

The Army Report

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Introduction

The Army Attachment, for most Probationers, is perhaps the most exciting, exotic, rare and memorable part of the *Bharat Darshan*. The long(est) duration, the exotic locales, the impossible adventures, and the opportunity to rub shoulders with people in action and see a forbidden experience up-close, make the Army Attachment a surreal experience.

A Basic Orientation – The Army, its Position, and its Relevance

India gained freedom along with her immediate neighbours much about the same time and democratic regimes were ushered in with huge popular support. However, unlike all her neighbours, including Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar, Nepal, India has maintained its democratic ethos – military intervention has been a norm throughout the region, as against India. At the same time, India has the second largest standing army in the world, has the dubious distinction of being the largest defence importer, and a security ambience where the army is continuously kept at its toes for causes with origins both within and without India. The Indian Army, in the present setup, has a most important position, with responsibilities to secure its borders against enemies, maintain internal and external sovereignty, force projection, help causes outside its borders for common good or national interest, and come to the rescue of citizens and aliens alike during times of disaster and distress.

At the same time, the Indian Army's origins lies with the British Indian Army that was used against its own people, and in structure and philosophy, still maintains many of the traditions, ethos and formations of yore. The Army is frequently accused as being exclusive, insular, thick-skinned in border areas, and iniquitous in terms of recruitment, as recently brought out by the Sachar Committee episode. Despite being the second largest army, it is always on a recruitment drive with a swelling Other Ranks cadre, while the Officer Cadre requirement gap yawns grotesquely at about 15,000. A poor country with intensive development needs, India is the 10th largest defence spender with 2.5% of its GDP reserved for the military. At the same time the increasing menace of Naxalism make many experts predict the increasing role of Army for internal security as well. While the recent peace process with both Pakistan and China has meant that the Army has got a deserved breather, India's increasing international stature and its UN commitments¹ and requirements of force projection means that much of its present operations are geared for the future.

Learnings and Experiences

1. The Indian Army is doing a necessary and important task at great pains. Usually posted in difficult areas, the Army is given the onerous and dangerous task of keeping our territorial integrity.
2. In general, however, the Army's work is thankless, as keeping security necessarily entails disruption of normal life, and miscarriage of justice as a necessary concomitant. This is very much so in the Northern and much of North-Eastern part of our country.
3. Fortunately, in Arunachal Pradesh, the situation is quite unlike Kashmir or Manipur. There is no internal strife ensuring that the Army does not have security responsibilities within the border. This enables the Army to deploy itself in development areas. Thus, the Army is very intimately involved in infrastructure development and development work in Arunachal Pradesh². In fact much of Arunachal is heavily dependent on Army for employment opportunities arising out of its development initiatives, for road works and road clearing, resuscitating power, transport and communication lines ensuing bad weather, etc. In fact, without the Army many people would lose their livelihoods if the Army were not involved in development work so extensively. This has ensured that there is great goodwill among the people for the Army. The corresponding WHAM (Winning Hearts And Minds) policy of the Army has meant that it has ventured into many new areas like sponsoring orphanages (Manjushree being a prime example, to which we were taken on our second day at Tawang), conducting health camps and AIDS awareness camp, etc.
4. The Peace process can work wonders for this sector and the whole country. All the personnel were to be found in a relaxed atmosphere. At the same time there is intense suspicion of Chinese intentions in the rank and file, starting from the Brigadier downwards. This distrust boils down to distrust in the peace process, and an awareness exists that there are hidden strategic plans on the other side, and that it is the Army which is putting restraints on any such plans. However, even the Army seems to

¹ UN commitments have much to do with the big dollars that the Army and its men get during foreign postings. A recent article in *Economist* (London) and frank disclosures by men in army, including an Army Major at Lumpo, bring out this fact.

² There is a different angle to this story. Please see *Scorched Earth Policy in Reverse* under **Observations** for more.

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enjoy the breather, and the regular Border Personnel Meetings, and the recently installed Hot Line between the military controllers on two sides, seem to have increased confidence.

5. Despite such wariness towards Chinese intensions, and the looming psychological shadow 1962 which seems to have pervaded every aspect of their lives, there seemed great paucity of war preparedness. There is open acknowledgement that the infrastructure development on the other side of the border is immense and the hardware and technology gap, apart from locational advantage, is huge on the Chinese side. Even the strategic importance of Tawang and Arunachal Pradesh is generally understood. In spite of that, it seemed to us on a surface level, that there was general laxity towards preparedness when it came to investment in equipment and training. For instance, they are still using old snow-chains for traction on snow, a process that takes ages to mount, hinders smooth movement, damages the road, and at which they did not show any level of competence. The level of coordination while conducting our tour was mediocre at best, pathetic at worst. None of us, despite the counter claims by Army that they are better prepared and equipped than in 1962, really believed that they stood any chance against a well planned attack from beyond the borders.
6. The physical conditions at the field locations, and especially at the forward posts, are extreme. The temperature dips below -25 degree Celsius, roads are nonexistent, icy terrain is slippery and treacherous, ration supply is tenuous and exposed to disruption, and psychological tension due to distance from family, extreme living conditions, threat from enemy, etc. extreme. Despite this, the strong brotherhood among the personnel keeps their lives ticking, and is worthy of emulation. There is constant support and inspiration from officer ranks that boost their morale. While resources are strained, they are still well stocked.
7. Despite the generally good conditions regarding availability of resources, it is pertinent to note that there exists a great disparity in the living styles and conditions of life between the officer cadre and the other ranks. The officer ranks can frequently call their family³, get to stay in well furnished accommodations, get the best picks from Canteen Stores Department, get almost unlimited supply of liquor, have the excellent facility of the Officers' Mess even at forward locations, and frequent get-togethers with peers and seniors⁴. The glass ceiling that exists – other ranks can never become officers regardless of how efficient and capable they are – is cause for great distress. While discipline is impeccable, it did seem to us to be all enforced, and real respect is not inspired by all⁵. A cursory look at any defence establishment will prove that there is no parity in distribution of resources to improve living conditions. It is pathetic to note that the *Sahayaks* attached to each room during our stay would wake up

³ We saw the wives and children of many officers posted at the forward locations beyond Tawang. For example, the wife of the Colonel who had Bumla under his command, had come during the New Year vacations.

⁴ We were invited for the New Year's Eve party where all the top brass of Korea Brigade had come. There was not even a token celebration reserved for the other ranks – they retired to their dimly lit barracks while their seniors were celebrating.

⁵ There was one particular episode when a Major bad-mouthed a *Subedar* Major in public at which the SM replied back. Later on a *jawan* derided the stature of a nine-year experienced Major compared with the twenty-seven of the SM.

- at 2.30 am just so he can warm our water so we could get warm water when we woke up – this is what they are used to do for their officers.
8. To impress upon this disparity, the other ranks are in a difficult position indeed. Being mostly computer illiterate they cannot use the internet, they don't have free telephones for use, nor can they afford cellphones (which are anyways usable only in cities). They are dependent on moving convoys for transport, have limited access to rations and don't have the same flexibility with regard to vacations as the officer cadre. Back at home they are pestered by land or accommodation related problems, or the numerous other civil niggles which the district administration is in the usual habit of disregarding. The result is a thoroughly demoralized fighting cadre that is defeated without and within.
 9. While the defence budget is huge, and while there is always a fascination for big ticket purchases, there seems to be a usual neglect for the smaller things that can provide a bigger bang. Their usual vehicles, the 2.5 ton or 3 ton trucks, are a torture to ride, their dress materials are irrational and designs insensible, their weapons are comparatively inferior⁶, their shoes are worn, their snow boots un-ergonomic and slow⁷. Instead of a lean and mean fighting force we have a slow and rusty, although motivated, force.
 10. Arunachal Pradesh is a pretty beautiful place. There is latent scope for development of tourism, but much needs to be done to improve infrastructure and gain access routes to difficult but exciting places. Hydro-power is a huge prospect that is being celebrated. Poverty is almost non-existent.

Conclusion

The Indian Army is passing through many important transitions. It is on the threshold of massive modernisation. India's increasing stature demands greater power of deterrence. At the other end, peace processes have provided cease fire and deserved relief.

All the same, there is much that the Defence Ministry and the higher ranks in Army can do to benefit the *jawans*. Further, the civil administration must also come to the aid of *jawans* and other officers as and when called upon. Greater coordination need to be established to help people during times of emergency when Army might be needed to be deployed.

Methodology

Much of the facts and figures relating to the Army, their formations, locations, rank structure, etc. are in the public domain and does not deserve repetition – they are easily available on the Net⁸ and on query. The report is based on field notes, perceptions and observations, and feedback from colleagues. Minimal stress has been given on schedules, details regarding field formations, regimental history or the like, as they do not have any direct relation to the objectives of the field visit. Stress has been made on the following points:

⁶ While the chief Indian weapon is *Insas*, which is mainly capable of wounding, the Chinese have much better weapons

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People's_Liberation_Army_Ground_Force#Rifles).

⁷ Many of the *jawans* don't even have snow boots while serving at -20 degree temperatures.

⁸ **Indianarmy.nic.in** and **BharatRakshak.com** are good sources on much, except field locations.

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1. The field conditions – climatic and geographic conditions, support structures, corporate ambience, etc.
2. Psychological aspects – relations between different Army cadres, morale, etc.
3. Larger issues that might have bearing on the Army or national security.

As such, the report is more analytical than factual.

Appendix I

The contents of this section may be considered as outside the report proper, but constitute serious observations which were considered relevant to the Army as such, or to our national security.

The *Dhai-ton* (2.5) syndrome

The *Shaktiman* has been a symbol of the Army for a very long time. It gives an aura of machismo and toughness. Its 4-wheel drive system took it to the uppermost reaches and the most difficult terrain. Unfortunately, it is also the most fuel-inefficient vehicle⁹, and compared to many other military trucks around the world that have a capacity of 5-6 tons, took only 2.5-3. *Shaktiman* was mostly replaced with the newer trucks made on TATA or Ashok Leyland chassis, with the body and accessories designed at and fitted by the Jabalpur Vehicle Factory. Unfortunately, despite greater fuel efficiency, its design is foolish at many points. There are no seat belts when *jawans*, sitting transverse to the vehicle movement, have to spend hours and days traveling. The head bangs into a rod kept at the same height instead of a cushion. The metal benches have no cushion cover. A huge spare tyre takes up a large space inside. Gaping holes exist on the front side which can be covered easily. And while the vehicle is in motion there is no way to communicate as the thoughtfully attached bell never worked on any *dhai-ton*, the popular name for such trucks. In short, the *dhai-ton* ensures that the troop that jumps down from the truck for deployment is in shatters after such journey. These are the little things that go a long way in making the lives of the *jawan* healthier. The ECC design is also foolish including its material. The gloves are unwieldy. The snow goggles are broken in new condition, and are unfit for human consumption. The snow boots are heavy that changes the centre of gravity, and unwieldy to boot. Small things thoughtfully designed, arranged and installed can improve the *jawan's* life manifold. Sadly, there is no philosophy of *jawan* comfort for anyone. It drains their energy and motivation.

Sarva-dharma Sthal

The biggest Army boast is that it does not recognize religion and that it is the most liberal organization in its recruitment. Hardly so. It does not take women. It takes foreigners (Gorkhas). It still maintains its racist approach – the martial race theory lives in the names of the regiments (more later). But what is the most glaring facet of the overt religious discrimination¹⁰ is the politically correctly named *Sarva-dharma Sthal*, but which is more commonly referred to as *mandir*. The gates of almost all such *mandirs* have the *Om* displayed prominently, without the *cross* of the *crescent* being there. Peep inside most *mandirs*, and you will find only Hindu gods

⁹ 1 kmpl.

¹⁰ Apart from the deplorable presence of Muslims in the organization, as sought to be brought out by Justice Sachar Committee.

and goddesses, and you will be lucky to trace one small *Allah*, *Rabba* or Christ. The greatest farce was committed at a place called Kereteng where we were given the *Gitas* after entering their *mandir* – a secular Army giving the *Gita* to a secular civil service. Some people reminded that there being more Hindus it makes more sense to have Hindu primacy. Point is, the *sine qua non* of democracy is representation of the minority than presentation of majority. Probably, in a service with life and death facets, religion is a fodder for the soul and opium for the mind, but the tenets of secularism should be maintained.

The snow-boot notch and the snow chains

We were given snow-boots that had a protruding notch at its back. Not one of the *jawans* or the officers could tell its utility. It is very obvious that that they had not been trained the proper use of gear. It was discovered by accident that the notch is used for taking off the boots. Putting snow-chains on tyres is another activity that is frequently relied on. Apart from the fact that they are absolutely inefficient, putting them on is also a time-consuming affair, and even experienced hands could not put them properly at times. War preparedness is not sitting with guns at the border, but a conglomeration of a thousand small and big things. The lethargy and inefficiency witnessed is also a cumulative thing.

Scorched-earth policy in reverse

That the territory on the Chinese side of the border was highly developed has been impressed upon often. However, a similar effort has not been made to develop the infrastructure on the Indian side. While this has nothing to do with any learning from the attachment as such, but it is also a frequent allegation that the lack of development is a form of scorched-earth policy in reverse. Bad roads on the Indian side mean that Chinese progress, in case of invasion, would be slowed down. Probably this betrays a feeling of resignation...

Of brain-washing and abstinence

Visiting a cantonment area, especially a forward area, is akin to an Orwellian nightmare. The mountainside and the roadside are smeared with thefts¹¹, the corny¹², the foolish¹³, the motivating, the resignation inspiring¹⁴ and a hundred other sayings. Introduced to a strict regime of unquestioning discipline as early as their mid-teens, most *jawans* are mere matriculates who seldom get any chance of intellectual progression and the glass-ceiling¹⁵ acts as a further demotivator. The repeated teachings and sayings seem to mock their intelligence and sexuality¹⁶. The more distressing part for the thinking person is that most of these writings are misological, irrational or cater to the nether aspects of intellect.

¹¹ 'Winners don't do different things, they do things different', copyrighted by Shiv Khera.

¹² 'Be gentle on my curves'.

¹³ 'Don't be a gamma in the land of lama'.

¹⁴ "*Brahmacharya hi jeevan hai*".

¹⁵ NCOs and JCOs cannot ever become COs regardless of how experienced or how talented they might be, leading to the curious situation that the junior-most CO is senior to the senior-most JCO.

¹⁶ It is significant to note that the family members of COs can visit them while the same is not applicable for other ranks.

Suspension of Disbelief – of superstitions and illogic

War and killing are the most irrational things, and can probably be countered with more irrationality. Religion, blind beliefs, mythology, superstitions, and hero and hero worship step in to fulfill this requirement. Inside this modern organization called Army hide the most grotesque farces. Brigadier Kulkarni (the GOC in C of Korea Brigade at Tawang) was in the first batch of officers to take over Siachen in 1984, and he confided how his CO had come to select the date for taking over the glacier through a *puja*. On the way to Tawang falls the memorial of Jaswant Singh at a place named after him called Jaswantgarh. This 1962 war hero fought valiantly and held the Chinese advance for long, dying bravely of bullet wounds. Yet the popular myth is that he was hanged and then beheaded. It is a ritual to stop and pay one's respect at the memorial before proceeding forward; violators, apparently, are sure to face some disaster. There is actual dread among the men in fatigues at what mischief the dead soul could wrought, thus making the war hero into a spiteful deity. His bed is prepared daily, which, according to the myth, is found slept in in the morning. His clothes are ironed and are found worn. Blank sheets of papers get written as letters. As if such farce was not enough, it is upheld systemically. He has continued to get his 'leaves', continued to receive his 'pay', and has, at last count, become a Major General (where no living JCO can become a CO). Similar is the tale of *Baba Harbhajan Singh* of Sikkim near Nathula. He even gets escorts during his 'leave'! It is not known what the Army is trying to achieve through such actions.

The Babel of confusion – Colours of Regiments

The Indian Army is the direct descendent of the British Army which was constituted on the theory of Martial Races. It is surprising that in independent India such racist regiments as *Jat*, *Mahar*, *Sikh*, *Gurkha*, etc. are continuing. At the NCO level, entry to most of the regiments to a great extent is reserved for people from a certain region (Madras Regiment), race (*Gurkha* Regiment), or religion (Sikh Regiment), violating Fundamental Rights. Besides, the constitution and structure of the Army is such, much like the British Army, that there is minimal contact outside one's own regiment at the NCO and JCO level. The primal identity is the battalion or regiment. There is no clear cut hierarchical structure for the corporate groupings within the Army structure, although there is functional grouping under territorial Corps. What this entails in is that the primary allegiance of a *jawan* is towards his unit, then to his battalion, then to his Regiment, then to the Army, and only in the last resort to the nation. This is very obvious when the *jawan* is exhorted to gain honour first for the unit he is serving, before anything else. Most people favour the present system because it holds together the army and gives greater cohesion. Plus, there is a natural respect for tradition in the Armed Forces. But if such logic were to be upheld in society in general, we shall have to celebrate casteism as well – after all castes provide primal identities and greater intra-group cohesion. The question is not whether it works or not; the question is, should it exist the way it is?

Disclaimer

Army is a large organization and fielded at various locations. Our interaction was with a small group of people for a small period of time during a program which they are not used to conducting. It is understood that broad generalizations should not be drawn upon micro facts. Where there is a mistake, it is a mistake of logic and observation, not intent.