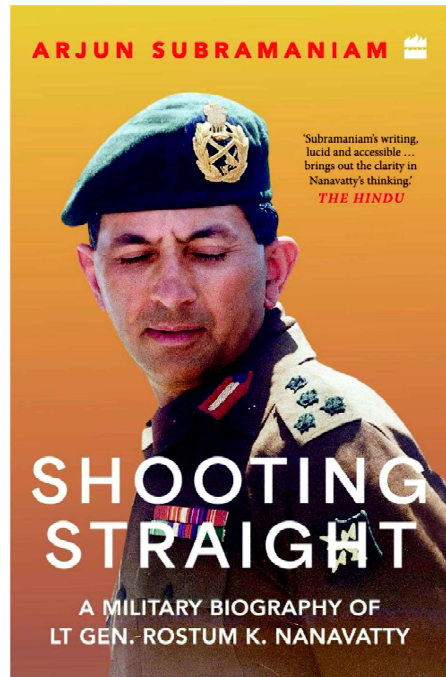


## Review Article 1



### Introduction

'Shooting Straight', the biography of Lieutenant General Rostum K Nanavatty—undoubtedly a man of stellar character, with a passion and commitment for soldiering, a military leader who tenanted some of the most challenging operational assignments in the Indian Army with a sense of purpose and had the ability to speak 'Truth to Power'—has been meticulously researched by Air Vice Marshal Arjun Subramaniam, AVSM, PhD (Retd) undoubtedly one of the finest military historians.

Air Vice Marshal Subramaniam has not only captured the details of Nanavatty's transition from the tactical to the operational and thereafter to the strategic level but has also provided a rare insight into the people and events that shaped his values and leadership style. His unique journey in uniform commenced from being commissioned into 2/8 GORKHA RIFLES soon after the

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**Shooting Straight: A Military Biography of Lt Gen. Rostum K. Nanavatty** by Air Vice Marshal Arjun Subramaniam, AVSM, PhD (Retd), HarperCollins India, Pages: 400 pages, Price: ₹ 469/-, ISBN: 978-9365697618

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1962 War with China to commanding the Northern Army during Operation Parakram.

Written chronologically, this is a book that can be read at multiple levels: as a personal story, as a narrative of the evolution of the Indian Army, and as a source of leadership lessons. What stands out is the way the sheer depth and breadth of Nanavatty's insights, and his rich operational repository, have been captured by Air Vice Marshal Subramaniam. The intellectual dimension of warfighting also emerges very clearly, as does his strategic mindset.

### **About the Author**

Air Vice Marshal Arjun Subramaniam, AVSM, PhD (Retd) is an alumnus of the Rashtriya Indian Military College, Dehradun. A former fighter pilot in the Indian Air Force, he has attended the National Defence College (NDC) and has served as an instructor at the Defence Services Staff College. He is an air power analyst and an accomplished writer on contemporary Indian military history and thought leader on global strategic issues. He has held the President's Chair of Excellence at the NDC.

He has also been a Visiting Fellow at Harvard and Oxford Universities and a Visiting Professor at Fletcher School, Ashoka, and Jindal Universities. He is also the author of *India's Wars: A Military History 1947-1971* and *Full Spectrum*, apart from numerous articles in leading journals, magazines, and newspapers.

### **About the Book**

When Nanavatty joined his battalion, it had withdrawn to a long after the 1962 War and had lost many personnel, including the Commanding Officer. When he later had the opportunity to pen his thoughts on the war, Nanavatty was "Unsparing in his indictment of the senior leadership". He felt that there was a complete lack of foresight and planning, and that the Indian Army had been reduced to a "Mere peacetime machine—physically unfit, ill-equipped, and ill-trained".

The other issues he touched upon would remain his focus throughout the career: building defences where logistics support could be easily provided, training extremely hard, encouraging junior leaders to take initiative, and creating an offensive spirit.

The battalion soon moved to Nagaland, where, as a young officer, he became involved in operations against insurgents. The new Commanding Officer, Colonel Shamsher Singh, “Was a man on a mission, determined to ensure that misfortune did not strike the battalion twice”. Nanavatty credits him and Colonel (later Lieutenant General) Anand Swarup—who “Embodied the ideal Commanding Officer, physically tough and mentally very robust”—with laying the high training standards of the unit.

During Operation Pawan, Nanavatty headed the Para Commando Task Force for a few months. His meticulous approach laid the foundation for special operations in Sri Lanka. As per him, the “LTTE was the most efficient guerilla outfit the Indian Army has ever encountered”. It was here that he put into practice his observations regarding the functioning of Special Forces units, based on his interactions and experiences as the Indian Army Liaison Officer in the United Kingdom. However, he was scathing in his assessment of how infantry units were equipped during the early days of the Indian Peacekeeping Force deployment.

About General Sunderji, under whom he served on multiple occasions and with whom he shared a personal rapport, he states, “The brilliant General Sunderji was, and remained, an ardent proponent of the ‘Big Battle’. Consequently, he paid little attention to counterinsurgency”.

As the Brigade Commander of the Siachen Brigade, he walked to every post and was instrumental in improving the quality of training at the Siachen Battle School. He focused on achieving ascendancy over the enemy and improving the living conditions of those who served on the glacier. He remembers his General Officer Commanding, Major General VR Raghavan, as “A fine, clear-thinking and erudite commander in the soldier-scholar mould”. Throughout his career—and even after retirement—Nanavatty argued against the prevailing hawkish perspectives, advocating the retention of significant deployments on the glacier.

In Jun 1993, Nanavatty assumed command of 19 Infantry Division at Baramulla. He focused on Counter Terrorism (CT) operations and felt that Pakistan was only likely to resort to a conventional war if CT operations fail. He also opined that “However successful the Indian Army was in securing the peripheral areas, the centre of gravity of the secessionist movement would remain

Srinagar”. He also felt that the Pakistan Army needed to pay for abetting and supporting terrorism and “Changed the rules of the game by dominating the no man’s land”. Intelligence was also given the highest priority and his leadership style was both “Enabling and empowering”. He states that his Corps Commander General Padmanabhan “Had a razor-sharp mind”. In his assessment after handing over, he said North Kashmir was a war zone and there was a sense of alienation and deprivation amongst the people. He felt that the government and civil administration needed to move the peace process forward.

Though he desired to command either 15 or 16 Corps, Nanavatty was posted to 3 Corps, where he was responsible for the insurgency ridden states in Northeast India: Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, and parts of Arunachal Pradesh. In Sep 1998, in Manipur, he told the then-Home Minister Indrajit Gupta that “The dire situation in Churachandpur was due to the fact that the state government had completely abdicated its responsibility” and cautioned about “The dangers of ignoring Manipur”. His observations, analysis, and prognosis regarding the problems in Nagaland and Manipur are striking. His tenure, which he termed complex and difficult, exposed him to “The perils and complexities of modern conflict, which involve an intersection of politics, culture, and societal fault lines”.

The book provides an insight into Nanavatty’s tenure as the Northern Army Commander and how he intended to carry out a series of limited, battalion-sized operations to seize and control key areas across the Line of Control. Operation Kabaddi was aimed at pushing the envelope of Northern Command’s proactive deterrence and introducing a punitive paradigm. Unfortunately, it was not launched due to the geopolitical events post 09/11. At a seminar at 16 Corps in Oct 2001, he had clearly stated that “With time, Pakistan’s role has dwarfed that of the Kashmiri separatists”. Then, India is now faced with a relentless covert war in the guise of freedom struggle planned, organised, directed, coordinated, and controlled by Pakistan.

It was during Operation Parakram that Nanavatty came the closest to a conventional war. However, as seven of his nine divisions were committed to CT operations, he required time to prepare. “This is not what Paddy wanted to hear”. Following his

experience during Operation Parakram, Nanavatty believed that “India is deceiving itself if it thinks it can prosecute a unilateral war of choice without creating the right conditions”.

He ended by stating that “As the Northern Army Commander, he called the capture of Pakistan-controlled areas in Kashmir ‘Achievable’ but ‘Would demand extraordinary synergy of political, diplomatic, economic, intelligence, and military effort’, and an uncharacteristic single mindedness of purpose”.

In Apr 2002, he, with the assistance of Colonel (later Lieutenant General) Sanjeev Langer, submitted a paper, suggesting a “Whole-of-government approach for the resolution of conflict in J&K”. General Padmanabhan had given the “Go ahead” but told him to “Be brief and ensure there are no accusations or recrimination”.

He sent copies of it to many senior government functionaries like the then-Home Minister LK Advani, Home Secretary NN Vohra, and Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh. However, except for Jaswant Singh, who took time off to discuss the strategy document with Nanavatty, there was little interest in other quarters. However, Lieutenant General Panag, who was the Northern Army Commander in 2007, calls the paper “A clear and bold contemporary road map for conflict resolution”. Unfortunately, the national security establishment did not leverage his experience.

Nanavatty’s view on fencing along India’s borders is also interesting. He felt that with deterrence not destruction being its effect, the fence deadens the offensive spirit of the fighting man.

### **Conclusion**

Given General Nanavatty’s ability to articulate his thoughts in writing and anticipate what needs to be done in the future, it is surprising that his views on China have not been expressed in greater depth. However, he has stated that “Deciding the mutually acceptable Line of Actual Control is a matter of the highest priority”.

This stands out for two reasons. The first is that he joined his battalion soon after it had been de-inducted from Mechuka following the 1962 conflict; as a result, he witnessed the plight of the Indian Army at that time and recorded several relevant observations. The second is that he held the appointment of Northern Army

Commander during Operation Parakram and was responsible for operations against both Pakistan and China.

What stands apart is his professional excellence, integrity, unflinching moral courage, and the ability to always stand up for what he believed was right and unhesitatingly put across his views with courage of conviction. His emphasis was on operational efficiency rather than ceremonial trappings. Though, he also has critics, including Lieutenant General Arjun Ray who states that “Innovation, mental mobility and foresight are not his strengths” and “He had little understanding of the big picture”.

The book is a masterpiece and holds leadership lessons across domains. It is strongly recommended to be read not only by those who don the uniform but also by academics, practitioners, and students of national security.

It also gives a prism of the country’s security challenges and the Indian Army’s operational art through the lens of one of its accomplished and distinguished soldiers. General Subramaniam has yet again added a valuable contribution to India’s national security literature.

**Major General Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd)**