

Short Reviews of Recent Books

The Saga of a Braveheart: Lt Col Ajit V Bhandarkar Shaurya Chakra. By Mrs Shakunthala A Bhandarkar, (New Delhi: Vij Books, 2021), Pages: 150, Price: Rs 750/-, ISBN- 9789390917129 (Hardback).

‘The Saga of a Braveheart’ is authored by Mrs Shakuntala Bhandarkar, a Veer Nari (a braveheart’s wife), wife of Late Lieutenant Colonel Ajit Bhandarkar who laid down his life for the country on 30 October 1999, while personally leading a Quick Reaction Team (QRT) to eliminate hardcore terrorists who had infiltrated across the Line of Control (LoC) in Surankote, Jammu & Kashmir. She has wonderfully described Ajit’s journey till he attained martyrdom on that fateful day. The book gives the view from the perspective of his family and colleagues. This is also probably the first book written by a Veer Nari about her departed husband, thus giving a very personal insight into the family life and times of a military hero.

The book has 16 chapters and each chapter covers a different facet of the officer’s journey in chronological order. It has first person narrations by various people who shared experiences from his school, academy and Service life giving us a rare insight into his personality.

The book brings out the people who influenced shaping of Ajit’s military ethos. One such person was his Company Commander, Major DP Merchant at the Indian Military Academy (IMA), whom he held in awe like other cadets at the IMA. He was the one who influenced his choice to join the Madras Regiment.

After joining his battalion, 18 MADRAS, in December 1981, his first posting was in Sikkim. He was soon to experience that wonderful feeling of brotherhood and camaraderie. The book covers snippets of life in the battalion and its moves, as well as appointments tenanted by him in diverse places including Sikkim, Secundrabad, Gandhi Nagar, J&K and Ferozepur. While every officer in the army experiences similar career moves and paths yet its documentation provides an insight to the non-military background reader about life in the army and in far flung field and peace areas.

On being posted to the Officers Training Academy (OTA) in Chennai, as an Instructor, Ajit, as a young Captain, motivated his

Gentlemen Cadets to ensure they always excelled. It was also at Chennai that he met Shakuntala in January 1990. He got posted back to his battalion in March and they got married in October that year in Chennai. She fondly recalls how he initiated her into the army way of life and the culture and traditions of the battalion.

In 1993, Ajit attended the Defence Services Staff College, at Wellington, Tamil Nadu, where selected officers from the three Services are trained in command and staff functions. It is the steppingstone for professional growth and an extremely busy time for the student officers but also a place where one gets a chance to bond with one's fellow trainees. The book narrates a number of lighter incidents including one where due to his quiet nature, he got in the cross hairs of the conducting instructor for not participating in the discussions and who told him he would be sent to hospital for a 'lockjaw'; needless to say, the instructor was soon taken aback by his sudden 'josh' as he suddenly became very participative!

Post the Course, he was posted as a Brigade Major, a prestigious appointment, at the Indo-China border at Nathu La. In 1996, he got posted to the Military Secretary's Branch in Army Headquarters in another prestigious appointment. Living as a family in a big city after the separation of a field area brought the family close together. Ajit had by now helped Shakuntala transform into a 'confident and independent *fauji* (military) wife'.

In June 1998, on being promoted to a Lieutenant Colonel, he was posted to 25 Rashtriya Rifles in Surankote as the Second-in Command in an intense counter-insurgency environment.

30 October 1999 was the day that will remain etched in the memory of the family forever. This was the day Ajit led a QRT to eliminate five hard core terrorists who had infiltrated across the LoC. He was accurate in his assessment of their likely location and displaying rare gallantry, courage, and bold leadership, unmindful of any personal considerations, he eliminated three of them but in the process took a bullet on his forehead and succumbed to his injuries. For this act of gallantry, he was awarded the Shaurya Chakra, posthumously, on 11 August 2000.

In Delhi, 30 October 1999 was like any other day for Shakuntala as she was busy designing teaching aids for her class

while the boys were watching 'Tom and Jerry' on TV. The doorbell rang and she found her colleagues and an officer from Delhi Area at the door who then went on to break the terrible news to her. Readers who have watched such a moment in Hollywood movies like "Saving Private Ryan" or "We Were Soldiers Once and Young" will find the narration very evocative.

While the book is extremely easy to read and full of anecdotes, the essence is in what lies within the lines. Namely, the challenges faced by those who wear the uniform and their families; the unique bonding within the army; the cadet days bonding and Course spirit; and lastly, the strength of the regimental family which becomes more important than one's own home. More importantly, the book also sheds light on how the families cope with loss. The character and strength of Shakuntala and her transformation from a protected wife to a widow who had to bring up two young children comes out well in the book.

This is a rare book as the focus is on an army hero's military upbringing, dedication, camaraderie, and courage while at the same time, it gives an insight into his personality and relationship with his parents, brothers, wife, children, classmates, course mates, brother officers, and friends and also tells us how his passing away affected each one of them in different ways.

"The Military Wife" by Laura Trentham is a very good 2019 fiction novel about military life and coping with the loss of a spouse. This, on the other, is a real-life story. It is very difficult to imagine but is extremely motivating and exposes the reader to the sacrifice and patriotism of not only Ajit but also Shakuntala, her two sons and the rest of their family, and by extension, all military spouses. There is an immense sense of grief evident in the book. It takes a rare resolve to write such a biography.

Maj Gen Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd)

Irrawaddy Imperatives: Reviewing India's Myanmar Strategy. By Jaideep Chanda, (New Delhi: Pentagon Press; 2021), Hardcover Pages: 341, Price: Rs 1495/-, ISBN- 978-9390095346 (Hardcover).

What are the factors that are imperative for India's foreign policy? Does India follow one or many strategies for conducting its foreign policy in its neighbourhood? Is there an interplay of conflicting mosaic of objectives? Does India's history, geography,

demography, and culture shape its worldview and, hence, its strategy? These are some of the questions one needs to answer to understand Indian strategy for its foreign policy in general and for Myanmar, in particular. The author has been able to answer some of these questions in a detailed manner in his book. He has leaned on the familiar terrains of looking into culture, history, geography, and rightly so, to place emphasis on India's Myanmar strategy. By recounting the geographic and demographic details of Myanmar and all the crucial aspects of it in the first chapter, the author gives a preview of the chapters to follow. The author also underlines the fact that geostrategic importance of Myanmar is something scholars can't ignore while writing India's foreign policy for Myanmar. Chapters on historical perspective of the India-Myanmar relations throw up some interesting facts and information including Mrs Indira Gandhi's visit to Myanmar in 1969, and the treatment meted out to the Indian PM, and the rice diplomacy. These two chapters give the granular details of the crest and trough periods of India's relationship with Myanmar.

The most interesting chapter of the book is the fourth chapter on Myanmar consciousness, a term which the author claims to have coined. One can debate the assumption of the author as to whether there is an intentional lack of willingness amongst the top policymakers to engage with Myanmar, as they do with other neighbouring countries, but he has certainly highlighted various events and speeches where the top leaderships have ignored mentioning or inviting Myanmar, or recognising Myanmar as a south Asian country, despite the fact that this country is her neighbour. The Delhi centrality theory doesn't hold ground when we look at India's not so enthusiastic engagement with much of the Latin American countries and a large part of European countries for decades. However, the author has been able to drive a point that such a blind spot can lead to unsustainable policy. The chapters on the Kaladan project, the Rakhine conflicts, and the Tatmadaw are interesting but have details that are available on various other books and platforms.

In the other two chapters on Myanmar and India's Northeast and Defence Diplomacy, the author has brought out fresh dimension to the whole approach. In the Northeast chapter, the author has concentrated his views on Mizoram's relations with Myanmar and dishes out informative details, and links the chapter

to the Kaladan project, Rakhine conflicts, and overall sentiments of the Northeast. The chapter is a must read for amateur scholars on Northeast India.

The chapter on Defence Diplomacy stops short of opening Pandora's box. The author's claim that major breakthrough in India-Myanmar relations came through using defence diplomacy can be contested at many levels, and by many scholars. However, one part where the chapter lacks is on the policy prescription when it comes to India's stand on the military junta in Myanmar. The author has highlighted long association of Indian defence forces with the Myanmar forces. However, despite having near to perfect 'defence diplomacy' as the author appears to imply, India has not been able to synergies her interests with the Myanmar junta. India has time and again looked for a democratic government in Myanmar to strengthen ties. Here one needs to ask whether India has one strategy for Myanmar or has many i.e., for elected govt and for military junta. The chapter is, however, fascinating for many reasons including the crucial details and interviews of prominent players in India-Myanmar relations. The other chapters are equally important however, the flow of the book is maintained and nurtured by some of the chapters mentioned above.

The author must be complimented for balancing his book with a comprehensive subsidiary or supplementary materials as appendices. A voluminous book is dangerously close to a double edged sword – it can both, act as a long chain of logical ideas and information; or it can over flood and, hence, confuse. The author has been able to provide extensive primary and secondary data to support his arguments in a coherent way. Empirical data collected from his field visits reflect his understanding of the topic and fill the crucial void in the research on connection between Northeast India and Myanmar.

On the flip side, one expects the author to shed more light on India's strategic outreach to East Asia, and the role Myanmar could play. Although the author has talked about it in bits and pieces, a specific chapter on India's act east policy and the role of Myanmar could have been an added value to the book.

Overall, the book is comprehensive and original in its content with a lot for both an amateur scholar and an expert.

Shri Gaurav Kumar

Manthan: Multifaceted Reflections on the Indian Armed Forces. By Major General VK Shrivastava, VSM, (New Delhi: Vij Books India Pvt Ltd, 2021), Pages: 181, Price: Rs 895/-, ISBN: 9789390439041.

Military History is usually written in two forms: it can either be recorded as a detailed chronicle of leaders, battles, campaigns, strategies reinforcing historical parallelisms and theories, often catering to the academicians; or it could be a succinct piecing of the popular narrative that seeks to highlight accounts of individual gallantry, courage and honour. Very rarely does one read a book that straddles across the dual domains, in what is commonly referred to as a hybrid narrative. *Manthan: Multifaceted Reflections on the Indian Armed Forces*, authored by Major General VK Shrivastava, fills the vacuum of well-recorded military history in India, making his work a notable contribution to military literature. Given his rich background in the army, wars, counter-insurgency/ counter-terrorism operations and a post-retirement senior fellowship at the MP Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, Major General Shrivastava comes into his own as a storyteller with flair, empathy and pride for his country. The western world is engulfed with a misconception that ancient India was negligent in skills featuring statecraft, strategy, the administration even though the numerous epics prompt tales of vast kingdoms and major battles won. *Manthan* is a book that precisely squashes the aforementioned myth. This book serves a perfect platter of India's historical strategic legacy, its deft implementation and lastly, branches out into introspection of defence capabilities. The author draws relevance from Indian mythology, skillfully featuring its relevance to contemporary statecraft and policy. The armed forces indispensability is established, vividly tracing the anatomy of cosmic defence planning and deeply intense strategic reciprocity between India and her neighbours.

The author pays a substantial amount of attention to the rich history of Indian Armed Forces from the British era, where the contingent was highly praised by the Allied nations for their role in World Wars I & II, to the post-independence civil-military relationship. However, through his writings, he identifies several political misfortunes in the Nehruvian period as a hindrance to the growth of the armed forces. Since independence, the top political

leadership in the country has been troubled by the probability of a military takeover. It is not undisclosed that people around Nehru exploited his paranoia of a military coup and started chipping away at the army in a maturing civil-military relationship. This argument has been substantiated in the book mentioning the failures of the then Defence Minister, VK Krishna Menon, during the Chinese aggression of 1962. VK Krishna Menon's fiddling with military leadership proved to be disadvantageous to the Indian Army. There is a heavy focus on the concept of adeptness – which the Indian Army has wonderfully endured over the years. What is remarkable about this book is the stamina of narration as it not only divulges the overall merits of the inter-linked historical perspectives but also presents a global historical perspective on Indian history. For this, Major General Shrivastava employs the use of relevant findings by defence experts from the Central Asian Region.

Subsequently, the chapters trickle down to contemporary conflicts, namely the Indo-China border aggression of 2020. The same year, Chinese People's Liberation Army tasted India's stern and lethal response to border domination. The book echoes distinctive observations on military strategy, technology and stratagem used as 'war tactics' in ancient India. The author's treatment of new-age conflicts and strategic initiatives, such as the QUAD, compliments his idea of the Indian Armed Forces' vast scope of integration and adaptation with changing times. *Manthan* is not simply a historical recital of India's victories and ordeals but is also a serious exploration of military leadership and the psyche behind orchestrating planned battles under dire circumstances. The author does not eulogise or unequally criticise failed army strategies in his work as coming from a military background, he understands the level of fairness and objectivity the military implements.

In the final analysis, the chapters carry futuristic recommendations and challenges that a non-military reader can easily understand. Hence, it is advised for people to pick up *Manthan* as the Indian historiography, more often than not, is deprived of quality literature uncovering details of operation, tactics, strategy and thorough understanding of Indian conflicts.

Ms Samriddhi Roy

Law of Armed Conflict: Application and Practice. By Major General (Prof) Nilendra Kumar, (Gurgaon: Thomson Reuters, Legal, 2021), Pages: 190, Price: Rs 495/-, ISBN: 9789390673735 (Hardbound).

The Law of Armed Conflict, also known as International Humanitarian Law (IHL), is a set of rules which seek, for humanitarian reasons, to limit the effects of armed conflict. The book can be divided into two parts; the first part containing six articles on various aspects of IHL; the second containing narratives confronted in armed conflicts between two neighbouring states. First part, incorporating six chapters, in the book has been authored by former military commanders and experts in IHL. This includes 'Introductory' remarks by Prof Umesh Kadam, 'Training of Troops under the Law of Armed Conflict' by Lieutenant General SPS Dhillon (Retd) & Major General Nilendra Kumar, 'Proficiency of the Indian Armed Forces in International Law related to Warfare' by Lieutenant General AK Ahuja & Major General Nilendra Kumar, and 'Dissemination of IHL within Armed Forces during the Pandemic' by the author himself. The rich personal experiences of authors in the IHL in the field and 'Foreword' by General VP Malik, the former Chief of the Army Staff of India, bring out the lessons learned and best practices expected to be followed in an armed conflict.

No true understanding of IHL can be attained without a solid appreciation of various complicated situations faced on the ground by a military commander. The second part of the book contributes to that appreciation with a nuanced sophistication. The author of the book, a well experienced former judge advocate general of the Indian Army, has presented various situations/narratives which could be faced by a military commander in an armed conflict. These are followed by expected responses from a commander under the IHL.

For example, situation 296 (on page 167) raises a relevant issue as to whether a military commander who discovers huge quantity of medical stores and equipment in an occupied area could sell the stores and use the proceeds for the welfare of his troops. To a person untrained in IHL, it may appear legitimate; the response explains that such an act is absolutely illegal under Article 33 of the first Geneva Convention of 1949. More than 300

such 'situations', contained in the book, exhaustively cover various Articles of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, their Additional Protocols of 1977, and the Rules of Customary International Humanitarian Law. In addition, a few provisions of the International Criminal Court and various weapon ban/regulation treaties have also been explicitly covered.

This book, first of its kind in South Asia, will be a valuable addition in the field of IHL. It will be immensely useful to students, military and paramilitary officials, military medical practitioners, academicians, and the members of civil society who have any stakes in the field of international humanitarian law.

Wg Cdr UC Jha (Retd)

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OUR ACTIVITIES

Library and Reading Room

The library holds over 68,000 books, and journals, including some books of 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, on an astonishing variety of subjects. While the principal emphasis is on strategy and defence, there are a large number of works on different vistas of Indian life. There are memoirs, biographies, recollections, diaries, journals, manuscripts for scholars and researchers. The reading room is air-conditioned, spacious and well stocked in terms of current reading material. Library was automated in 2002.

Correspondence Courses

The Institution runs regular correspondence courses for officers of the Armed Forces to assist them in preparing for promotion examinations, and for the entrance examinations to the Defence Services Staff College and Technical Staff College. Over the years, this has been a significant and well-received activity.

USI Journal

The USI Journal is the oldest surviving defence journal in the country and in Asia, having first appeared in 1871. In an era when there is a feeling that free expression of views by Defence personnel is not looked upon kindly by the establishment, the Journal in fact provides just such a forum, without regard to seniority and length of service in the Armed Forces, subject of course, to propriety and quality of the written work.

Centre for Strategic Studies and Simulation

The erstwhile Centre for Research and its resources have been merged into the new Centre named as USI Centre for Strategic Studies and Simulation (USI-CS3) wef 01 January 2005. The Centre aims at conducting detailed and comprehensive enquiry, research and analyses of national and international security related issues, and gaming and simulation of strategic scenarios, to evolve options for wider discussion and consideration.

USI Centre for UN Peacekeeping (CUNPK)

The Centre was established in 2000 and functioned with USI till Aug 2014, when it moved out of USI premises and was delinked from USI. Its aims were organising workshops, seminars and training capsules for peacekeepers, observers and staff officers – both Indian and foreign. It also oversaw the practical training of Indian contingents. It functioned under a Board of Management headed by the Vice Chief of the Army Staff and worked in close coordination with the Service Headquarters and the Ministries of External Affairs and Defence. In August 2014, CUNPK moved out to the accommodation allotted by the Army HQ.

Centre for Military History and Conflict Studies (CMHCS)

The Centre was established on 01 Dec 2000 and encourages study and research into the history of the Indian Armed Forces with objectivity, covering different facets such as strategy, tactics, logistics, organisation and socio-economic aspects and their implementation.

Gold Medal Essay Competitions

Every year the Institution organises two gold medal essay competitions: one for officers below 14 years of service and the other open to all officers. These essays, the first one of which was introduced in 1871, constitute a barometer of opinion on matters that affect national security in general and the defence forces in particular.

Lt Gen SL Menezes Memorial Essay Competition

This has been instituted from 2015 on a subject related to Armed Forces Historical Research. The Essay Competition is open to all across the globe.

Lectures, Discussions and Seminars

A series of lectures, discussions and seminars on service matters, international affairs, and topics of general interest to the Services, are organised for the benefit of local members in Delhi.

MacGregor Medal

This medal is awarded to Armed Forces personnel for valuable reconnaissance and adventure activity they may have undertaken.

MEMBERSHIP

The following are eligible to become members of the Institution :

- Officers of the Armed Forces
- Class I Gazetted Officers of Group 'A' Central Services.
- Any category mentioned above will be eligible even though retired or released from the Service.
- Cadets from the NDA and Cadets from the Service Academies and Midshipmen.

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