

Officers' Promotion Policy in the Army

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Summary

In a judgement pronounced by the Hon'ble Delhi High Court on November 19, 2012, promotions of officers of the rank of Major General (Maj. Gen.) to Lieutenant General (Lt. Gen.) approved by a Special Selection Board held on January 7, 2011 were quashed, mainly on the ground that the revised Quantification Policy (QP) forming the basis FOR the selection was not approved by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and, therefore, lacked legality. The Hon'ble Court also directed that a fresh Special Selection Board (SSB) must be held to assess the officers on the basis of QP dated December 31, 2008. Whereas the judgement may not benefit the petitioners for various reasons, it is a timely reminder to Army Headquarters (AHQ) and MoD that promotion policies should not be tinkered with every change of personality at the helm of affairs. The quantification model itself spells out selection criteria for greater objectivity and helps in selecting the most deserving officers for higher rank from among a batch of officers. This Issue Brief analyses the officers' promotion policy in the Indian Army. The arbitrary change in the QP is not the only aberration in the system. The system is by and large fair but needs to be freed from the proclivities of the military leadership itself. The subject is examined at the following levels: (a) Career ambition of voluntary officer corps; (b) Importance of Annual Confidential Reports (ACRs) in officers' career progression; and (c) Systemic problems afflicting the process of selection of officers for higher ranks.

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- (a) Career ambition of voluntary officer corps.
- (b) Importance of Annual Confidential Reports (ACRs) in officers' career progression.
- (c) Systemic problems afflicting the process of selection of officers for higher ranks.

Career Ambition of Voluntary Officer Corps

Service in the Indian Armed Forces is voluntary. Therefore, all officers who join the armed forces are either permanent commissioned officers or are granted permanent commission after expiry of the short-service commission period. Therefore, all officers who rise in the profession to attain higher ranks do so in a highly competitive environment, given the pyramidal nature of the rank structure. This needs to be seen in light of a longer period of service that higher ranks afford and the consequent impact on prestige and financial remuneration. The anxieties further get heightened because there are lesser avenues for alternate employment for a large number of army officers retiring every year. The shortage of officers in the army does not leave enough time for them to pursue academic or professional training, which empowers them for employment post retirement. This problem becomes more acute after the age of 50, when appropriate employment opportunities diminish.

Importance of ACRs in Officers' Career Progression

The inputs before the Selection Board for empanelling officers for higher ranks are confidential reports (CRs), performance on training courses, honours and awards, value judgement and negative inputs such as poor disciplinary awards. Of these inputs, CRs normally constitute approximately 90 per cent of the total weightage. In the past, spoken

reputation and employability in the higher rank of the officer being assessed was also taken into consideration before making the recommendation about his suitability for further promotion. However, after the Quantification Model was introduced in 2008, these inputs were by and large ignored. The operational performance of an officer against an external threat and in counter-insurgency operations provides an important input. Therefore, CRs form the most important input in the Selection Board. This has been the case for a very long time. Major Hoshiar Singh who earned a Param Vir Chakra in the 1971 India-Pakistan War retired as a Colonel because he was graded poorly in his CR initiated when he was serving as a Battalion Commander at the National Defence Academy.

The ACR system and its impact on an officer's career progression is often criticised on the grounds that it breeds sycophancy and induces sacrifice of moral courage merely to get a good CR. However, the fact remains that the CR system is well-designed since the report is normally reviewed by two superior officers in the chain of command, after it is endorsed by the initiating officer (IO). The Reviewing Officer (RO) and Senior Reviewing Officer (SRO) are required to moderate the report and eliminate biases of subjective reporting. For some time in the 1980s a closed system of reporting was tried, wherein the report was not required to be shown to the ratee (officer reported upon) unless there was an adverse comment in the CR. This created anxiety among the officers; those not empanelled for the next rank were forced to initiate complaints only after their non-empanelment, thus not providing them an opportunity to seek redress after the initiation of CRs. It was also felt that a closed system generated distrust between IOs and ratees. Review of the closed system led to the re-introduction of the present system of open CRs. The success of this system was dependent upon IOs displaying objectivity and moral courage. However, in an environment where most battalions function at half their authorised strength of officers, many commanding officers found it difficult to report objectively on their officers, lest those graded lower lost the motivation to work hard. A good leader is expected to carry along his team. However, objective reporting could result in some officers under-performing. Given the context of poor officer strength in units, this could adversely impact effective training and administration of units.

Exceptions apart, in any organisation at any given time, normally there would only be about 20 to 30 per cent personnel whose performance would be above average. However, the limitation of numbers has resulted in most officers being rated above average or outstanding. In the process, the truly outstanding or above average officers are the losers since there is no incentive left in the system except perhaps important assignments to which they can be appointed. Performance in courses like the Defence Services Staff College and the Junior Command Course remains the only criteria that separate the high achievers from others. Whereas good performance in courses helps such officers in tenantry prestigious staff and instructional appointments, however, a very low percentage of weightage is given to performance on courses in the Quantification Model and, therefore, they do not get adequate compensation in the selection process.

The ACR system followed by the army is, perhaps, still the best appraisal system in the armed forces with built-in checks and balances. However, in some cases it still tends to be subjective, particularly since the ROs and SROs do not get to see the ratees very closely to be able to make considered judgement on the latter's performance. Experience suggests that an officer of high integrity and professional capability cannot be denied his due and an odd aberration does not repudiate this observation. It rather proves a point, even though some officers overlooked for further promotion would dispute this.

It would be appropriate to cite two examples of objective reporting even before a formal system of redressal of grievances related to CRs was instituted within the Military Secretary's Branch in the Army Headquarters and Complaints and Advisory Board (CAB) was attached to the COAS Secretariat. In one case, wherein the ratee was assessed poorly by the IO, the RO, in his observation in the pen picture of the ratee, clearly mentioned that the IO had a tendency to be subjective in his reporting and had failed to improve despite being advised in this regard. The RO further stated that while writing the report on the IO, he would endorse this adverse remark in his report. The CR of the junior officer was kept pending in the MS Branch until receipt of the report of the IO. It was observed in the report on the IO that the RO had indeed made an adverse remark about the IO's tendency to be subjective. The junior officer's ACR was then processed and the IO's portion of the report was overlooked.

In the second case, an officer performing the duties of a Brigade Major – a prestigious appointment for a Major rank officer – was not approved for the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, based on the report of his RO, a Brigade Commander, when the officer was performing the duties of a Company Commander in counter-insurgency operations in Nagaland. In this case, whereas the IO had graded the Company Commander above average, the Brigade Commander as RO had rated him average in certain qualities. While doing so, he had explained the rationale quite clearly and said that the officer had the qualities of a good staff officer but, based on his close observation of the officer's leadership qualities, he found him to be an average leader of men. This observation was corroborated by a low high average operational report during the 1971 War when the officer was a Second Lieutenant.

These two incidents highlight the fact that the system can only function properly if the reporting officers have moral courage and adequate tenures to observe their subordinates in different situations.

The Systemic Problems Afflicting the Process of Selection

The problem of commanding officers having to run their units efficiently with a bare minimum number of offices available has been discussed earlier. An inflationary tendency in writing reports has also been highlighted. In addition, a major systemic problem impacts the redressal of grievance mechanism. This problem has existed for long. Way back in the late 1980s, a Lieutenant Colonel who was directly related to a very senior officer managed

to get at least three of his CRs 'cleaned' after submitting complaints against the reports. Although this officer was cleared for promotion by the Selection Board in a review after the reports were cleaned, fortunately for the system his promotion was not cleared by the MoD since an upright officer brought this travesty to their notice. A deeper examination of his earlier CRs revealed that the officer was not up to the mark right from the beginning of his career. As a result, promotion was denied to him. Whereas this was a good example of the system taking care of aberrations, a large number of cases do take place wherein some officers with 'connections' and sometimes based on parochial regimental affiliations with Service Chiefs or other senior officers manage to get relief and promotions.

The grievance redressal mechanism is meant to provide relief only to the deserving candidates; however, it is not always fair or adequate. In some cases, it merely looks at an aberration and removes it despite the possibility that it was perhaps the only time when the true worth of an officer was reported. To this extent it tends to favour some people who have already reached their level of incompetence. In some other cases personal preferences dictate decisions. A number of cases are fairly well known within the army circles and need not be specified here.

Recently, a large number of cases of misdemeanour and financial impropriety on the part of senior army officers has come to light. Some commentators have argued that the media is sensationalising such issues because they make good copy, while others attribute motives to some sections in the establishment who want to show the army in poor light. The merit in these arguments notwithstanding, it is clear that an increasing number of such cases will be exposed in future and exposure of misdeeds is not bad in itself. It is necessary to recognise that there is something wrong somewhere and corrective measures are required to be taken. Involvement of senior officers in cases of corruption or in other socially unacceptable actions brings down the prestige of the army and the faith of the rank and file in the senior leadership. While the armed forces are the only organ of the state that take swift disciplinary action against defaulters, though at the cost of invaluable time and manpower resources in taking such disciplinary actions, many cases of misdemeanour go unpunished for want of substantial proof to initiate disciplinary action. Objective reporting, therefore, assumes added importance in weeding out officers of doubtful integrity and competence.

The Chief of the Army Staff reports on every Major General in the Indian Army as IO, RO or SRO. The reputation of senior officers is generally known to his peers, subordinates and immediate superiors. The Chief also has the resources to brief himself on the reputation of senior officers, should he so desire. It is therefore incumbent upon him to make a definitive recommendation about every Major General as regards suitability for promotion to the rank of Lieutenant General keeping his performance, capabilities and conduct in mind. The Chief has the authority to moderate, agree or disagree with the report of the IO or RO. Under normal circumstances, when a Major General lacks either the capabilities or if his

conduct is not exemplary, the COAS should discuss the issue with the concerned Army Commander so that the officer is rated appropriately, thereby denying him promotion to the next higher rank. Even if the Army Commander feels otherwise, the Chief can exercise his prerogative as the final RO, to grade the officer appropriately and write his observations about the officer's suitability for promotion unambiguously in the pen picture of the ratee.

There is no requirement of change of policy or for the Chief to assume the powers to upgrade an officer's report. In case an officer is aggrieved by the reporting of his IO, RO or SRO, the Chief has the authority to provide relief when the officer submits a non-statutory complaint. It is unlikely that the government or the courts will go against the recommendations of the Chief, if he mentions the reasons for not recommending an officer for promotion in his report. By doing so, the Chief would do great service to the organisation by stopping the less competent and not so honest officers from rising in service. This will also send an appropriate message to all officers down the line to maintain high standards of integrity and professionalism. Over a period of time higher standards of probity and professionalism will get established, thereby benefiting the army and the country.

Conclusion

The reporting system in the Army is time tested and is probably the best among all the services in India. However, there is room for improvement. It is desirable, however, that the policies are not tinkered with after every change of command and are allowed to stabilize over a period of 5 to 10 years before they are reviewed for their efficacy. Obviously, any organisation is as good as its leaders and the senior leadership in the army must display moral courage in reporting objectively, particularly on senior officers to set an example for officers lower down the chain of command. It is only when the competent and honest officers are promoted and officers with less than optimal professional competence and compatibility are weeded out that the senior officers in the army will start getting promoted at a comparatively younger age, which would permit them to hold their appointments for longer periods. It is absolutely essential for senior officers to hold longer tenures so that they can influence their command positively and get to know all officers serving under them so that they can report on them objectively.

Policies must have a longer shelf life and a larger number of officers outside Army Headquarters should be involved in the formulation of promotion policies since they would have a stake in making the policy a success.