

An Apolitical Defence Force

POINTS TO DEVELOP 1. Defence personnel have as many political rights as a civilian citizen, but the defence force as a whole should be apolitical.

In the past, political and military authorities were vested in one person; today, the two powers stand separated.

Being apolitical does not mean lack of political awareness but refraining from direct involvement in political affairs.

In the pre-independence era, the British developed the tradition of keeping the army away from the national mainstream.

5. Still, the British Indian army helped in its own way in the attainment of independence and preservation of democratic values.

The India National Army played a significant role, but its direct involvement in political affairs also put question mark on its loyalty.

An apolitical defence force is basic to democracy and political stability.

Indian defence forces have maintained their neutrality in times of crises, both external and internal.

This has contributed towards national integration.

There have been no attempts to politicize the army.

The size and diversity of India also discourage military coups.

12. Close report between political and military establishment a must, if national interests are to be furthered.

The apolitical nature of the army is deep-rooted in the fundamentals of democracy in India.

Good governance is the right and expectation of every Indian citizen. Citizens exercise their right to vote in the hope and belief that the party they vote will bring peace and prosperity to the country and a better quality of life for the citizens. Politics, therefore is part of a citizen's life, and as soldiers are also citizens, they also have the right to vote. However, as far as the defence force's influence over

the political establishment is concerned, past and present bureaucratic, leadership prefers the defence force to be apolitical in nature.

Clausewitz, a great military thinker, considered strategy as the employment of the armed force to gain victory in war. He felt that strategy borders on political science and at the highest point the two become one. In the past, political and military authorities were combined in the same person. Alexander , Caesar ,Chengis Khan, Shivaji and after the American Civil War that separation of military and political authority became the norm in most countries Today, political and military authority stand separated, and control in these two spheres is exercised by different individuals.

What exactly do we mean when we speak of an 'apolitical' army? The balanced view of being apolitical should not be construed to mean lack of political awareness or foregoing of the right of a citizen to cast his vote in elections. On the contrary, a truly apolitical army should be politically aware its soldier interested in exercising his democratic right. However, his political awareness should include a conviction that the army's direct participation in controlling political affairs or wielding political power is counter-productive. Such a realization is the best guarantee for preserving the apolitical outlook of an army.

The British did their utmost to keep the India Army away from the national political mainstream. Politics during British rule invariable involved India's quest for freedom and the British were afraid that if the defence forces came in contact with the freedom fighters, their loyalty to their British masters would be subverted.

India political leaders in the pre-independence era were also reluctant to involve armed forces in the freedom struggle. This, however, does not mean that the struggle for India's freedom had no influence on the armed forces. There were, in fact, many instances when the soldier, sailor and airman, fully conscious of their brothers efforts to free the country from the British, had to choose between obeying their British officers and following their conscience when it concerned issues that involved loyalty to their own motherland. There were a number of occasions when Indian soldiers refused to fire on Indians demonstrating against British rule. These soldiers had to suffer the consequences-dismissal, imprisonment and, in one stance, death sentence. Thus, the Indian forces did make significant contributions in the attainment of independence and in preserving democratic values. However, this was done in an unobtrusive manner.

Daring the Second World War, the Indian National Army emerged from the ranks of Indian Army personnel held as prisoners, these soldiers declared that

they no longer owed allegiance to the British, and that thenceforth they would fight for the liberation of India from the British. Their change of allegiance, their fighting against the British and their subsequent trial at the Red Fort had considerable repercussions on the rank and file of the Indian armed forces. Immediately after the War, the mutinies of the Army, Navy and Air Force at Bombay, Jabalpur and Karachi convinced the British that they could no longer rely on the Indian armed forces to support them to rule India. What the participation of the armed forces in the political knell of the British Empire. Deprived of the loyalty of the Indian Army, Britain had no other option but to effect a withdrawal from the Indian subcontinent. ‘

Notwithstanding the significant contribution made by the Indian armed forces personnel who took part in the above events, it is important to note that these personnel were not allowed to return to the armed forces by the Indian government. Although they were considered as heroes of the freedom struggle, their reinstatement in the armed forces was vetoed on grounds that their value as soldiers had been contaminated by their involvement in politics, and their loyalty to any government in power was therefore in question. They were rehabilitated elsewhere.

Going back to the foundations laid by the British in the establishment of an ‘apolitical’ army. Field Marshal Philip Chetwode’s exhortation to the officers of the army is significant. He said: “May I urge you to remember that politics does not and cannot find any place in army life. An army can have no politics. It is the paid servant of the people, and is at the disposal of the government of the day, whatever may be the complexion or colour of its politics. Once there is suspicion that an army, or any part of it, has become biased politically, from that moment that army has lost the full confidence of the nation that pays for it. It is no longer impartial, and that way leads to chaos and civil war. “Stephen Cohen in his book *The Indian Army- its Contribution to the Development of a Nation* (1990) says, “Military theorists have argued that democracy and a large standing army are incompatible but India has managed both.” He further says. “There can be no doubt that the paradigmatic Indian Army has gloriously served that nation during the difficult days since independence.”

After independence. India was very fortunate to have political stability provided by mature political leadership with a strong popular base. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, a devoted democrat, guided the destiny of India for almost two decades. In this respect, the Indian experience was very different from that of the breakaway state of Pakistan, which till 1947 had shared a common heritage with India. In India, an army, conditioned by a tradition of several years of unquestioning acceptance of civil supremacy. Readily and enthusiastically welcomed the establishment of democratic rule in the country. In

the years after independence. India faced numerous crises. Both from across the border and internally, but at no time was the civil-military relationship in the country ever disturbed or the principle of civil supremacy questioned. This fact is a tribute to the maturity of our political leadership and the high sense of discipline in our army.

After independence, the Indian Army has been rendering singular service to the nation, covering a wide spectrum of activities. It has been contributing towards national stability, national integration and national defense. During the riots after partition, the army had to be used exclusively to maintain order in some areas where the local civil administration had crumbled. The army has continued to perform the role of assisting in the maintenance of order in the decades after independence. Apart from the restoration of order, the army has been called out whenever any serious national calamity has overtaken the country in the shape of floods, cyclones and earthquakes. The contribution of the army in the management of disasters has also helped considerably in establishing in the national ethos that the Indian armed forces are devoted to the service of the people and to democratic principles.

The army's apolitical character has contributed effectively towards national integration. With personnel drawn from different parts of the country and belonging to different religious, linguistic, ethnic and cultural groups. The Indian Army has been a symbol of national unity. Living and serving together in the army, the soldiers develop a strong sense of national unity. About 60,000 of them are important values of respect for different religions, communities, and cultures. It is well known that the presence of a strong professional, apolitical army was an important factor in influencing the Indian princes to merge their states with the Indian Union during the integration of Indian states. Where this process could not be achieved peacefully, the army had to be used to execute the national will as in Junagadh, Hyderabad and Goa. Violent breakaway movements by misguided elements impinging on national integration as in Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur and Assam had also to be kept in check by the army. In this role, the army's contribution has not only been confined to keeping violence under control but has also included winning the hearts and minds of the insurgents. This has been greatly facilitated because of the army's reputation for being apolitical.

By not meddling in politics, and by serving the government with professional competence, the army has played a significant role in preserving democracy. The army's apolitical attitude has also, no doubt, been appropriately reciprocated by different political parties in the country, which have refrained from attempting to politicise the army.

It is worthwhile now to consider whether there could be any involvement of the army in politics. India is a country of continental dimensions, with wide disparities in both ethnic and linguistic composition of the people. No large country of this size and diversity has had a history of a military coup. Thus, the size and complexion of the country and its people preclude any such possibility. There decades of democratic functioning since independence have fully established the tradition of the subordination of the military to the civil rule in India. The civil power in this context is represented by the elected representatives of the people and not any civil department or the civil service.

Unlike Pakistan, which has had a succession of coups, and Bangladesh and Sri Lanka which have had a taste of military rule, India has not had such experiences, largely because the Indian Army has remained consistently and steadfastly apolitical.

National interests demand close rapport and understanding between the statesman and the soldier According to John Adams, "National defence is one of the cardinal duties of the statesman" and, we know it national defense is the main role of the soldier. Therefore under normal circumstances, there should be no confrontation between the statesman and the soldier. The soldier must accept the supremacy of the statesman in power and the latter, while exercising this supremacy, should not expect subservience or blind obedience from the soldier. The top soldier must have the right of direct access to the head of the government and the liberty to fearlessly express views on military issues in the prescribed manner. Expression of dissent cannot be considered as an act of indiscipline. Where the issues are vital and could have grave repercussions, the soldier must, if necessary, resign to focus the attention of the nation on those issues. As in other areas, in the case of national defence also there may be differing views, but these must be resolved within the framework of the supremacy of the civil leadership and in accordance with the prescribed norms.

Today, the Indian Army continues to be the biggest volunteer force and the largest apolitical army in the world its apolitical nature is a product of history and is in conformity with the heritage of the Indian people. The political culture developed since independence has reinforced these past traditions. The parliamentary form of government, of which civil supremacy over the military is a necessary adjunct, stands firmly established in India. The four important ingredients of a functioning democracy- fair elections, and independent judiciary, a free press and an apolitical – have deep roots in the Indian system. Thus, unlike the political situation in most third world countries, Indian politics will remain free from military intervention and the tradition of civilian control over the military will continue.

