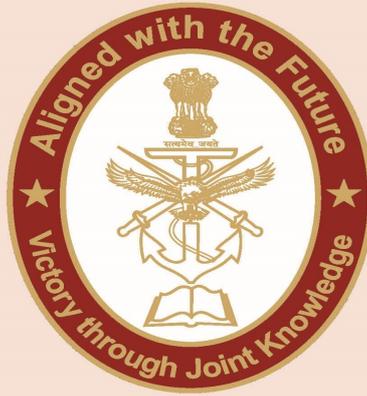


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INCREASING ANTI-MILITARY ATTITUDE BY MoD ORGANIZATIONS

BY

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The social media spat last weekend, initiated by the MoD spokesperson adversely commenting on a simple tweet by Admiral Arun Prakash, a former Chief of Naval Staff, was deplorable. Subsequent apology and claiming it was inadvertent did not reduce public anger. The spokesperson being sent on leave and replaced by the Army Public Relations Officer indicated that the Defence Minister was compelled to react to national sentiments.

More important than the wordings itself, as correctly stated by Admiral Arun Prakash, is comprehending the anger and feelings behind the tweet of the MoD spokesperson. It may have been meant for a private audience, yet the language indicated the divide within the system. It largely projects the opinion held by other central services against the armed forces.

The security apparatus of the country (MoD) has two vastly different components, a bureaucracy and a uniformed entity. The bureaucracy has taken on itself the task of controlling the uniformed, changing the basic principle of political control to bureaucratic control. It has no official role in ensuring security, except that the MoD is headed by the defence minister, who by her appointment, is answerable to the nation for any actions of the armed forces.

The uniformed, whose main task is ensuring national security and handling violence, whether it be war, border incidents, insurgencies or terrorism, have been kept away from decision making, even in areas which are solely their domain. Their independence in functioning is curtailed,

especially in matters pertaining to finance, procurement and promotions, by the MoD or various organizations under it. This control, fuelled by additional benefits given by the political leadership to the bureaucracy, including Non-Functional Upgradation (NFU), gives them a feeling of being superior to the uniformed.

This is compounded by the steep pyramidal structure of the military, its high levels of supersession and slow promotions. Despite the NFU being only an upgrade without impact on status or appointment, it is being misused, especially by departments under the MoD, to gain an upper hand, adding to inter-service battle for domination.

Despite all these disadvantages, it is always the uniformed which gathers the limelight and is respected by the nation. This is a common phenomenon across the globe mainly due to the task of the military and the risks undertaken to fulfil them. Being in the limelight and more respected is an additional reason for the anti-military sentiment leading to an increased civil-military divide, which was very evident in the tweet. Strong rebuttals from across the nation indicated the respect which the army carries.

It is this sentiment and divide which leads to a desperation within MoD controlled organizations to project a status higher than the military and compels its members, comprising of far junior personnel, to resort to illogical means, like displaying unauthorised flags thereby seeking recognition. Such self-indulgence is detrimental to the nation and the national security apparatus.

The incident over the weekend would have ramifications in the months ahead. The individual who sparked the controversy and the MoD spokesperson, sent forcibly on leave, belong to the same cadre, the Indian Defence Accounts Service (IDAS). The criticism across the nation for their immature actions would result in their cadre seeking to prove its authority by delaying defence expenditure and local projects on flimsy grounds.

Fault finding, delaying and rejecting on flimsy grounds is the easiest way of projecting authority, especially if those doing so are neither answerable to the soldier on the ground nor taken to task for lack of capabilities or equipment within the military. This has been the mantra of the MoD and organizations it controls. It has been noticed and commented upon on multiple occasions by the parliamentary standing committee on defence and CAG, but to no avail.

The military is no holy cow. It, like any other government organization, has its own shortcomings, whether it be integral to the services or their

approach to other central services. Internal discontent is also on the rise. For civil organizations of the MoD and the public, the 'Buddy System' causes maximum heartburn. Shortcomings are regularly raised in the media and being a disciplined force action is taken to overcome them. The military's feeling of being unjustly persecuted is evident in the manner their cases are treated by the bureaucracy.

Some examples of recent times include challenging disability pensions to veterans and NFU to the serving granted by the AFT in the apex court, refusing to defend the soldier on protection under AFSPA in the recent Manipur case and clearing the cadre review of the AFHQ cadre without seeking the approval of the agency which they are supposed to be a support service to (armed forces), are some recent examples. The further one goes back, the more incidents come to the forefront.

This twitter episode is a wakeup call to the national leadership conveying what was known always but pushed under the carpet. There is a clear civil-military divide, becoming more prominent by the day. A nation cannot afford a growing civil-military divide as both organizations are meant for one common purpose, service to the nation. Further, an anti-military approach by those meant to work in conjunction with it, including the IDAS, MES, BRO, DGDE etc would only add spokes to progress rather than be partners in growth and development.

There are few reasons for this increasing divide and an anti-military approach. The first is the compartmentalization of the armed forces and non-amalgamation of the MoD. Those organizations forming part of the MoD or operating directly under it have always felt superior to the uniformed, since they are responsible to the MoD, which considers itself above service HQs. This is one of the reasons that developed nations have merged service HQs with the ministry. It has not only reduced friction but enhanced an understanding of military matters. India hesitates even after 70 years, without any sound reason. No government in 70 years has justified this approach in a logical manner.

The second reason is creation of roadblocks in rank and status by the provision of additional unconstitutional perks like the NFU. With utter disregard to the rules under which it was granted, possibly with the blessing of the MoD, it has enhanced distance and changed an earlier peaceful working environment in quasi military organizations into one of competition for status and power.

The third reason is the conscious decision by the MoD to deny rightful benefits to the serving and veterans, despite court orders. With this action

the MoD has itself projected an anti-military bias, which would be exploited by other organizations which are a part of it.

While many would brush the twitter episode of last weekend as minor and the act of one individual, it should not be considered so. It is indicative of the malaise and anger within the system which needs to be removed if the national security apparatus should function as a single powerful entity, with all organs of the MoD working in harmony, rather than at cross-purposes. The defence minister must devote time, interact not just with the heads of organizations but maybe a few steps down the ladder, feel the pulse and then take appropriate actions. Ignoring it would only enhance the divide and damage the military.

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