

---

# India's Armed Forces' Contribution to Nation Building

V P Malik

*What constitutes a nation is not speaking the same tongue or belonging to the same ethnic group, but having accomplished great things in common in the past and the wish to accomplish them in future.*

— Ernest Renan

## Introduction

No nation state can be built without first creating and inculcating nationalism. The Indian paradox is that we are an old society and civilisation but we are a new nation state in the modern political sense. In its long history, India can be considered to have been a 'nation state' only a few times: during the Mauryan Empire (321-185 BC), in the Gupta Age (320-500 AD), the Mughal period (1527-1857 AD), and as the British India colonial empire (1857-1947 AD). The dynamics of these near whole or complete Indian nation states has been that each time, it has risen out of a hotbed of internecine quarrels and fighting among small states: a tendency which is sometimes felt even today.

---

General V P Malik (Retd) is former Chief of India's Army Staff.

As a nation state, India comprises a myriad streams of culture; 22 scheduled languages, 200 dialects, a dozen ethnic groups, seven religious communities with several sects and sub-sects, and 68 socio-cultural sub-regions. That makes us a great as well as complex society and nation. This very paradox also poses challenges in building India as a nation.

## **Nation Building**

What is nation building? Is it economic development and industrialisation? Is it building large metros, roads, schools and hospitals? Is it ensuring social equality and harmony? Or is it shaping a national identity based on our core values so as to mature as a strong and vibrant nation, proud and confident, backed by comprehensive national power to assume its rightful role in international affairs? In my opinion, nation building is a combination of all facets of progress. The last part stated by me is the ultimate goal in nation building. This is also stated in the Preamble to our Constitution.

In addressing the contribution of India's armed forces in nation building, the starting point lies in understanding India's military legacy. Military life, in its outlook and purpose, is heavily dependent on traditions of service imbibed over years of blood-stained history. These traditions, almost sacred to soldiers, can be traced upwards to patriotism and downwards to self-pride. These traditions are not only from the British Indian Army but also date back to the *Mahabharat* days. The *Bhagwad Gita* says, "Considering your own duty, you should not waver", or as Guru Gobind Singh says, "Deh shiva war mohe ehse shubb karman te kabhu na taru. Na darro arr seo jab jaye larun nishchay kar apni jit karun". Similarly, the Chetwode credo states: "The safety, honour and welfare of your country come first, always and every time. The honour, welfare and comfort of the men you command come next. Your own ease, comfort and safety come last, always and every time." An oath is the bedrock of the true military profession which differentiates it from all

other professions. Earlier, the oath was based on the concept of “Naam–Namak–Nishan: Be Honourable–True to your Salt–Uphold the Flag.” Today this oath is to the Constitution of democratic India.

The armed forces are a true reflection of the basic national concept of unity in diversity. In an exemplary role model for the rest of our countrymen, soldiers of all classes, castes, creeds and religions are able to serve the nation with total dedication; living together in barracks, eating from the same kitchen, speaking the same language, and observing each other's religious festivals. Secularism, discipline, integrity, loyalty, *esprit-de-corps*—these are essential values inculcated among our men. Such motivated people not only make efficient and dedicated soldiers in service, but even after leaving the Services, continue as nation building role models for others.

An important legacy of the Indian armed forces has been its totally apolitical outlook. As I have stated earlier, a soldier's oath is to the Constitution of India and to the constitutionally elected central government. The ideology of the political parties or their hue and colour does not concern the armed forces. Our armed forces, unlike those of some neighbouring countries, have stuck to the concept of loyalty to the constitutionally elected government. They have, thus, contributed to the political stability of the nation and enabled it to develop its unique democratic political ambience. Even in the insurgency-affected states of the nation, the Army has ensured an adequately secure atmosphere wherein India's autonomous Election Commission can conduct free and fair elections. I am glad that for the upcoming parliamentary elections, the Election Commission has asked the political parties, in a stronger and more comprehensive way, not to politicise the armed forces.

### **Consolidation of Nation State**

The Indian armed forces have played an important role in national consolidation from the day India became independent. Few political

leaders foresaw the mayhem that could result amongst the innocent people who had lived together for generations in the undivided India. The communal frenzy that was unleashed by the artificial boundaries of partition was at that time beyond the control of the police. In 1947, the police was insufficient: neither well trained, nor well equipped and suffering from the trauma of communal fighting. The armed forces, led by Indian as well as some British Service officers, had to control the furious rioting and enforce civil order.

It is generally believed that the British left India with a bloodless legal transfer of power. But the birth of the nation state that we see today was not such a smooth affair. Hyderabad and Junagadh had to be coerced to integrate with India by what came to be known as police actions. In October 1947, when Maharaja Hari Singh of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) signed the Instrument of Accession to join India, the armed forces were swiftly inducted into Kashmir Valley and other parts of the state to thwart Pakistan's design of capturing it by force. Later, the liberation of Goa, Daman and Diu carried forward the consolidation of our territorial frontiers.

## **Integration of Geographic Area and People**

India is a vast country. Some of its people are living in remote border areas, far from the Indian heartland. The armed forces have played a significant role in integrating people of these areas and border states into the national mainstream. Many a times, a soldier was the first Indian to reach out to these areas and make the locals realise that they were Indians. Deployment of the armed forces enabled governmental infrastructure to follow in the remote areas of Arunachal Pradesh (erstwhile North-Eastern Frontier Agency), Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, border areas of Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and some parts of Jammu and Kashmir. Till the late 1950s, the important Buddhist town of Tawang had very limited administrative links with India. The civil government representative was

located many miles short, at Bomdi La. Even today, most Indians do not know where places like Mon, Moreh, Giagong, Chushul or Sumdo are located. The credit for initiating the feeling of nationalism in such areas goes to the armed forces. The very establishment of a military station generates a certain amount of business and developmental activities in and around the station. This is how the government's developmental infrastructure like roads, electricity and tele-communication could reach out to remote and undeveloped areas.

The armed forces have also improved the ecology of the areas wherever they are located. The greening of the cantonments and the forestation undertaken by the Ecology Territorial Army (TA) battalions in Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and some other states has set a healthy trend for others to follow.

What about integration of the people? As stated earlier, there is no better example of unity in diversity than the armed forces. Unaffected by divisive politics or casteist social activities, military stations have always been, and are, totally cosmopolitan: oases of national unity.

### **Security of the Nation State**

The primary role of the armed forces is to defend the territorial integrity of the nation state against external and internal threats. Strong and well-trained armed forces are deterrence to our potential adversaries. If this is achieved, developmental activities and nation building can be progressed without external hindrance. This is central to the concept of national security and paramount for all nation building activities. Territorial disputes with China and Pakistan require India's armed forces to remain alert and deployed along disputed borders round the years.

History is witness to the fact that whenever a nation has neglected its armed forces and their capacity, external powers have been quick to exploit it. In the 1950s, we overlooked this important lesson of history

and allowed the security apparatus to drift till the Chinese shook us up in 1962. We had to relearn this lesson through an ignominious experience. Post 1962, we have had several skirmishes against the Chinese: at Nathu La in Sikkim in 1967, Wangdung in 1986 and Doklam in 2017. The outcomes have made it clear that the Indian armed forces are alert and determined to defend national territory. I do believe that this feedback has helped the Chinese and our leaders to pursue agreements for maintaining peace and tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and several other confidence building measures to improve relations.

Pakistan attempted to annex part of India's territories in major attacks in 1965, 1971 and 1999. In all these conflicts, it was effectively defeated. In 1984, the armed forces preempted the Pakistan Army's effort to illegally occupy the Siachen Glacier. Its many other minor intrusions and skirmishes along the Line of Control (LOC) too have been effectively foiled.

### **Internal Security**

Nation building is hardly possible when we fight and kill each other. I am referring to internal security and stability. Imagine a riot torn Mumbai of 1992, when the economic capital of India came to a standstill. Communal and inter-caste riots, Naxalites, secessionist groups, militants and other anti-social elements, aided and abetted by foreign countries: internal security has always been a serious challenge to our national security. The demand or the need to use the armed forces, particularly the Army, for internal tasks which are primarily a police and Home Department domain, has been increasing year after year. At a higher level of violence, we have fought, and continue to fight, full-fledged insurgency and terrorism in many states. The armed forces have not allowed, nor shall allow, any attempt by any state, or even a section of the state, to secede from the Republic of India.

The positive impartiality of the Indian soldier in such situations—odd aberrations notwithstanding—is legendary. By and large, the Indian soldier is looked upon as a source of confidence amongst the people, not only in India but even abroad. During such operations, the military not only fights militants and anti-national elements but also reassures innocent people feeling insecure or neglected due to inadequate civil administration. Large-scale civic action programmes are undertaken by the military alongwith anti-terrorist operations. At places we have formed an Army Development Group for this purpose.

### **Disaster Relief**

The nation has always counted on the military in every disaster-affected situation. If it is not an earthquake in some state, it is floods somewhere or a cyclone in a coastal area. India has seen earthquakes, cyclones, landslides and heavy floods almost every year. Despite the raising of disaster management organisations and forces, the armed forces are acknowledged as the most dependable rescue and relief organisation in such circumstances. They are effectively the nation's chief rescue and relief forces.

### **Image Abroad**

The armed forces have also enhanced India's image abroad. Our forces, in support of the foreign policy of the government, have projected military power in Sri Lanka and Maldives when requested by these neighbours. Since the mid-1950s, the armed forces have been deployed in a large number of UN peace-keeping missions all over the world. They have worked in Korea, Congo, Gaza, Cambodia, Angola, Somalia, Rwanda, Namibia, Sudan and many other countries and done the nation proud by their impartiality, efficiency and dedication. This aspect has received international recognition.

## **Conclusion**

A nation comprises not just its economic assets. A nation consists of its people, national character and core values, its culture, its unity, and its stature in the world community. We need to build India as a nation on the basis of a common ideology, high character and stable institutions so as to help create a strong and powerful nation which can improve the quality of its people.

The armed forces of India have established and sustained their credibility through dedication, sacrifice, professional competence, operational effectiveness. Besides being defenders of the nation, they are the people's armed forces, with recruitment from all parts of the country. The people of India, the most important element in our nation, have looked at them as secular, positive and impartial. The armed forces are proud of this achievement and image, and I am certain that they will carry this spirit in the future too.