

## Lock Step

The Modi government's dangerous politicisation of the Indian Army

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The scenes were unusual, the response extraordinary. At around 2 pm on 24 June, an army column arrested 12 members of a Meitei separatist group, the Kanglei Yaol Kanba Lup, in Itham, a village in Manipur's Imphal East district. Among them was Moirangthem Tamba, the alleged mastermind behind a 2015 ambush that killed 18 soldiers. The army column was soon surrounded by over a thousand women, as well as a Bharatiya Janata Party legislator, who forced the commander to release the apprehended militants and leave the area.

The army tried to put a compassionate gloss on its retreat. "Keeping in view the sensitivity of use of kinetic force against large irate mob led by women and likely casualties due to such action," it tweeted, a "considered decision was taken to hand over all 12 cadres to local leader." Making no mention of the party affiliation of the local leader, the tweet claimed that the "mature decision" of withdrawing "shows humane face of the Indian Army to avoid any collateral damage during the ongoing unrest in Manipur."

This excuse was scarcely convincing, as another incident, around twelve hours earlier, showed a different face of the army. At 2 am that day, soldiers of the 50 Rashtriya Rifles stormed two mosques in the Pulwama district of south Kashmir and forced the local muezzin and worshippers to chant "Jai Shri Ram." Despite two former chief ministers tweeting their outrage, the army refused to officially confirm or deny the incident—acknowledging it would have necessitated taking disciplinary action against the personnel involved, which would have angered Hindutva ideologues and their political patrons. Instead, the unit's commander offered a hush-hush apology to the villagers and moved the errant officer out of the area. The abominable episode has since drifted out of the public consciousness, which is par for the course at a time when even the lynching of Muslims hardly makes national headlines or begets public opprobrium.

Such impunity in Kashmir and pusillanimity in Manipur are two sides of the same coin. This is, after all, the army of Narendra Modi's new India, where the top military leadership is in tune with the political imperatives of the ruling party, and the character of a formidable institution is being refashioned by disturbing traits of a majoritarian ideology. The nature of the army as an instrument of organised violence endures and its outward appearance of a professional force remains unchanged but, due to sociopolitical and historical contexts, its character is changing fast. In Kashmir, its actions often support the BJP's agenda with scant regard for the humanitarian cost. In Manipur, where the BJP has chosen to persist with its chief minister, Biren Singh, who has transformed himself into a leader of the majority community, the army is choosing a soft approach instead of using a firm hand to deal with the Meitei groups targeting Kukis.

There has been enough evidence of the army's changing character in recent years. Take the case of Major Leetul Gogoi, who tied an innocent Kashmiri man to the bonnet of his jeep during a 2017 Lok Sabha by-election in Srinagar, claiming it was an attempt to prevent stone-pelters from targeting his convoy. It was a clear violation of human rights and the army's standard operating procedures, and was criticised around the world. But the BJP hailed it and the army chief at the time, General Bipin Rawat, called it "innovative." A few weeks later, Rawat personally awarded Gogoi a commendation for his "sustained efforts" in counterinsurgency operations. The army was eventually forced to institute disciplinary action against Gogoi after he was detained by

the police while checking into a hotel with a local girl. However, the damage had been done to the army's image, and the priorities of its leadership made evident. Instead of winning the hearts and minds of the Kashmiri people, it had chosen to alienate the population to win the hearts and minds of its political masters.

Rawat made a habit of this. In February 2018, he sparked a political row by claiming that the All India United Democratic Front had been growing faster than the BJP in Assam because Pakistan and China were pushing Bangladeshi migrants into the Northeast in order to destabilise the region. In December 2019, amid nationwide protests against the Modi government's efforts to institute a religion-based citizenship regime, he said that protesting students were being led in "inappropriate directions." Both statements were in tune with the political line being taken by the ruling party and government spokespersons.

A few months earlier, with Kashmir in the grip of a communication blockade after the abrogation of Article 370, Rawat dismissed reports that there was a clampdown in the region. "A façade has been created through a fear psychosis by terrorists," he said, "and they want to project to the people of Kashmir and the rest of India that harsh measures were being undertaken which is not the truth and far from reality." Unsurprisingly, he was echoing the BJP's political defence of its actions in Kashmir.

In May 2020, Rawat, who had been appointed India's first chief of defence staff, organised a press conference with the three service chiefs—a first in Indian history—merely to announce that the military would be felicitating health workers fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, including flypasts and band displays. The purpose of the press conference was to provide visuals for television and distract from the images of migrants walking back to their villages thanks to the government's mismanagement of the lockdown. What made it more galling was that this took place at a time when China was denying India access to large swathes of territory in Ladakh, and the service chiefs did not utter a word about it.

On Navy Day that December, instead of participating in the laying of wreaths at the National War Memorial with the service chiefs, Rawat chose to attend an event in Gorakhpur that was presided over by the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Adityanath. A day before the event, meant to inaugurate the foundation day celebrations at a local college, he landed at the Gorakhpur airfield in his official aircraft and paid obeisance at the Gorakhnath temple, of which Adityanath is the high priest. He was given a silver coin with Sri Ram Janmabhoomi inscribed on it.

As HS Panag, a former chief of the army's northern command, noted at the time, Rawat's participation in the event compromised "the secular and apolitical status of the armed forces." A few months earlier, after being present with the US president, Donald Trump, at a photo-op outside a Washington DC church meant to distract from protests demanding racial justice, General Mark Milley, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, had made a public apology. "I should not have been there," he said. "My presence in that moment and in that environment created a perception of the military involved in domestic politics."

A dangerous mix of religion, politics and the military has wreaked havoc in many postcolonial countries, and India seems determined to now drink from this concoction. The army's involvement in the Amarnath Yatra has increased over the years, especially since the abrogation of Article 370. Its tweets suggest that the number of senior commanders visiting preparations for the annual pilgrimage is higher than those visiting Manipur and Ladakh, the two areas where the army is facing serious operational challenges.

Ostensibly, the army's participation is in aid of civilian authorities, as is the case with other public events, such as the Kumbh Mela. But there are significant differences. The yatra takes place in Muslim-majority Kashmir, where the army's role in fighting the insurgency over the past three decades has raised serious questions. While it adopts a limited supporting role at the Kumbh, it flaunts the organisation of the yatra. The fronting and ownership of a Hindu religious activity by the army, under a Hindutva regime, feeds into adverse perceptions harboured by Kashmiris. In the Kashmiri mind, all this has added to the perception that this is now a Hindu army of occupation in a Muslim land—a phrase I first heard in 2017. That sentiment is hardly countered by the army's public-relations outreach to showcase the renovation of a mosque in Pulwama, on 30 June, despite the vicious abuse it garnered from Hindutva supporters on social media.

When the militancy started, the army saw the insurgents as misguided youths who had to be brought back into the mainstream. They then became anti-national elements, then militants and are now, without any serious thought, dubbed terrorists. The army certainly knows the difference between terrorists and insurgents. As per globally accepted definitions, insurgents mainly target the state apparatus and security personnel, using violence as the means to a political end, whereas terrorists cause violent incidents to spread terror among a population or purely for effect. Insurgents rely on the support of the population, while terrorists operate without broad public support. It is not hard to decipher which category Kashmir falls under, especially when the army characterises its own mission as a counterinsurgency campaign.

It may seem insensitive to highlight Rawat's misdemeanours when he is no longer around to defend himself, but each regime has certain individuals with whom its policies get identified. In the Modi government, it is Amit Shah for politics, Ajit Doval for security, S Jaishankar for diplomacy and Rawat for the military. Rawat is a representative example because he provides the largest sample. His successor as defence chief, General Anil Chauhan, also made a partisan statement during the citizenship protests in 2019. "The current government is keen on taking hard decisions that have been pending for a long time," he said at a public forum in Kolkata, while serving as the chief of the army's eastern command, whose troops were being used to curb protests in Assam and Tripura. "The Citizenship (Amendment) Bill was passed despite reservations from a couple of north-eastern states. It would not be hard to guess that some hard decisions on left-wing extremism may be on the anvil after this."

There are reports that a suite named after the Mughal emperor Akbar at the western naval command's mess in Delhi has been renamed. As with the recent decision of the Lansdowne cantonment board to rename the Uttarakhand hill station to Jaswantgarh, this is presumably part of a decolonisation project being undertaken by the military, in line with a spate of name changes initiated by BJP governments. But it is the definition of colonisation that is the problem here. The Mughals, who lived and died in the subcontinent, did not take any wealth out of India and are as Indian as the Guptas or the Cholas. The military leadership, however, seems to be buying into the Hindutva argument that India's slavery lasted twelve hundred years, a period Modi stipulated in his maiden speech in parliament, in 2014. This ignores the fact, for instance, that the forces of Jaipur who served in Akbar's Mughal army and helped defeat Pratap Singh of Mewar at the Battle of Haldighati, in 1576, were amalgamated into the 17 Rajputana Rifles (Sawai Man) of the Indian

Army after Independence. The Jaipur forces even boasted a battle honour to commemorate its role in Haldighati, although that was not transferred to the Rajputana Rifles battalion after amalgamation.

Whether military leaders are working of their own volition or under explicit political instructions is moot, because both possibilities are calamitous. The first amounts to military meddling in politics, while the second reeks of the politicisation of the military. In either case, their statements and actions—including in sensitive operational issues such as the surgical strikes across the Line of Control, the Balakot airstrikes and shooting down of a Pakistani jet, the accidental firing of a BrahMos missile and the border crisis with China—have mostly served to bolster the ideological and political narrative of the ruling party. It was a natural consequence of several retired officers joining the BJP over the past fifteen years and the way in which the Modi government chose military officers for top posts, bypassing existing norms of seniority. The message of political loyalty being rewarded over professionalism has been reinforced time and again by the government in choosing officers for sensitive posts. The example is set by people such as the former army chief VK Singh, a junior minister since 2014, when he proudly appears in the uniform of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or walks back his criticism of Adityanath's characterisation of the Indian Army as "*Modiji ki sena*"—Modi's army.

Such has been the shift that Rawat's successor as army chief, MM Naravane, who retired last year, was a guest at the national executive meeting of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, the student wing of the RSS, in May. Naravane claimed that the ABVP is making a major contribution to instilling nationalism among the youth and said that the controversial Agnipath scheme, formulated during his tenure, was "a step to bring nationalism among youth to make them disciplined and skilled."

The Indian Army's relationship with nationalism is rather complicated. Unlike the People's Liberation Army in China or the armies of some Latin American nations, this is not an army of revolution. It was loyally arrayed on the side of the British colonial masters, firing at innocent Indians at Jallianwala Bagh, a harrowing episode that gave a new lease of life to the freedom struggle. It opposed Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army as a fifth column of the Japanese. After Singapore was retaken, the future governor general Louis Mountbatten, who was commanding Allied forces in Southeast Asia at the time, ordered that the INA's memorial to its fallen soldiers be blown up. The Indian Army flatly refused to take INA soldiers back into service, a stance it maintained for years after Independence. Even as Partition was being finalised, the future field marshal KM Cariappa lobbied the British government to keep the Indian Army united.

The army's switch to its post-Independence Indian avatar was based on the premise of it being a professional army, an apolitical institution loyal to its political masters, be they British or Indian. The wide-ranging popularity of the Congress, the idea of anticolonial nationalism and its poor performance during the 1962 Sino-Indian War meant that the military could not wear the mantle of being India's nationalist icon. The former army officer and defence minister Jaswant Singh described this period as one of "empty posturing" and "living as caricatures" by the officers, arguing that the "army had better awaken to reality."

According to the former diplomat KM Panikkar, the army's swift and decisive action in Kashmir, in 1948, led to public opinion looking beyond its British leanings. The political scientist Stephen P Cohen wrote that, although Nehru "carefully circumscribed" its role, his death and that of his successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri, as well as a famine and wars with China and Pakistan, led to a shift towards the army as a symbol of nationalism in 1966—a sudden change from the general public attitude of casual indifference the year before. Cohen, writing in 1971, added that "the military symbolism is consciously and explicitly being taught to those hitherto unaware or unappreciative." He warned that, unlike Pakistan, "India will not find its military politically more powerful, but socially more pervasive."

The tide of rising nationalism in the army gained visibility as a new generation of post-Independence military leaders began to make their presence felt in the 1970s and 1980s. Indian nationalism was beginning to transition from its anticolonial origins to a territorial and cultural basis. The army could partake in it without betraying its colonial moorings. This trajectory reached its culmination during the Kargil War, when the presence of television cameras and the waving of the tricolour created a more vicious and aggressive brand of Indian nationalism. It was aided in great measure by the rise of Pakistan-supported Islamist militancy in Kashmir, along with the rise of the BJP on the back of the demolition of the Babri Masjid, at a time when the idea of Indian nationalism was increasingly acquiring majoritarian religious tones. As the dominant Western narrative shifted to Islamic terror, it was easy for Hindutva ideologues to cover up their long-held animosity towards Muslims as part of this global storyline. Always afraid of being attacked from the Right, the Manmohan Singh government did little to confront the ideological challenge posed by the Sangh Parivar, paving the way for the BJP to move beyond identifying with the army to shaping the institution in its own image.

The army travelled some distance after 2014, but the journey accelerated after 2019. It is now a nationalist army—it is just that the idea of nationalism seems more in sync with Hindutva forces than it is with the values enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The shift is not irremediable, but it will not be reversed by cosmetic measures. It is no longer an apolitical army, especially in the choices made by its senior leadership. A political army becoming an unprofessional one is neither inevitable nor impossible. Nevertheless, it risks losing widespread support and respect among a significant section of Indians. This is evident in both Manipur and Kashmir. The impunity and the pusillanimity march in step. When faced with bigger security challenges, its consequences for India can be devastating.