

The Indian Army : An Illustrated Overview

Squadron Leader Rana TS Chhina (Retd)

On the afternoon of the 26th of September 2007 a function to launch the book “The Indian Army: An Illustrated Overview” was held in the Major General Samir Sinha Auditorium of the USI. Shri AK Antony, the Hon'ble Raksha Mantri, who had kindly agreed to release the book, was the Chief Guest on the occasion. General JJ Singh, PVSM, AVSM, VSM, ADC, Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee and Chief of Army Staff, and Lieutenant General Thomas Mathew, AVSM, Adjutant General, were the other honoured guests, alongwith a host of other senior retired and serving officers and ladies who attended the launch. Notable amongst the senior retired officers in the audience were Major General UC Dubey who was commissioned in 1928 and is today the oldest King's Commissioned Indian Officer at 98 years of age, Lieutenant General ML Thapan, PVSM and Lieutenant General MN Batra, PVSM, AVSM.

Lieutenant General Satish Nambiar, PVSM, AVSM, VrC, Director USI, commenced the proceedings by welcoming the dignitaries and guests to the function. He recalled the origins of the Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research (CAFHR) under whose aegis the book had been compiled and published. He pointed out that although the USI was over 137 years old, the Centre was a relatively recent addition to the Institution. The CAFHR was set up under the aegis of the USI on 1st December 2000, to sponsor and encourage the study of the history of the Indian Armed Forces, and to be the repository of historical documents, artefacts, memorabilia and so on.

General Nambiar went on to observe that since then the Centre has blossomed into a recognised authority on military history and has sponsored a number of projects, prominent among them being The French Military Influence in India by late Lieutenant General Gurbir Man Singh, a biography of General KS Thimayya by Brigadier CB Khanduri and a History of Low Intensity Conflicts by Lieutenant Colonel Vivek Chadha, who also played a great supporting role in the publication being currently released. About four years back, the Centre undertook the compilation and publication of a Brief History of the Indian Army that encapsulated almost two hundred years of history in an ‘easy-to-read’ 400-page book for our young officers, university students and other such target readership.

Speaking of the present publication, General Nambiar informed the gathering that when approached with the proposal to compile an illustrated Coffee Table Book on the Indian Army earlier this year, the USI had accepted the project with some trepidation in context of the time-frame within which the project was to be completed. This was done since apart from being a rewarding challenge, it would enable the archival of some invaluable material and photographs. The assignment was taken on by the Secretary of the CAFHR himself, and no effort was spared to do justice to what was indeed a compelling challenge.

The Secretary CAFHR in his address stated that the book started as the brainchild of the COAS, General J J Singh, who felt that a suitable overview- of the genesis and development of the Indian Army over the ages would be of immense interest and extremely beneficial both as a means of educating young officers and soldiers as well as informing the public at large. In this endeavour, the COAS was whole heartedly supported by the Adjutant General, Lieutenant General Thomas Mathew who worked out the modalities of the project with the USI.

The book was accordingly intended to provide the reader with a glimpse of the myriad facets of one of the most fascinating institutions of the Indian State – The Indian Army. Working on the premise that one picture is worth a thousand words, an illustrated overview was considered to be the best method of covering the vast span of the Army's long and illustrious history in the limited space available. However, space was not the only constraint the project team was working with. Time was a major factor, posing an almost unattainable deadline and it was only the dedicated hard work and perseverance of a variety of agencies in general and the team members in particular, that enabled the project to be finished within the stipulated time. The Secretary CAFHR here made special mention of the untiring hard work put in by Lieutenant Colonel Vivek Chadha, Ms Shairi Mathur and especially Captain Suresh Sharma (Retd) who provided most of the contemporary photographs for inclusion in the book. Captain Sharma's diligence and dedication to his work, often under extremely trying circumstances were especially remarked upon.

The book attempts to provide an illustrated overview of the genesis and development of the Indian Army over the last four centuries. It covers the amazing diversity of the terrain over which an Indian soldier operates during his service career; the broad ethnic canvas that goes into making up the Army's constituent elements; the various indigenous and foreign elements that have influenced the Indian military ethos; an introduction to the Army in its present form and lastly; a brief glimpse at some of the myriad facets of the Army from the colonial era to the present day.

In structuring the book it was decided to follow a ratio of 1:3 in terms of weightage for pre and post-Independence events and illustrations. We have today matured enough as a society to come to terms with various aspects of our colonial past and the armed forces are no exception to this. Their deployment in the numerous campaigns of the nineteenth century notwithstanding, Indian soldiers fought on a global arena for the first time during the First World War where they gained everlasting fame on the battlefields of France, Flanders and Mesopotamia. During the Second World War, the Indian Divisions were to gain worldwide fame as some of the most magnificent fighting formations in the history of warfare and the Indian Army was to become the largest volunteer army ever raised in the history of human conflict. The British Indian Army is an indelible part of our military heritage and is chronicled as such within the pages of the book. Armies are not built overnight; and were it not for the battle-hardened units of the Indian Army, fresh from the battlefields of North Africa, Italy and Burma, who were flung into the breach to stem the tide of the Pakistani invasion of Kashmir in October 1947, India would have lost the vale of Kashmir to the aggressors.

The contribution of the Indian Army towards nation building has been immense and it is only now that this important aspect is becoming the subject of academic study. The revolt of 1857 was primarily a military event that became the defining moment for sowing the seeds of an Indian national identity. Subsequently, the Singapore Mutiny in 1915, the disaffection amongst personnel of the 23rd Cavalry and the 15th Lancers during the First World War, the Garhwalis during the Peshawar Riots in 1930, and the formation of the INA from Indian POWs during World War II, were all events that shook the colonial authorities to the core and

were largely instrumental in hastening the process of Indian Independence. Even today, it is one of the most effective and reliable instruments of last resort available to render assistance to the Nation in times of need, both in war and peace.

A number of little known snippets of information about the history, customs and traditions of the Indian Army have been included in the book, including the story of the Indian soldier who won the Indian Order of Merit four times, then the equivalent of being awarded the Victoria Cross or Param Vir Chakra with THREE bars.

While the team was conscious that to trace the genesis and evolution of as complex a subject as the Indian Army in the extremely limited time and space as was available, it was a near impossible task to cover it in its entirety. There were bound to be areas that had been missed out but it was reiterated that the book was merely an overview and not a comprehensive catalogue of the subject.

The COAS then addressed the gathering. He congratulated the team and lauded the efforts of the USI in preserving the military heritage of the country. He stressed that the book was but an introductory backdrop and hoped that it would form the foundation of many more such projects that would serve to highlight specific aspects of the illustrious history of the Indian Army. He also expressed the hope that suitable efforts would be made to chronicle the efforts of the Nation's Armed Forces during the conflicts of 1962, 1965 and 1971. The Hon'ble Raksha Mantri then released the book and in response to General JJ Singh's request for the production of the contemporary war histories, said that he and his ministry would extend their full cooperation to the endeavour.

The function ended with a vote of thanks by the Secretary CAFHR.

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