

# Jawan Aur Awaam

Lt Gen. Nirbhay Sharma PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM, Master General Ordnance, and former GOC 15 Corps, on what transparency means in J&K

I have served in Jammu and Kashmir seven times in various capacities. When I took charge of 15 Corps, my intention was to work towards strengthening peace in the state and also to involve people of the state so that they feel that they are a part of the process which will eventually bring peace. I felt that it was very important that people develop a bigger stake in peace. I was looking for a theme that would define my work there and the theme we evolved was: *Jawan Aur Awaam, Aman Hai Muqaam*. This basically means that whether it is soldier or civilian, the End-State for both is peace. There is no clash on that score. Obviously, both will have different means to attain that End-State but as long as there is congruency of purpose there should not be any problem.

We adopted a three-pronged approach to attain our objective. The first was to carry out surgical counter-terrorist operations with minimal casualties. Ideally, we want to remove the term collateral damage from our lexicon. So acting on sound intelligence, we went for the hardened terrorists, head-hunted for the top leadership and we did achieve a great degree of success with minimal collateral damage. In fact, in some instances, people actually celebrated when few dreaded terrorists were killed. Today, we have succeeded (to some extent, of course) in eliminating the fear of terrorists from the hearts of the people.

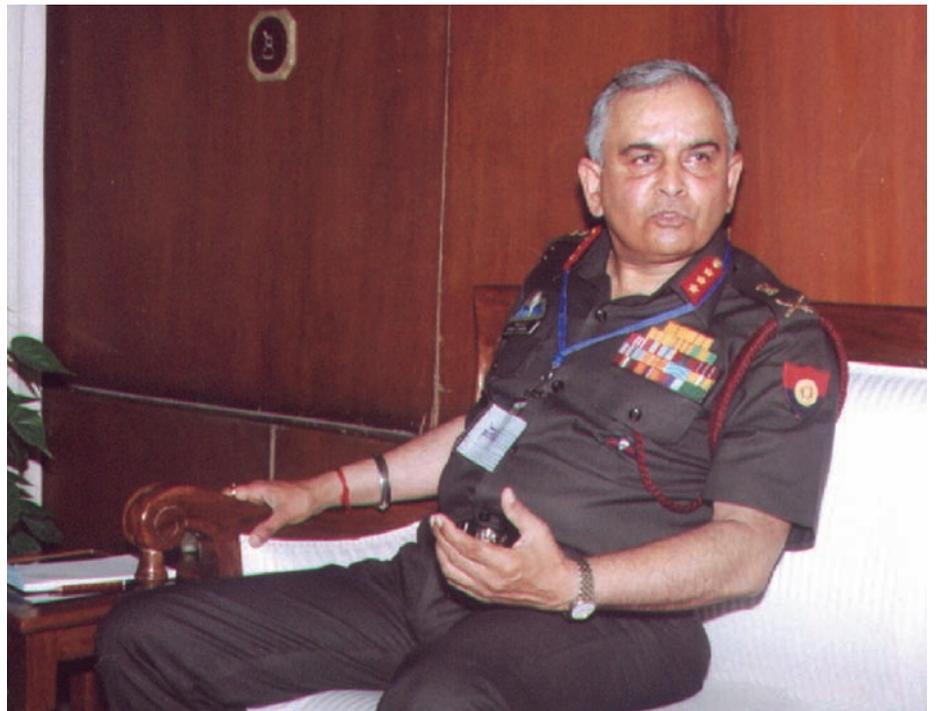
The second prong involved winning the hearts and minds of the people. We have been going ahead with some really meaningful programmes to involve the people of the state and we have seen tremendous success in this. We have 13 mobile medical teams comprising local doctors and paramedical staff. They move around the border areas and also the interior parts without any security and reach out to people. This wasn't possible earlier, but now they can do it without fear. They give basic treatment and in some cases refer people to hospitals. As a part of healing touch we supporting a large number of orphanages in the Valley, like Muskan. So much so that other orphanages tell us that we are setting very high stan-

dards for them. Through our Operation Sadbhavna, Operation Ujala and most recently Operation Rahat, which we did during the avalanche in Kashmir when the state was completely cut-off from the rest of the country, we have been able to make the common man part of the solution. We have involved and empowered him. We are giving him a feeling that we care. We have also started facilitating the Haj pilgrims. Since last two years, 10,000 people each year went on Haj from Kashmir. When they returned, we received them at the airport. At a function subsequently, we presented each of them with photographs of Kaaba. Through these 20,000 *hajis* you can imagine how many more people we managed to reach out to. Recently, we have also started 'Operation Ji Janab' to inculcate among our personnel that while they have to be firm in their conduct, they have to be polite all the time. Cordon and search and other checks are essential to counter-insurgency but there is a way of conducting such operations without offending the civilians.

Our Territorial Army, home and hearth

battalions also have been very successful in positive engagement of youth. We have raised seven battalions with 1,200 personnel each. Though they have weapons, fighting terrorism is their secondary role. Their primary role is as an interface between the army and the people. They represent their respective communities or the villages to the army. Through our various activities, including the TA we have actually generated employment opportunities in the state.

The third prong is perception management and media plays a very important role here. We are working towards making the people of Kashmir proud of their heritage. We are telling them about the people who have given their lives to the cause of peace in Kashmir. We recently built a memorial for Maqbool Sherwani in Baramullah. In 1948, he misled the raiders for a few days after they had torched the entire town of Baramullah so that they didn't reach Srinagar on time. When they found out, they literally crucified him and then shot him dead. People had forgotten him and others like him. We are bringing their memories



back. When the media reports on Kashmir after some violent incident, I have seen them use the phrase 'Violent Valley', I tell them that why don't you replace it with Vibrant Valley. After all, Kashmir is a vibrant place. When they write about the casualties among security forces, I tell them why do you write kill, why don't you write martyred? These soldiers have paid with their lives for peace. The least we can do is appreciate what they did.

A very important aspect of counter-insurgency is information warfare. The army and media have to fight this together. We cannot be at loggerheads. Fortunately, we are a democracy and in our environment, we do not 'manufacture consent'. The key to this is that we understand and respect one another's responsibilities and limitations. While we understand the compulsions of the media, it has to understand our limitations and ensure that truth does not become a casualty. The media has to understand that only this much information is available at this point and they have to wait for the rest. The key to transparency is mutual trust and understanding. So far, my experience has been that whenever you take media in confidence it acts responsibly with shared information. Of course, there are always a few stray cases. Throughout my tenure in Srinagar, I have always been candid with the media. It always works better than obfuscating. If there is some information which I cannot share with journalists, I tell them that, 'Look you cannot expect me to tell you this at this moment. This is an ongoing operational detail.' And they understand that. We don't have to be defensive. So many times, when an operation was in progress, I have told journalists that I cannot share this information till evening or the next morning. And they wait. Of course, some journalists are in a hurry to meet the deadline, so they go ahead and report as they perceive.

Information warfare has three levels: the local or tactical, national and international. Each has to be handled differently but in the end it amounts to basically the same thing: Perception Management. For example, when an incident occurs in a small village or a remote town in Kashmir, the first people to know are the locals and even before the real picture comes out. The local media picks up the news and then it is all over the state. If it is a big incident, then the national and subsequently the international media also pick it up and before you know, sometimes there is a massive uproar. My thrust has been that



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the moment an incident occurs, the press should immediately report it as it is. Analysis should wait. But the local media has its own pressures and compulsions. However, the false rumours and sensational contents fall flat in a while an ultimately truth prevails and spoilers are out. I understand that completely. But we need to be upfront with the spoilers as well. After all, they are important for perception management at the tactical level. We never employ different methods of dealing with different media. Our approach has always been consistent and open because we believe that in counter-insurgency operations truth is not a virtue but a necessity. How long can you hide the facts? And once they come out they can be really damaging.

We have an effective set-up for information warfare being evolved in Kashmir. I would say that it is not strictly hierarchical

or rigid. For instance, the 15 corps public relations officer interacts with the media on a daily basis. Once a month I used to drop in his office for a cup of tea and spend about an hour with the journalists. There was nothing formal about it. I preferred it this way as one can build rapport better. We also have an Information Warfare Brigade which looks at the entire gamut of information. Even they interact regularly with the media. We also developed a Website, [armyinkashmir.org](http://armyinkashmir.org) with the idea of disseminating information about what we are doing to a larger audience. We post activities, articles, letters, and just about anything on it.

Today, we need to have better understanding and synergy between the army and the media. Given the glut of information, we need an informed media which understands army operations. Probably it will be a good idea if journalists spend more time with the troops. There are two ways of doing this, either they become part of an operation or they witness an operation. Now these things cannot be orchestrated. So if journalists spend a couple of days with a unit or troops they can probably experience this first hand. We have done this in the past with some journalists. There have been occasions when media has witnessed an encounter. Perhaps, such close interaction should increase.

I am happy to say that in the last few years, army's image has really improved in Kashmir. The army chief on assuming command very clearly enunciated the policy of 'steel fist with a velvet glove.' A word has gone out that as far as terrorists are concerned, the army is going to be very tough, but it is a friend of the local people. In some ways, the army in Jammu and Kashmir has also become a catalyst for peace and development. Today, people do not fear the army as they did a few years back. This can be seen in the way more and more people are now coming forward with information about terrorist activities in their areas. I think the best evidence of this was seen in the days preceding the commencement of the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus service. Announcements were made in the mosques that people should come out on the streets to wave at the first group of passengers. It was a remarkable sight. Jawan and Awaam (soldiers and civilians) standing together in the streets waving at the passengers, right from Srinagar to Salamabad. ●

(As told to FORCE)