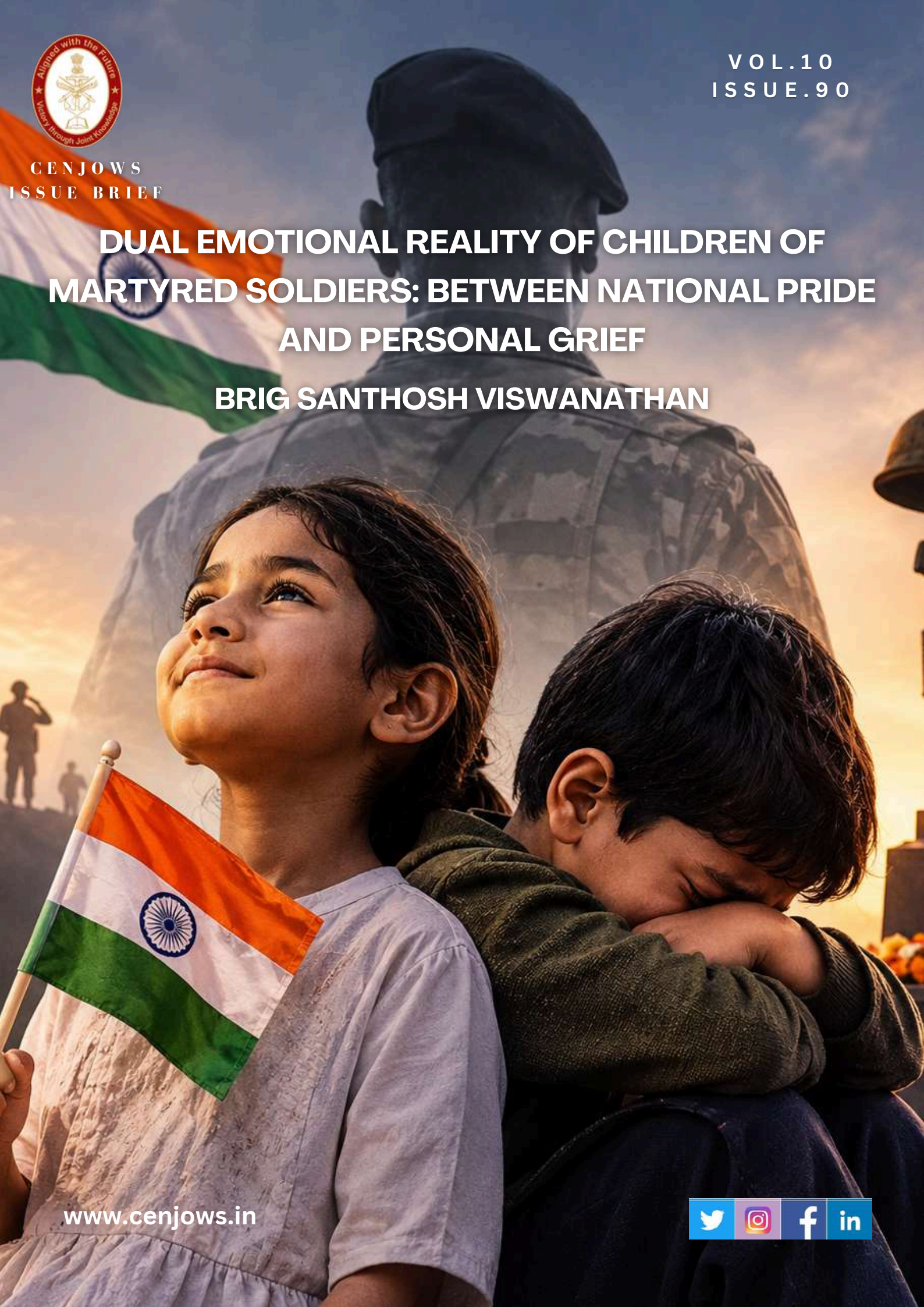
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DUAL EMOTIONAL REALITY OF CHILDREN OF MARTYRED SOLDIERS: BETWEEN NATIONAL PRIDE AND PERSONAL GRIEF

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CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES

CENJOWS

Dual Emotional Reality of Children of Martyred Soldiers: Between National Pride and Personal Grief



Brig Santhosh Viswanathan is an Indian Army officer posted as Brig A of OTA Chennai.

"Grief, pride, are emotions of the same heart, but when they arrive together, especially in a child's world, they do not coexist; they collide"

- Brig Santhosh Viswanathan

Abstract

Military Martyrdom refers to the Supreme Sacrifice made by Armed Forces personnel who lay down their lives in the line of duty, commemorated for their bravery, courage and selfless service to the nation. While they are commonly referred to as 'Martyrs' or 'Shaheed' (in Hindi), the official military terminology classifies such a loss either as a 'Battle Casualty', when the soldier is killed in action or in operations against the enemy, or as a 'Physical Casualty', when he dies while in service due to other causes such as accidents, training mishaps or illness. Either way, the soldier attains martyrdom, because he lived and ultimately gave his life under the oath to defend his country. More importantly, once the sacrifice is made, the emotional effect on the children he leaves behind is just the same. These children grow up in a 'dual emotional reality',

where society celebrates their father as a national hero while they privately mourn the loss of a parent. This article examines the concept of dual emotional reality and the conflict between national pride and personal grief, analyses its psychological, emotional and developmental impact on children and proposes remedial measures at the family, school, society and state levels. It concludes by recommending a multi-level integrated resilience model, functioning at the national and state levels as a single window clearance system, that brings together serving and retired Armed Forces personnel and civilians to provide sustained emotional and psychological support.

Introduction

One can motivate others to sacrifice money, time, efforts or achievements; all of these can be regained or made up even after they are lost. However, 'Sacrificing One's Life' is the highest form of sacrifice, unparalleled by any other. All personnel in the Armed Forces take an oath at their training establishments and promise the country to be prepared to sacrifice their lives while fighting for its honour. In the Indian Army, this commitment is expressed through the 3 Ns, viz., 'Naam, Namak and Nishan', which literally translate to 'Name, Salt and Flag'. Naam is the good name and honour of the soldier, his unit and his regiment, which he must never allow to be tarnished. Namak, the salt he has eaten, stands for his loyalty to the nation that feeds and sustains him – a debt he repays with faithfulness. Nishan is the flag, the regimental colours and the national Tricolour, which must never be allowed to fall. As General Manoj Pande, former Chief of the Army Staff, summed it up, "Naam means identity, Namak is the loyalty and indebtedness, and Nishaan is the respect for the insignia**.**" [1] In simple terms, it amplifies the soldier's loyalty towards the Motherland and his readiness to sacrifice his life to protect her honour. When a soldier is martyred, the bereaved family, importantly the children, endure the pain and burden of this supreme sacrifice. Our organisation is extremely sensitive towards families of our martyrs; however, the challenges faced in adapting to live with this irreplaceable loss is overwhelming for them and in most cases devastating.

We, as a nation, take immense pride and honour the supreme sacrifice of our martyrs. We also honour the bravery in many ways in terms of the respect, recognition and support to the families. The Army does its best and the unit and the organisation goes

out of its way to ensure military honours, ex-gratia compensation, pension benefits, employment of the Veer Naris/Widows and scholarships for children's education.

The families and the children of these martyred soldiers go through an extremely traumatic experience, the magnitude of which is difficult to fathom or comprehend without having lived through it. The loss of the soldier goes far beyond the physical absence; it alters the emotional well-being, psychological balance, social security of the entire family. The wife is still able to cope with the loss based on her emotional maturity and being an adult; however, for the children, the consequences are distinct and far more profound. Losing a parent during formative years can fundamentally affect their emotional development, sense of identity and ability to adapt to life.

For a child of 10 years of age, the sudden loss of the father due to martyrdom, can have an exceptionally deep impact. Considering the relatively few years of life experience and the child's evolving emotional and psychological faculties, such a sudden loss can be a defining turning point in their formative years. It has the potential to have a bad influence on their psychological wellbeing and emotional development, which has an overbearing effect on the child when he/she grows up to be an adult.

Concept of Dual Emotional Reality: Conflict between National Pride and Personal Grief

The emotional experience of children who have lost a parent to military martyrdom is fundamentally different from other forms of bereavement. In most cases of loss, grief is the primary emotion that individuals are encouraged to process and express. In the context of martyrdom, however, grief is accompanied by a powerful and persistent narrative of pride. Society consistently reinforces the idea that the child's father is a hero, who sacrificed his life for the nation. This creates a 'dual emotional state', where children simultaneously experience pride and grief, which is a duality that is not easily reconciled by a developing immature mind. Beard and her colleagues, writing for TAPS, have described this as "a strange dichotomy between the devastating negative emotions of grief and the feeling of immense pride." [2] This article develops that observation into the concept of a 'dual emotional reality' in the Indian military context.

As brought out earlier, the nation recognises martyrdom in many ways:

- **Military Honours at the Time of Death**. Full military funeral, Guard of Honour, gun salute, draping of the Tricolour, and the Last Post and Rouse played to signify farewell and final awakening.
- **Recognition by the Government.** Gallantry Awards (where applicable), ex-gratia compensation by the Central and State Governments, and pension benefits as financial support to the family.
- **National and Regimental Tribute.** Homage by leaders, State Honours, Memorial services and the Legacy of Battle Honours.
- **Support to the Family.** Recognition of the wife's sacrifices, employment opportunities and educational support for the children.
- **Public Honour and Remembrance**. Media recognition, memorials and the immortalisation of the soldier's legacy.

A fallen soldier in India is not just mourned but is revered, remembered and immortalised, and his family becomes a part of the nation's extended family. All of the above are very much required and important to honour the soldier's martyrdom. But what remains invisible in this whole process is the conflict between Pride and Grief, especially for the children, who are left in a confused state of emotion. As Bonnie Carroll, founder of the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) in the United States, who herself lost her husband in an Army plane crash, observes: "The public may see a military hero. The family grieves a whole human being with dreams and laughter and love." In her words, "the intersection of public recognition and private heartbreak creates this complex emotional reality".[3]

I often give the example of an Air Force officer who was martyred in a helicopter crash in Wellington. During the funeral, another officer tried to motivate the devastated 9-year-old son of the martyred officer by saying, "Your father was a brave officer, and you should also be brave." The 9-year-old retorted, **"**What is the use of my father being brave? He is not with us now, and hence I DO NOT want to be brave." This clearly displayed the emotional state of the child and is a clear example of the mixed dual emotion of the Pride and Bravery of the Martyred Father and the Grief of the Loss of a Father. If such an affected child is not set on the right track through a multi layered support system starting from his home to the society, he is likely to have a lack of good

emotional quotient and sense of security in order to navigate into the world around them.

A sense of pride for the martyrdom of their father and presence of deep hurt and grief creates a complex emotional conflict, and children often find themselves oscillating between these two emotions. This emotional tussle leads to mental confusion, as children fail to understand which emotion is appropriate to feel at what point in time. The conflict of emotions between the macro-level thought of ‘National Pride’ and the individual level ‘Personal Grief’, which is felt every single day, leads to a complex dichotomy in the little minds.

The larger picture is the soldier’s sacrifice for the unit, the organisation and the country; however, for the child, it is the daily battle of living and managing without a father, when he is left directionless. In simple terms it is the daily challenges, which seem bigger than the macro picture of the nation first, which even well-informed, educated grownups like us find difficult to digest.

From a developmental perspective, children are not fully equipped to process multiple conflicting emotions simultaneously. The emotional and cognitive senses of children work in a simpler and linear fashion. They understand and express one emotion at a time. Moreover, children switch over from one emotion to another very abruptly, forgetting the previous emotion within a short period of time. Their emotional quotient is very volatile as compared to an adult. With this as the background, the dual emotion of pride and grief cannot be coexistent and leads to ‘emotional hypocrisy’ in most children. It tends to create an adult maturity in childhood or completely breaks them down, both of which are detrimental to the emotional development of these children.

Psychological and Developmental Impact of Dual Emotions

The psychological effects of losing a parent to martyrdom are profound and multifaceted, and the dual emotional reality makes them more complex. The significant effects are enumerated in the succeeding paragraphs.

Internal Conflict. This is not a grief which time can heal. At each stage of growing up, the children feel the absence of the father physically, mentally and emotionally. Children experience roller coaster emotional turmoil with prolonged sadness and difficulty in accepting the loss. It is also termed “childhood traumatic grief, which is

marked by trauma-related symptoms",[4] that evidently make it harder for them to mourn. This also leads the children to guilty of feeling low emotions when the world expects them to be proud and similarly the converse guilt of feeling proud when they are actually feeling low. This creates anxiety, low self-esteem and emotional instability among these children, which is very complex to understand and resolve without professional help.

Insecurity and Dependency. The loss of a parent creates a deep sense of insecurity. Children may develop fears of abandonment and become overly dependent on the surviving parent, which limits their independence and confidence. Some may also become overly protective of the surviving parent.

Behavioural Pattern. The behavioural pattern varies from anger to irritability, aggressive behaviour, isolation, and PTSD, while younger children may be pushed to earlier developmental difficulties and challenges like bedwetting or too much clinginess due to insecurity. These behaviours are expressions of underlying emotional distress. [5]

Identity Crisis. The children feel that their identity is shadowed by the father's legacy. It creates a lot of stress for the children, who may suppress their own interests and aspirations and feel obliged to follow their father into uniform as expected by the world around them, leading to an identity crisis.

Academic Performance. Emotional distress impairs concentration, memory and motivation. Intrusive thoughts, emotional preoccupation, frequent absences and lack of engagement lead to a decline in academic achievement.

Physical and Mental Health. Chronic stress may cause sleep disturbances, changes in appetite and psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches or stomach aches. These children are also at increased risk of depression, anxiety disorders and post-traumatic stress symptoms, with emotional dysregulation being a significant challenge.

Social Development and Parentification. Children may find it difficult to relate to peers who have not experienced a similar loss and may feel isolated or different. Some take on adult-like responsibilities prematurely, a phenomenon known as parentification, which further affects their social and emotional development. [6]

Secondary Losses. The loss of a soldier is often followed by a series of secondary losses. The family may vacate service accommodation and leave the military station, and with it the child loses his school, his friends and the familiar environment that was a part of his father's world. Coming close on the heels of the bereavement, these changes add to the child's sense of insecurity and uprootedness. [7]

Reopening of Grief through Public Remembrance. Anniversaries, memorial ceremonies, award functions and media coverage rightly honour the soldier, but for the child each such occasion can re-open the wound. The child is expected to appear composed and proud in public even as the event revives his grief in private, thereby reinforcing the dual emotional reality year after year.

Re-grieving at Milestones. Grief in children does not simply end; it is revisited as they grow. At each new stage of understanding and at milestones such as school events, board examinations, choosing a career or marriage, the absence of the father is felt afresh. A child who appeared to have coped well may therefore experience renewed grief in adolescence or early adulthood.

Remedial Measures and Interventional Model

Addressing the challenges faced by children of martyred soldiers requires a comprehensive and multi-layered approach. The first and most important principle is the validation of emotions. Children must be allowed to express both pride and grief without fear of judgement; they must be told that it is alright to be proud of their father and still miss him and cry for him. The remedial measures are brought out at four levels.

- **At Family Level.** Supporting the surviving parent is crucial, as a stable and emotionally healthy carer plays the key role in the child's recovery. Parenting guidance can help carers understand the child's needs, and open communication within the family should be encouraged to create a safe and supportive environment. Professional help such as grief counselling and cognitive behavioural therapy can help children process their emotions and develop coping strategies; for younger children, play therapy provides an effective medium for expression. Emotional literacy can help children

understand and articulate their feelings more clearly. These efforts are most effective when started within the golden period of the first year.

- **At School Level.** Schools play a critical role, as the child spends a major part of his day there. Teachers should be sensitised to the unique challenges faced by children of martyred soldiers and adopt trauma-informed teaching practices. Schools should provide counselling services, allow flexibility in academic expectations when necessary, and handle occasions such as anniversaries and Father's Day with sensitivity. Peer support programmes can help children feel understood and included.

- **At Society Level.** Community support is essential. Mentorship by veterans or other role models can provide guidance and emotional support. Public awareness initiatives can help shift societal attitudes towards a balanced understanding of pride and grief, so that relatives, neighbours and well-wishers replace "be strong, don't cry" with "it is alright to miss him", reducing the pressure on children to suppress their emotions.

- **At State Level.** Policy-driven interventions are necessary to ensure long-term support. This includes assured access to psychological services, educational assistance and career guidance, along with continuous monitoring and evaluation of these programmes to ensure their effectiveness and sustainability.

Multi-Level Integrated Resilience Model

- The support available to the families of martyred soldiers today is substantial, but it is spread across many agencies. The unit and regiment, the Directorate of Indian Army Veterans (DIAV), the Kendriya, Rajya and Zila Sainik Boards, AWWA and several other government and non-government organisations each address the family's needs separately. What is required is not another agency, but a mechanism that brings all of them together under one roof.

- A structured approach to intervention can therefore be conceptualised as a multi-level integrated resilience model. It integrates the efforts at the Self (family), School(education), Society (Community) and State (including the Army) (4S) levels into one coordinated mechanism and functions at the national

and state levels as a Single Window Clearance System for the families and children of martyred soldiers. At the apex, a National Resilience Support Centre would integrate the efforts of the DIAV, the Sainik Boards, AWWA and the other organisations involved, so that every family has one point of contact for all its needs: emotional, psychological, educational, financial and administrative. Its reach to the family would be through the existing network of Rajya and Zila Sainik Boards so that support remains close to where the family actually lives.

It would comprise three components:

- **Serving Army Officers Trained in Welfare**. Officers specifically trained in welfare and family support, and posted to the centre for a longer tenure, so that the continuity of support is not broken by frequent postings. They would also maintain the link with the unit and regiment of the martyred soldier and keep the bond of the regimental family alive.

- **Retired Officers and Veterans Trained in Welfare**. Army veterans who understand the military ethos and the meaning of sacrifice and who are similarly trained in welfare. Being settled in one place for a long duration, they would know the background of each family, and the rules and regulations governing their entitlements and would be able to guide and help them over the years. They can also serve as mentors and father figures to the children. A similar approach is followed by TAPS at its Good Grief Camps in the United States, where soldiers volunteer as mentors, and "each mentor will be matched with one child who has lost a loved one who was a military servicemember." [8]

- **Civilian Psychologists**. Clinical and child psychologists and counsellors who provide professional emotional and psychological support to the children and the family.

The model would work on the following principles:

- **Early Intervention**. Every family is reached soon after the loss, with priority to the golden period of the first year.
- **Emotional Integration**. At its core, helping children accept and reconcile both pride and grief.

- **Identity Reconstruction**. Enabling children to develop a sense of self that is not solely defined by their father's martyrdom.
- **Continuous Support and Assessment**. Regular follow-up through the school years and at major milestones, with periodic assessment, so that interventions remain relevant as the child grows and his needs evolve.

Conclusion

Children of martyred soldiers live at a unique intersection of honour and loss. Their emotional journey is complex, shaped by both societal expectations and personal grief. While their father’s sacrifice is a source of national pride, the emotional burden carried by these children is significant and long-lasting. However, with the right support systems in place, these challenges can be transformed into opportunities for resilience and growth. By acknowledging their emotional reality and providing structured, long-term support, it is possible to help these children navigate their grief and build a strong and meaningful future.

Honouring the sacrifice of a martyr must extend beyond ceremonial recognition. It must include a sustained commitment to the well-being of the family, especially the children, who carry forward both the legacy and the emotional weight of that sacrifice. Supporting them is not only a moral responsibility but also a reflection of the values for which their fathers gave their lives.

A soldier’s sacrifice is written not only in blood on the battlefield but also in the tears of a child who grows up learning to remember a father more through stories than memories.

Declaration

I declare that this manuscript is being submitted exclusively to CENJOWS for publication consideration, is original, and has not been published or submitted elsewhere. I further certify that it contains no classified, restricted, or sensitive information and is based entirely on open-source material suitable for publication in the public domain.

ENDNOTES

[1] General Manoj Pande (Retd), former Chief of the Army Staff, address to young lawyers, reported in “Inculcate ethos of Indian Army: General Manoj Pande to young lawyers,” *The Hitavada* (Nagpur), 12 December 2024.

[2] Betsy Beard, Judith Mathewson, Tina Saari and Heather Campagna, “Military Children and Grief,” in *Living with Grief: Children and Adolescents*, ed. Kenneth J. Doka and Amy S. Tucci (Washington, DC: Hospice Foundation of America, 2008); excerpted by the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), taps.org.

[3] Bonnie Carroll, President and Founder, Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), quoted in Michael Merschel, “Grief Is Never Easy, but Military Families Can Bear Added Burdens,” *American Heart Association News*, 21 May 2025.

[4] Allison K. Holmes, Paula K. Rauch and Stephen J. Cozza, “When a Parent Is Injured or Killed in Combat,” *The Future of Children* 23, no. 2 (2013): 143–162, at p. 153.

[5] Holmes, Rauch and Cozza, “When a Parent Is Injured or Killed in Combat,” 143–162.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.; Beard et al., “Military Children and Grief.”

[8] Michael Norris, “TAPS Good Grief Camp Looks for a Few Good Mentors,” U.S. Army (army.mil), 3 May 2012.