu), to a question put to about 300 officers of field rank, as to which factors would motivate them most, 25% answered 'Money and Good Life'. It was the highest.

[7] F.M. Cariappa in one of his minutes as the Army Chief. Quoted by Brig. N.B. Grant in Indo-British Review, March 1989, op. cit., n1, p. 69.

[8] As per AO 46/87, mentioned on page 212 of Traditions and Customs, Brig. S.P. Sinha, 'Traditions and Customs', (New Delhi: Manohar, 2020), p. 212.

[9] Use of red beacon lights by all govt. officials was banned by the Supreme Court in May, 2017, with the exception of ambulances and vehicles of the fire service, police and army, who can use blue flashing beacons; however, there are still many that misuse it.

[10] It is generally accepted that the tradition was formalised by Fd Mshl Cariappa.

[11] Page 509 of the Traditions and Customs, Brig. S.P. Sinha, 'Traditions and Customs', (New Delhi: Manohar, 2020), p. 509.

[12] Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose had introduced 'Jai Hind' as the Indian form of greeting in the INA during the struggle for independence. The new form of salutation was introduced in the Indian Army in 2012 by Gen Bikram Singh.

[13] S. A.Hasnain, *'Honoring Faith and Secularism in the Armed Forces: Men who fight together must pray together', Times of India,* 11 October 2016, New Delhi, Edit page.

[14] I was commissioned in 9 GR in 1960 and passed lower standard Nepali in 1961. This tradition became extinct in the years after 1962; this happened because the battalions were overwhelmed with preparations and reorganisation that were taking place. However, officers were encouraged to learn spoken 'Gurkhali' when in peace stations.

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CL, No. 622, October-December 2020.