



What Makes A Soldier Fight: The Challenge of Operating in Jammu and Kashmir

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The year 2016 has been a tumultuous year for the Indian Army deployed in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). The challenge ironically came from a growing perception that normalcy was setting in and the role of the Army required to be recalibrated to facilitate the normalisation process. How this was to come about was not defined, but a general perception that trickled down to the rank and file was that nothing should be done that could vitiate the atmosphere and potentially lead to alienating the people in the Kashmir Valley. Herein lay the flaw. The assumption, though not stated, implied that a major contributing factor to alienation comprised the presence and actions of the Indian Army. Remove that, and voila, peace and tranquility would return. By laying the onus of a return to peace on the men in uniform, the causative factors were brushed aside, and the insidious role played by terror groups, their supporters from across the border and fifth columnists operating from inside the state and in other parts of the country was glossed over. Also overlooked was the role of the political class and the state administration in the entire process.

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Peace in the Kashmir Valley, as indeed in the whole state of J&K, will remain a chimera for a host of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that a peaceful J&K state does not fit in with the larger aims of Pakistan and its military. Kashmir is not the core dispute between India and Pakistan, as is generally stated and believed. That core is ideological, going back to the events in history that led to the creation of Pakistan as a separate country for the Muslims of the subcontinent. Kashmir is but a symptom of the larger malaise that afflicts Pakistan's polity and its military leadership. It defines itself as the antithesis of India and, in that sense, Pakistan is what India is not. If the two countries were to live in peace, then the question, why partition, would be difficult to answer. Are the two nations condemned by history to live in a state of constant friction and hostility? That is the fundamental issue which policymakers in India and its military leadership need to confront and address. Pakistan will continue to keep the pot boiling in J&K. The challenge is to keep the population of J&K immune to such influence.

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Like other states in the Indian Union, J&K too has had its share of poor governance, corrupt administrators, and self-serving politicians. While such factors have contributed to the spread of terrorism in the state, they are neither primary nor causative factors. Had this been so, we would have seen a similar influx of violence in many other parts of the country. Violence in the state of J&K is more a product of instigation by forces inimical to the state and a vitiated political discourse. The threat is from deliberate fomentation of violence by foreign-backed terrorist groups who are supplied weapons, explosives, and money by their cross-border handlers to carry out their nefarious designs, and who are also trained and indoctrinated in safe havens across the border. Threats also emanate from a focussed campaign to indoctrinate the people through propaganda and imposition of an alternate ideology which is inimical to the idea of a secular state. The latter is the more dangerous and insidious, as it poisons the minds of the youth through a surreptitious network

that has infiltrated the state's education system, sections of the print and audio visual media, government offices, and its religious edifice—the mosques.

The psychological dimension of subversion of society also needs urgent address, along with measures to eliminate violence, stabilise the polity, improve justice delivery, and ensure an efficient administration. As of now, the state suffers from multiple infirmities, and it is in such an environment of fear and distrust that the Indian Army has been operating. Since independence, the Army has played a sterling role in the state, and has been very active in the last three decades in combating terror supported from across the border. What India faces is not a proxy war by Pakistan but a war by other means emanating from that country. That is the prime reason why normalcy is yet to return to the state. Internal faultlines aggravate the situation further. The Army has successfully kept the situation under control but a total return to normalcy would require the synchronised efforts of multiple organs of the state to play their part in sync with the security force's operations. That is still work in being and, hence, the challenge faced by the Army is immense. In such an environment, we need to revitalise the capability and capacity of the military to ensure stability till durable peace returns to the state.

In his *Mann ki Baat* of 26 November 2016, the current Prime Minister stated, 'When the entire country stands with our jawans, their strength increases 125 crore times.' This is a truism which is oft forgotten. The support a soldier receives from the nation contributes in great measure to his morale and enables him to perform, well over his abilities. Sadly, this support is conspicuous by its absence, in both India's polity and its administrative network, over long stretches of time. The row over the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) is but a manifestation of this malaise. AFSPA is neither the cause of the violence, nor of its continuation. It is simply an enabling provision to permit the Army to effectively discharge its duties. But it becomes a handy tool for various inimical groups to demonise the Army and disparage the work it does in the most trying and difficult circumstances.

In a conventional conflict, the whole nation stands as one behind its armed forces. All the wars that the nation has fought since independence stand testimony to this observation, the Kargil War being the most recent expression of national will against an external enemy. But in long drawn out insurgencies and in wars conducted by other means, such as the current conflict in J&K, such support is not always forthcoming. In some cases, there are voices raised in the country supporting the terrorists, as happened in the prestigious environs of the Jawahar Lal Nehru University in February 2016, and later also in the Jadavpur University in Kolkata.¹ What then compels the Indian soldier to fight, despite a perceived lack of support from the nation he is committed to defend? The reputed historian, SLA Marshall, in *Men Against Fire* was remarkably prescient in his observation when he stated as follows:

I hold it to be of the simplest truths of war that the thing which enables an infantry soldier to keep going with his weapons is the near presence or the presumed presence of a comrade...He is sustained by his fellows primarily and by his weapons secondarily.²

Indeed, the primary motivation of men in battle is related to strong group ties and the desire of not letting their buddy down. Another noted research paper by Edward A Shils and Morris Janowitz also showed similar results among Germany's Wehrmacht soldiers who fought on even as Berlin fell.³ This primary motivation is as true today as it was in the great world wars. The United States validated this truth yet again in a study conducted in Iraq on what motivated soldiers to fight. The paper, published by the US Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute in 2003 validated the popular belief that unit cohesion is a key issue in motivating soldiers to fight.⁴ What makes men fight is, hence, a product of unit cohesion, *esprit de corps* and strong bonds of loyalty to one's comrades in arms and the unit one belongs to.

This has been the Indian experience too. The *izzat* of the *paltan*, unit cohesion and strong bonding make a soldier persevere, despite the most formidable odds. The saga of Lance Naik Hanumanthappa Kopad, who

was rescued alive after being buried 25 feet in an avalanche for five days at minus 50 degrees Celsius, in the Siachen glacier, reflects that spirit. The nation mourned when the brave heart passed away after being evacuated to the Command Hospital at Delhi, but the sheer grit in surviving such odds galvanised the whole nation.⁵ While the courage and fortitude of the soldier was commendable, equally commendable was the will of his commanding officer and all ranks of the battalion, who continued with the rescue efforts in extremely hostile terrain and weather conditions, despite knowing that medically, the chances of finding a survivor were nil. It is this spirit instilled in the fighting soldier that imbues him with the will to fight. He will fight for his comrades, because he knows that his comrades will fight for him. The larger cause is the nation, but the immediate context is survival, the *izzat* of his *paltan* and the desire to stand up for his comrades, knowing well that his comrades will always stand up for him.

Imbuing such spirit in the rank and file of the armed forces is a product of regimentation. Simply stated, the ethos of the unit requires each man to ensure that his unit or sub-unit is the very best that can be. No sacrifice is big enough to uphold the honour and good name of the unit. Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, as the Army Chief succinctly stated this in his address to the gentleman cadets in the Passing out Parade of the Indian Military Academy. 'You are required to ensure the security of your country', he said. 'Should you have to fight, you must fight to win. There are no runners up in war.' The desire to win is the cutting edge of every unit's ethos.

It is regimentation that builds up the will to win, to conquer, and persevere against all odds. Regimentation gives the individual the responsibility for the success of the unit and for preserving its honour. That is why he is ready to die to protect his comrades. And as his comrades are similarly inclined, the soldier gets the confidence that his back is also being protected. He, thus, trusts his colleagues with his life, just as they trust him with theirs. The third factor is trust in the military and political leadership, and faith in the national aim. This is vital both in war and long drawn out anti-insurgency and anti-

terrorism campaigns. But this faith and trust is not something that can be taken for granted. It has to be nurtured, else, like everything else, it can decay and wither over time, with negative consequences for the Army and the nation. It is this aspect that remains worrying in the ongoing war by other means which Pakistan is waging against India in J&K.

Mistakes committed by the troops on the ground, must be investigated and analysed to learn the appropriate lessons.

The war against terror being waged in J&K has been ongoing for nearly three decades and is not likely to terminate any time soon. In 2015, India witnessed the fourth highest number of terrorist incidents globally as indicated in the Statistical Appendix of the US Country Report on Terrorism 2015. Civilian and security forces fatalities were 181 and 155 respectively, in 2015. The figures for 2016 are slightly higher, at 191 civilian fatalities and 173 security forces fatalities. Of these, 84 security forces fatalities took place in J&K alone.⁶ The environment of operations is, thus, difficult, but soldiers still persevere because of the strong regimental traditions and unit ethos. However, certain incidents in the recent past have the potential to erode the confidence of the rank and file in its leadership—both political and military. That is a cause for concern.

Mistakes invariably will be committed by the troops on the ground, which obviously must be investigated and analysed to learn the appropriate lessons. How such incidents are dealt with, however, requires a great deal of sensitivity and finesse to avoid an adverse impact on the morale and confidence of the troops. An incident in November 2014, where a mobile checkpoint of the Army fired on a car which did not stop is a case in point. The incident led to the death of two and injury to two more persons, all of whom were later found to be teenagers. The uproar over the killing of innocent schoolchildren is understandable, but the immediate reaction by the Army, perhaps on political considerations that the guilty Army personnel will be dealt with, sent a wrong message to the rank and file.⁷ How was guilt established without even a cursory investigation? Why was it made so public? Could not there have been better means to inform the

public and assuage their anger? Regardless of the fact that the troops in this incident acted in good faith or otherwise, to arbitrarily condemn them as guilty broke that trust which a soldier has placed in his superiors. The larger fear of such breach in faith is that troops will prefer inaction rather than aggressively pursue a line which may have negative consequences for them, should things go wrong.

It is important that the morale of soldiers is maintained at any cost. Adverse occurrences need to be dealt with through skilful perception management which, while assuaging public sentiments, does not cause damage to military morale. At this all important cusp in the developing situation in J&K, it must also be ensured that the offensive spirit is not sacrificed in an attempt to reach a quick peace. This will lead to a siege mentality where troops will stay confined to their areas of operation, and will seek to avoid combat when they do venture out. In the process, we will see resurgence in terrorist activity which for the moment has been effectively contained.

It is also important for the state to get its act together. A revamping of the state's administration and improvement in the criminal justice system is a crying need and must be taken up urgently along with steps to check the mushrooming of *madrassas* that preach a virulent Wahhabi discourse. Many schools too have been infiltrated and now propagate Wahhabism which is tolling the death knell of the *Kashmiriyat* that was the state's tradition. The Army, on its part, must continue with offensive operations, and must learn to handle flak when things go wrong. The road ahead is long and slippery, but it would be a test of the military's leadership at all levels. The Army has no option, but to persevere and come out with flying colours.

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