

Fragging: Unravelling the Skein

Last few years have seen a spurt of cases where soldiers serving across the country, specifically those serving in conflict situations, turning their weapons on themselves or their fellow soldiers or officers. Even though there has been a decline in such cases lately, but they refuse to die down. We keep hearing of such incidents from across the country from time to time. The phenomenon has been a serious cause of concern for the army which has been seriously contemplating measures to curb this disconcerting trend.

All such cases of fratricidal killings have been termed 'fragging' and is not specific to this country. The phenomenon of fragging is traced to the Vietnam War when US soldiers stationed there would often roll fragmentation grenades into the tents of unpopular officers and 'run amok' ('amok' is a Malay word meaning 'out of control'). Such behaviour was traced to psychological disorders resulting from the 'pressure cooker' situation of the raging war in Vietnam owing to war fatigue, nostalgia and lack of emotional sustenance in such situations.

Whatever be the case, such a phenomenon had been unknown to this country but for recent times, when we have seen increasing penchant among soldiers to resort to 'fragging' due to multifarious reasons. We need to find out the whys and wherefores for its occurrence. In a country, where insurgency and proxy war conditions warrant regular and prolonged deployment of military, repeated 'fragging' cases can have a very demoralising impact on the soldiers. It also negatively impacts army's drive to recruit better soldiers and officers as such news send out very wrong signals for the countrymen wishing to join army. Ergo, it is really imperative to comprehend as to why a disciplined soldier loses his self-control and resorts to such extreme violence. Is it only the prolonged deployment in insurgency areas and stressful working conditions, as it is made out to be by the media, or is there something more than meets the eye?

Though most of the incidents are taking place in operational areas, the root-cause, it is believed, is definitely not prolonged exposure to dangerous and demanding working conditions. In fact, incidents of terror-related violence and attacks on soldiers in insurgency-affected areas have actually registered a sharp decline in the last one year. If fratricidal killings

were related to sustained exposure to stressful combat situations, then they should have actually experienced a decline and not an increase as has happened, demonstrating the flaw of such a correlation. This supposition is further strengthened by the fact that increasingly more and more personnel are volunteering to serve tenure in the Rashtriya Rifles (specialist counter insurgency force) and a good number of them are even requesting for an extended or second tenure. This is due to the good quality of life, better pay and allowances, improved facilities and timely leave in operational areas.

In fact, studies reveal that cases of fragging have nothing to do with prolonged postings in stressful situations, but relate to reasons other than those generally attributed. A detailed study conducted by the Army has revealed that in majority of cases, fratricidal killings were triggered more by the stress stemming from unresolved personal problems including property disputes and marital discords. The findings very clearly reveal that only a measly 0.3 per cent cases were linked to operational stress, while the remainder of 99.7 per cent were due to family factors.

It has been observed that the breakdown of the joint family system is taking its toll on the personal life of soldiers. Owing to this, the soldiers are anxious about their families left behind at home. The growing costs of sustenance and education are also proving to be a problem fanning and aggravating such tendencies. It has been found that most cases of fragging have occurred soon after troops have returned to duty from leave. This indicates that soldiers who go over the edge are severely troubled by unresolved domestic issues.

Perturbed and frustrated owing to a family problem, when a soldier returns back from leave, his helplessness in getting his rightful due affects him psychologically. An estranged and alienated individual, in such situations, can then turn the loaded weapon (which is always with him in operational areas) on himself or, on an immediate provocation over an issue with his comrades or officers, on them. The analysis clearly reveals that the maximum number of fragging cases take place within a few days of soldiers coming back from leave.

Various measures have been taken by the army to tackle the problem. Some of them include allowing families to stay in operational areas, provisioning of better infrastructure and facilities and improved personnel management. Special training has been organised for officers and soldiers for enabling them to master the techniques of counselling and for detecting early signs of stress and depression. Emphasis has also been laid on strengthening the 'Buddy System', whereby soldiers can share emotions and feelings with someone they can trust. This provides a channel of feedback to commanders, if something amiss is noted in the behaviour of an individual soldier. Standing operating procedures are being revised for carriage of weapons in operational areas. Zila Sainik Boards (associations of ex-servicemen) have also been asked to liaise closely with the district administration to ensure that soldiers' problems are addressed timely and effectively.

With the fractionalisation of land holdings, a large number of soldiers get bogged down by property disputes with close relatives. Often the problem of lawlessness in rural areas also affects their families and adds to their worries. The concerned civil administration departments have to be suitably sensitised to understand that the soldiers cannot get leave

beyond a prescribed limit and must, therefore, resolve to provide a helping hand, as far as possible. There is an urgent need for an institutional arrangement to give due consideration to the problems faced by soldiers serving in non-family stations and operational areas.

One just hopes that as the above arrangements start paying dividends, our soldiers shall have less and less problems affecting their psychology leading to sharp reductions in fragging cases. Fragging is an alien phenomenon and should remain alien.

Salient Points

- Last few years have seen a spurt of cases where soldiers turning their weapons on themselves or fellows.
- The Phenomenon is traced to the Vietnam War.
- We need to find out the whys and wherefores for its occurrence in India,
- Root cause is not prolonged exposure to dangerous working conditions,
- Triggered more by the stress stemming from unresolved personal problems including property disputes and marital discords,
- Measures like better infrastructure, counselling and the 'Buddy System' taken.

Glossary

Fragging: to kill

Skein: a length of yarn or thread wound on a reel

Fratricidal: the act of killing one's brother

Penchant: a strong inclination

Ergo: therefore

Perturbed: to disturb or disquiet greatly in mind