

## Reflections on Sustaining Morale and Combat Motivation in Soldiers

Nidhi Maheshwari<sup>#,\*</sup>, Rachana Sharma<sup>§</sup> and V. Vineeth Kumar<sup>!</sup>

<sup>#</sup>*DRDO-Defence Institute of Psychological Research (DIPR), Delhi - 110 054, India*

<sup>§</sup>*Freelance Researcher & Philosopher, Singapore - 789 097*

<sup>!</sup>*SHSS, Manipal University Jaipur, Jaipur - 303 007, India*

<sup>\*</sup>*Email: nidhimaheshwari@dipr.drdo.in*

### ABSTRACT

Military morale and motivation formulate the signature strength of a fighting force. However, sustenance of these faculties is a bigger challenge than generating them. The exponential development in the neo-cortex and emerging social structure has made human beings hardcore individualistic. The sense of 'self' has become much stronger than the sense of the whole. This results in the recurrent violation of collective identity, as evidenced by the rise in numbers of misconduct behaviors, mutinies, estranged leader-led relations, desertion, fragging, and suicides. Utilizing the lessons from various ecological systems and derived scientific principles, the present paper takes note of significant researches in the area to arrive at a reflective model of Morale and Combat Motivation in soldiers. Firstly, it attempts to understand 'why and why not the soldiers shall fight' and subsequently give suggestive guidelines to 'how they will continue to fight' with particular reference to the Indian military setup. The model can be utilised by military leaders and policymakers alike who are entrusted with the herculean task of upkeeping battle-mind state of soldiers in military organisations.

**Keywords:** Morale; Motivation; Collective identity; Combat stress; Suicide

### 1. INTRODUCTION

"Four brave men who do not know each other will not dare to attack a lion. Four less brave, but knowing each other well, sure of their reliability and consequently of mutual aid, will attack resolutely".<sup>1</sup>

The life of a soldier is more complex than understood. While much emphasis is placed on the domestic life or familial relationship of the soldier, but, in reality, his psyche is impacted more by the nature of his unit and his integration with this secondary family. Often, the Commanding Officer is considered the 'DAD' of the unit and fellowmen as 'brothers-in-arms' who accompany each other in thick and thin times. Soldiers consider their buddy's death in action as more grievous than their own. They experience the guilt of survival, which may be unique to this profession only. In the Indian context, military setup follows a hierarchical model, and leader-led relationship is given utmost importance in the all-volunteer force. Unit ethos, unit cohesion, horizontal bonding, and vertical communication gain crucial attention of the commander for healthy unit life and combat performance. The psychological contract and investment are decisive in this setup. Recent researches underline the significance of combat motivation in various missions and on different occasions<sup>2-3</sup>. The occurrence of misconduct behaviors is evidence of the aberrations in the psychological contract at the individual and unit level. Notwithstanding the hardships of combat,

there are both examples of courage and misconduct. Thus, combat motivation and morale occupy center stage in military research.

Precisely 'why the soldiers fight' attracts researchers' attention, and there has been contrasting evidence to represent the primary group as a significant determinant to combat motivation. Researches oscillate from group solidarity in World War II, to buddy relationships in Korea, to the contention that there was an almost total lack of cohesion within combat groups in Vietnam<sup>4-5</sup>. Other factors associated with war participation are delineated as a) War as a sublime spectacle, b) the delight in comradeship and, c) the delight in destruction<sup>6</sup>. Interestingly, attempts are underway to establish genetic algorithms to combat motivation<sup>7</sup>. In light of the contrasting theories, an inquiry is warranted to develop and sustain 'morale' and 'motivation' in Indian soldiers in the desired manner. Taking stock of relevant researches in the area, a reflective model of morale and motivation is attempted by the authors (Fig. 1), which comprises of three parts:

- Why they fight
- Why they may not fight (Inimitable challenges haunting the warrior)
- How they will continue: Scientific principles and practices for installing morale in Indian Warriors.

### 2. METHODOLOGY

To understand the psyche of a soldier in the modern era of gadgets and fancies, a comprehensive understanding of

related challenges was done. Also, lessons were drawn from animal models and other ecological systems to transfer the knowledge to military behavior to benefit the soldier. Several offline and online searches were done related to the keywords like ‘combat motivation, military morale, ecology and group behavior, esprit-de-corps, physiology and motivation, technology and motivation’ etc. These electronic searches on various databases yielded 6387 results. Thereafter, cross-references and additional citations and books were referred to understand the concept beyond the electronic search. Besides pertinent books, some of the relevant journals referred to as per their accessibility include Science, PloS One, International Journal of Stress Management, International Peacekeeping, IEEE Xplore, Military Medicine, and Military Psychology to conceptualise the reflective model for understanding and sustaining morale and motivation in Indian soldiers.

For understanding the roots of why they fight, studies from 1948 to 1978 have been primarily taken note of as they cover the ferocious wars of history. However, essential takeaways for sustaining the will to fight have been referenced in the studies done around 2010 to 2014.

### 3. REFLECTIVE MODEL ON MORALE AND COMBAT MOTIVATION IN SOLDIERS

A reflective model on morale and combat motivation in soldiers (Fig. 1) attempts to understand the process and achieve workable solutions for military leadership in preserving morale and motivation. The model ensembles three portions as follows:

- Why they fight: Based on the researches of soldiers participating in World Wars, Vietnam, and Iraq War, the ‘why to fight’ section of this reflective model is drawn.
- Why they may not fight: The challenges which haunt the warrior have been enlisted under the ‘why they may not fight’ section of the model.
- How they will continue to fight: The last section signifies ‘how they will continue to fight.’ It has two divisions:
  - Scientific principles and teachings for installing morale
  - Scientific practices for sustaining morale and motivation.

Each of the sections is elaborated upon in the succeeding paras.

#### 3.1 Why They Fight

The primary group theory of combat motivation<sup>8-9</sup> explains the soldier’s willingness to engage in combat with a few immediate comrades. This camaraderie is based on a set of shared needs related to hardships, scarcity of resources, communication of feelings, and contact comfort. Thus, it is easy to understand why surrender decisions were primarily a function of the disturbance in the primary groups. In a 1993 RAND report, Robert MacCoun proposed two types of cohesion – social and task.<sup>10</sup> Social cohesion is relationship-centric emotional bonding while task cohesion is unity for the achievement of a particular mission or common objective.

Further, the researcher apprehends that social cohesion may work at cross-roads to unit performance and may lead to scenarios like fragging and groupthink. Likewise, Stouffer’s study<sup>11</sup> and classic work, *The American Soldier*, defied the common notion of combat motivation related to ideology or nationalism. Besides the soldiers’ eagerness to return home, the study pronounced the dominance of emotional bonds between soldiers as one of the primary factors to combat motivation during World War II. It defied the conception of the ‘why we fight’ documentary series launched during WWII to ideologically motivate American soldiers for a just war against the axis of villainy.

#### 3.2 Why They may not Fight

There is a multitude of challenges that may haunt the soldier while maintaining his will to fight.

##### 3.2.1 Combat Environment

A harsh physical environment causes an indispensable impact on the soldier’s psyche, often leading to combat stress reactions and a decrease in their will to fight<sup>12</sup>. Taking the lessons from comparative psychology, it can be learned that even animals have negative effects of the displeasures in the environment<sup>13</sup>.

##### 3.2.2 Moral Injury

Soldiers are trained to be lethal without remorse under the ‘reflexive fire training.’ Such training shall disturb the value structure of an individual and diffuses discrimination capability. The authors presume that moral injury is perhaps one of the most important factors in military suicide rates. Bourne opined that killing and destruction of property illegitimate in civil society get a legal value in the military<sup>14</sup>. Otherwise, condemnable acts are now rewarded by praise, medals, and the representation of manliness. Thus, there is too much confusion overplaying in the mind of a soldier and there is a huge possibility to spill over the rewarded behaviors to other areas of life. This shall become a prima facie reason to get frustrated and bruised in the current job that the soldier is performing.

##### 3.2.3 Identity Crisis

Although the environment shapes identity, ultimately, the identity one procures entirely depends on personal experience. Researchers opine that this individualisation cannot be reduced to differences in environment or genetic makeup<sup>15</sup>. Even though men are trained to identify themselves with the group, there are no perceived benefits drawn from it. No value can be imbibed permanently based on goodness alone if it has no link with personal gain, and sacrificing one’s life for any unknown benefits is the highest value that can be expected from a living being.

##### 3.2.4 Fragile Morale and Group Cohesion

Moskos<sup>16</sup> and Keegan<sup>17</sup> enumerated two primary causes as to why soldiers fight: first, for self-survival, and second, to keep away from group sanctions for not fighting. The collective achievements can push collective morale, but it does not necessarily produce individual satisfaction every

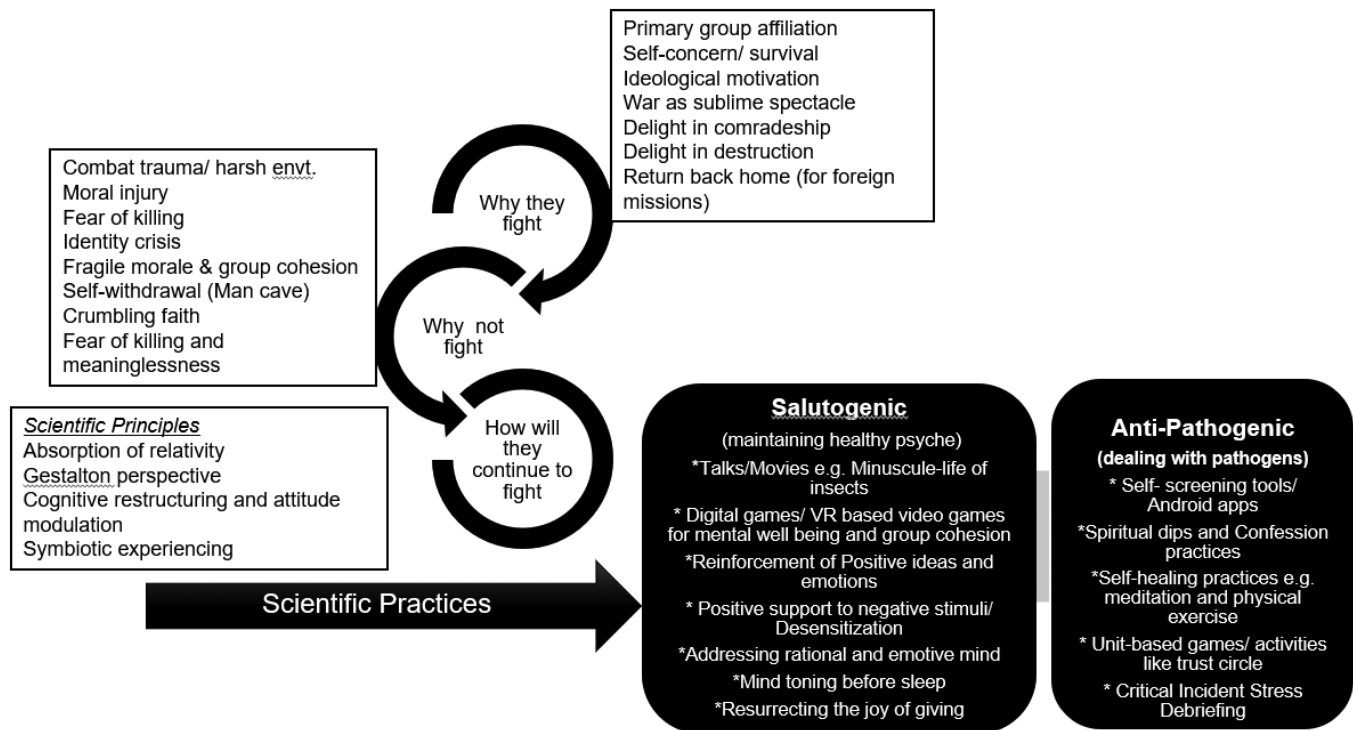


Figure 1. Reflective model on morale and combat motivation in soldiers.

time. Unless the collective goals are ‘directly connected’ to the individual achievement, the esprit-de-corps has to fade away little by little. Crisis in Command book by Gabriel and Savage<sup>9</sup> enunciate that dearth of professional attitude of officer cadre and one-to-one replacement policy in Vietnam resulted in dilution of primary bonding in the Army. They pointed out that groups set with faulty norms can contradict organizational goals, citing nearly 800 fragging cases in Vietnam.

Bhagavad Gita minutely acknowledges the fact when it recites: *‘Karmanye vadhikaraste, ma faleshu kadachan. Ma karmafalheturbhu, matesanghostavikarmani’* (Srimad Bhagvad Gita, 2.47, Part I). Translation: One only has the right to his work but not to its fruits. Do not let the fruits become your motive, nor let your attachment lead to inaction.

The last part of the sloka specifically prohibits the repulsion from the duty realizing that when a person’s self-interest is compromised or ignored, the natural reaction is aversion or disinterest from the action itself. Hence, even the soldier has to fight against this naturalistic tendency to inaction.

### 3.2.5 Self-Withdrawal (Man Cave)

Military life demands a continuous commitment towards an objective world on subjects that work against subjectivity’s natural flow. Self-withdrawal is comorbid to such situations resulting from lack of energy or resources, sensing danger in the external environment, etc. For introspection, seclusion may be productive. However, when a soldier chooses the ‘cave’ because he cannot cope with an objective environment’s demands, it may culminate into severe depression by eradicating the subjective causes of frustration (himself) or venting out his agony destructing the objective world. Thus, the misconduct

behavior and suicidal behavior set their root through self withdrawal long before it turns visible in such behavior.

### 3.2.6 Crumbling Faith, Fear, and Meaninglessness

Rationality and faith are often at a crossroads to each other. Earlier, merely based on principles like faith in God and his justice, karma theory, immortal soul, rebirth, etc. even self-sacrifice was adequately justified. Nowadays, soldiers’ altruistic readiness is difficult to accept rationally and abide by emotionally throughout the service life. The deliberate suppression of self incubates an internal convulsion of fear and meaninglessness, which ultimately explodes in extreme violent steps against self or non-self.

## 3.3 How They will Continue to Fight

### 3.3.1 Scientific Principles for Sustaining Morale

Various programs are designed for enhancing mental health and well-being in the armed forces. Among other significant battle mind training programs, important take-aways from the U.S. Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Model are recently incorporated and researched to build resiliency in Indian soldiers. However, the need would be burgeoning with the challenges looming large on our soldiers. Some strategic principles for designing various training programs are suggested for the armed forces in the succeeding text.

#### 3.3.1.1 Absorption of Relativity

Relativity can be developed as an underlying principle for a balanced approach in military life. Even concepts like time and space are relative; they warp consistently with the phenomena occurring in them<sup>18</sup>. Relativity may teach soldiers the art of giving due respect to both subjective and objective

forces. If one understands how relativity works at the collective level, he takes more responsibility for his actions, which are performed ‘now and here.’ Natural swarms provide ideal examples of the relativity principle. For example, Penguins in Antarctica dwell in huddles or large groups for fighting the icy cold winds and storms. While each penguin is minimizing its heat loss, yet, it leads to distributed heat sharing for everyone. Further, Waters, Blanchette, and Kim<sup>19</sup> revealed that penguin huddle is an autonomous system of interdependence for protection. Obviously, if someone becomes self-centered or acts irresponsibly as a free agent, it may cripple the whole system, destroying the group in the case of humans, and eventually the individual. The famous quote of American leader Martin Luther King is worth mentioning here, “Either we will live like brothers or perish like fools.”

Interestingly, Moskos<sup>20</sup> also argued that cohesion may be the outcome of the need for survival rather than altruism. Soldiers’ normative commitment in terms of understanding the value of the larger social system is considered of prime importance. A comprehensive understanding of this relativity can help deal with moral injury.

### 3.3.1.2 Gestalton Perspective

The ability to create the picture can prevent extreme reactions taken on the spur of the moment by counteracting negative thoughts’ conversion. As in huddling penguins, while standing inside, one may not be aware that one enjoys the warmth because some are standing out for him. However, while standing out, some again tend to forget that if they stand firmly at the periphery, their turn to get the warmth inside will always come at the right moment. Soldiers may be made to understand how a successful swarm leads to personal fulfillment. Shils and Janowitz<sup>8</sup> asserted that when the soldier’s immediate group, and allied support system, fulfilled his basic organic needs, including that of affiliation, esteem, and power, and regulated his relations with authority, the element of self-concern in battle is diluted.

Ant colony optimization exemplifies how swarming emerges to protect individual interests in an optimal way. Their strength lies in their communication. Thus, the swarm model reinforces the benefits of military units; how one can achieve goals with a collective strength that otherwise seems almost impossible based on individual strength. Marshall<sup>21</sup> noted that mere presence, actual or perceived, of a comrade during the action is valued first than the possession of weapons by an infantry soldier.

### 3.3.1.3 Cognitive Restructuring and Attitude Modulation

Glorifying the combat hardships may project soldiers as ‘tough’ but may create an unconscious self-pity element. Accentuation adds more challenges to the tough job giving the soldier a feel of a sacrificial victim. Soldiers’ beliefs and evaluations of the tough environment need to be restructured. They should be educated upon their chosen role in society as a soldier and considering the hardships as a general form of soldierly life. As the beliefs and evaluations change, the attitude towards the combat situation becomes favorable.

### 3.3.1.4 Symbiotic Experiencing

Symbiosis is a broad term that can be used for any type of persistent biological interaction; mutualistic, communalistic, or parasitic. The feature significant for our purpose is how a relationship makes both parties strong enough to survive and even thrive in extreme environmental conditions that, otherwise, could not even sustain in a normal environment. For example, the Pompeii worm is a deep-sea polychaete that maintains a friendly relationship with “fleece-like” bacteria residing on its back. This bacteria helps the worm sustain extreme temperatures up to 80 °C (176 °F) making it one of the most heat-tolerant organisms.

The Hawaiian bobtail squid, *Euprymna scolopes*, provides shelter to the colony of luminous *Vibrio fischeri* in its unique light organ which acts as an anti-predatory mechanism. The study of extremophiles challenges our concepts of the limits of life. Some anaerobes can continue life without oxygen, thermophiles who survive in the temperature up to 75 °C-80 °C, psychrophiles who extend their lives in frozen water, acidophiles who stretch up their acid tolerance to unbelievable limits, alkalophiles who live in Ph about 10, halophiles who bear with hypersaline conditions, barophiles who are unperturbed by increasing pressure to extreme limits for a living organism and xerophiles who are found in driest regions on earth. All these organisms show extreme tolerance towards a hostile environment based on symbiotic relations formed with other organisms supporting each other’s life.

Likewise, the demonstration of symbiotic behaviors in an organism may help the soldiers understand group cohesion strength. They shall be impressed by how micro-organisms exist in extreme climates with the strength of symbiotic relations alone, where the chances of presence of life are almost nil<sup>22</sup>.

### 3.3.2 Scientific Practices for How They will Continue

Training programs at various Armed Forces institutions focuses appropriately on maintaining healthy leader and led relationships. However, newer challenges require newer dimensions to pedagogy. Following are some multi-disciplinary suggestions that may be overemphasized and should be incorporated into the soldiers’ daily routine. Interventions shall be based on the salutogenic and pathogenic approach wherein strength-based empowerment goes hand in hand with disease evasion. While the former will focus on maintaining a healthy psyche of soldiers as a primary prevention part, the latter would diminish the hazardous environment’s ill-effects and events as secondary prevention.

#### 3.3.2.1 Salutogenic (Maintaining the Healthy Psyche)

Mind or psyche is not a fixed entity. It’s ever-changing, and the important fact is that its change is mainly directed through objective exposure, unlike the body that mainly operates through internal subjective force. It is imperative to provide constant support in waking hours to the ideas to be nurtured to maintain a healthy psyche, especially when damage is imminent in a job’s nature.

##### 3.3.2.1.1 Talks, Reading Materials, Movie Shows

The ideas discussed under conceptual guidelines for



strategic reference are required to be reinforced through various channels such as talks, reading materials, movie shows, etc. There is fantastic audio-visual material available these days which not only instill the targetted ideas but also provide excellent entertainment for a common human understanding such as *Minuscule—the private life of insects*. It is quite an intriguing animated French series on the life and times of insects giving important everyday lessons. On the same lines, various old and new movies should be sorted out and recommended to be played during the rest and recreation time, which can entertain as well as impregnate soldiers with the desirable ideas.

#### 3.3.2.1.2 *Digital Games or Virtual Reality*

While there are mixed reactions to video games, the choice of ‘right’ games with controlled use can be extremely beneficial for soldiers in many aspects. Action video games can be used to enhance cognitive skills by improving visual attention and team spirit<sup>23</sup>. One hour gaming experience per day may bring about subsequent improvement in those cognitive tasks which are performed during the game<sup>24</sup>, bring calming effects on aggressive children<sup>25</sup> and reap emotional well-being amongst senior citizens<sup>26</sup>.

#### 3.3.2.1.3 *Reinforcement of Positive Ideas and Emotions*

There is strong universal agreement about the plasticity of the brain. Plasticity gives evolutionary privilege to remodel itself following environmental changes. Thus, even the most hardwired propensities are subject to change. It opens up space for ‘reorientation’ to maintain desired psychic health.

It is essential to reinforce collectivistic ideas from time to time through various features like ‘thought of the day,’ ‘mission of the day,’ ‘naming the campsites,’ etc. This will help provide neuro-biological support to the ideas to be nurtured. Due to the brain’s plasticity, even the inattentive exposure to emotions and thoughts has a structural impact if they are brewed periodically.

#### 3.3.2.1.4 *Positive Support to Negative Stimuli or Desensitisation*

Earlier emotions were known as primitive and instinctive responses which have no association with cognitive functions but now neurobiological studies of emotional responses have made it clear that cognitive capacity may define and modify the emotional valence to stimuli. Thus, emotional reactions to stimulation may be trained to vary. Studies of brain functions clearly show that separate neural pathways exist for these important cognitive-emotional interactions<sup>27</sup>.

Soldiers can be ‘trained’ to react positively to most of their negative situations thus, strengthening the positive reaction neuron pathways. On the other hand, a rational scheme or cognitive support could be devised which directs attention towards some other positive emotion than sacrifice, e.g., self-pride, contentment, achievement, pleasure, etc. It can change the whole course of action. Mere categorization of rewards may motivate the individuals to perform, even on menial tasks<sup>28</sup>.

#### 3.3.2.1.5 *Addressing the Rational and Emotive Mind Differently*

Superficially individuals can be classified into two broad categories; rational and emotive. Emotive is driven by non-rational forces such as emotions, faith etc., while rational are more inclined towards scientific and logical materials. Hence, such individual differences may be visible in the soldier fraternity as well. To prepare both of them for similar positive reactions, differently crafted activities and tools are required that invigorates morale and motivation in them.

#### 3.3.2.1.6 *Mind Toning Before Sleep*

Sleep is not only an opportunity to repair all physical damage that occurred during wake, it is also a time when neurological functions are executed to maintain a healthy brain and mind. The consolidation of emotional memories and thoughts, flushing out the molecules associated with neuro-degeneration<sup>29</sup> etc., are the other functions that are performed during sleep. Before sleep, mind toning activities can be prayer, reading, meditation, de-stressing exercise, head massage, etc.

#### 3.3.2.1.7 *Resurrecting the Joy of Giving*

Noble acts and purpose may provide a deeper sense of well-being than mere gratification of personal needs, regardless of an overall perceived sense of happiness<sup>30</sup>. Surprisingly, sharing and physical connection with others increase serotonin and oxytocin in individuals, comforting and escalating positive feelings. Perhaps, that is why every unit commander is reinforced to pat the back of his soldiers, shake hands with them, and commend their good work in public, which has a reciprocal effect. Such gestures may be encouraged, and soldiers are promoted to experience the joy of giving.

#### 3.3.2.2 *Anti-Pathogenic*

Irrespective of the preventive measures, the environmental (mental and physical) pathogens tend to sneak in, turning the healthy body and mind sick. Before anyone else, it is the soldier himself who will receive pathogenic body and mind signals. Educating him of such sub-clinical symptoms and sensitizing him to them is essential for the upkeep of soldiers’ morale and motivation. At the earliest, the soldier should be able to understand and express his discomfort appropriately and should be provided with appropriate non-uniformed channels to seek help and get primary care in the initial stages of his concerns.

#### 3.3.2.2.1 *Self-help Tools/ Manuals/ Offline Apps*

Specific training materials, such as self-help tools and manuals, need to be designed to promote self-reflection. The prevalent mystic approach about mental phenomena should be discouraged by promoting the idea that minds are functional parts of one’s being and that negative thoughts are like stomach aches, which just need timely attention and appropriate treatment. During healthy times, soldiers should be trained to reflect and assess their mental conditions recognizing the pathogens and scan their psyche. If they can recognise an unhealthy state of mind and seek timely therapeutic help, many unpleasant incidences can be avoided. Moreover, self-

withdrawal, a benchmark of many psychological disorders, can be effectively controlled if soldiers are equipped with subjective tools to acknowledge it in the initial stages.

#### 3.3.2.2.2 *Spiritual Dips and Confession Practices*

When damage is imminent in the nature of a job, it will be wise to keep the instruments ready. Just as daily de-stressing exercises and reading before sleep, it is important to give easy access to spiritual healing tools such as Bhagavad Gita teachings or confession box in Christianity. Although the altruistic purposes nurture a healthy psyche in the long run, they blowhard on the immediate selfish mind, raising dissatisfaction with present selfless impositions. Before this dissatisfaction takes root in purposelessness, it is essential to replenish the purpose on greater grounds. The adequacy of arguments presented here can be used to prepare a complete mental health program to deal with the challenges a soldier faces in the armed forces. Although religious teachers (R.T. JCOs) in every unit are tasked to safeguard soldiers' spiritual quotient, they need to upgrade their skills and teachings to match soldiers' cultural backgrounds.

#### 3.3.2.2.3 *Self-healing Practices through Meditation and Physical Exercises*

There are many self-healing practices and meditation techniques prevalent these days. These practices not only make persons mindful but also capacitate them to mental health self-check. Soldiers should be exposed to relevant exercises that can help them in times of disruption.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

Global scenarios represent that soldiers fight for their primary group/unit and its 'izzat' (pride) with self-preservation and nationalism as associated needs. Nonetheless, whether they will continue to fight with the same spirit consistently is a matter of concern, and scientists have to flex themselves for evolving newer methods and models to sustain this will to fight. It is extremely significant to expose the soldier's mind to the basic philosophy of morale and motivation in a form he can relate to and absorb deeply. A soldier's existence is based on camaraderie and esprit-de-corps, which can be well exemplified through various ecosystems. The reflective model provides a strong basis for sustaining morale and motivation in soldiers. It may be implemented based on pragmatic possibilities across rank and files. Soldiers should be provided with continuous physical and mental support both at personal and social levels to keep them charged with positive emotions, leaving no space and time for negativity to set in especially in an individualistic world. They fight and will continue to fight for the existence rooted in their primary unit, group identity, and national fervor.

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## CONTRIBUTORS

**Dr Nidhi Maheshwari** received her Ph.D in Psychology from the University of Rajasthan. Currently employed as DRDO Scientist.  
Contributed to conceptualisation, scripting and editing of the paper.

**Dr Rachana Sharma** received her Ph.D in Philosophy from the University of Rajasthan. She has obtained her Specialist Diploma in Children and Youth Counseling and Management, Singapore.  
Contributed to review of literature and scripting philosophical solutions to the subject understudy in the paper.

**Dr V. Vineeth Kumar** received his Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of Rajasthan. Currently he is working as Associate Professor at the Department of Psychology, SHSS, Manipal University Jaipur.  
Contributed to scripting, reviewing, and editing the paper.