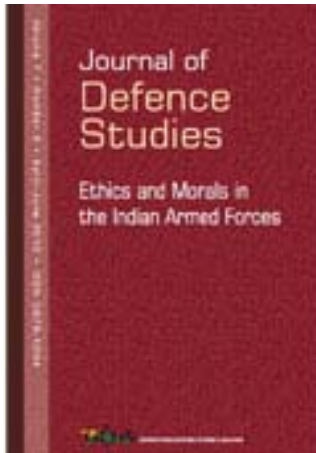


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No.1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg
Delhi Cantonment, New Delhi-110010



Journal of Defence Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.idsa.in/journalofdefencestudies>

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To cite this article: Mrinal Suman (2013): Falling Standard of Values in the Army: Dilution of Norms is the Root Cause, Journal of Defence Studies, Vol-7, Issue-2.pp- 27-34

URL: http://idsa.in/jds/7_2_2013_FallingStandardofValuesintheArmy_msuman

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Falling Standard of Values in the Army Dilution of Norms is the Root Cause

*Mrinal Suman**

As human beings are a product of their environment and society, their interpretation of morals, ethics and value system differ. In a traditional culture like ours, attitudes are moulded by long-established practices, rituals and conventions. Group cohesion is a battle winning factor for a military. The Indian Army recruits officers and men from all parts of the country with diverse value systems and attitudes. It is well nigh impossible to weave them into a cohesive group without bringing them on to a common grid of conduct. Instead of attempting to supplant their concepts of morality, ethics and righteousness, it is considered wiser to steer their conduct through a set of organizational norms. Norms are well-evolved and time-tested rules that act as rational and judicious guiding principles. They must be followed diligently for the continued good health of a military.

In the recent past, the Army has been in the news for all the wrong reasons. A number of television (TV) panel discussions have been held with retired Service officers to express concern over increasing acts of misdemeanour by the Army officers. In one such programme, an unusually aggressive anchor asked the panellists whether they resented constant media focus on the cases of misconduct in the Services. A senior panellist responded:

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‘Media never highlights existence of rampant corruption in other services. When an IAS couple is caught with enormous ill-gotten wealth, no TV channel considers it to be a newsworthy occurrence.’¹

‘On the other hand, every act of transgression by the service officers makes media headlines. It proves that such cases are rare. I dread to think of the day when such incidents become so commonplace that the media stops taking their cognizance,’ he added reflectively.²

By applying different yardsticks to the Services, the media is acknowledging the fact that it admires the Services for their high standard of ethical conduct and feels let down whenever cases of their unbecoming conduct are reported. Even minor aberrations carry considerable shock effects. Hence, there is zero-level tolerance due to the high expectancy quotient that the Services enjoy. Unfortunately, of late, the Army is losing its exalted status.

The edifice of the Indian Army is built on the twin pillars of committed leadership and motivated soldiers. Both are intrinsically linked and are mutually contingent. Distortions in one cause shock waves in the other as well. Whereas our soldierly stock continues to be excellent, it is the unseemly and unbecoming conduct of the leadership that is a cause for concern.

Militaries by nature are conservative and thrive on well-evolved traditions, precedents and conventions which, over a period of time, get translated into norms. Norms get evolved through intense interplay of individual, environmental and organizational influences. Norms are unwritten rules which need to be followed diligently for the continued sustenance of a military. A norm gives a rule of thumb for conduct.

EVOLUTION OF NORMS

Norms can be descriptive (what to do or ‘dos’) and proscriptive (what not to do or ‘don’ts’). Whereas descriptive norms suggest the right course of action, proscriptive norms prevent inadvertent slip-up by the ignorant. Thus, norms act as rational and judicious guiding principles that ensure individual and collective health of the armed forces.

Many tend to confuse morals/ethics with norms. Whereas there is nothing immoral about discussing politics and religion, these subjects are forbidden (proscriptive norm) in officers’ messes, being potentially divisive subjects. Similarly, wearing religious symbols cannot be deemed immoral. However, it is a common norm that officers do not display

their religious affiliations—no ‘tilaks’ on foreheads and no red thread on wrists.

Morals are tenets and beliefs of a society, culture and religion that guide conduct and behaviour of its members. Ethics is a code of moral principles evolved by an organization or society laying down rules and standards of proper conduct. Morals, beliefs and ethics contribute to the development of an individual’s value system. Values define the nature of character imbibed by an individual.

As every human is a product of his environment, his personal experience moulds his attitude. Attitudes are affected both by implicit and explicit influences. Attitude is defined as a predisposition or inclination in respect of something or someone. However, unlike a value, attitude is not a standard and is subject to change, albeit with difficulty.

Indian armed forces recruit officers and men from all parts of the country and all segments of the society. They come with different value systems and attitudes. It is well-nigh impossible to weave them into a cohesive group without bringing them on a common grid of conduct. Instead of attempting to supplant their concepts of morality, ethics and righteousness, it is considered wiser to steer their conduct through a set of organizational norms.

Like other human beings, soldiers are also concerned about self-preservation (survival instinct), self-interest (own welfare) and self-advancement (own progress in a hierarchical and pyramid-like structure with limited opportunities). It is for the armed forces to motivate them to be ready to subordinate their personal interests to the organizational interests. It is a huge challenge as such a makeover goes against the basic human nature. Well-established norms act as a catalyst in this transformation.

Precedents play a predominant role in the evolution of norms. Precedents take long to get established and are generally based on traditions and conventions. Traditions are customary or characteristic methods of thinking or acting. On the other hand, conventions are rules, methods or practices established by usage, custom or practice. Thus, norms are organization specific and equally applicable to all members.

Norms cover all aspects of an officer’s functioning—personal conduct, command functions and social interaction. As the subsequent discussion will show, dilution/neglect of some of the fundamental norms has been responsible for the falling standard of behaviour amongst the armed forces officers, resulting in the recent spate of adverse publicity.

PERSONAL CONDUCT OF THE OFFICERS

An officer is called a gentleman-officer and is expected to possess all virtues of being a righteous, congenial, honourable, upright and competent leader. Personal integrity is considered to be an essential trait of his character. Due to the misdeeds of some deviant officers, public image of a military officer has been indescribably dented.

Apart from coining highly outrageous and derogatory terms like 'Ketchup Colonel', 'Booze Brigadier' and 'Frisky General', the media has covered delinquent activities like unauthorized sale of weapons, misappropriation of funds, irregularities in land management, and corruption in defence procurements in sufficient detail. It appears that many officers have fallen prey to the lure of lucre and have no inhibitions in resorting to wrongdoings for selfish gains. Breach of some basic norms is responsible for the above.

Ostentatious living is an anathema to soldiering. Soldiering stands for honourable but simple living. The strength of an armed forces officer's character lies in moderation exercised by him. Undoubtedly, an officer must live comfortably and should be financially secure to fulfil his obligations to his family and save enough for his old age. However, a pompous lifestyle is most unbecoming of an officer. Worse, his inability to live within his own means forces him to seek extra resources through questionable methods.

Privilege is the most abused term these days. It is also a cause for many ills that afflict the armed forces. Service privilege means a dispensation that helps an officer in the discharge of his official duties efficiently. A privilege is not a sanction for misappropriating government/regimental resources. Unfortunately, once officers get over their initial inhibitions, privileges provide them an ideal smokescreen to indulge in other irregular activities.

It is a well-established norm that Service privileges that go with a rank/appointment must have informal approval of the next higher authority. No officer can ever decide as to what his privileges are. A commander has the privilege to use the vehicle that is mechanically most reliable as he must not get stranded on road. However, it is not a privilege either to decorate it extravagantly with regimental funds or to earmark a fleet of vehicles for his personal and family use.

It has been a well-established norm since the British days that officers should never be allowed to draw any personal entitlements from the

official stores but be compensated in cash. The decision to authorize rations in kind breached that norm. It has done immense damage to the psyche of the Service officers and demolished the wall of formal deference that earlier existed between the officers and the men. Worse, a number of disturbing reports have also been emanating alleging misuse of the facility.

COMMAND FUNCTIONS

Unlike other organizations, the relationship between a military leader and his men is based on the twin pillars of the commander's concern for his men and the unflinching loyalty of subordinates. Soldiers willingly repose faith in a leader in the belief that he would safeguard their interests. They willingly subordinate their personal interests to organizational interests only when a very strong merit-performance ethical linkage is put in place.

Seeking justice through courts shows the soldiers' lack of faith in the fairness of the system. Soldiers knock at the courts' doors only when they feel aggrieved and deprived of their rightful dues. Although the grievance redressal mechanism is a critical aspect of man management, it is apparent that adequate attention is not being paid to it. The norm of keeping troops updated through regular *sainik sammelans* and listening to their complaints ('*arzi* reports') is being given short thrift. It reflects adversely on the quality of the military leadership.

It is a norm that a commander has no favourites. Fair and unprejudiced deportment is an essential component of an officer's morality. To be trusted is the greatest compliment that a leader can earn. Trust is the expectancy that the followers can rely on a leader's impartial and just approach. Any commander who acts in a discriminatory manner is guilty of breach of trust and faith, giving rise to dissensions and litigations.

In addition to being a fundamental norm, empathy for men under command is a moral obligation as well. The Indian armed forces, particularly the Army, have been rocked by a large number of cases of suicides, fratricide and collective indiscipline. Stress is a key factor that drives soldiers to take the extreme step. When stress surpasses ability to handle, it generates the 'fight-or-flight' response in many soldiers and becomes a threat to both physical and emotional well-being. In most cases, officers' lack of empathy for the troops results in their failure to note the warning signals and take timely alleviating steps with due compassion.

Rapport, which is a function of interpersonal communication between the officers and the troops, is a norm that helps commanders to remain

vigilant about the embryonic issues of disconcerts and take necessary steps to put the soldiers at ease. Collective indiscipline in a unit is highly ominous. Such incidents do not occur as a result of impulsive outbursts but are a manifestation of simmering discontentment over a long period. Unconfirmed reports, conjectures and even rumours can give rise to antagonism against the organization. Lack of regular communication is making the existing bond of camaraderie between the officers and the men tenuous.

SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

It is a well-established norm that all officers be treated with equal deference in the military's social gatherings. Rank-wise segregation is considered repugnant and violative of the basic tenets of the Army culture. Social apartheid carries the deadly virus of promoting elitism. Of late, breach of this vital norm has become blatant. It is reprehensible to see separate areas earmarked for different ranks, even with different decor and menus.

All senior officers and their wives are well aware of the norm that social occasions should be used by them to interact with junior officers and their wives to get a feel of their morale and establish informal rapport with them. In addition, junior officers and their wives learn a great deal by watching the way the senior officers and their wives conduct themselves. Thus, social functions are a training ground where military norms and ethos are passed on to the new inductees.

Of late, it has become a common practice for the senior brass to huddle together and there is little mixing with the junior officers and their wives. Instead of promoting camaraderie amongst officers, such occasions become a highly humiliating experience for the juniors. Rank-wise stratification of social events has done immense damage and created a huge gulf between the senior leaders and the others.

'Military functions should be dignified and not ostentatious' has been a norm and the ruling mantra. Grandiosity demeans soldiering. Over the past few years, propriety has given way to a five-star culture. For unit functions, all activities from catering and decoration to entertainment are being outsourced at huge costs. The costliest whisky is served. Many cases of misuse of official funds are a direct outcome of this pretentious profligacy.

Due to the very nature of soldiering, the environment tends to be stressed. Ladies help soften it by their benign presence and soothing

influence. Thus, ladies have a major role to play in the well-being of the organization. However, it is a proscriptive norm that they should never meddle in official work.

CURRENT MESS IS DUE TO THE NEGLECT/DILUTION OF NORMS

Although norms govern all aspect of an officer's life in the armed forces, only a few common ones have been referred to in this article to demonstrate as to how their breach has adversely impacted the attitude of the officer cadre. As attitudes undergo changes, the value system gets distorted. The armed forces must ensure that organizational norms that mould attitudes are nurtured carefully and corrective measures taken expeditiously.

Partisanship in the Services gives rise to fissiparous tendencies and affects cohesion adversely. It generates ill-will and erodes faith in the impartiality of the system. A system should be put in place to monitor biases and prejudices of senior commanders. The system of granting redressal of grievances must be made more prompt and responsive. Many grievances are misplaced due to lack of information and can be resolved at the unit level itself.

Further, officers must demonstrate concern for soldiers' sensitivities. Officers will do well to remember the old norm that empathy for the troops is the primary hallmark of a good leader. A commander can be strict without being arrogant. Arrogance breeds contempt for norms and ethos, thereby triggering a collapse of values in an organization.

There is an urgent need to put an end to excessive extravagance. Drastic action must be taken on emergent basis to arrest this unhealthy trend. Cases of financial impropriety must be dealt with strictly. The onus for arresting the current unhealthy trend lies on the shoulders of the senior commanders. They must lead by example. Their conduct must be beyond reproach and their behaviour exemplary. Mere talks and exhortations mean little.

It is apparent that the much-hyped, internal self-correcting mechanism of the armed forces has collapsed and failed to ensure compliance of basic norms. Every organization has to be ready to face newer challenges. Brushing them under the carpet can prove very costly in the long run. Complacency breeds degeneration. When an issue that affects the well-being of the forces is raised, it should not be construed to be condemnatory or anti-organization, but considered as a reformative initiative and given due attention.

Finally, the Indian armed forces find themselves in the current mess primarily due to the dilution/neglect of the well-established norms by the officer cadre. Branding acts of impropriety as stray cases of misconduct and brushing them under the carpet shall be an act of self-deception of monumental proportions. It can have grave consequences. Unless remedial measures are taken on a war footing, the situation may drift beyond redemption. Regular introspection is the key to continued good health of a hierarchical organization like the armed forces.

NOTES

1. Suman, Mrinal, 'India at Nine with Rajdeep Sardesai', CNN IBNLive, available at <http://ibnlive.in.com/shows/India+At+9/372707.html>, accessed on 13 February 2013.
2. Ibid.