

# **REVIEW THE INTAKE PROCESS TO REDUCE SHORTFALL LEVELS**

## **IN THE ARMED FORCES**

**BY**

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In a reply to a question raised in parliament, the government stated that the army faces a shortfall of 7,298 officers. The statement read, 'As on 01 Jan 2018, the authorised strength of the army was 49,933 but it has 42, 635'. This shortfall impacts the lowest levels of leadership. It is this cutting edge of leadership which has ensured victory in all wars which the army has fought. Most of those who led and sacrificed their lives in Kargil was this level of leadership.

In the present era, it is not that the numbers who apply for joining the armed forces are low. In fact, almost 3 Lakhs attempt the UPSC exam, held jointly for the National Defence Academy (NDA) and the Naval Academy. Of these approximately 8,000 to 10,000 are called for the next level, based on their performance in the written exam, which is the Services Selection Board (SSB). It is from this that the final lot is selected. Thus, when viewed in totality, the selection percentage is 0.13%. This is just the case with one entry, there are similar levels of selection for the other entries.

The NDA entry has significance as it deals with those graduating from school. As a youth matures, his beliefs harden, which becomes difficult to change even with training. This impacts the qualities which the army seeks amongst its officers. Hence, selection percentages at the SSB reduce with senior level entries, whether they be the short service, engineering or law graduates.

Thus, analysing statistics alone, it is incorrect to state that the armed forces are not popular anymore, as has been mentioned by some veterans and policy makers and has become the general belief. While there would always be competition between multiple career options, the numbers appearing indicate that the armed forces remain reasonably popular.

The questions which arises is, whether the right material is missing or that the army selection process needs to undergo a change. The selection process comprises of two parts, the written exam and the SSB.

As far as the SSB is concerned, they are clear in their outlook. The candidate must possess qualities essential for him to be a commissioned officer in the armed forces. They have no quotas in selection. Some batches may result in zero selection, while others may have reasonable numbers selected. The pattern of SSB has been studied and perfected over the years, hence does not warrant any major change. Shortfalls may be acceptable, but dilution of standards would not. The feed into the SSB is from those selected post the UPSC exam for the basic NDA entry.

What requires deliberation and reassessment is the methodology adopted to shortlist candidates by the UPSC. The written exam is theoretical and based on science, mathematics, general knowledge and English, all covered in two papers, mathematics and general ability. The mathematics paper is of 300 marks and the general ability is of 600.

The top 8 to 10,000 are selected for undergoing the SSB. While the armed forces do not seek rocket scientists alone but rocket scientists with personality, hence only theoretical knowledge should not be the deciding factor in the written exam. For those seeking admission in the Technical Entry Scheme (TES) after class 12, engineering or law graduates there is no entrance exam, but only an SSB. The cut off for the TES is minimum 70%, while for others it is having obtained the degree.

Since the qualities that the army desires are far more than just academics, which can be enhanced through the education pattern adopted in the NDA, there is a need to reconsider whether the written exam should be only theoretical or also include some aspects of psychological or IQ tests. The written should aim to select those who appear to possess qualities and the basic IQ essential for the services.

It should feed the right level of candidates for the SSB, not based on the theoretical model adopted for other central services. As in the case of the TES, a basic cut off can be considered as the qualifying mark. It should be noted that the seniority within a batch on commissioning of officers is not based solely on academics but on the overall performance of the individual through his training.

Accepting the present academic model may be a simple solution catering for the large numbers which apply, but in this case, many deserving and possessing the right qualities are ignored only because they do not meet the academic cut off in the written exam. For all other civil services, the selection process is a collection of written exams, checking theoretical knowledge and a simple interview by a panel. The armed forces seek qualities more than theoretical knowledge.

For the TES, engineering and law graduates, it is assumed that since they possess the relevant degree or required percentage, they would have basic knowledge. The same could be adopted for those seeking to join the NDA also. The percentage could be lowered as compared to the TES.

Since the written is the prerogative of the UPSC, this aspect has generally been ignored. Since those who qualify are more tuned towards academics and do not clear the SSB, it is assumed that the right material does not apply for the armed forces.

There is therefore a need to study the existing system in totality involving the Defence Institute of Psychological Research (DIPR), service HQs and the UPSC. The NDA written papers could then be modified for determining IQ and basic qualities which the military seeks, while not impinging on the tests being conducted by the SSB. The aim should be to feed the right candidates for the SSB. The academic levels would be handled by the cut off percentages. This may result in higher selection rates and reduce existing shortfalls.

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