

STATE OF PLAY Gen Bipin Rawat could be the architect of a new working pattern for the army

Officer in the Barracks



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There's a discernible churn in the army, and its new chief General Bipin Rawat is at the heart of it. No need to start judging just yet. But it's important to understand the moving pieces. Because if it stays the course, this could mark a significant break from the pattern of working the army has settled itself into in the recent past.

Three decisions of Rawat stand out — rather, set him apart from the routine his predecessors followed.

First, the decision to give a commendation card to Major Leethul Gogoi despite all the outrage, for tying up a Kashmiri stone-pelter to his vehicle as a human shield to bring out stranded polling staff. Second, ending the periodic government-military pay commission stand-off through a new deal despite internal resistance. And third, moving a proposal to end the deployment of combatants as 'sahayaks' in face of continuing internal dissent.

Let us start with Gogoi. He is not the typical upper-crust army officer who joined the army through the National Defence Academy (NDA). In fact, Lt Ummer Fayaz, the slain Kashmiri officer, was in that privileged ex-NDA lot, who usually, due to their early grooming and younger age of commission, have the best chance of making it to the higher rungs of the army hierarchy.

Gogoi, on the other hand, joined the army not as an officer but as a regular

soldier in the Assam Regiment. He, however, took the difficult challenge of clearing exams from within the system and made it through the Army Cadet College (ACC) entry.

The strike rate through this channel is usually low, given the tedious transformation one has to make from the lower ranks to the officer cadre. It's not just a job change but a class transformation in a highly conservative saheb-jawaan hierarchy, which has its roots in the colonial origins of the Indian Army.

By publicly acknowledging Gogoi's actions as correct and giving him a Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Commendation Card, Rawat cut through the army's iron-cast hierarchy to send a strong message of solidarity down to the last rifleman. Gogoi, after all, is one among them, who made it to the officer cadre.

Stand at Ease

Most chiefs, like Rawat, would also probably stand by the officer because such seemingly appalling methods are not unusual in the army as long as the larger mission — in this case, the safe exit of polling staff — is accomplished. Except that, as the norm has come to be in such controversial cases in the Valley, the top brass may commend the officer in private while maintaining a public posture of inquiring into the matter.

Rawat broke away from this established norm to institutionally back and honour Gogoi in public. This is a significant shift in the army's approach in Kashmir, a conscious decision to take on the anti-army perception, draw new red lines, and be aggressive in response.

As a result, the army chief has also set the stage for a fresh debate on bringing amendments to the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (Afspa) to nullify the Supreme Court order in the matter, which includes a leeway to



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...and to cap it off

register FIRs on military encounters. In many ways, Rawat has ripped open a fundamental question of whether or not the time has come to officially frame the Valley as a 'war zone' so as to pre-empt a repeat of the late 1980s, the last turning point when Pakistan-sponsored militancy entrenched itself in the state.

Pay and pension privileges don't usually go with strategy-making in Kashmir. But these are files that may well lie side by side on an army chief's table. Regardless of the government in power, this is an issue on which the three service chiefs have mostly presented a united front, to the extent of being criticised as a 'unionised' front. And the army chief, by the sheer numbers of his force, is very much the fulcrum of this solidarity.

Rawat peeled away a bit, secured and consented on a deal that addressed the concerns of majority soldiers, and ended a stalemate because of which the armed forces were not getting their new salaries. While the officer cadre may not have been fully satisfied, particularly at senior levels, the message was once again sent down the rank and file.

The clearest message of recognis-

ing the army's changing profile at the entry point was Rawat's move to push a proposal to bar combatants from being made sahayaks. He, instead, feels a small cadre of civilians should be hired for this purpose, so that trained combatants don't have to do this job.

March Forward

He is up against internal resistance on this as well. But just like the phone number he has set up for any military personnel to register a grievance directly with the chief, this again is an effort at cutting past traditional military hierarchy.

For someone, who is sort of army blue blood, being a son of a general officer himself, the hierarchical disruption is unlikely to create a class divide in the army. But what's probably clear is the makings of a new Spartaism under the leadership of an army chief, who for all his pedigree, is surprisingly frugal: he pays bills for even official gatherings at home, and till date, makes it a point to mend and clean his own uniform just like the soldier in the barrack.

In many ways, Rawat has ripped open a fundamental question: has the time come to officially call the Valley a 'war zone' to pre-empt a repeat of the late 1980s?

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