

India's Wars: A Military History, 1947–1971,

by Arjun Subramaniam, Noida: Harper Collins, 2016, pp. 562, Rs. 799

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In this first of two volumes, Air Vice Marshal Arjun Subramaniam offers excellent and concise histories of India's wars and military operations, starting with the rescue and partial liberation of Jammu and Kashmir in 1947-48 from depredating Pakistani irregulars and ending with the 1971 war for the liberation of Bangladesh from Pakistan's genocidal rule. Based on published material available, and supplementing it with interviews, Subramaniam's *India's Wars* provides a layered perspective on the strategic, operational and tactical aspects of these wars and operations. While one agrees to a great extent with what the book has to say about the various land, air and naval campaigns, there are inevitable differences in perspectives, interpretations and nuances on specific issues.

To begin with, Subramaniam observes that officers and personnel of the Indian National Army (INA) were not integrated in the post-independent Indian military because of a quid pro quo between British and Indian leaders: the British would treat INA personnel on trial leniently in return for Indian leaders not integrating them into the Indian Army. This is a false linkage. There need not be any doubt about the sincerity of Mountbatten's advice to Nehru, cited in the book, about the importance of having officers who remain loyal to their oath and to the government in power. It is practical advice, not necessarily driven by ulterior motives or disenchantment with those who joined the INA. And

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that conclusion is reinforced by the views expressed by senior officers whom Subramaniam cites, such as Lieutenant General (Lt Gen) W.A.G. Pinto, who too held reservations about INA colleagues going against the basic tenets of soldiering such as loyalty and allegiance. According to Susanne and Lloyd Rudolph, the non-integration of INA personnel contributed to cementing the loyalties of mainstream officers to the government and established civil–military relations on a sound footing.

With reference to the 1962 war, Subramaniam offers the usual critique of the so-called ‘forward policy’. But the question that no critic of that policy has answered satisfactorily is this: what should India have done to assert its territorial claim and mark its presence in these areas once the disagreement arose over the boundary? Was there any alternative to the forward policy except to concede the Chinese contention that the entire border was a British imperial imposition on a weak China and open fresh negotiations? Analysts point to Lt Gen S.P.P. Thorat’s plan, which called for the army to hold a series of vital points located tens of kilometres away from the border that were more defensible both tactically and in terms of maintainability by road or air. While Thorat’s plan was indeed a sensible one, it catered for a situation involving open war. But open war was not the problem that confronted India at that time; it was only a latent possibility. In any event, the Indian leadership believed that war was unlikely due to geopolitical reasons (described later) and could be avoided by crafting a calibrated policy. Instead, the main problem was what to do to prevent Chinese encroachment and occupation of territory south of the McMahon Line in which there was practically no Indian presence. Locating troops in strength tens of kilometres away from the border, as suggested by Thorat, would lead to a large area being left without any presence and thus vulnerable to Chinese encroachment and occupation—precisely the scenario that the leadership was intent upon preventing. Thorat himself admitted that ‘small-scale penetrations’, which were ‘inevitable’ in the early stages of war due to such a positioning of Indian forces, ‘will have great demoralising effect on the country’s morale and may embarrass the government’.¹ Arguably, the army could have exploited the situation arising from the advancing People’s Liberation Army’s extended lines of communication to drive it back across the McMahon Line. But what if there was no war and Chinese troops simply encroached upon and occupied these areas? Such an outcome would still demoralise national morale and embarrass the government. Given this, the Indian leadership chose to distribute troops

in penny packets in the entire territory claimed.

A related assertion by Subramaniam is that Leftist influence convinced the Indian leadership that China was neither interested in nor capable of contesting the forward policy. He offers no evidence in support of this assertion. Contrary to his claim, the assumption about China not embarking upon war at that point in time was derived from a consideration of geopolitical factors, which included China's antagonistic relationships with America and its allies as well as its widening rift with the Soviet Union. That is, however, not to mean that the Indian leadership's conclusion about China not initiating war was correct. It obviously was not! But the point is that a critique should be based on sound logic and verifiable facts.

With respect to the 1965 war, Subramaniam asserts that India operated on the assumption that another Kashmir war with Pakistan would remain localised and confined to that state. On the contrary, it was Indian military strategy since the early 1950s *not* to keep the next war in Kashmir confined to the state where the mountainous terrain and lines of communication favoured Pakistan and where undertaking an offensive and achieving victory was likely to involve a hard and long slog by a large quantum of troops. Instead, India's military strategy, as approved by the Defence Committee of the Cabinet, was to expand the war into the Punjab theatre if Pakistan were to attempt to wrest Kashmir. The Indian Army's war plans were based on such an understanding of a future war with Pakistan. After the Kutch confrontation, the army leadership tweaked and adapted its plans dating back to the 1950s. That is the provenance of Operation Riddle executed during the 1965 war.

On the Simla negotiations, which brought the 1971 war to an end, Subramaniam refers to the conventional understanding that India failed to exploit the 93,000 Pakistani prisoners of war it held for securing a settlement on Kashmir along the Line of Control because of Zulfikar Bhutto's shrewdness and Indira Gandhi's magnanimity. This conventional understanding is, first, based on an inadequate appreciation of the extent of India's victory. India won a decisive victory only in the Bangladesh theatre. In fact, the Indian war effort was mainly concentrated on the Bangladesh front. In the western theatre, its effort was marked by an offensive-defensive approach aimed at attaining small tactical gains and preventing major losses of territory. In other words, India did not aim for nor gain a major victory in the western theatre, which was (and is) the economic, military and ideological centre of gravity of

Pakistan. As a result, all that it could actually aspire for and attain in the negotiations was to lock in the result of the war on the Bangladesh front. The principal challenge before India was to obtain Pakistan's formal recognition of Bangladesh and thus cement the outcome of the war, as well as ensure that the new country got off to a sound start with a stable government headed by an established and popular leader. Second, the Indian leadership also aspired to dilute Pakistan's hostility towards India and establish bilateral relations on a stable foundation. And for that, it was necessary not to heap humiliation upon Pakistan but treat it honourably. Hence, the decision to repatriate the prisoners of war was partly to ensure that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was in Pakistani custody and had been awarded a death sentence, was released unharmed and partly to re-establish India–Pakistan relations on a stable and non-antagonistic foundation.

In his conclusion, Subramaniam asserts that India had a pacifist strategic orientation until Indira Gandhi discovered war as a proactive tool of statecraft. Many counter-examples readily come to mind: the horizontal escalation of the war in 1965; liberation of Goa; integration of Hyderabad; mobilisation of the army to coerce Pakistan during the 1951 crisis; and the military rescue and partial liberation of Kashmir in 1947–48. Even the forward policy was an attempt to assert territorial claims through military presence. All these examples do not indicate pacifism. Subramaniam acknowledges some, not all, of these counter-examples but casually dismisses them as not proactive applications of force. But wasn't the 1951 military mobilisation with the intent of coercing Pakistan a proactive application of the threat of use of force? Wasn't the liberation of Goa proactive use of force to throw out a colonial power from Indian territory? Did not the world accuse India of being hypocritical and abandoning its non-violence legacy as a result of its use of force to liberate Goa? Was not the horizontal escalation of the war in the Punjab theatre proactive application of force especially when Pakistan desperately wanted to confine the conflict to Kashmir? Did not the world condemn India in 1965 for escalating the war beyond the 'disputed' territory of Kashmir? In the light of all this, the argument that India had a pacifist strategic culture before 1971 is nothing more than a caricature.

Notwithstanding the above critique, *India's Wars* is indeed a valuable book. It is not only a useful starting point for a new generation of readers interested in military history but is also likely to serve as an updated work for older generations of readers. Subramaniam's contribution redresses,

to an extent, the neglect of military history in India and will hopefully spur others to tread the path he has blazed.

NOTE

1. S.P.P. Thorat, *From Reveille to Retreat*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1986, p. 197.

