

Rediscover the Sainik school

M P Anil Kumar, January 25, 2008

Lately, the media has been awash with reports of just 86 cadets joining the Indian Military Academy at Dehradun against a course strength of 250. And, instead of 300 applicants, just 197 boys turned up at the National Defence Academy, Khadakvasla, at Pune.

These media reports also highlighted the staggering number of officers who have sought premature release. Worse, this knell has rung at a time when the Indian Army, Navy and Air Force combined are already crippled by a shortage of 14,060 young officers. This should worry not just the ministry of defence but the nation, too, for like nation-building or statecraft, the war machine too depends on mettlesome leadership to deliver results. And young officers are the sword-arm of any force.

This plight has been blamed on the usual welter of reasons: unattractive salaries, tough working environment, limited growth opportunities, dimming respect for the Armed Forces in the society and a green civvy street.

Also, there were reports of the army chief hinting at conscription as a way out if the trend snowballs into a crisis. Given that conscription is an unworkable doctrine in India, I believe the allusion was the army chief's oblique attempt to remind the Sixth Pay Commission of the desperate straits he is in. Earlier, Defence Minister A K Antony had urged the Pay Commission to issue bumper pay-packets so as to help in retaining those itching to leave and to entice bright youngsters into signing up.

In short, both the defence minister and the army chief have apparently exhausted other options and have pinned their hopes on the Sixth Pay Commission to stem the peacetime attrition. What if the Pay Commission misfires? After all, Pay Commissions are a typical governmental exercise in jugglery, so it's foolhardy to be bullish about its sixth avatar being Santa Claus.

Let me be less sceptical and assume that the Sixth Pay Commission will shower manna on the services. Let's also assume that the brightest lads, unable to resist the alluring emoluments, flock to the armed forces' training academies. What if they lack the hardiness to endure the physically exacting regimen of military life? My point is: You need certain attributes to be an officer and a warrior, and many bright sparks need not have it in them to be service officers. The right recruits are those with an innate desire for soldiering and the capacity to endure hardships.

Though the intake to the corps of officers has been on the wane, the UPSC and the SSB (Services Selection Board) have not compromised on their standards; they continue to pick the right material. Had it not been the case, our army would have begun crumbling in the nineties under the onslaught of the inimical elements in J&K and the Northeast.

No doubt, the men and women serving in the forces need to be remunerated handsomely. But to zero in on paltry salaries as the sole reason for the jam is like mistaking the trees for the forest. I believe the solution lies in catching them young and priming them up to become the 'right material'.

Sainik schools: A brief history

The make-up of the officer cadre of the Indian armed forces a decade after Independence was disquieting for a Republic still writhing from the throes of its birth. It was a monopoly of the patrician, blue-blooded alumni of public schools and the so-called martial races -- the 'more-than-equal' gentry who had little in common with the men they led.

The officer cadre patently lacked the grassroots character and ethos of the newborn nation and needed to be 'Indianised'. The infrastructure to nurture the essential levels of physical, mental

and intellectual calibre for induction into the officer cadre was found wanting in common schools. Since public schools were beyond all but the affluent, in 1960, then defence minister V K Krishna Menon envisioned Sainik schools -- at least one in each state -- to select boys from across the spectrum through an open entrance examination and to rear them for leadership in the armed forces.

The Sainik schools were modelled on public schools minus the elitism and snobbery. The syllabus-examination approach -- the bane of our education system -- was cast aside. These schools would aim at all-round development to enhance competitive and survival skills, and to foster personality development subliminally. To ensure mainly smart boys from the economically backward bracket joined these schools, the states were mandated to provide merit-cum-means scholarships. The campus life would be free from communal and social bias, and insulated from the rumpus that bedevil student life outside.

Given their background and grooming, they would identify themselves with the men they command. Sainik schools would thus serve as feeders to the National Defence Academy and the three service academies.

Did it work? Of course. The Sainik school cubs had their baptism of fire in the 1971 Indo-Pak war and emerged with flying colours. Remember how the young officers led their troops upfront, uphill, undauntedly through the cannonade to recapture the Kargil massifs? And last year, General Deepak Kapoor, a Sainik school product, took over as the army chief.

Some more history

The call to establish an Indian military college to raise an army officer cadre on the lines of the Royal Military Academy (Woolwich, later Sandhurst) and the United States Military Academy (West Point) was made in a Congress

resolution way back in 1887. This demand was renewed subsequently at the Indian National Congress session of 1917. These ultimately led to the institution of the Indian Military Academy in 1932. This is a testimony to the vision and quality of leadership during the freedom struggle. Madan Mohan Malaviya confirmed this when he argued in the legislative assembly in 1928: 'The question whether a military academy shall or shall not be established is a question of life and death to the people of this country. The whole question of future government in this country hangs upon that question.'

This shows our leaders of yesteryear -- including the much-maligned Krishna Menon -- were tall visionaries compared to the present lot. Our unconcerned polity and their vision deficit are responsible for nudging the three services to the precipice, perhaps the consequence of defence ministers being appointed for reasons of narrow politics than their grasp of matters defence.

Solutions and suggestions

1. In the past two decades, the profile of those joining the officer cadre and the students entering the Sainik schools has changed. Earlier, sons of officers followed their fathers' footsteps into the officer cadre. No more. Now boys from a lower pecking order are the ones joining the service academies, a sign of social mobility up the ladder.

As for Sainik schools, initially boys from indigent and not-so-rich background made it, but gradually they were replaced by those from the better-off stratum. Two reasons: one, in quest for sound education; two, given the steep rise in the fees, only the well-heeled could afford education in Sainik schools. Thus, Sainik schools, once acclaimed as the poor man's public schools, became unaffordable to the poor man!

Since the economic boom in the nineties opened several avenues, since their parents were paying up the fees, their wards were not motivated enough to see the armed forces as their profession. Naturally, the tally from Sainik schools dipped. Setting this right is a solution to the intake-deficit ailing the services.

The need to nurture and maintain the talent pool and its cost are an important dimension of overall defence planning. If the government is canny, it would regard the 22 Sainik schools (plus the five Military schools and the Rashtriya Indian Military College at Dehradun) as the catchment area-cum-nursery of the 'right material' not only to overcome the present shortfall of officers but also as an inexhaustible wellhead for future officers. The annual overhead of the 22 Sainik schools is nearly Rs 80 crores. That is less than 0.1 percent of the defence budget (Rs 96,000 crores for the year 2007-2008). The ministry of defence should pick up this tab as grant-in aid, not as largesse but as sagacious investment.

With aspirations booming proportional to the GDP growth, defence planners need to target the section of society likely to see becoming service officers as upward mobility and select boys from this segment to the Sainik schools. If 20 to 25 percent make it to the academies, the services will never face a shortage of officers. As for the rest, they will serve the country in other capacities. This will also accomplish the upliftment of those languishing on the margins of our society. Hence, the Centre footing the bill will provide a fresh lease of life to the Sainik schools currently fighting a battle for survival, with phenomenal returns on this investment. A win-win scenario. In brief, rediscover the Sainik school to bridge the shortfall.

2. The National Cadet Corps needs to be made universal and mandatory for two or three years at the school level. NCC, besides doing the

students a world of good, should inspire a few to join the services.

3. Because of an article penned by this writer that appears in the Standard X English textbook in Maharashtra, I have had the opportunity to interact with thousands of students in the past 12 years. Many boys and girls had expressed their desire to don the uniform but, shockingly, most of them did not know how to go about it. Hardly anyone had heard about the various service academies. At a time when the services have to compete fiercely with the rest to attract talent, not hardselling the defence forces surely earns a C minus. As they say, if the mountain will not come to Mohammed, then Mohammed must go to the mountain.

4. As retention of officers is getting difficult by the day, it's time to rewrite the manpower policies so as to swell the cadre of short service officers. Many out there may be willing to serve the forces for five years.

5. Lastly, many officers have sought premature release for reasons other than lucre. Like elsewhere, corruption has been corroding the vitals of the services, and the skeletons tumbling out apace have severely dented its image. Few will be tempted to prefer a career in the forces if the slide downhill is not undone. It's time for the top brass to set the house in order. Besides, the services need to frame a modern appraisal system to ensure that only the deserving ascend the totem pole.

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