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# The Bane of Pseudo Specialisation

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*India's Special Forces are ill-equipped and underutilised.*

— Gen S Padmanabhan

## Introduction

Who does not want to belong to, or feign that he is from, the special forces? Decades back, you could spot sloppy security guards outside shops sporting 'Commando' or 'Special Forces' on their shoulders, with maroon berets worn at rakish angles. It is so very convenient in India where little action is taken against anyone wearing military insignia. The paramilitary and police, in any case, wear the same badges of rank—something you do not see in other countries—that helps them seek parity of pay and perks with the military. Today, an officer in the Special Service Bureau (SSB) becomes a deputy inspector general (DIG) just with seven years service, enjoying the pay of a brigadier / equivalent rank officer of the military. There is considerable difficulty, even within some military cross-sections, in differentiating between 'Special Forces' and 'Special Operations Forces'. Wikipedia showcases some 50-odd special forces of India – ranging from Army Special Forces, Marine Commandos (MARCOS) of the navy, Garud Commando Force of the air force, Special Action Groups (SAGs) of the National Security Guard (NSG) to Special Protection Group, Special Frontier Force, Cobra, Railway Protection Force Commandos, Quick Reaction Team of the Indian Railways, Special Task Forces in each state, Special Operations Groups of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and Rajasthan, Mumbai's Anti-Terrorist Squad and Force One,

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Grey Hound Commandos and Octopus of Andhra Pradesh, Straco and Combat Force of West Bengal, Jaguar Force, Chhattisgarh Commando Battalion (CCB), State Security Guards, Anti-Guerilla Force and what have you. Little wonder then that our media is a confused – calling everyone ‘elite’ and ‘special forces’.

Ambiguity of the term ‘special forces’ in the army comes up periodically by design, aiming to facilitate categorisation of non-special forces into the special forces category. Such pseudo specialisation effort, as has come up again in the present dispensation, harms both ways – sidetracking implementation of the concept of special forces in the true sense and distracting the concerned non-special forces units from their primary task.

### **The ‘Pseudo’ Specialists**

We are the only army in the world where Parachute Special Forces [short form PARA (SF)] units and regular Parachute (short form PARA) units are clubbed into the same regiment: the Parachute Regiment. This aberration happened despite the fact that the first two special forces units (9 and 10 PARA (SF)) did not draw manpower exclusively from the Parachute Regiment. Grouping the PARA (SF) and PARA units in the same regiment resulted in the latter continuously weighing down on the former in an effort to seek parity, especially since senior level officers were regular paratroopers and had not served in the special forces. The army realised the folly in the early Nineties and took steps to rectify this anomaly. A separate Special Forces Regiment was created in 1994, clubbing the then three special forces units – 1, 9 and 10 PARA (SF). Maj Gen (later Lt Gen) Vijay Oberoi, PVSM, AVSM, VSM, the then director general of military operations (DMGo) was appointed colonel of the Special Forces Regiment. A decision was taken to raise Headquarters Special Forces in order to have a central agency oversee strategic tasking, operational employment, intelligence inputs, capacity building, manning, equipping, training and consolidation of the special forces. In addition, the appointment of the deputy director general military operations (special forces) was sanctioned in Army Headquarters – DDGMO (SF). Very unfortunately, the then Chief of the Army Staff (COAS), Gen BC Joshi died in harness within a short span of the raising of the Special Forces Regiment and Gen Oberoi was posted out of Army Headquarters. This gave an opportunity to a host of retired and senior level PARA officers to collectively tackle his successor (Gen Shankar Roy Chowdhury) to reverse the decision on the plea that the Parachute Regiment had been ‘broken’. No views of the then existing special

forces officers were sought on the issue, all of whom wanted the Special Forces Regiment to continue. This apart, the following steps were taken to prevent recreation of a Special Forces Regiment in the future:

- Raising and location of Headquarters Special Forces was done at a remote location like Nahan instead of Delhi (as earlier intended) so that it remained ineffective. This headquarters was later merged with the Infantry Directorate and finally disbanded with its appointments merged with Military Operations, Infantry and Weapons & Equipment Directorates.
- The appointment of DDGMO (SF) in the Military Operations Directorate was made tenable by both PARA (SF) and PARA officers.

The army now had a situation in that PARA officers without having any special forces experience, rendered advice on special forces issues from a chair of authority – as is the case even today. This situation had the following fallouts:

- 9 & 10 PARA (SF) who specialised in mountains and deserts respectively were moved out to Jodhpur and Agra respectively despite protests by both commanding officers. The anomaly was finally corrected in 2001 by reverting them to parent locations.
- Special equipment imported for the then three special forces units (1, 9 & 10 PARA (SF)) during 1984-85 was never introduced into the Service since the concerned cells in the Infantry Directorate (Infantry-7) and Weapons & Equipment Directorate (WE-4) were manned by PARA officers and not PARA (SF) officers. This resulted in inability of the Master General of the Ordnance Branch to provide any replacements in future.
- The appointment of commandant and chief instructor, Special Forces Wing – SFTW (later renamed Special Forces Training School, acronym SFTS) earlier always held by a PARA (SF) officer, was deftly made tenable by a PARA / PARA (SF) officer while reviewing the WE of SFTW.
- Prior to 1999, volunteer officers had 28 days and 90 days probation in PARA and PARA (SF) battalions respectively. With the aim to 'equalise' PARA and PARA (SF), probation in both cases was brought at par to 90 days and split between the PARA Centre and the concerned unit for 45 days each, overlooking past experiences and vehement protests by commanding officers of the special forces battalions.

Concurrently, successive colonels of the Parachute Regiment started pushing for converting the entire regiment to special forces. During the year 2001, a major

study for “Modernisation of Special Forces” was undertaken by the army, which resulted in restructuring of PARA (SF) battalions as tailor-made theatre specific units, and a fourth assault team was added to each unit. Probation period in PARA (SF) units was enhanced to six months in keeping with operational requirements. Modernisation and equipping of the then five PARA (SF) battalions was approved at a cost of approximately Rs 400 crore and raising of an Army Aviation Special Operations Squadron was approved. Very significantly, a conscious decision was taken for no further expansion of special forces till the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> Plan, after which a review was to be undertaken.

The US invasion of Iraq was used as an excuse by the pseudo specialist advisers in propagating that the US had deployed some 20,000 special forces in that country. The aim was to push for expanding our special forces capability. This was despite the fact that intelligence reports spoke of only “small detachments” of special forces having been employed by the US, the bulk of which were inducted into Northern Iraq a year and half ‘before’ the invasion. Propagation of the figure 20,000 was the height of naiveté as 82 and 101 Airborne Divisions of the US are not special forces. In fact, volunteers from these formations for US Special Forces have to undergo a full-fledged probation before they can join the special forces. Incidentally, the US Army Special Forces Command (SOCOM) is only 13,000-strong of which the Psychological Operations Teams and Civil Affairs Teams are not fighting men. Even during the peak period of special forces’ deployment in Iraq, only 90 x Operation Detachments Alphas (ODAs) were actually used (each ODA is 10-12 men-strong). Notwithstanding this, the non-special forces colonel of the Parachute Regiment managed to get the decision of “no further expansion of Special Forces till the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> Plan”, taken just six months earlier, reversed, and conversion of another two PARA battalions to special forces was ordered. With one PARA battalion recently converted to special forces, five assault teams being added as a result of the “Study on Modernisation of Special Forces” and two more conversions, the Indian Army went in for the addition of four and a half battalions worth of special forces in a span of just three and a half years. This was in complete disregard to the four universally acknowledged special forces truths: One, *Humans are More Important than Hardware*; Two, *Quality is Better than Quantity*; Three, *Special Forces Cannot be Mass Produced*; Four, *Competent Special Forces Cannot be Created After Emergencies Arise*. The expansion of special forces in foreign armies is very deliberate. Post 9/11, the US expanded its special forces only by 750 personnel. The UK went in only for an addition of a 650-strong “Special Forces Support Group”. Pakistan has added a fourth Special Services Group (SSG) unit only

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recently. Significantly, while our army went in for rapid expansion of special forces, validation of the newly raised units was left to a mere tenure in the counter-insurgency environment. Little effort was made even to concurrently hike the advanced special forces skills training capacity of the Special Forces Training School (SFTS). Though a review was undertaken in 2002, the decisions, including that this institution be used 'exclusively' for advanced training of special forces and the commandant and chief instructor only be from special forces, are yet to be implemented in full.

We have gone in for rapid expansion of special forces, diluting their combat potential, including manning, equipping and training in the process.

The Parachute Regiment Training Centre was in no position to meet the manpower requirements for such sudden expansion. Hence, dilutions were undertaken despite protests from commanding officers of special forces units. In one instance, a batch of 130 volunteers was sent to SFTS for probation (though SFTS had no such charter) and standards were diluted to pass at least 50 percent of them. Concurrently, a larger batch was made to do a three-month probation at the Parachute Regiment Training Centre itself, including one month of the PARA Basic Course. Thereafter, they were simply 'posted' to special forces units. This was in complete disregard of the requirement of six-month probation to be done in the respective special forces unit under the supervision of the concerned commanding officer. Many of such intakes were sub-standard, even poor in battle physical efficiency tests (BPET), and the older junior commissioned officers (JCOs) and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) were heard commenting, "*Sahib total pura ho raha hai.*" Since these individuals were 'posted' to units, to revert even one individual, the commanding officer was required to declare him 'unsuitable' and obtain sanction of Army Headquarters prior to such reversion. This meant delay in months with ample chance of non-acceptance by the PARA officer dealing with the issue in the Infantry Directorate. Incidentally, in the US Special Forces, the rejection rate of volunteers from even the US Airborne Forces is 70–75 percent. In Russia's Spetsnaz, it is 80 percent. Our own MARCOS has a rejection rate of 60 percent. Perhaps we could learn something from the selection process of the Special Services Group (SSG) of Pakistan where an individual first undergoes a 24-week initial testing and training process followed by a nine-month training-cum-selection process in all

types of terrain, including insertion and extraction. It is only at the end of this 24 weeks plus nine months that the individual is accepted into the SSG.

Uncomfortable with the 2001 study and the decisions given with regard to the SFTS, particularly that it was for the exclusive use of special forces, the colonel of the Parachute Regiment (a non-special forces officer) recommended the ordering of yet another study in 2003 but it was shelved when Gen Nanavatty (erstwhile army commander, Northern Command) pointed out that there was no requirement of yet another study and that all the issues had already been addressed by a similar study done in the 80s, which incidentally had led to the formation of a Special Forces Regiment. However, yet another study was ordered in 2004 with the colonel of the Parachute Regiment (a non-special forces officer) as chairman and some senior PARA (SF) and PARA officers. This study (not signed by special forces member officers) made some hilarious recommendations like renaming of the PARA battalions as Parachute Special Forces (Airborne), authorising them the special forces' insignia and special forces' allowance. The logic given was that PARA and PARA (SF) are the same force since both operate behind enemy lines. The study recommended that the special forces be expanded to 13 battalions by the year 2010 despite appreciation by the military secretary that officer requirements of special forces battalions in such case could not be completed before the year 2030. The study also recommended that the Special Forces Training School be merged and put under the command the Parachute Regiment Training Centre. This study was done in a most casual manner with just two initial meetings in Delhi which the commander, Parachute Brigade and para centre commandant (not members of the study) were made to attend. Significantly, the commandant and chief instructor, SFTS, a PARA (SF) officer, was not permitted to attend. The study was supposed to have interacted with serving and retired officers but the views of Lt Gen TS Pathak, PVSM, AVSM, YSM, the senior-most serving PARA (SF) officer were never sought.

The 2004 study had also recommended that each Parachute Special Forces (Airborne) unit (alias PARA) unit should have a minimum of 30 personnel qualified in combat military free fall. Prior to this, the pseudo specialist advisors had been asking for the 30 Pathfinders in PARA battalions to be based on Para Motors. In proposing this, the advantages of using Para Motors in counter-insurgency areas like Jammu and Kashmir was also being emphasised till someone in the audience remarked this would also require bullet proof bum pads lest we land up with gunshot wounds on the backsides. Talking of the combat military free fall capability, the US maintains a CFF team of 135 personnel, who undertake 10 operational jumps by night every month with full combat loads, including

weapons and two rucksacks. If we are looking at creating 30 CFF qualified personnel in each PARA battalion who will probably be able to do one refresher course of hopefully 10 jumps in a period of one or two years, then we will end up with a lot of jumping jacks wearing the CFF Basic Course badge but sans the required operational capability. Even the Para Motor capability introduced in PARA battalions over the past six years has resulted in a small number of personnel taking part in demonstrations. Using Pathfinders en masse using Para Motors is an absurd concept to say the least, their only use being stealthy insertion in ones or twos, providing the terrain and winds are favourable.

In recent years, the appointment of DDGMO (SF) in Military Operations was elevated to major general but the first incumbent (still in the chair) again is a non-special forces officer. Instead of placing the officer directly under the Vice Chief of Army Staff (VCAS—as originally proposed) the elevated appointment (ADGMO (SF)) continues within the Military Operations Directorate. Incidentally, before posting of the first AGMO (SF), the appointment of DDGMO (SF) was being held by a normal infantry officer who by his own admission had no idea of special forces or special operations. The only criteria for his posting as DDGMO (SF) was that he was from the same infantry regiment as the COAS, a slot had to be found for him in Delhi and the stamp of a tenure in military operations would boost his future promotion. That being the consideration of the army to special forces, it not surprising that there is ambiguity in understanding of the issue.

## **Current Proposal**

As mentioned above, a peculiar situation exists in our army, wherein the PARA (SF) and regular PARA units are clubbed into the same regiment. Senior paratrooper officers, who have never served in special forces, holding appointments dealing with special forces issues, merely concentrate to somehow establish parity between the tasking of special forces and normal parachute units. Reorganisation of the PARA units on the same lines has been attempted in the past but has been shot down on the valid grounds that the operational requirement of a parachute brigade and parachute battalions is undeniable. Similarly, the Parachute Regiment has been asking for the special forces allowance also to be admissible to PARA units including during projections for the last Pay Commission but this was rightly not accepted by the COAS. During the last reunion of the Parachute Regiment held at Agra in 2009, serving and retired PARA officers got after the COAS that more PARA battalions be converted to special forces role so that they can get the special forces allowance and the Balidan Badge. The COAS responded that this will imply

raising more PARA battalions which will again start clamouring for conversion to special forces the moment their raising is completed.

The current proposal thrown up by the pseudo specialists is continuation of earlier efforts to somehow gain parity between the PARA and the PARA (SF). The only difference this time is that there is no mention of the special forces allowance and the Balidan Badge to PARA units since it is perceived these would automatically come if the present proposal is accepted. The proposal simply recommends that the PARA units be assigned the roles of 'Independent Small Team Actions', 'Guerilla Warfare', 'Sub-Conventional Operations in Unconventional Scenario' and 'Hostage Rescue',

*significantly discarding their primary role of holding ground.* Under the shadow of such pseudo specialisation, the Special Forces concept relevant to special forces gets side-tracked. They might as well have proposed that PARA battalions be given the role of PARA (SF). Who, one may ask will then perform the roles of the parachute brigade and PARA battalions? Such pseudo specialisation efforts lead to parachute units clamouring for the special forces allowances and insignia rather than concentrating on their own primary task. A commanding officer of a PARA battalion, while briefing his colonel of the regiment two years ago, went to the extent of saying that his unit should be given the special forces allowance and insignia or they would like to leave the regiment and join the normal infantry. The fact that parachute units, which are infantry units with airborne capability, must continue to be mandated with tasks that are in support of a formation in their ground holding role strangely gets obfuscated periodically. The fact is that a PARA battalion is an infantry battalion in an airborne role and in no way can be equated to a special forces unit. Foreign armies are very clear on the issue. The US has separate manning and training policies for special forces and airborne forces as well as separate training institutions for each of these forces. If we are to equate the PARA battalions with PARA (SF) battalions, designate them as PARA SF (Airborne) and be the laughing stock of special forces of the world, then why be impartial to infantry battalions, some of which have outperformed PARA battalions in counter-insurgency operations. We might as well designate the infantry battalions or at least their *Ghatak* Platoons as Infantry Special Forces

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### **Special Forces' Concept**

The *Concept of Employment of Special Forces in the Indian Army*, instituted in 2001, says that "Special Forces should be employed to continuously 'shape the battlefield' from conventional wars in the nuclear backdrop to asymmetric and fourth generation wars. Their employment should be theatre specific and as force multipliers to complement tasks performed by conventional forces, entailing high risk, and high gain missions having minimum visibility with desired effect." Shaping the battlefield is a

continuous process covering the entire spectrum of conflict-including asymmetric war that implies shaping in peace-time as well and virtually every conceivable task is possible under 'covert operations', 'special missions' and 'special operations'. Our special forces are potent tools that possess the 'strategic punch' to achieve our security objectives. They must primarily look beyond our borders to nip asymmetric threats in the bud and control the fault lines of our adversaries. Why have we not implemented this concept? The reasons are many but most prominent is the lack of both national and military will, voids of which have led to the failure of defining a National Security Strategy and National Security Objectives as well. Flawed policies of total reliance on technical intelligence (TECHINT) over the years have dried up human intelligence (HUMINT) completely. Is it not a shame that the *New York Times* has to tell us that there are 11,000 Chinese doing 14 projects in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir? Whether we fight China or Pakistan individually or together, we will definitely be combating asymmetric forces concurrently. Hence, the importance to muster the will to go for proactive special forces employment. It should be a matter of grave national concern to us that organisations like Lashker-e-Tayyeba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) conduct open meetings with complete state support in Pakistan, that individuals like Hafiz Saeed (LeT) and Masood Azhar (JeM) continue to be at large after causing tremendous damage in our country, that China is fuelling dissent in our northeast and among the Maoists with apparent intentions of preparing the ground for a full-fledged fourth generation war in the Indian heartland. Unlike the US and even Pakistan, we do not permit our special forces to operate abroad during peace / no war no peace. When the requirement

is longer to operate below the threshold of war, it would be prudent to maintain a smaller nucleus of special forces and create irregular forces around them. Learning from the Bangladesh experience (Mukti Bahini), Pakistan has created the *jihadis* and is artfully employing the 'thousand cuts policy'. It is time we create appropriate deterrence.

## **Requirement**

The requirement for the army is to reflect on the above and take stock. The requirement of the parachute brigade and PARA battalions is loud and clear while we prepare for a combined China-Pakistan threat. You can hardly go any distance in the mountains unless you can establish airheads and go for rapid build-up in the enemy rear, including follow-up air transported operations. The PARA battalions must continue to concentrate on their primary role of ground holding. The mad race for finding parity with PARA (SF) must be put at rest even if it implies delinking them from PARA (SF). Additionally, the army should ensure that appointments dealing with special forces issues must be held only by special forces officers. Lower rank officers officiating in, say, the appointment of ADGMO (SF) should be accepted. Should the PARA (SF) and PARA continue to share the same regiment (though not desirable in the face of continuing acrimony), at least each of these entities must have its own colonel of the regiment. If delinking is unacceptable, then the Parachute Regiment should be renamed the Special Forces and Airborne Regiment, with a separate colonel of the regiment for special forces and airborne forces.

## **Conclusion**

Today's asymmetric wars are laced with unprecedented treachery, deceit and denial. On the question of proactive employment of special forces, the fear of being labelled the aggressor is fallacious since coping with non-traditional challenges does not equate automatically to physical attack. The special forces provide us the tools to address non-traditional challenges to our security by being a silent but effective medium. We need to develop the necessary will to contend with emerging strategic challenges. Their tasking should include asymmetric warfare, unconventional / fourth generation warfare, special operations, strategic reconnaissance, psychological operations and the like. We need to get a handle on the fault lines of our adversaries in order to achieve requisite deterrence. There is a need to be proactive on the issue lest we permit our economy and security to be weakened. We should not let this potent capacity be sidetracked by creating more and more pseudo special forces on the advice of pseudo specialists.