

## The Ethos of the Indian Armed Forces

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*The greatest love a person can have for his friends is to give his life for them.*

- *John: 15:9-17*

**T**he Indian Army draws its ethos from the philosophy and

beliefs of the society that it serves and of which, it is an integral part. It draws its vigour and vitality from the deep sources of strength that has moulded successive generations of soldiers from India's ancient past. No people or race, however, can remain unchanged with the passage of time. Great leaders like Chandragupta Maurya, Ashoka, Samudragupta, Shivaji, Ranjit Singh, Krishna Deva Raya, Guru Nanak and Mahatma Gandhi, to name a few, realised that change is inevitable but that it must be for the better. Both, ancient and modern values have shaped the ethos and the moral code of the Indian Army which is an amalgam of diverse philosophies, traditions and beliefs drawn from the rich tapestry of histories, myths and cultures of the various races that make up India's heterogeneous whole.

The 'unity in diversity' phenomenon of India is truly astonishing. The beliefs and value systems of the *Marathas*, *Sikhs*, *Dogras*, *Garhwalis*, *Tamils*, *Malayalees*, *Andhraites*, *Kashmiris*, *Coorgis*, *Assamese*, *Manipuris*, *Punjabis*, *Jats*, *Rajputs*, *Nagas*, *Bengalis*, *Mizos*, *Oriyas*, *Gorkhas*, the residents of the Konkan coast and many other clans, tribes and communities have all contributed to the ethos of the Indian Army to make it truly representative of the Indian nation. It is the fusion of these diverse cultures, philosophies and traditions that continue to be the bedrock of the attitude and behaviour of the Indian soldier that teaches him how to live and behave in peace and how to fight and die in war.

The fate of a nation in war depends on how well its soldiers fight. War has the ability to discover the quality of an army and the nature of its soldiers. It would, however, be foolish to wait for war to discover its proficiency and potential. It is here that the ethos of an army plays its vital part in shaping it before it goes to war. This includes an emphasis on a high moral code, sound leadership, good training and high morale. How well soldiers fight depends much on how well they are trained, motivated and led. Leadership at every level, therefore, plays a critical role in translating the ethos of the Indian Army into performance in peace and war.

The selection of leaders, therefore, is important. Nations which recruit their officers and soldiers with methods that analyse character, sense of duty, commitment, integrity and self-discipline are more likely to get men of moral and physical courage, particularly if the system is able to weed out candidates with character defects; rather than nations which make up deficiencies in their cadres by allowing entry of candidates who do not measure up to the exacting demands that war makes on its soldiers. Selection systems should, therefore, be able to identify persons with qualities of integrity, self-discipline, self-sacrifice, honour, commitment and personal example – qualities that will make them think and act beyond self and for the good of larger causes and institutions, like the country and the people of India. The moral force that drives the conduct of soldiers in war is based on love. Love may not be a very military word but it is on the altar of love that men and women in uniform place their lives in the line of fire and, if necessary, make the ultimate sacrifice and disappear in the smoke and fire of battle – love for India, love for its people, love for the Regiment, love for adventure, and for a way of life that has no equal.

There are many sources that have fashioned the contours of the philosophy and ethos of the armies of medieval India. Stories of Rajput chivalry is one of them. Most of these stories are heroic in concept and teach adherence to truth and the pledged word whatever the consequence, faithfulness unto death, loyalty, honour, and sacrifice for the common good. They have always maintained their traditions of fearlessness, chivalry, love for battle, and utter disregard for life when it came to defending their honour

and the integrity of their women and their kingdoms. Soldiering, for the Rajput, was not only his profession but also his love.

In southern India, for more than a thousand year after the *Mauryan* Empire had shrunk, and ceased to exist, great states flourished. The *Andhras*, the *Chalukyas*, the *Rashtrakutas*, and the *Pallavas* were powerful kingdoms, some of who had conquered Sri Lanka and Southern Burma. The Indo-Aryan theory and practice of warfare was strictly followed and illegitimate methods of warfare were not permitted. They believed that war for a righteous cause must be righteously conducted. The tragedy, however, is that throughout history, Indian states never united against a common enemy whether it was the Moguls, the British, French, Dutch or the Portuguese. Divisiveness was the cause of their downfall.

The *Marathas*, at their zenith, suggested some form of a nation state. The *Maratha* power was swift in its growth because it was founded on new principles. Shivaji established himself against the Mughals and was eminently successful in his use of guerrilla warfare as his strategy to defeat them. Had he lived longer, and had his principles been followed by his successors; the *Maratha* spirit would possibly have grown into nationalism. Shivaji owes his success to discipline, simple habits, and care and concern for his soldiers who were mobile, hardy and united. He enforced a high moral code amongst his troops. Looting was prohibited and women were treated with respect. His troops had the military virtues of discipline and fidelity; they could move fast and manoeuvre quickly against the enemy. The *Maratha* Empire continued to grow as long as the character qualities demanded by Shivaji were maintained.

The Sikhs are another race that has contributed significantly to the ethos of the Indian Army. After the martyrdom of *Guru Arjun Singh*, the Sikhs changed from a pacifist to a martial lot. Arjun's son, Hargobind, who succeeded him as the sixth Guru, organised his following into an army. The final transformation of the Sikhs into a martial sect came with the last of the ten Gurus, Gobind Singh who succeeded to the guruship at the tender age of nine. Later, at Anandpur, he began to organise the Sikhs into a fighting force. He described his mission in the following words: "To uphold

right in every place and destroy sin and evil; that right may triumph, that good may live and tyranny be uprooted from the land". Guru Gobind realised that in order to change the peaceful followers of Guru Nanak, he had not only to teach them the use of arms but also to convince them of the morality of the use of force. He said, "Light your understanding as a lamp and sweep away the filth of timidity". With this mission he set about earnestly to 'to teach the sparrow how to hunt the hawk and one man to have the courage to fight a legion'.

Ranjit Singh is the next most important figure in Sikh military history, next to Guru Gobind Singh, and is the Sikhs' venerated warrior. He united the Sikhs into the Khalsa brotherhood. He expanded the basis of his state from a religious to a secular one, giving positions of power and trust in civil and military matters to Muslims and Hindus without any discrimination. He raised the most powerful fighting force in two thousand years and brought the traditional conquerors of India – the Pathans and the Afghans – to their knees. However, even at the peak of his power he did not lose the common touch. He was devoid of arrogance and, despite his many conquests, he did not allow wanton destruction of life or property. He led his army personally into battle and risked his life like the rest of his troops. His values rubbed on to the Sikhs, his followers, who form a sizeable portion of the Indian Army of today. The focus of the ethos of the armed forces of India, therefore, is to prepare its members for their ultimate test, which is conduct in war.

The destiny of a nation during times of war often hangs in the balance on the outcome of a battle and the outcome of a battle often depends on the courage and competence of its soldiers. Regimental spirit is one of the primary motivators that make men fight without counting the cost. In the history of our armed forces, there have been many instances where men have performed outstanding acts of courage for the sake of their regiment. To them, it did not matter if they died as long as the honour of the regiment was protected. The regimental spirit of units of the Indian Army, and the traditions which nurtured them, is the strength of the fighting arms, particularly in times of war. It is this 'cause' larger than the 'self' that is the ultimate of all motivators that has

fortified men against death and put 'duty above fear' and 'death above dishonour'. Anyone, therefore, who meddles with the composition of our regiments, does so only at the peril of our nation's safety.

Leading men into battle is a privilege given to very few. It is an awesome responsibility because both, the officer and the men he leads, are aware that some of them may not come back alive. Leadership, therefore, has to be of the highest order. The officers of the Indian Army lead from the front and the exhortation is 'Follow Me! Therefore, percentage wise, the casualty rate of officers is very high. My own Battalion – the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion the 5<sup>th</sup> Gorkha Rifles (Frontier Force) entered the 1971 war with eighteen officers and at the end of a fourteen day war, only seven survived unscathed. Four were killed and seven badly wounded.

The Indian soldier is amongst the best in the world because he too is imbued with the qualities of putting country above all else. He follows his officers unquestioningly and undergoes great discomfort in unbelievably difficult circumstances without complaint because he knows that his officer is there right in front facing the maximum danger and setting the right example. The ethos of the armed forces is the life-blood of its members and inspires them to carry out extraordinary acts of courage. A few examples of leadership, and the outcomes that it generates, would be useful to understand the important part that honour, courage, self-sacrifice and personal example plays in translating these beliefs into action.

A classic example of leadership linked with the honour of the Regiment is the battle of Dograi. In the Indo-Pak war of 1965, Lieutenant Colonel Desmond Hayde led 3 Jat to capture Dograi across the Ichhogil Canal. It was a hard fought battle and many soldiers were killed and wounded. However, the Brigade was not able to reinforce the Battalion and 3 Jat was ordered to withdraw from the area it had captured. The Battalion was unhappy and considered this to be a slur to its honour. Therefore, when Dograi had to be recaptured, 3 Jat volunteered to be in the forefront. For them, it was a matter of honour to be given the privilege to recapture Dograi. But by then the Pakistanis had reinforced Dograi with armour and infantry and the capture of Dograi would

be even that much more difficult. On the eve of the battle, the Commanding Officer addressed the men in Haryanvi (the vernacular of his troops). He made it clear to them that the battle would be tough and that many more would be killed and wounded. And then he said: "I will be leading you into battle and if I die, I want you to carry me to Dograi because I want to be there with you – dead or alive"! And then he said: "Where will we be tomorrow morning"? and the Battalion roared "In Dograi"! Many more were killed and many more wounded but Dograi was recaptured in an epic battle by the invincible 3 Jat. But what was it that made 3 Jat so invincible? And the answer is Regimental spirit and morale.

When Desmond Hayde was an instructor, as a Captain, at the Indian Military Academy, he constantly dinned into our young minds that '*Battles are won or lost in the minds of men, before they are won or lost on the ground!*' He made this happen at Dograi under impossible conditions and this battle continues to remain an outstanding example of Regimental honour and courage and exemplifies what the ethos of the Indian Army is all about.

Self-sacrifice is another characteristic of leadership that inspires the soldier to go beyond the call of duty. An example of self-sacrifice is what happened in the Navy during the 1971 war. So successful were the two attacks by the Indian Navy on Karachi that the Pakistani Navy bolted into Karachi harbour and refused to fight. However, their submarine arm was far superior to ours and they were successful in sinking *INS Khukri*. Captain Mahendra Nath Mulla, the captain of the Khukri, when faced with the choice of saving his own life, rejected the easy option because it was not part of his character to save his life when his men were trapped in the sinking ship and he gave his own life jacket to a sailor who was without one. As a leader, he practiced what he believed was right – to his very last breath – when he chose to go down with his ship because he could not accept that he should save his own life when he could not save the lives of his men. Personal acts of cold courage like this are rare to come by, and when they do, they shake the world by their heroic content and epitomise the moral code which is so much part of the ethos of the armed forces. The

way he lived, and the way he died, has become part of the folklore of the Indian Navy and a guiding light not only to the officers and sailors of the Navy but also to all personnel of India's Armed Forces.

Another example of self-sacrifice is what happened in a raid across the border by the Indian Air Force (IAF) during the 1965 war. Squadron Leader 'Tubby Devayya' set a strong example of cool courage and diehard determination in the face of impossible odds. On an attack on the Pakistani airfield at Sargodha, he was faced with the option of returning to his air base in India or engaging in combat with a supersonic Pakistani Starfighter, which was far superior in weapons and avionics to his subsonic Mystere. His orders were to return to base because his fuel was just enough to hit Sargodha and return. However, being the last aircraft at the tail-end of his wave, it was also his duty to protect the other aircraft of the team of which he was a part. So he turned around and took on the Pakistani Starfighter in an unequal combat setting. Although the Pakistani pilot was able to damage his aircraft, Devayya continued to take on the Starfighter and managed to destroy it but was killed in the process. He lies today buried in a corner of a farmer's field in Pakistan. His action is an outstanding example of self-sacrifice of the highest order in keeping with the moral code set out in the code of conduct he was taught when he was a young pilot officer in the IAF.

There are many other stories that exemplify the spirit of the armed forces but there is a limit to stories. However, this account would be incomplete if one does not look at the conduct of Lieutenant Manoj Pandey and Captain Vikram Batra, whose exemplary conduct during the Kargil war typifies the code of conduct of the armed services officers groomed at the defence academies – the cradles of leadership.

Lieutenant Manoj Pandey constantly and persistently volunteered for the most difficult missions. In his diary, he had noted before the commencement of the war, "*If death strikes before I prove my blood, I promise I will kill death*". Philosophical words from one so young! He continued to lead mission after mission on the snow covered slopes of the Kargil mountains and, at last, when he was mortally wounded and lay dying on his last

mission, he said, "*I regret that I have only one life to give up for my country*".

Captain Vikram Batra became an icon well before the termination of the Kargil war. Due to his many skirmishes with the enemy, he was nicknamed 'Sher Shah' by the Pakistanis and that is how they addressed him above the tumult and din of battle. He is the one who made famous the quote '*Dil mange more*'<sup>1</sup> that typifies the spirit of the Indian Army. Prior to his last mission, he said, "*Either I will come back after hoisting the tricolour or I will come back wrapped in it but I will be back for sure*"! Prophetic words because that is what happened. He died saving the life of another soldier after a series of missions in which he displayed uncommon qualities of leadership, sacrifice and love for his country and his men.

Both officers were awarded the Param Vir Chakra – India's highest award for gallantry in war.

Equally important, however, is the selection of senior leaders of the armed forces. It is they who set the pace and ensure the high code of conduct which is the essence of the character and spirit of the armed forces. Some countries are allergic to appointing strong Chiefs. They prefer to select someone who would be pliable and who would toe the government line. This is a catastrophic way of thinking. All armed forces need strong Chiefs who understand the threats that face the nation and take appropriate measures to ensure the security and sovereignty of the country. They need to have Chiefs who have long term strategic vision and ensure that the armed forces have the requisite weapons and infrastructure to face all possible threats, and that the morale of the armed forces remains at an exalted level.

Selection of pliable Chiefs will result in the government having its own way in matters it has little understanding of and is not competent to handle. This is the first step to disaster and by the time the government tries to make amends it will find that it is too late. Such an instance occurred in India in 1962, when an army officer with political connections, who had never commanded a company, battalion or brigade, was found fit by the government

to command a corps in NEFA. The result was a humiliating defeat. Nine years later, during the Indo-Pak war of 1971, India was fortunate to have a strong set of Chiefs – Army, Navy and Air force – and the result was an outstanding victory, the liberation of East Pakistan and the birth of Bangladesh, and a great honour that projected India as a strong regional power.

High morale is the most important weapon in the arsenal of any army. It is also a principle of war and a weapon which relies on honour, physical and moral courage, integrity, professional competence, discipline, sense of duty, commitment, dedication, a spirit of self-sacrifice, and high standards of training. It also depends on how well soldiers are treated. Kautilya, the advisor to the *Mauryan* emperors, has in his discourses made it clear that soldiers will fight well if they are treated well. General Sam Manekshaw was one Chief who echoed Kautilya's teachings and under his leadership, the Indian Army did exceedingly well because, in addition to his great qualities of leadership, his concern for the welfare of his officers and men motivated the Indian Army to outstanding performance in battle.

The Indian Armed Forces have, over the years, earned a place in the hearts and minds of the nation. In consequence, they have been given honour, status and privileges which have been earned on the battlefield with the blood of countless soldiers. Removal of these privileges and status adversely affects the morale of the armed forces. Destroy morale and you destroy an army. The ethos of the Indian Armed Forces, therefore, has to be understood and protected. Without high morale, an army will find it difficult to fight. A typical example of poor morale, which resulted in an army's loss of will to fight, is what happened to the Pakistan Army in East Pakistan in 1971. In that war, the officers and the soldiers were given license to murder, rape and loot the citizens of East Pakistan. Led by debauched officers, depraved Pakistani soldiers lost all sense of good conduct and morality. Men were massacred and women, and young girls, raped and killed. As a result of this diabolical behaviour, the soldiers lost all respect for their officers and also their own self-respect and when that happened, the Pakistanis lost the will to fight and were convincingly defeated.

The ethos of the Indian Armed Forces, however, needs to be alive to the ethos and code of conduct, both military and political, of countries inimical to India. Whereas the ethos of the Indian Armed Forces flows from the nation's belief that progress and development must be through peaceful means, we must be alert to the aims and ambitions of both China and Pakistan who seek to destroy India through every means possible and cloak their aims and intentions with deceit, duplicity and guile. Individual or collective acts of heroism, therefore, are not enough. The Indian Army needs to move with the times and the practice of *dharma'yuddha* needs to be tempered to an understanding of the practice of treachery and deception followed by our hostile neighbours. We need to be clear that both China and Pakistan are doing everything to destroy us. So, what are we doing about it? Our long term strategies need to take into account the aims of Chinese hegemony, and Pakistan's eternal urge to wrest Kashmir from India. We need to be self-sufficient in weapons and technology, and not dependent on countries whose loyalties and affiliations could change with the passage of time. But for this, we need a succession of leaders, civil and military, who have vision and who can ensure India's place of honour in the world 50 years from now. It needs to be remembered that the defence budget for 2019-20 has been the lowest since India became independent.

The armed forces of any nation, therefore, need to work towards making their government understand that unless the needs of the army, navy and air force are met in a substantial way, they will not be able to do their duty to protect the nation against its hostile neighbours. This cannot, and will not, happen if the Chiefs of the army, navy and air force selected by the government are persons who will supinely accept decisions that affect the armed forces to fight competently. The American magazine Time, when reporting on the Sino-Indian war of 1962, stated, "*The Indian Army lacks everything except courage*".

Good ethos of any military does not mean subservience to unsound decisions and defective directions by politicians. This happened in India in 1962, when the Prime Minister favoured the strategy of a policeman heading the Intelligence Bureau over the strategy of competent military officers. Shri BN Mullick projected a

strategy, called the '*Forward Policy*', which had no strategic or tactical sense whatsoever, but Prime Minister Nehru accepted this policy and rejected the strategy presented to him by the Indian Army. The result was a humiliating and decisive defeat. Unfortunately, the Army Chief of that time had no moral courage to stand up to interference in military matters by unqualified agencies. The ethos of the armed forces took a beating because the military hierarchy did not stand up to political wrongdoing. The translation of the ethos of the armed forces into action on the ground lies on the shoulders of every member of the armed forces. Whereas the military history of the Indian Army in 1962 is replete with outstanding acts of courage by the rank and file, the same cannot be said of the military hierarchy who caved in to wrong decisions without taking a stand.<sup>2</sup> There is a saying, '*An army of sheep led by a lion will fight better than an army of lions led by a sheep*'.

Whereas the ethos of the armed forces lays down loyalty and obedience to the Constitution, the country and the government, it cautions its members against the divisiveness of politics. The difference between the government in power and a political party may at times be wafer thin, but the armed forces must be clear that their loyalty lies to the Constitution and the country only and not to any political party. If there is a doubt then, the Heads of the armed forces must have the courage to stand up to orders that violate the Constitution, and if that doesn't work then to resign rather than accept wrong orders to the detriment of the country and its people. An excellent example in this regard, on a minor matter, occurred when Sanjay Gandhi, the son of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and leader of the Youth Congress, rang up Lieutenant General Inder Gill, the then Army Commander Western Command, requesting for military barracks for his Youth Congress personnel, after requests by his officials were turned down by the staff of Headquarters Western Command. General Gill made it clear to Sanjay Gandhi that the Youth Congress was part of a political party and, therefore, they were not eligible to receive any assistance from the military and the matter ended there. Whereas this may have been a small matter, the principle remains the same.

General KM Cariappa, India's first Army Chief, made it clear that the Indian Army would be 'apolitical'. He echoed the thoughts of other senior army officers who felt that to have a politically oriented army was to head for disaster. A soldier's duty and loyalty is to his country and not to any political party or to any political figure. It has no business in political matters. The military owes its allegiance to an elected government and, through it, to the people of India. The military in India has never been disposed to intervention. The military has to be content to do its own duty and to do it to the best of its ability. They need, however, to voice their concern when the government falls short of its commitment to give the security forces the wherewithal to execute their duty.<sup>3</sup> The ethos of the Indian Army is allergic not only to the divisiveness of politics but also the divisiveness caused by religion. In the Indian Army, it is spirituality that shapes the attitude and behaviour of its officers and soldiers towards God. Religion in the army is a personal matter and the army focuses on the integration of men of all faiths to emphasise 'unity in diversity' and working closely together with differences intact.

In single-class units like the Sikhs, *Gorkhas*, the *Garhwalis*, *Kumaonis*, and other one-class units, religion does continue to be a motivating factor in war and peace. In such units, religious functions are considered to be a parade. Officers and men of other faiths attend such functions as part of their military duties. This helps in cementing regimental bonds and the officer man relationship. In mixed-class units; the *mandir*, *masjid*, *gurudwara*, and *girja ghar* are often seen together as separate parts but under one roof, with men of different faiths attending each other's religious functions. In the Indian Army, all religions are respected and there is no difference whatsoever in consideration of creed, cast and community. In all the wars that India has fought before and after Independence, soldiers of different faiths have fought shoulder to shoulder with outstanding results.

It needs to be remembered that in the Indo-Pak war of 1971, although the majority of the generals were of the Hindu faith, the Indian Army had a Parsi Chief, a Sikh Army Commander, a Jew as the Chief of Staff of Eastern Command, a Sikh as the Director of Military Operations, a Christian as the Commander of a Strike Corps on the Western front, and three Christian officers

commanding infantry divisions spear heading offensive operations on both fronts. It is this unity in diversity that makes the Indian Army the finest in the world. There is no distinction, whatsoever, in the Indian Armed Forces between caste, creed and community. In this respect, the Indian Army is an example to the world in contrast to the army of our western neighbour where the dictates of religion are paramount.

As has been said at the beginning of this article, the ethos of the Indian Armed Forces draws its inspiration from the beliefs of its people and, therefore, the government elected by the people of India needs to reflect the beliefs and aspirations of the people of India in its policies, programmes and strategies. India is a spiritual country and people of various faiths believe that belief in God and a high moral conduct is essential for progress of the country in peace and war. This belief needs to permeate into the conscious mind of every person of the armed forces, from the Chief to the junior most soldier, sailor and airman. This consciousness must translate into a habit because habits transform attitude, which in turn affects behaviour and, which in turn, affects conduct. It is this that motivates personnel of the armed forces to put country first, courage beyond fear, and death above dishonour.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Translates as “The Heart Wants More”

<sup>2</sup> Regimental tradition narrates an allegorical example in this regard. An officer asked the Regimental Contractor of his Unit to provide him with a cycle on hire. The Contractor asked the officer, “Should it have a carrier or a stand?” On the officer asking the Contractor what was the difference; he was told, “Sahib, in the Army you have to decide what is more important - your career or taking a stand!”

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Cohen. *The Indian Army*, Delhi, pp.166-168.

<sup>4</sup>Major General Ian Cardozo, AVSM, SM (Retd) was commissioned into 1/5 Gurkhas and fought in the 1965 and 1971 wars with 4/5 Gurkhas. He was wounded in the battle of Sylhet in 1971 where his foot was so badly mangled that he had to amputate it himself. He commanded an Infantry Division and was the Chief of Staff of a Corps. He is a military historian of repute and a prolific writer.

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