

Nehru and the Indian Armed Forces  
5th Lecture - by General J N Chaudhuri  
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Lord Butler, the first of the speakers in this series, mentioned the influence of an English education and particularly Cambridge on Nehru. My own connections with this distinguished university were unfortunately limited, for I was educated at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst. I mention this for despite some ungenerous references just after India's independence to the 'Sandhurst mentality', this played an important part in ensuring that new India's armed forces remained totally apolitical, the servants of the state and not its masters.

The second speaker in the series was Lord Mountbatten who has so graciously taken the chair today. He was perhaps the first Englishman in 180 years of British rule who completely understood contemporary India's aspirations and had the courage to see that these aspirations were achieved. Actually, Lord Mountbatten in March 1946, as Supreme Allied Commander in South East Asia, first introduced me to Jawaharlal Nehru. He ordered me down from Kuala Lumpur, where I was Chief of Logistics to Malaya Command, and put me in charge of Nehru's visit to Malaya and Singapore with the prophecy, and perhaps the caution, that I would be responsible for independent India's first Prime Minister. This prophecy was to be fulfilled seventeen months later.

The third speaker, V K Krishna Menon, probably knew Nehru longer and more closely than any of us and at one time was second only to Panditji as an international Indian figure. Shortly before coming to England, I visited him and found a relaxed mellow man with an alert mind full of ideas as usual.

The fourth speaker, Lord Blackett, to whom we owe a good deal for our country's progress in the scientific and economic field, described aspects of India's development since independence.

I would like to use as my theme in this lecture a view of Nehru and India's armed forces, which of course must include something about the development of these forces and the British connection with this development.

#### Historical background

The Indian armed forces as constituted today originated from the locally recruited watchmen employed by the East India Company to guard their trading sheds and settlements. However, when the directors of 'John Company' changed their priorities from enlarging their trade to increasing the size of their trading territory, these watchmen grew in number and quickly became an army. As the scope of military operations began to expand, into this army were incorporated the military forces of those Princes who threw in their lot with the British. Take my own regiment, the 16th Light Cavalry, for example. The brief history given in the Indian Army List states: 'Date of raising unknown. Formed from details of the Nawab of Arcot's Bodyguard in 1784'. Initially these Indian soldiers in the Company's service were officered and led by their own countrymen, but when the French, also competing for power in India, began to use European commissioned officers to command their local troops, the British quickly did the same. This policy of British officers only to command locally enlisted soldiers continued until 1918, after which Indians in very small numbers began to be commissioned on par with the British.

The East India Company's rule over India came to an end in 1858. Queen Victoria became Empress of India and the Company's military forces were taken over by the British Government. Though originally recruited only for the conquest and pacification of India and not for deployment overseas, the Indian Army, as it was now known, was soon serving the Crown abroad. Britain's colonial policing problems and her small wars of the 19th and early 20th centuries, required competent, inexpensive and not very highly technical manpower. Consequently, Indian soldiers began to be used out of their own country on Imperial duties. Between 1858 and 1914 Indian

troops were sent to Abyssinia, Afghanistan, Africa, Burma and China, and their record in all these campaigns was excellent.

When World War I broke out, one of the first Imperial contingents to arrive in France to support the British Expeditionary Force was a large group of Indian troops. Nobody thought it surprising that soldiers from a tropical country should be sent to fight in Europe. It may not be commonly known that during World War I over one million nationals of India served in the Imperial armed forces and fought in France, Africa and the Middle East. In World War II the figure was over two million. In both cases every single man was a volunteer.

#### British reluctance to commission Indians

It was at the end of World War I that India's future political leaders began to take an interest in the armed forces, and press for nationalism within the officer cadre. Nobody could deny that Indian troops had fought loyally, successfully and gallantly in whichever theatre of war and against whichever type of enemy they had been committed. It seemed absurd that they should continue to be commanded wholly by non-Indians, even though this command was exercised with understanding and affection.

I might interpolate here that this understanding and affection was clearly apparent in the way British officers identified themselves with the men they led. For example, no Jat was firmer in his allegiance to the Jat community than a British officer commanding Jat troops, and the same held good for officers commanding Punjabi Mussulmans, Pathans, Dogras or any of the other communities recruited into the armed forces. In the case of the Gurkhas, this identification became even more specialised and occasionally somewhat ludicrous, as officers in the various Gurkha regiments argued about the merits of men recruited not only from different areas in Nepal but also from different heights in the Himalayas.

Indian political leaders, in the forefront of whom were Jawaharlal Nehru and his father, Motilal Nehru, had much to support their demands for increased Indianization. The gradual induction of Indian into the prestigious civil services had worked smoothly and efficiently. This set a good precedent. Educated and suitable young men were available for commissioning. In fact, some Indian students studying in England at the outbreak of the 1914 - 1918 War had clearly demonstrated this suitability by applying to join the nearest British Army unit and fight the Germans. Refused a commission, they had enlisted in the ranks and as NCOs of British battalions had shown both courage and powers of leadership. However, perhaps the most important factor in convincing Whitehall that it could not hold out any longer against the pressure for nationalisation was that, in the later stage of India's development, it was impossible to deny a qualified Indian a commission into an army composed of his fellow countrymen and raised to defend his own country.

In 1918, a start in training the Indians for King's Commission was made by converting Daly College in Indore into a military school. The planners making out the curriculum must have had a curious and complicated task, for not only was there a need to train the cadets militarily, but a certain amount of training had also to be given to them in new and strange social arts. One might also say that a class of Indian had to be created who could mix easily with the British officer and his lady, who could live without friction or indigestion in a predominantly British mess, and who could understand the usages and taboos of a system concerning which they had no previous knowledge or experience. Actually, if the truth has to be told, many Englishmen probably had no experience of it either. Though their fellow countrymen in those early years sometimes disparaged Indian officers commissioned between the two World Wars and accused them of being socially aloof, or called them Brindians (an amalgam of British and Indian), when independence came not a single one of those officers resigned his commission or had any doubts about pledging his full support and loyalty to the new government.

Daly College as an Indian replica of Sandhurst was not a very satisfactory experiment, though one of its first graduates, General K M Cariappa, became the Army's first Indian commander-in-chief. The next stage was to send six to eight cadets a term to the Royal Military College at Sandhurst in England. In the ten years between 1922 and 1932, the Royal Military College trained and commissioned about 126 Indian officers into the Army. The Royal Military Academy at Woolwich, which started taking entrants from 1928, trained a further twelve. In 1932, India inaugurated its own cadet-training establishment, and after that all entrants for the Indian Army came through the Indian Military Academy. Even this Academy between 1932 and 1939 had the surprisingly small output of about 290 officers, and it was only when the needs of World War II became irresistible that the barriers of caution were removed and a large influx of Indian officers came freely into all branches of India's forces.

Looking back, it now seems extraordinary that after the need for nationalizing the officer ranks of the army had been accepted, the method of implementing this decision was so slow and hesitant. Only 126 officers in the first ten years was hardly a large number, and even these officers, once they came back to India, were limited to service in certain specific regiments, designated as earmarked for Indianization. There must have been a good deal of doubt at the time as to whether the experiment would be a success and whether, by the introduction of Indian officers, the loyalty of the Indian army would be subverted. One of the results of this slow input during the early stages was that in 1946, after the end of World War II, only three Indian officers reached the rank of brigadier. This shortage of senior officers created a number of problems within both India and Pakistan, when the old Indian Army was divided between them at partition. Each country dealt with the problems in a different way, India, firm in her political leadership, retained all her senior officers and indeed promoted many of them into appropriate positions compatible with their seniority within the armed forces, even if previously they had not made these grades. Pakistan, on the other hand, tended to move out many of her senior officers and particularly those commissioned from Sandhurst, into diplomatic or other civilian posts, entrusting the officering of the top service ranks to a much younger group. Later events seem to show that the Indian pattern was politically more stable.

#### National Character of the Armed Forces

My own entry into Sandhurst was in mid-1926. As I was at school in England at the time, I seemed to escape the long process of selection that my contemporaries in India had to go through, a screening for ability, and presumably loyalty, that started at the level of the District Magistrate and finally ended in front of the Viceroy at Simla. When our batch met each other for the first time at the gate of the Royal Military College, the others were a little surprised to see me but I was delighted to meet them. The entry from India that term was, as usual, a mixed group consisting of a Hazara, later to become one of Pakistan's Presidents, two Mahrattas, a man from Meerut, a Sikh, a Dogra, a Gurkha who did not manage to finish the course, and myself, a Bengali. Despite this diversity of background and culture, each one of us was very conscious that we were Indians first and anything else a long way second. This belief was ingrown and not implanted. We also knew that this fact came first in relationships between ourselves and between us and our hosts. This philosophy of India first and Punjabi, Bengali or Madrassi later, was strongly held from the beginning amongst all the Indian officers coming into the army from Sandhurst. The same national outlook continued within the output from the Indian Military Academy when it came into being and needless to say, is still very much part of the philosophy of every officer and man in the armed forces today.

Shortly after Independence, in some political quarters there was a view that greater provincialization of the armed forces would be advantageous in giving all parts of India a degree of proportional representation in the services. The implementation of such a scheme would, of course, have meant a major reorganisation. The suggestion was put to the Prime Minister by those favouring it, while its internal security aspect in an era when the governments of newly independent countries were slowly being taken over by a section of their soldiers must have been emphasized. However, by this time Jawaharlal Nehru was sure that despite a marked provincial

imbalance in the make-up of the armed forces created during the days of British rule, the armed forces themselves had neither a provincial nor a sectarian bias. Consequently, apart from suggesting a gradual broadening of the recruiting pattern, a change which the armed forces themselves welcomed, any major reorganisation was deemed unnecessary by the Prime Minister.

#### Nehru and the INA

Another important, interesting and in some ways crucial decision taken by Prime Minister Nehru, soon after Independence, concerned the future status of the Japanese-supported, so called Indian National Army. In 1943, after the fall of Singapore, when the British forces surrendered to the Japanese, a large number of prisoners, both British and Indian, were taken by the enemy. From among some of these Indian prisoners the Japanese managed to raise and equip a force to fight alongside their own troops in the forthcoming attack on India. This attack failed, and shortly afterwards the Imperial Japanese government capitulated. The Japanese forces surrendered in their turn, as did the officers and men of the Indian National Army. In India, then on the verge of Independence, the fate of the latter became an intensely political affair. While the British treated them as traitors, the Indian politicians of the Congress Party deemed them to be patriots who, given the opportunity and arms, had fought against the alien rulers for the freedom of their country.

To bring matters to a head, it was decided by the then British Government of India that some senior officers of the Indian National Army would be tried for treason by military courts in the precincts of the Red Fort in Delhi. Nothing could have been more spectacular. The trials attracted a great deal of attention and the Indian leaders organised the ablest legal skills to represent the defendants. As most of these leaders were lawyers themselves, this was not too difficult.

The tribunals in every case found the defendants guilty but bearing in mind the circumstances at the time imposed fairly mild sentences of imprisonment and dismissal. Independence followed and the excitement about the trials died down quickly, but left undecided what the final disposal of the personnel who joined the Indian National Army was to be. The British had dismissed them from the service without any benefits. The armed forces were apprehensive about their return to the ranks, but the Indian National Army and many of the high ranking, political supporters, considered that they should be fully reinstated into the Indian Army. The newly appointed national government headed by Prime Minister Nehru was required to find an answer to the problem. In reality, the decision was Nehru's alone, for by this time he had such a prominent position in the minds of both the people of India and the Congress Party which governed them that his word was law.

In early 1948 the Prime Minister sent for three of us to hear our views on the matter. The trio comprised Mr Rao, a Defence Ministry civil servant with a judicial background, General Srinagesh, an early Sandhurst graduate and myself. We each expressed our view and though there were differences in reasons and reasoning, individually and collectively we all felt that the reinstatement of the Indian National Army into an army which they had left and against which they had fought would be incorrect, probably unwise and certainly disruptive. The Prime Minister heard us out and when we finished he said in his usual forthright manner, 'I disagree with your reasons but I agree with your conclusions.' The Indian National Army men were not reinstated and though some benefits were paid to them and a very few political appointments having no connection with the armed forces were made available to some of them, their treatment was in fact surprisingly cool after all the adulation they had received just one year earlier. Yet in December 1945, in a postscript to *The Discovery of India*, Nehru had written:

The story of the Indian National Army, formed in Burma and Malaya during the war years, spread suddenly throughout the country and evoked an outstanding enthusiasm. The trial by court martial of some of its officers aroused the country as nothing else had done, and they became the symbols of India fighting for her freedom. They became also the symbol of unity among the

various religious groups in India, for Hindu and Moslem and Sikh and Christian were all represented in that army. They had solved the communal problem amongst themselves and so why should we not do so?

Eighteen months later, Panditji must have realised that his own army originally British-trained but now led by Indians, was equally patriotic and equally non-communal. He took the correct decision though at that time it could not have been a particularly easy one to take.

### Apolitical Tradition

In the period of slow Indianization between the two World Wars, naturally any discussion of politics or even of political leaders and their aspirations was totally taboo in the military cantonments and in officers' messes. Much of this prohibition was the result of the average senior British officer's own attitude towards politics both in India and at home. They were scornful of politicians, brown or white, and derogatory about political methods which they felt were always so much more of a compromise than the traditions they themselves followed. The isolation of cantonments, the indifferent political reporting contained in British edited national newspapers of the day, and the thought that a forceful expression of national views might tend to label one as politically minded, inhibited many young Indian officers from commenting on political developments within their own country. Yet no Indian, either in the officer cadre or among the men, was unaware of or uninterested in these developments.

In 1932, my squadron commander after a brief discussion with me on the evils of over-rapid change, asked a senior NCO in my presence if he had ever heard of Gandhi. 'No sir, never' was the immediate reply. The major sauntered off after shaking his head as if to say that young officers did not know very much. When he was out of earshot, I asked Daffadar Badloo Ram what prompted his answer. 'Lieutenant Sahib', he said 'Of course I have heard of Gandhi. Everyone has heard of Gandhi. But if the squadron commander feels I should not have heard of Gandhi, well I haven't heard of Gandhi. I am due for promotion shortly.'

Though there were many Englishmen serving in India at this time who deliberately blinded themselves to India's future, equally there were a number who saw that future quite clearly. Again in 1932, I was out on a morning ride with the Commissioner of Jullunder Division, a man by the name of Ferguson. We were talking about farming in the Punjab, when he switched to the subject of India's independence. This he said would come much earlier than many people thought. Once the country became independent, the responsibilities of people like myself, now very junior officers, would be important for the welfare of the country. He then went on to forecast the future with sympathy, understanding and precision. It is an incident I have not forgotten, and my admiration for Mr Ferguson and those like him who were to be found in every branch of the Indian services remains as high as ever.

I think one mistake the British made in the transfer of power to their ex-colonies, whether it was in Asia or Africa, was not to make the national political leaders, and the military officers who were eventually to serve them, better known to each other at an early stage. They only got to know each other after Independence and, though in India things went very well, elsewhere this sudden confrontation, with its inevitable misunderstandings, often produced unfortunate results. During this particular pre-independence era, Jawaharlal Nehru and the hierarchy of the Congress Party were apparently of the view that Indians in the army should keep out of active politics. In 1936 a small group of young officers stationed in Peshawar, with their feelings considerably ruffled about some stupidity concerning the admission of Indians to the Peshawar Club, arranged to see Nehru clandestinely and take his advice. Any other way of meeting him would have been completely misunderstood. Nehru listened carefully to what they had to say and then without any equivocation advised them to stick it out and continue following the military pattern then in force. 'Learn all you can, he said, 'learn to be good soldiers. When Independence comes we shall want good military leaders. We shall have need of you'. The results of this interview soon got around on the grapevine to all of us and it was wise counsel.

Many years later, in 1963, when I was his Chief of Staff, Prime Minister Nehru discussed with some of us the desirability of officers talking politics in the mess. It had been reported to him that many young officers were referring in a critical manner to the events leading up to the Indo-Chinese clash of 1962. This was true, but then the whole of India was doing the same. After some discussion, the Prime Minister agreed with our view that modes had changed a great deal since the British days. Officers belonging to a national army discussed in the mess very much the same sort of subject they talked about at home. If a political topic came up, suppressing such discussion by order would only drive it harmfully underground. In any case, occasional criticism of Government policy did not in any way imply a lack of loyalty either to the Government or to the country.

#### Neglect of Armed Forces after independence

In his book *The Discovery of India*, Nehru explains that in the years 1937-38, the Congress Party put forward proposals for the expansion of the Indian Army, its mechanisation and the development of the absurdly small naval and air arms then in existence. Again during the Munich period the importance of developing the air arm was emphasized by the Congress Party, but the then Government apparently replied that expert opinion was not agreed about this. This last statement seems an odd one, but there could have been misunderstandings on both sides.

In 1940 the Congress Party specially attended the Central Assembly in Delhi and repeated all these charges, plus pointing out how incompetent the Government and its military departments were in making arrangements for India's defence. By this time the Government of India must have been well aware of their own shortcomings but could not have been particularly happy at having these pointed out to them by a political party whose own philosophy regarding the war in progress was none too clearly defined. Nehru adds that at no time was the question of non-violence considered in relation to the Army, Navy or Air Forces by members of the Congress Party. It was taken for granted that its application was solely confined to India's struggle for freedom.

The policy of non-violence had a powerful effect on the thinking of Indian leaders, which made them strongly favour world disarmament and a peaceful solution of all international as well as national disputes. Intrinsically, in all their thinking for the future, with one or two notable exceptions, they believed that once independence had been gained by a country which had no territorial ambitions, a country which had no history of colonial conquest and which wished to live in amity with its neighbours, the role of the armed forces would gradually dwindle away to border policing, plus some tasks in aid of the civil power for the maintenance of law and order and the provision of the necessary colourful ceremonial for State functions. Even after Independence when the need for strong, alert defence was clearly brought out by the almost instant war with Pakistan over Kashmir, for many years India's Government gave the impression that they felt expenditure on the armed forces was non-productive and so took the lower priority.

India's independence and the emergence of Pakistan as a new nation in August 1947 naturally meant that the old Indian Army, and the rather newer Royal Indian Navy and Royal Indian Air Force, would have to be shared out between the two countries. For a very brief while there had been a suggestion that perhaps the defence services could still remain an integrated whole, ready to serve both countries against their common enemies. This suggestion, probably put forward solely for sentimental reasons, obviously made no sense either politically or in any other way. When partition came the various units, some of whom had been together for nearly 170 years and whose members, Hindu, Sikh, Christian and Muslim, had successfully fought side by side in campaigns all over the world, were split up between the two countries. It could have been a traumatic experience leaving both sides with forces in a psychologically disturbed condition, and unfit to carry out their duties.

In reality nothing of the sort happened, and indeed both the armies with their loyalty solidly behind the new governments they now served were soon fighting each other with the same zeal and enthusiasm with which they had previously fought the enemies of the King Emperor. None of the Indian officers or their counterparts in Pakistan were in the least surprised by this phenomenon. But the British officers, and particularly the older ones no longer in command or even in the country, could not comprehend how this sudden change could have taken place. Even now, a quarter of a century after partition, I am asked by my friends in England to explain how it happened. My view is that there were two factors behind this quick psychological transformation. The first factor was the old British officers themselves, who had built up a top-class, highly professional force, always ready to challenge the enemies of the regime they served without too many qualms about how or why they were enemies. The second factor went much deeper. Every man has a loyalty to his own country, though it may sometimes lie very deep down inside him. This loyalty is particularly strong among the yeoman farmer class, a group who can see their country in tangible terms. The vast majority of recruits to the old undivided Indian armed forces were drawn from this class. Therefore, perhaps, once again the old British officers who had built up the recruiting policy had an indirect influence in the affair.

The first fifteen years after Independence were lean ones for India's armed forces. Budget allotments were restricted; provision for new equipment was slow - in the case of the Indian Navy, almost non-existent. There was no firm decision as to what the ultimate strength of the armed forces should be. This had its effect on morale, for until a firm strength figure was established important ancillaries, and particularly such things as family quarters, could not be built. The operational task was defence against a threat from Pakistan, and when a military dictatorship took over in that country, and then their armed forces were re-equipped by the United States, there was some concern in India. However, one Defence Minister followed another and though they were obviously men of sincerity and patriotism they were neither innovators, nor sufficiently aware of the correlation between foreign policy and defence, to ensure that the latter was in tune with the former.

From time to time the Prime Minister himself took on the Defence portfolio, but, being a very busy man, could only deal with it in a somewhat desultory manner. It appears to some of us as if he did not visualize a serious defence problem arising and perhaps felt that, if it did, the existing organisation would be able to handle it while the appropriate decisions could be taken at the time. This belief was probably strengthened by seeing how efficiently the armed forces dealt with civil commotion or calamity, important things in themselves but no criteria of operational efficiency. But the blame for lack of innovation or necessary change cannot be put wholly on the political leaders; many senior military officers were also hesitant in suggesting changes that they felt were necessary. The appointment of Krishna Menon as Defence Minister was initially welcomed by the armed forces. They felt that here at last was an internationalist who would understand what needed to be done and who had the ear of the Prime Minister. The change was only partially successful. Some good beginnings were made in the development of defence industry, but again the quick success of the operations against Portuguese India created a false sense of euphoria that all was well with the armed forces of India. A year later the Indo-Chinese border war totally shattered this complacency.

#### Traumatic effect of War with China

I saw Panditji on the night of 19 November 1962, two days before the Chinese declared a unilateral ceasefire to be followed by a withdrawal on their part back to the MacMahon Line. He asked me to take over immediately as Chief of Army Staff and we had a short discussion. The Prime Minister was looking exhausted and had suddenly aged in appearance. However, he had no word of recrimination for any person; he blamed no-one and his sole concern was to see how he could assist in rebuilding a shattered edifice. Offers had been received from some countries to help us in this process and Panditji asked whether we should accept them. I suggested that we might accept for the time being weapons and other military equipment of the type that we wanted, but that we should no longer accept amongst us, and in direct contact with the troops, experts from

abroad. The rebuilding of the Indian Army had to be the sole responsibility of those who led it and were part of it. Panditji agreed, and from then until the day he died his firm support of those involved with the rebuilding process gave us all both strength and confidence.

Though we knew of his illness and it was apparent that the end could not be far off, the sudden news of his death produced within the whole country and, of course, within the armed forces, who represented a cross-section of the country's finest young men, a sense of shock and bereavement. The older officers and men who had known him before Independence, and had known him personally since then felt they had lost a friend. Those more junior, who could not clearly remember anything except an independent India, found it hard to visualize their country without Nehru. He had always been with them. Though there had been occasions in the past when the troops had felt that the Prime Minister neglected his armed forces or that his views and priorities concerning them were incorrect, at no time had there been among them any diminution in the respect and affection they had for him. Every Indian was proud that their country had a leader who was not only a pre-eminent national figure but who was also a figure of great international repute.

It has fallen to my lot to make arrangements for, and, to walk in, the funeral processions of three great Indians, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri. I can still see the faces of the enormous crowds who lined the route on each occasion. For the Mahatma, they stood silent, respectful and shocked. For Lal Bahadur Shastri they mourned the passing of a dear and courageous friend. But in the case of Jawaharlal Nehru they wept as if some member of their own family was on the gun carriage passing in front of them.

#### The Armed Forces and Indian Democracy

I am sometimes asked why, of the many ex-colonial armies that became national forces after the Second World War, the Indian armed forces alone have remained totally apolitical and, as I said at the beginning of this talk, the servants of their people and not their masters. Firstly, I think the training they received from their British mentors in the old days laid a solid foundation of stability. Incidentally, the friendship that existed between the Indian soldier and his big British Sahib still remains very strong. Each time I come back from a trip to England, every pensioner I meet - and I meet quite a number - asks after Smith Sahib, Jones Sahib and Robinson Sahib. They think I fail in my duty if I cannot give them some authentic news about how their old friends are doing. May I suggest that some of these sahibs visit India and stay with their old regiments. They will be warmly welcomed and will, I think, feel very much at home. Secondly, I feel that India was fortunate in having at the time of Independence a hard core of officers who, though they might have been junior in rank, had served a solid apprenticeship. This hard core with their in-built stability and loyalty were a great asset to the national leaders of the country when they took over power.

The armies of many ex-British dependencies had the same advantage of sound basic training from the British, plus a varying number of officers trained in England at the time of their Independence and yet they took a different path. Therefore, the third and certainly the most vital factor for the continuance of democracy in India was undoubtedly the character and personality of the Indian leaders themselves, men like Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and many others, men who commanded respect and attention from all sections of their countrymen, including of course, the armed forces. For the future I am sure this democratic pattern will remain.