

# INDIAN ARMY: THE MOST SECULAR INSTITUTIONS IN THE COUNTRY

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## COGNIZABLE HISTORY

It has been a widely held ‘myth’ that Indian Army institutionalizes religion or caste. There are some regiments in Indian Army named after communities, and some named after regions as determined by the British rulers then. But this has a historical context and has continued as an inherited legacy.

Thus, we have the Sikh regiment, the Marathas, the Jat, the Gorkhas etc. but this doesn't make any of these regiments exclusive for other communities or regions, like all other public institutions. So, it is no surprise to see a Mohammed Zaki commanding Garhwali troops or a Y N Sharma as commanding officer of the Grenadiers (which incidentally has Muslim soldiers) as head of the family, which is what a commanding officer is. It is common for a Zaki to felicitate the *puja* on Janmashtami, celebrating the birth of Lord Krishna, or for a Sharma to organise the *namaz* on Id Ul Fitr after Ramzan.

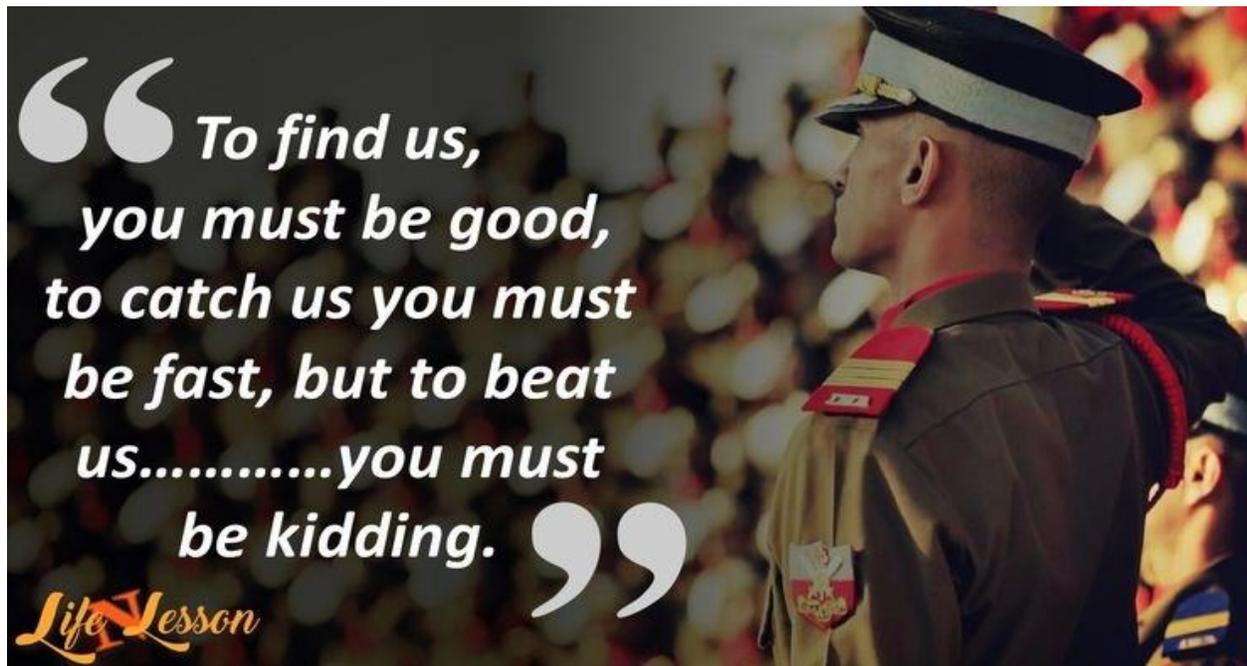
It is further emphasized that Indian Army has maintained a strong secular tradition and does not believe in religion based discrimination. To the extent that strong opposition was raised over the proposal for so called ‘census’ of Muslims in Indian Army. Several sections of Indian Army have also opposed the headcount on the basis of religion especially when the Sachar Panel had sought the data on Muslims share in Indian Army. Hence, there is no official report available in this regard. However, the strength of Muslim may be roughly around 2.50-3%, forming approximately 25-29000 personnel (CNN IBN).

It is undoubtedly true that the number of Muslims in the Army is far less than their proportion in the population. This is also a historical legacy as the recruitment of Muslims in the armed forces in pre-Independence India was concentrated in Punjab, North West Frontier and Balochistan which are all part of Pakistan today. Similarly, the states of Orissa, Gujarat or even Andhra Pradesh are not represented in proportion to their population. To assume any bias on regional basis is to see evil where none exists (Girish Palariya, 2019).

It is true that severe threats to amity and accord on account of divisive politics and the consequent weakening of the social fabric in recent years, many Muslim officers have continued serving in Indian army at all levels. For example Idris Hassan Latif rose to the position of Air Chief Marshal, later served as Governor of Maharashtra and Ambassador to France. Brigadier Usman gave his life fighting in Kashmir and it was his effort at Uri that the invaders couldn't get

advantage in the turbulent period, soon after partition. The gallantry of Havildar Abdul Hamid is known to all and sundry. His valour in the Khemkaran sector during 1965 war is now part of Indian army's folklore. Hamid was posthumously given the highest gallantry award the 'Paramvir Chakra'. In the Kargil war, Captain Hanifuddin was amongst the first of officials to lay his life for the motherland.

## **OPPORTUNITIES WITHOUT RESERVATIONS**



There are no reservations in the Indian armed forces either for minorities or SCs/STs. What exists is a unique representation system which is regionally balanced and based on what is referred to as the Recruitable Male Population Index (RMPI). It is slightly complex system which ensures regional distribution but no bias towards any faith or caste. This exists in the level below the officers' cadre. However, at the officer level also, it is simply open competition which means those who are competent get selected.

Major General (Retired) Shashi Asthana talking to BBC emphasizes that the recruitment in the Indian Army is not based on caste or religion, the army only sees fitness. He further said that there is no reservation in the army based on religion and the selection process is only through merit. "If you are physically fit then only you will be selected."

However, the question is about motivating the less-aware youth with lower education levels to equip themselves to compete for the officer cadre. Unfortunately, most Muslim youth lack motivation and confidence, and still consider the armed forces as something outside their ambit.

Living in dense clusters in walled cities, their lack of exposure has severely hampered growth and awareness ( Lt. Gen Syed Ata Hasnain (Retd).

Lt. Gen Syed Ata Hasnain (Retd) further narrated that one young skull cap-wearing youth asked me “How can you be a General?” “There is no place for Muslims in the Indian Army.” It is stunning that such perception still prevails in India, 71 years after Independence. It is, after all, a question of awareness. The average Muslim family from a mofussil town considers the Indian Army completely alien with the perception that its culture does not permit a good religious Muslim to practice his/her faith. Little is known that the practices of the Indian Army actually make most of them even better Muslims and infuse a sense of professional achievement.

### **FAKE PROPAGANDA ON MUSLIM REGIMENTS**



The outright fake propaganda on social media started in 2013 about existence of ‘Muslim regiment’ which refused to fight against Pakistan in 1965 after which it was dismantled. This kind of fake propaganda has created uproar on social media like Twitter and Facebook and is also being circulated in the form of a video.

A number of reports published through different media and statement recorded by veterans revealed that there has been non existence of Muslim regiment ever in the history of Indian Armed forces. ABP News report from June 22, 2020 has found a list of all the regiments of the Indian Army which contains no Muslim regiment in the list. On the other hand Jagran Josh dated July 15, 2020 has also published an article with a list of the Indian Army’s caste-based regiments but there is no mention of a Muslim regiment there either.

Earlier, Lieutenant General (Retd.) Syed Ata Hasnain in his statement to the Times of India dated November 30, 2017 affirmed that there was never a Muslim regiment in the Indian Army. He has also been quoted in the report by saying that “This is propaganda and the Indian Army has never had a Muslim regiment for the last 200 years. Apart from regiments like the Sikh, Punjab, and Garhwal in the British Indian Army, there were also the Baloch and Frontier Force regiments. After the partition, the Baloch and Frontier regiments moved to Pakistan and the Punjab regiment exists in both Pakistan and India.”

In an another attempt to destabilize the viral claim, the BBC’s article noted that the 1965 war against Pakistan is in fact the same battle where Quartermaster general Abdul Hamid destroyed seven Pakistani tanks and was posthumously awarded the Paramvir Chakra which is country’s top military award. Also in the 1965 war, Major (later Lt Gen) Mohammad Zaki and Major Abdul Rafey Khan were both awarded Vir Chakra, the latter posthumously, when he fought against the Pakistani division commanded by his own uncle, Maj Gen Sahibzada Yaqub Khan. Even earlier, at partition in 1947, Brigadier Mohammad Usman refused the call by Jinnah to move to Pakistan, but fought the Pakistani invasion in Kashmir, was the senior-most officer killed in action in July 1948, and was posthumously awarded Mahavir Chakra for his gallantry.

Recently, on Oct 10, 2020 Alt News also reported Major Navdeep statement that “There was never a Muslim regiment in the Indian Army. The Indian Army is an apolitical, secular institution where all the soldiers live and fight together under a shared national flag,” he said.

Therefore, a Muslim regiment in the Indian Army has never existed. Regiments with caste-based names came into existence long ago and their names have not been changed after Independence. However, this does not mean that only Jats are recruited in the Jat regiment and Rajputs in the Rajput regiment. People of all castes and religions are included in all regiments. The religion or caste of these soldiers has nothing to do with their regiment.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article is to dispel the ‘myth’ that Indian army institutionalizes religion or caste. It may be clearly concluded from the above survey that it is a fake construct and that the Indian Army is one of the most secular institutions in the country.

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