

# **MILITARY LEADERSHIP IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY - THE WAY FORWARD**

## **Introduction**

1. When one was a young Brigadier, I attended the ‘Cavalry Memorial Lecture’ in Delhi, way back in 2004. It was with great awe that one sat in the audience amongst the Who’s Who of the Cavalry elite – the journey seems to have come a full circle today, as one is privileged to deliver the ‘Cavalry Memorial Lecture’ this year at 33 Armoured Division – the first time this event has moved out of Delhi.

2. Before I commence, let me thank the President of “Cavalry Officers Association” and his team, and also the DGMF & his team for giving me this honour and taking a bold step to move this event to the environment, who should be the major beneficiaries. I also thank all the veterans and serving officers and ladies who have travelled to be here today, and of course, our gratitude to the Army Cdr, South Western Command, GOC Strike I and GOC DOT Division for hosting us so graciously.

3. The subject that I am covering today is vital to all of us assembled here: “Military Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – **The Way Forward**”. But its even more vital to the Nation, for the Indian Armed Forces are the ultimate guarantors of our Nation’s Security and well being; and how this instrument of ‘**Last Resort**’ performs will be largely decided by the leadership that leads &

guides. Seated here today amongst the audience are some of the iconic Cavalry Leaders of yesterday; your presence here, Sirs, is greatly motivating for all of us.

4. Whilst working on my script I have consulted a number of officers at various levels to get their views. Some gave me references to material on the subject, which wasn't what I was seeking, while others gave me their candid views. I thank them all. I had to also guard against a tendency to become over critical/negative or may be even cynical, for its so easy to fall in into that trap. So let me start by very candidly and forcefully stating that the Indian Armed Forces are the most professional, capable, credible and well-led organisation, in fact, the "Pride of our Nation". Being so important to the Nation's well being, there is no scope for any complacency. Others may have this luxury, we don't. We need to constantly look within to remain dynamic and relevant, always one step ahead of the challenges and threats. And in this wonderful organisation, Leadership plays the most crucial role and, hence, the criticality of the subject we are discussing today.

5. This year also happens to be the commencement of the Centenary to celebrate the magnificent contribution of the Indian Cavalry on the killer battlefields in France in World War I. Lt Gen Aditya Singh, President of the COA has already spoken, hence I'll just start by paying our tribute to those gallant men, who defied the odds, to etch in blood, a most inspiring chapter in the annals of our history.

## Preview

6. What I intend to do today is to go over the **challenges** we face as we progress through the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, some critical issues that affect us today and may well threaten our future, and then see how we **respond, overcome & move forward**.

7. I will cover the talk as under:

- a. Role of the Armed Forces – Remaining Relevant.
- b. Challenges for Military Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.
- c. Status Check – The State Today.
- d. The Way Forward.

Will take any questions towards the end, and also look forward to your views and suggestions.

## Role of the Armed Forces – Remaining Relevant.

8. We have a **primary role** to protect and secure our Nation from external threats and a **secondary role** to aid the civil authority when called upon to do so. Whilst the primary role is our raison d'être, the secondary role is gaining prominence with a variety of requests/tasks which clearly lie in the civil domain. Moreover, the armed forces are steadily being dragged in as 'First Responders' because of the non-performance of other agencies and lack of confidence of the people in them. We have also seen the severe consequences of delayed call up of the armed forces as witnessed in 'Uttarakhand' in 2013 & J&K recently. So what do

we do? Await a formal call up and see the problem magnify, or take the initiative when you see things going beyond a point. The answer is not easy: in a law & order situation, it may be prudent to await a call, whereas, in a disaster situation, local/operational commanders must step in at the earliest. The bottom line is that we need to remain relevant whenever the Nation needs us and therefore the Senior Military Leadership needs a good **politico-military understanding** and rapport in difficult situations.

9. Beyond the primary and secondary roles, the armed forces also have a '**Derived Role**', which is gaining prominence:-

a. The very presence of the Army has a salutary affect on the environment, and therefore, in marginal areas, the Army needs to mark its presence in some form.

b. Our professionalism and conduct is a great morale booster for the Nation – here's one organisation that works and has the confidence of the citizens across the length and breadth of the country.

c. Contribution in sports, environment protection etc is becoming more significant, by the day.

d. Approximately 60,000 soldiers retire and join the society every year, enriching it with their discipline, commitment and nationalistic approach.

e. Last but not the least, the armed forces have come to signify the true spirit of our constitution, by adhering scrupulously to its core values.

Thus, remaining relevant to the Nation and its security needs is becoming more and more significant.

## **Challenges for Military Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

10. **Hybrid Nature of Combat.** The nature of combat has changed steadily over the years, but the most dramatic change occurred in the nineties at the end of the cold war. To the hithertofore mix of 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Warfare, got added a new dimension of the 4<sup>th</sup> Generation and now the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation, aptly being termed as 'Hybrid Warfare'. This has been to the fore in recent conflicts in the Middle-East and Afghanistan. Whilst the Indian Army has seen both conventional combat, as well as engaged in long periods of counter-insurgency, we are yet to experience the full dimensions of hybrid warfare. The question that arises is "what type of military leaders do we need to combat 'Hybrid Warfare', and more importantly are we training and grooming our leaders, specially at the higher levels appropriately. This in itself is a separate subject of study, but some qualities that have become most essential are – **wider education base, innovation and adaptability, boldness and risk taking abilities**. More important are ability and willingness to look over the horizon, thus being prepared for newer threats & challenges before they hit us. The Army Training Command would be well advised to review its approach to training with a great focus on '**why**' rather than '**how**', an appropriate mix of training and education.

11. **Harmonising Technology & Human Resource.** We have largely been overwhelmed by the power point. With slick presentations prepared by smart staff officers, everyone seems to be on top of the situation, whereas in reality there is considerable hollowness. Yes, technology needs to be harnessed to our operational advantage, but optimum value will only be achieved when this is harmonised with human resource, certainly not at the cost of it. Star wars is slick, but the reality has recently been witnessed in Afghanistan. Robust military leadership can be optimised through technology, not substituted by it. **Recent bias towards science & technology at the cost of art & humanities needs a relook.** The art of warfare, specially at the operational level cannot as yet, be substituted by the science of it. A recent initiative to turn NDA, totally science oriented and technical, has thankfully been shelved.

12. **Decision Making in a Complex Environment.** A complex matrix of factors is making 'decision making' very challenging in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The information overload is clouding minds and it requires true leadership qualities to distinguish wheat from the chaff. Good communications are tempting commanders to reach down levels, thus local conditions are having a disproportionate influence on higher level decision making. Consequences of decision making are making more and more military leaders, specially at the senior level – "**Risk Averse**". If a leader is to pursue an ethos of "**Risk Avoidance**", he will seldom be able to exploit opportunities that come his way, and this ethos is infectious, leading to an army of conformists, with a tendency to look over their shoulders. We have seen glimpses of this in recent encounters on the line of control(LC), where local

commanders hesitated to react, awaiting instructions from higher HQs.

13. **Mediocrity to the Fore.** Meritocracy in the armed forces is still sufficiently valued, but mediocrity is creeping up. Among many factors, reservation introduced at the colonel to brigadier level is now beginning to push up mediocrity in larger proportions than is desirable in senior ranks. A concerted effort to introduce it at 'Two Star' rank was thwarted with great difficulty by some of us on the high table. Had it succeeded, the results would have been disastrous for the well being, efficiency and morale of the Indian Army. Mediocrity/mediocre performance cannot be allowed to prosper in the armed forces, where lives are at stake, where decisions by military commanders can mean the difference between life and death.

14. **Culture of Careerism.** This is a hard truth of the last few decades, and in a limited form, it may be considered benign. However, shortened command tenures are exacerbating performance anxieties, leading to micro-management and 'No slip up' syndrome, thus lowering the vital ingredient of trust between leaders at various levels and even between the leader and the led. Every event, however minor, has these days, become a do or die event, with little leeway for subordinates to have any luxury of erring and correcting or engage in prudent risk taking.

15. **Transparency : Power of the Social Media.** This is a hard truth of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century that has to be recognised by all leaders, specially those in high places. Aspects even of a trivial nature become viral over social media and tend to be blown out of

proportion. The electronic media also tends to favour negative portrayal. Therefore, recognising this reality, military leaders need to be not only **ethical** and **correct**, but also **transparent**. At the same time, the organisation needs to look within and also educate and discuss this issue, so that its own don't start spreading this malaise. In-house mechanisms should be vibrant to offer redressal of grievances, even against the hierarchy.

16. **Trend towards Egalitarianism.** The 21<sup>st</sup> Century trend is towards a classless society in the socio-economic and political domains. There is increasing discomfort towards authority, specially perks that go with such authority. Recent debates in the country on many issues are reflective of this trend. Our men and young leaders come from the same stock, therefore, what are silent whispers today are bound to grow. We need to take cognisance and corrective action, before this issue spreads in the armed forces also.

17. **Officer's Shortage Impacting Operational Effectiveness and Efficiency.** For too long, we have tried to live with a shortage of officers. Whilst managing in peace time, such shortages have a serious impact in operational situations. And I dare say, the next rung of JCOs and NCOs haven't been able to fill this void. World over, the trend in modern warfare is towards officer intensive roles; we are milking existing units/Formations to meet the requirement of new organisations, seriously impacting our functional efficiency. Whilst some steps have been taken, they are not bold enough. As DGPP, I had suggested some very bold and innovative measures to enhance intake, but my attempts were thwarted by a conformist, bureaucratic wall within Army HQ itself.



18. **Distractions and Peace Time Clutter.** Bulk of our Army lives in peace stations and should be focussed on training for their role/task assigned. Since we live in social groups with families, a little bit of peace time distraction is unavoidable. It becomes a problem when it starts replacing the main job. Added to this is the undue emphasis on '**Event Management**' as a core activity. Visits by senior officers, sports/social events including AWWA/family activities, which should be taken in our normal stride, assume larger than life proportions and are often seen as a chance for career progression, specially by mediocre leaders. The burden invariably falls on the junior leadership and the troops, distracting them and, perhaps, adding to cynicism and demotivation.

19. **Ethics and Morals – The Difficulty of being Good.** We are living in the midst of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century society, where standards of ethics and morals have reached a low point. Whilst the society may learn to cope and live with this, we in the armed forces cannot afford any such dilution. On the other hand, maintaining the high levels of ethics has itself become very challenging. When we talk of integrity, we need to cover not only personal but also professional integrity. The Chetwode Motto has guided us for long, but is it adequate, or do we need a more detailed code to guide the armed forces on this vital issue.

## **Status Check: The State Today**

### 20. **Cutting Edge Leadership (Lieutenant – Major) .**

a. Highly motivated, focussed and raring to go. Follows the Chetwode Motto, ready to sacrifice and uphold the noble traditions of valour and leading from the front.

b. Is bold and enterprising and high on risk taking abilities.

c. A percentage fall short on physical as well as mental robustness, specially those in supporting arms and services.

d. Due to shortage of officers, the learning curve is shortened and young officers are pitch-forked into higher responsibilities with inadequate experience/ exposure.

e. Not challenged enough in peace stations – maximum time spent on the mundane, routine and trivial.

f. As he rises in service, starts getting slight confused and may be a little cynical, based on the conflicting signals he receives/witnesses.

### 21. **Directional Level Leadership (Lt Col – Brig) .**

a. He is the **backbone** of the Army – mature, highly motivated and productive.

b. Is **ambitious, conscious of pitfalls**, yet, **reasonably high on integrity/moral values**.

c. As he goes up the ladder, becomes cautious and starts focusing on his career, to the detriment of other essential values.

d. DSSC and HC/HDMC become vital and key targets – filtering the officers into two streams virtually. Those left out have two choices; get disillusioned or try extra hard to make up, with attendant pitfalls.

e. As the environment becomes more and more competitive, risk avoidance and ‘no slip up’ syndrome come to the fore. For some, command becomes a **‘Stepping Stone instead of a Milestone’**.

f. As power increases, some fall prey to the lure of unethical practices and excessive perks/misuse of office.

g. Some start exhibiting traits not conducive to good military leadership, but have the finace to ensure that their senior hierarchy remains oblivious.

h. Mediocrity, starts coming to the fore, mainly due to the reservation system.

## 22. **Senior Leadership (Brig – Maj Generals)** .

a. A mix of highly competent and some mediocrity.

b. Conformists, risk averse and conscious of rising

competition/narrow filter.

c. Concept of personal and professional integrity comes under stretch; shades of grey creep in.

d. Loyalty to organisation and subordinates is subsumed by loyalty to the boss.

e. Become cautious and start looking over their shoulders.

f. Excellent performance in peacetime and predictable situations – may not prove so in combat.

g. Majority are ambitious, transitory commanders; most lacking understanding of operational level of command and higher direction of war.

h. Excessive focus on distractions and other infructuous peacetime activities, mostly generated at this level.

23. **Conceptual/Higher Level Leadership (Maj Generals and Above)**

a. A small percentage are outstanding military leaders, with clarity and conviction, well versed in higher directions of War.

b. A fewer qualify to be role models with high integrity, competence and commitment.

c. A percentage of mediocrity manages to get in – not able to rise above tactical level, despite higher responsibilities.

- d. Status quo approach, parochialism and turf battles manage to retain hold on a majority of higher level leadership, at the cost of organisation health.
- e. Knowledge of financial and perspective planning is limited and negotiation skills are not upto the mark.
- f. Lack of transparency, double standards and unable/not willing to walk the talk.
- g. Some fall prey to excessive perks and privileges and ostentatious culture.
- h. Lack of accountability for professional inefficiency and sometimes personal misdemeanours.
- j. Decision making highly centralised, bringing in unwanted biases in senior appointments.
- k. Shortfall of visionary leadership becomes apparent.

## **The Way Forward**

24. Having taken stock of the challenges and the present state, lets look at ways and means to set right, invigorate and move forward. In you, sirs, lie the Nation's expectations, confidence and assurance, that guarantees security and well being of the country and all its citizens. This necessitates exceptional and

extraordinary standards of military leadership at all levels, specially at the senior level.

25. Leadership is present in all walks of life, so how is military leadership different! Three things distinguish a military leader:

- a. **Unlimited liability contract** towards serving the Nation/Organisation, without any caveats.
- b. As military leaders you deal with **life and death** issues, **not profit and loss**.
- c. You are the **last resort** and therefore, do not have the luxury of being runners up even once.

### **Professional Aspects and Core Values**

26. There is reason to believe that there is a bias that is confusing event management for military leadership. Nothing could be further from the truth. We need to nurture and develop combat leaders as distinct from event managers: leaders who lead from the front, follow the Chetwode Motto, stand up when the chips are down and who can, through personal example and influence, both direct and indirect, make their men achieve the seemingly impossible.

27. Do we have such leaders in our midst? The answer is a categorical 'Yes', but such leaders need to be recognised, nurtured and supported, in ways as detailed below:

a. Greater focus on professional aspects – aiming to endow leaders with **professional astuteness, strong character, a keen intellect** and a **penetrative mind**.

b. Laying down with **clarity essential attributes** of professionalism to be achieved at various levels during service. Passing of promotion exams alone has proved inadequate.

c. All that we do must lead to strengthening “**Operational Focus and Offensive Spirit**”.

d. The most powerful tool any military leader carries is not his weapon but his mind. The Indian Armed Forces must reinforce with vigour – “**The Yodha Ethos**” and develop “Scholar Warriors”, who have the character and courage of conviction, combined with professional competence, mental agility and strength to measure upto the most challenging tasks.

e. Encourage creative thinking based on **operational logic** and professional education to enable growth of dynamic leaders. **Risk taking ability** needs to be nurtured at all levels, so that decisive operational moments are not missed.

f. Focus on developing **communication skills**, based on your personality and key leadership requirements, as distinct from glib talk or power point staff-assisted presentation.

g. Empowerment and education of subordinates must remain a solemn responsibility of the military leadership at every level.

28. **Work from Hope of Success rather than fear of failure.**

There are grounds for thinking that incompetent commanders tend to be those in whom the need to avoid failure exceeds the urge to succeed. We need to create an environment where leaders focus on success rather than failure avoidance.

29. **Professional Dissent.** Genuine and constructive professional dissent needs to be encouraged in the armed forces, since its exclusion would only encourage mediocrity and predictability. Professional arrogance based on integrity, competence and commitment, rather than a flexible spine should be the credo of the officer corps.

30. A leadership programme to train officers in **Operational Art** and **Higher Direction of War** has become imperative. ARTRAC may consider establishing a faculty of “Higher Leadership”, with visiting faculty consisting of eminent, proven and charismatic military and civil leaders, both serving and retired. The selection of faculty is critical and should be based on role model leaders, irrespective of rank/status.

31. And lastly, the challenge remains, how to select, nurture and promote leaders in peace time, who will come good in war/crisis and not prove to be just paper tigers. My thesis on the subject is available at Higher Command, Mhow.



## **Organisation Aspects**

32. **Reinforcing the charm of Regimental Service.** This remains crucial to the well being of the Army and needs to be reinforced in many ways. Avoidance of unit service must be viewed seriously and steps taken to reinforce unit ethos and regimental spirit.

33. **Reduce Focus on Mundane and Peace Time Clutter.** We all understand this, yet it remains an issue. Senior officers must proactively ensure this through clear instructions and personal example. My understanding is that at the higher levels, this has been/is being addressed, yet the middle rung still remains confused, in the absence of unambiguous signals. One way to reinforce this is to give clear signals that such activities will not assist in your career progression.

34. **Encourage Meritocracy.** The profession of arms is too serious to allow any space for mediocrity, specially in higher ranks. This needs the most serious attention from the high table of the Chief and Army Commanders. The time for reservations is long over and a review is necessary, in addition to a host of other measures that can be undertaken.

35. **Assessment and Selection System.** In all fairness, the assessment and selection system of the armed forces has been fair and objective. But it has not been dynamic enough to cater for various challenges that have appeared over time. It's also '**one man centric**', lacking consistency, with periodic flip flops, which open it to accusations of bias. Over assessment, of which most are guilty has overwhelmed the system, making it lose its discerning character. Similar is the case of appointments at

senior levels, with square pegs being driven into round holes. So what recipe/change does one offer; a few suggestions are detailed below:-

- a. **Consider 360° evaluation** – a trial may be ordered to evaluate and harmonise before introduction.
- b. **Review assessment system** so that assessing/reviewing officers are able to offer a true representation of performance and potential; many steps can be taken.
- c. **Assessment of integrity** has to be more detailed; today virtually everyone is getting a ‘9’, thus permitting officers with questionable integrity to get through.
- d. We are a **command oriented army**; yet everyone is not suited for it. Since it is a must for further promotion, many unsuitable officers are given crucial command assignments. This is a real issue, needs a more dynamic solution.
- e. Something also needs to be done to dissuade increasing trend of **complaints**, in fact repeated complaints against supersession. There are many officers who have risen to high levels by getting a redressal at every rank!!
- f. **Senior appointments (Maj Gen/Lt Gen)** should be approved by an **appointment board**, composed of Chief, Vice Chief and Army Commanders. The Chief may retain a veto, based on a speaking order.

g. Time has come to move away from age related senior appointments. We are mature enough to pick up the most competent and suitable for the highest appointments, through a **credible system**. We cannot afford the luxury of **date of birth** as the **ultimate determinant**.

36. **Establishing Accountability**. Let me state upfront, the Indian Army is **shy of enforcing professional accountability**. While personal misdemeanours are brought to book, how many have we removed from command assignments for **operational incompetence – few and far between**. The American Army lost its moorings when it stopped relieving incompetent officers from command assignments – resulting in their poor performance in Vietnam. This needs a serious relook, with sufficient in-built checks to prevent misuse.

37. **Embracing change**. The **culture of status quo** can no longer be allowed to impede our progress. An analysis of past studies undertaken, with great deliberation, shows **implementation ranging from Zero percent to 50 percent**. The last transformation study, I am afraid has met a similar fate. We need **'Visionary Leaders'**, who have a vision for tomorrow and who work with focus to leave a better organisation for the military leaders who will follow. The transformation that such a visionary leader will usher, may result in **short term turbulence**. He must stay on course and not be dissuaded by short-sighted vested interests.

38. **Ethics & Priority**. The Army as an institution cannot allow any compromise in its own standards of ethics and probity. The **impeccable character and transparency** that is expected of military leaders should be **constantly reinforced**. Therefore,

there is a requirement to lay down a code of conduct to ensure a culture of ethical standards and probity. A suggested code is enumerated below, as a guide to be followed and reinforced:-

- a. Senior Officers should **lead by example** and **set the standards**. It will suffice to say that military leadership is **'leadership by deeds'**. There should be 'No double standards' and commanders should have an approach of **'top down - top first'** in this regard.
- b. **Perks and privileges at various levels need to be related to the appointment/job and not be left to individual interpretations.** Misuse/abuse of privileges should not be tolerated. Reduce over emphasis on ceremonials and **non-productive "spit and polish"**.
- c. **Parochialism** threatens to mar the fair and just image of the Army and needs to be curbed at all levels. Its manifestation in the garb of misplaced sense of esprit-de-corps, loyalty and regimentation has to be guarded against. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Army, there is no scope for this kind of culture.
- d. For a healthy professional atmosphere, a clear distinction between **'On Parade'** and **'Off Parade'** should be observed. We should not carry our ranks too far in off parade activities.
- e. Exercise due **propriety** and **austerity** in the use of public and regimental funds.

f. **Encourage Honest Reporting.** Mistakes should be acceptable provided they are not acts of commission or repetitive.

## **Conclusion**

***“Whether a man is burdened by power or enjoys it; whether he is trapped by responsibility or made free by it; whether he is moved by other people and outer forces or moves them – this is the essence of Leadership”.***

Theodore H White

39. The Armed Forces **Have, Are and Will** remain crucial to the Nation’s Security and well being. How they deliver will depend mostly on the calibre of military leaders that lead and steer the organisation.

40. We, therefore, need leaders who are steadfast, visionary and who measure up to the highest standards of military skills, who have a comprehensive understanding of challenges of modern warfare and who possess the physical stamina, strength of character and mental resilience and flexibility to carry the burdens that modern warfare conditions impose.

41. My recipe for such a Military Leader is:

**“Humility in his persona and Arrogance in his uniform”** – based on his integrity, competence and commitment.

42. I rest my case – thank you for your patience - JAI HIND