

MANAGING FAULT LINES

Since independence, India's military leadership has faced formidable challenges in dealing with the country's religious diversity and colonial heritage. Avoiding the seepage of communal disharmony into the military's cultural fabric requires a multi-dimensional approach that prioritises education, information tools, and the preservation of institutional values

By **LT GEN (DR) PRAKASH MENON**

India takes pride in its ancient civilisation and believes it will continue to provide the cultural fabric with which the Indian State will weave its unity that would, in turn, provide the ultimate strength to ensure the welfare of its citizens. The Indian Constitution reflects this value system and serves as a guide for the country's continuity and permanence. Changes in modern India's socio-political fabric are expected to be confined within the Constitutional framework. The military institution is the guardian of the Constitution and operates under the Supreme Commander- the President of India.



Defence Minister Rajnath Singh

MANAGING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Ancient India gave birth to two religions that continue to be major religions of Asia - Hinduism and Buddhism. While Hinduism continues to remain the religion of the majority in India, Buddhism is comparatively thin in the land of its birth but has many adherents, especially in the rest of Asia. Hinduism has a justifiable claim to being one of the earliest religions and has coexisted for long with other religions like Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Jainism, and Judaism.

India's religious diversity harbours a communal fault line that requires constant attention from political and religious leaders. The lines are visible in phenomena such as deepening religious animosity, exploitation of religion for political purposes, spread of religious fundamentalism, stereotyping of other religions based on myths and fallacies, and entrenched positions within one religion that are characterised by intolerance and provide no room for give and take.

These lines impact communal harmony to variable degrees in variegated geographies at most levels of Indian society from where the military institution draws its human capital in terms of its leadership and soldiery. The seepage of communal disharmony into the military's cultural fabric is likely and perhaps inevitable, hiding below the surface and rearing its head during a national communal crisis that calls for an impartial military intervention.

MANAGING CULTURAL CHANGES

The first step to deal with this matter is for the apex level military leadership to accept the possibility that institutional values considered sacrosanct could be eroded by seepage from civil society. Bucking the larger trend in civil society will be a major challenge that must be confronted by education and information tools that provide reminders of Constitutional loyalty in the context of the contestation between religions.



So, managing the impact of cultural changes on the Indian military in the context of India@75 requires a multi-dimensional approach that prioritises education, information tools, and the preservation of institutional values. The military must remain vigilant and impartial, adhering to its Constitutional role as the guardian of the country's unity and stability.

The military leadership may choose to ignore the communal polarisation caused by political winds, but it would amount to a dereliction of their constitutional duty, according to the author. However, it is an act that would not have individual attribution, despite its potential to cost the nation dearly. Only a high level of military professionalism could resist the temptation to turn a blind eye to a highly sensitive issue that may not find favour with the government in power. The government has recently indicated to the military that it is time to shed some of its colonial legacies, which runs concurrently with the national communal currents and is the second element of cultural change that the military institution has to manage.

Dealing with communal tensions and shedding colonial legacies are connected through civil-military relations. Post-independence civil-military relations in India were assumed to be closer to Huntington's Objective Civilian Control Model, which involves balancing civilian control of the military and allowing their professional autonomy. This is in contrast to Subjective Control, which places legal and institutional restrictions on the military's autonomy.

When dealing with communal trends that must be kept at bay, the military needs to assert

its professional autonomy. Still, while dealing with the political push to jettison colonial legacies in the military, the Subjective Control model seems predominant. Therefore, the two models need to be concurrently in play. However, there may be a shift towards Subjective Control, making it difficult to deal with communal issues while making it easier to scrub the military's colonial legacies.

The shift to Subjective Control is visible in the political leadership exercising its powers in the selection of senior military leadership. Earlier, seniority was the reigning principle. Still, that seems to have changed, as witnessed in the change of rules for selecting the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). The shift, when viewed through the Huntington Model, indicates a move towards Subjective Control. It is also possible that both models of control can co-exist, and the dominant style would depend on the context. While dealing with the communal context, Objective Control should be preferred, and Subjective Control might facilitate the required changes that involve jettisoning some colonial legacies.

SCRUBBING COLONIAL LEGACIES

The problem with colonial legacies is that some have connections to the primary source of military effectiveness – its fighting spirit. Fighting spirit is founded on the willingness to sacrifice for an entity and cause with which the soldiers must identify. While the spirit of nationalism provides the overarching spiritual framework that envelops and embraces the military institution, the identity that provides the

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STRAIGHT DRIVE



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spirit that is lived, felt, and experienced is the unit and subunit represented by battalion, company, platoon, and section. Therefore, preserving and strengthening the regimental spirit of the Indian Army should not be sacrificed in the name of eradicating colonial legacies.

The question that arises is whether some combat and combat support arms of the Army, such as the Infantry, Armoured Corps, Engineers, and Artillery, which are still more or less organised on regional, caste, and religious bases, should continue in their present form, and whether moves to change their composition and name could adversely affect their military effectiveness. In practice, it would entail converting the Rajput, Sikh, Maratha, Mahar, Gorkha, Assam, inter alia, into entities of All India Class Composition. The logic of composing units on a regional, class, or religious basis is a British legacy, and it has outlived its purpose. For example, if the Sikhs had to be used against the Gorkhas, it would be problematic. There was also the notion of the martial classes that underpinned the grouping and recruitment.

The logic that fighting capabilities are enhanced by narrow ethnic and other groupings has been disproved.

The Infantry Regiment – The Brigade of the Guards – was created in 1949 by the late Field Marshal Cariappa as an experimental vehicle. Its units have demonstrated excellent performance in both war and peace. However, the weight of legacy has prevented any move to shift all regiments to the All India Class, despite attempts to do so after the mutiny of Sikh units during Operation Blue Star. The selection of Agniveers on all India merit may make the change to all India class composition inevitable, though the issue of whether to change the names of regiments is not central to military effectiveness.

Uniforms and ceremonials, including cultural symbols and music, also pose challenges. Uniforms should prioritise comfort, simplicity, smartness, ease of maintenance, and suitability for weather and affordability. Symbols and emblems may have historical significance that links serving soldiers to the bravery and sacrifices of their forefathers, so changing or replacing them to suit contemporary political trends may be unjustifiable. Music, however, should blend the past and present and transcend boundaries.

Ceremonial parades involving multiple entities should harmonise uniform changes for the armed forces with other uniformed forces. Otherwise, the colonial legacy will stand out among police forces that have inherited colonial uniforms and selectively imitated the Army. The continued use of camouflage by police agencies despite protests by the Army exemplifies this issue.

The major change that must be managed for military effectiveness is the shift of all Army units to the All India class.

In conclusion, India at 75 shows signs of evolving a hybrid Civil-Military relations model that balances Objective and Subjective Control. Flexibility of control is essential, and the style of Civil Control should vary according to contexts and always aim to improve military effectiveness. However, managing communal trends will be more challenging than scrubbing colonial legacies and may require Objective Control, which may not be easily forthcoming and remains a significant challenge for military leadership in managing its cultural sphere.

– The writer is Director, Strategic Studies Programme, Takshashila Institution; former military adviser, National Security Council Secretariat. He tweets @prakashmenon51. The views expressed are of the writer and do not necessarily reflect the views of Raksha Anirveda