Review Article - 1

POLITICS AND MILITARY PROFESSIONALISM *

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At a time when so many of us are being increasingly "brainwashed" by the currently popular flood of books on the Raj, this book should give the Indian youth of today some idea of what things were like before they were born. This book deals mainly with General Verma's military life starting in the late 'twenties, and also the distinguished part he played in setting TELCO's factory on its feet in 1964, and his foray into farming. It is studded with reflection of men and matters right up to the present. He tells his story succinctly.

It is seldom realised, even by those in uniform, how strongly the British resisted having Indian Commissioned Officers in the Army. The seniormost rank permitted was that of Subedar or the Risaldar Major and they were called "Indian officers". It would surprise many that before World War II the "Indian officers" wore the same badges of rank as the British officers. The stripes currently worn on their epaulettes by the Junior Commissioned Officers came into being much later. In the 'twenties the British under pressure started taking a handful of young men from "reliable" families for training in England. The Indian Military Academy, Dehra Dun came into being only in 1932, from which were commissioned a much larger number each year.

It is also seldom realised how much pressure was brought by leaders of India's freedom struggle for Indianisation of the Army's officer corps and for giving an opportunity to educated Indians to enter the profession of arms. It is, therefore, paradoxical that the leaders of the freedom struggle who had so strongly pressed for Indianisation paid scant attention to the Armed Forces and their officers in the early days of Independence.

General Verma was one of the few who had been granted a King's Commission in His Majesty's Indian Land Forces. These were the elite KCIOs who led India's Army right up to 1969 when the first officer Commissioned from the Indian Military Academy became Chief of the Army Staff. Although General Verma and many other KCIOs tend to remember nostalgically the pleasenter aspects of their life as young officers, their character was moulded by the constant threat of living in an environment in which they could be "sent out of the Regiment", or ordered to "put in their papers" at any sign of unorthodoxy from the given norms. Any "deviation" such as an intellectual bent of mind, an openly avowed preference for things Indian, food, music or culture

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was labelled "subversive". In today's context it could mean nationalistic.

A KCIO had, therefore, to show himself up in the eyes of his superiors, brother officers and his troops by excelling in the norms of that period. That meant being good at games, riding, polo or shikar. These were the accepted signs of excellence. "Ride don't write" was the maxim of the era. KCIOs were kept in their place, and they knew it, but accepted it as inevitable. Is it therefore any wonder that the only KCIO who commanded a unit in the earlier part of World War II was Maharaj Rajendrasinhji who later became the second Commander-in-Chief of India. But then he was a Prince!! Command of units came much later in Burma in 1945, when the War was being won.

Service in these conditions certainly left a mark on these officers. They had to bend but not break and yet at the same time, they had to excel. They developed a certain code of conduct. Their loyalty was transmuted to the Regiment and to the men they commanded. They were disciplined the hard way, and they saw to it that it was the organisation and not the individual which must be given their all. In the milieu of India after Independence these officers could therefore lead their Army into a mould of total professionalism. They were never political and they made the Army apolitical which has permitted democracy to take root, and made us one of the exceptions to the general rule of military dictatorship in the region. Chicanery and manipulation required in politics were anathema to them and they despised the politicians set in this cast. This is very evident in the latter part of General Verma's book. Not only he, but many honourable officers of that period thought the same way. This was hardly relished by the politicians who considered Army officers narrow in their outlook, hidebound and too "British" for Indian conditions. In contrast one or two who had chosen to be more malleable, became the blue-eyed boys of their political masters.

General Verma has written from memory having been "bullied, coaxed and threatened with dire consequences" as he puts it. Shri B.K. Nehru writes in his Foreword to the book that he happily pleads guilty to the charge and maintains that "we as a people have always underrated the value of history and have consequently seldom chronicled events whether by way of personal memoirs, or otherwise. No matter how modest one's achievements may appear to onself, their record is of interest to the succeeding generations".

To the Service reader possibly the most significant revelation of this book would be General Verma's "disciplined acceptance" which comes out so well in his own words that it is worth quoting verbatim about his resignation and supersession.

"Sometime in the autumn of 1960, we were hit by an epidemic of severe influenza in the Hot Springs area. Brig. Man Singh, my medical chief, made

all necessary arrangements to fight it and provided additional medical cover considered necessary. When the report reached Army Headquarters, we received a signal from Kaul ordering extra precautions and a four-hourly report to be sent to Delhi on the situation. I reported to Western Command that we had already taken the necessary measures to control the epidemic and that it was not possible to send a four-hourly report because we did not have the signal facilities as there was only one battery charging set in the brigade signal company at Leh, and none at Hot Springs. I added that even during war conditions the normal practice was to issue one situation report a day. Kaul took umbrage at my remarks and had the cheek to quote Field Service Regulations Part II which authorised the higher authorities to demand a "sitrep" as and when it deemed necessary. Perhaps he did not know that FSRs, like King's Regulations, had become irrelevant after India became a Republic. He asked Western Command to take disciplinary action against GOC XV Corps (that was me!) for defying orders. Of course nothing came of it, but his main aim, i.e. public relations to show his concern about the troops suffering from flu, had been fulfilled. "Generals Thimayya and Thorat both proceeded on leave pending retirement, and Gen. Pran Thapar took over as officiating COAS. He had been promised by Menon some months earlier that if he was a good boy he would be made the chief. Thapar told me this himself. Thorat was senior to Thapar, had a lot of war experience, had won a well merited DSO in Burma and had held a number of important command and staff appointments, but he was not a "yes-man", the only quality that Menon liked and wanted. As mentioned earlier, Thorat had stood up to Menon and told him where to get off, so he was not considered a suitable choice to replace Thimayya as the COAS. Two vacancies of Army commanders thus became available. Menon decided to supersede me, and two officers, several years junior to me and with much less experience and qualifications than myself, were appointed. I think the orders came out on 27 February 1961, and I put in my resignation the next day. It was accepted within eight days, a record. That was proof enough of my popularity with the defence minister. But his vindictiveness was to take more virulent forms in the days to come.

"In view of my relations with Krishna Menon and my supersession, I could not have looked myself in the face if I had continued to serve, as some others did. To me, self-respect and professional dignity were more important than hanging on just to have a job. Hence I left, and the respect I continue to enjoy has been worth more than any job."

Twenty six years after our humiliating defeat at the hands of the Chinese, and its still persisting trauma, it is worth noting that sycophancy at any level of leadership can only lead to disaster. Krishna Menon, though a giant intellectually and one who had worked hard for India's independence and whose

contribution to defence production cannot be forgotten, by his personal traits and character qualities alienated himself from the hierarchy of the Army at a time when great skill and understanding was required in dealing with both Pakistan and China. This required excellent team-work at the defence and political levels. The circumstances in which the political and military leadership of the country had been brought up and the lack of respect and understanding for each other at that time, were instrumental in the country's humiliation. It was only in later years, and by the brilliant stewardship of the then political and military leadership that we retrieved our reputation and honour in the 1971 Operations.

At a time when the Armed Forces are undergoing a major technological change, let us not forget that 40 years of Independence have also brought about major sociological changes. These affect not only the top brass, but permeate down to the lowest rung of the ladder where with increasing education and social awareness, the upheavels of the country cannot now remain absent from the psyche of the military. As such, any signs of sycophancy which surfaee from time to time within the Armed Forces, and also in the politico-military nexus, should be important pointers and cause of concern. We have yet not been able to create a suitable Higher Defence Organisation, a politico-military apparatus, sensitive enough to gauge such nuances, and at the same time, be responsive to the increasing demands on the Armed Forces both of meeting an external threat and concurrent internal subversive pressures and views them in the overall national strategic interest.

Let General Verma's book therefore serve both as a reminder and a warning that the unhappy relationships as of the early 'sixties, can lead us to disaster. Relationships are of prime importance in all walks of life, but even more so for the Forces, where the man is still the most important weapon of war. Relationships between seniors and juniors, between officers and men, and between the Forces and the civil power are all equally important. Deteriorations at any level of these relationships are disastrous. Good relationships last only when based on mutual respect, and loyalty to the organisation; the Regiment, the Formation, the Army, and above all the country. They cannot be based on a personality cult.

To Serve With Honour is a most worthwhile addition to every library.