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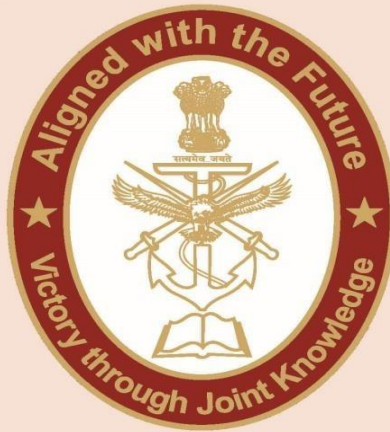
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INDIAN ARMY'S MULTI GENERATION OFFICER CADRE: CHALLENGES & RESPONSES

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Indian Army's Multi Generation Officer Cadre: Challenges & Responses



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Introduction

A newspaper report carried in the Times of India; Capital Edition of 12 Jan 2025 gave out the seven generations into which people can be categorised. Quoting Mc Crindle, "Generational transitions are more than just chronological – defined by events, technologies and cultural shifts of their timeⁱ". That said, the author has had discussions with a lot of civilian acquaintances who talk of challenges working with the new generation. It therefore may be pertinent to analyse how can these inter- generational dynamics express itself in the Indian Army (IA) particularly when three generations, each

from a different social milieu are presently working together in the same organisation. This article is limiting its scope to Commissioned Officers only however analysing the same in respect of troops should be carried out as well.

Categorising Generations

There have been categorisations by various researchers. The author has chosen to work with the Mc Crindle's 'Trends of 2025ⁱⁱ' since it categorises each generation in blocks of 17-18 years for first two categories and thereafter in 15 years blocks. Generation categories based on year of birth in the Indian context are given as under: -

- **Builders (pre-1945).**

This generation saw the freedom struggle and came of age as citizens of a newly independent nation. This generation in its value framework would not have been much different from those preceding it. They would have been aware of advancements around the world due to newspapers and radio. For the rest, they wouldn't have been much different from earlier generations.

- **Baby Boomers (1946-1964).**

This generation grew up in shortages and would have had a congruence of values with the one preceding it in. Baby Boomers, now retiring have seen maximum disruptive changes. A generation that spent its childhood mostly without electricity is now handling smart phones. They had set the stage for the next generation (Generation X) change India. This generation pioneered moving away from the venerated old order.

- **Generation X (1965-1979).**

This generation too like the Silent Generation & Baby Boomers spent a childhood of shortages but decided not to live with it. This generation came of age when India started liberalising and are presently the biggest beneficiaries of liberalisation. Generation X was born at a time when nuclear family system was taking roots and most at an average would have one/ two siblings. This generation has a world view radically different from that their parents and grand-parents. This generation absorbed advances in tech more rapidly be it Cable TV, Mobile Telephony and were the first to occupy those then ubiquitous Cyber Café cubicles. They have seen the world go from wired to wireless but still a strong geographical rooting remains. The author belongs to this generation.

- **Generation Y (1980-1994).**

Also known as Millennials, this generation now makes up the largest part of the workforce. They did not see the kind of shortages seen by preceding generations. This generation, along with the latter half of Generation X have integrated with the world in a manner not seen earlier. This generation has been transformational in the sense that they easily took to remote working during the COVID era. In mental makeup, they do resemble Generation X but are more amenable to new ideas. This generation has had unprecedented access to technology, due to affordability- the first generation to enjoy fruits of the Moore's Law.

- **Generation Z (1995-2009).**

This generation is the engine of the present era. They are social media natives and their world view is shaped by myriad influences home and abroad. This

generation had no major adjustment issues adjusting during the COVID Pandemic. This generation is mostly born into nuclear families and therefore are generally a single child/ have one sibling. This generation is used to instant gratification and does not have the patience (at times with nonchalance) the preceding generations had (were forced to have). The younger of this generation have gone through two to three years of online instruction and therefore are trained to look beyond locations. Their choices possibly are guided by search algorithms and they are AI natives- they will expect routine work to be left to the machines. More needs to be observed before making a definitive characterisation of this generation.

- **Generation Alpha (2010-2024).**

This Generation is still in primary school with elder ones soon to enter college. They are in a depopulating world where there will be a premium on whatever talent they bring to the table. Geographical bounds will not appeal much to them. Having begun education online they will be very comfortable with this format. Having been most likely born to parents who themselves are single kids/ one of two children, they will never experience familial connections preceding generations had. This may manifest in them being unsocial by today's standards and they may be more individualistic rather than team players. It has been mentioned by many specialists that this generation is more prone to instant gratification as most of these kids have faced no competition from siblings.

- **Generation Beta (2025-2039).**

This Generation has made its entry this year. It is therefore way too early to make any prediction or characterisation at this stage.

Interplay of Generations.

Having seen the various generations in today's Indian society, it would now be pertinent to analyse how the IA officer cadre is composed considering various generations. First things first, in the Indian Armed Forces there is a positive correlation between seniority and age- something that will generally not be the case in the civilian field. As things stand, based on data obtained from open sources, in IA, it's only the Chief of Army Staff who is from the Baby Boomer Generation. That said the following aspects stand out: -

- All Flag Officers down to Brigadiers at present would most probably belong to Generation X. This also includes senior Colonels who would become Brigadiers in the next two – three years.
- Battalion Commanders & Company Commanders would most probably belong to Generation Y (Millennials) This should also include senior Company Commanders who will become Commanding Officers till the next four to five years.
- Junior Company Commanders down to Young Officers should all be from Generation Z. This Generation will continue to enter IA as Lieutenants till 2031-33.
- The first of Generation Alpha will start entering NDA in next three to four years and receive their Commissions in the next six to eight years.
- By 2039-2040, the IA Officer Cadre will span four generations with each having completely differing motivations, world views and characteristics.

There needs to be an institutional framework to bring in congruence between the various generations who serve as officers in one organisation but look at the world through different lenses.

Analysing Generational Interactions

Army personnel are bound by long standing traditions & existing regulations within an all-encompassing paradigm of military discipline. Everyone who signs up to serve the Forces is expected to (and rightly so) subordinate his/ her individual thoughts to organisational roles, goals & ethos. It is still important to analyse generational interactions with an aim to attract the best talent into the IA in the future as well. In an India that is bound to start to de-populate in the next two decades or so it is important that IA should continue to remain an attractive option even among the future generations who will most probably have a different world view than what exists today.

Analysing the past, it can be concluded that Generations X & Y grew up in generally the same social milieu and therefore there is a similarity if not outright congruency in values. This therefore translated into greater convergence between Generations X & Y; however, this may not be the case between Generations Y and Z (and subsequent generations). It therefore necessitates a fresh look on how IA approaches its Officer Cadre management in the future.

The Way Ahead

There are three aspects that need utmost attention in context of Officers-Recruitment, Retention and Interactions.

- **Recruitment.**

While this facet looks straight forward but it has many layers. IA is a volunteer Army and therefore the one question that needs to be tackled every day is 'HOW TO ATTRACT THE BEST POSSIBLE TALENT? Will the 'Do You Have It In You?' slogan/ 'National Service' tag be enough? With imminent de-population there will be a massive pull by all sections of society and sectors of the economy for talent in an over reducing cohort of 16–25-year-olds (the age of which people decide their calling). It is therefore imperative that IA works on its messaging to the youth to attract the best talent so that they apply for the positions offered in as many numbers.

- **Retention.**

This too is a multidimensional aspect. Retention is not merely keeping a person in the organisation physically. It also implies that the person remains aligned to the organisation in all aspects. While recruitment is a onetime activity where the candidate will put in his/ her best, retention is an aspect which will play out every day as long as an officer serves. In this, an officer not aligned to the goals and ethos of IA is as good as lost even if (s)he continues to remain on IA's rolls.

It therefore implies that IA answer the question that 'WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO KEEP THE OFFICER IN THE ORGANISATION?'. For this it is important that Terms of Service and working conditions be made more contemporary. Some may argue that tweaking to make more 'civilian' working conditions will have a detrimental effect on war fighting. This however is unfounded because in the entire career of a soldier war will not happen every day but preparation for the same will take place every day. IA needs to chart out a work culture, more contemporary but at the same time adhering to old values. This is also important because whatever IA does to retain will also have an effect on Recruitment- attracting the best talent.

- **Interactions.**

The Army functions as a team. Camaraderie is the *sine-qua-non* for any fighting outfit. It therefore goes without saying that all Ranks of the Army need to interact with each other, both formal & informal. The advent of the digital age, ubiquity of mobile devices and relatively lonely upbringing of children is having a detrimental effect on how people interact.

In the days gone by there was only one TV Set between five or six Young Officers, who therefore had no option but to stick around together. This is unlike today when one's entire world is in the mobile phone/ computer. Needless to state, the next generation of officers will be 'digital natives' in which mobile devices will be a part of life even before being recruited. Bringing around an attitudinal change is the key.

Another major challenge in the years to come arises from the fact that most officers would have been raised as single kids, something that brings along a lot of instant gratification during childhood and which one may also crave for as adults. Further, given that outdoor activities among kids have reduced, it needs to be seen how easily they can fit into and function as part of Army teams in adulthood. The challenge is to instil brotherhood/ sisterhood within officers who have never lived with a sibling. The question that sums up this situation is that 'CAN MILITARY DISCIPLINE PREVAIL UPON GENERATIONAL INSTINCTS & TILL WHAT EXTENT?'

Getting Started Now

Leadership related interventions for in-service personnel are something that IA does on a regular basis. However, it is time to look beyond, towards those who are will be aspiring to join IA in the coming years. For this, ground work needs to be done in order to collect basic data and base assumptions on which IA needs to move forward. The following steps are recommended: -

- IA team up with Child Psychologists to study contours of mental growth among children. This will help ascertain psychological parameters to select officer entrants and recruits as well.
- A study be instituted at NDA to understand differences (if any) in performance of cadets having siblings and those who are single kids.

- Augment role of Manpower Planning to map the national talent to arrive at a futuristic induction and on-boarding plan with regards to officer cadets & recruits.

Long Term View

As mentioned above, the first of Generation Alpha will be entering NDA/ Regiment in the next three to four years. IA needs to prepare for the new inductees. Some suggested lines of action are given below: -

- **Recruitment.**

Psychological tests to include parameters may require a relook to factor future generational mindsets. Defence Institute of Psychological Research needs to take a lead and ensure that Recruiting Organisations are ready for this.

- **Physical Standards.**

It's a fact that children these days are leading a sedentary life when compared with those even a decade ago. It is therefore imperative that physical training be re-oriented so that entrants progressively come up to the high physical standards that the Army demands. HQ ARTRAC should take the lead in this aspect.

- **Training.**

Generation Alpha has been extensively put through non-contact learning during COVID-19. In the next decade, as these children become commissioned officers, there is a case to introduce blended training, a format they are comfortable with. HQ ARTRAC with all Line Directorates should take the lead in this aspect.

- **Interactions.**

As brought out above, interactions between the next generation service personnel will be quite different than it is now. Propensity of Generations X & Y to 'push' their way by exercising military authority may lead to resentment & negative outcomes. There is a need to study the future social milieu and arrive at new ways of interaction which is modern, yet in line with IA's requirement and ethos.

Conclusion

This topic is way too complex to be dealt with in a single thesis, leave alone an article. It is time that manpower planning within IA goes beyond counting and begin to work more on what officers (and troops) material to expect and how to forge the new generation of Officer Cadets (and Recruits) into fighters' worthy of carrying forward the legacy of their valiant forebearers.

DISCLAIMER

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