

Army's Ingenious Frontier Diplomacy

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In an extraordinary endeavour and perhaps for the first time, the Indian Army invoked the struggles and ardors of civilians from borderland Ladakh during its annual day celebration this year. Lt. Gen. Sanjeev Chachra, Army Commander of Northern Command paid tribute while awarding three civilians for their exemplary valour that included porters working with the army at Siachan glaciers. The gesture, a marked departure from traditionally awarding only the army personnel, would surely raise the morals of hapless civilians battling two difficult fronts but so far remained hopelessly in the slough of despond.

The awardees included Stanzin Padma, a porter who exhibited exemplary grit by digging out live two army soldiers trapped under snow avalanche last summer. Not just this, on 6 December 2012, Padma saved fellow porter Nima Norboo who had fallen into a 200 feet deep crevasse while operating a trolley for 16 Rajput. In a daunting exercise that lasted for 20 hours, Padma physically extricated Norboo from treacherous crevasse. Nima Norboo himself displayed extraordinary nerve to keep himself alive for over 20 hours in sub-arctic temperatures. But for Padma's nerve-racking effort, death for Norboo was certain. He has been through traumatic head surgery and suffered amputation of both his legs and left hand due to grade IV frostbite. After months of treatment at 153 army hospital, Norboo was left to his own fate without even an artificial limb. He came from Waris, the last village on border with Pakistan in Turtuk Sector. Norboo now redundant his survival along with two small children seemed improbable. But fate of many despondent porters like Norboo changed after Lt. Gen. Rakesh Sharma, newly joined GOC 14 Corps promptly recognised their sacrifices when this author also brought the case to his attention last summer. Not only the Army gave justice but also conferred him with honour for his exceptional contribution to national security. Another hero included Jigmet Urgain who had to leave army after a mine blast left him completely wounded. He lost his eyesight as well as both hands. However, it didn't distraught Jigmet from helping his less privileged brethren which earned him bravery award from Army.

Lt. Gen. Rakesh Sharma, a sound military geo-strategic thinker and ex-colleague of this author at IDSA knows that big challenges never come easy. In a first, the Army picked another civilian hero Rigzin Tangay from Demchok, a border village over facing a Chinese military post in Eastern Ladakh, for this year's award. Tangay's contribution for combating the PLA's intrusions is known to the nation through media. Yet, except for Army, no civilian authority or political class could even set their eyes on these heroes. They were only busy pushing their own lobbyists and fixers for the Padma awards, the sheen and credibility of these anyway seem fading away. In a unique public discourse on the Depsang incident held in New Delhi last summer, Tangay left India's elite security community stunned when

he said that the next generation will not live along borderland due to government's apathy. Yet, the Army remains the only hope. This time professionalism of military leadership has been proved. It still remains unvaryingly the country's most effective institution, far ahead of our usual laggards as political, bureaucracy and the media.

For the GOC 14 Corps, it was a masterstroke to offset the loss of public confidence and attitude towards the Army - a trend begun in the aftermath of Kargil War. In the face of growing Chinese intrusions like in Depsang, Chushul, Demchok and Chumur regaining people's trust is utmost important. To be sure, the Corps has risen to the challenge, and undertaking measures what would prove to be a dramatic change, especially when the Army is raising a Mountain Strike Corps with an offensive capability to penetrate into Tibet.

Military remains a catalyst; the infrastructure built compensate for the short falls of government development plans in Ladakh. The DRDO projects had trickle-down effect on local agriculture growth and it needs to do more innovative work to stabilize sparsely populated eastern Ladakh prone to Chinese incursions. All in all military's role still remains paramount for tackling a range of social problems, virtually providing employment to the poor.

To reshape public confidence further, the Union Home Ministry should quickly address the long festering issue of redeploying at least one regiment of the *sashastra seema bal* (SSB) in Ladakh. Initially raised as Special Service Bureau in the 1960s, SSB effectively involved natives for building a second line of defence against adversaries. It resembled China's Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), known as *Bingtuan*, a quasi-military force working as an "ecological warrior" to defend frontier desert, mountains and wasteland under adverse conditions. SSB gave guerrilla training to even women folks and kept the public morale upbeat at all odds. The decision to shift the force (post-Kargil) to the Indo-Nepal border proved disastrous for security and demographic profile of borderland. Its dislocation left the natives demoralized; hundreds of labourers, porters, transporters and others were deprived of their livelihood that also entailed social discontentment. Set adrift by lack of employment, thousands of youths in Ladakh stray in distress. Ladakh component of SSB personnel remain scattered across the UP, Bihar and Bengal plains who routinely complain of heat-strokes, snake-bites and malaria-attacks. The relocation would allow these young men to return to their native land stronger mentally and physically; better fit to serve in the high altitude warfare conditions. Revisiting the policy by the Home Ministry should be considered as deemed necessary for national interest.

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