CHAPTER 7

IDEALISM
VS
GROUND REALITIES
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“The safety, honour and welfare of your country come first always, every time”.
“The honour, welfare and comfort of the men you command come next”
“Your own ease, comfort and safety comes always last and every time”

Field Marshal Lord Chetwode
1931

(Words enshrined in golden letters in the Chetwode Hall at the IMA, Dehradun)

7.1 The aforesaid words are indeed the essence of what should personify a soldier in uniform. These were the priorities, which were set forth for an officer. This Chapter will not be restricted to the officer cadre alone but to the JCO, NCO and OR. The words of Lord Chetwode sums up as to what is expected of man who dons a uniform ready to barter life for the safety of his nation. It is essential at this stage to first understand the terms idealism and realism prior to the subject proper.

Idealism

7.2 To a common person, idealism signifies that we do not live for bread and butter alone or for that matter comfort of life. The dictionary meaning of idealism is, “representation of things in an ideal form”. Idealism is ingrained in Indian culture and has always provided to our society a sense of uniqueness, stability and an element of permanence. A child born to a Hindu family is taught about the ideals of Ramayana viz, Lord Rama as the ideal son, husband, Sita as the ideal daughter (in law) and wife, Laxman as the ideal brother and so on. Each religion has teachings, which teach idealism. Therefore, each parent attempts to groom his child under idealistic teachings. Perceptions about idealism however vary from individual to an individual who as a member of society is not insulated from all ‘wrongs’ in the society.

Characteristics

7.3 There are certain characteristics of Idealism which are as follows:

7.3.1 **Human Nature is Essentially Good.** Humans are capable of altruism, mutual aid, and have the ability to work with others. Humans have uncalculating
regard for interests of others.

7.3.2 **Inherent Goodness of Humans and our Instinct to be Social Makes Progress Possible.** It is said that it is possible for humans to achieve perfection. Essentially each human being is good or born good, it is the circumstances which influence his/her thought process.

7.3.3 **Bad Human Behaviour is not Product of Evil People.** It is said that bad behaviour is not a product of evil people but it is the presence of evil institutions that create incentives for people to act badly.

7.3.4 **Humans are not Inherently Evil.** Humans are subject to some catalyst, which makes them evil.

7.3.5 **Long Term Goals.** Idealists put their goals as more important than the available means to achieve them in the sense that idealists will take longer risks because they value ideals over what is necessarily best for them.

**Criticisms**

7.4 Having seen certain characteristics of idealism let us consider its drawbacks or criticisms which are as follows:

7.4.1 **Idealism is far too Optimistic.** Unfortunately States and individuals are not what the idealistic theory suggests. In actuality, States and individuals are both good and evil.

7.4.2 **The Idealistic Institutions have Failed.** Idealistic institutions created to prevent war have failed. Take the example of UN and its inability to bring peace and world order.

7.4.3 **The Strong do and the Weak Endure.** Simply stated, ‘The strong do what they can, the weak endure what they must’.

7.4.4 **Extreme Idealism.** Extreme idealism is basically flawed too in that it assumes the power of instituting perfection. Moreover it often doesn’t allow for unforeseen consequences.
7.4.5 **Impractical.** The opponents of idealism are of the belief that idealism is
good in theory and unfeasible in today’s environment. They are of the opinion that
idealism has more pitfalls than realism. It causes hindrances and impediments in
achievement of overall aim. It consumes time and the efforts involved in
achievement of idealistic codes are not commensurate with the results that are
desired in a reasonable timeframe.

**Realism**

7.5 Consulting the dictionary again realism is referred to, as a practice of regarding
things in their true nature and dealing with things *as they are*. Realism is a comprehensive
term. Evidently, the best exponent of realism was Shankaracharaya. If a rope is mistaken as
a snake, it was real at least for that moment and the dreams are real as long as they last. If
society has certain views of idealism and morality, irrespective whether it is right or wrong,
it is a reality because it exists. Coming back to the dictionary meaning the words in italics
need a mention here *as they are*. Simply put it is dealing with things with a practical
approach with the realities prevalent in our society. Needless to say, the stark realities are
that the teachings of idealism of ‘Ram Raj’ do not, in a full measure, find themselves being
insulated to deeds by individuals and the society as a whole.

7.6 **Tenets.** Certain tenets as regards realism are highlighted below:

7.6.1 **Human Nature is Essentially Greedy.** Humans lust for power, want to
control others and want what others have.

7.6.2 **Inherent Evil and Greed of Humans makes Progress Impossible.** Human
nature cannot be perfected, and those who try are on a fools errand.

7.6.3 **The Society is in a State of Anarchy.** The environment is always in a state
of flux, corrupted to the core.

7.6.4 **Promotion of Self-Interest.** Promotion of self-interest is the primary and
paramount concern of any individual. It is only then that the individual excels in
whatever he endeavours.

**The Society Today**

7.7 The Society today is a constant state of flux. The joint family system which was
prevalent to absorb shocks and unnecessary influences on individual members has given way to nuclear units. Idealistic behaviour is not the norm today. In fact in the quest for power and materialism the very concept is under serious threat.

7.8 When one takes some time to educate about what makes the “real world” outside operate and become aware of its dirty little secrets, the view of reality becomes too clear to do anything than to work for change. It is a sad state when people are resigned to simply allow the status quo to persist, as if it had been and forever shall be. People, however, do care somewhere deep down their hearts. Unfortunately, everyone seems to think that setting the standards and not settling for anything else is futile, and in the end only results in frustration and burnout.

7.9 Movements that promote ideals are often termed as “radical” or “extreme”. People often stop short of formulating vision of perfect world. Rather than set lofty goals which may not be reached within a reasonable time, they set lower goals and confine their expectations to what they see as realistic. This view unfortunately will never lead to great strides in the state of humanity, nor will result in anything more than stagnation of individuals and society.

7.10 People by and large have no time for idealism which is considered as a frustrating experience and lonely at times. Being realistic is being smart and in tune with the trends of the societal behaviour today!

7.11. It seems that the ‘man of principles’ has been taken over by ‘the practical’. A lot of things unheard of decades ago are the norm of the day. With such dramatic changes in the society there has been a tendency to give different colours to the definition of Idealism to suit individual or group needs. Strange but true, the words “men of idealism” is today a quoted sum of words only! Corruption and heavy dose of practicality has taken over it.

7.12. It is a known fact that majority of people are not idealistic nor do they wish to follow an ideal. All they want to do is fill up the stomach and ensure happiness for their family. The situation can be described best as “indifference”; the new generation does not even pay lip service to idealism. This is a ruthless generation of materialistic, indifferent, and a confused generation. So is idealism feasible, with more than one billion people in India,

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24 Tamlin, Justin: Idealists do it better.
fewer jobs, when most people are not sure of the next meal?

7.13 For the vast majority of people, it is the practical that matters - especially if the basic needs of life are hard to come by. The biggest problem we face today is erosion in our connectedness. The more we become a 'me and mine' only society the less connected we become. But who is to blame for this? - the parents who have no time for the children? The market where anything is made into a commodity? Politicians who cannot see beyond power and money? Or our children who cannot think beyond cell phones and parties?

The Indian Soldier

7.14 Chapter Eleven of this Thesis dwells in detail on the aspect of the Indian soldier who also has a parallel existence as a man. It is essential in this Chapter to make a mention too. As seen earlier in this subject that idealism over a period of time has degenerated and has got mixed up with realities. The philosophic reality seeks ultimate truth. Nachiketa in Upanishad urges Yama to teach him that knowing which all else in known. All our worldly anxieties and concerns are superficial and transitory, as we ourselves are; reality lies somewhere else. Reality is concerned to high profile idealism. Even if we accept such version of reality, we cannot afford to ignore evils, which also exist. Hence, no idealist will disagree because the reality can only be one.

7.15 After having seen idealism, realism, and their relevance today we must now focus our attention on the Indian soldier. What is expected out of him, Lord Chetwode had said it all. However, let us understand him, the man who is to do it all. An Indian soldier has traversed through ages. In the British Indian Army, he generally came from a combined family, from a rural background. The valour and sacrifices of soldiers of his village goaded him to join the Amy primarily for the honour of his nation. He did not treat the profession of arms merely as a job, as a means to earn a livelihood. The Indian officer cadre was limited in size. It is only after independence that the officer cadre grew and was fully in command of the troops.

7.16 The Soldier Today. The last 4-5 decades has seen the Indian Army grow from strength to strength having seen four wars. The associated problems too have grown and become more complex. The demands on leadership have never been as high as ever before. It is important to analyse as to what goes into making of a soldier today and points are given
as follows:

7.16.1 He is better educated.

7.16.2 The general awareness level has improved manifold with the availability of vast array of the audio-visual media.

7.16.3 The standard of living has gone up, again due to exposure and availability of vast consumer markets.

7.16.4 He is more mature and expects more from his officers.

7.16.5 He likes to be taken into confidence.

7.16.6 He has an inquiring mind, which at times manifests itself into an inquiring attitude towards instructions/orders.

7.16.7 He no more belongs to a joint family where the interests and safety of his wife and children were well looked after. Due to compulsions at home, due to non-family stations and due to limited availability of accommodation in family stations he is constantly concerned about his family.

7.16.8 He today has to function under greater levels of stress as a major part of the Army is constantly engaged in maintenance of peace and tranquillity within the State, his duties on various borders notwithstanding.

7.16.9 The Army today is under strength, with most of which is in field with less than the authorised strength of troops. This puts additional loads on the posted strength of manpower that have to cope with additional duties with a lesser time frame for rest and recoup.

7.16.10 At times he is unhappy with the affairs of the State. The ever-increasing use of the Army in maintenance of law and order does have an effect on his psyche. He may not say it openly, but he questions himself constantly. He thinks at times, that he is a mere instrument being used at will to serve political ambitions.

7.16.11 He finds his future uncertain, after 15-20 years of service, at the age of 35/40 where does he go? The joint family is no more there to absorb him. Also in the
eventuality of his death due to his duty, what will happen to his wife and children? And perhaps old parents?

7.16.12 When he goes home on leave he finds his brother in the police living in a far higher standard of living. There is corruption at all levels in public life which surrounds him.

7.16.13 A soldier today is confused about the concept of commitment. He finds it sardonic when he was asked to pick up dead bodies after the Andhra cyclone when the civilian counterparts refused to undertake the said task.

7.17 To sum it all a soldier today is no longer a gallant blockhead who is only ready to do or die. It is safe to say that the situation in the country today has changed so has changed the attitude of people. As said earlier a soldier today is no exception - he has a parallel existence as man which he cannot disassociate himself from. He therefore is not functioning in an idealist society of which the Army is a part and parcel of. Does this mean that he functions what the dictionary tells him about realism - deal with things as they are? Or that the solution lies in a proper mix of idealism and realism, a balanced attitude? If so, who decides the ratio or can the functions of a soldier today be compartmentalised under the subjects of idealism and realism? These questions need to be answered as it directly affects the work ethics of a soldier today.

7.18 We come back to the words of Lord Chetwode at this juncture. By no means has the researcher wished to question the noble and golden words, he being a soldier in uniform. However, this study will not be purposeful if we do not address ourselves to questions as stated in Paragraph 7.17 of this Chapter. The researcher admonished a civilian friend who said that the words of Lord Chetwode should be written in reverse order.

7.19 The researcher is of the firm belief that unless the words of Lord Chetwode are followed in letter and spirit from “within” by each and every person in the Army the objectives and tasks as laid down cannot be fully accomplished. So how does one sell these words to a soldier today? Heavy doses on subjects such as sacrifice for the cause, maintenance of highest codes of moral and ethical behaviour, etc. can prove counter-productive. On the other hand one cannot allow Army to turn into an organisation which an agency is just providing jobs. The ethical behaviour of a soldier today and the organisational behaviour need to be looked afresh and tackled with a more practical approach.
Relevance of Idealistic Codes

7.20 The proponents of idealistic codes in the Army today are often scoffed at. Many argue about its unassailability and impracticality. Many cite examples wherein men of good character had not found a place in the scheme of things and have had to leave the system. In a discussion with the researcher, a senior officer quoted example of a general officer who was extremely successful in operational effectiveness but had shown lack of probity in private life. This senior officer posed a question to the researcher whether it would be advisable to place such a successful officer in operations under the compass of ethical scrutiny. This officer brought to the notice of the researcher about the laurels the general officer brought to the Army on the battlefield. In a way the senior officer was putting a question mark on the relevance of idealistic codes in today’s world. The researcher reminded the senior officer of innumerable examples of military history with special reference to Indian military history where lapses of character have been calamitous. If small or big indiscretions are accepted as a way of life in the Army then there is a lurking danger of institutionalising such practices the consequences of which would be inconceivable.

Realities Today

7.21 That the black and white colour of the idealistic codes of conduct established by the forefathers of the Army has undergone a change is a reality. Shades of grey seem to be prevalent in every walk of life in the Army today. There are many who are oblivious of the dangers posed by the acceptance of various forms of ethical relativism, or blurring of right from wrong. Person who believes that everything is relative and depends on the existing circumstances does not have the basis for making ethical judgements. And unfortunately there are not many leaders who were prepared to buy this argument.

Dangers of Realism in the Army

7.22 The concept of honour embodies within it the primary concept of integrity. Of late the honour codes of the military academies are under serious threat. These honour codes traditionally have been utilised to maintain and develop strict ethical standards among the cadets. Unfortunately the propagators of the theory of relativism have initiated debates about its relevance in today’s world. If one conducts a survey in civilian educational institutions especially in government schools one can easily find out whether sizable

percentage of the students would have cheated on their educational studies. The students perhaps would justify that the system was out of date therefore it gave them the liberty to cheat on examinations. Another reason which perhaps a student would give is the pressure to succeed. Unfortunately in training academies of the Army the smart ones are more successful than the rest. At times guile is encouraged and the distinction between guile and astuteness is slowly getting blurred.

“Let us stand for something lest we fall for anything”

Dr Peter Marshall

7.23 There are instances in the Army where in high-pressure environment a number of personnel including senior personnel in the absence of basic sound ethical moorings tend to fall prey to urgings of their more worldly wise and less scrupulous seniors. Guile is the quality which is part of their survival manual. What is surprising is not the existence of such personnel but the benevolent and even approving attitude of their superiors.

7.24 There are many today who have accepted the theory of bandwidth as a practical and ‘mature’ way of functioning in the Army. This theory of bandwidth refers to acceptance of shades of grey of codes of conduct as a realistic way of moving forward in the Army. This theory stipulates a certain variation from the idealistic codes on both sides of the bottom line. And this is becoming the norm of the day. But there are certain questions which remain unanswered. For example, who decides the bandwidth? Is it left to the discretion of each and every CO and Cdr on ground and their personality traits? Are lapses of character howsoever small acceptable in military culture? Would it result in institutionalising such practices? What about the Chetwodian motto? If such practices are allowed to take roots is their a possibility of the Chetwodian motto ultimately losing its significance totally and fading into oblivion?

The Other Viewpoint

7.25 There are gentlemen in the Army who feel that people successful in war are often failures in peacetime duties. For as they say to be successful in war, a leader requires guile and cunningness to outsmart the enemy. These characteristics may not stand the test of scrutiny on the ethical compass but have facilitated victory on the battlefield. As far as the peacetime duties are concerned they are of the opinion that it is the CO on ground who decides the bandwidth. The CO lays down the terms of reference within which he expects
his commands to function. He is the best judge to do so. They further opine that honesty and uprightness are signs of inflexibility. They do agree that officers are gentlemen but they are quick to add that they are humans too. So what is the commotion all about?

**End Notes**

7.26 Unfortunately the soldier today is functioning in an environment wherein the very fundamentals of moral fibre are threatening to get eroded. ‘Practical philosophies’ often do the rounds at work place in the Army. These philosophies confront the unassailability of age-old core values. To be fair, a large number of officers and men however do believe in the value systems so cherished in the Army. However over a period of time due to various circumstances a lackadaisical attitude has set in wherein small indiscretions become a way of life as it looks trivial in daily routine of a soldier. It is only on the battlefield that degradation of value systems manifests themselves in unnecessary loss of life. As repeatedly mentioned in this treatise that though it may be acceptable in the civil society for the devaluation of moral codes of conduct, in the Armed Forces they are unacceptable. Lapses of character in peacetime howsoever insignificant could have grave ramifications on the battlefield.