Guest Column | Cdr Shrikumar Sangiah (retd)

Uniform Justice

Rule of law and not public opinion must determine cases of violations



EARLY LAST MONTH, in June 2026, a video from the Combat Army Aviation Training School (CAATS) in Nashik, Maharashtra, attracted national attention and got everyone talking. Captain Bharat Bhardwaj, freshly qualified as an Army Aviation pilot, proposed to his girlfriend, Arushi, at the conclusion of his passing-out parade. He proposed dressed in full ceremonial uniform kneeling beside a military helicopter on display at the tarmac. The young officer turned a personal moment into a widely shared and viewed spectacle on social media. The moment went viral and garnered millions of views—with some praising the young officer for his romantic gesture while some others criticised him for breaching military protocol and discipline.

The army sought an explanation from Captain Bhardwaj, highlighting its concerns over decorum, behaviour whilst in uniform, and the use of an official setting to serve a personal end. Despite the furore over his actions, the fact that Bhardwaj found widespread public sympathy and significant support from military veterans, including many senior veterans, reflects a deeper cultural shift in society—the normalisation of the growing tendency among Indians to broadcast every aspect of their personal lives. The sympathy and support for Bhardwaj also signals a societal intent to humanise the Indian soldier and see officers and soldiers not merely as embodiments of duty and sacrifice, but as relatable young men and women with emotions.

As a result, Bhardwaj's act is being viewed not as a breach of protocol but as a refreshing assertion of humanity. In a social media-driven age, society has come to accept, and even reward, emotional vulnerability and grand gestures—applying these values even to institutions such as the Indian Army, that was traditionally insulated from such expectations.

Furthermore, the sympathy for Bhardwaj signals a broader erosion of deference to institutional formalism. When public sentiment so strongly overrides concerns about decorum, uniform regulations, and military protocol, it points to a democratisation (some would argue a dilution) of authority. The support from veterans reveals that even within the military, there is some acceptance of youthful individualism and a reluctance to enforce older standards of restraint when they conflict with contemporary ideas of a 'full' and 'open' life. India clearly wants its heroes to be professionally competent and yet personally expressive. Bound by duty yet unbound by outdated restraint.

At an even deeper level, this phenomenon highlights the increasing power of the public mood, amplified by social media, to influence institutional decisions. While this incident humanises the armed forces and makes them more relatable to a new generation, it also carries risks. It subtly shifts the balance from rule-bound discipline toward sentiment-driven flexibility. Allowing public sentiment to arbitrate professional conduct sets a dangerous precedent that risks turning matters of service discipline into popularity contests, with damaging consequences for the armed forces' record of impartial justice.



Shifting Culture

Bhardwaj's western-style proposal, complete with a ring and dramatic kneeling, has no roots in Indian tradition. Historically, marital commitment in India was sealed through family-mediated ceremonies and rituals rather than individual proposals. Public displays of affection were generally restrained by norms of modesty, and even today they can occasionally attract social or legal scrutiny under provisions like Section 294 of the Indian Penal Code concerning 'obscene acts' in public. The shift toward public proposals therefore represents a significant cultural shift.

The embrace of the western-style marriage proposal reflects both aspiration and anxiety in a globalising India. It signals a desire to participate confidently in a connected world, yet it also reveals underlying insecurities about one's own cultural norms. Cultural confidence would allow Indians to selectively borrow, adapt, and innovate rather than copy slavishly.

Several interconnected factors have accelerated this cultural shift. The economic reforms of 1991 opened the doors to global media. Indian films have played a particularly powerful role by adapting Hollywood's romantic tropes and presenting them in an Indian context. Indian films blended western notions of dramatic gestures with local values, creating templates that millions of young Indians find deeply aspirational—turning the hitherto alien marriage proposal into a relatable and accepted cultural norm.

While global media and entertainment have provided the imagery of modern romance, the non-resident Indians (NRIs) have served as living examples of hybrid lifestyles that appear successful, glamorous, and 'modern.' Increased international travel by Indians has also helped normalise individualistic expressions of love and personal freedom.

In this mix there is also, undeniably, a strong element of a 'wannabe' mentality among Indians blindly aping the West. Some sections of Indian society continue to harbour an instinctive belief that western practices are inherently more progressive, sophisticated, and cool. This attitude leads to the blind adoption of visible markers of modernity to signal upward mobility. Such blind imitation encourages a shallow prioritising of optics and external validation over contextual and cultural appropriateness.

However, the mature response to this cultural shift would not be a total rejection of global trends, but thoughtful integration—accepting external influences while retaining traditional restraint. The challenge lies in ensuring that such expressions respect the specific contexts in which they occur, rather than treating every setting as a stage for personal performance.



The Psychological Drivers

The impulse to live life 'in full public view' reflects deep psychological causes that are amplified by technology. Sharing positive events triggers dopamine release in the human brain from likes, comments, and shares. Sharing good news with others intensifies personal happiness. Captain Bhardwaj's proposal at the passing-out parade merged two highs—professional achievement and romantic fulfilment—creating a viral moment.

Erving Goffman, a Canadian-American sociologist, developed one of the most influential metaphors in 20th-century sociology—dramaturgy. In his 1959 book The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Goffman argued that everyday human social interactions are akin to theatrical performances. Individuals act as performers on a social stage, managing impressions to shape how others perceive them. A public proposal, in uniform, was impression management meant to signal multifaceted success—as a professional soldier, a marriage partner, and a modern Indian.

Insecurity plays a role too. Individuals posting frequently may be overcompensating for self-doubts, using external validation to reaffirm their own self-worth. Psychologically, this could be an adaptation to an attention economy where visibility is equated with value. Awareness of these psychological drivers allows mindful choices—sharing of content that enriches versus mere performative excess.

Military Regulations

Military regulations are meant to ensure that individual actions remain subject to the norms of military discipline and

conduct. Military regulations stipulate strict social media protocols for its personnel for safeguarding operational security and institutional image. Recent policy revisions allow 'passive participation'—viewing/ monitoring only—on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and X. Active posting, commenting, or sharing remains prohibited for serving personnel (with select exceptions such as PROs, etc) to mitigate risks of information leaks.

Uniform and decorum rules are also clear. The uniform symbolises the service and not the individual. Using ceremonial dress, parade grounds, or military assets (e.g., helicopters) for personal purposes violates guidelines against unauthorised use of official property, and bringing the service into disrepute. Using official settings for proposals or celebrations must invite scrutiny for breaches of discipline and protocol.

In Captain Bhardwaj's case, the proposal occurred post-ceremony but on official military premises in full ceremonial uniform. The army, rightly, has sought an explanation, viewing his actions as having occurred at an inappropriate time and in an inappropriate place.

At the time of writing this article, the army has not issued any official public statement on the final outcome in the case. The matter is still in the internal inquiry stage. However, any disciplinary action against the officer is likely to be relatively lenient—perhaps a formal warning, counselling, or some corrective sensitisation training—rather than the punishment stipulated in the army's rule book. This anticipation of a measured and a relatively lenient reaction to his transgression stems from the overwhelmingly positive public optics generated by the viral video.

A lenient approach will reflect the exercise of command discretion, where senior officers weigh not just the letter of the rules but also contextual factors and broader reputational impact. While such flexibility is understandable, it highlights the growing tensions within institutions in the digital era, where what was once an internal issue can become a subject of public debate. In the digital age, a single viral video can shape public perception not just of the individual officer but of the entire institution. A private or semi-private moment, once invisible to the outside world, can now define the image of the Indian Army—for better or worse—in the eyes of citizens. This requires the military leadership to thoughtfully navigate the tensions between upholding institutional norms and traditional standards of discipline while simultaneously being cognisant of contemporary social realities.



Lt Samuel Kamalesan

Support from Veterans

Several senior veterans strongly defended the officer on television and on X. One retired Lt Gen. criticised the 'nuktachini' (petty fault-finding) in the public commentary around the incident. He argued that if the nation demands the ultimate sacrifice for the love of country, it should allow expression of personal love. 'Youngster nahi karega, toh kaun karega' (If not the young, then who?) framed it as harmless youthful spirit that did not undermine military discipline. Several other senior veterans expressed similar sentiment—condoning Bhardwaj's act as harmless youthful indiscretion.

Logically, however, rules should be and are age-agnostic. Discipline underpins effectiveness. Subjectivity in the implementation of rules (leniency for 'youthful indiscretion') promotes inconsistency. An older officer at a higher rank would face stricter scrutiny due to expectations of exemplary conduct. The public support for a lenient view of Captain Bharadwaj's actions stems from the act's virality and romantic framing rather than principled age distinction. While empathy is necessary, institutional rules demand consistency to avoid any precedent for the selective application of rules.

The intense public debate has created significant pressure on the authorities. In what can be described as a 'trial by media' in reverse—the widespread support has generated an expectation of leniency rather than punishment. Instead of the media pushing for stricter accountability, public sympathy is effectively pushing the army towards a softer response. While this reflects the democratising power of public opinion it carries notable risks. It can subtly undermine command authority by suggesting that decisions about internal discipline may be influenced by external sentiment rather than being determined only by the army's own rules or professional judgment. Over time, such dynamics may weaken the chain of command, encourage other officers to weigh public visibility against regulatory compliance, and erode the principle that military conduct should be guided by institutional standards rather than popular approval.

Selective Enforcement

A natural and important question now arises—would the same level of public sympathy and veteran support have been extended to an enlisted man if he had done something similar? The answer, it can be safely said is no—at least not with equal enthusiasm or leniency. A similar public proposal by an enlisted man, even if equally heartfelt, would have attracted far less or no media coverage. Instead of widespread appreciation, it would have most likely triggered swift internal disciplinary action and minimal public defence from veterans or the commentariat.

This disparity becomes clear when contrasted with real cases involving jawans who raised grievances on issues of genuine concern. In 2017, a Border Security Force (BSF) constable Tej Bahadur Yadav posted videos on social media showing the poor quality of food being served to troops in forward areas. His complaint, which touched upon a basic issue of jawan welfare, went viral and even prompted a high-level internal inquiry. Yet, instead of widespread public support or institutional empathy, Yadav was swiftly dismissed from service after a summary trial court found him guilty of breach of discipline, including making false allegations and unauthorised social media posts.

This disparity is rooted in the deeply ingrained hierarchical culture of the Indian military. Officer-centric stories find greater interest in the public imagination. Commissioned officers are seen not only as leaders, but as symbolic representatives of the force's modernity, professionalism, and upward mobility. In contrast, the jawan is often viewed through a more traditional lens of silent duty, discipline, and sacrifice. The hier-

archy, therefore, unconsciously favours the officers when it comes to public forgiveness or admiration.

While this differential treatment reflects certain practical realities it also reinforces perceptions of elitism and double standards. When similar actions receive markedly different responses based on rank, it can breed resentment within the ranks and weaken the moral authority of the force. True institutional equity demands that standards of discipline be applied with consistency. While some contextual adjustment based on rank and responsibility may be inevitable, such discretion must not become arbitrary or influenced by media optics.

The feudal undercurrents—although diluted over time—continue to influence how discipline is interpreted and applied. This risks creating a two-tiered system of justice—one that is more understanding toward the officer cadre, and another that demands stricter conformity from the rank and file soldier. Addressing such biases does not require dismantling hierarchy, which remains militarily necessary, but rather ensuring that the application of rules becomes more transparent, consistent, and insulated from both public sentiment and ingrained institutional prejudices.

Another striking contrast that illustrates the inconsistencies in the application of rules is the case of Lt Samuel Kamalesan. Commissioned in 2017, he was dismissed from service in 2021, a decision upheld by the Supreme Court in 2025. The young Christian officer had refused full participation in certain regimental religious rituals citing fundamental differences between the rituals and the tenets of his personal faith. He was eventually dismissed from service on grounds of indiscipline and actions detrimental to unit cohesion. Unlike Captain Bhardwaj, Kamalesan drew very little public sympathy or support from veterans.

Both officers were young and yet one was celebrated for romantic expression, while the other was punished for conscientious objection on the grounds of his faith. This selective empathy—extending support to expressions of romance but showing no accommodation for principled dissent—may reflect cultural majoritarianism or institutional discomfort with minority assertions that challenge established norms.

Who decides leniency? Military commanders are vested with and do exercise some discretion, but such discretion must be principled and transparent. Youthfulness cannot be accepted as an excuse for any transgression of rules by either officers or the men. Military training is meant to build accountability and self-restraint from an early stage. Selective application of rules based on considerations of age or rank breeds cynicism and erodes trust in the institution's fairness.

Broader Parallels

The proceedings in the Captain Bharadwaj case mirror societal trends where public sentiment influences outcomes. Judicial pundits and commentators have critiqued judgments such as in the Ayodhya Ram Janmabhoomi case where majoritarian mood reportedly shaped the reasoning for the verdict (as admitted by one of the five judges on the bench [later to be the Chief Justice of India] that decided the case).

Another case was the Sabarimala temple case, where the right of entry for women of all ages was the core issue being decided. Although the final verdict is still pending with a nine-judge bench in the Supreme court, a 2018 ruling by a five-judge bench declared the selective barring of women from entry to the temple as unconstitutional. While commenting on the verdict of the five-judge bench, many argued that the court succumbed to liberal and media-driven public discourse on gender equality while ignoring the unique religious nature of the deity (Ayyappa as a Naisthika Brahmachari (perpetual celibate)). Institutions—military or judicial—must prioritise rules over popular sentiment to preserve institutional legitimacy. Subjectivity in the implementation of rules erodes the legitimacy of the institution's justice dispensing mechanism.

Trial by media, works both ways. It can demand harsh punishment in some cases, while in others—as seen with Captain Bhardwaj—it exerts pressure toward leniency and forgiveness. A viral video creates an environment where authorities feel compelled to respond, not strictly on the basis of rules and facts, but with an eye on public perception and reputational impact.

The greater danger lies in the precedents selective leniency (if it is exercised for Bhardwaj) can set. If one infraction is excused or dealt with leniently because it captured public imagination, it opens the door for future cases where other violators also seek justification through public campaigns, veterans' endorsements, or viral support. Over time, this could erode the predictability and consistency that are the bedrock of military discipline and its system of justice.

To address these challenges, several practical recommendations deserve serious consideration. First, the army should issue clearer, more detailed guidelines on personal conduct in uniform and during official events. Second, there must be training on the consistent enforcement of rules for commanders at all levels and for eliminating any reliance on subjective discretion. Third, comprehensive social media awareness programmes should be made mandatory for officers and jawans alike, helping them understand the boundaries between personal expression and institutional representation. Finally, broader cultural confidence-building efforts are needed within the forces (and the broader Indian society) to encourage a healthy integration of global expressions of individuality without the blind imitation of western practices.

Endnote

The Captain Bhardwaj episode encapsulates many of the deeper tensions of modernity that Indian society is currently navigating. While the widespread support of veterans and lay citizens for Captain Bhardwaj has a positive dimension—it humanises the image of the Indian soldier and makes the institution appear more relatable—this support must not be allowed to override established rules and protocols. Captain Bhardwaj should face appropriate punishment in accordance with existing army regulations. Empathy and understanding have their place, but when they begin to influence disciplinary outcomes, they risk compromising the foundational principles of military justice.

The uniform application of rules—irrespective of age, rank, or public sentiment—remains the cornerstone of the military's justice system and institutional integrity. Youthful passion, undoubtedly, deserves some space for expression and public mood can inform democratic discourse, but they must always operate within clearly defined boundaries and should never be allowed to dictate the rule of law.

Also, true progress and modernity—for people and nations—does not lie in blindly imitating western ideals. It lies instead in mature, thoughtful synthesis. Captain Bhardwaj's proposal, beyond all its charm and controversy, serves as a mirror to the tensions that arise when personal freedoms and notions of modernity collide with the demands of institutional order. How we choose to resolve these tensions will define not only the character of our armed forces, but also the kind of nation we choose to become. II