

Bridging the Gap - Balancing Personal Aspirations and Service Requirements in the Armed Forces*

Commander Sunil Dogra@

Introduction

Personal aspirations are one of the most important factors that drive human beings to excel in any field. They change with times and grow stronger each day. A child at the threshold of adolescence aspires for a good life, name, fame and recognition in the society. After finding a suitable job, his aspirations gain momentum and they become more focussed. Now he wants to grow more at a personal level and strive even harder to meet his material as well as aspirational needs. The middle years bring in mixed fortunes and the aspirations keep varying. In later years he still nurtures his aspirations but they change to the level of self actualisation. At no point in time, a person is devoid of aspirations.

Over the years, the value system of our society has changed. The all-round flow of information brought in by the information age has brought a paradigm shift in the aspirations of our people. A common man, irrespective of his financial/social status is aware of the concept of fine and luxurious living - which hitherto was limited only to a few rich and famous people. Needless to say that he too yearns for a more fulfilling life which he feels is attainable with an extra effort, while he is young. Fulfillment of this aspiration entails quick success and climb to the top. But this arduous climb has its own share of casualties as it is able to accommodate only a few people at the top - leaving behind many disillusioned and bewildered souls at the half way mark.

A young man is a reflection of the civil society from which he comes. Once he adorns the military uniform, his aspirations start taking a definite shape. Now, he is at the threshold of a career where he wants to find the wings that would help him achieve his aspirations and turn his dreams into reality. However, the pyramidal structure of the Armed Forces cannot accommodate all the aspirants and some of them are superseded on the way up the ladder and many officers have to make a difficult choice whether to make an honourable exit from the Service or to stay on regardless of the ignominy of being superseded. A few officers take the difficult path of starting afresh in the civil world to seek success in an alternate career. Some lose their way and slide down into a life of anonymity. A few others stay on to serve till the age of superannuation - suffering remorse while serving in innocuous appointments, in spite of their professional qualifications. The officers who cannot reconcile to the reality of supersession, irrespective of the rank at which they get superseded, take the extreme step of seeking justice outside the military legal framework, to seek higher promotions in the Services.

Personal Aspirations of Officers

The Armed Forces provide an attractive and respectable career prospects at a very young age and are able to attract the best of the youth to join as officers. These men join the Services through a stringent selection process; followed by strenuous training, promise of a demanding life, steep pyramidal structure and a decent pay package. The very fact that a young man comes through a stringent Services Selection Board, followed by rigorous training as a Service officer, is a testimony of the quality of his character and professional competence. Does all this make him believe that he is as 'good as anybody else'? The answer is 'Yes', because the Armed Forces actually need only the best officers to lead their men - often against very heavy odds.

The initial years of service in the Armed Forces are full of adventure and very satisfying experiences. The closely nurtured feelings of patriotism, regimental spirit, honour and pride in uniform along with early recognition in society, keeps a young officer motivated to deliver his best to the organisation. The challenging task of leading his men in battle in most trying and difficult circumstances, often endangering his own life as also the lives of the men he leads, inculcates in him the feeling that he is second to none. Personal aspirations are confined to the task at hand and upholding the regimental spirit, heritage and honour. This selfless service ethos builds-up his self esteem and pride over the years and earns him a good reputation.

Later, in service career, numerous factors start playing on the mind of a young officer. His aspirations no longer remain confined to his own self; because expectations of his parents, wife, children and the society also begin to dictate his performance and destiny. As he begins to understand the Services ethos better, he wants to 'do well'. Unfortunately doing well in the Armed Forces involves climbing up the ladder with more 'Brass' on the shoulders. This is when some young officers become desperate to achieve higher ranks because of their misconception that they deserve it more than anyone else. Success, they feel would bring in more opulence for the family, higher privileges for himself, and increased respect and recognition in the society.

With a strenuous life and the ever existing prospect of being superseded, an officer in the Indian Armed Forces faces uncertainty at a very early stage in life. With limited promotion avenues, increasing family responsibilities, no alternate career opportunities; an apathetic political and bureaucratic set-up and the trials and tribulations of life in the Services, an officer is forced to take unusual measures to stay in the competition for promotions. Timely promotions not only provide more perks but also enable him to serve for a longer period. When despite his best efforts an officer is unable to pass through the narrow window of promotion avenues, he feels it is his right to seek justice through civil courts. This is also because of the anxieties caused by non availability of appropriate employment opportunities to officers on premature retirement in their early fifties.¹

Satisfying Personal Aspirations of Officers

Satisfaction of personal aspirations should not be limited to promotions only; hence creating more vacancies in higher ranks can never be an everlasting solution. The organisational and command structure of the Armed Forces needs to be kept intact and the authority inherent in a particular rank should not be diluted with more number of higher ranks. In view of the above, personal aspirations of officers need to be reviewed holistically, without tampering with the basic

foundation and structure of the Armed Forces. We need to adopt a three pronged strategy which involves:-

- (a) **Putting own House in Order.** Firstly, introducing objective and transparent promotions which ensure that only professionally competent officers attain the next higher rank at every stage – with no tolerance of sycophancy, favouritism and personal considerations. This would deter officers from going to the civil courts as they get to know the fact that promotions in the Armed Forces are strictly on merit. There are many other measures that could be instituted in-house to keep the officers motivated – despite their losing out on promotions.
- (b) **Sensitising the Government and Bureaucracy.** Secondly, the Government and the bureaucracy need to be more sensitive to the personal aspirations of the Armed Forces officers. An honourable exit with suitable re-employment for superseded officers would go a long way in not only reducing the number of civil court cases but would also attract bright young men to adorn the military uniform; thereby, reducing the alarming shortages that the Defence Services face in the Officer Cadre.
- (c) **Recognition in the Society at Large.** Thirdly, a career in the Armed Forces is more demanding, both physically and mentally. There is a need to make a concerted effort to seek better recognition and appreciation of the sacrifices the soldiers are required to make while performing their duties.

In-House Measures

Transparency in Promotions.

- (a) Most of the dissatisfaction among officers in the Armed Forces is due to inconsistency in promotions. The promotion policies and procedures followed in the Services are always shrouded in mystery with little or no transparency. An officer who is made to believe that he is generally doing well is shocked when he suddenly comes to know that he has not made it to the next rank. This is perhaps the main reason for his discontentment. The very basic Indian psyche of being 'good to one and all', does not permit the 'reporting officers' to counsel an officer being reported upon that he lacks certain qualities for the higher rank. Even when officers are formally counselled by the reporting officers, most of them fail to call a spade a spade. This results in a feeling amongst officers that since his superior had never apprised him that he lacks in certain qualities, he is a fit candidate for the next rank. The reporting officers, therefore, need to be more honest and straightforward in their approach while assessing an officer's potential for promotion and must apprise such officers in no uncertain terms why they consider a particular officer unfit for the higher rank. Merely writing adverse remarks in the confidential reports (CR) creates a sense of betrayal and a false belief that makes an officer overestimate his capabilities.
- (b) The next level at which transparency needs to be instituted is the promotion boards. There is a need to have a more objective assessment with little or no subjectivity. The objective assessment could be based on various factors and must not be heavily 'CR dependent'. It must cater for the officer's performance in various courses, decorations, awards, type of billets the officer has served and personal attributes recorded in the CR.
- (c) Bringing in more transparency in promotions would ensure that officers who are not fit for next higher rank and are made aware of their inadequacies, can plan an alternate career option at an early stage in life rather than be left stranded in their forties. This would greatly enhance the satisfaction levels amongst the officer cadre and would also give a boost to the image of the Armed Forces as a caring organisation.

Restoring Self Esteem. Ironically, officers when superseded are considered a burden on the organisation and downgraded to not so challenging assignments. This trend is even more damaging to the self esteem of an officer. The fact of the matter is that superseded officers are more conscientious in fulfilling their responsibilities because they want to prove a point and are seen to put in extra effort in discharge of their duties. But despite this, the prevalent thought process precludes such officers from being appointed to challenging assignments. Services can gain a lot by appointing officers based on their capabilities, experience, attitude and professional qualification. This would go a long way in restoring the self esteem of officers.

Preparing Officers for a Second Career. Most of the officers are ill prepared to find a suitable job when they quit the Services because they are not suitably qualified to take senior management positions in the corporate sector. The officers must be encouraged to pursue higher studies whilst in Service to ensure smooth transition to a second career. Indian National Defence University (INDU), which is now being set up should begin to conduct courses which can be offered to those officers who are unlikely to move up in the Service career.

Pro-Active Placement Cells. We need to infuse fresh blood into the existing placement cells of the Services. The placement cells need to be managed on the lines of the 'top eight' Business Schools and Engineering Colleges. We have a highly talented and experienced pool of officers who leave Services every year but there are no takers. Their market value needs to be worked upon, on the same lines as the civil world to ensure that our officers are absorbed in Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) as well as in the Corporate Sector. An indifferent approach coupled with insensitivity to their needs has resulted in many officers remaining unemployed after premature retirement from Service.

Spirituality at Work Place. Galen and West noted (in 1995) that growing number of companies are setting off on spiritual journeys to create a sense of meaning and purpose at work and a connection between the company and its people.² The Services also need to introduce the concept of spirituality at work place, not only to address the issue of the officers going to civil courts but also to cultivate a healthy relationship between the organisation and its human resources (HR). There are numerous thoughts, feelings and aspirations that occupy the mind of a Serving officer and there is an urgent need to fill the void created by unfulfilled aspirations. Spiritualism is a tool to prevent anxiety, envy, insecurity and even feeling of remorse and guilt, and act as a catalyst to improve employee-employer relationship within the Services.

A Sensitive Government

The disparities in promotion pattern and status of a defence officer vis-à-vis his civilian counterparts are glaring and have been debated and written about extensively and forgotten.³ Is it not a matter of great national importance that every Government in this Country irrespective of its ideology, finds the Armed Forces ‘an instrument of last resort’ on issues related from internal turmoil to providing succour to people affected by natural calamities. But no one in this Country has ever found time to address issues which address the legitimate concerns of the Services. There is an urgent need to restore the honour and pride of officers to not only bring them at par but to provide them an edge vis-à-vis the civil services on account of hazards of military service in matters like promotion, pay and allowances and other facilities. It is important to address the anomalies which are apparent and are severely affecting the morale of the Armed Forces officers.

It is ironical that a disciplined, trained and well educated armed forces officer does not find any takers in other Government organisations when he decides to quit after being overlooked for promotion in the Services. Despite all the inherent shortcomings in our system of governance, there is hardly any effort to absorb retired Defence Services officers in other Government organisations. Once an officer decides to take premature retirement at a young age, he is left to fend for himself and look for alternate employment in the Corporate Sector, where he has to start afresh. If the Government provides alternate employment to retired Defence Services officers, it would go a long way in providing the Country a pool of experienced officers to help in providing clean and transparent governance. However, there is a general indifference towards the Armed Forces which has resulted in overlooking the talent and capabilities of the retired Defence Services officers.

Recognition in the Society

In the 20 years after 1991 i.e. since economic liberalisation and globalisation, attractiveness of the military as a career option has dropped. A public survey in 1995, to gauge the popularity of a military career, revealed that among the career choices, “the armed forces rank at the bottom”.⁴ The youth today is striving for financially lucrative careers at a young age – which in their perception is not possible in the Armed Forces.

A military officer commanded a distinct place in the Indian society a couple of decades back and it was considered a singular honour when a young man from any family was commissioned into the Indian Armed Forces. There was an aura that surrounded a military officer and the rare sight of a soldier in the civvy street gave a sense of security to an onlooker. The troops marching through the villages at night during various exercises in border areas gave the village folk a sense of assurance that ‘all is well’. Every young boy was inspired to adorn the uniform of the Indian Armed Forces.

But it is not so any more. A young boy keeps a career in the Armed Forces as his last choice i.e. after he has exhausted all his options. Parents want their children to join the Civil Services or to become doctors, engineers, or to join the corporate sector. A career in such professions brings in a hefty pay package, more respect and prosperity for the family. Even the prospects of finding a suitable bride are brighter. So, where does that leave a military officer? The answer is that after serving 20 odd years in uniform he cannot even identify himself with the roots from where he started his military career and finds himself at crossroads with a dead end staring at him in all directions.

Recent incidents of corruption and other incidents related to the Defence Services, although not pardonable by any stretch of imagination, should not be overplayed in the media and elsewhere. Services have an in-house system of investigation; and this system is competent in finding facts as well as punishing the guilty. Furthermore, there are many stakeholders whose main aim is to demean the Services and create an adverse image of the Services. Such tendencies need to be curbed, to enhance the image of our Services in the civil society.

News of Service personnel approaching civil courts for justice and media hype on scams related to Defence Services depicts officers in poor light. Immediate remedial measures need to be instituted to prevent such aberrations. A more positive image of the Armed Forces needs to be created in the civil society and an officer in uniform ought to be seen as an honest, straightforward and efficient individual. For every scandal that is reported in the media there are hundreds of heroic deeds representing valour, sacrifice and bravery of our officers that go unreported. The Public Relations Organisation of the Services must be more pro-active to build a positive image in a society where media plays a key role in the formation of public opinion.

Balancing Personal Aspirations and Service Requirements

A Supreme Court Bench comprising Justices Markandey Katju and TS Thakur had expressed their concern by observing that “Armed Forces are disciplined, that is the reason why they do not protest or hold violent rallies. But they are returning medals in thousands and some have even burnt their artificial limbs in protest.” It identified lack of grievance redressal mechanism as the key reason. They even drew attention to Chanakya’s advice to Chandragupta as the king to take good care of the army since it was crucial for the security of his kingdom.⁵

These observations are an indicator to the extent of damage that has already been done to the Armed Forces in India. A serving officer will never protest in public, because the inherent military value system prevents him from doing so. But the protests by

ex-servicemen on issues ranging from unresolved anomalies from previous pay commissions (rank pay – 4th CPC), pensions, disability pensions to re-employment, reflect the cumulative effect of unfulfilled aspirations whilst they were in Service and after retirement. Do we need to do more for the personnel of the Armed Forces? Are their ways and means to meet the aspirations of Service officers whilst keeping the Service requirements in the forefront? The answer is an emphatic ‘yes’, provided a sincere effort is made by those who matter.

‘Service comes first always and every time’ and there is no doubt that the Armed Forces require officers with vision, charisma, intelligence and initiative to carry-out the most challenging and honourable task of defending our Country. There is a need to have energetic leaders at the higher echelons of power in the Armed Forces and there

should be no compromise when it comes to the issue of promoting the right man to the right job. But those who get left out on promotions, due to whatever reasons, also need to be accommodated – not in terms of higher promotions, but definitely in terms of pay, perks, allowances and recognition in the society. These officers need to be provided the requisite avenues to keep them motivated through measures like rehabilitation courses, foreign assignments, command appointments and recognition in terms of honours and awards. Civil society, media and political leaders can play a pivotal role in ensuring recognition and respect for the Service officers. The Armed Forces in particular and the Country in general will undoubtedly gain a lot if the personal aspirations of this group of officers, who form a large chunk at the middle level, are fulfilled.

Endnotes

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@Commander Sunil Dogra was commissioned into the Executive Branch of the Indian Navy on 01 Jul 1990. Presently, he is posted in the 7th Pay Commission Cell (Navy), IHQ, MoD (Navy), New Delhi.

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