

# Restoring the Dignity and Honour of the Kashmiri Awam: An Insight into the Army Way

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*“Is India’s preference for a conflict management rather than a conflict resolution approach sensible? Past Indian responses to crisis situations do not infuse confidence...while tight control and deep surveillance in Kashmir help keep India from being surprised and thereby over reacting, India’s crisis response will have its own compulsions and dynamics, rendering the direction, momentum and outcome indeterminate.”*

— Ali Ahmed<sup>1</sup>

The aspirations of the Kashmiri *awam* can finally be addressed only by active and focused political measures and therein lies conflict resolution. As the government and civil administration tries to find its feet, the Army by virtue of sheer presence and an unprejudiced motive has an important role to play in conflict management. And one cannot deny, as stated by Mr Ali Ahmed, that this state will continue for an indefinite time. It’s a grey zone, a phase involving rebuilding of trust lost over two decades of violence. It’s also a difficult phase where the soldiers are being asked to perform in areas beyond the training of a regular soldier. But one in which the men have exhibited remarkable sagacity, and consequently the Army has tasted extraordinary success through the year

2011 and so far in 2012.

The period covering the last two years has been historical for Kashmir. It has laid waste the predictions and extrapolations of the well-informed intelligentsia. In the mind's eye one can appreciate the disappointment of a number of removed-from-the-scene writers and journalists who have thrived on and made a reputation of one-sided reporting of tumult in the Valley. However, what is encouraging is a new crop of writers delving into saner subjects like history, religion, architecture and the like. The newspaper brims over with articles— most genuine, a few planted, applauding the Army's role in civic action programmes. There has been the odd inescapable fodder provided by the discussion on the revocation of AFSPA but largely, angst in newspaper columns has been directed towards political and administrative failures, a welcome relief from the anti-Security Forces venom that the papers spewed over 2009 and 2010. The former year had seen the alleged Shupiyani Double Rape and Murder controversy and the latter saw the *Sangbazi Daur* (period of stone pelting) a la *Intifada* triggered by the unfortunate demise of a young boy, Tufail Mattoo due to a tear gas shell. The Macchil Fake Encounter case, currently under enquiry, added further to the mess. These two years of public outcry have played their own significant role in ensuring a peaceful 2011 through the significant lessons learnt by the security forces and also by the *awam* who realized the futility of falling prey to the separatist agenda. This article seeks to highlight the role of the Army in restoring the honour and dignity of the Kashmiri *Awam* during 2011 and 2012 and the proposed roadmap for the next two years.

## **What Did the Army Do Different - An Appraisal of the Army Tactics and Procedures through the Last Two Years**

In an article for a defence magazine, while outlining his strategy to generate goodwill, General Office Commanding 15 Corps said in Apr 2011, "*It is a battle of minds where firepower is of little consequence. Heart as a weapon has changed the context of SF interaction with people and it is a part of common lexicon even with the local media. The Army always had very good people friendly relations with villages in outlying areas because of its development related activities, boost to local economies and its exemplary conduct. The fresh offensive with the new message reached the urban areas as well.*"<sup>2</sup> A year later, *Rising Kashmir*, one of the premier English language newspapers in the Valley reacted thus,<sup>3</sup> "*The Army's 'Jee Janab' policy over the past one year is an ambitious one, designed more than to merely win hearts and minds. It*

*stands the Maoist principle on insurgency on its head: of using a base in rural areas to envelop and take over the centre. Here it is the counter insurgent resorting to the strategy of squeezing the centre. The success of the strategy is in the invective AFSPA incites in separatists. These calls for demilitarisation are to unlock the vice like grip of the Rashtriya Rifles. Their omnipresence restricts space for the terrorists.”* Clearly, the approach had been successful. But there’s more to what the Army did in 2011 than this simplistic Mao analogy. Listed in succeeding paragraphs are some thoughts from hindsight which made 2011 the ‘Game Changing Year’.

### *Short-circuiting the Contact*

During preceding years, the vernacular and local media was the chief stumbling block in the Army’s effort to normalize the situation. Sensing the motivation in the civil agitation, their fiery discourses added the proverbial fuel to the fire. They detected, wrongly, nefarious intentions behind every genuine endeavour. There was apparently no accountability for responsible journalism as the Shupiyan incident of 2009<sup>4</sup> amply demonstrated. Providing rejoinders, which nobody cared to print, and fretting over the impact of the latest prejudiced article was a daily affair. The battle of perception management was being lost. What was perhaps glossed over was the simple tenet that the media would illustrate what the people would want to see, hear or read. Thus, the emphasis evolved primarily on the people and through them, the Army reached out to the media. Sooner than expected, the media, including those that were categorically anti-Army (*Greater Kashmir*, the Valley’s premier English newspaper, for example) was churning out pieces on the negatives of the armed insurrection, the evil role of Pakistan and the ill-effects of the turmoil on the Kashmiri psyche. An odd editorial lauding the efforts of the Army was also slipping through. Honesty of intent had cut through the guarded mesh of distrust.

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### *Changing the Army's Perception: Differentiating between the Victim and the Perpetrator*

Given the three years of civil agitation and the excesses committed in stemming it, the *jawan* was wary and his important but limited role prevented him from gauging the difference between the exploiter and the exploited. Never mind that the bulk of the civil agitation was orchestrated; the focus at lower levels shifted to Kashmir in terms of geographical territory. Kashmiris became the villains. Mutual suspicion was rife and many actions by the SF, in hindsight, were perhaps, not so well judged. A renewed challenge was to manage the perception of the junior leadership brimming with cynicism. The frequent turnovers in Rashtriya Rifles battalions, an issue responsible for many shortcomings, now came to the rescue. Personnel who had not been through the agitation phase were indoctrinated with renewed vigour at the Corps and Force Battle Schools. New Commanders and leaders were given a fresh take on the '*Jee Janab*' doctrine. 'Cultural sensitivity' became a roar. Slowly but surely, the Company Commanders, the Junior Commissioned Officers and finally the men came aboard. Ill-conceived generalisations to define the Kashmiri attitude reduced and sympathy for a generation marred by physical violence emerged.

### *Genuine Engagement: Passion in the Heart, Fire in the Belly*

The concern for the aspirations of the population has been most visibly exhibited by infrastructure development through the Army's flagship programme, Operation Sadbhavna. This has demonstrated the Army's understanding of the Kashmiri aspiration for inclusive growth. But what has clearly tilted the opinion in Army's favour has been the marked change in attitude in daily dealings. And this singular factor is picked by the *awam* as the most welcome change. However, it has not marred the operational edge and the Army has been ruthless in eliminating gun-toting elements out to disturb the peace. The concept of minimum force has been buttressed with elaborate Rules of Engagement (RsOE) to cater for most situations that may be faced in the field while dealing with terrorists or unruly, violent mobs.

### *Getting Over the Numbers Game*

The romance of 'kills' had for long gripped the Army's hierarchy. It defined effectiveness of Commanding Officers and Company Commanders. It was the over-riding factor in gauging professionalism of a Battalion. And the syndrome perhaps was responsible for some errors of intention having crept in. A conscious

effort was made to impress upon the units that a mindless and misplaced 'pursuit for glory' was not appreciated. And for the first time the hierarchy meant it. The emphasis was shifted to the population and modulating of its perception towards the Army, the Government and the rest of the country through genuine commitment.

### *Visible Changes*

The *Rising Kashmir* wrote in June 2011, *Continuing with his policy of using 'Heart as (a) Weapon' the General Officer Commanding (GOC) of Srinagar based 15 Corps has moved forward on his people friendly agenda on regulating the movement of Army convoys on vital routes in Kashmir. In an informal chat with Rising Kashmir, he said that after receiving the feedback from (the) local population about the movement of Army convoys, 'I immediately looked at the issue to ease out the problems being faced by the common people, Though it is not enough and will take (a) long time to fully implement what is in my mind, but to begin with I have ordered that no convoy will move from 9 am to 12 pm and 4 pm to 6 pm from Anantnag to Srinagar and HMT crossing to Pattan'. He said that this has been a long pending demand and due to singularity of the highway there have been problems.* Apart from measures, such as the one described above, the aggressiveness of the Army was toned down. No mounted machine guns, no batons in hand, no flashing of headlights, no pointing of fingers, etiquettes during house search, no whistle blowing and no forced right of way, etc. Gradually, the demeanour has changed in consonance with the requirement of the times and the presence of the Army is less intrusive and disruptive. The stark comparison between the tactics of the police and CPMF on one hand and the Army on the other has also worked to the Army's advantage and has come to be widely acknowledged by the local population.

### *Emphasis on 'No Trigger'*

This was the constant refrain from the Army hierarchy in the Valley throughout the period under review. The separatists wanted an issue to blow it out of proportion and portray the 'callous attitude of the Occupation Army'. The Army was in no mood to oblige. General Officers addressed officers down to Company level and stressed the need for restraint even in the face of grave provocation. Given the lessons from the past two years, the junior leadership played its part. Procedures were evolved at battalion level and 'prevention is better than reaction' was the mantra. Situations with potential to foment trouble were resolved with the proactive approach of the senior officers.

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### *The Media Campaign*

The media, drained dry of any anti-Army scoops and sensing the assuaged sentiments of the public, was taken on board as never before. Civic action by the Army found increasing space in the print and electronic media. Cricket matches between the Army and media personnel became a runaway hit. The media was no more that dark, unseen force laying waste to the Army's effort. Channels and newspapers now had a face to be associated with. Social interaction increased and pleasantly the media too began to tip off the Company Commander on likely trouble in his area of responsibility.

### *Breaking Ice with the Intelligentsia*

Recognising that the intelligentsia held the key to public opinion, teachers, doctors, lawyers, politicians, civil society activists, accomplished journalists and media persons were engaged. Seminars and forums on sensitive issues like Human Rights were organised and people spoke their heart out. The Army did not shy away from explosive discourses and uncomfortable comments. It was a two-way learning process. While the Army learnt about the misgivings and suspicion in the civilians, they in turn appreciated the compulsions and ethos of the Army. Some objected to the treating of the successful conduct of the panchayat elections as a victory for Indian democracy or the fondness to reiterate, every now and then, that Kashmir was an integral part of India. The repeated stress on the disputed nature, and consequently, an aspersion on his identity were, perhaps subconsciously, not appreciated by the Kashmiri. It seemed that the average Kashmiri yearned for integration.

### *Targeting Unemployment*

Lack of jobs and opportunities was a major source of disaffection. The implementation of the Rangarajan Committee Report<sup>5</sup> was pursued with the civil administration. Project Himayat<sup>6</sup> was kick started in several districts with the Army engaged actively in publicising the scheme and sponsoring candidates. The Army recruitment for ranks and officers was pursued with renewed vigour with company commanders reaching out in their areas, identifying potential

candidates and providing them training and guidance. The efforts saw a marked increase in the recruitment numbers. Vocational training classes were conducted by various units and formations to empower the unskilled populace and empower them to take up a job or a venture as an entrepreneur.

### *Promoting Cultural Sensitivity*

*Moulvies* were invited to the company operating bases for motivational talks and for felicitation. The junior leadership was pleasantly surprised on the neutral and irreligious nature of their clean-your-soul talks. *Hajis* were greeted on their return from the pilgrimage. Festivals were celebrated jointly; text message greetings on the day of festivals were exchanged and banners greeting the people were displayed by the Army, sweets were distributed and never-before bonhomie prevailed. Advisories listing 'dos and don'ts' for a particular occasion were sent down from higher headquarters to keep the men informed and promote understanding of the Sufi strain of Islam.

### *Addressing the Aspirations of Women*

To promote the cause of women, lectures on save the girl child were organised on a regular basis, free computer education was imparted and the girls in rural areas experienced the liberating and empowering force of the internet. Individuals were sponsored for training at Air Hostess Academies and post-training new, more confident personalities emerged. Participation in debates and cultural activities was encouraged. Exclusive tours for girls were organised to various parts of the country as also to local tourist spots. The reservations and suspicion of the uniform promoted by years of rumour mongering and aggressiveness during operations began to fade rapidly.

But even as things appeared on an even keel, the separatists were at work, issuing *hartal* calendars and motivating, through rumours and intimidation, the local population to shun the Army effort. The locals though, had seen through. *Bandh* calls went unheeded and there was a general cynicism towards the separatists whose own kin studied in foreign universities or attended to plush jobs while the local kids died in mindless rioting. The Army, as part of the security setup and the local population, has been instrumental in ensuring the year that was. The *awam* has surprised the Army with their willingness to move on and embrace peace. They have indeed responded prudently to the overtures of the Army, allowing it to gain their confidence and goodwill. While most of the current crop of terrorists can be said to be a

mere shadow of those seen in previous years, two recent instances serve as grim reminders. The first was the torching of an Army vehicle following an accident at Anantnag and the second were the twin encounters in Handwara in which ten terrorists were eliminated. While the former cautions us against assuming for granted that general public perception is decisively pro-Army or even neutral, the latter conveys that the trans-LC network is alive and kicking. So, clearly there is no room for complacency. And it is in this light that the current year and the future assume meaning.

## **Reinforcing Peace, Security and Stability: Challenges for the Future**

*The Army is one of the main stakeholders in the situation in the Valley. It connects the masses to the government in a way that no other organisation can. Intellectual understanding of the ground situation is much better in the Army than in any other organisation operating in the Valley owing to the availability of officers at ground level. This understanding ought to be harnessed for greater good. Since Army is a main player in stabilisation, its role extends beyond military operations, although these remain at the core of its actions.*

— Lt Gen Syed Ata Hasnain, AVSM, SM, VSM\*\*7

### *Intellectual Exploitation of Goodwill*

Some aspects which have traditionally distinguished the Army from the police and Para Military Forces are:

- High degree of professional competence and high rate of success.
- Quick response and deployment.
- People friendly operations aimed at separating the terrorists from the local populace with minimum inconvenience to the locals.
- Strictly apolitical dealing with the civilian administration, police forces and the people.
- Use of minimum force graduated according to circumstances.
- Constructive contribution to development activities.

But there is another more significant distinguishing feature. The Army is blessed in having intelligent scholar-warriors, the company commanders—the backbone of the entire population-centric effort—on ground. Now is the time for consolidation of gains. There can be no let-up in the efforts of 2011. What has to be added is the intellectual exploitation



of these gains at company level to cement the positive perception of the Army. The slogan of bonhomie *Mukam hai khushali ka, rasta hai aman ka* (on the path of peace the destination is prosperity) has to be interpreted in spirit and translated into meaningful engagement on ground. Fringe elements have to be brought on board and separatist sentiments rendered irrelevant. The junior leadership must arm itself with an opinion on important contentious issues as also have a deeper understanding of intangibles like *Kashmiriyat* and the common man's pulse. This can be achieved only by embracing the environment and treating the people oriented effort as an extension of military operations, which it certainly is. Also required is a continued management of the perception of the rank and file, for it is easy for a sense of despair and futility to set in given the slow and uncertain gains.

### *Likely Graph of Militancy*

With the USA firm on its stand of withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan by 2014 and in a recent campaign address hinting at a possible 2013 deadline, it is expected that foreign elements may once again try to bring Kashmir to a boil. It is in this light that a two-day seminar on 'Afghanistan Dynamics: Impact on Regional and Strategic Environment' was jointly conducted by the Department of Strategic and Regional Studies, University of Jammu and the Army's 16 Corps on 30 March 2012. "Our challenge lies in preventing the spillover of Taliban ideology and the resultant violence into our country, especially in J&K. The challenge is immense, but not insurmountable," General Officer Commanding, 16 Corps, Lt Gen A S Nandal said at the seminar at Jammu University<sup>8</sup>. Even as the majority of the Kashmiri Muslims follow the Barelvi sect and do not subscribe to the extremist approach encouraged by the Wahabis, there is a need to guard against its dilution. *Urs* or festivals of the Pir saints must be encouraged, Sufi shrines and *Ziarats* must be restored through joint effort with the public and *moulvies* from outside the state need to be kept under watch for what they preach. The Army at the ground level has an important function here in preserving the peaceful and moderate tenets of Sufi Islam. The measures, however, have to be subtle and we must be guarded against overtly taking sides and putting our secular, non-religious identity at stake.

### *Factors to Guard Against*

While the singular most important factor to guard against would be

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complacency, both in military operations and in the people-centric approach, there are other issues too which beg attention. The close contact with the population must not dilute our soldierly attributes. Training as hithertofore must continue. Neither must we take on the ills that afflict the police and paramilitary forces. The distinction in professionalism must remain. Secondly, our efforts must not undermine the civil administration. We must be acutely conscious of not allowing a parallel structure to exist for it will inevitably cause heart-burn and showcase lack of synergy. The civil administration must be

bolstered by our efforts and not feel challenged. Given the lethargic attitude in some districts this may be easier said than done but efforts must be to take them on board. Street protests for want of amenities are becoming an everyday affair and the next big occasion for a trigger might be just that as the Boniyar incident<sup>9</sup> showed. Further, there will be some civilian elements out to look for personal gains from the Army's effort and we must not let them or those who undercut our endeavours to define our perception about the general population. Generalisations that reflect animosity may not be the best ingredient of a genuine effort.

### *Influencing the Police and Para Military Forces*

Watch Youtube and all videos that allege misdemeanour or excess by the Army are invariably clips involving the police or the Central Reserve Police Force. With the CRPF also insisting on wearing camouflage fatigues, the difference is difficult for the layman to spot. Though the common man in Kashmir knows the difference, it is unnecessary fodder for the separatists against the 'Occupation Army' who publicly paint all uniformed personnel with the same brush. As the clarion call for synergy in effort reaches a crescendo, the Army will involve itself more and more with the police and PMF. Already, they are an indispensable part of our operations and on days of expected trouble, joint patrolling and manning of control points is an increasing norm. Our professionalism in conduct of operations and execution of orders must rub-off on them. The Inspector General of CRPF in Kashmir has requested the Army for training its companies and joint training at company locations of the Army has commenced. One important

aspect that we must impart is our sense of even handedness and the respect for Rules of Engagement.

Even as the powers-that-be ponder over a political settlement to the Kashmir issue, conflict management is the present and foreseeable future for the Army and all its efforts must be to strengthen the prevailing sense of security and inclusiveness. 'No Trigger' will continue to be the operative phrase to deny any space for manoeuvre to the separatist sentiment. We must prepare ourselves for a spike in the numbers of foreign elements in the terrorist ranks as and when the foreign military presence in Afghanistan comes to an end. The intelligentsia must be engaged with informed opinions and the common man with unwavering commitment. The civil administration must be supported in its endeavour to cope up with providing amenities for the people in the face of inadequate infrastructure and means. The gains over the past two years must be built on further and then hopefully the perspective which lent credence to agitations in the past will be altered for good.

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Col **Amit Singh Dabas** is presently commanding a Rashtriya Rifles battalion.

## Notes

1. Ali Ahmed, "Kashmir: Declaring Premature Victory," *Kashmir Times*, Apr 03, 2012.
2. Lt Gen Syed Ata Hasnain, AVSM, SM, VSM\*\*, "The Heart is my Weapon: Kashmir Revisited," *War College Journal*, Summer 2011.
3. Ali Ahmed, n.1.
4. In 2009, two women were found dead on the banks of the Rembiara River in Shupiyan. Local sentiment was motivated in part by inimical elements and mainly by the media's overtly biased and untruthful reporting and allegations of rape and murder by the Security Forces gained ground. There was widespread protest and Shupiyan was closed for 47 days. Separatists had a field day, motivating mobs and disrupting normal life. Later, the bodies were exhumed by a joint team of CBI and local doctors and rape was conclusively disproved. Death by drowning was the probable cause in the final report.
5. The Expert Group to formulate a jobs plan for Jammu and Kashmir was constituted by the PM on 8 Aug 2010. The Task Force submitted its report in February 2011 and offered innovative ways to generate employment.
6. The Expert Group in consultation with the Ministry of Rural Development has developed a special placement linked, market driven skill training programme for the youth of J & K. It is tailored to move the youth from the unorganized to the organized labour market. Some private sector partners are IL&FS, Kuoni, Don Bosco and Dr Reddy's Foundation.
7. Lt Gen Syed Ata Hasnain, AVSM, SM, VSM\*\*, n. 2.
8. Press Trust of India, "Preventing Spillover of Taliban Ideology Challenge for India,"<http://>

articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2012-03-31/news/31266557\_1\_ideology-challenge-jammu-university accessed on Apr 08, 2012.

9. CISF personnel guarding the NHPC compound at Boniyar, Uri, opened fire on a mob protesting erratic power supply killing one person in early 2012.