

Morals and Ethics – How to Teach, Imbibe, Implement and Enforce Desired Standards in the Indian Armed Forces*

Major Sushant Rai®

“The moral and ethical value system in the forces is not an abstract concept. It is the very foundation, upon which, the entire edifice of the service organisation has been built”

General VK Singh, PVSM, AVSM, YSM (Retd)

Introduction

Morals and Ethics have always been placed at the exalted position of being the spine of a successful and organised society or culture. While morals constitute the innate knowledge of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, ethics relate to conscious reflection of morality, in behaviour and application in conduct. To judge these aspects, we refer to the accepted standards or principles that we call ‘values’. Psychologists claim that no values are negative; there are values and anti-values and humans are born with five inherent values of care, fairness, loyalty, respect to authority and self-control and restraint.¹

From the battle of Megiddu, fought in 1479 BC, to the contemporary era of perpetual war against terrorism, the profession of arms has been considered as the most revered in the world. The citizenry has always appreciated the Armed Forces when they engage in conventional wars, fight terrorists and insurgents, keep peace on foreign lands and when they undertake operations in consonance with societal and military ethics. However, as in any other organisation, some ethical transgressions occur in the Indian Armed Forces as well, that are directly or indirectly linked to the moral decline of the society at large – the intake base of all ranks. Nonetheless, these incidents render it imperative for us to analyse whether they are isolated

acts of human misdemeanour or there is a general moral decline in the Forces.

Morals and Ethics in the Indian Armed Forces

Concept

While the Indian Armed Forces still maintain some British traditions, mainly social etiquettes and graces, from the Imperialist Raj of over 200 years, they have promptly distanced themselves from imbibing the subjugating British techniques (infamous Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 1919, ignorance towards the Bengal Famine of 1939, the failure to save lives of innocents during Muslim League's Direct Action Day and the disinclination shown during catastrophic mutual killings by Indians and Pakistanis during partition).² The cultural ideals of '*Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam*' (the world is one family) and '*Maa Kashchid Dukh Bhaag Bhavet*' (may no one suffer) are well supplemented by the core military values of courage, honesty, integrity, loyalty, respect and selfless service, that have been ubiquitous amongst the three Services. This is also evident from the fact that the Indian Army gave proper burials, as per Muslim rites, to over 270 disowned Pakistani dead soldiers during the Kargil War.³

The Civilian Support

When Major Leetul Gogoi tied a hostile stone-pelter, on 09 Apr 2017, on the front of his vehicle, he was widely criticised by horde of pseudo-liberals.⁴ But, the unbiased Indians who earnestly attempted to fathom the dilemma of a soldier, caught between saving human lives and accomplishing the assigned mission, appreciated him. His decision prevented disruption of an essential democratic activity (elections in Badgam) and also saved the lives of seven Paramilitary Forces personnel, one Jammu and Kashmir Police Constable, four Polling Booth staff and 17 of his own men against the violent mob. Also, it is pertinent to mention that there are allegations that the stone pelters are continually paid by anti-national elements for disruption of democratic and counter terrorist operations in Jammu and Kashmir. Major Gogoi did not open fire at the 1200 plus mob and prevented the lynching of those threatened by the mob. Even under the abundance of negative criticism and information propaganda on Whatsapp and Facebook groups, Indians stand with the belief that the Armed Forces are

the epitome of fundamental Indian values of humanity and selflessness. Thus, it is the responsibility of the forces to uphold these virtues at all times.

Moral Erosion in the Forces: Imaginary or Real

The hierarchical structure in the Forces has always ensured punitive actions against the morally guilty personnel in harsh, swift and timely manner. But, in the era of Target Rating Points (TRP) hungry news channels, the 'thumb strong' smart phone typists and free internet connections, the transgressions within the forces are recurrently brought to light. Some recent cases are:-

(a) In reply to a Right To Information (RTI) petition (*filed by Mr Venkatesh Nayak of Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative*), Ministry of Home Affairs supplied the data that from 2012 to 2016 a total of 186 Human Rights violation cases were registered against the Indian Army.⁴

(b) Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) arrested Army officers in Delhi for seeking monetary gratification in lieu of getting favourable postings to officers serving in field locations.⁵

(c) On 18 July 2017, a Jawan fired two bursts from his personal weapon and killed an officer when the latter had pulled him up for using phone during duty hours and had confiscated his phone.

Some other cases include the notorious Sukna land, fratricides, suicides, soldiers running amok and espionage. Statistics highlight that the cases are few, but they are enough to question the moral fibre of the organisation.

Causes of Moral Decline

By and large, the well-established military culture, regimental systems and disciplined realms of military cantonments have insulated personnel from the influence of ever present maleficent and unethical acts in the society. However, in recent times, societal realities have begun to reflect in the thinking and conduct of service personnel too. Nevertheless, some ethical wrongdoings can also be attributed to causes emerging inherently in the

organisation. Some societal and organisational realities that have led to the gradual decline in ethical conduct are:-

(a) **Declining Societal Culture.** From its unique beliefs of selflessness and integrity, the Indian culture has moved gradually towards consumerism and materialism. From being austerity driven, the society has adopted wealth, comfort and pleasure targeted lives. The breaking of the joint family system has contributed substantially to this change. And hence, being a part of the society, the shift is seen among military personnel too. The challenge for the Armed Forces today is to be able to maintain their value systems in the face of the changed societal culture, which has got degraded over a period of time.

(b) **Misplaced Loyalty and Careerism.** In 1944, when the Soviet Army (then called the Red Army)⁶ was advancing towards Germany and Hitler had ordered his Waffen SS battalions⁷ not to give up an inch of ground, the soldiers followed the order with impeccable loyalty till the last man died while fighting.⁸ Obviously, they showed exemplary loyalty to an evil dictator who was running over one thousand extermination camps or death factories. This is a case of misplaced loyalty. Today, in the Services, cases have often come up where subordinates try to cover up the misdeeds committed by their seniors showing misplaced loyalty. There is also the fear of getting 'fixed' for promotions which has led to encouragement of officers who subdue their gut feeling about decisions, even unethical ones, of their seniors. The root of most of the unethical behaviour amongst the officer cadre, especially seniors, generate from the blind drive to achieve success. Sycophancy to get attention, 'going along to get along' while following even illogical directions of the superiors and the infamous 'Zero Error Syndrome' are all by-products of careerism.

(c) **Aversion to take Responsibility.** Lately, a trend is visible of grant of credit of 'success to the boss and failure to those under command'. This originates from careerism, but becomes an involuntary habit.

(d) **Lack of Personal Example.** The military adage of 'lead and serve by example' is slowly losing its relevance. Authoritative behaviour in asking for 'five-star treatment' from the subordinates has become a norm. On the contrary, asking those under command to give up their basic expectations from the organisation is considered righteous.

(e) **Conduct when not in Uniform.** A military man is always on duty, even while on leave. His conduct is expected to be exemplary at all times. But, incidents like lewd behaviour towards ladies, sexual harassment of colleagues and altercations with civilians over trivial issues depict the missing sense of respect that each individual owes to the profession. The proud feeling of being emissaries of the organisation when interacting with civilians is fading away.

(f) **Financial Understanding.** Often due to unawareness about management of funds at regimental levels, officers tend to rely excessively on the portrayed proficiency of clerks dealing with the subject. While, it cannot be denied that major misappropriation cannot take place without involvement of an officer, the incompetence or ignorance of the officer in charge of funds often leads to creation of money swindling clerks.

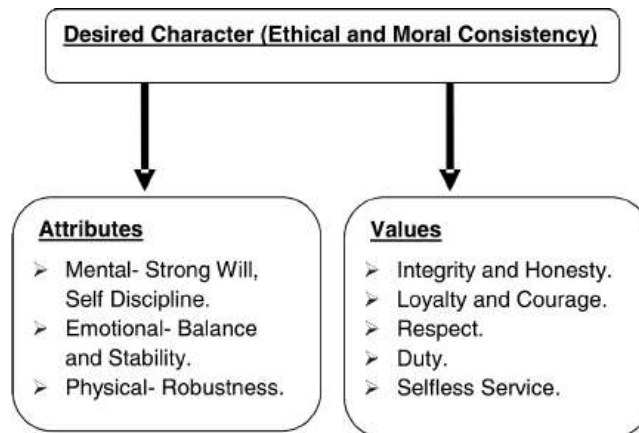
(g) **Ends Justifying the Means.** With desire to be recognised in the fraternity and expedite climbing the ladder, an individual aims at achieving success and often follows the concept of *Sam, Dam, Dand, Bhed* in an organisation that should run on values like 'honesty' and integrity' and manages to succeed sometimes.

(h) **False and Non-Reporting.** When a subordinate observes his superior lying to his superior to avoid embarrassment for a failure; he imbibes a habit called 'The Positive Reporting Attitude'. It involves informing the superior only about things that he would appreciate, and nothing else, thereby creating a false impression in the senior's mind. Complemented by the superior's comfort seeking nature of not checking back personally, this attitude takes a more prominent dimension. This can ruin the basic structure and values that the Indian Armed Forces are built upon and can lead to greater falsification in the future.

(j) **Closeness and Magnanimity.** Often the junior leaders tend to choose the path of 'cheap popularity' to maintain a happy team. Passing inappropriate comments against other service personnel, presenting the fallacies of the system over drinks and sharing and forwarding of messages on Whatsapp are considered to be methods to cultivate a sound professional culture in the organisation. Somewhere down the line, the old practice of participation in sports and games together with men seems to have got diluted. Showing magnanimity in dealing with offenders has not done good to the organisation which should run on a value system.

Creating and Nurturing Moral and Ethical Strength

On 21 February 2015, former Chief of the Army Staff, General Bikram Singh PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM (Retd) spoke on 'Character and Competence' amidst a gathering of students at Pune. The talk reflected the exact concept of desired character in the Armed Forces and the important part of it is depicted below.



The desired standards of ethics and morals should include the following:-

- (a) Continued development of individual attributes that will provide strength to face adversities and stay undeterred.
- (b) Maintain the nobility of the profession of arms by imbibing an amalgamation of core military values and the concept of 'right' and 'wrong' as defined by the *Dharma*.

The first step towards improvement would be to accept that the Service culture is facing an alarming downfall in moral and ethical standards. We cannot afford to ignore acknowledging this and the possibility of the ailment becoming an epidemic. If we recognise and accept this, we can frame an institutional response to it at the earliest.

Recommendations to Achieve Desired Standards

- (a) **Character Development.** Increased and sustained emphasis should be laid on character development of the personnel both for the officers and the junior ranks. 'Situation Reaction Tests', purely on the concept of 'accepted' ethical standards in peace and in operations should be conducted in various courses of instructions.
- (b) **Training to be Imparted by Experts.** The training at Pre Commission Training Academies (PCTAs) for Gentlemen Cadets and for other ranks in the respective training establishments should have dedicated capsules on ethical training. Instead of relying on the personnel who are untrained on the subject to impart this training, experienced psychologists should be placed at all training centres. Another option would be to make the chosen instructors to undergo a module based on psychological training before they take up the position of 'Gurus'.
- (c) **Informed System of Promotions.** Junior Leaders should be advised and explained the importance of quantitative and qualitative assessments in appraisal reports, so that there is a shift in perception towards the mechanics of reports. Detailed promotional procedures should be explained to all ranks, once or twice every training year,

which will abolish the speculative misconceptions prevalent amongst all ranks. Importance of professionalism and correct conduct should be emphasised upon consistently.

(d) **Replace Accountability by Responsibility.** The negative sense that is often associated with the word 'accountability' should be replaced with 'responsibility'. Not with the fear of repercussions but with the aim to accomplish the task, with responsibility, needs to be inculcated.

(e) **Imbibing the Desired Conscience**

(i) Leaders should stand inviolably facing the degrading societal ethics and maintain the dignity of responsibilities entrusted to them. They should be assertive and communicate the desired standards expected from subordinates and should take serious cognisance of transgressions while preventing them from recurring by enforcement of discipline.

(ii) Expressing blunt truths and posing logical questions should be encouraged and appreciated by the seniors. In the present scenario of irregular engagements and rising indulgence of the media in defence affairs, it is imperative that the culture of 'unquestionable decisions' be done away with at the earliest. Controversial issues should be addressed before giving the final decision.

(iii) For a long time now, a perception has been prevailing in lower echelons of the Forces, that only units and formations that give quick and tangible results are considered for recognition by the hierarchy. Individuals serving in difficult areas should be rewarded in some way, monetarily or in terms of amenities. Distinct appreciation should only be expressed for the most conspicuous of acts.

Methods to Implement and Enforce Desired Standards

These days many candidates who apply for the Defence Services do so due to lack of employment in other sectors. They are already privy to the comforts of modern lifestyle and face difficulty in

adapting to the military life and value systems. Hence, instead of only concentrating on the physical and written tests at the time of recruiting, Defence Institute of Psychological Research (DIPR) should formulate a test that assesses the inherent capability of an aspirant to adopt the core values of the Forces.

As a practice, officers responsible for handling funds and executing projects in the organisation should be trained extensively at all levels. Probes, into financial dealings, should be carried out at higher levels and lower echelons by multiple agencies.

Owing to constraints of time before and after operations, briefings and debriefings are conducted comprising of only operational matters. During field as well as peace tenures, likely ethical contingencies along with the prescribed reactions should be driven into the thinking of a soldier, enabling him to act appropriately, even under stress of combat. War gaming and discussions on these eventualities should be included in training programmes of units and formations.

Instead of flashing flex boards in cantonments and carrying laminated cards on code of conduct during operations in the front pocket, the expected and appropriate behaviour should be carved into personalities of all ranks. Every activity, training or otherwise should be directed at imparting some essential lessons on morals and ethics. Good conduct shown should be commended in Sainik Sammelans etc.

All ethical misdemeanours should be punished with severity to create deterrence for future breaches. Magnanimity should only be displayed while giving reformatory periods to individuals committing of minor offences.

The rigidity of the 'need to know' clause while conducting operations, deny the media even minimum of details required by them. This leads to speculations. We should have qualified spokespersons at all levels and vetted information should be provided to the media. This will usher in transparency without compromising security of classified information.

Conclusion

There is no exaggeration in stating that leaders in the Forces will have to make the most crucial contribution to achieve the near

perfect state, by their personal examples and by enforcing impeccable discipline on those under command. It is imperative that intransigent values are inculcated in the Armed Forces so that the organisational and individual consciences remain intact, even under most complex circumstances. The Indian Armed Forces have the ability to imbibe high standard of moral values and courage through training and discipline.

Endnotes

¹ Dr Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in ancient Wisdom*, (Basic Books publications, 2006). pp.

² Shashi Tharoor, *An Era of Darkness*, (Aleph Books publication, 2016). pp.

³ Naam, Namak, Nishaan translates into “Reputation of the country and organisation, duty/ fidelity to the salt partaken and pride of the Flag, Ensign or Standard”

⁴ “Human Rights Violations”, report available at NHRC website. The statistics also point out that 49 per cent of the cases were from Jammu and Kashmir alone and only 3 per cent of those were proven to be correct.

⁵ “CBI arrests Army Officers running racket of favourable transfers for money” Article on m.indiatoday.in aired on 03 June 2017.

⁶ In February 1946, the Red Army along with the Soviet Navy amalgamated to form the Soviet Armed Forces, with the official name of ‘Soviet Army’.

⁷ The armed Wing of the Nazi Party's SS (Schutzstaffel) organization. It included volunteers and conscripts from both occupied and unoccupied territories.

⁸ Alasdair C MacIntyre, *Routledge Handbook of Military Ethics Edited by George Lucas*, (Routledge Publications, 2015), pp. 7-8.

*This is edited text of the essay which won the First Prize in USI Gold Medal Essay Competition 2017 in Group B.

®**Major Sushant Rai** was commissioned into the 21st Battalion The KUMAON Regiment on 12 June 2010. The officer is presently posted as Instructor Class B at Cadets Training Wing, Military College of Telecommunication Engineering, Mhow.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLVIII, No. 611, January-March 2018.