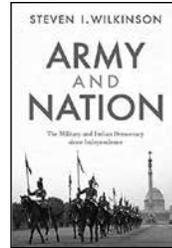


*Army and Nation***Steven I Wilkinson**

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*Army and Nation* by Steven I. Wilkinson is a good read. Painstaking research has gone into it, and the book is copiously annotated. Facts, as quoted, leave no scope for doubts. The graphic presentation of the statistical analysis is attractive, and most, but not all, of the conclusions are valid. It is flattering for a former soldier like me that the Indian Army, in which I served for over 37 years, has attracted the attention of one more scholar from the First World.

The author has gone into the most minute details of the ethnicity of the soldiers who had been recruited by the Army raised by the East India Company, and how and when the British introduced the concept of mixing ethnicities at the unit level as a protective device. After the Army had been hit by the Mutiny in 1857, in which some units had revolted, and others had not, cause and effect relationships between ethnicities and loyalty to the British Raj were established. As a result, significant changes were brought about in the class compositions of the units by the percipient British masters. A revolt by a unit of mixed ethnicities was considered unlikely; the differences in ethnicities were expected to act as firewalls. Single-class units, from the most 'reliable' sections of the population of the subcontinent, based on the part that they had played in helping the British in quelling the Mutiny, were also raised. The Gurkhas, Sikhs, Muslims from the Punjab, and some Muslim tribesmen from the border region made the grade. But even they were not fully trusted, and a certain proportion of British units was retained in the Army in India. Their presence promised swift retribution for those who revolted. With

few exceptions, as in the case of the Mountain Artillery batteries, Indians were not trusted with guns until 1935. The regiments of the Royal Artillery were also meant to act as a deterrent against another revolt. As far as the British political leadership and the bureaucracy in India were concerned, they had reasons to conclude that the measures taken by them after the Mutiny had been effective in preventing a blowback. Except for the formation of the Indian National Army by the late Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, there had been no major breaking of bounds. In the twilight hour, a lot had changed and the imperial power had also thrown in the towel.

In the wake of the 1857 Mutiny, a strong correlation between reliability and mixed class units had firmly been established in the minds of the British rulers. *Divide et Impera* was a strange policy to follow within the Army that was trusted to fight loyally against the enemies of Great Britain. Over a period of time, the British political class and bureaucracy came to believe that their balancing acumen had produced the desired results. The truth seems to have eluded them: it was neither the balancing act, nor the presence of British troops that had ensured the loyalty and fighting efficiency of the Indian units. It was the devotion of the British leadership at the unit level that had achieved the desired results. They had won the hearts of the Indian troops.

The Mutiny in 1857, principally, was by the native soldiers against their British officers rather than against the Raj *per se*, although that motive was also present in some cases. Good regimental soldiers in the then ruling class rightly concluded that it was the failure of leadership at the unit level that had mainly led to the revolt; the penny-wise policies of the East India Company had also added the fuel to the fire. They concentrated on improving the quality of leadership at the unit level. They sent some of their best officers to India who totally identified themselves with the ethnicities and religions of the troops they commanded, and trained them well. Unlike before the Mutiny, the new lot was professionally competent,

and went about setting a fine example to the Indian officers and soldiers of good military leadership. Many of them forgot the colour of their skin, led from the front, and inculcated in their troops the fighting spirit and the will to win.

The internal tensions within the sub-units and ethnicities were turned into competition to achieve professional excellence. The example set by the officers created the value system that motivated the units to fight to the last man and the last round. Wages and allowances were pushed into 'lesser considerations', and the upholding of the 'name and the *izzat*' of the unit became the sole purpose of their lives. The response of the troops was sincere and overwhelming.

The machinations of checks and balances, and the exercises in the creation of firewalls had been rendered irrelevant. The units, in defiance of the suspicions harboured against them by the policy-makers, proved to be fully cohesive. There were a few incidents of insubordination or refusal to obey orders but the swift corrective action rather than the firewalls prevented large scale mutinies.

The Indian units gave a good account of themselves in many frontier actions, but the real test came in the Great War when the performance of Indian soldiers was startlingly impressive. It became a matter of honour for the Indian soldiers to fight shoulder to shoulder with the regimental officers. The concept of honour pushed pay and allowances into the background. The performance in World War II was excellent except for the defection of some prisoners of war to the Indian National Army (INA). Those who joined it, belonged to all the ethnicities. The so-called checks and balances had fallen. The notion that the mixing of ethnicities was a necessary and sufficient condition for ensuring loyalty of the Indian soldiery was not borne out. The author mentions the book *A Matter of Honour* by Philip Mason in the bibliography, but his conclusions make one wonder if he absorbed the spirit of the book.

The first Prime Minister of independent India had doubts if at all India needed the Army it had taken over from the British. The Army's *raison d'être* was a matter of doubt for him. It seems that he did not look upon the Army as one of the national assets for ensuring the security of the newly independent country. He had persuaded the then Army Chief, Gen Thimayya, to withdraw the resignation that he had submitted to the government as a result of friction between him and the Defence Minister. Later, he thought it fit to show the Army Chief in poor light in the Parliament. The entire Army had felt belittled.

Taking a cue from him, the main concern of the political class seemed to have been to keep the Army in its place so that its demands on resources were reduced, rather than keeping it in prime condition so that it could perform its role. With the willing assistance of the bureaucracy, they began the exercise by lowering the status of the Army officers. As a good measure, their pay was reduced. Poor remuneration was expected to bring about the lowering of living standards, and, in turn, the prestige of the Army. In due course, the Army would be reconciled to being on the lower rungs of the hierarchy. The inherited suspicions about the reliability of the Army could well have been the reasoning for continuing with the self same policies governing the class compositions of single class and mixed units. The partition did call for adjustments in class compositions; therefore, some unavoidable changes had to take place. We have no reason to believe that the political class or the bureaucrats feared the possibility of coups *per se*. But their disdain did produce an adverse impact on the morale of the Army. No wonder that the Army suffered from neglect. But for the jolt of 1962, things would have continued in much the same vein until a bigger disaster struck.

The author gives credit to the political class and bureaucracy for having preempted the possibility of a *coup d'état* in India. For someone like me, this is nothing short of blasphemy. Such facile conclusions subsume an abiding intent in the minds of the rank and file and the

leadership to execute a coup, or coups for that matter. We do not know what led the author to believe that the senior leadership of the Army ever thought on these lines. There has never been even a whiff of the likelihood of a coup in India except in the minds of some imaginative and overzealous bureaucrats, and a 'gifted' journalist. But even those fears were quickly dispelled. Certainly, these 'non-happenings' did not warrant a conclusion that the Indian Army was prevented from undertaking a coup by a vigilant political leadership and astute bureaucracy. There is no need for a counter-balancing Border Security Force (BSF) to keep the Army in its place. The BSF has its own role, and it performs it well. It is a ludicrous idea to believe that the Army is held in check by the BSF in the same manner that the British battalions had kept the 'native' units away from mischief. No, it is the value system, which is the life-breath of the Indian Army, that keeps it going even in adverse conditions. Remaining within the constitutional bounds is an integral part of this value system. It has never been different.

There are two anecdotes that best illustrate the spirit of the senior leadership of the Army. Towards the end of the emergency, when there were signs of political instability, the Prime Minister had asked the late Gen TN Raina about what the Army would be doing in those circumstances. He replied that he would abide by the Constitution. The late Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw was asked a comparable question by the same Prime Minister. He reportedly replied that he would not do anything improper, not because it was impossible to do so, but because he had no such intentions.

One wonders why the author presumes that coups did not take place in India on account of the vigilance of the civil authority? Are coups normal unless made impossible or prevented by a slew of measures? Does he think that it is normal for all Third World Armies to seize power as a matter of course? Or is he equating India with Pakistan? If that is so, it would explain quite a lot of his speculation. Yes, there is a lot between

India and Pakistan that is alike, and yet there are fundamental differences. All Indians, including its defence forces, firmly believe in both democracy and the Constitution. The notion of a *coup d'état* in India is absurd. For the Indian Army, the Service is both a matter of faith and honour: faith in the Constitution, and honour in upholding the traditional values of the Army at all costs.

The Indian Army would be within its rights to say to the doubters, “O ye, of little faith”.

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