

Challenges for Military Leaders of Future due to Changing Socio-economic Norms*

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*'When a Military spirit forsakes a people, the profession of arms immediately ceases to be held in honour, and Military men fall to the lowest rank of public servants; they are little esteemed and no longer understood ...Hence arises a circle of cause and consequence from which it is difficult to escape –the best part of the nation shuns the Military profession because that profession is not honoured, and the profession is not honoured because the best part of the nation has ceased to follow it.'*¹

– Alexis de Tocqueville, on peacetime armies

Preamble

Military leadership has been studied extensively the world over. The special treatment of this subject stems from the fact that through the course of history, state power has often manifested itself via the barrel of the gun. Destinies of empires, like the destinies of modern states, had a lot to do with their militaries. Militaries are unique and artificial societies, established to provide security to the State. In their management, the role of Military leadership is very crucial since it provides the means for constructively channelising the energies of an extraordinary human resource which is characterised by professional attributes like controlled aggression and organised violence. In India, the Armed Forces have a glorious tradition of providing first rate leadership to its rank and file. The Armed Forces of India have been staunchly apolitical and secular in character, discharging their responsibilities in accordance with their constitutional charter. In recent times,

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however, the Country has witnessed an unprecedented public debate and controversy over some human resource management issues related to the Armed Forces. These include the 6th Central Pay Commission award, the fracas over civil-Military rank equations and the publically articulated concerns over the steady decline of the image of the Armed Forces as a career option for the youth. This essay analyses how traditional motivators in the Armed Forces have come under strain in the 21st century and what can be done to manage the change to keep the leadership and professional standards intact. It will also objectively bring out organisational flaws which need to be addressed to restore the pre-eminent position of the Armed Forces as an attractive career option for the youth.

Traditional Motivators – Why did they work earlier?

The British, after conceding Independence to India in 1947, left behind a legacy of socially deep-rooted and well-settled Military establishment. The Indian Army, Navy and the Air Force in free India were based on the classical British organisational precept of Commissioned officers as 'leaders' and the recruited or enlisted men as the 'followers'. The officers were obviously the higher-class, distinct from the gentry by virtue of their social background, anglicised education, even race and genealogy. The Army maintained a tradition of inducting anglicised young men, many belonging to the royalty or the princely families. The Navy and the Air Force too received men from similar backgrounds. Young men from martial and ruling clans found this calling particularly appealing to their sense of honour and pride. Entry into the officer cadre of the Services was much sought after and keenly contested by the cream of the educated youth. Likewise, many communities in the vast rural populace of India found the soldier's profession particularly appealing to their martial instincts. Therefore, recruitment of the 'right' soldier material was never a problem then. This phenomenon perpetuated all along the early decades of Independence. There was a psychological and social background to this trend. Noted psychologist Abraham Maslow's famous 'hierarchy of needs' model provides some useful pointers to understand how the Military was once a successful employer ² (Refer to Fig 1).

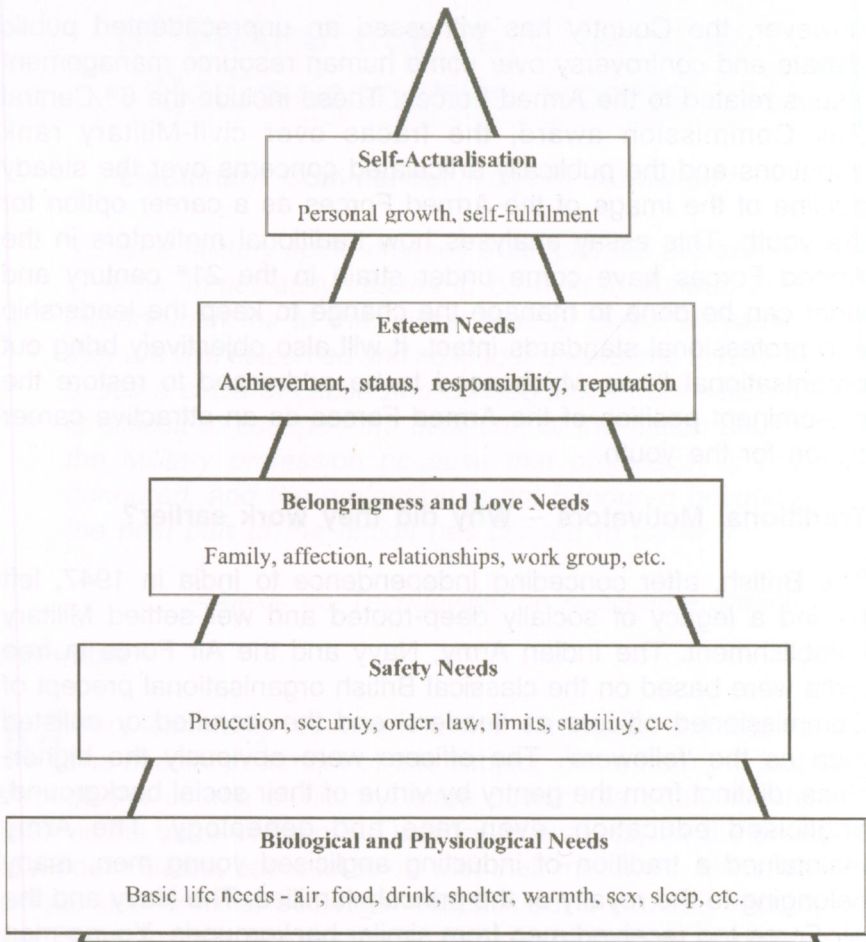


Figure 1 : Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Lower Order Motivators. Physiological, security and safety needs dictate choice of profession among prospectors from financially weaker backgrounds. The Armed Forces of the post Independence era offered very satisfactory terms and conditions of service to fulfil these needs. The monetary benefits were pitched at a higher level; perks and privileges were also comparable to the top few professions in the society. Most importantly, a member of the Military was accorded an esteemed status in the civil society. Even in his absence, his family members would be extended support and sympathy by the neighbourhood they resided in. For those joining in the rank and the file, the assurance of fulfilling

most of the lower order needs was perhaps the biggest motivator. The Military profession gave good returns to the rustic recruits, who predominantly came from agrarian backgrounds. The assurance of an early pension and long term medical support was unique to the Military among other government services.

Higher Order Motivators. The Armed Forces provided an ideal vocation for a buoyant young man to satisfy his higher order needs of self-actualisation such as recognition, approval, achievement, sense of pride, honour, taste of authority etc. Apart from grooming young men to become effective leaders, the Services encouraged them to practise leadership in a uniquely adventurous way. The pride of wearing the uniform, notions of chivalry, patriotism and national service enthused self-esteem among the youth of a nascent democracy, which India was in the early years of Independence.

Relative Comparison. In the early decades of Independence, the Armed Forces outscored most other professions by offering much attractive perks and compensation afforded to prospectors with comparable educational qualifications. For the officer cadres the Indian Foreign and Civil Services were formidable competitors but the selection there was difficult owing to requirements of high academic qualification. The industry was in its infancy. Other scholastic disciplines such as medicine, science, law and literature demanded high intellect and academic perseverance. Lucrative employment opportunities abroad were very rare and almost like a privilege for a select few! The Military on the other hand promised early returns, decent social security by virtue of perks and pension. By and large, the Military retained its appeal to young men with a spirit of adventure and taste for 'outbound' life. For those in the 'rank and file' or 'lower decks' the assurance of fulfilling lower order needs along with some of the higher order ones was attractive enough to volunteer for an otherwise tough profession.

Changes and Challenges

The ongoing transformation process is ringing the alarm bells for the Military, which finds itself at the bottom of the priorities when bright young men and women choose their careers today. Once a coveted profession, the Services today are no longer the desired destination. While this is true for the officer cadres, even for the non-officer base, the recruitment patterns have undergone a

marked change. While there is no dearth of volunteers, today's recruits are much better educated, aware and aspiring than their predecessors. Correspondingly, the service conditions and compensation in the Armed Forces have not improved to the level where a majority of these new-age entrants would feel fully satisfied. Many factors have contributed towards the decline of satisfaction levels in the Armed Forces. The traditional motivators in the Armed Forces have been adversely affected by certain socio-economic developments of the last decade or so. These developments have directly impinged on the Military's ability to fulfil the various 'higher' and 'lower' order needs of its constituents. We shall try to understand these by broadly classifying them into external and internal factors.

External Factors

The Armed Forces cannot be completely insulated from the effects and influences of socio-economic phenomenon that occur in the world around them. The external influences that pose socio-economic challenges to the Services today are covered in the succeeding paragraphs.

Economic Upsurge. It is well known that in the last decade, the fast paced economy and booming markets have had far reaching implications. Successively, now India has ranked as one of the fastest growing economies in the world, with its GDP ranking fourth largest in the world in terms of Purchasing Power Parity.³ As a result of growing foreign investment, domestic industrial growth and increasing number of international partnerships in sectors such as Information Technology(IT) and IT enabled services, Financial Services, Manufacturing, Offshore Exploration, Automobile, Tourism, Hospitality, Civil Aviation, Biotechnology and even Agriculture, the career opportunities for well educated youth abound like never before. Unfortunately for the Armed Forces, the fallout has not been particularly favourable because the lucrative options in the private sector tend to wean away many of the potential bright youngsters who otherwise may have taken the call for the Services. As the growth pike of the economy continues to rise, the dazzle also tends to distract those who are already a part of the uniformed community. Many who find themselves professionally stagnated or disillusioned with their assignment begin to see the grass greener on the other side. In contrast to the

improving life styles in the civil world, tough working conditions may become a way of life for some in the Services, only to compound the problems caused by family separations and housing shortage.

Media Activism. In recent years the Armed Forces are coming to terms with two unsettling phenomena – media activism and rising public inquisitiveness in their affairs. The media revolution which the country witnessed over the past two decades in a way caught the Services by surprise. Traditionally the Armed Forces have despised unsolicited interference from outside. Unmindful of the sensitivities associated with Service customs or way of life, the media often indulges in sensational reportage, which results in avoidable damage to the image of the Military. The increasing awareness levels in the country have also brought into focus activities concerning the Military that involve large sums of public money. Reforms like the adoption of the Right to Information (RTI) Act have set into motion a process of rising public inquiry into the affairs of the state. All this sensationalism has caused the Military to appear less glamorous and more ordinary. The romanticism surrounding the military profession has been watered down by intrusive media attention.

Perceived Exclusion and Neglect. The run up period to the 6th Pay Commission award saw unprecedented controversy and public debate over the status of the Armed Forces vis a vis their civil counterparts in the Government. Strong opinions were articulated publically on these matters by Military veterans. This public debate saw a general expression of a perceived sense of neglect and disregard displayed towards the Military profession by the decision makers. The steady decline of the status of Military ranks in relation to their civil counterparts was highlighted as a prime example of this slight. While newsroom discussions and television debates have their share of relevance, this kind of publicity becomes counterproductive for the Services when it comes to portraying their profession as an attractive career option to the youth. It is hard to believe that the Military's promise to fulfil the higher order needs of bright young men would find many takers when the public opinion repeatedly revolves around the injustice done to the soldier's profession by those in positions of power. After some rather sordid episodes of demonstrations by Military veteran organisations, a reformative step has been taken by the declaration

of intent to set up a separate Armed Forces Pay Commission in the future.⁴

Nature of Warfare. Today's Armed Forces face challenges in multiple domains – sub-conventional (asymmetric), conventional and also in the nuclear domain. This transformation from a pure conventional level has happened within a span of last two decades. The preponderant involvement of the Armed Forces in countering asymmetric threats and fighting a proxy-war waged by a conventionally weak adversary has arguably taken a toll on their preparedness for conventional warfare. For instance, when an infantry battalion trained in conventional infantry battle tactics gets deployed in a counter-insurgency role in civil populated areas, it is bound to experience some degree of dissonance no matter how well prepared it is for the change. Similarly, when skilled sailors of a warship or specialised aircraft technicians in an airbase find themselves deployed as sentries and guards on the perimeter, it is but natural that their trade-specific skills get blunted over the months. These pushes and pulls in opposite directions have confronted the Services with daunting challenges in human resource management. Maintaining high motivation levels in such environment is a very tall order placed on young leaders of men today.

The Ethics Deficit. In an environment where scandals, scams and corruption seem like the order of the day across the Nation, the Armed Forces cannot remain completely unaffected. The lure of quick money, fame and creature comforts has trapped many a seasoned soldier, a moment of weakness thus destroying impeccable reputations built over a lifetime. The culture of consumerism, materialism and credit spending has led to an increase in petty crimes, incidents of dishonesty and loan default. With each passing day it is becoming increasingly difficult to monitor individuals who have easy access to plastic money, electronic cash transfers and high-tech communication technology. The rising proclivity of individuals for share-market speculation has altered the popular Service culture of saving and exercising financial prudence.

Internal Factors

The challenges that have emerged to the symbiotic relationship between the Services and their personnel are a reflection on the rapidly transforming social dynamics of our Nation. In the face of the compelling social changes, the major issues that are emerging

as challenges to the unique social structure of the Services are mentioned in the succeeding paragraphs.

Altered Human Resource Equations. The effects of societal and economic transformation of our nation can be most vividly seen in the comparison of recruitment of the past and present. As the Armed Forces are in themselves a microcosm of India, the rising education and awareness levels in recruits are easily perceived. The typical recruit of yesteryears hailed from a rural milieu and belonged to communities with dominant martial traditions. The average academic qualification was matriculation at the best. Selection as a recruit was an admirable achievement for any rustic young man. A complete paradigm shift is visible in the hordes of young men who line up outside recruitment offices across the Country today. Most hopefuls are the educated unemployed youth who turn towards Military for acquiring early financial and social security. Educational qualification is Class XII on the average, many being graduates too. The fact to be noted is that the average recruit of today is decently educated, aware, ambitious, often more conscious of his rights than obligations.⁵ The stereotype of an innocent, less educated but hardy soldier is now a thing of the past. The officer base has also shifted predominantly to the middle class. Socially this could be viewed as a positive development but for the Services it has further narrowed the gap between the 'leaders' and 'followers'.

Separation. Separation of serving personnel from their families for varying durations is an integral feature of Military life. In the Armed Forces, a variety of factors such as field postings, operational deployments of seagoing units, unaccompanied temporary duties, training courses and non-availability of married accommodation can lead to separation. In the olden days, separation was accepted as *fait accompli*. However, today most parents are explicitly conscious about their children's upbringing and schooling, with a keen desire for personal involvement in the process. Therefore, management of separation can be an intense experience for many inexperienced families. Prolonged separations bear potential to cause marital discord, especially so in present times when joint families are breaking apart. The rate of separation is only on the rise with recurrent field duties, deployments of seagoing units away from base ports and detachments of aircraft squadrons or flights. Hence the need to systematically treat the issue of separation induced due to Service exigencies is real.

Spouse Employment. The winds of economic and social change in our Country blowing since the advent of liberalisation have thrown open the doors of opportunity for many a skilled individual. Wives of Service personnel, who represent the exuberance and diversity of Indian society, are no exception. Hitherto, the institutionally encouraged role for Service wives has been limited to volunteers for community welfare activities and paid employment in Service run schools. However, an objective assessment will reveal that the aspirations of many wives go beyond volunteering for community welfare. Many wives see themselves as 'career-worthy' and strive to assume an earning role for themselves. Till now this issue has been completely left in the private domain of the Service member. However, experience of militaries in some developed countries has brought out that institutional assistance to spouses for seeking paid employment is a major motivating factor, which improves the family's trust in the organisation.

"Ignoring or denying social change has enormous cost and operational implications for the Armed Forces, for whom the 'ostrich position' is not a credible long-term choice"

· Christopher Jessup

Shaping the Environment

It does not take much soul searching to realise that certain fundamental changes in approach and policy are required to stem the tide of regression that threatens the delicate socio-cultural construct in the Armed Forces. As seen earlier, the challenges are diverse and multifaceted. However, without complicating the issue, we need to identify the thrust areas that can take care of most of the difficulties. These are covered in the succeeding paras.

Focussed Leadership. In an HR crisis, when organisations are in need of a shake down, the cliché often heard is 'get back to the basics'. This is equally relevant for Military organisations. Basics of leadership have not changed. To quote late Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw, *"Leadership does not change. The attributes of leadership have come down over the years. All that happens is that greater emphasis is placed on certain attributes of leadership as countries advance and technological developments take place"*. Leadership training has been formalised in the Services over the years. At various levels, officers and senior Personnel Below Officer

Rank (PBOR) are provided opportunities for honing their leadership skills. In the face of the prevalent socio economic stresses that affect human resource, there is a need to cast a fresh look at some of the techniques and the tools employed by leaders. In terms of Military leadership, a useful approach to understanding the subject is to categorise leadership into three distinct categories – strategic leadership, organisational leadership and direct leadership.⁷ These categories can be flexibly applied to leaders at various hierarchies in the Military. Leaders at the strategic and organisational levels are required to essentially create those enabling conditions which would allow direct leadership to be effective. The process of redefining leadership has to address two dimensions – technological and human. The significance of both aspects needs to be acknowledged by leaders at all levels. It would be illuminating to see how new approaches to old issues have become imperative to meet these challenges.

(a) **Impact of Technology.** The technological impact on leadership pertains to two types of technologies. The first type concerns the technology ushered into the professional domain as a result of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). The second type is more individualistic and has to do with personal use gadgets and devices which are the products of the Information Technology revolution. In the context of this essay, the second type is more relevant and is therefore being discussed at greater length. The Information revolution has transformed the way people communicate and understand the world around them. Technological innovations such as satellite based telephony, mobile connectivity; Internet and Global Positioning System (GPS) enabled phones and micro sized computing devices have shrunk the world to a 'global village'. These technologies have also changed the way soldiers communicate with their families. Soldiers, sailors and airmen can now receive regular feedback from their dependents and families. This phenomenon can have positive as well as negative fallout. While regular good news from home would obviously contribute incrementally to the soldier's motivation levels, bad news and complaints can cause quite the opposite to happen. All modern-age technical gadgets are like a double-edged sword. Junior leaders have a very crucial role in ensuring that this kind of equipment is authorised and

exploited appropriately. A fine balancing act in management of technology has to be performed to ensure that it positively contributes to the organisational environment and does not become an impediment in human resource management.

(b) **Adapting to the New-Age Soldier.** Common sense dictates that followers have to adapt themselves to their leaders, particularly in the 'appointative' leadership pattern that is followed in the Services. However, this conventional belief needs to be modified in context of the Military leadership of the 21st century. The onus of changing and adapting now equally lies on the leader who has to calibrate his or her leadership style to suit the new-age recruits. This requires modern leaders to understand the aspirations of the new class of recruits joining the Military. Attitudinal changes are imperative in this regard. As seen earlier, entrants at all stages, be it officer or recruits, are better educated, informed and aware than those of yesteryears. Rising awareness and education has increased aspirations and expectations. Today soldiers look beyond pay, food, the Patiala peg and a bedroll. Men are becoming increasingly perceptive about dignity and needs of self-esteem. Future leaders have to seriously address this issue. In certain cases major policy amendments will be required to address this issue. Junior leaders will have to take the lead by adopting changes in their area of influence. This will be not easy, particularly in organisations with very deep-rooted culture of menial employment of men. Automation technology can be of great help in this context. It can substitute and relieve manual labour involved in unavoidable mundane work. Even for junior leaders themselves, the need of the future is to be on the real job, remaining away from unproductive or ceremonial employment. This means to focus on assimilation of technology, hone professional skills and interact with men. The Services can provide a high sense of purposefulness to their younger leaders by discarding the baggage of redundant practices and red tape, which result in squandering of time and effort. The complexities of Military leadership are best reflected by a quote from Norman Dixon as reproduced below⁸ :-

"Of the psychological problems which beset Military officers few exceed in severity those associated with leadership.

In this respect they are required to fulfil incompatible roles. They are expected to show initiative, yet remain hemmed in by regulation. They must be aggressive, yet never insubordinate. They must be assiduous in catering for their men, yet maintain enormous social distance. They must know everything about everything, yet never appear intellectual”.

Reinforcing the Value System. Indians have always pride in their ‘value’ based culture and society. Values and ethics find an equally profound significance in the context of the Armed Forces, where human life and public money presume high stakes. During training and in subsequent service the insistence on moral values and assertion of the ‘harder right’ is universal across the Services. Indian Military history and chronicles from the retired community are replete with instances where men in uniform responded beyond the call of duty, displaying unusual moral and physical courage. Equally notorious are examples of those who brought infamy to the organisation by their unethical acts. So what are these core values? It is a tough call to clearly list and define them, though the Armed Forces have, in their own way, attempted to identify them for their members. Be it the Army Chief’s ‘Ten Commandments’ or the IAF’s ‘Code of the Air Warrior’, the endeavour has been to provide an aide- memoire for the constituents to follow the righteous path. The Navy has popularised an interesting acronym of ‘PRIDE’ to define its core values. The letters expand into *Patriotism and Loyalty, Resolve and Fighting Spirit, Integrity and Honesty, Duty and Commitment*, Example. Honour is another lofty concept that is the latent spirit behind service in the Military. Camaraderie and esprit de corps are features that lay the foundation for team work. In essence the Armed Forces cherish all those values that appeal to the higher human conscience, which propagate their sanctified image and cultural distinction in the society. The value system and its supporting ethos are the fundamental strength of the Armed Forces. Secularism and inclusive character have been the defining virtues that have now become models in communal harmony for the civil society to emulate. It is only by adherence to these time tested ideals and principles that the Services shall be able to retain the reputation they have traditionally enjoyed in the society. When it comes to morality and ethics, nothing works better than having real life role models to inspire and lead. Leaders at all

levels have to make a conscious effort to show the way and spread enthusiasm in the ranks. Negative, cynical and phlegmatic attitudes have to be shunned. An effective system of positive feedback and reinforcement should be created to encourage those who choose the harder right in face of the easier wrong. Officer-man relationship rooted in trust and loyalty has to be the basis of any combatant unit. Ethics are closely associated with good leadership. In face of modern day challenges such as suicides by ranks, fratricide and other stress related behavioural inconsistencies; the value system can provide clues for leaders to redress burning issues.

Strengthening Welfare. Welfare as an organisational responsibility is a feature that can be credited to the Military ab origine. It is a different matter today that large industrial houses and other government agencies have borrowed the philosophy from the Military and modelled their employee welfare on similar lines. The British created large cantonments during their times, leaving generous real estate to the Armed Forces post Independence. Notwithstanding the housing crunch, the Services are today well known for offering a good standard of living to their members. The welfare measures cover a wide range, from amenities such as Canteen, free medical facilities and subsidised education to support Services in the form of 'rehabilitation' and 'resettlement'. Financial assistance of various kinds, placement agencies, the Ex-Servicemen Contributory Health Scheme (ECHS), MoUs with Civil Universities are some of the recent initiatives that have sought to bolster the process of 'Welfare'. Welfare is misconstrued by some as paternalistic largesse or pampering. To the contrary, an effective welfare and support system can be immensely beneficial to the productivity of an organisation. Within the fiscal space provided to them, the Services have always strived to provide the best of facilities and amenities to their members including families. It is imperative now to build upon this fine tradition and reorganise welfare to suit the changing times. The value system and ethical conduct can only be germinated in a genial environment. Pay and remuneration, housing infrastructure and other amenities require constant enhancement. Emerging needs such as family advocacy, relocation assistance, student counselling, financial consultancy and spouse employment have to be factored in the gamut of welfare. In our Armed Forces, welfare' is a function that is tackled at two

levels – primarily within the unit and later at the station level. The arrangement works generally fine in peacetime locations and family stations. Unfortunately, the function of welfare in the context of families may be adversely affected when the unit, ship or the squadron is deployed in non-family stations. In the Western Armed Forces such as the United Kingdom and the United States, they have a well established welfare service within each larger service with clear charter of duties.⁹ The welfare service has its offices spread across the country and even abroad, co-located with the units of their parent Service. This kind of arrangement comes with an inherent advantage of standardisation and professional approach to community welfare. Our present arrangement certainly does not require an overhaul but it can definitely do well by adopting some features of the foreign models, particularly those pertaining to standardisation of services, stress reduction techniques, use of Internet and other innovative family support measures.

Transparency and Internal Reform. Military organisations are based on the premises of disciplined workforce and unity of command. However, on the extreme side the culture of ritualism and excessive regimentation can become deep rooted in certain organisations where creativity fails to act as a moderating factor. While discipline is the basis of the Military's functioning, there is a thin line that divides healthy discipline and authoritarianism. Commercial organisations have to innovate, reinvent and reform, lest they get left out of the commercial competition. In case of the Military, the compulsions may not become immediately apparent. Therefore, a continual revision of policies is a must. Particularly in the domain of Human Resource Management, a progressive approach becomes imperative. In the face of rising public criticism, cases of corruption and negative publicity, the response should be directed at increasing transparency. At the same time, the positive facets of the Military culture should be projected in the public domain to lay frivolous doubts at rest. Unless the Military reassures the public proactively, critics will continue to point suggestive fingers at its closed doors, seeking answers to uncomfortable questions.

Conclusion

The winds of social, cultural and economic change are sweeping across the length and breadth of India, changing fortunes and altering destinies. A silent socio- economic revolution is on its

way, bringing in its wake fundamental and enduring variations. It would be naïve for any organisation to presume that it can remain unaffected by the turbulence that occurs during such profound changes. The Military as an institution still inspires confidence and hope in the civil society. To keep this trust the Armed Forces need to reinvent and constantly revise those ways that may have outlived their relevance. With the onerous responsibility of National Security, the Services must respond to the socio-economic challenges with élan and alacrity. In an environment where enemies of freedom and democracy recurrently undermine the peace and security of the country, reform and reinvention may well be the only options for the Armed Forces to retain their high standards of leadership.

End Notes

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, (Cambridge - Sever and Francis 1983), p.280.
2. Abraham Maslow quoted in *Psychology - The Search for Understanding* by Janet A Simons, Donald B Irwin and Beverly A Drinnien, (West Publishing Company, New York, 1987) and <http://ed-eb3.educ.msu.edu/outreach/k12out/pdf/language06/Maslow-laineTableHandout.pdf>.
3. World Bank, *World Developmental Indicators Database*, 01 Jul 2009 http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/GDP_PPP.pdf.
4. The Indian Express, *Govt clears separate pay panel for Armed Forces*, 02 Jan 2009, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/govt-clears-separate-pay-panel-for-armed-for/405593>.
5. Excerpt from the authors earlier published work. Citation omitted to maintain anonymity.
6. Christopher Jessup, *'Breaking Ranks - Social Change in Military Communities'* (London; Brassey's, 1996).
7. Articulated by Adm (Retd) Arun Prakash, former Chief of the Naval Staff in a talk on 'Strategic Leadership' delivered at the College of Naval Warfare Karanja, India in Apr 2007.
8. Norman Dixon, *The Psychology of Military Incompetence*, Chapter 20, 'Leaders of Men', The English Book Depot Dehradun India, (Radom Century Group London) p 214.
9. Army Welfare Service Organisations of the USA and UK, see www.armymwr.org and www.army.mod.uk.