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## MANAGING SOCIAL CHANGE - DO WE NEED A FRESH APPROACH TO WELFARE

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*"Ignoring or denying social change has enormous cost and operational implications for the armed forces, for whom the 'ostrich position' is not a credible long-term choice"*

(Breaking Ranks - Social Change in Military Communities Christopher Jessup; London; Brasscys, 1996)

### **Introduction**

The armed forces of our nation, modelled on the pre-independence British structure, have

functioned as total institutions, in the sense that, owing to their unique ethos they are able to determine not only the working life of individual members but also their private and family life to a considerable extent. Such a characteristic is used by the organization to promote cohesiveness and community well-being among its members in order to reap the resultant benefits of high morale. Military morals encourage systems and ethos that bring out voluntary participation in community activities from its members and their families as well. The military

seeks total and undivided loyalty from them as it sees an obvious interest in utilizing this feature for retention of organisational effectiveness. Most members of the Services are thus highly institutionalised in the sense that they surrender a large degree of control over their lives to the organisation, pledging allegiance to its values. In the bargain, military institutions adopt a paternalistic and benevolent approach towards the welfare of its members, including the associate members - the families, wherein it is endeavoured to proffer institutional services which holistically fulfil the 'lower order' as well as 'higher order' needs of its constituents. The IN has, over the years, made steady progress towards this objective, albeit with varying results. Starting as a very small service with just a couple of major stations, the IN has grown over the decades to create a unique identity for itself on the national canvas. Synonymous to this growth has been the increased presence in various stations, primarily in urban coastal locations. The geographical expansion of the 'silent service' is only a natural consequence of the growing operational presence and enhanced reach, in pursuance of national security objectives. While we move from one operational achievement to another, it could be interesting to take a hard look and examine our present system of community welfare, which directly bears upon personnel motivation levels. Does the current system comprehensively address the challenges emerging anew to our social structure? Can the present system do justice to the demands stemming out of social variables, cultural dissonance and rising aspirations of our personnel? Shall we be able to retain our edge by successfully adapting to the changing characteristics of both - the uniformed personnel and their families? Will our much-vouched system of 'institutional welfare' remain effective in attracting quality recruitment and improve retention of meticulously trained talent? Or do we need to change tack with the wind and tide of social change?

Is it time to actually evolve a system that can diametrically serve the needs of the naval community in the 21 century?

### **The Present Arrangement**

In the present structure, the issues of personal and family welfare are broadly addressed in a two-fold fashion. The first among these is the time-tested' Divisional System, which is applicable more to the uniformed members. Succinctly put, this system ensures that serving personnel have a paternalistic hierarchy of superiors available to look after their welfare, offer counsel and proactively perform those functions, which could improve motivation and morale. In the wider domain, at the station level, are institutions, services and forums, which are available to the community members to address a variety of needs. This component is addressed at the Command/station level for quicker implementation and better administration. Highly subsidized housing, free medical facilities, schools, canteens, tax exempted alcohol, free rations etc are some examples of material benefits which are available all over the Service. In addition, the NWWA, which is the mainstay of family welfare in the IN, prominently addresses issues like special education, literacy, women empowerment, self-employment, charity, counselling etc. The NWWA, which is based on voluntary contribution by wives of serving personnel, has rendered yeoman service in times of crisis and otherwise. Initiatives like Sankalp, Sparsh, and Sahara etc have received wide acclaim. Dedicated efforts have been made at Command/Station within the internal resources to strengthen both - the Divisional System and community welfare activities through the NWWA. The big question confronting us today is - given the factors like prolonged family separations in the sea going community, frequent geographical moves, intense cultural changes, recurring cases of domestic violence, juvenile crime, rising aspirations of spouses, high awareness/



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expectation levels in recruits and the constraint of married accommodation, is it time to look for futuristic solutions?

## Emerging Challenges

The challenges that have emerged to the symbiotic relationship between the Service and its personnel are a reflection on the rapidly transforming social dynamics of our nation. The traditional relationship between the Service and the families is one of mutual benefit. Acknowledging the peculiar demands of military service, the IN has traditionally provided facilities and opportunities to serving members and families that are superior to those available to others with comparable background in the civil world. For majority of personnel who come from the rural or semi urban backyards of our country, the naval environment has been a goldfish bowl of progress. In return, the Service has rightfully expected total commitment from its personnel. This expectation is also extended to the families in terms of lifestyles and patterns of behaviour which fall within the naval ethos. In the face of the compelling social changes, what are the issues that are emerging as challenges to the unique social structure of our Service?

## Family Relationships

Sooner or later, most serving personnel get married and raise a family. The relationship of the service person with his family members has been normally treated as a matter within the 'private domain'. This is with due regard to the privacy of individuals. However, it is perhaps the single most significant factor which has a direct bearing on the individual's emotional health. Let us see which aspects of family relationship can deeply affect the individual's work effectiveness, thus necessitating attention from the Service.

- (a) **Marriage.** Marriage in the Navy is more than just a conjugal relationship between a man and a woman. Marriage brings about a sea change in a person's approach

and outlook to work and life. It creates an order in which the individual plans his life and attempts to realise his aspirations. In the Navy, it makes him feel as a complete member of the Service community. Healthy marriages are immensely beneficial to the Service because they accord stability, control and sense of purpose to the members. As our society slowly acquires many features of the western world, it is experiencing increasing rate of marital disaffection and divorce. Moreover, in many instances marriages in the Service are exposed to a variety of situations and circumstances, which impose stresses that are unique to military life. Though no data exists in the public domain about the rate of divorce in the IN, it may not be preposterous to state that a significant number of marriages undergo turbulence of varying proportions. Many such marriages could be salvaged or repaired by clinical counselling and professional advice. The transregional representation of our recruited personnel, along with the inherent problems arising out of caste/feudal traditions makes this task highly complicated. The effectiveness of the Divisional system or for that matter the NWWA in marriage counselling is limited. This limitation is more due to the natural inhibition in individuals to share unhappy private matters with their own work associates. Moreover, the Divisional system has its own constraints. The preoccupation of the Divisional superiors with operational or professional matters can shadow Divisional functions. On seagoing units, especially operational Fleet units, the interaction of the Divisional Officer with the families of sailors, to the extent that they can earn their trust for marital counselling, may actually be an impractical expectation. The NWWA does run counselling services under programmes like 'Sakhi'; but even here, it is an



observation that many personnel resent the idea of their spouses seeking counselling assistance, on the grounds that the possible disclosure of 'family problems' may not augur well for their careers. Moreover, in many cases the counsellors in such situations are Service wives, who themselves are prone to transfers and geographical moves. Therefore it is of prudence to have qualified clinical counsellors to offer confidential and apprehension free advice to the affected parties. Neutrality and confidentiality are basic prerequisites for effective counselling. Another spin off, related to marital relationships, is the aspect of litigation. Instances have occurred when serving individuals have got embroiled in protracted legal battles with their spouses involving charges of dowry, harassment, infidelity etc. In such circumstances, the matter being subjudice in civil courts, the serving individual has to sources-legal assistance from civil lawyers to present his case. Such individuals naturally get distracted from work as they find themselves drawn in a difficult world of legal procedures. Ideally, it could be highly beneficial if at least preliminary legal assistance and guidance were available from the Service, as a facility for individuals involved in litigation to chart their legal plans. In the present arrangement, such advice would be expected to come from within the Divisional system, which lacks the professional expertise in matters involving civil law. Therefore, such advocacy, among others would naturally be an integral component in the revision of the welfare service being proposed.

(b) **Separation.** Separation of serving personnel from their families for varying durations is an integral feature of military life. In our Navy, a variety of factors such as operational deployments of seagoing units,

unaccompanied temporary duties, training courses and non-availability of married accommodation can lead to separation. Separation is generally accepted as *fait accompli* and managed differently as per individual needs. The nature of support provided to 'separated' households by Service organisations has been normally limited to the institution of 'liaison cells'. These liaison cells have different charters as per the needs of various units or organisations. In some cases, the efficacy of such liaison cells' can become questionable given the fact that they operate on expropriated resources like manpower, transport, office space, telephone etc which are often meagre. In any case, no amount of material support to separated families could possibly train them in effective separation management. Management of separation can be an intense experience for many inexperienced families. In today's scenario, the remaining partner has to rely heavily on the support extended voluntarily by the network of friends, shipmates or work colleagues of the absentee. Hence the need to holistically treat the issue of separation induced due to Service exigencies is real. As the operational units of the IN spend more and more time at sea with each passing year, separation management is an issue, which we will certainly have to come to terms with. This kind of counselling assistance will have to form a part of the standardisation of family welfare services under proposition.

(c) **Juvenile Issues.** In the IN, one of the primary incentives for many personnel for re-engagement is the progressive atmosphere and good quality schooling/education facilities available for dependant children. The presence of school going children in the naval community throws up a host of issues. Not all parents find themselves in an advantageous position to guide their children in coping up



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with pressures of modern day English medium schooling. Failure of the child at school leading to disinterest and vagrancy can be a highly stressful experience of any well meaning parent. Aggravated by the negative influences of urban living, cases of vagabond behaviour and juvenile crime among children of serving personnel are not uncommon. In the recent past, a long list of such children of serving personnel found indulging in peccadilloes within naval premises was published in the daily order of one of the Commands. This is only an indicator of the serious nature of the problem and the pressing need to address it institutionally. It may be desirable to factor juvenile counselling and student academic guidance in the revamp of welfare service under proposition.

(d) **Spouse Employment.** The winds of economic and social change in our country blowing since the advent of liberalisation have thrown open the doors of opportunity for many a skilled individual. Wives of Service personnel, who represent the exuberance and diversity of Indian society, are no exception. Hitherto, the institutionally encouraged role for service wives has been limited to volunteers for community welfare activities and paid employment in service run schools. The significance of these roles for the well being of the naval community cannot be over emphasised. Moreover, the total inclusion of service wives in these roles helps the organisation to strengthen the function of social integration. However, an objective assessment will reveal that the aspirations of many wives go beyond volunteering for community welfare. Many wives see themselves as 'career-worthy' and strive to assume an earning role for themselves. Till now, this issue has been completely left in the private

domain of the service member. However, experience of militaries in some developed countries has brought out that institutional assistance to spouses for seeking paid employment is a major motivating factor, which improves the family's trust in the organisation. This assistance could actually be limited to provision of local employment information, maintenance of data bank, display of job listings/classified advertisements, resume compilation, career counselling etc. For career aspiring wives who grapple with frequent geographical moves and family unsettlement, this type of institutional assistance could be truly welcome and reinforcing.

**Service Housing.** Housing shortage continues to be a cause of concern and an issue with evasive answers in the context of welfare, especially in major metropolitan stations of the Navy. Despite concerted efforts at various levels, the rapid growth of the Service, coupled with difficulties of urban space management, has precluded a satisfactory solution to the married accommodation crisis. The recently approved Married Accommodation Project (MAP) has shown a ray of hope for the Services. Subsidised housing plays a very crucial role towards fulfilment of personal requirements. Civil accommodation where available, either self-rented or service hired, are very far off from Naval premises, thereby adding a new dimension to the challenge posed towards achievement of welfare objectives. Physical detachment of families from Service premises is a paradox in the context of community development. It hampers implementation of proactive welfare policies thus affecting the generation of bonhomie and social cohesiveness. Stress resulting from shortage or lack of married accommodation and consequent hoc arrangements like 'sharing' and protracted existence in transit facilities needs to be addressed scientifically and clinically.



## Trauma and Stress Management

The demands of military life are many and often unique. They can create tall orders on the serving members who are expected to give their one hundred per cent at work. Moreover, many of our recruited personnel and their families undergo an intense cultural transformation when they adapt and adjust to the cosmopolitan, liberal and secular environment of the Navy as compared to the feudal, caste ridden cultures prevalent in the regional heartlands of India. The conflict between the tradition-dictated ethos and the demands of progressive communal living might result in coping problems for many. Also, sustaining adult relationships in such exacting circumstances, while maintaining high standards of professional competence, can be a tight-rope act. It is not uncommon to come across cases of psychological trauma caused due to bereavement or privation. Isolated cases of adultery, child abuse, molestation, incest and unnatural offences do occasionally rear their heads in the society. While the law deals effectively with the offenders, it is of paramount importance to extend clinical counselling and emotional reassurance to the victims. For the uniformed personnel, the only available clinical option for addressing psychiatric problems comes collaterally with a stigma enunciated by the infamous 'Form AFMS 10'. Acknowledging the impact of trauma and stress on the health of the Service community, provision for confidential and proactive family advocacy is the need of the hour.

## Searching for the Right Welfare Model

Human resource managers of almost all modern day navies are seized with community welfare as one of the top issues on their agenda. Time endured personal and community welfare models exist in almost all advanced navies. While the US Navy has its Fleet and Family Support Centres (FFSC) and Navy Family Ombudsman Program to assist the Commands in meeting readiness and retention goals,

the Royal Navy has its Naval and Personal Family Sendee (NPFS) and the Royal Marines Welfare (RMW), with similar objectives. These welfare agencies have been dedicatedly established to take care of all types of needs of Service personnel by providing clinical counselling, employment and transition assistance, family advocacy intervention, financial management, information and referral, relocation and other support services. The exhaustive nature of the services provided by the two most advanced navies to their personnel is readily apparent. However, it is not to be missed that these welfare agencies have grown to their present form with great difficulty. Internal opponents have questioned the utilisation of defence expenditure for 'welfare' and old-fashioned cynics have scorned at the contemporary servicemen who seem 'weak enough' to need such support. However, in both countries the overriding need to retain trained personnel has justified the expansion of welfare services within the navies. It can be inferred that, faced with a prospect of losing quality manpower due to disenchantment, the two advanced navies carried out the widespread review of welfare needs in the 1970s.

## Conclusion

The case for a dedicated and professional welfare service will not be without its share of objections in our Navy too. Critics and unsympathetic opinions are bound to question the need for a systemic revision. It may also be argued that enough is being done and 'overdose' of welfare may actually amount to imprudent expenditure. Moreover, creation of Navy-wide standard counselling infrastructure will require specific manpower and budgetary provisioning. Contracting qualified and experienced civilian counsellors may not be feasible in all stations. As seen earlier, the compulsions arising from the need to retain exorbitantly trained personnel prevailed over the fiscal and conceptual objections in the developed countries. Being a developing country, where the military is still a major



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employment attraction, we may not have reached a stage where retention of trained personnel is such a key issue; however a proactive thought in that direction may not be misplaced. With a fast pacing economy and dynamic markets, the national objective of joining the ranks of the developed world by 2020 does not seem a chimera. A blue water capability can only be sustained by a corresponding forward march in response to social changes. Emerging social challenges will have to be identified,

acknowledged and addressed. In this article, any attempt to suggest a new welfare model or structure for the IN is consciously being avoided because that itself will entail an exhaustive study demanding wide-ranging research. A systematic review and redressing of welfare needs will go a long way in sustaining that symbiotic relationship between the Navy and its community; which is echoed by the oft-repeated catchphrase 'the Navy cares for its own'. (Refers to para 18 of NO 24/95)

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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*While serving on board INS Delhi, I was the OOW on one of the morning watches when the starboard look out came rushing in and announced, "Sir FOCWF Saab bahar pare hue hain." I along with my Asst OOW rushed out to find the Fleet Commander lying still on a sheet in the Flag Bridge Wing. Like a good OOW I immediately summoned the PMO and the EXO to assess and initiate further action before we called the Captain.*

*Within second EXO, PMO, OOW, Asst OOW, look out and a few other onlookers were leaning over the Starboard bridge wing right above the Fleet Commander, and considering the next step. Just then he arose from his "Shav Assan" and saw the eight of us staring. Explanations were asked and given. Incidentally he always did yoga every morning and the Navigating Officer who usually did the Morning Watch had not handed over this part of the watch properly.*

*Contributed by Lt Gaurav Gautham*

