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Issue Brief

Is Lowering Colour Service a Suitable Option?

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S*ummary*

This issue brief argues that the idea of lowering the colour service below pensionable service is a retrograde and an ill-advised measure to reduce the revenue expenditure. This step is likely to have a negative psychological and functional impact, which must remain the basis for evaluating any suggestion that has a direct bearing on the operational efficiency of the armed forces.

In recent years, there has been a debate around the need to reduce the revenue expenditure of the armed forces and more specifically the army, which is already facing severe fiscal challenge. This is borne by the fact that 82 per cent of its budget has been allocated for revenue and merely 18 per cent is available for capital expenditure, as per the 2020-21 budgetary outlay.¹ The underlying argument is indisputable given the unsustainability of growth in revenue allocations both in percentage and real terms. However, differences surface in relation to some of the specifics often suggested to overcome the challenge over time.

A recent article notes that “the *root cause of the exponential growth in defence pension is the change in the colour service* (or minimum engagement period) from earlier seven years to 17 years for a vast segment of PBORs [emphasis added].” The article adds that “the CDS needs to take a hard look at the current strength of uniformed personnel, and importantly *the colour service that decides the number of retirees eligible for pension* [emphasis added]. Needless to say that the current scenario in which there are 2.2 pensioners for every uniformed personnel is unsustainable for a balanced growth of India’s military capability.”² The argument made in the article is not new. Earlier, Bharat Karnad, a noted security expert, had argued in one of his articles that the colour service in the army needs to be reduced to five years.³

Numbers are important. They provide a context and a perspective. However, the logic of numbers can be misconstrued if the letters that represent them become more important than the spirit guiding them. There has traditionally been a debate between those who account and others who fight. Such debates rather than being dismissed, must inform and cross-pollinate opinions on both sides with alternative perspectives. It is through such lively discussions that policymakers can take decisions which are well-considered and informed.

In essence, the above mentioned writings call for a reduction in the colour service, which is the minimum prescribed number of years a soldier is bound to serve prior to retirement from the army. Presently, the period of colour service is 17 years, even as service in the armed forces become pensionable after completion of 15 years. This implies that every soldier serving for the minimum colour service is also eligible for pension.

This issue brief argues that the idea of lowering the colour service below pensionable service is a retrograde and an ill-advised measure to reduce the revenue expenditure. This step is likely to have a negative psychological and functional impact, which must remain the basis for evaluating any suggestion that has a direct bearing on the operational efficiency of the armed forces.

¹ Laxman Kumar Behera, [“India’s Defence Budget 2020-21”](#), *IDSA Issue Brief*, February 04, 2020 (Accessed February 05, 2020).

² Ibid.

³ Bharat Karnad, [“Army will be without arms...if it doesn’t revert to Five-year colour service”](#), *Security Wise*, July 22, 2018 (Accessed February 10, 2020).

Why Reducing Colour Service is Ill-Advised

The suggestion to reduce the pensionary outlay over time by lowering the colour service to seven years or a comparable timeframe is feasible in theory. However, it is important to understand the potential implications of the same. This is especially relevant for the non-uniformed fraternity, which may not be entirely familiar with the functioning of the most critical element of the armed forces, which is a battalion or a regiment, depending upon which arm or supporting arm/service one is referring to.⁴

The adverse impact of lowering of colour service will not only be felt at the structural and functional level but also the psychological level. Given that the latter is difficult to quantify, it often gets neglected. However, it is this intangible element of military effectiveness that deserves greater emphasis.

For the purpose of illustration, it would be prudent to take the example of an infantry battalion. Infantry is representative of the fighting arms of the Indian Army. Other examples include Armoured Corps and Artillery. The Infantry is also the most operationally committed, given its role along the Line of Control (LoC) and in counter-terrorism (CT) operations. It further boasts of the largest numbers amongst all arms and services of the army.

The Psychological Impact

How does high morale relate to battlefield performance? And, does morale correspond to a soldier's self-respect and a feeling of being cared for by the people of the country? This brief strongly argues in its favour and contends that these attributes create a positive psychological impact on the battlefield/conflict area performance. It leads to the manifestation of *josh* and helps build an ethos of excellence that drives a soldier to victory, despite facing obvious odds. It is perhaps this reason that despite fighting on the same battlefield, an equally well-equipped soldier from the opposing side gives up and retreats.

The impact of psychological conditioning on the performance of a soldier in conflict scenarios can be illustrated through a number of examples. This includes the Siachen Glacier where in 1984 troops climbed onto heights up to 20,000 feet without the requisite equipment and clothing. It is an area where even specialist mountaineers would find it difficult to negotiate a combination of altitude, low temperatures and inhospitable conditions. The soldiers achieved it in the face of enemy fire. Those aware of military history would know that all past attempts by Pakistan to dislodge the Indian Army from Siachen have failed including the one in 1987 led by then Brigadier Parvez Musharraf.⁵ A relatively more recent example

⁴ For instance, this fundamental element or organisational setup is referred to as a battalion in the infantry, and a regiment in the artillery and armoured corps, with each having numbers ranging approximately 500 to 800.

⁵ Andrew North, "[Siachen Dispute: India and Pakistan's Glacial Fight](#)", *BBC News*, April 12, 2014 (Accessed February 05, 2020).

includes soldiers fighting up the heights of Kargil in 1999, in an unequal battle. Unequal because the side that occupied the heights had an obvious advantage. Similarly, a well-sited machine gun on a commanding height can literally stop a battalion in its tracks. And yet the Indian Army prevailed in Kargil.

The effectiveness of India's armed forces is also borne by its ability to bring down violence in disturbed areas like Jammu and Kashmir, despite an ongoing hybrid war being waged by Pakistan. The challenges of dealing with mob violence in Haryana in November 2014 and again in February 2016 were handled with equal efficiency when all other administrative and police measures seemed to fail. Instances of armed forces playing a stellar role in areas hit by natural calamities, like the 2005 earthquake and 2014 floods in Kashmir, are too well known to call for any elaboration.

The aim of highlighting these examples is not to extoll the virtues of a particular uniformed segment in India. It is to reinforce that it takes motivation, morale, leadership, training, and the unseen aspect of service ethos to create an effective fighting body of men and women. And while pay and perks and privileges may not be the only foundational factor to develop these qualities, the honour and pride associated with being duly compensated remains a symbol of pride amongst the uniformed fraternity.

A key factor for building ethos is the self-respect of a soldier. An infantry soldier being released after seven years of service, which includes 18 months of basic training in the regimental centres (effective stay in battalions for four to five years), given his minimal educational qualification (usually Class X) and the limited experience and exposure to anything other than soldiering (involving counter-insurgency operations and training with his sub-unit like a 10 man team), will probably find himself standing outside a bank opening and closing doors for customers. This will not only lower his emoluments by a factor of three but more importantly his pride and self-respect. This is not the picture of an ex-serviceman anyone would like to visualise. Least of all, prospective soldiers who still join the army and the regiments of their forefathers to follow a way of life offered to them, irrespective of the potential cost they may have to pay in combat. They do so with the firm belief that their future and the future of their families will be guaranteed by the state.

The last thing on the mind of a soldier with six years of service should be his retention in the battalion the following year when he is sitting in an ambush waiting for terrorists. A commanding officer will baulk at the thought of a soldier who calculates the odds of going up the icy heights, given the possibility of his release from the army soon thereafter.

It needs emphasis that the colour service of a soldier has progressively been increased over the years from the 1960s and 70s to the present.⁶ This has not been done merely to give additional pay and perks to soldiers. Instead, it emerged from

⁶ Dilip Bobb, "[A Better Deal for the Indian Army](#)", *India Today*, March 31, 2015 (Accessed February 06, 2020). This article was originally published in the January 31, 1976 issue of the *India Today* magazine.

the series of wars fought in 1965 and 1971. It also took into account the deployment of soldiers in counterinsurgency operations in Nagaland in 1955, Mizoram in 1966, which only increased in the seventies and eighties given the disturbances in Manipur, Punjab, and Jammu and Kashmir, besides the constant state of cross-border firing along the LoC. The rationale to give pension was therefore anchored in the high intensity operations that the army was engaged in, and the resultant psychological impact it had on the soldiers. It goes to the extent that the Chief of Army Staff recently announced special pensions for Emergency and Short Service Commission officers as well.⁷ This indicates the importance given to this privilege for the armed forces by successive governments. Even as money may not make up for physical deprivations, the pride and support associated with a pension is undoubtedly an important psychological imperative to enhance functional efficiency and performance under the most trying operational conditions.

Structural Challenges

The second implication of reducing the colour service is functional, which emanates from the existing structure of a battalion. After decades of changes based on operational requirements and infusion of weapons and technology, the existing organisation of battalions has come into being. As part of the same, roles and responsibilities are assigned to officers, junior commissioned officers (JCOs), non-commissioned officers (NCOs), and other ranks. Unlike a number of other arms and services, an infantry soldier is general duty, or GD as he is often called. It implies that, to begin with, he is provided basic training that prepares him for fundamental responsibilities and combat skills. This does not include specialist responsibilities within a battalion, such as handling battlefield surveillance radars, frequency hopping secure radio sets, thermal imagers, planning and taking mortar shoots, etc. The selection for training in such specialist functions commences after six to seven years of service. While selection for specialist sub-units remains an important function in a battalion, it is not suggestive of the reduced importance of the others, who continue to man rifle companies as part of their platoons and sections. Therefore, to release a soldier at this stage is a waste of a valuable asset after years of training and investment.

Further, the existing rank structure allows promotions and upgradation only after a certain number of years of experience, qualification in training courses and other examinations. This commences yet again at around seven years of service. Any attempt to circumvent this would disrupt the organisational requirement of rank and service specific demands of a battalion. To give an example, a section commander is a Havildar (three stripes) and his section second in command a Naik (two stripes). A platoon commander who leads 36 men is a JCO, and so on.

It is not necessarily a young soldier with two to three years of service who is considered the fittest for battle – both psychologically and physically. It is more often

⁷ [“Army Plans Special Pensions for 1965, 1971 War Veterans: Indian Army Chief Naravane”](#), *The Economic Times*, January 17, 2020 (Accessed February 06, 2020).

a soldier with more than five years in the army who learns, matures and becomes more adept at soldierly responsibilities with age and service. The induction and training and grooming of soldiers is not based on their intake qualification (which is Class X), as much as on how a battalion grooms and moulds them. Incidentally, this is also true for cadets joining as young officers from respective academies. It is for this reason that an infantry battalion places more faith and trust on soldiers with a certain number of years behind them. If one still needed empirical evidence, a passing glance at the list of gallantry award winners would be suitably indicative of the reality.⁸

The Ghatak Platoon of an infantry battalion is the equivalent of Special Forces amongst the 800 odd men. They not only represent the pride but also the cutting edge of the battalion, trained for very special and challenging tasks. Yet again, the average service of a soldier selected to the Ghatak Platoon is rarely below five years. A large majority of them are senior and often qualified in the Ghatak course, which they do eight to 10 years after having been in the battalion and proved their physical and mental ability to operate individually and collectively in an operational environment.

Even if one were to consider the possibility of reducing the colour service to seven years, it would imply a much faster turnover of soldiers. That would, in turn, require the recruit training infrastructure to be increased substantially to cater for additional trainees. Further, it will increase the demand for instructors and support staff, virtually negating the logic of reducing the colour service.

The suggestion to reduce the colour service is probably being made keeping in mind the infantry and its large numbers. However, it is not clear whether the suggestion also seeks the release of technically qualified soldiers, airmen and sailors who form the backbone of the support superstructure of the three services. Propriety and logic suggests that if such a reduction is implemented, it would also have to be undertaken simultaneously in other arms and services (like signals and electronic and mechanical engineers) of the army, some of which primarily have technically qualified, and highly educated and trained manpower. A similar case exists for the navy and the air force as well. This would incidentally include the staff that runs the engine rooms on a ship and maintains fighter aircraft.

⁸ The breakdown of awardees during the Kargil Conflict is Sepoys – 21 (It can also include those above seven years of service. This figure is not available. The rest mentioned hereafter have more than seven years of service. Lance Naik – 7, Naik – 12, Havildar – 19, Naib Subedar – 5 and Subedar – 6). The number of personnel below officer rank with more than seven years of service who have received gallantry awards during the Kargil Conflict is therefore likely to be more than two-and-a-half times than those who may have less than seven years of service. For further details, see [“Gallantry Awards”](#), *Ministry of Defence*, Government of India (Accessed February 12, 2020).

Alternatives

Having argued against the suggestion of lowering the colour service in the army, this issue brief sets out to suggest some alternatives to the same. And the need stems from the reality of fiscal challenges, especially in relation to the armed forces.

- The Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), General Bipin Rawat, recently suggested that the retirement age of soldiers in the armed forces should be raised to reduce the pension liability of the government.⁹ In doing so, he reverses the argument of lower colour service. This is especially relevant for technically oriented arms and services like the corps of signals and electronics and mechanical engineers, where the specialist skills of soldiers remain useful well beyond the initial years, and the demands on physically challenging operations is relatively lower than the infantry.
- The second alternative relates to the lateral entry of soldiers into central police organisations and the state police.¹⁰ This will give them the requisite length of service to secure themselves financially and provide the recipient organisation with trained soldiers without the gestation period of recruitment and initial training. It will simultaneously reduce their pension liability, given the extended service they will undergo.
- The suggestion of releasing soldiers at seven years of service can be an option for a few. However, this should be a result of an individual's choice and the willingness of the army to relieve them on a case by case basis, provided it does not adversely affect the operational efficiency of the regiment. This voluntary option can be taken up, given the possibility of employment available in alternate avenues outside the uniform. For such cases, a lump sum compensatory payment and training in a field of their choice can be included as a support measure. This may well work in areas where job opportunities are better.
- The army has been deployed in CT operations for a number of decades. Over the years, additional Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) battalions have been raised. These battalions have played a commendable role in the fight against left-wing extremism (LWE). The existing role of the army in CT operations can further be reduced by progressively deploying CRPF battalions in CT areas. Over time, this will allow greater cost-cutting within the army given the specific costs of CT operations and the additional numbers that have been raised to cater for it. This includes Rashtriya Rifles. The Chief of Army Staff, General M.M. Naravane, has already indicated his intent to progressively pull

⁹ Amrika Nayak Dutta, [“Retirement Age of Military Personnel should be Raised to 58, Says CDS Bipin Rawat”](#), *The Print*, February 04, 2020 [Accessed February 05, 2020].

¹⁰ [“Review of Implementation Status of Group of Ministers \(GoMs\) Report on Reforming National Security System in Pursuance to Kargil Review Committee Report—A Special Reference to Management of Defence”](#), Standing Committee on Defence (2006-07), Twenty-Second Report, Fourteenth Lok Sabha, *Lok Sabha Secretariat*, New Delhi, July 2007, p. 36 [Accessed February 05, 2020].

out the army from counter-insurgency duties from the Northeast.¹¹ This could potentially open the possibility of reducing numbers, thereby helping control revenue expenditure.

- The post of CDS has been created to ensure rationalisation. This will include common pools which can be employed by all three services for training, logistics and revenue intensive procurements for maintenance. This is likely to further reduce the revenue expenditure of the armed forces.
- In addition to these suggestions, it is incumbent on the armed forces to reduce the cost of operations within. This can be done through structural changes, which are being undertaken in earnest through greater jointness, indigenisation of defence production and removing redundancies. This effort deserves the full support of the government to ensure optimum results. The initiative to reduce officers in the Army Headquarters, rationalising numbers within field formations, looking at the option of joint theatre commands are all steps in this direction. This will help reduce numbers, thereby lowering both the pay and allowances and pension costs, which is a better option than keeping the existing size of the army and lowering the colour service of the soldiers.
- The financial cost of maintaining the armed forces is dependent on the responsibilities and threats envisaged and capabilities that need to be created. This, in turn, relates to the size and equipment profile of the armed forces, further linking it to the cost of maintaining the same. It has, therefore, become critical to co-relate the changing character of war to the role and responsibilities of the armed forces and therefore their equipment profile. If the ongoing hybrid war is the present and future of war in a foreseeable time frame, should the armed forces make a two-and-a-half front war scenario the basis of their equipping policy? Similarly, if war between major nuclear powers is increasingly becoming unlikely, especially given the limited gains that may accrue at its termination, should the size and composition of the forces remain as it is? While deterrence against conventional misadventures is well understood and appreciated, can the majority of resources remain locked into structures and equipment that are unlikely to be employed? These are no easy answers to these questions. However, when competing realities create a decision dilemma, it is possibly time that more such questions are raised, not merely within the armed forces, but also the government. And ideally, the focus and direction that should govern such options and alternatives, must flow from a clearly articulated national security strategy.

¹¹ Kairvy Grewal, [“Army will pull forces out of internal security duties in Northeast: Gen MM Naravane”](#), *The Print*, January 29, 2020 (Accessed February 12, 2020).

Conclusion

The international and domestic economic conditions are indicative of a degree of stress, even if these are transient. This is accompanied by the simultaneous requirement of preparing and defending India against external and internal threats. It includes challenges along unresolved western and northern borders, which demands a high state of preparedness of the armed forces. In addition, India faces cross-border terrorism from Pakistan. This has led to the duality of responsibilities to include both conventional and sub-conventional challenges. In addition, it required the army to raise and maintain a paramilitary force, the Rashtriya Rifles. The armed forces are also employed in other disturbed areas of the country to fight internal security challenges, as is the case with some states in Northeast India.

However, it remains an important priority to reduce revenue expenditure with the larger aim of bringing greater efficiency and releasing more funds for modernisation of the armed forces. Modernisation is a critical requirement for maintaining a world class organisation, given the nature of challenges faced by the country. All the more imperative, since the armed forces are often seen as an instrument of last resort in times of national crisis. Any endeavour to reduce revenue expenditure should be an exercise that must not only look at options that will make account books look healthier, but also ensure that the health of the armed forces is not compromised. An approach that ensures the operational effectiveness of the armed forces, while enhancing the percentage of the capital budget through a process of reprioritisation and reducing redundancies, is a better option.

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