

## **Leadership Below Officer Level in the Indian Armed Forces\***

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*"Leadership is a complex phenomenon, leaders are both born and made, but mostly made."*

- General George S. Patton Jr.<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

The above quote reveals complexity of the leadership phenomenon. It is a phenomenon which comprises various personality traits like bearing, courage, decisiveness, endurance and initiative etc. Modern psychology claims that different personality traits are responsible for various types of leadership. These traits cannot be analysed in isolation. Blending them leads to an overall leadership style. A widely accepted definition of leadership describes it as 'an act of conducting, guiding and persuading'. It has been recognised that for one man to obey another with some enthusiasm, there ought to be something in common. Any individual from a group can become a leader subject to a chance given to him. It is a proven fact that these traits always form part of the overall personality of an individual. These inherent traits in a person can always be improved upon and brought out by regular training.<sup>2</sup>

Till recently, in the Indian Armed Forces it was a moot point that we do not have able leadership below officer level. During the period from 2000 to 2010, when induction into the officer cadre was short by 20 per cent, this weak link in our junior military leadership was identified clearly. Today, when the Armed Forces are facing shortage of young officers, do we have sufficient leaders below officer level? With the severe shortage of young officers – in units/ sub units, can we continue to employ young officers to perform all minor tasks? Why can we not employ Non

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Commissioned Officers (NCOs) and Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs) instead, to perform these routine tasks confidently? To find an answer to this question, we need to carry out a systemic introspection. The quality of leadership below officer level is very crucial for the Armed Forces. The burden of work on young officers can be reduced by employing JCOs / NCOs for routine duties; which would relieve them for employment in more complex tasks. This essay explores the answers to the above questions.

**Role of Senior NCOs and JCOs.** The British Indian Army was led by British officers to uphold loyalty to the British Crown. But, the personnel below officer rank (PBOR), the natives of India, were separated from the British officers by language, socio-economic status, local customs and life style. To bridge this gap the British Army felt the need of having junior leaders of similar background as the natives. They were entrusted with some additional authority to command and control a group of soldiers during operations and peace time. In 1929-30, they were given the status of 'below officer rank', but above the natives. The authority and powers of these junior leaders were not laid down in any manuals / documents. British officers in command (in field) were privileged to employ these junior leaders according to the situation.

After 1947, the Indian Army retained the same colonial concept. It is true that the existing system is time proven and won laurels in the past operations. But, the system has failed to adjust with the changing environment. What are the factors that have led to this situation? Do our JCOs and NCOs have the ability to take decisions in dire situations? Do we impart adequate training to them to carry additional responsibilities, distinctly apart from the tasks given to them in the colonial days? Do we impart training during induction period to enhance their utility commensurate with their ability and potential? The answers to these questions would mostly be 'No'. Apart from these factors the system has some inherent weaknesses.

**Weaknesses.** Inherited perception and thinking led to notable neglect in upgrading the standard of leadership training of PBOR. This weakness needed more attention, especially after Kargil War. Following weaknesses have inhibited the growth of leadership



qualities in PBOR :-

- (a) Age factor of JCOs.
- (b) Levels of education and intelligence.
- (c) Limited exposure to various situations in initial years of training and service.
- (d) Aiming for personal benefits from higher authorities.
- (e) Introducing regionalism, nepotism and favouritism.
- (f) '*Chalta hai*' and '*Sahab se pucho*' attitude i.e. avoiding excellence and responsibility.
- (g) Fear of being looked down upon among colleagues and losing face.

Organisational factors which have contributed to these weaknesses are discussed in the succeeding paragraphs.

**Intake Standard.** Since Independence enrolment of the Other Ranks (OR) in the Armed Forces are based on recruitment rallies and drives. No test to evaluate the qualities of character and leadership of a recruit is conducted. Later, on becoming a NCO / JCO, the organisation expects him to display leadership qualities to meet varying situations; whereas, throughout his career these aspects are ignored. Then it becomes a herculean task to train the individual to imbibe the required qualities to reach the expected standard.

**Leadership Training in Service.** This is an important facet of military training. Leadership training should start *ab-initio* from the recruit training stage and it should continue to be upgraded at various stages in an OR's career. Unfortunately, this aspect has been given very little attention and importance.

**Reluctance in Taking Decisions.** To keep their own tail clear, the PBOR always follow the principle of getting back to the immediate senior, whenever in doubt. They are unwilling to take minor decisions; and whenever they do, later they do not accept responsibility for the same. This aspect got highlighted very clearly while examining the incident, when in 2008, a JCO failed to save his ambulance from a mob in Jammu & Kashmir.

**Personal Factors.** As per Freud's Theory in Psychology, every individual has some personality traits which control his behaviour

in day to day life. If an individual's character and integrity are questioned, as a matter of rule, then he cannot become a successful leader among his subordinates. The recent developments in society have produced varying effects on the character of an individual. These trends have not spared the Armed Forces as well. The Armed Forces have not modified the system to check and balance the effects of these social trends, and the responsibility to keep his image and integrity untarnished, is left to the individual.

**Centralisation of Responsibility.** As no mistakes are accepted by the higher echelons, various authorities at the middle level do not take any chances. Even for petty jobs an officer is detailed; although the same could be easily done by a NCO / JCO. It leads to lowering of morale of both the officers and the men. A leader below officer level is not even allowed functional independence to carry out his task. To reach the stage of combat decision-making in war; a section/platoon commander (which essentially implies a NCO/JCO) has to learn to take decisions during peace time soldiering. Due to dilution of authority and over-centralisation of responsibility, JCOs / NCOs get into the habit of looking over their shoulders all the time.

**Curbing Initiative.** Initiative is the essence of a leader's character. This quality, amongst other important factors, helps him to come out with innovative ideas. There is a growing tendency in the officer cadre to curb the initiative of NCOs / JCOs. The NCOs and JCOs need to be groomed in a planned and progressive manner by decentralisation of responsibility.

**Rigid Frame of Mind.** It is said that to get an old idea out is more difficult than to introduce a new idea. The present higher echelon officers (because during their younger days the strength of officers was sufficient) believe that no OR can be a good leader. Some of them believe that only officers should be employed to accomplish all tasks. This thinking has led to neglect of the idea of imparting leadership training to NCOs and JCOs.

## **Remedial Measures**

**Reorientation of Leadership Training.** Today, employment of Armed Forces is not limited to conventional war situations only. Their commitment in internal peacekeeping, counterinsurgency and



low intensity conflicts etc. has grown over a period of time. Due to shortage of young officers and unsatisfactory state of leadership standard amongst NCOs and JCOs, it would be difficult for the Armed Force to perform their enhanced tasks/role with required efficiency. Since officers would not be available to take decisions everywhere, NCOs and JCOs have to be trained to take vital decisions at lower levels of leadership. To meet this requirement leadership training for junior leaders below officer level needs modification and reorientation by initiating following measures:—

(a) **Recruitment Procedure.** Evaluation of a large number of recruits for assessing leadership qualities is a difficult task. The present recruitment procedure should include a simple psychological test to identify key leadership traits. Result of this test, in the Record of Service, would later help in selection of right individuals for nurturing leadership qualities during their service career.

(b) **Induction Level Training.** Result of psychological test should be used as a base during initial training at the basic training establishments. Firstly, a discreet check on character and leadership traits should be maintained during this phase of their training. Thereafter, the parent units should take on the responsibility of guiding individual soldiers to attain their full leadership potential.

(c) **NCO Level Training.** During the initial stage of training in the units, periodical review of leadership traits should be conducted. These reviews should highlight the positive and negative character traits clearly. At the end of about 10 years service, a formal training capsule on leadership training should be conducted to select NCOs for training at regimental centres. They should also be tested at various levels of responsibility like detachment, section and platoon. These evaluations could help in ascertaining the level of responsibility that can be given to individuals. Suitable candidates should be subjected to section / platoon level tactical exercises. Successful NCOs should be screened to assess their eligibility for promotion to the JCO rank.

(d) **JCO Level Training.** When a NCO becomes a JCO, he generally experiences a period of stagnancy in his career. At

this stage, he is neither part of a working party nor is he a working party commander. Therefore, in day to day functioning he needs to be given more responsibility, as this will give him confidence to shoulder bigger responsibilities, both, in peace time duties and as a leader during operations. On becoming a JCO, he needs training capsules on leadership so that he keeps abreast with the newly commissioned officers. Officers with adequate maturity and experience should guide the JCOs to become better leaders.

### **Role of Senior NCO / JCO**

*"No man is a leader until his appointment is ratified  
in the minds and hearts of his men".*

– DAG Hammarksjold

The responsibilities of a NCO and JCO should be defined in doctrines / pamphlets of the Armed Forces. These should be followed in letter and spirit at unit / sub unit level. The employability of a NCO/JCO, to take on the duties / responsibilities of a young officer, should be increased. This would encourage him to take decisions more confidently. Any person who fails to meet these responsibilities should be identified, and counselled to show improvement in a given time frame, failing which he should be wasted out to maintain functional efficiency of the organisation.

**Knowledge and Exposure.** In modern society, anyone who selects Armed Forces as a career is well informed and educated. As he moves ahead in service and gets promoted as a NCO / JCO, he tends to ignore the importance of knowledge to develop his leadership qualities. Competence comes with knowledge because experience alone does not make a man to grow to his full potential. A NCO / JCO should be given adequate opportunities to improve knowledge relevant to his service and trade. He should be encouraged to keep abreast with the younger generation by being open to new ideas. This would enhance his ability and confidence to work with subordinates. Even as a young jawan he should be exposed to take right decisions in complex situations, as part of a detachment to carry out important tasks. This methodology will pave the way for developing his leadership qualities.

**Appraisal System.** The appraisal system for NCO / JCO in vogue needs revision to meet future requirements. New features should



be included to evaluate his character, professional acumen, level of initiative, willingness to take responsibility and other desired attributes. The officer cadre should ensure that the new appraisal system is fair and judicious.

**Role of Young Officers.** When a young officer joins the unit from the academy his interaction with men starts through NCOs and JCOs. They help him to understand the men who will follow his command in peace and war. He should establish a positive rapport with them and take care not to hurt their emotions through immature conduct on his part. Young officers should understand that the NCOs and JCOs have spent most part of their lives in the Armed Forces and are a reservoir of inherited military wisdom. He should, therefore, endeavour to help them to become good leaders by entrusting them with more responsibility. Officers critical appraisal should be directed to reinforce the confidence of a NCO / JCO. Middle level leadership in the Armed Forces should give adequate freedom to NCOs/ JCOs to perform their duties confidently.

### **Comparison with Other Armies**

In modern armies the concept of having competent NCOs has survived; but the concept of JCO has met with moderate success. The systems being followed in some foreign armies are enumerated below :-

(a) **The US Armed Forces.** Comparing the United States (US) Army with Indian Armed Forces would be an inaccurate hypothesis. In the US Army the role of NCOs in combat is vital. As a young NCO, he is given responsibility equal to, if not more, than our JCOs. <sup>3</sup> The NCO would be assessed for this on various occasions (to reach this level in his unit /sub unit). His position is quite well defined in the organisation, alongwith his role, responsibilities and duties.<sup>4</sup> The JCO like appointments in the US Armed forces are more at the formation and administrative level. The percentage of such appointments are very low in comparison to the Indian Armed Forces.

(b) **Armed Forces of NATO Nations.** Being a forerunner to the Indian Armed Forces, most of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) nations are still following the concept of

JCO rank. Functioning and grooming aspects of their leaders below officer levels are very concisely explained in their tactical / operational doctrines.<sup>5</sup> Studying these concepts indicate where we have failed in our Armed Forces.

(c) **Singapore Armed Forces (SAF).** SAF may be smaller in size; but, there are some aspects which we need to learn from them for betterment of our Armed Forces. In SAF the concept of JCO is given very less weightage. Induction of NCOs in SAF starts with a 'Reasoning and Psychological Test' at the age of 17 to 19 years. After selection they attend three years Graduation Programme in Defence Institutes. These NCOs, being backbone of SAF, become 'Specialists' or 'Subject Matter Experts' (SME) on completion of studies.<sup>6</sup> These SMEs are young in age with high potential and are able to carry out all kind of tasks during operations and peace time. After 10 years of physical service SMEs are promoted to the rank of Warrant Officers (WOs) who are equivalent to our JCOs. On becoming WOs, they are mostly employed in administrative duties; unlike the Indian Armed Forces where a JCO is expected to lead a platoon in battle. This system in SAF ensures that an NCO is competent, intelligent and young to lead a platoon during operations.

## Recommendations

The modern warfare is characterised by small detachment actions in specific tactical situations. In the prevalent system in the Indian Armed Forces, where the average age of JCOs is 38-40 yrs, they would not be able to cope with the physical requirements of modern warfare. To that extent, existing system needs to be amalgamated with a new system. The salient features of the proposed new cadre are as under :-

(a) **Age Profile.** Age profile of NCO/ JCO needs to be reduced to meet the basic requirements of modern warfare. With the reduction in age profile an NCO /JCO will be high in receptivity and more confident in taking additional responsibility to lead a detachment in peace and war.

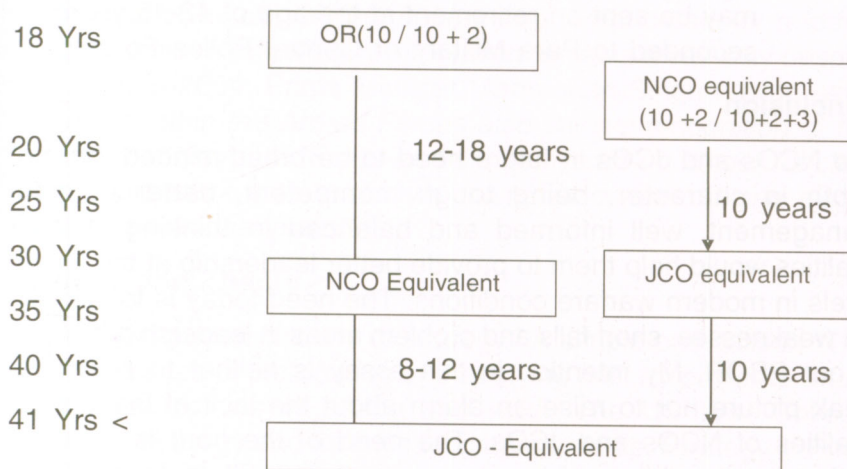
(b) **Formation of a New Cadre.** Apart from the present JCO / NCO cadre, an additional stream of direct JCO / NCO



cadre needs to be formed. Basic structure of the New Cadre would be as follows:-

<u>Age Profile</u>	<u>Present System</u>	<u>Proposed New Cadre</u>
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(Service in years)



**(c) Features of the Proposed New Cadre.**

(i) Educational qualification for the New Cadre would be 10 + 2 with preferably Diploma in Arts / Commerce / Technical field (specialisation).

(ii) Psychological test to be conducted during recruitment.

(iii) Grooming and on the job training be given for six months at unit / sub unit level.

(iv) Younger age profile increases the employability in various conditions for an NCO. He is more flexible and receptive during initial military training.

(v) On completion of 10 years of physical service NCOs should be given an option to either go out of service or to get promoted to JCO rank (through selection).

(vi) Younger JCOs (30 to 32 yrs) would be more capable than the existing JCOs. As a JCO with a

younger age profile, the individual would be available to the organisation for more than 10 years.

(vii) The present ratio of JCOs in the Indian Armed Forces may be reduced. Their employability should be more in administrative than operational roles in the units.

(viii) After 15 years of physical service as a JCO, he may be sent on retirement at the age of 42-45 years or seconded to Para Military or Central Police Forces.

## Conclusion

The NCOs and JCOs in future need to be broad-minded: having depth in character, being tough, competent, better in man management, well informed and balanced in thinking. These qualities would help them to provide better leadership at the lower levels in modern warfare conditions. The need today is to identify the weaknesses, short falls and problem areas in leadership training of our PBOR. My intention in this essay is neither to project a bleak picture nor to raise an alarm about the lack of leadership qualities of NCOs and JCOs. The need of the hour is to have professional soldiers; who are competent, willing to take on responsibility and do not have *'followers'* attitude of *"sahab se pucho"*. There is a definite need for reforming the system; else it may lead to failures during the hours of crises and need. This weak link has the possibility of remaining unnoticed during peace time but would get highlighted during operations. Such changes are not possible in a short time frame of one or two years. A clear plan and road map should be prepared so that we have combat ready Armed Forces, befitting our aspirations to be a great power.

## Endnotes

1. Dr Rakesh Khurana of Harvard Business School as quoted in his research work 'Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice'.
2. *ibid.*
3. "Field Manual - Army Regulation", [www.usmilitary.about.com](http://www.usmilitary.about.com). Accessed on 10 August 2011.
4. *ibid.*
5. "Organisation - UK & NATO Army", [www.en.wikipedia.org](http://www.en.wikipedia.org). Accessed on 10 August 2011.
6. "Command Structure", <http://www.mindef.gov.sg>. Accessed on 10 August 2011.