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Military Environment:  
An Appraisal

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# *Combat Motivation in Contemporary Military Environment: An Appraisal*

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**To every man upon this earth, death cometh soon or late.  
And how can man die better than facing fear full odds. For  
the ashes of his fathers, and temples of his gods.**

—Thomas B. Macaulay

## **Abstract**

Battlefield motivation and its manifestative nuances have always aroused interest among students of warfare. The article delves upon two fundamental approaches to combat motivation viz. religion centric and organisational ethos (Naam Namak Nishan Sentiment) driven. Combat motivation is a phenomenon that causes in a combatant an inner compulsion to fight on the battlefield. While religious motivation is regarded by many as the highest and purest form of motivation, it has certain evident pitfalls. At the same time combat motivation based on organisational ethos approach, derives strength from certain institutional values including secular credentials of the fighting force. However, this too has certain contextual limitations. It is therefore postulated that optimum battlefield motivation is an intangible virtue that rests on a scientific mix of personal (sum total of moral, social and religious) and organisational (professional and ethical) factors. Also, religion as a motivating factor is exceptional as long as it radiates inner strength to a soldier in combat situation, however, it loses its sheen when exploited to derive motivation by denigrating and demeaning the enemy and promoting them as 'enemies of own faith'.

**Keywords:** Combat Motivation, Religion Centric Motivation, Organisational Ethos, Optimum Battlefield Motivation, Leadership and Camaraderie

## **Introduction**

Consider the heroic act of the Ukrainian soldier Vitaly Skakun Volodymyrovych wherein he blew himself up while guarding a vital bridge connecting Crimea with mainland Ukraine, to impede the advancing Russian tanks during the ongoing Russia - Ukraine war (OpIndia, 2022). Also recollect the famous Battle of Rezang La, during the 1962 India-China war, wherein 120 men of Charlie company of 13 Kumaon led by Major Shaitan Singh stalled

about 1300 Chinese soldiers (Yadav, K. 2021)— 110 of these men eventually made the supreme sacrifice, thus preventing the loss of Chushul airfield. In the same league, one can also consider the Battle of Badr in 624 AD, Prophet's war with Quraysh tribe of Mecca wherein 313 untrained Muslims prevailed against 1000 seasoned soldiers (ibn Jubair, R., 2017).

While the above incidents have all resulted in favourable battlefield situation for the numerically inferior side, the fundamental reasons for a soldier's combat motivation in each case are inherently different. Whereas combat motivation in the first two instances was primarily based on nationalistic cause underscored by deeply ingrained organisational ethos, in case of the battle of Badr, victory was attained by invoking religious fervour. It is believed that success, in the latter scenario, was only possible due to divine intervention. Intrigued by the above phenomena, the article aims at developing a nuanced understanding of combat motivation in the contemporary era with a view to extract some pragmatic postulates for the Indian context.

## Battlefield Motivation: Concept and Drivers

**Deh Shiva bar mohe ihai, shubh karman se kabhu na taraun, Na  
daron arr siyoo jab jab jai laroon, nischai kar apni jeet  
karaun...**

— Shri Guru Govind Singh Ji

Motivation in combat may be defined as “conscious or unconscious calculation by the combat soldier of the material or spiritual benefits and costs likely to be attached to the various courses of actions arising from his assigned combat tasks”(Kellet, A., 2013). Simplistically stating, combat motivation is the phenomenon that causes an inner compulsion to fight on the battlefield. In general, the factors driving motivation in war zone can be grouped under two broad categories— external and internal.

### External Factors

All those factors which are facilitated by the environment can be categorised as external in nature. These factors, while not naturally intrinsic to man's behaviour, are purposely cultivated by a nation or organisation so that it results in combat motivation.

- **Nationalism.** A distinct characteristic of nation states which binds its citizens in a feeling of love, belongingness and willingness to sacrifice. Most modern wars have banked on combat motivation based on nationalism.

- **Organisational Ethos.** These are the ideals that a professional organisation instills among its employees to develop faithful behaviour. Once inculcated properly, individual strives and even fights to uphold the sanctity of these ideals. Aspects like organisational prestige, regiment/ unit pride, esprit -de- corps form vital ingredients of this component. While the feeling of nationalism is an overarching concept and applicable to all citizens of the nation, it is organisational ethos that actually binds any fighting force/soldiers on ground.
- **Leadership.** It is one of the most important factors causing motivation on battlefield. An inspiring leader who leads from the front can well be the difference between victory and defeat.
- **Information environment.** Information flow needs to be carefully calibrated during combat. Feeding uplifting information may instantaneously motivate troops whereas demoralising news can do the exact opposite.
- **Rewards/ Recognition/ Institutional Support for Next of Kin.** While an honest soldier seldom fights for want of any reward or recognition, however, the fact that his gallant act will be valued by his nation and society and his next of kin will be looked after in case of an adverse eventuality, is good enough for him to do his duty with motivation.
- **Legal Protection.** With conflict situations becoming more and more complex, owing to varied dimensions of human rights, a soldier needs to be well assured of his legal protection before committing himself holistically to the situation at hand.

### **Intrinsic Factors**

In contrast to extraneous factors, intrinsic factors need not be cultivated but only channelised appropriately. Being related to one's basic nature, these are also difficult to change or influence, however once shaped in the desired manner they have the potential to outweigh all extraneous factors.

- **Religious Ideology.** Arousing battlefield motivation through religious ideology has been an ancient practice. Often related to the higher calling viz. religion- based motivation, offers a divine exaltation that seemingly outshines other motivational theories. The issue will be discussed in detail further in the article.
- **Region/ Community/ Identity based Cohesion.** Feelings of inherent affinity arising out of regional/ communal/ clan-based similarities also contribute towards motivation on battlefield. Composition of army battalions based on region/community/identity is an

example of this aspect.

- ***Personal Morality.*** Personal morality of a soldier is a crucial determinant of his behaviour in combat. Morality is the sum total of his growing up environment and subsequent influences— both personal and professional.

## **Religious Ideology and Organisational Ethos As Driving Forces in Combat Situations: A Comparative Analysis**

### ***Battlefield Motivation through Religious Ideology***

Invoking religious ideology for motivation on the battlefield is not a new phenomenon. Fighting and even giving up one's life for preserving the God's glory results in the highest and purest form of motivation which can inspire and impel humans to endure abnormal hardships. The above fact is distinctly evident through both historical wars like the Crusades, Islamic Expansions, the Reformations etc. and even modern conflicts like the Israel - Palestine conflict, War in Afghanistan, Iraq War, Global war on terrorism etc. Certain overarching characteristics of this war waging philosophy are elucidated below.

- ***Superior Impact.*** Working towards furthering the god's purpose is the highest form of obligation for any mortal person. Being the highest form of calling, the comparative advantage gained by exploiting a religious vis-a-vis purely nationalistic narrative explains why most state and non- state actors try to impart a religious colour to their politically intended conflicts. Mujahidin struggle against the Soviets in Afghanistan, Al- Qaeda's war against the west and Taliban's war against the coalition forces, are precise examples of the above aspect.
- ***National cause as a subset of religious cause.*** Nations like Pakistan, which are founded on an overarching religious ideology, go to the extent that they subsume nationalist cause within the dominant religious narrative. This is clearly evident from repeated proclamations made by its political masters. Consider the statement made by Musharraf during Op Parakram in the year 2001— "Pakistan Islam ka Qila hai" (Fair, C.C., 2014) meaning, Pakistan is the fort of Islam and any attempt at attacking its territory will be akin to attacking the home of Islam. Accordingly, Pakistan depicts all conflicts with India as defensive Jihad to defend Pakistan— the edifice of Islam (Fair, C.C., 2014).
- ***Religious Morality may Overrule Professional Merit.*** Nations wherein overarching premium is attached to religious propriety and protocols, professional considerations



may sometimes be relegated to lower priority and decisions may be guided by non-military considerations. The role of religious Evaluation, in the professional reports of officers, at every level in Pakistan Army (as introduced by Former President of Pakistan, Zia-ul-Haq) hints towards the above.

- **Limitations and leverages on the battlefield.** Even the most professional armies are conscious against inciting religious motivation of the target nation. They forego the military advantages envisaged through manoeuvres across tactically important but religiously sensitive areas. Opponents, at the same time, extract leverage out of the above consideration. During Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm, coalition forces took great care so as to avoid desecration of holy sites even at the cost of overlooking destruction of certain vital combat assets which Saddam Hussein deliberately placed there (Wrigley, 1996).

### **Pitfalls of Religious Motivation philosophy**

Notwithstanding the profound and unmatched impact of religious motivation on the battlefield, there are certain distinctly visible implications of relying purely on religious motivation during war. Invoking religious fervour during battle by a nation entails a long and deliberate inculcation of religious fundamentalism and radicalism among its troops. Pakistan army demonstrates this phenomenon (ORF, 2007).

Invoking religion for motivation also requires framing the adversary as a religious /ideological adversary vis- a- vis a belligerent. Pakistan for example showcases this aspect by denigrating its adversary India as the enemy of Islam. To actualise this theory, it reduces the diverse Indian Army into solely a Hindu force (Fair, C.C., 2014). The same was also evident during the 1971 war when President Yahya Khan motivated his soldiers by calling Mukti Bahini a Kaffir army (Fair, C.C., 2014).

### **Battlefield Motivation through Organisational Ethos (Naam Namak Nishan Sentiment)**

While nationalism is an overarching sentiment guiding individual and collective actions towards the nation's integrity, wellbeing and prosperity, at the functional level, it is the organisational ethos that keeps the soldier going during combat. Certain salient characteristics of the phenomenon are discussed below.

- **Pillars of Organizational Ethos model.** Combat motivation under the structure of organisational ethos derives strength from certain basic neutral pillars such as unit and

regiment spirit, pride in the unit's class composition, camaraderie/ esprit -de-corps and last but not the least bond between the leader and the led. These are values that a soldier lives each day in uniform and ultimately derives strength from during the toughest combat situations.

- ***Role of Religious morality in Professional Ethos Model.*** Religion, being an indispensable part of human lives, a combatant's personal religious faith as well as the collective religious faith of the battalion becomes a tremendous source of strength under testing combat conditions even in organisational ethos model. Point to note here is, motivation derived from one's religious faith becomes a part of the overall motivational framework and not the main guiding factor as was happening in the previous model. Finally, it is one's duty towards nation/ organisation which becomes synonymous with service to God.
- ***Secular Character.*** Organisational ethos framework rests on secular credentials of a force. A fighting unit at times has persons of all religious faith bound by a common professional motive. Nurturing collective religious faith of a force/unit is an institutional function for which religious teachers are the mandated appointments. The Indian Armed Forces are good example of the above phenomenon.
- ***Professional conduct guided primarily by military considerations.*** Battlefield behaviour of a professional army will majorly be guided by its military ethos with a fine balance of other considerations including religion. However, when it comes to professional propriety, religious aspects are respectfully managed. In the Indian context, Operation Blue Star and Counter insurgency/ Counter terrorist operations in Jammu and Kashmir are live examples. Safety and well being of innocent people being paramount, the Army has entered religious shrines on many occasions and flushed out militants.
- ***Adversary in professional sense.*** Guided by the norms of Geneva Convention and basic Human Rights even during war, there is no denigration or demeaning of adversary in the behavioral sense. Before and beyond conflict, the opponent ceases to be an enemy. The same is at variance in an ideological war which thrives on continuous projection of the opponent as a perennial foe both pre and post combat.

## **A Pragmatic Framework for Combat Motivation in Context of the Indian Armed Forces**

### ***Optimum Battlefield Motivation***

Optimum battlefield motivation will always result from a proportionate mix of well ingrained professional ethos and secular religious faith. Expecting optimum motivation on battlefield only on the basis of professionalism or religious faith, well knowing the fact that a soldier's professional conduct is intertwined with his personal morality (both ethical and religious) would be inappropriate.

### ***Limit of Exploitation***

Once in a combat situation, accommodation of religious practices may only be provided to the extent so that it does not affect mission accomplishment, military readiness, unit cohesion and standards of discipline. Religion as a motivating factor is exceptional as long as it radiates inner strength to a soldier in combat situation, however, it loses its sheen when exploited to derive motivation by denigrating and demeaning the enemy and promoting them as enemies of own faith.

### ***Leadership and Camaraderie***

A professionally competent leader leading from the front during challenging combat situations arouses tremendous motivation among troops. Also, during combat, a soldier draws immense strength from suffering as well as heroic acts of comrades fighting alongside. This further impels and motivates him to take unprecedented risks.

### ***Humanitarian Justness of Cause***

Before exhorting soldiers to carry out a challenging combat mission in a motivated manner, it is incumbent to present to him, the professional and humanitarian righteousness of the cause. With his personal morality satisfied, the man on ground will draw an inner legitimacy to execute the task even under testing conditions.

### ***Adequate legal and material Provisions***

A soldier on the battlefield can only fight unencumbered if he enjoys unbridled legal protection and requisite material sustenance both during and after his life. Slightest of incoherence in any of these may induce traces of doubt in his mind, thereby seriously



hampering his motivation to endure the hardships of battle. Sanctity of legal provisions like AFSPA in zones of conflict is thus an important contributor to combat motivation of a soldier.

### ***Positive control over the Info Environment***

Information, both positive and other wise, affects the soldier's morale instantly and contributes to his overall motivation to fight. With weaponisation of the social media sphere, the scope of influencing the combatant has immensely increased and a positive control over flow of information is an absolute essential for victory in battle. Recollecting how Dronacharya was killed during the Mahabharat may substantiate the aspect.

### **Conclusion**

Notwithstanding the tremendous advances in warfare and associated technologies in the last few decades, the soldier on battlefield along with his will and motivation to fight still remains the most crucial element for victory in war. Sole reliance on either religious or institutional mechanism to cultivate motivation may lead to suboptimal results. The virtue of motivation in combat zone therefore needs to be cultivated thoughtfully by an inspired leader and the organisation through sustained efforts.

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