

Armed Forces: A Career Choice?

*H. Dharmarajan**

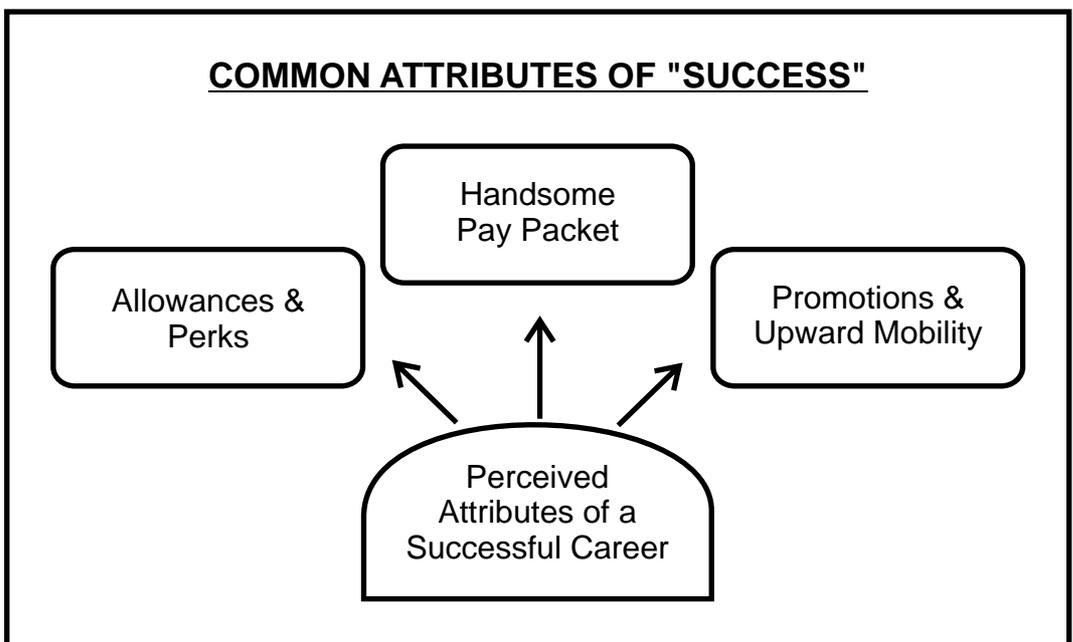
The youth of today are a well-informed gentry. Mentally mobile, analytically aware, surgically sharp and clinically precise - the Indian teenager is rarely ingenuous or naive. He is inquisitively thorough, exhaustive in examination of his options and intensive in the depth of his research. With myriad technological tools at his back and call, he need look no further than the nearest cyber café, his very own modem-enabled palm top or better still his personal 3G I-phone. Gleaning all that he desires to know, he will stop at no firewall, to delve into the nitty-gritty of the meat of the matter.

Images of the world flash past his mental screen, like a fast-paced trailer of a music-video. His vast horizon encompasses the entire ocean of opportunities, dreaming in his own Utopia of opulence, filled with all the luxuriant splendour at his imaginative best. Be it the palaces of the Arabian Sultans, the luxury yachts sailing in the Mediterranean, the prohibitively-priced BMWs, or the underwater weddings - to mid-air mega-events. Everything seems achievable, as easily as it is to see them in virtual space.

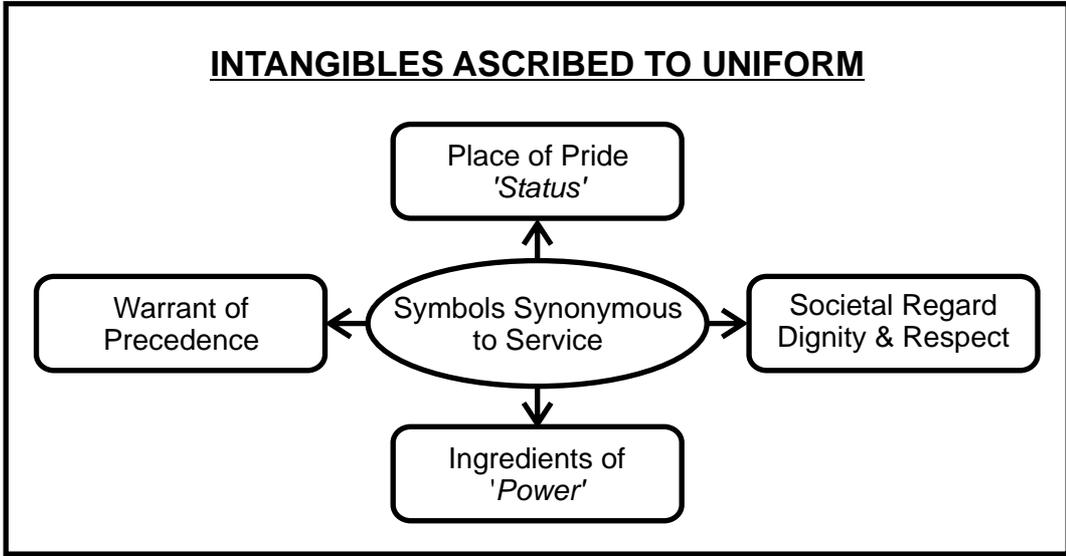
Yet, an adolescent's mind in high school is a constantly vacillating bundle of contradictions. It is swayed by perceptions formed over day-to-day experiences, stories of hearsay, myths of “*success*”, examples of “*rags-to-riches*” and many other such biographical narratives. Bombarded increasingly by the electronic media - both through TV as well as the Net,

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opinions are initially formulated at a very nascent stage. These early views then get bedded-in with the passage of time, till it comes to the career-crossroads. The way forward gets chosen based on his underlying aspirations, his conceived value system and eventually his individual capability. It can be expected of any teenaged lad to aspire for 'success'-but what constitutes 'success' is important to be constructed in the correct perspective. Parents, teachers and the company he keeps play a vital role in instilling the correct values as a strong foundation in a child. Beliefs, ethics, morals and principles inculcated, besides the importance accorded by the visible society to these values, norms-traditions-culture - all add up to the ultimate outlook of every high school pass-out.



While material comforts do occupy a very high place on the agenda of a young man, often there are various other intangibles, which spark a surge of commitment and fire up the passion in an individual to perform. Particularly, for the charm that 'uniform' exudes, there are different facets ascribed to it that add on that sense of self-esteem in an individual.

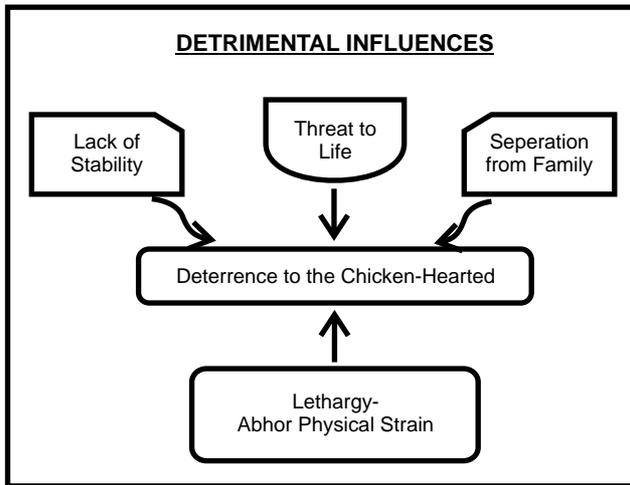


Are these accreditations of the Forces still in place today?

Different societies accord varying degrees of importance to the uniformed class. Often, this is judged by the simple privileges and immunities enjoyed by this warrior clan vis-à-vis the common man. In a war-torn country or a state brutalised by martial law, '*power*' does appear to flow from the barrel of a gun. Where battle wounds are fresh, there is overwhelming concern for things *military*. Nations that have conscription in vogue, have all walks of life and all arms of the Government being dealt with by people who have been in uniform. Not surprisingly, countries such as Israel accord prime status to their defence forces, the IDF, in their society.

On the other hand, the streaks of lethargy that pervade the society at large prevent the couch-potatoes and the chicken-hearted from even contemplating on options such as the Armed Forces. The electronic media today beams graphic and gory images of bloodshed on the borders into our bedrooms... not just reminding the public of the need to respect the one risking his life, but also amplifying the rigours and dangers of the

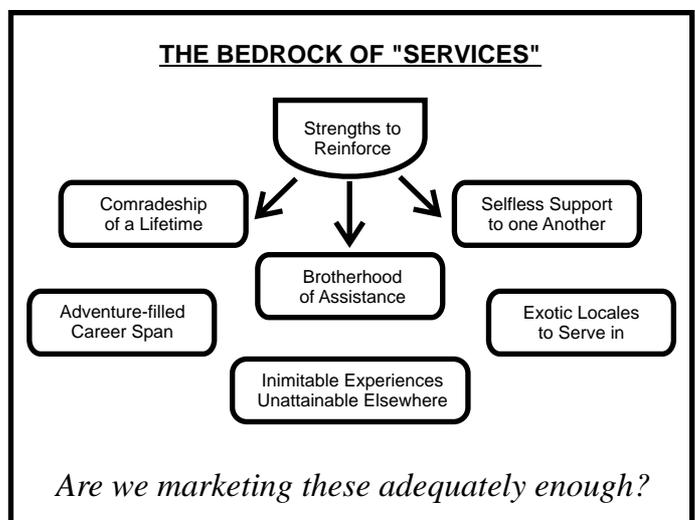
profession. Various adverse aspects of the Services, highlighted repeatedly to garner additional sops from the Government - such as the recent pay commission - also reinforce such convictions and deter sections of the youth.



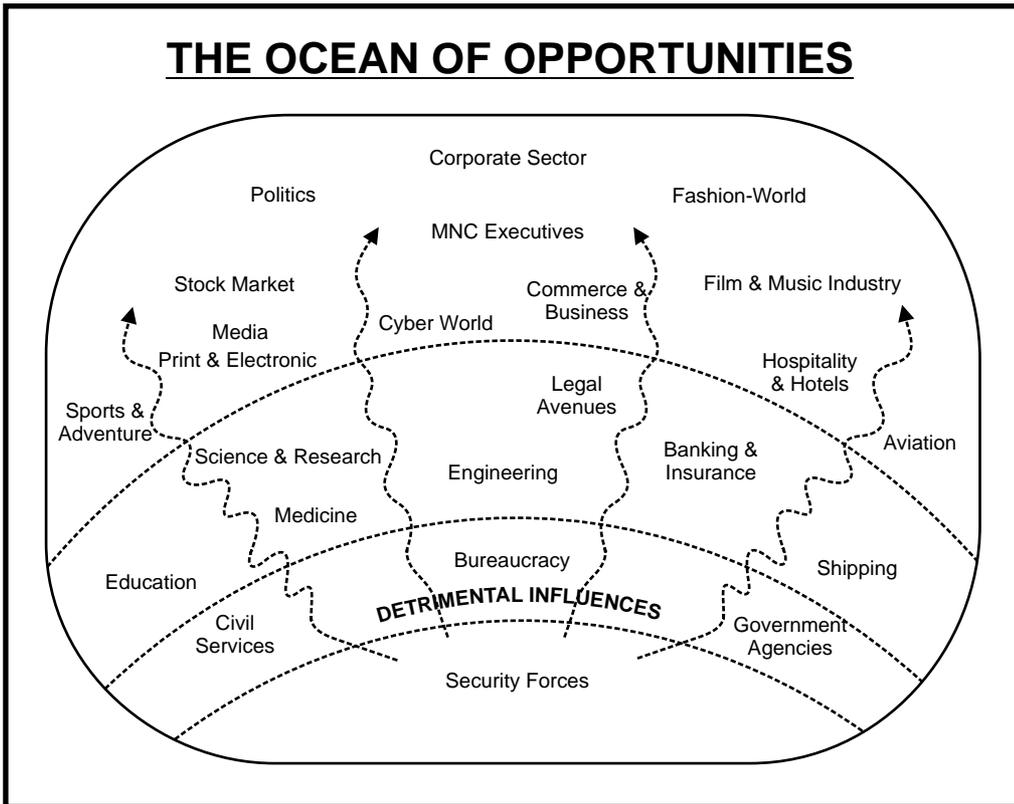
Can these detrimental influences be themselves turned into strengths, in some way? The “*threat*” is itself a form of a thrill, akin to that experienced while undertaking adventure. The 'exotic' tenures that a soldier occupies are simply beyond replication anywhere else. Besides, the bedrock of the services is in

its fierce spirit of camaraderie. It is essential to emphasise upon that selfless and extraordinary brotherhood, something very different from the civilian mainstream.

While there are these impairing factors that deter some considering the option to the olive-greens, there is also a concurrent phenomenon that weans away the young brigade with its ocean - full of opportunities. For the vast multitudes of

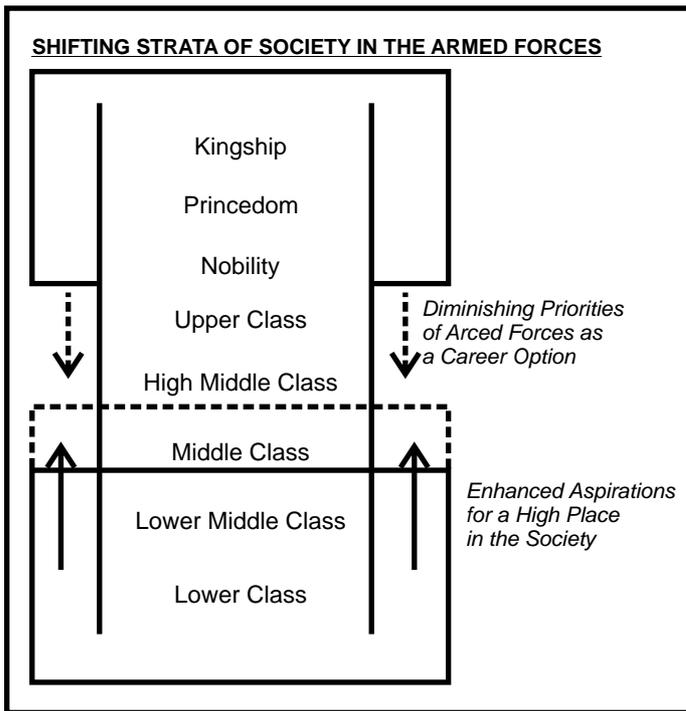


fence-sitters, the temptations of enriching soft placements, or the challenges of unexplored vocations, form obvious first-choices in their perceived *easy* road to 'stardom'.



The pride in the warrior clan of the medieval yester-years has slowly regressed in the modern era, leaving it no more amongst the so-called elitist options.

There is a deluge of tremendous human resource potential emerging from the renowned educational institutions across the length and breadth of the country – fresh with bubbling energy and enthusiasm. But the *crème de la crème* of talent is drawn inexorably towards the '*greener pastures*'. The aura that earlier drew the nobility and the princedom to soldiering has veritably vanished, leaving the worthy profession of arms as *just-another-career* for the not-so-high classes of society.



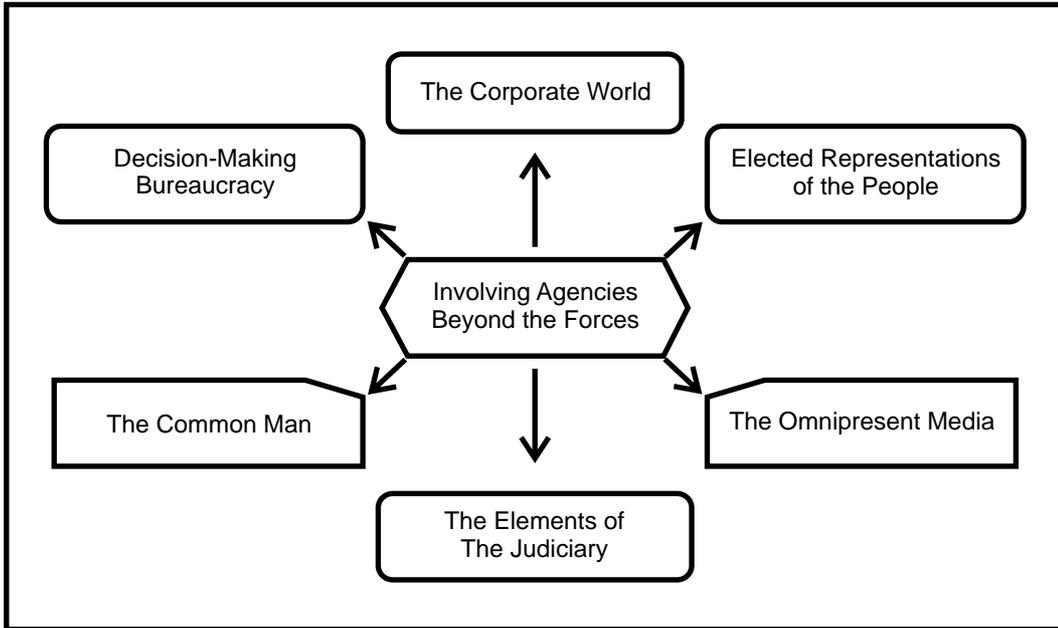
What course correction is the need of the hour to get back the status quo ante of the forces? The old position of pride, that erstwhile warrant of precedence, the honour, respect and dignity?

The first thought that comes to mind is to plug the dribble of talent leaching out from the Services. But, to make the career option

sustainable, is the policy of merely shutting exit-doors a step in the right direction? Are we actually struggling to fight a defensive battle of holding on only to the mediocrity within? Further, are we deterring better talent from coming into a *one-way street*?

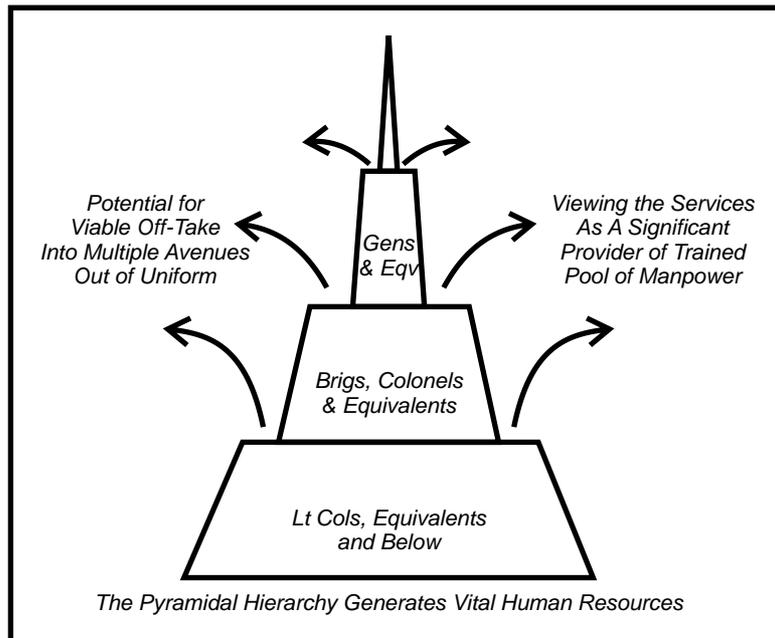
What deliberate shifts can we envisage to make a successful and satisfying option of choosing to serve for the Nation? Can the tide be turned by making *soldiering* an actual attractive choice - not just a bottom-rung pick? The need of the hour is a positive and proactive approach, not a back-to-the-wall fight for survival.

There *are* innumerable measures which can be addressed towards making a better career-choice within the Armed Forces. Some may not figure in the ambit of possibility within the Forces themselves, since various other agencies like the bureaucracy and the decision-making politicians have to be brought on board.



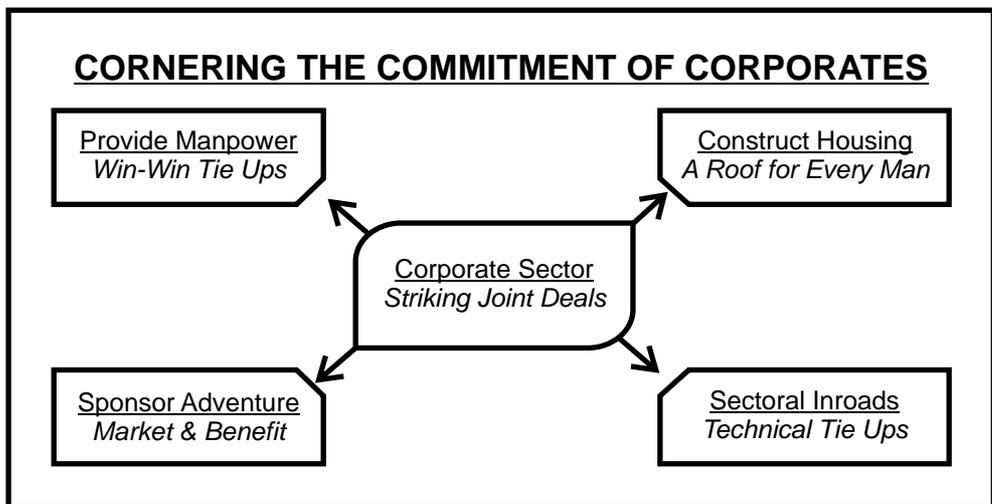
Often, there is an agonising sense of despair since there is a steel wall of intransigence towards the demands of the forces, from most entities. In all cases, the first step would be to generate a strong sense of empathy within *all* these agencies towards the soldier. Unless the authority in every chair

understands the sacrifices that 'Service' involves, one can expect little benevolence. The predicament at hand is then to generate such an awareness-wave *w i t h o u t* resistance. Merely stating that 'India does



not value its soldiers who keep the Nation's borders inviolate' will move no mountains. If there is a need to stem the demotion of the forces in the social hierarchy and reverse the steep decline in honour being faced, concrete steps forward have to be taken in multifarious directions.

At the outset is the brain-drain. This 'leakage' of talent can be categorised in two parts - one that is ejected by the pyramidal system and the other which willfully exits for better standards of living in other sectors. Both are existential – and do not need to be seen in isolation. Ordinarily, 'leakage' is seen only as the good talent *selected* organizationally to be retained, which still seeks to 'quit' at the individual level. Debarring one who is seeking to doff his uniform can do little for motivation. It is essential to address the factors leading to it rather than merely preventing it by legislation. For long term health of the system, it would be essential to market this vital pool of human resource to the glut of agencies who seek them vigorously.



Today, corporate houses seek particular Army-course qualified personnel, reaching out to the best in every stream. There are great marketing stakes involved, which can be addressed only with clean & genuine joint ventures. Many other fields of common interest can be identified for mutual gains.

The ever expanding economy of India continues to sap the best of our service manpower into diverse streams of expertise. This irreversible trend, no doubt, is here to remain and grow. Can the Armed Forces join this bandwagon, instead of trying to counter it? The Services need to formalise win-win tie ups with every type of organization that headhunts into the system. This would result in streamlining the flow. More importantly, taking a long-term view, this would get better motivated manpower into the forces itself, at the intake level.

Often, many a foreign-returned Indian officer learns that his counterparts across borders are each promised a house at a location of their choice as soon as they don their uniforms. It needs no financial genius to recognise that the young officer emerging from commissioning academies could, strike a sensible and reasonable long-term deal¹ with sincere and earnest building magnates for common housing colonies, may be as course-mate groups in multiple choice locations. There again is a win-win corporate² tie-up which can be enacted with a flavor of selfless *service* to the noble profession. Needless to mention, such a corporate tie-up, enabling *a roof for every officer* can itself rake in a much better intake potential, at the pre-commissioning stage.

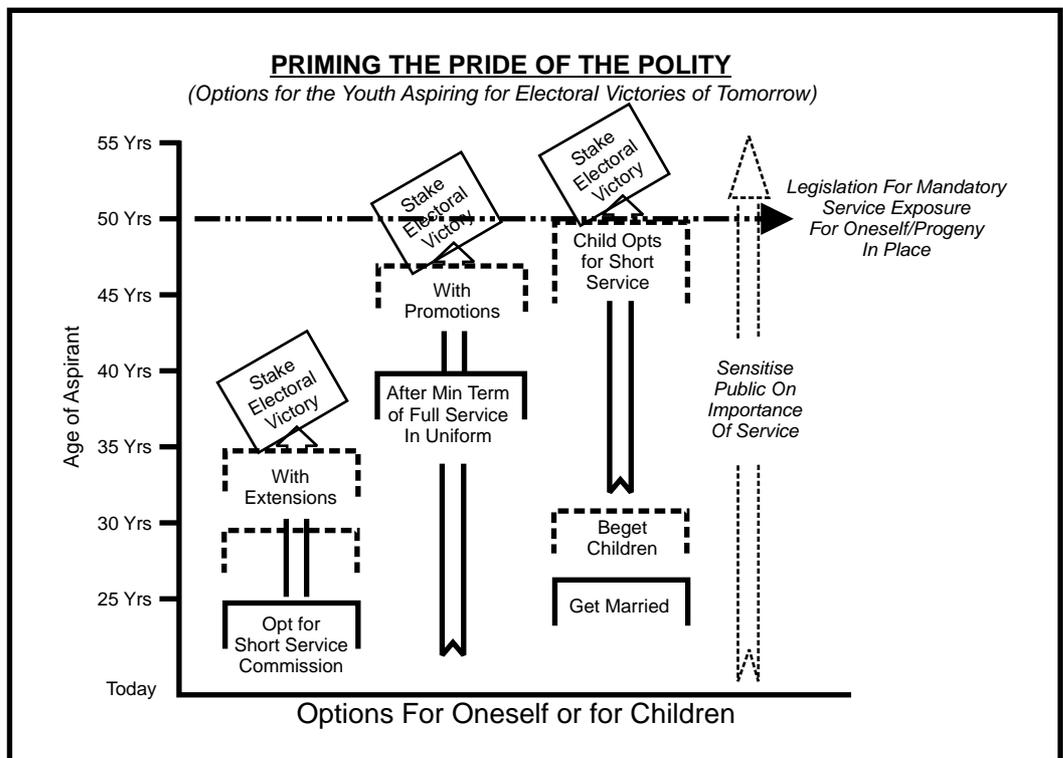
There has always been the need felt to get the elected executive decision-makers to stand by the genuine sentiments of the soldiers. However, headway has not always been made in this regard since some in the places of power have not seen what it takes to take up the noble cause of soldiering. There is hence apathy sometimes at different decision making levels. Hammering away at an insouciant leadership may not get the requisite attention. There are two aspects that need address in a deliberate and long-term manner.

First is the example from the ongoing American election debates. If a Vice-Presidential nominee like Sarah Palin can get an immense fillip by having

her son in the US Army in Iraq doing *National Service*, can a similar denominator for patriotism and *service* be applied here to *our* nominees seeking election to various legislative bodies. If Prince William can take pride in doing frontline duty with the British troops in Afghanistan, our leaders should claim such proud recognition likewise. The Indian public at large need to value and recognise the selflessness index of such service, by oneself and/or by the nearest of blood-related kin.

Considering a gestation period of 25-30 years, when the youth of today would be aspiring to lead the polls, mooted legislation *now* for all born after say 1988, to have personally, or through their own progeny, experienced any form of uniformed service by 2038, may see the light of day. This could apply to both males and females, with equity.

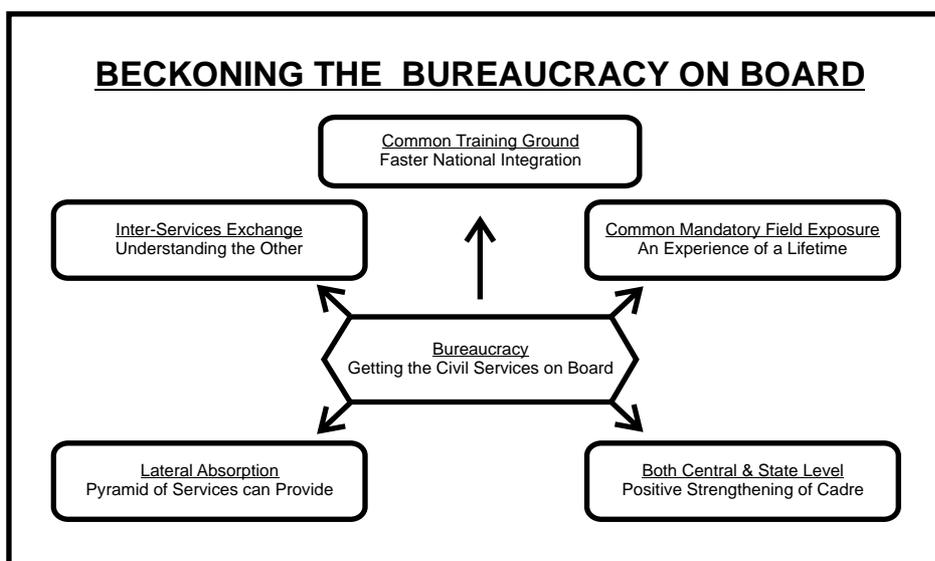
The exercise of mooted legislation itself is likely to sensitise the public



and generate much of the desired empathy. While this empathy alone may not necessarily address the opening up of the financial 'purse strings' to the defence forces owing to the growth pangs of our developing economy, it may yet provide the requisite impetus to get the warrant-of-precedence back in place.

Second is the aspect of getting the serviceman's vote to count. His importance in a democratic society is only as much as his vote counts. With the archaic postal ballot, there is little cognizance taken of his worth. What is required is an ATM type of facility for any serviceman, posted anywhere in the country, to be able to walk into an ATM-like polling booth and vote with his electronic voter-identification card. With a strong and active ex-servicemen lobby sensitizing the voters, the empathy index for the service fraternity can only rise.

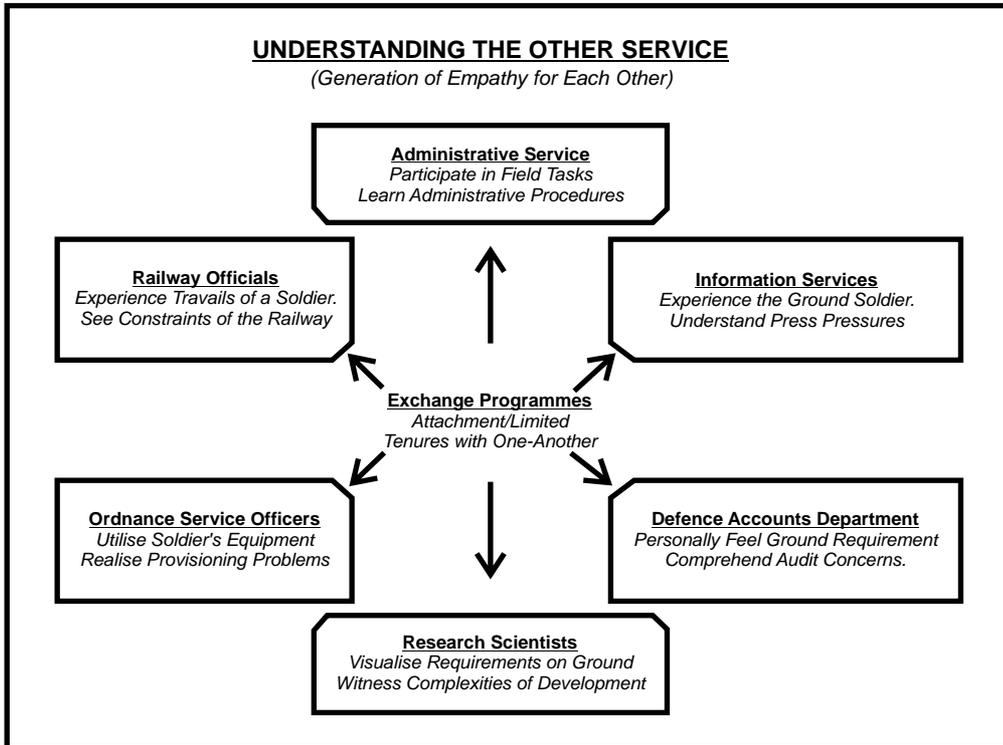
The Bureaucracy, though disinclined to merge identities at any level with the Services, could be approached with mutually beneficial proposals. Certain similar problems plague the civil services. Yet, there are complementarities too.



It is common knowledge that the civil services have been on the look-out to tap high school-pass outs to meet the gap in its quality intake. An elite institution like the NDA is ideally poised to instill the values of discipline, comradeship and a common platform to integrate not just the Armed Forces, but the civil services as well. If there are joint curriculums like the National Defence College in which there is a common training ground, the same could similarly be transposed to a graduate stage, which is otherwise presently diverse for the civil services.

Both, the Central as well as the State level civil services cadres suffer deficiencies, akin to the Armed Forces. There is again a brain-drain into the corporate sector to be dealt with by them. But the ejections of the pyramidal structure of the Armed Forces hierarchy is absent in their case. This is where lateral sidestepping by the Army into the civil services could afford value-manpower – trained officers with immense management experience in the field, besides polished interpersonal communication skills.

Exchange programmes have often been mooted earlier. Presently, visits are organized for trainees of the various civil services to visit Army establishments in the field areas. Very little is done in converse, that too at a late stage. What is important is to have a *mutual exchange* with slightly longer attachment periods at an earlier stage. Be it research scientists serving in the field for at least a few months of attachment, railway officers getting a prolonged exposure of field area nuances, defence accounts department officials brushing shoulders in high-altitude, or ordnance factory officials utilizing the equipment that they would subsequently provide, information service officers could experience what they would cover later in service; all these could immensely pluck a deep chord of empathy which no letter can re-create. The idea is not that there is only one side of the fence to be shown, but much to understand the constraints of what each of these services face in their day-to-day discharge of duties.



While a soldier may feel that his stature in society would largely be enhanced by such exchange exercises, there may also be other experiences to show that the grass is not so green on the other side of the fence either. In summation, there will result a healthy respect for each other's capabilities, a sense of professional satisfaction of doing one's bit to the best of one's ability.

The Media is the next on the list to be partnered in their quest for the “truth”. Embedded media and defence correspondents serve the requirements of both and need to be nurtured in the right spirit, without jeopardizing security. This has proven to be a successful venture on many occasions and is already underway. However the media continues to feed off the stories that malign the forces at every opportunity. It is essential to afford every avenue to these very correspondents to get a first hand view on professional matters in the field as well – where they would get to see the true picture of the *'unknown soldier'*.

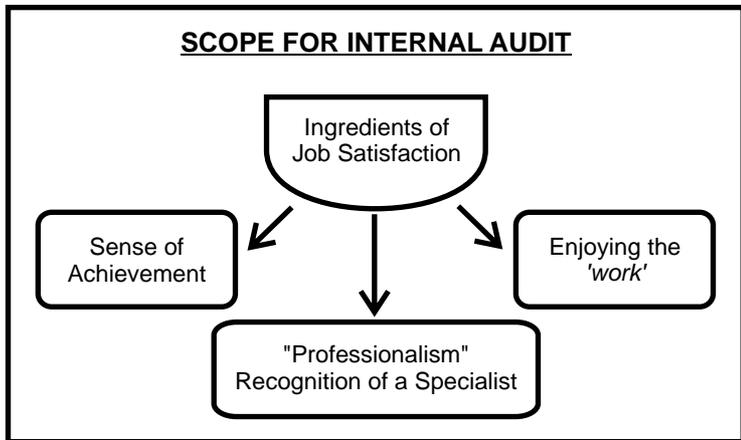
The elements of the judiciary are important addressees too, who can bring in vital changes required on a different plane. Already there is a sense of hesitation in the legal community to defend a “terrorist” in a court of law, in the interests of national security. While the forces battle such elements day-in and day-out in far flung, inconspicuous locations, some recognition of the *services* rendered may appear as a silver lining. However, according a pre-eminent status in the society to the soldier community, in a democracy, may require some deliberation to attain a state of legitimacy. Notwithstanding, the judiciary may be able to support the cause of the much-needed long-term electoral reforms.

There is then the perception of the all-important common man. This simple being, in all walks of life, needs to be made to feel for that anonymous soul in the soldier who braves the heat-and-the-cold, the fire of the enemy and the fury of nature, battling the floods and providing succour in calamities - for just being there when he is needed most. The Indian public is possibly the only community that treats its soldiers the way it does. The rich applause that any and every American soldier returning from Iraq or Afghanistan gets at his port of entry is a stark comparison to how a battalion-strong posse of our jawans may inconspicuously pass through a railway station returning from Siachen Glacier or insurgent-infested Manipur. The Israeli soldier similarly is accorded the highest priority in uniform even when there is no war on - be it in public transport, at the theatre or at any other civic utility. Evoking that dormant sentiment of concern for things military in the common man is something that can be addressed by a variety of agencies. The film and music industry, the electronic media, the internet are just a few examples. The ex-servicemen fraternity has to play a focussed role in the same. The media obviously needs to play its positive and proactive part in this venture too.

Notwithstanding the agencies outside the military domain, there is a cause for introspection too on different fronts. If the services are truly geared up

to offer an immensely satisfying job, are we meeting up to it? How much has its once exclusive work culture been diluted? What actions can be taken in-house to meet up to the self-esteem desired by every uniformed serviceman? Even as we examine the intake potential, one has to analyse the core issue - that of the happiness quotient of the existing officer cadre in the Services. Do we enjoy the recognition of being a professionally-sound *specialist*? Do we continue to be perceived as '*enjoying*' the work content, day-after-day? Are we able to afford an inimitable sense of achievement to the aspiring youth of the country who choose to don uniform?

It is this feedback which is taken first-hand before the young man in the *Civvy Street* chooses to take the plunge. Therefore concerted effort on this account is a pre-requisite to ease out any breakneck tasking ethic and overly demanding challenges that may appear to lack



purpose, while consistently modifying our working sub-culture to accept the tools of latest technology to advantage. Adapting to rapid development may require accepting a professionally tech-savvy rookie's solution rather than a time-tested one!

Where does *the way forward* then lead to? The future will depend on what is initiated *now*. Every small effort towards strengthening the core competence and enhancing the true status of the military in the society will impact on the watchful and discerning youth. There are miles to go, and every step will reach that much closer. There is a vision of a professionally

sound, intrinsically happy and upwardly mobile force, much sought after by the large sections of the aspiring youth as *a premier career option*. A perspective view of the next few decades does show promise - but how it will eventually unfold - only time will tell. 

Notes

- 1 Such long-term deals also ensure unmitigated allegiance to the organization, till the said housing loans are liquidated. It would be prudent to enable softer clauses of lending for the required period of service mandated for the officer, with commensurate harsh premature-exit riders.
- 2 Empathising construction firms could well be managed by ex-servicemen manpower - those who have been absorbed by lateral side-stepping of technically-proficient and experienced officers, wishing to give back to the system, out-of-uniform.