
Morals and Ethics in the Armed Forces: A De Novo Look

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What the bad man cannot be is a good soldier, sailor or airman.

— Gen John W Hackett

Introduction

Change seems constant in society at large and it would be hypocritical not to recognise the armed forces as a microcosm of society. Lately, we have been awash in numerous military scandals. Sad tales abound of armed forces in an existential identity crisis, financial mismanagement, fake encounters, accusations of sexual harassment, espionage and involvement in terrorist activities. While a series of isolated incidents may seem unrelated on the surface, they may also reflect deeper institutional shortcomings regarding ethical matters and underlying cultural attitudes regarding duty and accountability.

The aim of this paper is to identify and analyse the real and imaginary moral erosion in the armed forces. One clearly cannot purport to glibly prescribe a vague general ethic for the armed forces. Yet the need for overall moral and ethical standards and adherence to institutional values is glaringly obvious.

Higher Moral and Ethical Standards in the Armed Forces

Morally serious and thoughtful members of the armed forces feel a deep tension over the perceived moral erosion in their profession. On the one hand, there are few places in our society where the concepts of duty and 'service before self' have such currency. High and noble ideals have a place in the armed forces that they

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have in few other spheres of modern Indian life. For many years now, survey data have shown that the average Indian respects and trusts the armed forces more than any other group in society. Military service embodies some of the deepest values of human life in our society, and it produces character that inspires admiration and respect. This respect ebbs and flows a bit, of course, when scandals and conspicuous moral failures such as a Tehelka, Siachen fake encounter and sexual harassment of a colleague tarnish the image of the armed forces. Upholding ethics in the armed forces is an absolute requirement if we are to retain the sacred trust of the society and the nobility of the profession of arms.

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For the ancient Greek's, the word ethics meant character. For Aristotle, the study of ethics was the study of excellence or the virtues of character. It has come to mean the study and practice of the good life; the kind of life people ought to live. In our time, the concept of ethics has broadened to include not only the characteristics of the good human being, but also the best practices or ethos in various professions, among them the armed forces. Military ethos embodies the spirit that binds the profession together. Ultimately, it is the ethos which incorporates fundamental Indian values and distinguishes a member of the Indian armed forces from ill disciplined irregulars, mercenaries or members of another armed force that lacks the defining core values.

Armed forces need under-girding core values in order to function effectively. I will restrict myself to the discussion of those values which are brought by individuals, who must unequivocally espouse them. These are character (moral and ethical consistency), service before self (resisting the urge of personal gain or pleasure at the expense of the organisational value system), integrity (consistency and clear definition of individual and organisational competencies) and excellence (continual pursuit of the highest standards).

Military values and moral values for military members can well be identical to societal values. Certain values and virtues are held to be important in both our civilian society and the military profession. Some values receive more attention and emphasis in civilian society (for example, personal freedoms) and some in the armed forces (for example, obedience, loyalty, courage). Questionable moral practices, no matter how widespread they become, should not become part

of military practice just because they are widespread. What we do can only be morally correct when it confirms to what we know is morally right.

The changes in society are a matter of culture increasingly defined in terms of consumerism, globalisation and, often, politics. Although there are disagreements over the implications of the changes, I think there is widespread agreement that over the last several decades, Indian society has become more fragmented, more individualistic and arguably less disciplined. These changes put it at odds with the classic military values of loyalty, self-discipline, sacrifice and placing the interest of the group over those of the individual. It would be unwise to assume that the members of the armed forces are immune to the societal changes. It has been argued that the armed forces must adhere to the societal standards and 'move with the times', but in doing so, is it necessary to permit erosion of ethical standards because the character of a society changes? Or does the military virtue stand alone, apart from societal mores, which threaten the erosion of military standards.

There is a popular disposition to regard ethics and morals as absolute and enduring, yet they are neither. That which is considered ethical alters with time in ways between societies, civilisations and even families. The specific content of society's ethics is generally determined by accumulative tradition, epochal convenience and local habit. A question often asked is as to why a society that tends to condone dishonest and unfaithful practices among its civilian members demands honesty and commitment in its armed forces. The professional function of the armed forces is to defend society by being able to fight and win wars. To do so, the armed forces must have members who are committed to principles 'outside of themselves'. Military personnel must be willing to risk their own welfare for the good of others. Military leaders must be so trustworthy and inspire such confidence in their judgement that their subordinates are willing to follow their orders even at the risk of death. Certain character traits such as honesty, selflessness and commitment — traits that inspire such trust and confidence— must be present in military personnel if the military is to effectively serve the society. The values gap, the gap in moral standards of conduct between civilians and armed forces, in a society, is created by a functional demand for these traits in the military. Still, it does seem that society holds the armed forces to a higher standard. Armed forces personnel, unlike other professionals, are required to adhere to their profession driven higher moral standards even in their personal lives.

Traditional Structures (Society-Military Relationship)

The belief that in some sense armed forces personnel are bound by a higher moral standard is equally prevalent in the armed forces. Even though there are occasional and perhaps inevitable moral failures, there are also numerous internally promulgated codes and moral espousals that enunciate such a belief. Commanders exhort their troops to moral goodness and chastise them when they fall short. I will now critically examine some elements of the Indian armed forces tradition, history, culture and ethics as a background to subsequently exploring the moral slide;

- **Separateness** : Common to most military organisations is the notion of being different from the rest of society. The Indian armed forces are no different in feeling a consequent separateness from society. The notion of separateness flows from the distinctive mandate of the armed forces to maintain the security, and defend the sovereignty, of India, if necessary by means of force. Moreover, the service to be performed by the armed forces is total, involving what has been called “the clause of unlimited liability — or loss of life”. The concept of unlimited liability in defence of national interests distinguishes members of the military profession from other professions, in that soldiers may lose their lives in order to achieve national and military objectives. The stark and brutal reality of these differences from normal society has traditionally been a distinguishing feature of military life, contributing to a sense of separateness — even superiority — in relation to the civilian population.
- **Distinctive Culture** : As a result of the distinctive mandate and need to instill organisational loyalty and obedience, the armed forces have developed a culture unto themselves, distinguished by, and with emphasis on, the hierarchy, traditions, customs and distinctive dress and insignias. The separation between civilian and military society in India, as in some other countries, is also maintained by physical and social space as in the case of our cantonments and military stations.

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- **Regimental System :** The regimental system forms a strong subculture within the armed forces (though to a lesser degree in the navy and air force) and is a pervasive and common bond within which the personnel live their daily lives. It is often referred to as a family and its essence is tribal and corporate rather than bureaucratic. A vertical chain of command within this culture ensures that discipline is maintained and that information flows freely through the system. As a flipside, this tribal nature of armed forces culture may lead to a sense of exclusiveness and apparent tendency to justify disrespect for authority outside the group (as in assault and affray with civilians) and at the worst, deliberate hiding of information of moral wrongdoing that could tarnish the reputation of the organisation.
- **Ethics in the Armed Forces :** There are three elements to military ethics. There is the military ethos, which is the general statement of the spirit of the profession. There is the military ethics, which is usually used as a title of the various components or facets of military ethos such as obedience, loyalty, integrity, and so on. Finally, there could be a code of military ethics, which contains obligatory statements of duty and responsibility. Training and ethics in morals forms one component of education received by all ranks in the armed forces. However, formal ethics education is evidently uneven between the commissioned officers and personnel below officer rank. Traditionally, the Indian armed forces have relied on unwritten codes of moral conduct for their members in the belief that the internal checks and balances in the system would take care of all misdemeanours, from bouncing cheques to the grave moral wrongdoing of larger dimensions.

The more stressful the situation, the more likely the fundamental character will show through. It is for this reason that in a profession demanding unlimited liability from its members, higher moral and ethical standards are a must. Character is indivisible.

What Ails Us : Societal and Organisational Realities

Having established the strong basis for the perception that the armed forces are different as far as moral and ethical issues are concerned, it would be prudent to analyse contemporary societal and organisational realities, and in so doing, the implicit causes for the moral erosion that leads to gross moral misdemeanours like the sight of a senior army officer seeking financial gratification in the Tehelka videos or the chain of command in an infantry battalion being vulnerable to

staging fake encounters, thus, displaying the lowest of moral standards at the highest battlefield in the world.

- **The Pleasure Seeking Culture** : There is good reason to believe that when our country gained independence, the leaders of the community hoped to establish and sustain a virtue seeking culture. They were concerned about the character of individuals and about the way in which culture and government could shape the citizens for the better. The virtue seeking culture — to the extent that it existed, it never really took deep root — was to a great extent in convergence with the ethics and virtues that define the armed forces. However, the fragile virtue seeking culture in Indian society has progressively (if one could use the word) moved to being a status seeking then a wealth seeking and, today, a pleasure seeking culture. Up to a point, the tensions between the military subculture and the status and wealth seeking culture were manageable because many of the virtues celebrated in both were similar. A business organisation might pursue wealth and a military unit, victory but both cherish discipline, loyalty, honesty, excellence, and so forth. With obvious exceptions, both encourage teamwork, self-sacrifice and perseverance as rules for success and both cultures could achieve considerable agreement on values and conduct that are bad and ought to be discouraged. On the other hand, a pleasure seeking culture can offer no similar point of intersection with military culture. A pleasure seeking culture that promotes the idea of freedom from constraints to pursuing one's chosen pleasures can neither commend a set of values and virtues nor condemn vices. A professional military force cannot exist without subordinating personal freedoms and aspirations. The cultural problem facing the armed forces is not how to catch up with the progress of society, but how to maintain the sound elements of their culture and tradition, their integrity in the face of deterioration of the national culture. After all, as I have stated earlier, the armed forces are a microcosm of society and some of its members do succumb to the pursuit of immoral gains.
- **Careerism or Career Fear**: Careerism or career fear, as it is often termed,

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can eat away at the core values that are at the heart of the armed forces', ethical culture and we can ignore it only at our own peril. Careerism is a pandemic reality among officers of the armed forces. It could be that this is due to initial perceptions of career opportunities in the armed forces being too optimistic or the perception that evaluation criteria for promotions are too subjective. Neither honour, integrity nor courage are fostered in an atmosphere where a subordinate is reluctant to speak honestly for fear of displeasing a superior. In such an atmosphere, 'going along to get along' often becomes the operating procedure and core values take a beating. When a single less than optimal outcome can end a career, caution, self-interest and a strong aversion to take responsibility often replace initiative, courage and selflessness. This promotes the aberration of individualism and immoral behaviour to 'beat the system' as have come to the fore in the recent past.

Count thee not on certain promotion but rather to gain it, aspire though the sight line aims true on the target, there cometh, perchance a misfire.

— Captain Ronald Hapwood, US Navy

- **Military Efficiency and Moral Benchmarks:** We often hear of good units, good officers and successful operational conduct and then are faced with distressing truths about the same individuals and organisations having violated the norms of good conduct and military discipline to the detriment of the overall reputation and standing of the armed forces in the society. One of the possible causes of the presence of such 'fly by night operators' in armed forces could be the absence of any moral benchmark in the military appraisal system, which rarely questions as to how success has been achieved as long as nothing abnormal has been brought to the fore till an action or event is termed a success. In many ways, members of the armed forces are encouraged by these instances to be more interested in self-gratification while the good people who are prepared to make the personal sacrifice, go largely unnoticed.
- **Service Conditions, Morale and Societal References:** It would be presumptuous to discuss service conditions in the armed forces, considering the readership this paper is addressing. Nevertheless, the issue does merit attention as morale and morality are undeniably linked. I would even go to the extent of saying that both require each other to sustain. The pleasure seeking society, busy in the pursuit of its own

pleasures, often denies the recognition that was awarded to the professional soldier in the past in the virtue, status and even wealth seeking societies. As a result, at times, under sub-optimal leadership in the prevalent service conditions, there is a breakdown of military morale that sustains military ethics. At such times, the armed forces personnel succumb or may succumb to quick gains, often immoral and counter to the values that define the organisation.

- **Perceptions, Media and Legal System:** The armed forces often feel that they are under siege by the civilian culture, which does not share the same values. The ever increasing reach of the media, coupled with a large number of armed forces personnel, of all ranks, approaching the civilian legal apparatus, seeking relief for the wrongs done unto them have sometimes contributed to demonising the image of the armed forces. To be fair to the media and the legal system, they have a tough job to do in a democracy. However, it becomes a problem area if the media shows a mercenary willingness to exploit any scandal or misperception to sell copies, or when the contemporary society, through the civilian system, gives vent to anxiety about the armed forces' ability and readiness to address moral and ethical issues. This has a domino affect, leading to situations wherein some military professionals succumb to the temptation of using the media or the civilian system to further their own cause, instances of which are known to all of us in the environment. If left unchecked, their dimension of immorality is as much a threat to our core values as the issues discussed earlier.

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Arresting the Fall : Recommendations

There is a growing perception that the armed forces have lost their moral compass. Though there is a sense within the armed forces that there is an element of truth in the charges, we lack institutional responses to address the fall. The armed forces can weather the scrutiny but we cannot and must not remain unresponsive to

the current state as to how military personnel incorporate and reflect the moral and ethical values in consistently 'doing the right thing'. Some recommendations that will contribute to creating an institutional response to the developing moral crisis are discussed below:

- **Evolving from Separatism to Fusionism:** The traditional view that the armed forces need a cocoon in which they can safely generate their own way of life can no longer be the basis for the military-society relationship. Modern communications, technological needs of the armed forces and increasing desire of contemporary society to know what its institutions are doing entail that the armed forces take up the challenge of evolving the association with the society to a new level. This is not to suggest that all barriers between the society and the armed forces be removed to the point of identicalism. Rather, a suggested relationship would be that of fusionism, which implies that while armed forces maintain their own ethical ideals and traditions, and retain a certain degree of desired separation from the society, stronger institutional connections are fostered between the military and the society. These connections will represent points of fusion, which are conversational in nature. Fusionism favours letting the society as a whole know more about the activities of the armed forces so that the excuse of 'military secrecy' is not used to hide errors and corruption. A beginning has already been made in this regard with the media gaining access to proceedings in the Siachen fake encounters case. The evolution from separatism to fusionism, however, requires greater deliberation and an institutional approach so as to minimise the ills and maximise the benefits.
- **Comprehensive Dialogue:** I suggest that we need to encourage the widest possible dialogue about the challenges to leadership, morals and ethics. This means dialogue with people within and outside of the armed forces, new ideas to encourage and support civilian-military collaboration wherever and whenever possible. The National Defence University, if and when created, can be one pillar of a national dialogue between the military and society (exchange programmes, education, research, etc). Isolationist tendencies and simplistic assumptions about the social effect on the armed forces can lead to an internal focus and a lost mentality.
- **Benchmarking Leadership to Morality and Morale :** Too often, the military appraisal system contributes to careerism and career fear by

disregarding morality and ethics against perceived morale and success. This needs to be curtailed and achievement of success within the moral framework should be encouraged. On the other hand, punitive action against immoral behaviour needs to be strict and consistent.

- **Moral Education and Character Development:** The present status of teaching of ethics and morals disregards the imparting of these values to personnel below officer rank, relying heavily on the regimental system for the same. Though a beginning has been made with institutions like the Junior Leader Academy, it needs to be understood that ethical standards need to be explained to all in armed forces in an evolving society. The regimental culture can only be relied upon to develop the same once the individual has joined service.
- **Service Conditions :** The military personnel demand of their leaders the moral obligation to project their case to get them the recognition, and, no doubt, the remuneration, they deserve. A discussion on the need to constantly update service conditions is beyond the scope of this paper but optimal service conditions are equally important to preventing the individual from succumbing to the temptations of immoral gains.
- **Perception Management :** From the perception of every citizen, it is not only important what the armed forces do but also how they do it. In other words, the profession must meet public expectations of consistent and exemplary behaviour. The armed forces believe that we are able to police our ranks, in a moral sense, through the subculture's standards and a self- applied specialised legal code. Consistent and non-subjective performance appraisal and legal systems within our armed forces will ensure that the armed forces can lay to rest the societal anxiety about organisational readiness in capabilities. A continual and open dialogue with the media and aiding the media in formulating an ethical framework to operate in matters related to national security will also help ameliorate the situation.

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Conclusion

Character is like a river. The longer it remains in a particular channel, the deeper it cuts and the less likely that it will leave the channel. Rivers that frequently leave their banks to explore other routes, pick up enormous amounts of mud and silt, clog their original channels and sometimes wind up permanently in other channels. People may occasionally slip out of their channels, but most will remain true to their character indefinitely. Although some individuals can follow contrary ethical guidance (in professional and private life), most cannot. Character usually shines through regardless of the situation. In a profession, which demands “unlimited liability — loss of life” from its members and frequently exposes them to intense stressful situations, higher moral and ethical standards are the foundation of trust, teamwork and selfless service. Indivisible character is the key to both personal and military success.

In their interactions with contemporary society, military professionals are likely to find themselves in situations which pressure them to lower their standards. The armed forces have to take the necessary preemptive and corrective action by injecting moral energy into the system to arrest the real and perceived moral erosion, for the greater good of the organisation and the society. The soldier ever more often has been a teacher rather than an erring student of moral questions. The highest service of the armed forces to the Indian state may well lie in the moral sphere.