

Review Article 2

About the Author

Dr Amlesh Kumar Mishra, born in 1971 in Palamu, Jharkhand, is a distinguished scholar and administrator currently serving as the Director of the History Division and the Armed Forces Film and Photo Division under the Ministry of Defence, Government of India. An alumnus of Ranchi University, he holds master's degrees in both History and Sanskrit, both completed with distinction—which sow the seeds for academic rigour and multidisciplinary depth that would mark his career.

Dr Mishra's scholarship is characterised by a deep engagement with India's military and administrative history, underpinned by a nuanced understanding of classical Indian knowledge systems. His previous work, *Pracheen Bharatiya Rajnaya Me Guptacharo Ka Mahatva* (The Importance of Spies in Ancient Indian Polity), stands out as a meticulous study of statecraft in ancient India and has been honoured with an award from the President of India—testament to both its scholarly merit and national significance.

Beyond his contributions to classical historical research, Dr Mishra has played a key role in documenting modern Indian military history. He is the editor of the widely read *Deeds of Gallantry: Fifty Years of 1971 Victory*, published by the National Book Trust, which brings to the public domain a curated account of bravery from one of India's most defining military campaigns. Additionally, he has authored the sections on naval and aerial warfare—War at Sea and War in the Sky—in the volume *The 1971 War: An Illustrated History*, compiled by the Ministry of Defence. These contributions reflect not only his command over archival material and military historiography but also his ability to present complex events in a manner accessible to both academic and general audiences.

Books authored by Dr Mishra embody a rare balance of scholarly inquiry, institutional responsibility, and public engagement, making him a significant voice in the contemporary Indian military history.

Honours and Awards of the Indian Armed Forces, by Dr Amlesh Kumar Mishra, Pages Price ₹ 1995/-, Pentagon Press LLP, New Delhi), ISBN 978-81-980002-2-0, Rs 1995/-.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CLV, No. 641, July-September 2025.

Introduction

Dr Amlash Kumar Mishra's book, *Honours and Awards of the Indian Armed Forces* stands as a monumental work in the domain of Indian military historiography. At once encyclopaedic and interpretive, the book is a rare synthesis of archival precision and narrative sensitivity. Through this comprehensive compendium of military decorations, campaign medals, commemorative honours, and the institutional frameworks governing them, Dr Mishra not only offers an authoritative reference guide but also elevates these seemingly procedural instruments into a profound cultural and historical narrative. The book is further enriched by the inclusion of photographs of nearly all the medals discussed, offering readers valuable visual references that complement the detailed textual descriptions. The book's credibility is underscored by the endorsements on its back cover from four eminent military historians: Dr UP Thapliyal, Shiv Kunal Verma, Air Vice Marshal (Dr) Arjun Subramaniam, and Commodore (Dr) Srikant B Kesnur. Supported by the United Service Institution of India and published by Pentagon Press, this monumental volume is available on leading e-commerce platforms at a price of ₹ 1,995.

About the book

The volume is remarkable in both scale and scope, traversing millennia in its exploration of honouring traditions. It opens with a deeply contextualised survey of premodern India, tracing practices from the poetic encomiums of the Rigveda and the martial valorisation of the Mahabharata to the Sangam-era *vīrakkal* (hero stones) and the Mughal-era robes of honour. This opening chapter provides a rich historical background on how valour has been commemorated across Indic civilisations. Far from being an incidental prelude, this chapter is critical to the book's structural logic: it anchors the reader in a civilisational continuum of honour, recognition, and statecraft that culminates in the formalised awards system of post-Independence India. Dr Mishra's engagement with sources ranging from the *Arthashastra* (The Science of Politics and Statecraft) and royal epigraphy to medieval court rituals demonstrates a commendable interdisciplinarity, resisting the tendency to treat honours merely as colonial imports or modern innovations.

The subsections of the opening chapter trace the evolution of medals and ribbons in colonial India. Dr Mishra highlights the shift from personalised gifts and cash rewards under the East India Company to a more institutionalised system of honours under British rule. His detailed account of British-era decorations—from the Order of British India and the Indian Order of Merit to the Victoria Cross—illuminates the hierarchical and racially inflected frameworks that governed military recognition. Yet, the chapter does not remain tethered to colonial frameworks alone. The inclusion of Indian-initiated honours, such as those instituted by Maharaja Ranjit Singh and later by the *Azad Hind Fauj* (Indian National Army) under Subhas Chandra Bose, introduces a subversive counter-narrative. These sections exemplify Dr Mishra's capacity to read honours not merely as bureaucratic artefacts but as politically contested instruments of legitimacy and identity.

The detailed exposition of British campaign medals awarded between 1848 and 1946—the Punjab Medal, Africa General Service Medal, Tibet Medal, and numerous World War decorations—offers readers a panoramic view of India's entanglement in British imperial military enterprises. Dr Mishra adeptly demonstrates that these medals function as symbols of both loyalty and exercised agency within hierarchical structures. His analysis of the Punjab Medal's aesthetics and iconography is exemplary: the obverse depicts Queen Victoria, while the reverse shows Major General Gilbert receiving a surrender on horseback, creating a tableau that both represents and ritualises imperial authority.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 comprise the heart of the book, detailing the evolution and classification of honours under the Republic of India. The narrative here is chronologically fluid yet thematically rigorous. Dr Mishra shows how the Indian state, in the wake of Independence and the 1947 Kashmir conflict, urgently sought to establish a national system of military recognition that would be both symbolically resonant and functionally autonomous. The introduction of the Param Vir Chakra, Maha Vir Chakra, and Vir Chakra—retrospectively effective from 15 Aug 1947—marked not just a break from the colonial legacy but a deliberate assertion of sovereign valorisation. The later establishment of peacetime gallantry awards—Ashoka Chakra, Kirti Chakra, and Shaurya Chakra in 1952—alongside distinguished service medals such as the Param Vishisht Seva Meda, Ati Vishisht Seva Meda and Vishisht

Seva Meda reflects a deliberate expansion of the honours system, meticulously codified by the state.

What distinguishes Dr Mishra's account is not simply his ability to catalogue, but his acute attention to symbolism, aesthetics, and procedural logic. His treatment of the medal designs, many of which were designed by Savitri Bai Khanolkar, brings forth the fusion of mythological motifs and nationalistic iconography. The use of the *vajra* (thunderbolt), *chakra* (wheel), and star are not incidental; they are carefully chosen symbols that reflect India's spiritual heritage and martial ethos. Ribbon colors, inscriptions, and shapes are analysed with a semiotic insight seldom seen in military scholarship.

The classification of awards—into gallantry, distinguished service, campaign, service, meritorious service, and commemorative medals—is presented with exhaustive detail. Campaign-specific medals such as the General Service Medal (1947), Samar Seva Star (1965), Sangram Medal (1971), and Operation Vijay Star (1999) are not only described in terms of design and eligibility but also contextualised within their respective military engagements. The book avoids abstract taxonomy by consistently anchoring each medal within historical operations, personnel narratives, and administrative frameworks.

One of the most impressive features of the book is its consistent focus on inclusivity and comprehensiveness. By covering medals such as the Videsh Seva Medal, *Uchch Tungata* (High Altitude) Medal, *Tatrakshak* (Coast Guard) Medal, and the Special Service Medal with its many clasps (Mizoram, Manipur, Tirap, etc.) Dr Mishra makes a case for recognising all forms of military commitment—be it combat, border patrol, counterinsurgency, or international service. He extends this logic to include long service medals, Territorial Army recognitions, and commemorative awards like the 25th, 50th, and 75th Independence Anniversary Medals, arguing—implicitly yet powerfully—that the narrative of national service is incomplete without these markers of never-ending devotion.

Chapter 4 elevates the work from being merely descriptive to analytically robust. The description of the Honours and Awards Committee, the chain of recommendations and approvals, the Presidential role, and the investiture ceremonies provides crucial

insight into the institutional mechanisms behind decoration conferment. Of particular note is Dr Mishra's discussion of the symbolic geography of the awards—Republic Day for highest gallantry, Rashtrapati Bhawan for others—demonstrating how space and ceremony together perform the work of national remembrance.

The discussions in Chapter 5 on the continuities in rewards—cash awards, land grants, pensions—between British and post-colonial India is another moment of historiographical richness. The analysis is not merely economic; it points to the ways in which states incentivise loyalty and sacrifice, and how material compensation intersects with symbolic recognition. Further details on the same are provided in the Appendices. The provision of benefits to families and next of kin, coupled with state-specific variations in financial allowances (outlined in Appendix E), further underscores that honours celebrate not only individual achievement but also communal recognition.

Dr Mishra's analysis of the Ashoka Chakra and Param Vir Chakra in the Chapter 6 and accompanying appendices is particularly compelling. These lists—far from being mere annexures—become memorial archives, repositories of courage that embody both the brutality of conflict and the transcendence of individual spirit. The inclusion of civilians in gallantry awards, as in the cases of Neerja Mishra or Vijay Jagirdar, further expands the canvas of the nation's gratitude.

The book's appendices merit special attention, featuring illustrations of medal ribbons, comprehensive lists of Victoria Cross recipients, detailed information on monetary allowances, and comparative charts outlining awards conferred on personnel and their families. Rather than relegating this material to a purely referential function, Dr Mishra integrates these documents into the larger narrative, suggesting that the afterlife of an award—its remembrance, benefits, and ritual display—is as significant as its conferment.

One of the book's most notable strengths is its prose, which combines scholarly rigour with clear and accessible language. He navigates a vast terrain of technical detail without descending into jargon. Each decoration is treated with dignity; there is no hierarchy of attention, no bias toward the spectacular. Instead, the work

exudes a deep moral seriousness: an understanding that behind every medal lies a story of human fortitude, sacrifice, and national commitment. However, the book occasionally omits the historical context behind the nomenclature of certain medals—for instance, the text ‘AVA’ found in Burma War medal, which derives its name from ‘Ava’, the *Meiteilon* (Manipuri) name for present-day Myanmar.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Honours and Awards of the Indian Armed Forces* transcends the role of a mere reference text—it is a work of homage. Seamlessly bridging military history, institutional policy, art history, and cultural studies, it documents the Indian awards system with exceptional thoroughness and insight. Dr Amlesh Kumar Mishra illuminates how nations commemorate, how states confer honour, and how individuals are enshrined through metal, ribbon, and ceremony. This volume is indispensable for military historians, defence scholars, students of political symbolism, and any reader seeking to grasp the significance and dignity of national service. It merits a place not only on reference shelves but also within the moral and cultural imagination of the nation.

Dr Navaneeth Krishnan S