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MILITARY

Religion in India's Army

Soldiers maintain a deep personal faith while seeking interreligious harmony

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It is well known that our troops mostly come from rural backgrounds and are religious by nature. Even India's troops from urban backgrounds and educated families have deep-rooted faith in their religions. As a result, religion forms an important part of a soldier's life. His faith inclines him to uphold his religious ideology, including his moral and ethical duties. Daily practice of his faith makes him a better human being. It helps in promoting self-discipline, reduces the stress factor of a soldier and overcomes the feeling of loneliness. Besides, religion is also considered as the single most important battle-winning factor. As with other modern armies, the Indian army has striven to meet the religious needs of all soldiers of all faiths in a harmonious spirit. In 2002, there were 980,000 active troops and 800,000 reservists in our army.

The routine religious activities of a unit temple--that is, a temple attached to an army unit--is just the same as we find in civilian life. Hindu soldiers celebrate Mangala Arati, Nitya Puja, Sandhya Aratrikam, etc. Havans (fire worship), special pujas and other services are performed according to the soldier's faith on holidays such as Dussehra, Deepavali, Janmashtami, Holi, Guruparab (Birthday of Guru Nanak), Christmas Eve, etc. For troops belonging to the Christian community, Church services are held on Sundays and holidays. Similarly, kirtan or bhajanas (devotional songs) are conducted on a regular basis in the temple for the Hindus as are Sabadh Kirtan and Gurbani in the Gurudwara of the Sikh regiment. It may come as a surprise that in Mathura and other cantonments of the pre-partition days, masjids (mosques) constructed for the troops of Muslim units of the undivided British Indian Army still continue to be maintained, often by the Hindu or

non-Muslim troops [Muslims comprise just two percent of the Indian army]. Id and other major Muslim celebrations are held regularly in these mosques under the supervision of a maulvi (Muslim priest). As a result, an atmosphere of perfect religious harmony and esprit de corps have existed in India's Armed Forces since the beginning.

The army includes religious teachers who are qualified priests in uniform with badges of rank in war, but permitted to put on civilian wear like any other civilian priest in normal circumstances. Their duties include religious discourses and lectures on values to the troops. Traditionally, these religious teachers come from brahmin families or priestly castes. They are adept in ritualistic worship. It is customary in most army units for a religious teacher to read out the horoscope of the unit on the Raising Day of the unit (anniversary of the unit's founding), to which the troops listen with rapt attention as it gives them an indication of the unit's likely performance during the rest of the year. Tying of the sacred thread on the wrists and applying vermilion tilak on the forehead of the soldiers by the religious teacher gives them a sense of purity and happiness. It also inculcates a sense of belonging to the unit.

Attendance or roll call is taken of the soldiers for the Mandir (temple) parade every Sunday and at important religious functions. This is how spiritual discipline is instilled in the soldiers. In a noncombat location, even the women and the children of our soldiers attend these functions. As the children of the soldiers grow up in such a close-knit family environment, many of them later join the Armed Forces. Even in the remote and high altitude mountainous terrain in the operational combat areas, a religious teacher visits the troops regularly, which enhances the morale of the troops greatly. In any case, a religious institution is also the place where exhausted, broken and desperate souls take refuge to recover their lost strength. Post-Korean War psychological research has shown that strong religious faith builds up mental resistance to brainwashing. Therefore, a religious institution such as a temple, gurudwara or church is authorised to every unit of our Armed Forces and preserved and maintained as such.

In this connection, the inspiring words of Swami Vivekananda uttered a century ago are most appropriate and still hold good: "Your forefathers underwent everything boldly, even death itself, but preserved their religion. Temple after temple was broken down by the foreign conquerors, but no sooner had the wave passed than the spire of the temple rose up again. Some of these old temples of Southern India and those like Somnath of Gujarat will teach you volumes of wisdom, will give you a keener insight into the history of the race than any amount of books. Mark how

these temples bear the marks of a hundred attacks and a hundred regenerations, continually destroyed and continually springing up out of the ruins, rejuvenated and strong as ever! That is the national mind, that is the national life-current. Follow it, and it leads to glory."

Hindu Observances: Some of the older and most famed Army regiments remain caste, religion or region based, with the religious observances of the regiment following its tradition. For example, the icon of Lord Vishnu, popularly known as Badri Vishal, installed at Badrinath in Garhwal, Uttar Pradesh, by Adi Shankaracharya, is the presiding deity of the Garhwal Rifles, an Infantry regiment of the Indian Army drawn from this area. Badri Vishal is worshipped in all the Battalions of the Garhwal Rifles. For the Garhwal Rifles personnel, Badrinath is of supreme significance. The name of Lord Badri even embellishes the Garhwal Rifles' war cry and is their ultimate motivating force.

The typical person from Garhwal is animated with intense religious fervor. As per Markandeya Purana, Goddess Durga is the powerful Deity who killed the demon king Mahishasura in a fierce battle and restored peace and tranquillity in heaven. The Goddess Durga is represented as a golden-colored Deity with ten hands having a gentle countenance, but according to other accounts the Goddess is having eight hands. Being the embodiment of shakti (strength), troops get a lot of happiness and derive inner strength by worshipping Her image. In all the battalions of the Garhwal Rifles, Goddess Durga with eight hands is worshipped. Within the Garhwal Rifles, Vijay Dashami or Dussehra in the month of September/October is the religious event of the year.

Garhwal Rifles units fully observe the festival for ten days, beginning with the ghatastahpana ceremony at the unit temple in which nine grains are set in a pot to germinate during the following days. On the ninth day is shastra puja, during which all the weapons of the unit armory are decorated with flowers and displayed in a square fashion in the center of the parade ground or an open space. Similar ritualistic celebrations with minor changes are performed during the Dussehra and Durga Puja days in all the battalions of Gorkha Regiments, Kumaon Regiment and other army units.

Another vital aspect which needs deliberation is the performance of various religious rites as described in our Holy Scriptures. These rites usually take the form of worshipping of arms, equipments, vehicles and musical instruments. Religious

rites are also performed before undertaking expeditions or going into the battle. It is equally important that mortal remains are properly laid to rest by organizing befitting funerals in the highest traditions of the army. In fact, this is the least that any army or a nation can do to pay their last respect to a martyr.

Battle Cries: The battle cries of the various regiments in the Army can be traced to deep-rooted faith of the troops in their presiding Deity or in their pride of belonging to their community. It is from a soldier's strong conviction in his religious faith or class composition that he gets the last ounce of his inner strength in battle. The deafening battle cries by the troops is the last act of final assault on the enemy with fixed bayonets. It is a do-or-die situation. While the battle cry revitalizes the inner strength and spirit of our own troops, it is also intended to totally demoralize the enemy and shatter his hopes of surviving.

For example, the battle cry of the Garhwal Rifles is "Badri Vishal lal ki ji, " "Victory to the Great Lord Badrinath." That of the Gorkha regiments is "Ayo Gorkhali, " "Here come the Gorkhas." The Sikh cry is "Bole so Nihal, Sat Sri Akal, " "He who cries 'God is Truth,' is ever victorious." The Jat regiment, who originate from Rajasthan, shout, "Jat balwan, Jai Bhagwan, " "The Jat (clan) is powerful, victory be to God." And the Dogra Regiment, raised from Jammu/Kashmir, cry, Jawala Mata ki jai, " "Victory to Goddess Jawala "--a popular form of Shakti in their area.

Religious Harmony: It is said that if one religion is true, then all the other religions also must be true. As such, every man should follow his own religion. A Christian should follow Christianity, a Muslim should follow Islam, and so on. Therefore, the true meaning of religious harmony is to allow every one the equal liberty to stand by his own religious faith and belief. A truly religious man should think that other religions, too, have so many paths leading to the Truth and maintain an attitude of respect and tolerance towards them. In fact, the spirit of religious tolerance in Hinduism is rooted in the Rig Veda statement, "Ekam sad viprah bakudha vadanti, " "One alone exists. Sages call that by different names." The idea that God can be realized through different spiritual paths has been taught through the ages by many saints. But Sri Ramakrishna, the great Indian teacher of the 19th century, is regarded as the prophet of religious harmony all over the world. It is through the fine cord of religious harmony that we come closer to each other and project a united front as a nation. Like all the centers of the Ramakrishna Order where important religious ceremonies of other religious faiths such as Guruparab (the birthday celebrations of Guru Nanak), Christmas Eve and New Year Day, etc., are celebrated in the true spirit of universality, such events are also held in the Armed Forces for promoting integrity and religious harmony amongst the troops belonging

to various compositions.

Religious Integration: It may be noted that the organization and composition of the Indian army is highly secular and apolitical. All religious practices are observed without any discrimination. After Partition, the Indian Army units, i.e., Battalion/Regiment (a composite fighting unit), inherited from the British Indian Army was based on caste and religion. However, during the pre-Partition days it was sufficient to have one religious teacher of the class composition in the unit. The religious practices were also restricted to that religion. After Independence, in keeping with the national policy, the class composition has undergone changes. While no changes have been made in the basic fighting regiments, the units of Technical and Supporting Arms and others of the Armed Services have been remodelled on a mixed-class basis. In order to maintain the religious sentiments of the troops, facilities have been provided to the religious institutions of all such units under the guidance of a Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christian priest. Troops of all religions are allowed leave of absence to practice their religions. Where the number exceeds more than a hundred of a particular faith, a religious teacher is provided. Discourses are held followed by community meals. Inside the cantonment area, these facilities are centralized as the Station Religious Institution and the functions are also managed as Military Station Functions.

In the Regimental and Training Centres, where basic training is imparted to the troops, these facilities are also centralized. It is compulsory for the recruits to attend. These occasions are used to inculcate in the young soldiers the feelings of religious integration, harmony and tolerance.

Training of the religious teacher is done in the Regimental and Training Centres. Although enrollment of religious teachers is made from the same background as the Regiment, grooming is done at the Centre so they fit in a multi-religious organization. Teaching includes all religious observances from birth to death. Teachings from the religious books are interpreted to inculcate moral values, social values and cultural values. The teachings are practiced and the required knowledge is ascertained through examinations. Customs and unwritten traditions of a religion are passed along as teachings. Also, trained religious teachers from the units are sent periodically for further education, freshening of knowledge and integration with other religions at the Institute of National Integration.

As a nation is composed of different states, religions, culture, caste and creed, so is

the case with the Armed Forces. It is a nation within India. Religious integration is made an instrument to inculcate the feeling of national integration. During their service tenure, the troops, though having varied religious background, live together, fight together and eat together--sometimes even from the same plate. An Indian soldier is fully trained to take his rightful place as a citizen in the country without any bias towards any religion. He shuns religious groups preaching religious dichotomy as he understands the true value of an individual and his religion.

Conclusion: It is observed that most of us tend to overlook the broader aspects of a religion and generally look at it from a narrow angle like a selfish man. We must not forget that as true Indians and responsible citizens we should treat all persons in the society alike irrespective of caste, creed or religion. Like a military commander or a true leader, we should lead from the front and take the masses along, or else, the country is bound to disintegrate. Therefore, we in the Armed Forces can ill afford to lose sight of this vital aspect and must always keep a close watch for any secessionist elements or divisive forces that may have crept in within the forces. Even though we in India pursue multiple religious faiths and at times fight with each other on petty issues, yet in times of national crisis or in the event of any foreign aggression, the people of our country have always displayed great solidarity and stood by the Armed Forces like a totally galvanized nation in the true spirit of national integration.

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The Tirukural on the "Merits of the Army" and "Military Pride"

The Great South Indian Tamil scripture on ethics, Tirukural, is 2,200 years old. Its 1,330 verses cover an astonishing range of topics, from the nature of God to the correct choosing of friends to how to run a kingdom, including the twenty verses here of chapters 77 and 78 on the military.

Foremost among a monarch's possessions stands a conquering army, complete and

fearless.

Only seasoned soldiers remain bravely determined when onslaughts decimate them and threaten defeat.

So what if a legion of rats roars like the raging sea? The mere hiss of a cobra will deaden their din.

Commanding a long tradition of valor, acquainted with neither defeat nor desertion--that defines an army.

That indeed is an army which stands together, even when faced with death's grim fury.

Valor, honor, trustworthiness and a tradition nobly upheld--these four are an army's protective armor.

Well-trained armed forces will withstand every attack, then outflank and storm the foe.

Even without a winning offense and defense, an army of splendid appearance may still win acclaim.

An army will prevail as long as there is no desertion, no privation and no contention.

Though courageous troops abound, there can be no army without commanders.

Dare you not, my enemies, to stand against my monarch! Many who did now stand as stone monuments.

It is more gratifying to carry a lance that missed an elephant than to hold an arrow that hit a thicket-dwelling rabbit.

Intrepid courage is what they call valor, and clemency toward the defeated is its sharp edge.

Having hurled his spear at a battlefield elephant, the hero found another piercing his side and grasped it with glee.

Is it not a disgraceful defeat to the courageous warrior if his defiant eyes so much as blink when a lance is hurled at him?

When recounting his days, the heroic soldier regards all those on which no battle scars were sustained as squandered.

To fasten the warrior's anklet on one who desires glory more than life is to decorate heroism with distinction.

Men of courage who do not fear for their lives in battle do not forfeit soldierly ardor, even if the king prohibits their fighting.

Who would dare deride as defeated men who die fulfilling valor's vow?

Heroic death that fills the sovereign's eyes with tears is worth begging for and then dying for.

Verses 761 to 780 of the
Tirukural, translation
by Himalayan Academy