

**Officer-Men Relationship -A Critical Appraisal\***

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**Introduction**

A soldier is an epitome of valour and courage. He does his duty under unforeseen circumstances, even under incomprehensible odds, which sometimes lead to grave injuries and loss of life. Simultaneously, an officer in the Armed Forces is a dedicated professional leader who has to lead by example. Together they fight for their country and unreservedly perform the tasks assigned to them both, in peace and war.

The questions that arise are : firstly, how can they achieve this to meet the expectations of their countrymen; secondly, what needs to be done to ensure that they get the essential wherewithal to measure up to the required standards of infallibility; and lastly, is the present situation in terms of 'officer-men relationship in the Armed Forces' an ideal one? If not, what needs to be done to bring about an ideal synchronisation between the two vital components of the military might of the country? It is imperative to visit the past and take a look at the aberrations that have crept in this relationship and are the weeds in the present day Armed Forces of our Country.

**A Historical Perspective**

The British Indian Army was the principal 'instrument' of power of the British Raj in the pre-Independence era. The present day Indian Army's heritage and origins go back to the aftermath of the 1857 uprising when the British Crown took over direct rule of British India from the East India Company. Upto the end of the Nineteenth Century, the term Indian Army was used as a collective description of the Presidency armies (the Madras Army, the Bengal Army and the Bombay Army) of British India. Thereafter, in 1903, Kitchner reforms unified them into one Indian Army.

In those times, only the British could become officers and the soldiers were predominantly Indian. The stark disparity between salaries and social status of Indian soldiers and their British counterparts was a cause for dissatisfaction amongst the Indians. The Indianisation of the Indian Army began in 1918 after the publication of the Montagu-Chelmsford report, which established the principle of self-governance in India.

In the following three years a trifling bit was done and only ten seats per year were allotted to Indians at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst. The Indianisation had been painfully slow and it wasn't complete until 1947. An extreme view point has been that we are still "walking in the shoes of our colonial masters. That we treat our own people with same contempt and distrust as the British did."

The result has been that we have had no major changes in the ideology of recruiting men since the creation of the Indian Armed forces. The "officer level" on the other hand is a different story. It was with great difficulty that one became an officer in the earlier days to be at par with the "British". We absorbed all those Victorian cultures and traditions and imbibed them as our own. We still follow with great reverence the archaic customs of the Victorian era that unfortunately displays a lack of evolution. We imbibe a false sense of superiority and fail to follow the true tenets of military leadership that have been inscribed on the oak panelling at the entrance to Chetwode Hall at the Indian Military Academy. There exists, undoubtedly, a great barrier between the Officers and men which can no longer be disregarded in this age of information.

Though our Armed Forces have made vast technological advancements, and have transformed themselves into a very modern and superior force with state of the art weapon systems, the framework of the relationship between officers and men, sadly remains nearly the same as it was post-Independence. Cultural changes are also afoot with every next generation yearning for the Indian equivalent of the "American dream"! This has changed the way the new generation views the profession of arms. While admiration for the men in uniform still fuels the respect of most citizens of India, the numbers of officers joining Armed Forces is fast dwindling. This has led to a shortage of officers in the Armed Forces and may be one of the reasons for the eroded image of an officer in the eyes of the men. A bold relook at preventing a breakdown of this relationship is required to put it on a sound footing that would be able to withstand the challenges of the future. The Officer-men bond is an intangible and to suggest measures to improve this bond, one needs to look at measures to improve the quality of life and the quality of the intake of officers and men rather than suggest behavioural changes in the existing system today.

**Macro Level**

**Glorify the Profession.** The success of advertising industry is a proof that the human mind is extremely gullible in certain ways and gets influenced, voluntarily or in- voluntarily by various mediums. Data reveals that after huge success of the Hollywood film "Top Gun", the enlistment for American naval aviators jumped 500 per cent. Military service was glorified in the United States of America after years of resentment from the fallout of the Vietnam war. Not only did "Top Gun" benefit the United States of America, a lot of aviators around the world joined their Air Forces with the dream of becoming fighter pilots. Projecting Armed Forces in positive light by way of good advertising can do a great deal of good at attracting promising talent in our country rather than the unnecessary criticism of the sensationalist news of many news channels that seem to blow out of proportion the statistically low cases of reported indiscipline in the armed forces albeit on the seemingly increasing trend. What is needed is a dedicated media cell at the Service HQ to advertise the Indian Armed forces in an imaginative and sustained manner, more than what is being done today. Not only will this increase the intake in the armed forces, but the common man's opinion about a soldier defending his country will improve greatly. This will further result in an increase in the motivational levels and finally help make the officer-men bond a better one.

**Amend the Pay-Scales.** The soldier has always been glorified in the Indian conscience and glorified as the bearer of

high morals and ideals. When the slogan “Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan” was raised by the then Prime Minister of India, Lal Bahadur Shastri in 1965, it was to motivate the soldiers to defend India against enemies and simultaneously increase the production of food grains. But the pay scales of Defence Forces Personnel based on the Post-war Pay Committee equates a fully trained infantry soldier with 3 years of service with a semi-skilled worker. This disparaging equation does not echo in any way the slogan “Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan”. While it can be argued that the report on the Sixth Pay Commission is, by “equating”, creating an unbiased comparison to the nearest possible profession in the civilian context, it seems a trifle vague when it talks about a comparison with the private sector and echoes the bureaucratic red tapism of the bygone British Raj. To top it all, there was no military member in the Sixth Central Pay Commission. It goes on to say that “a mere comparison of the pay or pay scale without taking cognisance of the total package of allowances and benefits available within the Government may not be appropriate and the value of job security provided cannot be undermined since they form major components of the total package”. While the Government does provide job security, the nature of the job does not provide life security! Never, in the parlance of common sense, has the value of job security, whatever it means, been higher than the value of life. “A trifle vague” now seems sarcastic. It is the same story with the recently announced Seventh Central Pay Commission, i.e. to say that there is no representation from the Armed Forces.

The growing shortage of officers in the Armed Forces, as mentioned earlier, is of concern and is taking a toll on the officer-men relationship. The time that should be devoted to developing the bond is now being devoted to fill up for officers permanently in absentia. This shortage can be directly linked to potential officer candidates being lured away to greener pastures in the pursuit of making more money. The only possible solution then, is to amend the existing pay scales and give the Armed Forces a perceptible edge over the highest rung of Central Govt Civil Services and police forces. It has been observed that for men, the stress levels during operations are much lower than the stress generated due to the problems at home, which many a times are monetary in nature. These stressors have been initiators of unrelated officer-men clashes. Keeping the soldiers financially more comfortable will in turn help in keeping this bond untarnished.

**The Cradle of Military Leadership.** The many officer training institutes that are viewed as being the cradles of military leadership have the onerous task of keeping up with the job of churning out great leaders of men. While the National Defence Academy is a premier institution and boasts of being an institution that - “educates, trains and develops future military leaders to possess the requisite qualities of leadership, integrity, character and intellect”, in practice, it has turned out to be an immensely difficult task in imparting cadets with such a multitude of honourable traits amidst a rigorous routine. While the Auchinleck Committee might have envisioned a rosy future, the de facto arrangement seems to be otherwise, not just for the National Defence Academy, but for other officer training academies as well. What is ultimately taught and learnt under the aegis of adolescent seniors is not always higher virtues but the esoteric arts of “managing, minimum-effort, shamming, etc.”. The task of guiding young cadets must not be left to the ever so slightly more experienced cadets who still are at the cusp of adulthood. The official rhetoric may be that it is the duty of officers to guide the young cadets but in reality young impressionable cadets spend much more time with their senior cadets than officers. The academies are where the future leaders are moulded and every possible care must be taken to ensure that they become true cradles of military leadership. To state such things might brand one as a blasphemer, but the road ahead needs to be paved with stones of criticism to reach the gates of a semi-utopian reality. Unnecessary rigour should be removed and greater involvement of officers in the lives of the cadets needs to be ensured. Good leaders will mean a good bond.

**British Customs and Traditions.** The Indian Armed Forces are the offspring of that once mighty colonial empire that left a huge legacy of customs and traditions that are still prevalent in our Armed Forces today. To cling still, to those traditions which are alien to the Indian way of life, tend not to establish a common bond between the officers and men, but rather does apportion a superficial tone of elitism amongst the officer clan, regrettably so. The idea is not to alienate the officers from the men and display gaudy acts of customs and traditions that were never Indian in the first place but to show quite the opposite – the congruence of a common goal. To divorce ourselves completely from the legacy of the British will be foolhardy, but the point is to render more reverence to the officer-men relationship rather than an extreme reverence of archaic and anachronistic Victorian traditions that are rendered moot in today’s context. This is important to ensure that the men do not have to look up to the officers with estranged eyes and also ensure that the officers don’t imbibe a sense of elitism resulting in branding everyone else as inferior.

**Sir, Yes Sir Syndrome!** In an extremely hierarchical institution like the Armed Forces, it is considered irreverent to say “no” to a superior officer even if the subordinate officer graciously disagrees. A jawan, sailor or airmen doing so is nothing short of insubordination. While it may be an exaggeration, the truth is that nay saying, in the constructive sense, isn’t part of our culture. While there may be many boards displaying the proverb- “professional disagreement is not insubordination”, saying “no” is by and large taken as a sign of incompetence or an inflated ego.

In the United States Air Force after the Vietnam war, many combat pilot veterans were left disillusioned with the culture of combat that prevailed before Vietnam; and soon after Vietnam, a mass exodus of officers took place once they had served the minimum number of years. The combat veteran pilots that stayed became majors in the early 1970s. They became known as the “iron majors”, a group that was willing to put their careers on the line while they pushed hard for changes. They seemed to have vices of a rebellious spirit and a willingness to criticise higher authority. However, it soon became clear that these weren’t vices but virtues that helped change the USAF into what it is today.

Without a constructively critical approach to the way our organisation works, the feedback from the lower levels will resound the worrisome chants of “sir, yes sir” to portray an image of absolute perfection, a fallacy. Someone who is opening a Pandora’s Box of realities in the field will certainly face the stigmatisation of his superior officers and peer group. A way to reverse this is to reward acts of bold initiative, even at the cost of the initiative being atypical as far as the accepted norms and customs are concerned. This will empower the JCO level, in taking decisions, in creating a smoother gradient in the hierarchy instead of a steep gradient from men to officer.

**At the Unit Level**

While it is becoming more difficult to devote a greater amount of time in developing a bond with the men, young officers need to be the instrument of change before the vagaries of time and the pressures of family life erode the youthful and somewhat quixotic notion of leadership and gives way to a wry and pragmatic approach to leadership that is based out of experience of knowing the quickest way to get the job done.

Displays of the customs and traditions of the British era must be toned down at the unit level and instead, more Bara Khaana's should take place to increase interaction with the men and their families. Also, the JCO's must be empowered more to take decisions and be a part of the decision making process. An officer supervising every tiny detail of every mundane activity relinquishes the faith of the JCO's in the officers and vice versa even though they might have spent many years serving in the forces.

**Professionalism, a Higher Virtue.** Professionalism is a virtue that is seldom placed in the top shelf generally reserved for seemingly romantic virtues such as loyalty and integrity. The concept of warfare has changed, with technology being the most crucial factor for determining the output of a futuristic combat zone. With technology also comes the need to be well aware of all the capabilities of the weapons platform. Thus there is a greater requirement of being an astute professional. Professionalism should not just confine itself to the specifics of work but should be the *raison d'être* more so at the lower levels. During the process of achieving higher professionalism, the importance of team work that is required between men and officers will come to the fore, thus improving the bond.

## **Conclusion**

In the past few decades, our Country has seen a number of conflicts and has undergone unprecedented socio-economic changes. Modernisation seems to be the order of the day for the three Services. Technology has seeped into every mundane task and is now a way of life. Technology is now a bigger tool than ever. But the greatest asset which always was, is, and will

always be is the man – the man behind the sight of a gun to the man behind the controls of an advanced fighter jet. Modernisation cannot be at the cost of losing the effective bond between officers and men. The onus of responsibility lies on the officer, the leader.

\*This is an edited version of the article which won the First Prize in USI Gold Medal Essay Competition 2013, Group B – open to officers upto 10 years of service.

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