

Letters to the Editor

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Morale of the Armed Forces

Sir,

The Chambers dictionary defines 'morale' as the mood as regards courage and confidence in the organisation. Some of the recent events and controversies in the media—whether pertaining to corruption in the sale of canteen goods, fake citations for seeking awards, unauthorised diversion of petrol and rations for personal gains, or the role of middlemen and inducements for procurement of arms—have shown the Armed Forces in poor light. The so called 'Sukhna land scam' and the role of senior army officers in it have drawn adverse criticism in the media. It is good that we have a proactive and vigilant media. However, what the media also needs to say - which so far it has not - is the fact that even today the Armed Forces have zero tolerance for corruption, especially in comparison to most other national institutions and organisations.

The Indian Armed Forces are a large organisation. They have their own traditions, institutions and norms. In fact, by and large, they are a unique community, well respected for their distinct identity and standards. This is reflected by their conduct in national wars, natural calamities and even in its smart cantonments. This is because we operate in a time-tested systematic and transparent manner, following the norms and chain of command. The senior officers are expected to and display high moral standards, following the service norms. In case of any aberrations, the Armed Forces take swift action unlike other organisations. I am personally aware of many cases, where Army personnel have been given strict punishments, including dismissals. Which of the other national institutions can truthfully claim a similar record? However, the Armed Forces believe more in action than in presentation. That is why, even after many instances of the Armed Forces taking appropriate actions against deviant personnel, just because we have not unduly projected such actions, the media has chosen not to cover these.

It is for us to examine the reasons for the 'beatings' in the media and in the public eye, which appears to increasingly be the case although the Armed Forces of today are significantly better in many ways than that of a decade ago. We have better tools, more professional junior leaders and better fighting doctrine. We have top class training institutions and

management systems, well supported by regimental customs and excellent opportunities for sports and adventure. However, we have not projected these well in the public domain, because of our traditional aloofness inherited from our colonial heritage or the perception of the 'security syndrome' which is often misplaced. Thus, we are also not getting the better talent which we should ideally attract.

The Armed Forces have to operate in an environment which cannot be immune to the pressures and influences of the society. These must, however be resisted strongly by senior leaders in the Services. We have allowed influence in matters of promotions and extensions of services in a few cases of senior officers. We also have to realise that our political leadership is generally not aware of military ethos, conventions and doctrines. They are dependant on the civil servants who process all our cases, even though they are no specialists or experts in any military issues. We do not have a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) to render single point military advice or resolve inter-service priorities.

The 'combat edge' has been allowed to be eroded. We have got used to accepting directions and saying 'yes'. Civil servants and politicians have got used to taking the Armed Forces for granted, and also exploiting intra-service differences. But taking the Armed Forces for granted places us all as a Nation at peril. The Nation was surprised at Kargil and again in the November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai for want of adequate surveillance means. But despite these scares and attacks, acquisitions still remain slow. As a Nation and a society we are quick to point fingers, and when in danger to rely on our Forces, but we have become far too selfish and self-centred to constructively strengthen them materially and morally.

In such circumstances, how can one upgrade the morale of our Armed Forces. Modern wars are fought on the strength of technological superiority of the Armed Forces. While we have a highly skilled Defence Force, its capability to defend the borders and the security of the Country depends to a large extent on the provisioning of arms and equipment, i.e. combat potential. This implies:

- (a) Improving our combat edge by modernisation of defence equipment, guns and aircraft.
- (b) Resolving alignment of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), which is subject to interpretation by the two sides.
- (c) Improving surveillance, both ground and air-based.
- (d) Ensuring better development of infrastructure along the borders for roads, airfields and logistics.

We simultaneously need to counter other threats to National Security, by development of a National Strategy and proactive response to cross-border terrorism. This needs to be reflected in the pro-active actions of our political leadership rather than belated disjointed and defensive response - as was post 26 November 2008. We also *must* enhance maritime power to defend our coastline and island territories, and project our Comprehensive National Power - economic, military and technological - aggressively. This needs to be supplemented by a firm and pragmatic foreign policy.

We must at the same time harness the incisive expertise of 'Senior Retired Officers' by giving them an active role in the National Security Council (NSC). Presently, the CCS and the NSA constitute the NSC. It needs to be supplemented by a senior retired service officer to balance the national perspective. Our response to events such as the Mumbai terrorist attacks and our preparation for such contingencies would have been perhaps different with the induction of a military adviser, as also a permanent CDS.

The Armed Forces also have to introspect and reflect within as to why there has been erosion in values and standards. The intention here is not to highlight all the possible shortcomings and the anomalies, but the soldiers tend to blame their officers for not getting a fair deal. Lack of job satisfaction and over centralisation of authority even in matters of resource control by the senior officers create dissatisfaction amongst the juniors.

Finally, it needs to be emphasised that the Armed Forces function best in an environment of faith and trust. This extends to superior/ higher echelons, vertically, to the sister formations and with the subordinate units. The guiding principle is always '*National Interests*' and '*Service Before Self*'. This ethos and culture takes time to build. The political leaders and the media need to be made aware that military institutions have been developed over a period and need to be respected and *not judged by isolated events*. Dignity of soldiering and the soldier has to be maintained. The shortcomings which erode military capability, technological superiority and leadership qualities must be highlighted, but the '*status and morale*' of the Armed Forces must not be diluted by tampering with its systems and institutions. Such tampering will prove counter-productive.

Yours Sincerely

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