

# Readings for Officers

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ALI AHMED ► IDSA

The profession of arms has a striking disadvantage for its practitioners. This is that opportunities for its practice are few and far between. In all of India's wars, only a partial fraction of the Army has been exposed to the cut and thrust of combat. Therefore, the substance of the profession has to be acquired vicariously. However, the nature of continual deployment in field areas comprising either counter insurgency or in difficult terrain and weather conditions makes up for the lack of exposure to high intensity war. Ironically, a job well done in the former leads to deterrence and consequently lack of experience of war. Nevertheless, even while accretion of experience may be had along a career span, there is a case for reading not only to supplement it but more importantly to make sense of it.

The Army is already cognizant of this. It has an introductory course to military studies at the Academy stage in the form of a military history capsule. The text for this requires a definite makeover, not only in content and readability, but also its presentation. Even though the subject is broached in sessions with the DS, rather than left solely to AEC instructors, serious academic attention is recommended. The next stage is in the unit, under a watchful 2IC. But given the pace of life these days, the mentorship system has all but vanished. Reading is more eclectic and less curricular. The Part B and Part D promotion exams are there for enhancing exposure. But, connotations associated with 'exams', do little to nudge officers into reading. Reading is nevertheless a popular pastime, with officers usefully taking to self-development and management related books. This is all for the good, indicating that the intent and energy exist and could be usefully capitalized on. What then needs to be done?

A change over at the Staff Course entrance exam stage from replicating the pattern of promotion exams in the Military History paper, of a campaign study and biographies, to a more contextual Military Studies paper may be useful. A wider mandatory reading can be prepared by the MT 2, comprising selections from its Golden Hundred. This could cover the gamut of military studies including technology, military history, military sociology, strategy and international relations.

This need not be confined to Indian texts or experience. Since an officer is aware of when he is to come up for the exam, preparation in terms of reading can start even half a decade earlier. This would get the officer acquainted with the context of his profession, even while the other papers test the content bit. The exam questions can be framed in line with that of the NET for defence and strategic studies. Past papers are available at the UGC website for reference.

It is an ill-informed belief that officers at the spear end and tactical level can do without contextual knowledge and sensitivity. This is a sure fire way to create Colonel Blimps. This conception has already changed. Great strides have been made such as placing a plethora of reading on the intranet and WAN, such as notably that of the Junior Command course. It is important to keep the challenge stern enough for those rising in their careers to ultimately make their minds receptive to demands at the operational and strategic levels. While all would of course not be so privileged, they would be none the worse off since it would better prepare them for exit into the civilian world.

As part of reading habits, once the initial set is consumed such as the timeless one by Major KC Praval, the officer is ready for the next higher level. The India specific set need not be restricted to wars and biographies of military heroes. While books such as those of LP Sen, John Dalvi, DK Palit etc are available in formation libraries, academic works need to supplement their narration. These include earlier output of authors such as Sumit Ganguly and the more recent one by military historian Srinath Raghavan on conflicts of the Nehruvian era. Works by academics, such as Kaushik Roy and Sundaram, need the encouragement of purchase, review and mention.

Ever since India's rise, its military has gained academic attention. Works interpreting India's rise, such as by Stephen Cohen, S Paul Kapur, Peter Lavoy etc are useful since these are based on access to India's strategic community. The work of Kanwal, Manpreet Sethi and Raja Menon helps grapple with military issues including the exotic nuclear 'backdrop'. This helps in acquainting the practitioner with the significance of operational engagements, such as, for instance, proactive stance preparedness or raisings of mountain divisions. There being an anachronistic sanction against talking 'shop' in messes, it is perversely taken as infra-dig to discuss such issues. Suffice it to say this can only be tyranny of insecure seniors.

Care needs to be taken by libraries to tap the higher end book market such as that of Routledge and Sage. The Sixth Pay Commission emoluments surely make these accessible. Numerous defence 'glossies' now are in the market with veterans

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and the defence industry driving ideas and selling products. Websites of Service think tanks, such as this one, keep the officer updated. Web groups of course-mates enable circulation of material for reference at leisure. A discerning eye needs to be cultivated so as to not lose time chasing down quality reading. The military profile of generals such as Petraeus, Panag etc indicates that reading provides ballast to careers. That should be incentive enough in this competitive world to sometimes also take a book to bed!