

Lessons from the Story of a Forgotten Story

The author calls for proper norms of public discourse in India on sensitive matters, in the context of a recent reported comment on an old issue of alleged deficit of trust between the army chief and the government in 2012.

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In what it claimed to be a major scoop, the *Indian Express* newspaper had reported on 4 April 2012 that the Indian Army had, without prior notification, initiated a troop movement by its key units from Hissar and Agra towards Delhi on the night of 16/17 January. The troop movement, the *Indian Express* report claimed, had sparked serious concern, in fact alarm, in the highest echelons of the political executive in the national capital. The alarm was such that the Defence Secretary, who was on an official visit to Malaysia, was ordered to cut short his visit and return to the country immediately. What matters, though, is that such troop movements are quite normal. Mechanised columns do conduct exercises, and from time to time move out of their garrisons to undertake routine training requirements.

The insinuation in the *Indian Express* report was that, since the then Army Chief, General V K Singh, had taken the then Government to court on an issue relating to the authenticity of his recorded date of birth, there was a deficit of trust between him and the Government. Since the court case was filed after a series of protracted differences of opinion over that issue

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between the Army Chief and the Government, the report claimed that the tensions had escalated to such an extent that the Army Chief was possibly being adventurous! The news report was discussed in the Standing Committee of Parliament on the Defence Ministry matters, and a clarification was provided by the Secretary of the Ministry. The clarification provided by the Secretary stated that "mobilisation forms an important facet of training. These are carried out in a routine manner by various formations and units". The issue was, for all practical purposes, laid to rest after this clarification.

Of course the newspaper may have continued to publish various snippets to try to prove that its reporting was indeed correct and that the political establishment had been 'spooked' by the troop movement. But no one really paid much attention to it – after all, it was the 'conjecture/claim' of one newspaper. In due course, the then Army Chief 'superannuated'. He contested elections to the Parliament in 2014 and won and was also appointed a Minister in the Narendra Modi Government.

Recently, four years after the story first appeared – at a book launch event – Manish Tewari, who was a first-time Member of Parliament and a Minister of State in the United Progressive Alliance's second government which was succeeded by the present Modi Government, reportedly said, in answer to a query, as follows: "In so far [as] that particular story you are referring to [is concerned], [at] that time I used to serve in the [Parliamentary] Standing Committee on Defence, and it was unfortunate but true. [The] story was correct". Continuing in the same vein, while speaking to the *Indian Express* newspaper, after the book launch, he went on to state: "I was a part of the Standing Committee of Defence and I recall that in April of 2012, after the story appeared in the *Indian Express*, there was a briefing of the committee done with respect to the story. During the briefing, the Defence Ministry maintained the stand that the Government had officially taken. Privately, the officials involved in the briefing confirmed to me that the story 'may just be true'".

This is a remarkable case of a person, who is a leader in the opposition Congress Party, giving his opinion on an issue which could be termed sensitive – that too, basing that opinion, not on the official version of the government at the relevant time but on what he was told 'privately' by un-named officials. It was his party that was in government then, and he should have conformed to the official version, which no doubt had been deliberated upon at length and put out after due consideration of all the aspects.

The issue that needs to be examined now is: why should people in public life comment on issues that are neither of any contemporary relevance nor really of public concern, and for which there is no credible evidence to base an opinion on, especially when it is not the official version but only a matter of a private conversation? Why should higher credence be placed on private opinions? None of Mr Tewari's colleagues, who were present at the Committee meeting which he has now referred to, has corroborated the story. Indeed the earlier *Indian Express* report had created a sense of disquiet. The veracity of its observations aside, it had further fuelled the feeling of distrust, which it alleged, existed between a Chief of the Army Staff and the country's democratically-elected government. How much could the march by two army columns, at best about 400 personnel, 'spook' a duly-elected stable government? That is open to anyone's imagination. Even if it did 'spook', such that the Defence Secretary was summoned back from a foreign tour, the Government had, after due consultation, clarified that the marching columns were engaged in a routine exercise.

The role of thought leaders, the more mature and sedate among the leaders, would be to create a high degree of commitment and confidence and not to spread dissensions, confusion and doubts in the minds of people. The basic quality of a good leader is to be humble, be a good listener, to empower people and provide clear direction. A good leader has to be a better team player. Issues which have divided people and societies should best be left untouched.

It is very clear in the present case that any amount of debate or 'clarifying' on the issue is neither going to serve any purpose nor will it ever allow the issue to be resolved to the satisfaction of all parties. Today's opposition, which was in government then, as experience reveals, will continue to toe a particular divisive line, whereas today's government, which was in opposition then, will only uphold the formal government viewpoint. Never will the twain meet. This is where a leader plays a positive role, merely by dousing the fire over an inconsequential issue which has no present-day relevance.

Leaders are not born. They are moulded and trained. Monarchs, as well as democratically-elected leaders, are required to be agents to channelize the energy of constituents of society, to uplift the quality of life and not to detract from it. In a democracy, it is very essential that the leaders first train to be good and positive, contributing to the team members; only the deserving among them are to be chosen to lead. The captain in the football team no doubt has to be a good player individually, but more importantly has to weave the team into a cohesive

amalgam which plays like a well-oiled machine, seeking to fulfil a common and well-defined target. These are the leaders who are the need of the hour in India today, so that they can be the change-agents for consolidating and up-grading societal welfare, institutions and individual well-being in the country.

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