

INFORMATION, DEMOCRACY AND THE MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT

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So far, the military sector has escaped the long arm and searching eyes of India's "right to information" campaign. For instance, proposals for right to information laws typically leave room for liberal exemptions when it comes to military matters. This is an understandable short-term compromise, and even in the longer term, it would be naïve to expect that full transparency can be achieved in this domain, given the inherent need for secrecy in certain aspects of military activity. Yet the immunity of the military establishment needs to be challenged sooner or later. Indeed, the need for transparency and accountability is perhaps greater in this domain than in any other field of public activity.

The right to information is not an end in itself. It can be seen as a tool to bring greater accountability in public life, and to empower the citizens. Going beyond this, public accountability and civic empowerment can themselves be seen as essential steps towards participatory democracy. In contemporary India, there are strong anti-democratic influences as well as tendencies towards a more active and participatory practice of democracy. The former include the expansion of reactionary nationalism, the growing hold of the corporate sector on economic policy, and authoritarian legislations such as POTA. On the other side, the quality of Indian democracy has been enhanced by a better representation of women in politics, wider opportunities for people's participation in local governance, and the spread of education among disadvantaged sections of the society. The anti-democratic camp is often declared victorious by its opponents (as in the frequent lament that we are witnessing a "shrinking of democratic space"), but I see no reason for such defeatism.

It is in the context of this tussle between democracy and authoritarianism that a more critical view of the military establishment is urgently needed. In India as elsewhere, the military establishment is inherently antagonistic to the progress of democracy. Its growing power is one of the anti-democratic tendencies at work in Indian society today. The fact that this consolidation is going hand in hand with the growth of reactionary nationalism is an added cause of concern. While most political parties have been quite supportive of the military establishment over the years, the BJP-led coalition has been particularly active in this respect, as can be seen from the hasty denotation of nuclear devices soon after the coalition came to power as well as from the massive rearmament that followed. The potential emergence of a nexus of sorts, however discreet, between the *sangh parivar* and the military establishment is

a significant threat to the quality of Indian democracy as well as to peace in the region. This prospect reinforces other arguments for public scrutiny of military institutions.

The anti-democratic influences of the military establishment have many aspects, including hostility to human rights, extensive propaganda activities, promotion of a culture of secrecy, intensive lobbying for military projects, and the spread of corruption. At an obvious level, military activities involve a high concentration of power, and in this respect they are fundamentally at odds with democratic ideals. It is hard to think of something more anti-democratic than the situation where one person (say, the President of the United States) effectively has the power to blow up the entire world by pressing the nuclear button. Political leaders in south Asia do not have quite so much power, but still, a faux pas on their part could lead millions of innocent citizens to the nuclear oven. This absurd situation is one symptom of the fundamental antagonism between militarism and democracy.

Another anti-democratic influence of the military establishment is the spread of a culture of secrecy. A certain amount of secrecy is perhaps inevitable in military matters, but the culture of secrecy tends to spread well beyond the bounds of necessity. To illustrate, there is an urgent need for greater transparency and accountability in the nuclear industry (a de facto extension of the military establishment). India's nuclear reactors are the most dangerous in the world: according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, all of them are among the world's fifty least reliable reactors, and four are among the worst six. The precarious condition of India's nuclear facilities has been kept under a heavy lid of secrecy, consolidated with liberal use of the Official Secrets Act. According to Dr. A. Gopalakrishnan, former director of the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board, India's nuclear reactors are a "powder keg", and the regulatory process intended to ensure their safety is a "total farce".

Closely related to secrecy is the role of the military establishment in spreading corruption. Defence contracts are particularly attractive channels for illegal inducements: the deals are sheltered from the public gaze, the number of "partners" tends to be small, and the amounts are huge. It is no surprise that, in India as elsewhere, some of the biggest scams (from Bofors to Tehelka) have taken place in the defence sector. The Tehelka affair was a good opportunity to reflect on these matters, but characteristically, the mainstream media missed the point. Most commentators lamented that the Tehelka exposé had "tarnished the image of the country's armed forces", instead of acknowledging that corruption is the bread and butter of military contracts. Indeed, as Air Commodore (retd) Jasjit Singh, head of the Institute for

Defence and Studies Analyses, put it in a recent interview, “no defence deal can be free of corruption”.

Propaganda is another aspect of the anti-democratic influences of the military establishment. In India as in other democratic countries, national security agencies are actively involved in shaping public perceptions of “security threats” and how they should be dealt with. According to one expert on military intelligence, “media management has been the buzzword in the army in recent years”. Interest in media management tends to be at its peak in periods of active conflict, such as the Kargil crisis, when winning the “information war” and using the media as a “force multiplier” were explicit strategic objectives. But even outside periods of active conflict, a steady stream of pro-establishment advocacy seeps through the media. Critical perspectives on defence policy are few and far between, with unfortunate consequences for the true interests of the citizens, including their need for human security in a broad sense of the term.

It is often thought that propaganda is unlikely to be widespread in “democratic” societies. But in fact, as Noam Chomsky and others have discussed with great clarity, the dependence of the military establishment on propaganda is particularly strong in democratic societies, where dissent is allowed. If dissent is not allowed, propaganda is unnecessary.

A related misunderstanding is that propaganda in democratic societies, if it exists at all, must be based on a “conspiracy” of some kind. In fact, no conspiracy is needed. Rather, propaganda is mainly the product of a smooth “filtering” process, whereby those who sing the right tune rise to positions of influence and power. To illustrate, a defence correspondent who toes the official line in military matters is that much better placed to obtain confidential documents, to be invited to select conferences and cocktails, and to enjoy other perks of a good rapport with the military establishment.

One of the great successes of military propaganda is to have defused any serious criticism of the Indian Army’s activities in Kashmir and the North-East. As Kuldip Nayar aptly observed, “when it comes to Kashmir or the Northeast, the conscience of most in the country becomes dead”. This anesthetic operation is based on a barrage of distorted accounts of the situation in these areas in the mainstream media. Another success of the propaganda system is the glorification of defence-oriented scientific research. India has one of the most militarised scientific establishments in the world, with about two thirds of public funding for research

and development (R&D) being allocated to defence-related research. The outcome of this colossal investment is a litany of waste and failures. Yet defence research projects can always count on a good press in the mainstream media. Even resounding fiascos, such as the development of the “Light Combat Aircraft”, tend to be projected as glowing successes.

There is an interesting contrast between perceptions of “foreign” and “domestic” military establishments on the part of the Indian public. The real nature of, say, the American or Pakistani military establishments is fairly clear to the Indian public, across the whole political spectrum. There is no illusion here that these military establishments are geared to the “defence” of the nation, or that they are free of corruption, or that they are trustworthy custodians of nuclear weapons, or that they pose little threat to the integrity of democracy. But when it comes to India’s own military establishment, critical judgement fades away and these superstitions take over. This is another interesting symptom of the hold of propaganda in military matters.

In short, military establishments do not belong to free and democratic societies. The only plausible reason for having one is that our neighbours also have one. This is the standpoint of the short-sighted nationalist: we need military strength to “defend ourselves” against external threats. Peace-minded internationalists, for their part, recognise that the continuing reliance on “unilateral defence organisations” for national security is the main threat to world peace today. Even the insidious spread of freelance terrorism would be much easier to deal with if international relations were based on détente and cooperation rather than military confrontation. The abolition of militarism from human affairs may seem like a utopian goal, but it is even more naïve to expect that humanity can survive much longer without the creation of a peaceful world order.

Meanwhile, the anti-democratic influences of the military establishment can be contained by demanding greater transparency and accountability in defence matters. Much can be done, for instance, to ensure transparency in defence contracts, to bring the nuclear sector under public scrutiny, to make the armed forces accountable for human rights violations, and to contain militaristic propaganda. This is an important direction of future engagement for the right to information movement.