

**E**VEN those societies which effectively resist chauvinist forms of nationalism in normal times, tend to succumb to the influence of jingoists during wartime. Despite the fact that India was treacherously dragged into fighting a difficult and defensive war on terms and terrain chosen by Pakistan, the most heartening aspect in our response to the Kargil crisis was the absence of nationalist hysteria. There were no major hate-soaked or violent demonstrations against Pakistan, though a few low-level politicians did organise their usual ritual protests outside the Pakistani embassy. The media tried and succeeded in mobilising a high pitched nationalist fervour by choosing to become an uncritical mouthpiece of the army. However, the people's responses were more like a heart-felt display of natural patriotism.

### Communal Tension Avoided

Anti-Muslim sentiment was not popular. Barring a small number of stray exceptions in places like Ahmedabad, the people in the rest of India refused to be incited into Hindu-Muslim riots. Even provocative statements from across the border describing the Kargil intrusion as a holy *jihad* by Islamic *mujahedins* did not spark off anti-Muslim violence in India.

The biggest test of the nation's comprehension of what is at stake came when the public was informed that the Pakistani army handed over the tortured and mutilated bodies of six Indian soldiers. They were on patrol duty in the Kaksar area of Kargil on May 14, when they were ambushed by Pakistani intruders. By the time their bodies were returned to the Indian army, they were badly decomposed and showed signs of death due to torture. Their eyeballs were missing, their ears, nose and genitals had been chopped off.

Despite the genuine outrage it produced, there were no ugly outbursts in India.

The media quoted army authorities as saying that despite these provocative actions our soldiers did not retaliate in kind. As someone who has been very critical of the human rights abuses committed by the Indian army in the Northeast and Kashmir, where rights violations have been used to suppress secessionist movements, I was relieved at this restraint. In addition, our army spokesmen told us that they made it a point to give dignified burial to Pakistani soldiers killed in battle. The army was left with the task of burying Pakistani soldiers since the Pakistanis, for most of the period of the conflict, refused to accept the bodies of their own soldiers. That would mean acknowledging that their army was involved in the intrusions, not just the *mujahedins*. We were told that our soldiers responded to this challenge with exceptional grace. They wrapped the bodies of their dead in the Pakistani national flag and buried them with appropriate Muslim burial rites. For this Indian troops first tried to find *maulvis* and where they were not available, Muslim

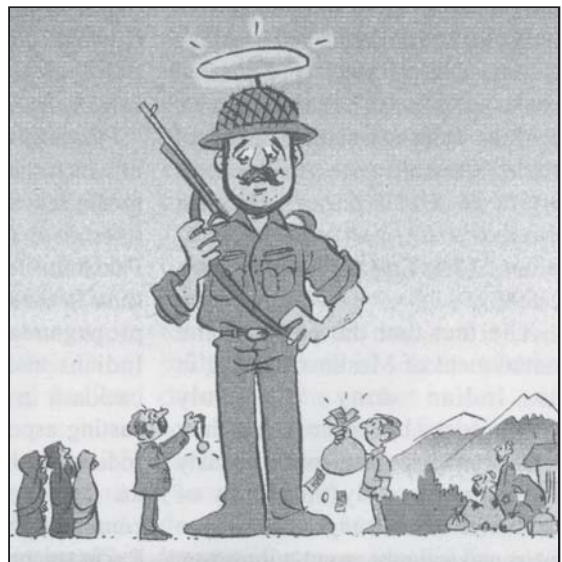
soldiers of the Indian army fighting in Kargil performed the last rites. Graves were dug in the hard rock of the mountains and burial took place with Indian Muslim soldiers reciting *suras* from the Quran.

These reports may well be part of a sophisticated public relations exercise by the army. It may well be that the truth is more complex and that the Indian army covered up instances of their own brutalities. But even if such gestures were made and publicised because the army calculated that they would go down well with the Indian public, it is a sign that the public mood was not in favour of vicious nationalism, that by and large people in India wanted their army to behave in a civilised fashion, no matter how ugly the provocation.

## When Soldiers Became National Heroes

### Kargil Holds a Mirror to Our Rulers

○ Madhu Kishwar



ANOOP KAMATH

The lunatic fringe of our political spectrum did attempt to foment communal disharmony. But we can be legitimately proud of the fact that they were given a fitting rebuff. Thackeray's targeting of Dilip Kumar and attempts to bully the widely respected actor into returning the Pakistani award he had received last year was soundly condemned and Thackeray was advised to stop his malicious mischief. Similarly, attempts by the VHP to rake up communal trouble were resisted steadfastly though they could boast of some mild successes in parts of Gujarat.

The beneficial fall-out of this national sobriety is there for all to see. Because the Muslim community did not by and large feel at siege, it responded vigorously to the challenge posed to our secular polity by Pakistan's aggression against India and presenting it as an Islamic *jihad* to whip up religious hysteria among their own citizens, who on the whole did not seem much inspired by the misadventure in Kargil. Apart from other modes of expression, there was a continuous flow of articles, comments and letters in the Indian press from a whole spectrum of Indian Muslims condemning the attempt by Pakistani rulers to legitimise their aggression as a holy war and drive a wedge between Hindus and Muslims in India. Dilip Raote, who studied reports published in Urdu newspapers in Maharashtra, wrote in a recent article: "there are more anti-Pakistani letters in Urdu papers than in Mumbai's English and Marathi dailies." (*The Times of India*, August 1, 1999)

The fact that the courage and commitment of Muslims fighting in the Indian army was duly acknowledged by the media and their mortal remains were spontaneously paid homage to by thousands of Hindus in their respective home towns and villages, went a long way

to assure Muslims that their patriotism was not under cloud, that they had as much stake in snubbing the two nation theory as any other Indian.

Here is a summary of a report that appeared in *The Times of India*:

Thousands of Delhiites lined the streets of the capital to salute their brave hero, Captain Hanifuddin, who laid down his life fighting intruders in the Kargil region. When the body was brought to the Sajjadanashin Dargah in Nizamuddin, Hindus and Muslims stood side by side to pay their respects to the martyr. Since people had lined up on both sides of the road, it took almost an hour for the cortege to traverse the short distance between the Dargah and the cemetery. People seemed overwhelmed with the reported heroics of the soldier. "The country is blessed with such brave sons who sacrifice their lives like this," said a mourner. The captain from the Rajputana Rifles was buried with full army honours as befitting a war hero. Ghulam Mohammad, who dug the grave, said: "My family has been here for nearly four generations digging graves and serving people but an honour of this kind is seldom bestowed upon anybody." After the burial, many rushed to the grave, some offered prayers, others placed flowers, and some even collected freshly dug earth. (*The Times of India*, July 23, 1999)

Equally noteworthy was the way in which the Indian intellectuals and media reacted to Pramod Mahajan's ill-advised and short-sighted ban on Pakistani Television on the ground that it was spreading anti-India propaganda which might mislead Indians and produce a communal backlash in India. This was seen as casting aspersions on the loyalty of Indian Muslims and treating them as an irresponsible and gullible community who could be swayed by Pakistani propaganda. The minister

was put on the defensive, compelled to retract some of his statements.

## Solidarity Across Borders

But most impressive of all was the campaign in India to get the government to advise VSNL to lift its Internet block on the reception of the Pakistani paper Dawn's website. Hameed Haroon, Chief Executive of the Dawn group, acknowledged this positive role by sending a personal letter of thanks to The Indian Express:

"...I do not believe that *Dawn's* website would have been unblocked quite so soon without your help and that of large sections of the Indian press." The banning of Dawn's website reported in The Indian Express, had caused a stir on the Internet and was picked up by a number of international publications and organisations, including *Salon* and *Rapporteurs Sans Frontiers*. But Haroon wrote to say: "...there is no doubt in my mind that India's press played the crucial role in pressuring its government to lift the ban. In my opinion this is an excellent example of how bilateral relationship and dialogues can help resolve a crisis. I hope that now, as our two countries move into a post Kargil scenario, the press on either side of the border will continue to play its role in promoting balance and restraint." (*The Indian Express*, July 16, 1999)

## Message From Electorate

On the whole, informed opinion in India stayed steadfast against imposing bans on Pakistani newspapers, magazines, exchange of artists, writers and even business linkages between the two countries. Most commentators kept emphasising that this war should be treated as a temporary setback to the process of negotiations and dialogue set in motion with Vajpayee's Lahore trip to resolve Indo-Pak disputes.

Most important of all, the BJP

leadership successfully resisted the attempts of their mentors, the RSS ideologues, to use the war to launch an aggressive anti-Pak and anti-Muslim propaganda war. Even when the RSS organ *Panchjanya* called for a nuclear strike against Pakistan to retaliate for their aggression, the BJP leaders chose to talk in measured tones and kept reiterating that India was committed to no first use of nuclear weapons and that thinking of nuclearising this war was sheer lunacy on the part of Pakistan. It was good to see our Prime Minister assert confidently that India would exercise restraint and not cross the Line of Control (LoC). This was in sharp contrast to the well known BJP-RSS commitment to bring about an *Akhand Bharat* by undoing Partition.

All this should not be interpreted as a spontaneous change of heart by the BJP. It is rather a consequence of their realisation that the Indian electorate had given them a clear cut message that they are not willing to be manipulated by the politics of mindless hate any more. The traumatic experience of politically engineered riots from the early 1980s through the early 1990s culminating in the demolition of Babri Masjid has undoubtedly increased the wisdom of both communities. Hindus and Muslims have let their leaders know in no uncertain terms that pitching one community against the other will not be rewarded. Such hawkish politicians are being marginalised. Hence, the more 'liberal' and 'secular' *avatar* of the BJP is willing to go against the dictates of the RSS because the former has to face the electorate whereas the RSS does not.

### Soldiers As Heroes

Another noteworthy feature was the honour accorded spontaneously to the soldiers who died in battle. Day after day the press carried reports of how thousands of people would turn



up to pay their homage to soldiers killed in Kargil battle when their bodies were brought for funerals to their villages and towns. The bereaved families of all the soldiers were made to feel they were not alone in their sorrow, that others not only shared their grief but were also eager to honour those who lost their lives reclaiming or defending Indian territory.

For example, at the cremation of Major Manoj Talwar in Meerut "...all roads leading to the cremation ground were jampacked and vehicular traffic

came to a halt at different places, when an army motorcade carrying the body of the dead Major wrapped in the tricolour flag, passed through the city for its cremation with full military honours. Earlier with the arrival of the body more than 50,000 people belonging to Meerut, Baghpat and their nearby districts began to pour in his residence to pay homage to Major Talwar." (*The Times of India*, July 17, 1999)

Similar scenes were repeated in virtually every part of the country: cities, towns and even villages including in the insurgency ridden Northeast. In Assam, people even braved the ULFA's (United Liberation Front of Assam) directives against honouring the army heroes of Kargil and mustered courage to stand up against ULFA's murderous and extortionist politics for the first time since this terrorist outfit came into prominence.

A *Times of India* report on 29th July tells us that the Army Headquarters had upto then received more than six lakh letters during the two month long battle in Kargil. Out of this school children sent 5,10,725 letters. These letters included cheques sent for the Army Central Welfare Fund which has already collected more than 37 crores from such donations. This is not counting the much greater amount being collected by the Prime Minister's Fund for Kargil heroes or by several other organisations which took the lead in such an effort.

Numerous citizens, young and old organised fund raising campaigns on their own initiative for the welfare of the families of the dead and injured soldiers. Reports of school children donating their pocket money and scholarship money came in from all corners of the country. The *dhobi* (washerman's) Union in Delhi donated Rs 51,000. Sex workers, lawyers, doctors and housewives and

even beggars joined together for collecting donations for the Kargil soldiers. In Delhi Tihar jail inmates alone gave a donation of Rs 3.31 lakhs in cash from their meagre earnings and a larger number of them also donated blood. (*The Indian Express*, June 8, 1999) Such efforts cut across class, caste, gender and regional barriers.

In addition, blood donation camps organised in different parts of the country elicited such an enthusiastic response that for the first time our blood banks were flowing with surplus blood. People wouldn't stop giving blood even when they were informed that there was no way that the collected blood could be transported to Kargil. This, when there has always been a perennial shortage of blood donations in India.

The letters to the army headquarters included offers of service from doctors, students, engineers and even retired personnel who expressed a desire to do anything that the army requires from them — including a wish to recruit in the army with the readiness to die in battle.

Besides such requests, the army was surprised to find a manifold increase in the applicants coming to join the army during the period of Kargil conflict. The response was so overwhelming that in many places, the army recruitment camps were mobbed with tens of thousands of young men, all desperate to go to Kargil right away. (*The Times of India*, July 10, 1999). Thousands of educated young men in border villages volunteered to be porters for the army. One would expect, people would be more afraid to join the army during wartime. But the Kargil crisis seems to have had the opposite effect.

All this is noteworthy considering that in recent

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years the army seemed to have lost some of its glamour and allure for educated young men who till recently seemed to prefer even ordinary clerical jobs to joining the army. For years army establishments had been complaining that a large percentage of their officer grade vacancies were not being filled due to lack of enthusiasm for an army career.

### Army on Charity?

However, despite the generosity of the public response, there remains something troubling about the fund raising drives among the people for the welfare of the soldiers. It indicates that our citizens do not believe that the government is looking after our soldiers adequately. The government as well as the army establishment seemed to confirm this by inviting donations for the armed forces welfare fund. In few other countries in the world are voluntary donations

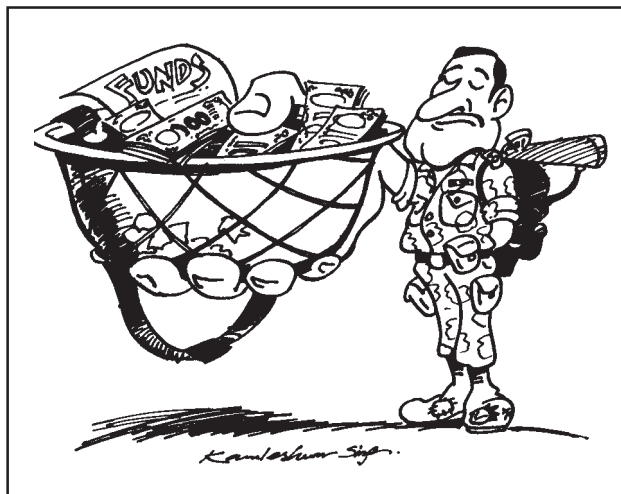
deemed so central to welfare of the soldiers. What is the message we are giving the world by making it appear that the welfare of the soldiers and their families is contingent upon contributions from the pocket money of little children? Alongside the tales of the heroism of our soldiers, there was a parallel flow of news reports about many of the heroes of our previous conflicts who were living in penury and how the widows and other dependents of many of our decorated soldiers had spent decades trying to get the benefits due to them from the army — all in vain. (*See box on facing page for a small sample of them*)

What do we learn from the enthusiasm and support expressed spontaneously for the Indian soldiers, considering there was very little sign of war hysteria in the way people responded? No film star, no cricketer or politician has in recent decades received the kind of deep felt upsurge of public honour as did the humblest of army jawans during the Kargil conflict.

All these are unmistakable signs that in this day and age when anti-heroes have come to dominate our public life, people have finally found symbols of inspiration in ordinary soldiers who demonstrated extra ordinary courage and determination in fighting one of the most hazardous battle in literally the most inhospitable terrain in the world. (For a detailed description of the stupendous task performed, see Prem Shankar Jha's article in *Outlook* of July 26, 1999).

### Our Rulers Disappoint

In post-Independence India, most politicians and other power wielders in our country have transformed themselves into plain thugs and looters of this country's resources. Their conduct



KAMLESHWAR SINGH

## The Travails of Previous War Heroes

“Octogenarian P.R. Gambhir, a proud father of Second Lieutenant Kamal Gambhir who died fighting for the country at the young age of 20 in the 1971 war feels extremely bitter about the country his son died for. All he has received till now is a solarium of Rs 10,000 and a paltry sum of Rs 200 per month as pension, which has increased now to Rs 2,500. The increase in pension is due to inflation and the government has not done them any favour he rues. They were all busy celebrating their victory over Pakistan... people like us were forgotten. We had the means and the will to continue, but what about those who don't have either? The root of all the trouble was the “permanent residential status” of the Gambhirs. They had migrated from Pakistan in 1947. Kamal was born in Udaipur, Rajasthan, but the family moved to Rourkela soon after. Kamal had given Rourkela as his permanent address, ‘But the Orissa government said we were not permanent residents of Rourkela and were, therefore, not entitled to any war-related scheme there. In Delhi it was the same story,’ Mr Gambhir says. He claims a sub-divisional magistrate in Orissa had offered him a plot but demanded a share as a bribe. ‘I was made to feel a beggar. I wrote to many people, including the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, but did not get any response,’ he says, pointing to a thick file.” (*The Times of India*, July 13, 1999)

In another case 55 years old Sepoy Sahadeo Prasad had to have both his legs amputated at the young age of 27 because of severe frostbite during the 1971 war against Pakistan. With a paltry pension of Rs 1,275 per month he is supporting a family of eight children in dire poverty.

The fate of many jawans who fought gallantly, gave their life or limb can be glimpsed from the experience of Sepoy Nripen Chandra Saha Roy, 62 who lost both his legs during the 1962 war. He was one of the 11 survivors of the 2nd Rajput regiment. With no help from the state, Roy brought up his four sons and just about makes ends meet. “He says, ‘Even if they [meaning the government of West Bengal] give us land, it'll be barren. Prime land and plots have gone to party cadres and anti-social elements, who cares for us?’” (*Outlook*, July 12, 1999)

Then there is the sad story of Sepoy S. Thomas who fought during a fortnight of intense fighting that saw the creation of Bangladesh. Thomas lost his left eye and in 1975 was made to retire as an army medical team declared him physically unfit. With no salary or pension he and his wife had to move to their village in Thiruvanamalai in Tamil Nadu where they worked as paid labourers. He says “I earned Rs 1.50 for a day's labour while my wife made Re 1.’ Whenever he could save Rs 10, he would visit the office of the Madras Engineering Regiment in Bangalore to enquire about his compensation and pension. ‘The stock answer: the files were missing and they were trying their best,’ he says. With lot of running around he got a monthly pension of Rs 75 and an annual maintenance of Rs 500. Later through local ex-servicemen's association he got a postman's job. ‘I had to strain to read addresses and ride along busy roads,’ he says.” (*Outlook*, July 12, 1999)

At times even officers had to suffer at the hands of non-caring bureaucrats. Take Major General Dayal for instance. A serving major he was christened “the saviour of Haji Pir.” Gen. Dayal was promised land by the Himachal government after his daring feat in 1965, but he is yet to get it after 34 years. (*The Times of India*, June 22, 1999)

Not only the wounded warriors but the widows of soldiers especially of the 1965 and 1971 too have faced a horde of problems. It is in fact shocking that some of them like Manidevi, 51, who lost her husband in the 1971 war when he was blown up in a minefield near Abohar in Punjab receive a meagre Rs 15 as monthly pension. (*Outlook*, July 12, 1999)

This points to a rather sad picture of corruption, inefficiency and mismanagement of funds meant for the welfare of our soldiers by the bureaucratic establishment in our country. □

would have turned even angels into hard-boiled cynics. Time and again, our people were given the hope that they had found leaders capable of challenging the corruption and mismanagement which has become the hallmark of our public life. People thronged enthusiastically to lend support to whoever projected himself/herself as a real crusader — J.P. in the 1970s, V.P. Singh in the

1980s, and in more recent times many regional figures like NTR in Andhra Pradesh and Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu. Most of these men and women betrayed the trust reposed in them. In the past few decades, the quality of public leaders declined so sharply that young people turned to other national icons like cricketers to sustain their patriotic fervour.

However, even at their best, cricketers can provide only momentary relief to a people who feel rudderless on account of the mess our rulers have made of our country. The battle of Kargil showed the Indian soldiers at their best in their commitment to risk their lives to safeguard India's vital interests. Given how badly our soldiers had been let down by the ruling establishment, who failed to per-

form even basic intelligence tasks and provide essential amenities to soldiers stationed in freezing temperatures and hazardous living conditions, their fighting spirit was indeed commendable. Even when due to lack of proper intelligence information about enemy positions on the strength of the Pakistani army on those unnerving peaks and knowing well that they were sent on virtual suicide missions the soldiers kept their morale surprisingly high.

### **Army Ill-Equipped**

It was alarming to read stories of how ill-equipped our army is to fight at such high altitudes on one of the world's most difficult terrains. The soldiers had neither adequate clothes nor some of the most basic equipment like snow goggles so essential to survive and fight effectively. By contrast, the Pakistani soldiers — especially the officers — seemed far better equipped in every way, as shown in their weaponry, food, clothing, accessories and even facilities like TVs and telephones recovered from their bunkers.

How much of what we were told about the Pakistani officers' accommodations after they were captured was propaganda by the Indian army which has always clamoured for larger allocations in successive budgets, and how much of it speaks of real neglect of the legitimate needs of the Indian soldiers, is hard to tell. But given the track record of our bureaucracy in every field, given their propensity for making a tragic mess of anything they touch with their corrupt and inefficient hands, it is not far-fetched to believe that our soldiers were not nearly as well-equipped as they should and could have been. There could well have been a revolt in the army. Instead, our soldiers fought valiantly, many died heroically, with young officers leading their jawans rather than using them as cannon fodder, as seemed to

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be the case in many Pakistani military units. The incredibly high proportion of Indian officers who were killed while leading their men is in sharp contrast to the casualty figures of the Pakistani army officers in this conflict.

The extraordinary courage and unity displayed by our military units is especially moving considering that many of the colonial traditions are still preserved in the Indian army. The gap between the ordinary soldier and the officer cadre remains too large to be healthy. The ordinary soldiers largely come from rural poor families. Many are poorly educated and are treated like drudges by the officers. It is a common sight to see up to half a dozen soldiers attached as flunkies to each army officer (depending on his rank) as his personal servants. Often they cook, wash, clean and do many of the menial chores in the homes of their *sahibs* and *memsahibs*. This is certainly not the best way to organise a modern army with a democratic spirit. And yet, our soldiers demonstrated exceptional courage, commitment and a spirit of teamwork during this battle.

### **Thwarted Idealism**

There is a lot to be learnt from our soldiers' performance and the following public response. The desire to see India do well in living up to its responsibilities is indeed intense among our people, as is a sense of idealism — an aspiration to live for goals in addition to and higher than personal enrichment and well-being. But this idealism is not finding

expression in a country weighed down by a decaying and exploitative political and economic structure and poor quality leaders. There is a whole sea of enthusiasm and idealism waiting to find creative expression in peacetime. It is being thwarted by the corruption and sheer mismanagement of our gargantuan, inefficient *babudom* and its venal rulers. They have often gone out of their way to divide people on caste, religions, regional and linguistic lines. Yet, they have had only brief and limited successes. People tend to rise above those divides because of a deeply rooted sense that they are repositories of a great common heritage rather than being a mere nation. The Kargil war confirms that in India a sense of belonging to a common civilisation and patriotic feelings for this land survive and even thrive despite all the doings and misdoings of our ruling establishment.

This conflict also showed the changing character of the Indian army and the shift in its recruiting base. During British times when this army was created, even junior officers were recruited mostly from wealthy, aristocratic families. In the early post-independence years the anglicised upper classes provided the recruiting ground for the officer class. As the Kargil casualties showed, that is no longer the case. Most of the officers seem to come from modest middle, lower middle and even working class backgrounds, many even from rural areas. As with the fundraising drives for the army, the middle and lower middle classes seem far more responsive to the call of patriotism than the rich and powerful overall.

### **Desperation for Recruitment**

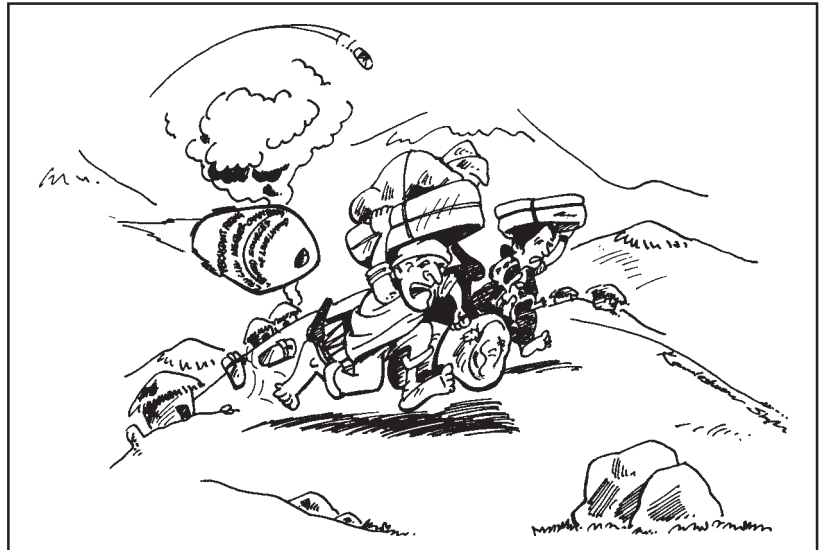
For many among the poor, service as a low ranking jawan in the army is the route to upward mobility. Most other avenues for advancement are badly choked due to the mismanagement of

our economy. This was demonstrated tragically in the way in which over 30,000 young men from poor families gathered at the Darbhanga Air Force Base, in response to army advertisements announcing a recruitment drive in Bihar's Darbhanga and Chhapra districts for a few hundred jawans. Most of these young men did not possess even the pitifully few minimum qualifications demanded of those seeking to enlist as jawans. They were undersized, malnourished, maleducated young men who had not even cleared their class VIII examination. Yet, given the low literacy and high unemployment rates in these regions, they were desperate to be recruited. An announcement by authorities that only men from Darbhanga were eligible for selection was enough to trigger off eruptions of violence. The police acting in their characteristic crude, ham-handed style, opened fire on these young desperate men, killing dozens in the process. The army closed the main gates. In the prevailing panic, aspirants ran into the murky flood waters that had engulfed the district those days. The full death toll is not yet ascertained because many bodies were washed away, though official sources mentioned 23 dead. (*Outlook*, August 2, 1999)

### Brutalising Our Own

The outrage over the torture and brutal treatment meted out to our captured soldiers by the Pakistani army also reminded one of some unfortunate truths about our own society. Pakistani mutilations of Indian soldiers were attributed to "to some cannibalistic streak" (*Hindustan Times*, June 12, 1999) and evidence of the "steady brutalisation of the Pakistani armed forces." (*The Times of India*, June 12, 1999)

We in India, especially the elites, have hardly ever expressed a similar outrage over similar acts of torture



and mangling which are routinely occurring in our police stations. The poor in India have been at the receiving end of such brutalities from the Indian police and even the army. Thousands die in police custody every year. Many are arrested on mere suspicion of having committed some petty theft. I know of any number of people among the elite in India who actively justify such acts. I also know many more who want the police to use third degree methods of punishment on their own servants if there is a theft in their house. All this in a bid to recover their stolen property expeditiously even when they have no real evidence that the theft is actually the servant's doing. Likewise, in the name of curbing insurgency, many innocents have been brutalised and murdered by our army in areas like Nagaland and Kashmir. Whole

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villages have been burnt down and thousands of women raped and killed by our soldiers in the Northeast. Thousands of people have simply "disappeared" after being taken into custody over the last few decades. Yet, such brutalities on our own people by our own police and our own army have rarely evoked similar outrage or condemnation. (*For details see the reports listed in the footnote*)\*

- \*1. *Disturbed Areas of the North-East*, PUDR, January 1983.
2. *Voices From Kashmir*, MANUSHI 83, 1994.
3. Report by Justice D.M.Sen on Kohima Firing, 1995.
4. *Army in Nagaland, Finding of an Enquiry Commission on Killing, Rape and Arson*, PUDR, 1996.
5. Proceedings of the workshop on the *Impact of Militarisation and the Imposition of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act*, The Other Media, 1996.
6. *Where Peacekeepers Have Declared War*, The National Campaign Committee on the Repeal of Armed Forces Special Powers, The Other Media Act, 1997.
7. "We Need a Surgeon's Knife, not a Butcher's...", MANUSHI 103, 1997.
8. *Right to Life in Manipur*, Committee on Human Rights, Feb. 1997.
9. *Civil War and Uncivil Government*, A Report by People's Union for Democratic Rights, MANUSHI 104, 1998.
10. *An Illusion of Justice*, Supreme Court judgement on the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, May 1998.

If significant sections of our society had demonstrated similar outrage and condemnation at the violence inflicted by our police and security forces on many vulnerable sections of our own citizens, perhaps we would not be facing long and drawn out insurgencies in certain regions. Prolonged army rule, with all the excesses that go with it, turned many people against the Indian state. If the general population in Kashmir had not felt so disenchanted with the Indian state for treating them with such mistrust and disdain, Pakistan would never have succeeded as much as it has in creating trouble for us in Kashmir.

### **Misuse of the Army**

And if the army's actions had been subjected to fair, thorough and appropriate scrutiny all these years, we would have a more efficient army, with fewer intelligence failures. It ought to be a matter of great concern that hundreds of thousands of army men have been for years deployed to quell internal rebellions rather than guard our borders — their actual mandate. Those soldiers risk demoralisation and loss of purpose. They feel frustrated engaged in warring on their own people. It is much more demoralising for an army to face the hostility of their own citizens as has been happening in Kashmir and the Northeast than to face an external enemy. We have debilitated our army considerably by misusing it for the wrong purposes. Ultimately, all this is the result of the short-sighted, venal politics being pursued by our national and regional leaders.

### **Plight of Border Villages**

Another sad revelation of the Kargil war which ought not to come as a surprise, is the sad state of our border villages. Rural areas in all of India are worse off than our miserably impoverished towns and cities.

However, the condition of border villages is far more pitiable because of the constant insecurity. Forces on both sides exchange intermittent fire which hits innocent civilians living in villages across the Line of Control more often than it does the opposing armies.

One consequence of this insecure atmosphere is that no one is willing to invest in any business or industry around those areas. Even government officials treat these villages with great disdain. Consequently, life for the people in such areas is truly harsh. It was only after the national and international press descended on these god-forsaken villages to report on the ongoing war that we were able to comprehend how woeful are the living conditions in these areas.

The reporters also had a tough time in these terribly deprived circumstances where any evidence of basic infrastructure is virtually non-existent. They had to make herculean efforts to send their reports to their papers because of the paucity and lack of functioning of telephone lines, the absence of electricity and running water and other such essential services. This forced the press to notice how callously the government reacted to the plight of these border villages even during this crisis. Here are a few samples of news snippets that appeared in the press recently:

A report from Malayan village in Kargil district tells us that when the inhabitants had to flee their village following heavy artillery fire, they were not even provided bare shelter by the government. They left their homes in panic. Consequently, they could not carry with them even essentials like warm clothes and utensils. They expected the government to help them till conditions became safe for them to return home. But nothing came by way of assistance. To quote 50 year old Noori, "We have become beggars

in our own country... we would have starved were it not for the kindness of the local villagers. They have fed us and allowed us to live in their own homes." The report goes on to add that most of the villagers who have migrated from Malayan are suffering from malnutrition, gastroenteritis and scabies. (*The Indian Express*, June 25)

In most places free food camps (*langars*) were organised by local people.

It was voluntary organisations who have come to the rescue of the thousands of starving border migrants camping at various schools on the outskirts of Jammu region. Though government officials and politicians made the mandatory rounds of these camps, assuring the migrants of immediate relief, those promises were not honoured. Government did announce a relief package for the uprooted people consisting of 5 kg grain per person and 5 litres of kerosene per month. But in many places even this inadequate amount failed to appear on time. The business community of the Jammu region pooled money to organise *langars* for the people putting up at various makeshift camps.

Through this period, we have watched the state government pass on the buck to the Central government, arguing that their failure to provide adequate relief was due to paucity of funds and that they were awaiting more central assistance. The Central government, on its part, is too busy making political capital out of this war to bother much about the plight of its already vulnerable citizens in border areas.

Even during quiet times their lives in this area are difficult. In winter, the temperature drops to minus 50 degrees celsius. They live in mud houses that are completely sealed off for seven months. They live with their cattle on the same



floor to get some warmth generated through the animals' body heat. They stock up food like *sattu* (roasted barley flour) and survive on salt tea with yak milk. Health facilities in the area are negligible even in normal times. During war times even the little that is available breaks down. News reports talk of premature deliveries and higher maternal mortality rates since virtually no post-natal care is available to them. The already skeletal health delivery system is being deserted by doctors who have moved away to safer areas.

Even those border villages of Punjab which are situated in normal terrain don't fare any better.

For example, a report from village Simbal-Scole off the Gurdaspur border told us that fear and tension run through the lives of the villagers as the battle rages on the border and monsoon threatens to flood the rivers. While gunshots from Pakistan threaten them on one side, flooding rivers do so on the other. Just 50 meters separate the village from Pakistan and three small rivers cut them off from India. The Ujh, the Uni and the Tarnah are already widening their course before meeting the Ravi. In a few weeks, they will overflow as they normally do every year. And if the fighting spills over, the villagers have no escape routes. Their only boat lies broken and abandoned, their sole telephone has never worked since its installation three years ago. The village elder says, "*Je baad aaye, pehle sada number, je ladai shuru hoyegi, pher bhi pehle sada number*, (If the floods come, we will be the first to die. If the war starts, we'll be the first to die.)"

The battle at the border has derailed their lives. Those who migrated and returned have belatedly started planting their

paddy. Shopkeepers have stopped giving the customary credit for the purchase of fertilisers. Traders are not ready to take any risk.

Many women have been forced to pawn their jewellery to buy agricultural essentials like manure. To reach the village, it is necessary to take a detour from Pathankot to Kathua in J&K, as there is no connecting bridge across the river Ravi. They have to cross the rivers to reach the nearest hospital and school. Every monsoon they are marooned, and subsist on a diet of potatoes, pickles and roti. (*The Indian Express*, July 7, 1999)

Another report from Devi Garh tells us that Swarno, whose husband is bed-ridden since 1971 after he sustained injuries while fleeing his village before the war, has had no help coming to her from the government. Even during this crisis, she herself had to carry him in a bullock cart to a camp. "I do not even have enough money for a *kafan* (shroud) if he dies," she says.

Most villagers are at the brink of destitutions because they have not been able to cultivate their land because of persistent firing. The uncertainty of sowing and harvesting has forced many to take up menial jobs in and around their villages. Some of them feel even a war would be preferable to this continuous insecurity. At least during war, the government has to pay some attention to their plight because of increased media attention.

A large number of people who left their villages during this period had to live with relatives and friends but some have no where to go and took shelter in government buildings. At many places up to 10 families were sharing a single room. In most places there is no electricity, no bathroom, no water. Many reported that they were given slips

stating their entitlement for ration but those slips brought forth no food supplies.

"The focus of the entire nation is on Kargil, and deservedly so, but the nation should not forget that we too are suffering for the nation's cause and deserve some attention," says Janak Raj, of Devi Garh whose only source of livelihood - two buffalos - were killed in the firing from across the border." (*The Indian Express*, July 2, 1999)

Reading reports of this kind one cannot help but ask, is this war being fought only for territory? When will people living in that area begin to matter to the "defenders of the nation?" How does one deal with the callousness of the government which is unable to even provide adequate food and shelter to citizens who have been rendered homeless on account of this war?

Most importantly, what does it mean to be an Indian citizen? What does it actually entitle people to, at a very minimum? What advantages, guarantees, securities and entitlements come with being an Indian citizen? If people are expected to fend for themselves even during those times when a war is imposed on their area by the governments of the two countries, shattering their fragile economy and jeopardising their very lives, why then should it make any difference to them whether Pakistani state rules their territory or India?

Strong nations are built when people can see that the state provides them real security of life and property, provides them certain facilities as their minimum due, and that they can count on the state to come to their rescue in time of crisis and calamities—be it war or floods. If none of this can be counted on as a citizen's inalienable right, why have a government at all? □