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The Politician and the Soldier

Is There Political Courage to Review the Flawed Agnipath Scheme?

By: Bhopinder Singh

Dispassionate and truthful introspection is routine in the armed forces. Can the political class now do the same – for the country and the forces?

Honest and acknowledged mistakes always make better soldiers. Contrary to the widely held perception of infallibility (especially with the recent air of manufactured jingoism) that civilians often attribute to the Armed Forces, no other institution introspects about its operations, procedures or even doctrines more dispassionately, truthfully, and ethically. Beyond the penchant for Bollywoodising the Indian Soldier with “How’s the Josh?” type rah-rah, there is a stark difference in reel-life and real life.

Every soldier from the top to the bottom studies a range of situations to understand what went right, and more importantly, what went wrong and could be done better. This results in labouring over sand models, training modules, physical exercises entailing full formations to validate various assumptions, doctrines and preparedness. This leads to constantly being in correction/update-mode, where a decision made earlier is put through the brutal test of reflection and evaluation, to rectify, if required.

Within the institution, a more sobering appreciation of sifting the wheat from the chaff exists. Even operations like the fiasco of say the Indo-China War (1962), or the spectacular outcome of Indo-Pak War (1971) are deciphered and discussed threadbare. The overall and contrasting picture between 1962 and 1971, notwithstanding, there could be instances of operational brilliance to be celebrated within many battles of 1962 or operations of concern even in the overall victory of 1971. Every decision and impact are studied, minutely.

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For the Armed Forces, going beyond the simplistic binaries is critical. Hence, the revered ethos of questioning – in a professional, measured and apolitical manner. Symbolising the constant endeavour to avoid faltering is the light-hearted saying of the US Marines: “To err is human, to forgive divine. However neither is Marine Corps policy.” While faltering occasionally is inevitable, not correcting this is unforgivable.

It is this culture of fairness and constant improvement that makes the “sword arm” of the nation closest to perfection. The drill square-induced normalcy of discipline, efficacy and repeating a step, posture and movement is part-tradition, part-functionality and part-inherent belief in the American maxim, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

The armed forces are an institution that is predicated on the regimentation of virtually all aspects of functional existence. Therefore, there are certain norms, ethos and traditions that have survived the test of time and the most daunting challenges. They are persisted with, without change.

Kargil is a fine example of the armed forces (especially its junior leadership) doing the impossible, given the unbelievable odds. The unmatched steel, fierce fighting ability and surreal confidence amongst its combatants is attributable to the age-old system of recruitment, training and the culture steeped in its barracks.

Kargil was achieved not because of, but despite the neglect and missteps of its political leadership across the partisan divide – just as in 1971.

There is a timeless grouse amongst the uniformed fraternity that its politico-bureaucratic leadership has always sought to diminish and dilute the institution. If bureaucrats have successfully managed to deny the services parity with other governmental agencies, politicians have always sought to interfere and appropriate the imagery of Indian Soldiers, even as they mouth patronising platitudes and condescending noises.

In recent times, the institutional image has been milked towards building one muscularity despite so many lingering inequities (less than promised one rank one pension), the continuing shortage of personnel, equipment and materials, ham-handedly enforced schemes such as Sparsh for pensions, and perhaps the gravest all, the martial-sounding Agnipath Soldier intake scheme. Remember, this scheme was introduced in the wounded backdrop of the summer of 2020 when the Chinese “transgressed” (the term preferred by the dispensation) and posed a substantial threat.

As always, the age-old system that historically made, trained and delivered the Indian soldier template proved its efficacy against all odds in the blood-stained heights of Galwan. Yet again, it was the Indian soldier who paid the ultimate price to address the politico-diplomatic failures against China. (It happened in 1962, and it happened again, now).

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But for the age-old system of making the Indian soldier as has been the norm for decades, the situation would have been far worse than was grudgingly and hesitatingly revealed for public consumption.

Yet incredulously, let alone addressing the lingering institutional inequities, shortages and affording more empowerment to the existing system, it was this very system of intake and making of the Indian soldier that was challenged with the harebrained, surrogate and deflective Agnipath scheme. It intakes recruits between 17-and-a-half and 21 years of age for the armed forces for only four years, with the provision that just 25% of them will be retained for 15 more years.

Any military professional (or anyone in any high-performance civilian/corporate organisation) would have instinctively and conclusively confirmed the pitfalls of a guaranteed short-term service for 75% of intake, but it was persisted with. The same spirit of sloppy experimentation that had birthed demonetisation, the clumsy implementation of the goods and services tax was now extended to the only institution that had not failed the nation – the armed forces. This particular aspect of an Indian soldier wasn't broke but they “fixed it” nevertheless.

The casualness was inherent with the genealogical intent of the “tour of duty”: the armed forces ought not to be the realm of tours and travels, sundry exposure, or time-serving jaunts. It is also not a propaganda tool for “inculcating national pride” and certainly the performance of the institution till then warranted no urgency for “youthful profile” as was casually suggested – if anything, there was already a persisting conundrum of rehabilitating combatants, who in any case retired from active service in their 30s and early 40s. Just how much younger could the institution get?

Obviously, no one in the corridors of power talked about the elephant in the room – pension bill concerns, as that would have made the Agnipath decision look defensive, unspectacular and un-muscular. The bombastic bluster was put forward that the scheme was a “game-changer”. So, the experiment persisted, to the dismay of most apolitical and professional observers.

In the midst of unprecedented security challenges facing the country, Comrade Mao-like talk of building disciplined populace, nationalistic fervour and talent pool were bandied, none of which were military concerns. The time-tested system of incubating the valourous Indian soldier underwent a change for reasons best known to politicians only.

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Now, it is futile to even talk about its deleterious effect in the neighbourhood with Nepal (with its glorious tradition of Gurkhas soldering for India) or of its expected impact with two types of soldier intake in a unit deployed along the border. Does it strengthen camaraderie with trust or lead to strains of short-termism, an unhealthy competitive spirit to survive or lead to the natural curse of different types within one unit. It is commonsensical to imagine what impact it does to the near-perfect system that survived for decades.

But in present times, for the politicians to similarly introspect, evaluate and acknowledge their mistakes (honest or otherwise) is to expect the moon. Only in India could the crippling demonetisation – with government data to prove the return of 99.3% of black money back in circulation – be subjected to a celebratory Anti-Black Money Day a year after its painful implementation. In short, the political class has simply not shown the humility and magnanimity to accept a wrong decision or policy and Agnipath risks the same

hubris.

Thankfully, with a changed political landscape in the 18th Lok Sabha that has provided some bold reasons to introspect, will the rare call to be open to changes and review of the obviously flawed Agnipath actually be made? There is a party in the ruling coalition that already has a stated commitment on reviewing the scheme. Will politicians, for once, behave like mortals who falter (not of some non-biological fount) and do what the armed forces routinely do without acting vainglorious, thin-skinned and infallible? Will they show the courage to accept a wrong?

For had it been up to the armed forces themselves, they would have surgically analysed the impact and course-corrected for the betterment of the institution, and by that extension, for the nation. It is this sort of inflexible, unrepentant and mule-headedness that differentiates a politician from a soldier.

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