

Human Aspect of the Indian Soldier*

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I shall be speaking on the Human Aspect of the Indian Soldier about the soldier who also has a parallel existence as a Man, as a Social Being about his hopes and aspirations and his personal problems. Whilst there is no question about his contributions to the country - is the country doing enough for him.

Having been fed on a surfeit of historical and mythological tales of past hostilities, stories focussed almost entirely on the "Knights" and the "Leaders" as "Heroes" to the exclusion of the foot-soldier who bore the brunt of the fighting - from the "face-less hordes" of Ghengis Khan to the "thin red line" at Waterloo, the awful carnage at the Somme, the Marne and Verdun - the civilian man-in-the-street may be forgiven for overlooking the average soldier's claim to personhood. But, if any single development can be said to have been the key to raising the level of sophistication and effectiveness of today's army, it is perhaps the fundamental change in our view of, and our attitude towards, the modern fighting man. This holistic view did not develop overnight, but it has paid - and is continuing to pay - rich dividends in the informed and intelligent cooperation of the modern soldier within the army and in his greater mutual sensitivity and empathy with his civilian counterpart.

I want you to visualize in your mind just two images of the Indian soldier engaged in doing his duty. The snow is deepening once again in the world's highest mountain range and the Indian soldier will continue his wintry vigil along the Indo-Tibetan border. His job is to maintain a peace of sorts, while a political solution eludes the Government in Delhi. But the Indian soldier will not question why.

Again, the Indian soldier is part of the 80,000 Peace Keeping Force in Sri Lanka in a unique role of restoring peace in a foreign country and making supreme sacrifice in the endeavour. There may be debate and more than one opinion on this particular role assigned to the Indian soldier, but he will not question why.

Here I would like to define certain attributes - that assist in formulating the character of an Indian soldier. These are military definitions.

First is Leadership that is provided to the soldier. There are scores of definitions of Leadership, but the most explicit, compact and all encompassing

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is the definition given by a Medical Officer in World War II. According to him - "Military Leadership is the capacity to frame plans which will succeed and the faculty to persuade others to carry them out in the face of death".

Second is Discipline which is the basic fibre of the soldier. A simple definition would be that it is a systematic method of obtaining obedience. Discipline is training that is expected to produce a particular character or pattern of behaviour, especially that which is expected to produce mental and moral improvement.

Third attribute is Courage which can be defined as the state or quality of mind or spirit that enables one to face danger and overcome fear.

And lastly is that enigmatic quality of Morale which is quantified as three times stronger than physical strength. Morale is what enables a man in adverse situations to keep his self-confidence and discipline and remain cheerful. The state of morale in a soldier or in his unit is in direct proportion to the state of their fitness for war.

When we talk about Leadership, we in fact are talking about the Officer cadre. Lest an officer forgets the priorities, the following words of Field Marshal Lord Chetwode are enshrined in golden letters in the Chetwode Hall at the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun:

"The Safety, Honour and Welfare of Your Country comes first, always, every time".

"The Honour, Welfare and Comfort of the Men you command, come next."

"Your own Ease, Comfort and Safety come last always and every time."

When I referred to the human aspect of the Indian soldier, I was referring to him as a man, as a social being and how he was treated in the Army and the Officer-Soldier relationship.

When I painted an image of the Indian soldier guarding the inhospitable frontier or fighting in Sri Lanka to restore peace, I also said that he will not question why. But I would like to caution you that today's Jawan is no longer a gallant blockhead who is only ready to do or die. Today, he is a literate person with an inquiring mind and, therefore, understands what he is doing and because he understands he also approves. Therefore, he does not question why. But we

must at the same time ensure that we ask of him what is just and what is right. He has implicit faith in us - we must not betray his faith.

There is widespread terrorism in the country - there are communal holocausts and cancerous political instability and corruption. The system of kickbacks has long existed but what has provoked public scandal today is the scale of pay-offs and the level of acceptors of pay-offs. In a country thus infested, there is an imperative need to sustain the morale of the Indian soldier. He is still professionally the best soldier in the world. Considering our country's vastness, its multi-lingual population, disruptive pulls of caste and creed, provincialism and illiteracy - the silver lining is the Army which is one single wholly predictable, reliable and immutable force of stability. As long as the Indian soldier retains his special ethos of a completely apolitical professional fighting man, dedicated to the ideals of service to the country through his regimental mystique, loyal to the Government elected by the people, Democracy will survive in our country.

I would like you to visualize once again in your mind the image of a soldier who has just joined his unit after completing his basic training at the Centre. He has come from a rural background, a rustic simple and God-fearing soul, trusting, willing and eager to prove himself. He places himself entirely in the hands of his officers. The first correct impression he forms is when he knows and feels that his officers care for him and share with him his joy and his hardships. CARE is a simple four-letter word but perhaps the cornerstone of the edifice on which Officer-Man relationship is based. Here, I would like to relate an incident. Gen. Mathew Ridgeway had assumed command of a very demoralized US Eighth Army in Korea. The day he arrived he went to the front and by then it was getting dark. He saw a young marine who was heavily laden and unable to bend to tie his boot laces which had loosened. The marine called out to a group of soldiers standing near by - "Hey will one of you tie my laces?" Gen. Ridgeway knelt in the mud and tied the marine's laces. This is what caring is all about - being sensitive towards another person's needs and feelings. How many of us care as much for our men? For that matter, how many of us care at all?

What is it that is precious to the Indian soldier on the personal level? He wants respect and to live with dignity and honour. He wants encouragement, an occasional appreciation of his work and an occasional thank you from his superiors. He wants his problems to be treated with kindness and understanding and problems he has many in today's socio-economic times. The soldier of today is basically the same as of yesteryears except that since 1947, he is better educated and, therefore, more responsive to correct and inspiring leadership. He is more mature and expects more from his officers - he likes to be taken into confidence and accepts responsibility more readily.

It is the peace time mission of an officer to mould his men into a cohesive, winning and enthusiastic team. This demands great personal attention and understanding of soldiers as individuals. Officers must strive to learn the regional language of their men, their customs and religious mores; share with them their meals in the langar and attend with them religious discourses in their temples. An officer in his formative years should tour villages and areas during a part of his annual leave from where his men come. He should know his men's entitlements - all about their salary - rations and leave. An officer may demand obedience from his men, but men's respect he has to earn.

What is most precious to the soldier is his family and, therefore, Family Welfare is an important subject for officers to study. Men must be confident in their minds that when they are away from their families doing duty in inaccessible and inhospitable terrains, their wives and children will be looked after - that when they die their widows and orphaned children will be taken care of. When officers are taught man-management, family welfare forms an important part of it. Neglect of a jawan's family can cause immediate demoralisation and a demoralized unit is unfit for war.

Another aspect of morale is the need to ensure financial security for men on retirement. As you know, a soldier retires after 15 years service when he is in the prime of life and has another 25-30 years of active life ahead of him. But, he retires at an age when he is burdened with maximum responsibility to provide for his family and educate his young children. Government must do its utmost to rehabilitate retiring servicemen and provide opportunities for employment. Government must also appreciate that ex-servicemen are the largest reservoir of trained and disciplined work force which can be gainfully employed in national reconstruction and development. Defence forces are a symbol of national unity and integration. This asset must never be frittered away.

Officers serve their men. It is not the other way round. Gen. Patton had said that the badges of rank which an officer wears on his coat is really a symbol of servitude to his men. This aptly sums up the officer-soldier relationship. Gen. Taylor had also said that "A reflective reading of history will show that no man ever rose to military greatness, who could not convince his troops that he put them first above all else".

Like any fever or disease, discontentment among troops throws up certain symptoms in a unit. If an officer has his fingers on the pulse of his unit he will know immediately when his men are unhappy and more importantly, why.

Increase in the number of applications for premature discharge, in cases of indiscipline, in cases of desertion or Absence without Leave or Overstay of

leave, in cases of sickness rates or hospital admissions especially in the psychiatry ward are all symptoms indicating that the unit is unwell.

Every soldier is like a delicate sapling. He is to be nurtured with care and kindness, pruned with wisdom, sheltered from the elements, supported in distress, nursed in sickness and allowed to grow unfettered. When he errs, he is to be justly punished, but always with compassion and understanding. Then when the flower begins to bloom, we can sit back with pride and enjoy the show.

Officers will do well to remember that no man is a Leader until his appointment is ratified in the minds and hearts of his men.

I wish to end my talk now by reading out "An Officer's Prayer" which in fact is an ode to the Indian soldier.

The Officer says -

"Lord make me worthy
Of the men I serve.

(Please note that the Officer wants to be worthy of the men he serves - he does not say worthy of the men he commands. This is exactly what I referred to a little while ago when quoting Gen. Patton that the badges of rank are a symbol of servitude to men and not to be displayed as a symbol of authority).

Worthy of their loyalty
and Devotion to Duty.
Their wond'rous willingness
and ready laughter.
This great humility
that asks so little,
and gives so much,
so readily, without complaint.
Grant them simple wishes, Lord,
and bless them please,
For in this world, no better soldiers breathe
than these.