

The Grey Zone

Lt Samuel Kamalesan's dismissal from the Indian Army has raised many questions

IN NOVEMBER 2025, THE SUPREME Court of India upheld the 2021 dismissal, by the Indian army, of Lt Samuel Kamalesan, a Christian officer of the 3rd Cavalry regiment (a Sikh-majority regiment). Lt Kamalesan's services were terminated for repeatedly refusing to enter the regimental gurudwara and lead Ardas (Sikh prayers) along with other officers during the regiment's official religious parades. The army viewed this as a grave breach of discipline, its secular traditions, and regimental ethos.

Lt Kamalesan defended his actions on grounds of religious freedom under Article 25 of the Indian Constitution (Article 25 guarantees all persons the fundamental right to freedom of conscience and the freedom to freely profess, practice, and propagate religion). Freedom of conscience is the freedom of an individual to shape their relationship with God or inner beliefs in any way they desire.

The questions that arise from Lt Kamalesan's termination, although outwardly simple, are profound—was his sacking legally, morally, and constitutionally justified? Or were an individual officer's rights sacrificed on the altar of the army's regimental traditions?

In situations such as this, when the lines between right and wrong are blurred, moral ambiguity is a natural consequence. When an incident defies clear judgment, our desire for moral clarity causes a nagging discomfort. The discomfort arises from competing values that cause cognitive dissonance. Our brain craves resolution, but reality presents nuance—denying us an easy resolution.

A parallel, to the moral ambiguity that the Kamalesan case evokes, is to be found in the Indian epic *Ramayana*. In some retellings of the *Ramayana* (especially in post-Valmiki adaptations), after Ravana's death, his wife, Mandodari, marries Vibhishana (Ravana's brother). The retellings of the Ramayana describe Rama advising Vibhishana, the new king of Lanka, to wed Mandodari as an act of 'statesmanship'. The union is deemed essential to legitimise Vibhishana's rule through the act of his marriage to the reigning queen to ensure the kingdom's stability. The Vibhishana-Mandodari marriage exemplifies moral ambiguity arising from our notions of duty and personal conduct in ways that defy clear ethical judgment.



Scholars and commentators have analysed this marriage through the lenses of morality, ethical norms, and kingly duties. The moral ambiguity emerges from two legitimate but incompatible values. On the one hand, Mandodari's marriage upholds pragmatic ethics meant to stabilise a war-ravaged kingdom. Yet, on the other hand it also creates unease. Did Mandodari agree to the marriage voluntarily or was she coerced by a mixture of grief, Rama's authority, and political necessity? Mandodari's marriage to her brother-in-law also challenges our ideals of fidelity and autonomy, especially since Vibhishana was married and had a living wife.

The tension between pragmatism in service of the greater societal good and personal moral integrity, evokes dissonance akin to the Kamalesan case (the army's imperatives for safeguarding institutional ethos versus Kamalesan's constitutionally-guaranteed individual freedoms).

The Lt Kamalesan Case

Lt Kamalesan joined the Indian Army in the 3rd Cavalry regiment in 2017. The regiment comprised three squadrons of Sikh, Jat, and Rajput soldiers. He was made the troop leader of squadron B, which comprises Sikh personnel. The 3rd cavalry regiment did not have a dedicated *sarva dharma sthal* (multi-faith worship site) but had separate mandir and gurudwara facilities. Weekly religious parades were routine, aimed at fostering unit cohesion and morale through shared traditions.

Kamalesan participated fully in the non-ritual aspects of these religious parades. He attended festivals like Diwali, Holi, and Gurupurab, celebrated with his troops, and showed respect by adhering to external customs. His objection was specific and principled—he declined to perform specific acts of worship, such as offering flowers or holding a *thali* (worship tray) in the gurudwara, believing that these conflicted with his faith's first commandment—You shall have no other Gods before me.' Further, he cited his personal Christian conviction that bowing inside a Sikh shrine or leading Ardas amounted to idolatry and apostasy.

Despite counselling, including from Christian clergy who advised him that mere entry into a gurudwara would not compromise his beliefs, he persisted, viewing it as a matter of personal conscience. This stance cannot be said to be born of disrespect; rather, Kamalesan argued it honoured both his faith and that of his soldiers'. He accompanied his troops to these religious events, removed his shoes, donned a turban when required, and stood respectfully outside. By staying outside, he avoided potentially desecrating their sacred space through insincere participation.

However, his failure to fully participate in the rituals was deemed an act of 'gross

indiscipline' by the army. The army issued a show-cause notice under Section 19 of the Army Act, 1950, framing his refusal as misconduct detrimental to the army's discipline. He was counselled multiple times by the army and, according to some media reports, offered transfer to other regiments (which he declined). He was finally court-martialled in 2019 for defiance of a lawful command. After considering his response, the authorities ordered his dismissal on 3 March 2021. The Armed Forces Tribunal and both benches of the Supreme Court (2024 & 2025) upheld the termination emphasising that officers are expected to lead by example and cannot prioritise 'religious ego' over collective ethos.

The Supreme Court criticised Kamalesan as a 'cantankerous man' and 'a misfit,' arguing that his actions insulted his troops and violated the military's secularism, which requires participation in diverse religious rituals. However, it could be argued here that this framing overlooks the coercive nature of army's demand. Kamalesan's case cannot be viewed only as an act of indiscipline but also about him seeking accommodation for genuine religious discomfort—a request that aligns with India's pluralistic ideals.

Navigating Moral Ambiguity

Lt Kamalesan's case evokes moral ambiguity because it forces us to choose between two compelling yet irreconcilable arguments. On the one side is the Indian Army's insistence on regimental tradition and collective discipline. Officers, the army maintains, must lead by example, participating in shared rituals across faiths to forge unit cohesion, mutual respect, and morale in a religiously diverse force. Selective abstention, even if principled, risks eroding trust, undermining the army's secular ethos, and setting a precedent that could unravel the delicate balance sustaining a multi-ethnic, multi-faith military.

On the other hand is Kamalesan's deeply held conviction that certain ritual acts, such as leading Ardas, constitute idolatry incompatible with his Christian faith. He sought reasonable accommodation (without rejecting his troops' religious beliefs) arguing that his personal religious beliefs too deserved protection under Article 25 rather than coercion in the name of uniformity.

Both the positions carry moral weight—the greater good of institutional harmony versus the inviolability



of individual religious freedom guaranteed by the constitution. Neither side is wholly right or wholly wrong.

In everyday life too, moral ambiguities arise when people tell white lies or when CEOs take corporate decisions that benefit shareholders at the expense of workers. Did the CEO act unethically or pragmatically? Such ambiguity creates self-doubt and anxiety as we grapple with these irreconcilable tensions. In a world of absolutes, moral ambiguity forces us to contend with the messiness inherent in daily living.

Such moral dilemmas defy easy resolution. The only acceptable way out is for the lines of reasoning in support of the competing positions to be presented and for reasonable and thinking minds to weigh the competing arguments and arrive at their own independent judgments.

The Army's Stand

The Army's stand, that its orders for Kamalesan's dismissal were lawful, is built on three pillars:

Nature of military service: Unlike civilian employment, the armed forces function on the principle of unlimited liability. Article 33 of the Constitution explicitly empowers the Parliament to restrict the fundamental rights of the armed forces personnel 'to ensure the proper discharge of their duties and the maintenance of discipline.' The Supreme Court has held (Union of India v. L.D. Balam Singh, 2002) that military discipline overrides individual rights when they clash.

The 'secular' character of the regimental gurdwara: The army does not treat the regimental gurudwara as an exclusively Sikh religious place but as a sarva dharma sthal. Officers are not required to perform Sikh rituals. They are merely required to stand in front, read a short common prayer, and say 'Jai Hind' or 'Sat Sri Akal' at the end. The Court accepted the army's contention that this is a secular tradition of unity, not a religious rite.

Precedent and uniformity: The practice is identical in Gorkha, Dogra, Madras, Maratha, and other regiments. The army argued that if every officer (and potentially every soldier) starts opting out on grounds of faith, the entire regimental system, the bedrock of India's combat effectiveness will collapse.

The Supreme court's verdict sparked widespread debate—was the army overly rigid? Could it have accommodated Kamalesan? Possible accommodations that could have been considered include:

- Allow Kamalesan to pray outside the gurdwara. However, this was rejected because it would be viewed as visibly singling him out and damage cohesion in a Sikh-majority unit.
- Transfer him to another regiment. This option was, reportedly, offered to Kamalesan multiple times, which he declined, seemingly wanting both the prestige of an armoured regiment and exemption from its traditions.

Eventually, the army chose to protect the integrity of its regimental traditions rather than grant accommodations to one individual.

Kamalesan's Defence

Kamalesan's plea, in challenging his dismissal, was emotionally powerful and premised on the individual conscience argument (inner freedom of an individual to shape their relationship with God). Kamalesan contended that as a devout Protestant Christian, entering a gurudwara and leading Ardas violated his faith's essential beliefs. He was willing to pray outside the gurdwara but not inside a shrine dedicated to the Guru Granth Sahib. He cited Article 25 (freedom to practise and propagate religion) and Article 28 (freedom from attendance at religious instruction in state institutions) in support of his position. He argued that forcing him to enter a non-Christian place of worship amounted to compelled speech and belief, prohibited under Article 19(1)(a) read with international covenants. He found support from several Christian forums and some liberal commentators who called it 'majoritarian coercion disguised as secularism.'

The Supreme Court Ruling

The Supreme Court judgment ruled that article 33 (the article empowers parliament to restrict or abrogate the fundamental rights of members of the armed forces, paramilitary forces, police, and in-

telligence agencies) overrides Article 25 in matters of military discipline and opined that the restriction imposed by the army was reasonable and proportionate.

The court concurred with the army's position that the regimental gurdwara functioned as a secular space during official religious parades and that no exclusively Sikh ritual was imposed. It viewed Kamalesan's repeated refusal to obey a lawful command (despite counselling and warnings) as constituting disobedience under Section 41 of the Army Act (a court-martial offence). The officer was reportedly offered transfer to a mixed-class unit but Kamalesan insisted on remaining in the cavalry while refusing to follow its traditions—a stand that the court ruled was untenable. The court observed that, 'personal religious conviction cannot be a cloak for indiscipline. If the appellant found the tradition irreconcilable with his faith, the honourable course was to seek a transfer out of the unit, not defy lawful orders.'

So, was Kamalesan's sacking right? It certainly was legally correct, constitutionally sound, and militarily necessary. Individual conscience matters enormously, but in the military, it surely must yield when it threatens the chain of command and unit cohesion. A combat unit survives on trust and shared practices. When an officer publicly refuses to stand with his men in their place of common prayer, he fractures that trust. The Indian military has accommodated several religious demands in the past (beards and turbans for Sikhs, *halal/ jhatka* meat rations, prayer breaks for Muslim personnel, etc.) because those were community-wide practices. An officer demanding personal exemption from a decades-old secular tradition crosses the line from accommodation into anarchy.

The Supreme Court held that although Lt Kamalesan was entitled to an absolute right to hold his beliefs, this, however, did not entitle him to continue to stay in uniform while refusing to obey orders that are deemed necessary for maintaining institutional discipline and cohesion.

The Counterview

In a nation as diverse as India, where the Constitution enshrines secularism and religious freedom as foundational principles, Lt. Kamalesan's case raises questions at the intersection of individual conscience and institutional demands.

At the core of the argument justifying Kamalesan's refusal lies Article 25 of the Indian Constitution, which guarantees 'freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess, practice and propagate religion.' This provision is not merely permissive; it protects against state-imposed practices that infringe upon individual beliefs. Kamalesan's monotheistic faith, rooted in protestant Christianity, prohibits participation in rituals perceived as polytheistic or idolatrous. Forcing him to enter the gurudwara and perform *Ardas* is tantamount to compelling him to act against his conscience, amounting to a violation of this right.

Critics of the Supreme Court's ruling argue that this case exemplifies the overreach of authority at the expense of constitutional rights. Those holding this view aver that a robust argument can be built to justify Kamalesan's stand on the principle of his fundamental right to refuse participation in practices that made him uncomfortable vis-à-vis his faith. This principle is grounded in India's constitutional framework—secularism, proportionality in restricting rights, and ethical considerations of conscientious objection.

By forcing ritualistic involvement, the army can be said to have not only violated his freedom of conscience but also undermined the secular ethos it claims to uphold. This position is supported by legal precedents, human rights norms, and the need for a modern military to evolve beyond colonial-era structures that prioritise uniformity over diversity.

Critics of the court's decision further contend that the army's practices, while couched in terms of 'secular' regimental tradition, effectively mandate religious observance. No explicit law or regulation requires active participation in rituals—they only emphasise respecting customs without compelling participation in worship. Thus, the command to enter the gurudwara and perform rituals, in the critics' view, was not 'lawful' as it lacked constitutional backing.

Moreover, argue the critics, India's secularism is principled pluralism that accommodates diversity. The army's insistence on uniformity risks reducing secularism to 'ritual uniformity,' in violation of the constitution's spirit. Kamalesan's partial participation demonstrated that cohesion could be maintained without full ritual observance, making his refusal a legitimate exercise of his rights rather than insubordination.

While Article 33 permits the Parliament to restrict the fundamental rights of armed forces personnel to ensure 'proper discharge of duties' and 'maintenance of discipline,' such restrictions must be explicit, reasonable, and proportionate. No specific law abrogates Article 25. The army, in dismissing Kamalesan, relied on customs and ethos, which cannot override constitutional mandates.

The court's deference to military judgment can also not be absolute, it must scrutinise if the restriction serves a legitimate purpose and if there indeed are no other less extreme alternatives. Critics contend that making a Christian officer choose between his faith and his career is neither reasonable nor proportionate when alternatives existed such as letting him stand outside or remain silent during Ardas (as Jehovah's witnesses were accommodated in the Bijoe Emmanuel verdict of the Kerala High court [1986]).

It is reported that, as a concession, Kamalesan was offered a transfer to a different regiment. However, those justifying Kamalesan's stand point out that such transfers are often punitive. Forcing an officer to leave his chosen arm of service, because of issues stemming from faith, customs, and religious rituals amounts to dismissal disguised as accommodation.

Additionally, it could also be argued that Kamalesan's dismissal fails the proportionality test. His refusal was an isolated act in the course of his service, without complaints from troops or evidence of eroded morale. It is argued that his dismissal reflects a colonial mindset and that the Indian military should reform toward true constitutional secularism. Article 33's unthinking application risks arbitrary curbs on personal rights.

Ethically, Kamalesan's stand can be viewed as conscientious objection. Forced participation can, not only be viewed as coercion but also as eroding trust in the institution's neutrality. The army's model of *'sarva dharma sambhav'* (equal respect for all religions) should permit abstention, as true cohesion emerges from shared patriotism, not enforced rituals. Evidence from other militaries shows that accommodating minorities strengthens loyalty, not weakens it. Since 2017, the US Army accommodates Sikhs by allowing turbans, unshorn hair, and beards (≤2 inches), enabling religious observance while maintaining combat readiness and enhancing loyalty through inclusion).

Further, the court's language in labelling him a 'misfit' sends a chilling message to religious minorities in the military—conform or exit. This contradicts the army's secular oath to the constitution, not any particular faith. Kamalesan's response to the circumstances that he found himself in—re-

spectful non-participation—embodies pluralism demonstrating that discomfort with certain practices need not necessarily threaten unity. Kamalesan's refusal to comply could be viewed, not as indiscipline but a principled assertion of rights under Article 25.

Endnote

When two sides affirm equally valid truths, the debate becomes irreconcilable. The army's insistence on championing institutional ethos and cohesion at the expense of personal liberties is entirely understandable. However, those opposed to the army's position view it as infringing on individual autonomy. Both positions stem from valid and yet opposing ethical bases—the salience of the institutional good versus individual freedoms.

Could a middle path not have been found? Excusing Kamalesan from leading Ardas while allowing him to be present without active participation in the rituals? Or a transfer without damage to his career? The choice of the severest available option has certainly helped preserve regimental tradition but at the undeniable cost of justice for one officer and an unease for many religious minorities who don the uniform.

The Supreme Court's verdict is legally unambiguous and conclusive. Yet, morally and constitutionally, the case lays bare a tension that remains unresolved for many. The underlying moral tension endures beyond the courtroom. For, when the army's 'secular tradition' requires a member of a religious minority to surrender individual freedoms, the line between discipline and coercion begins to blur.

Philosophy teaches us that morality is often subjective and that wisdom lies in nuance, not binaries. It reminds us that ideals can conflict without a tidy resolution. We know that culture too shapes morality. Together, this mix serves to amplify our moral ambiguity around the Kamalesan case.

Philosophy can only illuminate a debate. It cannot resolve it. However, through the simple act of acknowledging persistent moral ambiguity, society fosters space for accommodation and coexistence should a similar future dispute arise.

All told, the choice of the principle, holding greater moral weight, rests with individual readers—the army's stand on the primacy of regimental cohesion or Kamalesan's insistence on his constitutionally guaranteed individual freedoms. The army chose cohesion; Kamalesan chose individual liberty. You must choose yours. II