

From Political Neutrality to Mediate in the National Issues: The Army in Contemporary India

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Abstract: India has been proved to be one of the important countries of South Asia in recent times in matters like civil-military and its related aspects. Initially, Indian Army has shown reluctance in matters like politics and civil issues which emerged out of eruptive environment since the independence of India. Political neutrality has been maintained under the British colonialization of the Indian Army so that they could be kept outside the orbit of such political entanglements in order to maintain peace and stability in the society at large. This reluctance has been further reinforced since India received her independence in 1947 onwards. Sadly, this legacy of political neutrality of the Indian Army of contemporary times has been threatened in order to get political and agenda driven mileages. Furthermore, Army in recent times got automatically politicized while it has been use to quell communal or ethno- linguistic violence which has been erupted in recent times in some parts of India. Therefore, this paper tries to examine the complicated or multifaceted civil-military relation of the Indian Army in contemporary times and how the notion of political neutrality of the Army has been threatened since the last decades by deploying it in order to get political mileages.

Keywords: Contemporary India, Civil, Military, Independence Indian Army, Violence etc.

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Introduction

South Asia provides some of the largest and most important military organizations in the world today. The Indian Army is one of the significant state powers in South Asia and has growing stock of modernized military technologies along with manpower. As we all know that South Asian army has a shared origin in the British colonial Army, and India is the home to other military forces with divergent beginnings notably in the navies and air forces and

From Political Neutrality to Mediate in the National Issues: The Army in Contemporary India

paramilitary forces. The shifting tendencies of politico-cultural transformation since 1980s gives birth to the emergence of dynamic military culture in South Asia and India proved to be crucial for major army reorganization both in techniques and mechanism of fighting capabilities to combat with the several non-state forces and with cracked situations within the country and South Asia as general.

This essay focuses on the recent developments that question the political neutrality of the Indian Army and how it has become saffronised under the current regime and inpassing discusses other South Asian forces and their transformation. While their role in civil-military perspectives will be emphasized, it should be borne in mind that all armies are essentially follow diverse complex state bureaucratic steps that used to perform several functions to project its colossal presence. Their stated purpose is to apply force in a war against a foreign enemy, or to use force at home to maintain law and order.² Yet South Asia's armies have a complex relationship to their respective societies, especially to their many ethnic, caste, and linguistic groups (Wilkinson, 2015 and Peters, *et.al*, 2006).³ They may also play a role in decision making, and their budgets are often occupying the state's single largest expenditure. Finally, militaries (again, especially armies) often play a role in shaping both state and national identities, which might give birth both to contestation and majoritarian tenet.

Indian Army and its Colonial legacy

It has been seen that the British evolved a military structure in India to serve their own purposes of brute conquests and subsequently expansions. Firstly, the British force wanted to establish control over the territories they ruled directly and indirectly. Later, as part of a larger imperial project, the British deployed Indian-based forces throughout the frontiers of Asia and Europe which played a critical role in both the World Wars. These age old colonial structures as well as these policies have shaped the present-day armies of India and South Asia as a whole (Cohen, 2010).⁴

It is argued that the Great Revolt of 1857 proved to be alarming for the British East India Company across India as this provided the necessary ground for the unification of both the Hindu and the Muslim troops against their British officers and nearly succeeded in routing the British edifice. After the Revolt, recruitment was subsequently restricted to the most loyal regions, castes, and ethnic groups and steps had been taken to discharge members, who deemed disloyal and perilous for the British. They also reduced recruitment from those

From Political Neutrality to Mediate in the National Issues: The Army in Contemporary India

regions, such as the South and Eastern parts of Bengal presidency, which had been pacified, justifying both steps terms of a freshly invented theory that deemed only some classes to be martial. The designation of 'martial races' shifted over the next hundred years, and some groups, thought to be martial in the middle of the nineteenth century surprisingly saw their numbers markedly reduced by the colonial military officials to project the British racial arrogance towards the native Indian forces.⁵

In course of time, Indian Army passed through a major transformation in 1980s as it saw the changing security threats, economic growth and new political and military leadership came into existence and paved the era of contemporary ethos countrywide. At this juncture, the Army has been instrumental in procuring large numbers of fighting equipment, diversified military supply among other mechanised techniques. Indian Army was also pulled in the opposite direction of the conflict spectrum, towards fighting insurgencies, which is prevalent since 1947 onwards in the different areas of the Indian subcontinent. Having a growing problem with Pakistan and China, Indian Army has been struggling to make a fine balance between internal and external security questions. Finally, the Kargil incident of 1999 one again proved that cross-border infiltration and counter-insurgency issues has been crucial in this case and the Army requires to adopt both defensive as well as offensive measures to counter such operation in future.⁸

Currently, the Indian Army is the world's fourth largest after the US, Russia and China. It has a million-plus volunteer army that is well trained, disciplined and equipped with modern weapons and ammunition, it has a robust air force with modern fighting jets that are capable of playing of both offensive and defensive roles and it also has a blue-water capable navy whose strength is rapidly growing to combat not only with the South Asian countries but beyond its shared territories.⁹ The present turbulent politico-diplomatic situation, the Army in India has been able to transform its core aspects with that of the global scale and paradigm.

Colonization and Political Neutrality in the Indian Army

The ever evolving presence of the British governance in India marked a shift in the colonisation process in Asia and proved benevolent for its native force. After setting its foot in the Indian subcontinent, the British developed military bureaucracy that was instrumental in governing the vast territories of India since 1757. As the British Empire's reliance over

From Political Neutrality to Mediate in the National Issues: The Army in Contemporary India

military increased with its every expansion, the professional interest of the military transformed into an 'autonomous sovereignty' within the imperial structure and priority was given to the military in terms of resource allocation and manpower mobilization. This process was known as military fiscalism that had simultaneous connection with the notion of 'garrison state' (Yong, 2005).¹⁰ The Garrison state of imperial days could be defined as a state preserved by military power, where military matters dominated the social, economic, and political affairs of the state. It epitomizes a state where military had its sway over the affairs of the state and controls its fiscal resources and adverse effect on its subject populace. Therefore, the mechanism around the garrison state empowers the military elites with great importance and put emphasis in the provision of security and management of society. It marked the militarized societies, dominated by military culture, values and goals.¹¹ Indian society was largely controlled by military rule and priority had been given to the military force for securing political and strategic objectives against internal unrest or external threats under the colonial rule. The British rule essentially monopolised the military labour market of entire south Asia for the supply of manpower to British Indian Army to continue its sway over this region (Kolff, 1990).¹² Contours of Civil-Military relations in India since 1947.

In order to understand the political neutrality of army and its subsequent intervention in the civil- military issues, one needs to examine the contemporary political atmosphere in India. Further, one can epitome whether India is transforming into a pro-military nation and playing the cards of garrison state tenet in current scenario. The ever evolving civil-military culture has to be one point in this direction. In one hand, civilian control was firmly established in the society while strict operational matters remained in the hands of the military since the time of independence of India. We have been able to see the last two viceroys namely Wavell and Mountbatten were from the military largely obscured the degree of civilianisation that had taken place in this continent. Besides, Indian defence budgets were hotly contested in the nascent Indian assembly by Indian representatives, who were also critical of the way in which the military was used to support imperial goals. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, argued in favour of the furtherance of relative power of civilians. The position of Commander-in-Chief was abolished (the President of India is now the titular commander-in-chief). Control over the armed forces was lodged in the civilian cabinet under the Prime Minister, and the status of the officer corps vis-à-vis the civil service as well as elected and pointed public officials was sharply downgraded.¹³

From Political Neutrality to Mediate in the National Issues: The Army in Contemporary India

Now, civilian control was further tightened after the 1958 coup in Pakistan, as it had a contact with foreign armies. Nehru believed that the Pakistan military's coup had been facilitated by ties to its American and British counterparts. The Indian government had two other major policies in the immediate post-Independence era: it attempted to 'democratize' the army by effectively doing away with the martial race theory and it kept military matters away from public scrutiny.¹⁴ As for organizational patterns, India's new leaders, encouraged by the British ethos, permitted the army to retain its colonial structure, but emphasized the sense of loyalty to the new government. Now, political and military theorists argued that one consequence of the way civilian control was imposed in post-Independence India was that the political leadership stayed away from military matters while the military leadership remained institutionally frozen and kept them away from country's political discourse. The war against China in 1962 helped the government for the implicit bargain—internal autonomy in return for political supremacy over the armed forces has been strengthened. Thus, India's defeat in the conflict was squarely blamed on political interference.¹⁵ Prior to the war, Nehru and his defense minister V.K. Krishna Menon had promoted politically pliable generals, requiring them to pursue a risky 'forward strategy', a move that had clearly backfired. Later wars in 1965 and 1971 reinforced the utmost military autonomy and supremacy in its approach and targets. In the War of Independence of Bangladesh in 1971, General Sam Manekshaw, the army chief, asked for operational freedom and came back with the country's only outright military victory. This is further ensured that political leaders of India remained wary of interfering in the internal matters of the military so long as the armed forces accepted political supremacy.¹⁶ In later crises, notably with Pakistan in 1999 and 2001–02, civilians called the shots and hue and cry has been made to justify their point. Consequently, it is argued that the frightening 2001–02 crisis led to re-examination of some of the potent issues like the eighteenth century army structure, the archaic defense budgeting system, and the absence of real 'jointness' between the services and among the various civilian agencies responsible for national security policy.¹⁷

The genesis of the current military culture and its dictated agendas focuses on the issue that India's robust civil–military arrangement is different from virtually every other ex-colonial or developing society, it does not mean that it is optimal and does not require any initiative for any fruitful move. Issues like 'civil control' has been achieved, the military is politically meek, but India has not really had a debate on the purpose and role of the Indian Army, let alone its relationship to Indian society, and civilians generally lack the professional expertise or experience to make informed decisions when it comes to the use of force, training, or weapons acquisition and manpower mobilization under dire situation.¹⁸ Rather than pledges for real reform, India prefers to expand its forces.

From Political Neutrality to Mediate in the National Issues: The Army in Contemporary India

Now, it has been seen that the Indian military is expected to modernize significantly over the next few years, an effort that is backed by an explosive growth in India's defense budget enabled by a rapidly expanding economy. India's defense budget grew by 75 percent between 2002 and 2007. In 2019-2020, it is allocated as 3.19 Lakh crore excluding the defence pension. Finance Minister, Nirmala Sitaraman said that defence had an immediate requirement of modernization and up gradation as well as this is a national priority.

Finally, the nature and character of Indian civil-military relations and the way it has been evolves has significant implications for the democratic governance. Political leadership has always been wary of designating too much decision-making power to the military in order to keep the armed forces under democratic control in India since 1947. However, it has often been said that India's political leadership must strike the right balance in working to develop a modernised military with enough weight in defence policy while locating clear political goals without negotiating the external and internal security interests of India .¹⁹

Burgeoning notions of Nationalism and the Army

However, there is a growing consensus among the civilian and military peripheries about the army's outlook towards the question/issue of nationalism, or rather how far Indian Army follows the ethos of nationalism in modern day parlance. As we have seen that Indian Army follows the legacy of the colonial military fabric since 1947 to a large extent. (Dasgupta 2011 and Roy, 2013).²⁰ Regimental organisation and recruitment doctrines of the post-1947 Indian Army are two examples that highlight the colonial mechanism. Despite having considerable economic growth and socio-cultural transformations, Indian society remains multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-religious in nature. So, it could be argued that India is a nation with many layers of nationalities and orientations. Now, the complex and ever evolving interactions between the Indian Army and the Indian society with pluralistic tendencies and outlook made the ground favourable for the army personnel to be neutral in nature and actions in case of its performance and day-to-day activities within the regiments as a whole.²¹

Now, theorists and military historians have been opined that the social character of the Indian Army is basically two fold. On one hand there are group of scholars argue that Independent India has a national modernising army, which essentially represents all the communities and geographical regions (Moore 1969, Bopegamage 1971, Singh 1985, Rosen 1996)²², while the other group has argued that Indian Army still has a quasi-mercenary

From Political Neutrality to Mediate in the National Issues: The Army in Contemporary India

unrepresentative army (Cohen1991 and Cohen1993).²³ Therefore, it has been visible that there is a conflicting opinion prevailed in the Indian Army regarding its social orientation and this has been still prevalent in the Indian Army despite having its diverse set up and functions.²⁴

Now, the rhetoric of nationalism and its association with the Army has been moulded under the present government in India and of course this has an adverse effect on the South Asian military and defence culture as a whole. Even the shift in the Army's ethos from the secularism to the majoritarianism has been afflicted the country's environment (Chatterjee et.al., 2019 and Sood, 2019).²⁵ The (ab)use of military achievement has recently been used as campaign props by the ruling party to showcase nationalist fervour of the country and trying to project the sense of patriotism with it. Apparently, there is a hue and cry among the Army regarding the ruling party's projection of the armed forces and its contribution towards the country for political gains. Somehow, this has proved to be misleading for the Army and its approach towards nationalism. Even the foundation of the Army's own peculiar secularism has been questioned under the current regime. Army, which is essentially free from religious and political ideology, is now under threat of religious overtones of the Hindu state and the slogan '*Bharat Maata Ki jai*' which is associated with the invocation of nationalism, proved to be highly religious manufacturing ethos for the Army at large (Shukla, 2019).²⁶

Post-independent Indian politicians, it is often argued, have opportunistically polarized the public along communal lines, but have so far minimised from interfering with the Army's apolitical, secular structure. In recent times, the foundations of this peculiar Indian Army's secularism are being potentially destabilised by a series of events that are quite accidental in nature (Shukla, 2016).²⁷ It seems that the Indian Army were exploited for narrow political gain and electoral favour in 2019 as issues has been ascended from Balakot to Kashmir to CAA (Panag, 2019)²⁸ Under the present government, India has taken a majoritarian and hyper-nationalist stand on national security issues, and in this process, co-opted the armed forces, which have been adored. Moreover, all critics, reformists, opponents and a large section of the population of India have been identified with the external enemy namely Pakistan. The distinction between the Modi government and its instrument of last resort-the armed forces-has blurred, particularly with respect to accountability towards national security and of course public mobilisation for the army. We have seen the government pursue an aggressive military strategy against Pakistan along with the Line of Control and International

From Political Neutrality to Mediate in the National Issues: The Army in Contemporary India

Boundary, and in the form of surgical Special Forces to make repeated air strikes across them. An equally aggressive strategy has been adopted with respect to the ongoing insurgencies, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir and vast areas of Naxalite-infected areas of India. Article 370 was diluted on 5 August to strip the erstwhile state of Kashmir and its special status, and the security clampdown since then seems to be never-ending. In 2019, post the Balakot airstrikes and aerial clash the following day, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ran a national security-driven campaign for the Lok Sabha election, keeping the Army at the centre stage.²⁹

Indian Army and its politicized tendencies

The question arises now whether the Indian Army has been turned into a politicized institution in current scenario or not. Politicization generally signifies that the Army is identified with a political ideology and becomes an extension of a political party. For instance, People's Liberation Army (PLA) in China is a politicized army. The other variation of politicization is when the army dominates the politics of a country. Pakistan is an example where the army controls the government in South Asia.³⁰ The saving grace for India is that barring a few aberrations due to rogue actions and panic-driven violations of terms of engagement, the traditional apolitical ethos of the Indian military has prevailed despite the political environment and unethical statements by a few senior officers. However, in current conjuncture, there is no doubt that the military and its operations have been politically exploited to procure electoral dividends.³¹

Generally, initiatives used to take by most of the governments to adhere the principle of seniority with respect to the appointment of service chiefs and Army commanders to prevent senior officers from succumbing to the temptation of promoting self-interest with politicians. The Modi-led government deviated from this principle when General Bipin Rawat was appointed the Chief of Army Staff, superseding two Army Commanders, and again while appointing the present Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Karambir Singh. It is the prerogative of the government to follow relative merit-driven selection, but without a transparent methodology, and considering our political culture and past experiences, it only leads to producing a politicized hierarchy. Moreover, rather than reprimand delinquent senior officers, the political statements sometimes towards this direction have been lauded and defended.³²

From Political Neutrality to Mediate in the National Issues: The Army in Contemporary India

Conclusion

In a span of nearly seventy six years, Indian Army has been transformed from a small force with limited war-fighting capabilities into a large and modern fighting machine. Subsequently, this has received adequate civil-military attention. While, the Army is trying to be neutral in political matters since the independence of India in 1947, the country's political atmosphere is no longer neutral in true sense and often intervenes in the matters related to the army. Arguably, the recent government could be held responsible for that as it tries to project the Army as its own political tool for capturing the greater attention of the citizens across the country. Concepts associated with the Army like garrison state and issues of nationalism have been constantly changing its contours in order to fulfill the narrow political agendas set forth by the current government. This has been further worsened while the military personnel and government officials/ bureaucracy have lent their voice in favour of keeping the Army as a political tool. Therefore, India's the civil-military relation has to be brought to the forefront for making the army apolitical and function according to the military and security related terms.

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From Political Neutrality to Mediate in the National Issues: The Army in Contemporary India

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