CHAPTER 3

MILITARY ETHICS?
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3.1 The scope of the study undertaken by the researcher was vast and manifold. Fourteen specific issues were identified to form part of the treatise. The issues were examined in detail. During the course of the research, interesting new facets of the subject under consideration emerged which too were consequently examined and made an integral part of the Thesis. But all along the researcher always felt the need to examine threadbare the very basics of the subject of ethics and military ethics to give a meaningful glimpse into the thesis proper. As mentioned in Chapter Fifteen – ‘Training For Military Ethics’, the knowledge of the subject amongst the rank and file of the Army range from average to abysmally poor. An even worse was the fact that many showed a palpable disinterest in this vital issue of military life. Lackadaisical attitude and the subject featuring low on one’s priority was what were commonly seen. This chapter though written at the very end of the research features first as it is critical to first understand and clear all concepts about ethics and military ethics.

Multifaceted Dimensions of Ethics

3.2 The subject of ‘ethics’ has many dimensions, colours and hues. Various authors have propounded their ideas of the subject and dictionaries have stated their own meanings of this word. To be able to examine a subject in detail it is essential to first define it in specific words and language. Abstract and ambiguous nature of the word ethics has resulted in many definitions. The abstract nature of this word makes it all the more interesting and challenging to deal with and more so when one has to explain this to minds which are not fully inclined towards it. It is easy to define words such as cartridge, glue or a knife but certain vitally important terms such as ethos, honesty, morality, integrity and honour are difficult to define and explain in specific language.

3.3 Mid - 2005 was known for the infamous ‘M. M. S’. sex scandal by some of the Delhi school children. It may be hard to define M. M. S. sex in exact terms but one knows what it is and that it exists. An example is that of word love. Dictionary defines love as a profoundly tender, passionate affection. Yet there are people who make mistakes-mistaking infatuation for love. That the word is ambiguous, however, hardly means that love does not exist.
3.4 The more important the word is, the more difficult is its definition. Ethics too isn’t so simple to define. Yet it is essential to understand and capture its meaning. There are people who know what ethics is when they see it in practice, but this is not sufficient. For ethics relates to mind as also the heart. Ethics essentially involves study of the theory (the mind) and getting convinced of its viability (the heart). To begin with, ethics can be described as the critical study of standards for judging the rightness or wrongness of conduct. Going further, it is also not only the study but about doing what is right. For this to happen, the person must understand what ethics is as also possess requisite experience and be capable of doing ethics. At this juncture it would be pertinent to note the definition of ethics by Albert Schweitzer who says: “In a general sense, ethics is the name we give to our concern for good behaviour. We feel an obligation to consider not only our personal well-being, but also that of others and human society as a whole”.

3.5 During the interaction with respondents in the research process, the researcher found ethics and morality being frequently used interchangeably. As one dictionary puts it, ‘ethics is a set a moral principles, the rules of conduct as recognised in a particular profession’. The same dictionary defines morality as, ‘degree of conformity to moral principles’. And as the dictionary says, ‘morals are concerned with right and wrong behaviour pertaining to good or bad, distinction between right and wrong or good or evil or rightness and wrongness of conduct’. Ethics therefore in the strictest sense refers to theory and morality to practice that is conduct of behaviour. But if this strict definition is made then it would be hard to explain ethical conduct as it concerns human behaviour or conduct or for that matter moral attitude which essentially is theoretical - a state of mind. Therefore it is not only ‘thought’ which is important but action too. At this juncture ‘ethics’ could be defined as: the study of good and evil, of right and wrong, of duty and obligation in human conduct, and of reasoning and choice about them.

Diverse Ethical Codes

3.6 Customs vary from society to society; in fact within a particular society too customs have various forms and shades. Sati has been the dominant social practice in some parts of India. Though legally banned it still continues to overshadow certain communities. People in these regions argue that it has been a practice handed down to them by their forefathers and hence the onus is on them to maintain such a tradition. Sati in such places is glorified and people visit a number of Sati temples. But then one tends to question such a practice -
just because it is a tradition in some communities is it right to continue such practices? But to be fair to Sati practitioners, one also tends to question the right of people of other communities to act as moral policemen. If Sati is acceptable to one community what right it gives to people of other community to question such a practice. Each group has its own standards. Who decides which is moral and which is immoral? Is there a universal template to measure the goodness or ugliness of norms of behaviour of various communities? Or are all standards relative? Does ethics therefore relate to a pattern or norm or code of conduct actually adopted by a group of people? It goes without saying that today diverse ethical codes exist in the world.

3.7 Referring to the example of Sati once again, obviously the practice of Sati in certain communities has ethical approval of its community members. Do we accept this as a parameter for judging practices of other communities? Is the practice of Sati ethically correct or is it merely a custom of a particular community? To be able to find out whether the practitioners of Sati are correct in their conduct, one first needs to establish what ordinarily is the right conduct universally.

3.8 It must be understood that there are no clear cut solutions to ethical dilemmas. Ethics is primarily a subject of logical reasoning. Firstly the general environment is discussed and from where one focuses on the issue proper. How does one find out what is good or bad? To be able to find out if a person is an effective teacher one formulates a set of parameters in one’s mind. Personal prejudices must not come in the way of impartial reasoning. We go by certain benchmarks. The ideal guru in a teacher in India would be Dr S. Radhakrishnan. To determine ethical standards of a teacher we now commence the procedure of comparison. This is what the main purpose of ethics is; to compare. Dr S. Radhakrishnan represents what ought to be in a teacher. This ought to be is then compared with what is. The Geneva Convention lays down the methodology of treatment of prisoners of war. These are universally accepted norms laid down by comity of nations. These are morally binding on all warring factions. The recent Kargil conflict brought again to the forefront this aspect as regards treatment of uniformed Indian personnel by the Pakistani Army.

3.9 What ethics essentially does is to establish universally accepted norms and lays down rules for good conduct. Ethics is therefore concerned with both thought and deeds. It can safely be concluded that the practice of Sati is incorrect and ethically untenable.
3.10 We come back to discuss the issue of determination of right and wrong. Who decides what is right or wrong? Let us take an example. As leader of troops one is often confronted with the problem of spread of AIDS in the society. Constant education of all ranks is carried out against this disease. Troops are cautioned against unprotected sex. Suppose the jawan questions the leader “do you know what enjoyment it gives to have unprotected sex”? Assuming that the answer from the leader is in the negative, then the jawan is likely to say if not openly at least in his mind that to allow him to have fun his way! As learned people and leaders, introspection at this stage would be beneficial. Isn’t this the personal life of a soldier? What right it gives to his leaders to cast their views on him? The answers are straight and simple - that as a learned citizen who has been entrusted upon the task to lead troops and look after their welfare, his knowledge is far superior as compared to the jawan. He knows the practice of unprotected sex with a stranger is wrong - it has grave ramifications - it is unethical to contact AIDS. It would be interesting at this stage to consider a hypothetical situation - that in a particular group of soldiers the practice of unprotected sex is common - in fact a norm and is accepted in the community. Would it then be termed ethical? The answer still is a NO. Unprotected sex with a stranger is a major cause of AIDS and AIDS kills. So any such norm or practice in a group of community which can lead to deadly AIDS is clearly wrong and unethical.

3.11 Another interesting aspect to be debated at this stage would be ‘universally accepted norms’. What could be universal may not actually be so. November 2005 saw in India a heated debate on premarital sex. There are people who supported it and others who were vehemently opposed to it. While the researcher does not wish to be drawn into the expression of his own opinion it would be worthwhile to compare this universally accepted norm in western countries with that of a society which India has. Is it at variance or that the vast majority of Indians also approve of premarital sex? If the majority has a negative opinion, then this issue is a reflection of so-called universally accepted norms. Indian society has certain established and widely accepted practices. It has its own culture which needs to be respected by all. In the name of freedom of speech and certain clichés such as – ‘let us leave the choice to the persons concerned’, one should not go against commonly accepted norms in this country unless if it has to do with issues such as Sati.

3.12 The subject of ethics is an open-ended one and that is the beauty of ethics. During ethical dilemmas, debate even on the quiet, must ensue. In fact that is the aim. To raise consciousness level, to introspect. And if in one’s considered opinion, based on comparison
with universally accepted norms, something is incorrect then it must be said so in clear and unambiguous ways. Study of ethics permits us to pass judgements on what is right and wrong. Ethics also exhorts all to fulfil their commitment to mankind and that is be ethical - in thought and deeds.

**The General Milieu**

3.13 The Indian society is in a state of flux. Age-old systems and traditions are giving way to new thought processes and *independent way of living*. Dress code in colleges which was an accepted norm during our forefathers' times is questioned today. When in 2005 Pro Vice-Chancellor of Bombay University issued a dress code, the students were up in arms. The Pro VC had laid down certain restrictions which were vehemently opposed by a group of students. Can we say with full confidence that teachers today receive the same respect which was say 50 years ago? Conversely can we say for sure about the quality of education being received especially for the underprivileged? Are the teachers today fully dedicated, professionally competent and committed to the cause? Have the teachers today set for themselves highest standards and are they prepared to go the extra mile to educate the child? Indian education today is at crossroads. Schools and colleges are beset with immense problems. We need to answer this important question: “is education in India today capable and geared up to prevent the onslaught of moral decadence on the youth today”?

3.14 A debatable issue is the effect of TV and other audiovisual media on the youth today. The researcher consciously wishes to avoid a lengthy debate on this. We need to answer one question: “is TV today becoming a major source of knowledge and ethical education?” If the answer is in the negative than it does not bode well for the society. Most of Indian movies today survive on thin scripts or storyline with heavy doses of sex, body show and violence. How many movies are today depicting a happy family with great concern for maintenance of highest ethical standards? The Indian student today is in turmoil - the TV, the films, the vast array of electronic gadgets and its uses are certainly not the best repository of highest moral and ethical values of any civilised society. Isn’t ethics in such a situation a big casualty? A society is a set of values - of what is right or wrong. This is being constantly challenged by the youth today. Levels of the tolerance have drastically reduced.

**Moral Chaos**

3.15 That there is moral chaos in the society is an obvious statement. The real point
is - how can in such a situation one expect each one who is primarily surviving for his bread to determine of what ought to be and be able to compare with what is being done. But then there has to be a way out of this muddle. Each human being needs to analyse the condition he is in at present and proceed from there. Each person needs to understand that he couldn’t have chosen the place, parents and circumstances of his birth. One must recount the story of Hindi film ‘Deewar’ where Amitabh Bachchan is seen as consciously torturing himself about the environment of his upbringing. He allowed his past to haunt him and finally to envelope him into a character of hate and revenge. The real challenge for this protagonist would have been to act with honour and dignity and not get trapped in the whirlpool of ethical dilemmas. To live with honour and practice noble deeds should be the ultimate aim of any human being. But to think good and do good demand clear understanding of these terms. Given the chaotic state of the society how much of it is possible is anyone’s guess.

3.16 Paucity of ethical knowledge or for that matter the courage to possess that is worrisome. How is ethics developed? We need to first examine its composition to be able to deal effectively with specific issues. Ethics comprises of or is born out of the following aspects:

3.16.1 Circumstances. Again referring to the film ‘Deewar’ a boy stole bread for his starving family. For this young boy it was absolutely ethical to steal as the circumstances in which he was enveloped forced him to do so.

3.16.2 Objectives. Each individual has objectives in his life - small or big. It could range from mere struggle for survival to becoming the CEO of Microsoft. If survival entails anything and everything, so be it!

3.16.3 Customs and Traditions. At times one is bound by age-old traditions and customs of one’s society. “My clan disapproves of premarital sex, so I won’t indulge in it”.

3.16.4 Rules and Regulations. Participants of civilised societies follow law of the land. Indian law forbids sale and use of narcotics, so be it!

3.17 Ethics is a balanced mix of aforesaid issues. Undue importance to one aspect can lead to ethical dilemmas which then one is unable to face and resolve. To decide what is right and wrong is dictated by one’s conscience. Is conscience an aspect of “within” or this
too can be influenced. Many people are often heard as saying, “my conscience does not allow me to indulge in sycophancy, so I won’t”. Others are often heard as saying, “what the hell, as long as it serves my purpose I will appease my seniors”. Is conscience a victim of social norms and practices (sati for example)? Existence of conscience in the person is a forerunner of ethical values of the individual. Conscience leads to obligation. A person with a high level of conscience has a high level of commitment of well-being of the society he lives in. It is essential therefore to keep the conscience alive in order to keep the obligation alive.

3.18 Duties can at times overshadow one’s conscience. The bread stealing episode of ‘Deewar’ is a case of ‘situation ethic’ - the obligation of the boy towards his hungry parents. Situation ethics as the name suggests, ‘is good for as long as it lasts’, which may seem justified temporarily. It cannot under any circumstances override the ethical wisdom of not stealing.

3.19 The researcher is reminded of a Hindi film wherein the male protagonist is portrayed as a Samaritan who is seen as messiah of the poor and the downtrodden. He is shown as robbing the ill-gotten wealth of the rich or cheating the swindlers and then is seen as distributing the booty to the poor. He endeared himself to the oppressed and when questioned he terms it as fully ethical and in order. Robbing is of course wrong; in this case however, the absolute of good deeds for the poor is served by a robbing the local Zamindar who has amassed wealth by enslaving the poor. This is not situation ethics where no absolutes exist. In this case what the film is trying to convey that by robbing the evil, the hero per se has not renounced the good of not cheating or deceiving the others. This brings us to a crucial fact that the worldly affairs of society are demanding, that the evil exists and the stark reality of human life is that at times one is compelled from shades of black deeds for the genuine and compelling benefit of humanity at large.

**Ethics and Good Education**

3.20 The researcher wishes to again at this stage to reflect upon the importance of good foundation of the youth for development of ethics and character. And good character is built by good education. Ethics essentially deals with selection of an appropriate choice by an individual after having logically reasoned it out. To arrest the trend of moral decadence in the Indian society (which provides the young men and woman to the Army) is by development of character by an all encompassing education. There is a need to reorient our
youth and all have a role to play. From parents to dedicated teachers to the mandarins of power all have a role to play. The moral bankruptcy in the society is like the moth eating into the strong ethical foundation which our forefathers handed down to us. There is a compelling need to develop the attribute of virtuous conduct amongst the children. This thesis has often quoted the life of Admiral (Retd) James B Stockdale whose integrity and character was put to test by the incessant torturing in the Vietnamese jails. In his various lectures and published works the Admiral professes resorting to “hardcore philosophy and the reading of enough high-quality ultimate solution literature”. This he says helps “deter self pity when in extremes”. This Thesis also has quoted a famous incident of ‘My Lai’ a village in Vietnam which saw Lt William Calley order indiscriminate firing killing 400 villagers. Obviously the Lt had no sound education which should have built his character leading to a set of good ethical values.

Military Ethics

3.21 From the field of ethics we derive the term ‘military ethics’. What is military ethics and how is it a modified version of the larger field of ethics? The researcher wishes to draw from the works of Sir John Winthrop Hackett. He emphasises that virtues such as courage, fortitude and loyalty are moral virtues for all human beings but that in the military profession they attain a special significance.

3.22 Military virtues are not a class apart, “they are virtues which are virtues in every walk of life. In the profession of arms they are functionally indispensable. The training, the group organisation, the whole pattern of life of the professional man at arms is designed in a deliberate effort to foster them, not because they are morally desirable but that they contribute to military efficiency.”

3.23. The military profession in an ideal state is clearly among the most noble, its functions involves preservation of our highest human values, referred to as a way of life. We perceive military function as necessarily involving moral integrity in such a crucial fashion that any hint of dishonesty in the services must become a matter of paramount concern. Military knowledge and competence are not enough, they be cojoined with courage, obedience, loyalty, subordination of self to greater whole and moral integrity.

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10 Wakin, Gen (Retd) Malham M.
3.24 General Malham M Wakin further states, “there are two main discernible ties between moral virtue and military profession: first, some important virtues (loyalty, obedience, courage, selflessness, integrity) are crucial to carry out military profession and not merely the *nice to have*".

3.25 Unless the military profession captures the full dedication of those who are competent both morally and intellectually to meet its challenges, unless it becomes for the most a complete and fulfilling vocation, it is likely to fall on hard times. In the hands of mediocre or morally insensitive vocation of arms could find its noble purpose distorted.

*The military ethics is basically cooperative in spirit. It is fundamentally anti-individualistic.*

*Samuel P Huntington*

3.26 Duty of the military man is to serve the society and because of the nature of the means he employs to carry out his tasks, the military man emphasises subordination of the will of the individual to the will of the group. Tradition, espirit, unity, community - rate high in the military value system. Officer submerges his personal interests and desires to what is necessary for the good of the service. As a German officer put it, “*a military man must forego personal advantage, lucre and prosperity*”.

*Profession of arms is an essential social institution offering an orderly way of life, set a little apart, not without elegance.*

*Sir John Winthrop Hackett*

3.27 A cause of strain upon the Armed Forces is the divergence in the ethical pattern of the parent society from that of what is existing in the Armed Forces. The quality demanded in military service, which includes self restraint in the acceptance of an ordered life do not seem to be held in growing esteem everywhere among the youth today. Military institution has formed the moral repository that is the source of the State it serves.

*The idealistic code is indeed at the very heart of the acceptance and trust of the military establishment in a free society.*

*Lewis S. Sarley*

3.28 Ethics as stated earlier is the *study of virtue*. But the study is not sufficient. Thought must be followed by action. Military ethics also espouses the same reasoning, and that is.
the military man must not only have the capability to know what ought to be done but possess the requisite expertise to execute the same. But then soldiers are often faced with ethical dilemmas especially in situations of combating C 1 operations. At times the leader is not sure of what to decide, is more concerned perhaps of the consequences. It often happens when leaders are aware of what ‘ought to be done’ but lacked the requisite qualities (such as moral high ground) to execute it. Now this causes severe psychological stress in the soldier or the cadet who is burdened by the consequence of his action. Due to lack of good education of development of character at the level of school/college, most cadets or YO grope in dark to first determine what is wrong and then do it. The critical distinction between ethics in civilian life and military life is beautifully described by General Sir John Hackett in October 1970 in his address at the US Air Force Academy. He said, “a man can be selfish, cowardly, disloyal, false, fleeting, perjured and morally corrupt in a wide variety of ways and still be outstandingly good in pursuits in which other imperatives bear than those upon the fighting man. He can be a superb creative artist, and still be a very bad man. What bad man cannot be is a good soldier, sailor or an airman”. What Sir Hackett was trying to explain that one can be an effective nuclear physicist by having an immoral character but one cannot be a proficient soldier with such a character. An evil person is evil if he does good deeds occasionally. It is a known fact that not all good people are always good soldiers; but it is certain that bad people are always bad soldiers.

3.29 We come back to the subject to military ethics. As one author defined military ethics as ‘the study of honourable and shameful conduct in the Armed Forces’. This definition implies that the soldier should first be capable of defining what is honourable and what constitutes shameful acts. This same author goes on to explain ethics which he says, ‘ is about trying to separate the right from wrong, honour from shame, virtue from vice. It is the studied search for wisdom and an inquiry and in what ought to be done. It also entails the obligation of acting wisely and resolutely from the judgements we make’. And as stated earlier, character is the cornerstone of military ethics and is developed by right education at the right time. Developing character means developing conscience. Conscience tells the military man to reflect about the choice he has adopted and its consequences. It acts as a check-mate to one's own self. It is only through live and ticking conscience that the military man can uphold the highest ethical values of its noble profession.

3.30 **Dictionary Meanings.** Dictionary meaning of the relevant words in this Chapter are given at Appendix C.