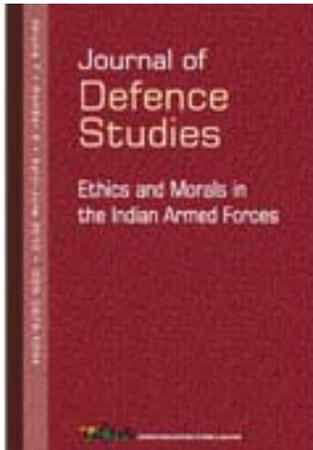


Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

No.1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg
Delhi Cantonment, New Delhi-110010



Journal of Defence Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.idsa.in/journalofdefencestudies>

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To cite this article: V. Mahalingam (2013): Role of Military Culture and Traditions in Building Ethics, Morals and Combat Effectiveness in Fighting Units, Journal of Defence Studies, Vol-7, Issue-2. pp- 95-108

URL: http://idsa.in/jds/7_2_2013_RoleofMilitaryCulture_vmahalingam

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Role of Military Culture and Traditions in Building Ethics, Morals and Combat Effectiveness in Fighting Units

V. Mahalingam*

Developing culture and traditions is one of the pragmatic ways of breeding ethics and moral standards in the military. These moral issues are profoundly linked to the military's way of life and ethos, which includes discipline and esprit de corps. Although issues like developing a sense of belonging may be the theme while creating cultures, the ultimate aim is to influence a soldier into becoming an ethical team player as an instrument for winning wars. The creation and pursuit of culture establishes common values and a sense of ownership amongst the troops. The military family thus created prevents individuals from doing the unethical. The pride in a soldier forces him to protect the honor of his military family, if need be by making the supreme sacrifice. This article elucidates military culture and traditions besides explaining their relevance to ethics.

INTRODUCTION

The Indian defence services derive their functional rules from the values which the society and the country cherish, such as democracy, individual dignity, civilian control of the military, equality, integrity, fair play and justice. It takes into account the operational imperatives to fulfil the raison d'être of their establishment and existence, namely, war fighting

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for protecting the nation from external aggression and internal threats. It adapts itself to suit the nature of employment under varying situations, including in insurgency as well as aiding the civil authority in certain scenarios. It respects various international laws and obligations, such as the Geneva Convention on the handling of prisoners of war. The military takes it upon itself the responsibility to manage violence on behalf of the society and the state. In pursuance of this commitment, the rules of conduct that it lays down for itself are the military ethos. As a part of its ethos, it accepts an obligation to kill and to get killed, if need be, to protect the integrity, dignity, values and objectives of the nation on behalf of the people. The people and the country need to recognize such unconditional sacrifice and accept their part of the obligation towards the defence services. It is an unwritten two way contract.

To fulfil its part of the contract, the military develops its own ways of achieving the ultimate by instilling fighting capabilities, both physical and psychological, by a process of training and motivation. Developing military culture and traditions is a part of this process. Where the government falters on its part of the obligations or the society accepts moral degradation as a way of life, the military cannot be expected to remain unaffected. Its ethos, traditions, customs and values then come under tremendous pressure affecting its war-fighting capabilities.

DEVELOPING CULTURE OR TEACHING ETHICS?

Individual soldiers do not fight or risk their lives for the nation or the so-called national loyalties. It is their self-esteem, pride, sense of belonging and commitment to the military family, the unit, which motivates them to make the supreme sacrifice. It is the ego in him that prevents a soldier from being seen as a coward by his colleagues and leaders with whom he has been associated with, right through his career. Achievements of an individual soldier, excepting when he is decorated with an award, seldom get noticed beyond his colleagues and officers. Like any other human being, a soldier craves to be recognized. A leader who recognizes this phenomenon and makes use of it by providing an opportunity to the soldier to participate, learn and contribute to his immediate environment empowers individual soldiers to achieve recognition. The process of providing the right kind of opportunity to the soldiers to achieve recognition, developed over a period in a military unit, is a culture of their own. Once a soldier achieves

recognition and establishes himself as a useful member, he is left with no option but to preserve his own pride, if need be by risking his life, well beyond the call of duty. A soldier who has been motivated to achieve such a state of mind is, in fact, the true soldier. Such soldiers cannot but be ethical. The motive is the same—to preserve their own dignity in the eyes of their colleagues.

To be ethical or to follow a moral code is a mindset. Lectures and pamphlets do not change the attitudes of people—least of all the soldier community. It doesn't convince people. It, therefore, follows that ethical training, especially the deliberate bookish ways of preaching ethics and moral values, may not be the logical way of approaching the issue. It is traditions and culture developed over a period and followed in units that ingrain ethical qualities in the soldiers. Cultures are a discreet means of influencing thinking and habits without sermonizing. To be able to follow a culture implicitly or make it binding on oneself demands individual discipline, character, and the willingness to place group interests above one's own self. Where a military unit has been able to build that attitude in the troops by practice and example of their leaders, ethical qualities and moral values are automatically cultivated. Where such a culture is lacking, it is for the officer class, and especially the commanding officer (CO), to institute them.

UNDERSTANDING MILITARY CULTURE AND TRADITIONS

Theoretically speaking, culture essentially means customs of a particular civilization or group improved by mental or physical training and practice. Traditions, on the other hand, are those customs, opinions or beliefs that are handed down to posterity. Military customs, culture and traditions are essentially certain practices and methods of functioning or doing things that have been developed and refined over a period of time and are followed in a unit. These methods need to be in consonance with the philosophy and belief of the specific group of troops. These are experiences which have been practised and gone through under trying conditions, and been found useful. It helps in managing stressful situations in an external environment. It is also an approach to developing internal integration. It is borne out of an experience-based conviction as to what is correct, ethical, good and suitable to be followed in a military unit to shape it into an effective fighting machine. Culture needs to be flexible and adapt itself to be able to cope with changing technologies, advancements and the

environment. That does not imply acquiescing on values, ethics and the ultimate goal of withstanding the pressures of war.

The link between ethical values, discipline and the pride of belonging to a group for developing the war-fighting capabilities of military units is undisputable. The underlying purpose of evolving certain culture in military units is to build character in the troops so as to be able to achieve the ultimate, namely, combat effectiveness. It binds soldiers, their leadership, and provides a sense of purpose and worth. Such bonding, to be effective, cannot but be evolved based on shared ethical values. Discipline provides a platform for practising ethical values and follow accepted norms and moral standards. In other words, a disciplined way of life automatically habituates a soldier to accept ethical and moral qualities as the right way of life.

The regimental system that evolved and is in vogue in the Indian Army has proved useful and has stood the test of time. It has been a repository of traditions and culture. It recognizes the fact that lack of continuity and frequent changes of manpower, especially in a fighting unit, is not conducive to building the level of group cohesiveness needed for war fighting.

It, therefore, follows that discourses attempting to tinker with the regimental system in the Army as well as with the traditions and customs of the military need to be restrained. Ill-informed discourses may unwittingly cause critical damage to the organization's fighting capability. The fact that numbers alone do not constitute a combat force, or rhetoric does not produce troops willing to make the supreme sacrifice, needs to be realized. War fighting and winning wars is the business of the military and they understand their needs better—based on their experience and expertise in handling troops. These are matters best left to them.

BUILDING ETHICS THROUGH DISCIPLINE

My first unit had, over a period, developed a culture of questioning and pointing out shortcomings even though the deficiencies by themselves were not very important or serious. Apart from being a way of training and imparting knowledge, such a culture also enabled the recognition of inadequacies and taking corrective actions. The rules were same for all ranks. No exceptions existed for the officers or the Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs). Where it involved non-implementation, violation of orders or failure in training standards, the defaulter was sure to be

reprimanded, not through the medium of the Army Act but through the unit's own ways.

It was the second day after the battalion had camped on the side of a river in preparation for the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War. The day was abnormally sultry and hot. Water was a scarce commodity as it had to be transported from an authorized water point established under the arrangements of the Brigade Headquarters. Orders had been issued not to use the river for either bathing or drinking purposes as that would inconvenience the civil population. We were told that a proper bathing point for troops would be established in the river by next day.

The Support Company, in which I was a platoon commander, had five JCOs, all of them exceptional in their own way. After an exciting basketball game, Subedar Madhavan Nair, a command swimming champion and a basketball team member, decided to take the company JCOs out for a swim in the adjacent river. That evening when I went for the evening roll call (a parade where all the soldiers of the sub-unit are accounted for, orders for the next day passed, and the troops suggestion on administrative issues heard and resolved), I found all the four JCOs in their big packs in the presence of the men who were comfortably dressed. Subedar David, the senior JCO, though of the same rank as the other JCOs in the company, had seen the JCOs coming back from their bathing expedition and had instantaneously ordered the punishment for violating orders. Nothing could send a clearer message to the troops—the code of conduct is equally applicable to seniors irrespective of their rank or seniority. Though the punishment was meted out right in front of the troops, none contested the punishment and that was an acknowledgement of their guilt.

Similarly, on induction of our battalion to Arunachal Pradesh, a mountainous area, the CO had ordered that every individual in the battalion had to pass the Battle Physical Efficiency Test in excellent standards to be able to cope with the difficult terrain in which we were required to operate. Troops were given time to practice and were warned that those who fail to qualify would be required to undergo extra training for two weeks during the afternoon break before they could be re-tested. The day arrived and unfortunately, the CO, Lieutenant Colonel A.O. Alexander himself, known for his uprightness and strictness, failed to qualify the test by a few seconds. At sharp 2 p.m., the CO was there along with

the other who had failed the test, in his packs for the extra training. He continued with his training for a fortnight like any other soldier and ultimately passed the test. The CO had set a personal example by sending an unambiguous message across the unit that when it comes to mistakes, deficiencies and corrective action, the officers were no different from the troops. A culture had been evolved and a tradition set.

Obedying one's own orders was a professional ethic which was inviolable. The leaders cannot be out of the ambit of their own directives or the unit's culture. In the Madras Regiment, one could not give blind orders and expect men to obey. The rationale behind every order had to be explained and be allowed to be questioned by the soldiers. This process enabled individual soldiers to own the orders. These traditions over a period of time enabled the men to see the logic of doing the right things on their own without being watched or through the threat of punishment. Discipline and obeying orders became a way of life. None complained when ticked off or punished for one's shortcomings or for failure to follow orders. Over a period, the orderly room procedure where offenders were marched up to the CO and punished became redundant.

The spinoffs of discipline are very many. It establishes clear sets of norms, ethics and moral standards in a unit. It enables the members of the team in a unit to predict the reaction of the others in any situation. Once a decision is taken, self-discipline guarantees its faithful execution. It precludes adoption of unethical means by its members and minimizes confusion and disintegration in highly intense battle situations.

**DEVELOPING A CULTURE TO CREATE A SENSE OF BELONGING:
AN APPROACH TO MAINTAINING MORAL STANDARDS**

In regiment-based infantry battalions and armoured regiments, once a soldier is posted to a battalion after initial training, he remains a part of it till he retires and walks into the civvy street. Those who go out of the battalion on Extra Regimental Employment (ERE) or instructional appointments return to their parent units after their tenure. This provides continuity in maintaining systems and traditions. Bad apples changing the basic character of the unit are unlikely to survive and flourish in such a system. There is a saying in the Army, not without a reason, that a good unit can carry three bad COs.

Having left their families at a very young and impressionable age, with infrequent and short visits to their homes during their career, a battalion can very well be made to assume the role of a second home for the soldiers. This is entirely dependent on the unit's work culture which helps create a homely environment, a sense of belonging. Providing a decent living and dining arrangements, seeing off the men at the railway station, visiting patients in the hospitals, attending and responding to their needs, making proper reception arrangements at the railway stations when men arrive, providing due care and respect to the relatives of soldiers when they visit them, arranging outings, etc., are some of the traditions of a few units. Once the bonding is created within a military unit, it is not very easy for any individual to cross the boundaries of ethics and moral values, at least till he remains a part of it.

TEAM INFLUENCE ON COMBAT EFFECTIVENESS

When our unit was ordered to move out of Hyderabad, a peace station, for the 1971 war, the men were directed to dispose of their families. Due to the short notice, concerns of children's education, security of the family, packing, etc., they took time to decide when and where to move the family. It was a moment for understanding and support. Time was needed for planning; completing administrative formalities, such as handing over the house to the Military Engineering Service (MES), and other preparations related to the move were constrained. The unit accordingly established a team to take over the family accommodation from family members and hand them over to the MES. A help centre at the railway station was established to assist men and their families to move out comfortably. Military warrants were prepared at the railway station, and got exchanged by a team. A second team worked to get rail reservations or find place for the families in the unreserved compartments. A third team provided a hot cup of tea and packed meal for the duration of the journey. Officers were also available to make payment to troops at the railway station if the need arose. Those who could not make it that day were brought back to the unit and made comfortable. These were very small measures but their impact on creating the bond between the men and the unit was significant. Such gestures build a sense of belonging and esprit de corps amongst troops.

The self-esteem and the pride of being a member of the battalion that we were able to build in the men stood us in good stead during

the Battle of Basantar, one of the fiercest battles fought during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War. The battalion was tasked to establish a bridgehead across the Basantar River. Orders for the attack were issued. A minefield to the depth of about 600 metres was encountered. The first phase went through successfully with about 8–10 dead bodies and wounded soldiers with bullet and mine blast injuries lying and groaning in the middle of the minefield. The second phase had to go through before the enemy could mount a counter-attack and dislodge us from the foothold that we had gained after the first phase. There was no time for evacuation of casualties or removing the dead bodies from the minefield. Immediately after the success signal was received from both the forward companies, the CO gave the code word for the second phase to commence. The two company commanders at the 'Forming Up Place' gave their field signal for the company to get up and commence their assault. It was a tense moment. Would they go in with all the bodies of their comrades lying in the minefield right in front of their eyes? What if they hesitated?

What followed was something that every soldier of the Indian Army needs to be proud of. The men quietly got up and for some unknown reason shouted, '*Ganesh Bhagwan ki jai*', instead of our usual war cry and moved on to capture their respective objectives. It was their discipline and their resolve to fight for their honour and self-esteem which propelled them to fight and win. The battalion suffered 201 casualties, both dead and wounded in the battle. They stood their ground despite the four counter-attacks that were launched on the bridgehead between 15 and 17 December 1971. The men had shown courage of exceptional order to uphold the traditions of the Indian Army and the prestige of their military family, the battalion. Needless to say, they were awarded the Battle Honour and a Theatre Honour for the action.

**DELEGATION OF RESPONSIBILITY: A TOOL FOR EMPOWERMENT,
RECOGNITION AND CREATING A SYSTEMS WATCHDOG**

16th Battalion, the Madras Regiment (Travancore), had over a period of time developed a system of lateral as well as vertical flow of information within the unit. The institution of the Subedar Major (SM), the senior most JCO in the unit who had risen from the rank of a sepoy, was strengthened by giving him the authority, respect and a standing in the

unit. He monitored and acted independently on all administrative issues affecting the unit and the troops through the JCOs. He kept an eye on the discipline of the troops and areas affecting ethical practices. He was accountable for the conduct of the unit JCOs. This responsibility gave the SM as well as the JCOs the authority, recognition and a sense of participation in unit affairs.

Every evening he met all the JCOs in the JCOs' Mess over a drink and got a briefing of the day's happenings in an open forum. He gave specific directions for dealing with administrative issues in the unit. Where things had not happened as they ought to have, he did not hesitate to give a piece of his mind to his fellow JCOs. The JCOs had no option but to give the correct picture and tell the truth as they were aware of the other channels of information flow within the unit. Every morning when the CO came to the office, the SM was the first person to meet him and brief him on the events of the previous day and the actions he had instituted on various issues. The SM also had the informal mandate to meet the company commanders and brief them on anything unusual in their respective companies. In fact, as company commanders (Coy Cdrs) we always found it more effective to inform the SM of any JCO not pulling his weight for an effective remedy than taking it forward through the CO.

TRANSPARENCY: THE GATEWAY TO ETHICAL AND MORAL STANDARDS

The Company Havildar Major (CHM)–Adjutant channel of communication flow functioned concurrently in the system. Daily, at an appointed time, the CHMs gave all the information pertaining to their respective companies to the Subedar Adjutant (SA) again in an open forum and received the orders for the next day emanating from the Adjutant. The orders were recorded and communicated to the Coy Cdrs by the company duty NCO of the day. The Coy Cdrs gave their directions in addition, and these orders were disseminated to the troops. The CHM was answerable to the Coy Cdr as well as the SA and he had to deliver in time.

The Battalion Order Book maintained by the SA was carried to the CO by the Battalion Duty NCO. The CO thus became aware of the orders passed to the troops through the respective CHMs, besides having an opportunity to have a chat with the day's Duty NCO. The

Adjutant walked in to the CO's office immediately after the SM to brief him on the previous day's happenings. This is besides the regular communication that he maintained with the CO throughout the day on matters relating to day to day functioning of the unit. These are routine issues but helps one understand how the system brought about accountability in lower functionaries and established a culture of transparency.

The third channel that worked its way up to the CO was the troops—CHM—Senior JCO/Coy Cdrs—CO/Coy Cdr-Senior JCO—SM—CO. The company commanders, where necessary, walked up to the CO to give him their inputs.

The fourth channel that worked in the unit was the Quartermaster—Subedar Quartermaster—Company Quartermaster Havildar—Senior JCO/Company Commander. This channel, besides providing a flow of information pertaining to logistic issues, did sometime give certain valuable inputs into the other areas as well. The Quartermaster briefed the CO immediately after the Adjutant.

The two-way multichannel communication flows within the unit kept the machinery ticking besides providing valuable inputs into the clogs in the machinery, if any. The various functionaries in the system were made accountable in their own spheres of control and activity. This system provided total transparency in the running and functioning of the unit. With so many eyes watching and channels functioning, there was no chance for any unethical practices setting in, even unobtrusively. This culture provided the initiative, which empowered the JCOs and NCOs. The junior ranks automatically became stakeholders in the system. It paved a way for individuals to maintain a high standard of ethics and morals within their respective domain. A sense of purpose and involvement of every single individual in the unit was apparent. The system acted as the watchdog of ethics and moral standards. Its contribution towards the effectiveness and war fighting capabilities of the unit were immeasurable.

When the General Officer Commanding (GOC) the Division decided to carry out his annual inspection of the unit a day prior to a battle presentation on Arab—Israeli war to the officers of the entire corps, it was nothing unusual for the SM to confidently assert that he would take on the inspection, leaving the officers to concentrate on the presentation. The annual inspection went off without any glitch.

**DO SOLDIERS BECOME INDIFFERENT TO VALUES WHEN
REMOVED FROM CULTURE AND TRADITIONS?**

The relationship between the culmination of a soldier's affiliation with a particular group and the lowering of moral standards and discipline in him has not been fully studied or established. It has been noticed, however, that individuals do change depending on the spirit prevailing in their new environment. It has also been observed that personnel, especially of the fighting arms, while with the unit, generally maintain a very high standard of integrity and moral standards. On the other hand, it is not uncommon to see some of the men who had been transferred out of a unit to a different unit or officers on promotion to General Officers' rank switching to the environment and the character of the new settings. It is quite possible that this change may be the result of the individuals' association with people of different cultural background and value systems. It is also possible that increased financial powers, involvement in bulk and major purchases, and lack of effective supervision and leadership may be contributing towards the change of values. Even soldiers seem to change after retirement to adapt to the environment, may be out of the instinct to survive.

Is this change due to the absence of the restraining effect of the group and the work culture to which the individual had been bound during his tenure with the troops? Is it due to an association with an environment which views gaining riches irrespective of the means more important than maintaining certain moral standards? The absence of the group environment to which an individual had been a part and which restrained him from indulging in unethical practices is perhaps one of the reasons for the decline in moral standards, professional ethics and even professional performance of some of the officers as they climb up their career ladder. It may be the reason why some of the mentally weak acquiesce to unethical orders, pressures, becoming 'yes men', or use unethical means to earn decorations or favourable Annual Confidential Reports (ACRs) in their quest to climb up the professional ladder. This aspect requires more study and understanding. The military life caters for an individual's social needs and provides a sense of belonging within its own consortium. Perhaps the fear of early retirement at a time when family commitments are at their peak, and a realization that it will result in a huge loss of overall lifetime income, may also be the stimulant inducing some to compromise on their morals and ethics late in their careers.

**SERVICES UNITS: TRADITIONS AND THEIR EFFECT ON
ETHICS AND MORAL STANDARDS**

A comparatively lower value attached to ethics and moral standards by some of the officers and men belonging to the services units too needs a mention. Unlike the fighting units, the visibility of military traditions and culture in services units is relatively diminished. In these units, officers and men do not have permanent affiliations with specific units but are posted to units on tenure basis. Owing to their association and the nature of their dealings, in place of ethical cultural values, at times, certain wrong habits and practices are formed thus fostering unethical and immoral means and methods. Frequent changes in troops, besides providing a sense of being in a job rather than a profession of war fighting, detaches some of them from the community to which the soldiers are expected to be a part of. A common approach to making money amongst various ranks and the hierarchy erases the sense of right and wrong. The hesitation to adopt unethical means vanishes.

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

Culture and traditions may not be the only solution as a rule. As the officer class climbs up the military hierarchy, their association with the troops and transparency in doing things become a casualty. In staff appointments and at higher headquarters which comprise of a floating population, customs and traditions or their effects are hardly visible. These organizations go blindly with the attitude, values and philosophy of the head. As the head changes, the environment adapts itself to the new one. Under such circumstances and at that level, an attempt to bring these officers under the restraining effect of any particular group behaviour or tradition may not really work. It is here that a leader can make a difference in instilling values of ethics and morals in his subordinates by personal example. Unfortunately, in most cases, leaders at that level choose to remain aloof and deal with their subordinates through the branch heads rather than allowing the imprint of their personality permeating down the line. Short command tenure is also a problem because of which the commanders do not have adequate time to devote to this extremely important command responsibility.

Under these circumstances, transparency in the working of the offices dealing with procurement, civilians, contractors, vendors, etc., may be an answer. The decision-making process in such organizations should

necessarily be collective and open. Bringing about transparency within the sections of a branch and within various branches of a headquarters may also be a part of the solution.

In areas where the effect of a group, customs or traditions may not work out, effective and quick punishments may be the other remedy to instill a sense of discipline, ethics and moral values, especially amongst the senior officer class. At the level of officers of the rank of colonels and above, there is a need for an effective mechanism to deal with all unethical and moral issues. Investigations and punishments on wrongdoings need to be swift, effective and exemplary.

It may be worthwhile examining the possibility of changing the basic structure of independent services units, especially the static ones like the supply and ordnance depots, workshops involved in repairs beyond the second line and units involved in procurement and supply of medical stores and works services. The present system of administrative control being exercised by the static formations and technical control by the Services head at a higher headquarters, in some cases at the level of Command Headquarters, have not worked well for a number of reasons. Mechanisms to ensure that individuals do not gather roots or unethical connections in some of the sensitive appointments may have to be looked into.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article is not to suggest that customs, culture and traditions alone bring about ethics or moral standards in individuals or combat effectiveness in military units. These are effective tools available in the system and can be exploited in conjunction with the other means available to the institution to bring about improvement and changes. However, whatever we may do or attempt, the success of the effort hinges on the professional competence, sincerity and honesty of the leaders in command. To that end, the system of evaluating officers through the ACRs, promotions, detailing of officers on career courses and postings, etc., needs to follow a well thought out and transparent system. It is the system that should decide such crucial and sensitive issues, and not individual whims and fancies, irrespective of how high the status or the rank of the decision-making authority is. The government has no role to play in these areas which fall entirely within the domain of the defence services. Individual favourites or preconceiving a succession line, at least

in the defence services, has no place. If the areas of man management of the leaders are faulty, corrupt or susceptible to manipulation, one cannot expect a virtuous system to emerge out of the dirt.