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India's External Intelligence Agency: Managing the Human Resources Challenge

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	5
The Problem	6
Recommendations	8
Conclusion	14
REFERENCES	15

Executive Summary

In India, reform advocacy for the Intelligence community has largely been focused around parliamentary scrutiny over the intelligence agencies and removal of defunct ones. These suggested reforms, however, tend to overlook what is at the core of intelligence - people. This discussion document¹ argues that any reform of intelligence agencies in India would be ineffective unless it is centred on its human resources. Reforms need to be introduced at various stages such as recruitment, training, and retirement.

1. For the pre-recruitment stage, we recommend:
 - a. Planning procedure to forecast vacancies.
 - b. Recruit contractors from outside the government to enhance capacities for tasks involving open source intelligence, provision of technical support in specialised domains like cyberespionage, professional translation, monitoring of social media, profiling and evaluation, and writing of propaganda pieces.
 - c. Partner with talent spotters to identify potential recruits with specialised skills.
2. For the orientation stage, we recommend:
 - a. Add more skills (language specialisation, analytical thinking, cultural awareness) to the basket of orientation programmes offered and increase the training period.
 - b. Engage retired officers/seasoned veterans for training new recruits in the finer skills of espionage during the orientation period.
 - c. Outsource training on non-classified aspects.

¹This is the discussion document as part of Takshashila's Intelligence Reform Project. The project team comprises of Anand Arni, Shibani Mehta, and Pranay Kotasthane. The document is prepared for discussion and debate and does not necessarily constitute Takshashila's policy recommendations. For any feedback, please email research@takshashila.org.in

3. For the mid-career stage, we recommend:
 - a. Mid-career training programmes in managerial skills such as project management and leadership.
 - b. Introduction of a **Seven-Year Review** process wherein an officer is personally interviewed by seniors once every seven years and given an incentive subject to performance. If an officer underperforms, he or she is given a two-year window to improve his/her work before being reviewed once again. If it is found that an officer has underperformed on two consecutive accounts, he/she should be released from the agency.
4. For the Post-retirement stage, we recommend that retired officers can help inspire new recruits during the training period. Another suggestion is for retired officers to work for, or set up, business concerns that have dealings overseas. This would increase the intelligence footprint and also act as a point of contact and logistical support for stationed officers.

Introduction

In 2016, Kulbhushan Jadhav was arrested by Pakistani security forces under circumstances which continue to remain murky. Pakistan claimed that he was arrested inside Balochistan while on an espionage mission. Other reports indicated that he had been picked up by Pakistani officials on the Iranian side of the Iranian-Pakistan border. Subsequently, Pakistan claimed that Jadhav was on a mission for the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW), a claim that India denied.¹

While details about Jadhav's involvement with R&AW remain ambiguous, what has emerged clearly is that there were deviations from the time-tested procedures in the conduct of Indian intelligence operations. Unconfirmed reports suggest that, contrary to established practices, Jadhav had been in contact with a multitude of Indian agencies, ranging from the Indian Navy to the R&AW and the Intelligence Bureau (IB). Jadhav, according to the media, was said to have the telephone numbers of successive R&AW chiefs and that of the National Security Advisor (NSA) on his mobile phone. If this is true, the R&AW appears to have abandoned its established operational practices of using pseudonyms; of not raising sources who have connections to Indian defence forces; of using intermediaries (cut-outs) to contact sources; of eschewing telephonic contact unless imperative; and staying away from sources run by other agencies. In other aspects too, the agencies appeared to have diluted their operational standards to the detriment of their operational conduct - the R&AW of old would never have permitted the source to use his own address. This incident only illustrates the point that India's external intelligence agency is in need of serious reform.

In the wake of an intelligence mishap, overhauling the entire system seems like the best way forward but it seldom brings about effective change. Intelligence is primarily about people, and the success of intelligence depends on the individuals within the intelligence community.² Bringing about effective reform would only be possible by making workforce planning a central component of the reform strategy. Strategic workforce planning involves forecasting demand and managing supply of personnel. This essay addresses the gaps in recruitment, training, and retirement³ of India's external intelligence agency officers and suggests ways to strengthen the supply side of the equation.

Uri Bar-Joseph and Rose McDermott of Haifa University are of the opinion that intelligence failure is not the result of insufficient information but incorrect analysis of available information.⁴ The CIA's Director in a public address mentioned that the agency would focus on recruiting and training more human

assets. She is of the firm belief that developing HUMINT or human assets should remain a high priority for all intelligence agencies because it is able to convey intent better than any other electronic source of intelligence.⁵

The Problem

In a 2013 investigative report, Praveen Swami found that India's intelligence agencies are functioning with 40 percent staffing deficit, pointing to an acute shortage.⁶ A significant section of this shortage is of management-level staff.

The R&AW's current approach to recruitment is one that hinders professionalism within the organisation. At present there are two routes of entering the R&AW. The first is recruitment via the RAS (internal cadre) and the second, on deputation either short-term or permanent secondment (long-term deputation) from the All India Services. This principally means the Indian Police Service (IPS) but also includes the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and the Indian Forest Service (IFS). It excludes other services, including the Indian Foreign Services (IFS) with whom the R&AW has considerable commonality. Those on short-term deputation are mainly from the defence services whereas those on permanent secondment have no fixed-tenure. Officers on deputation continue to exercise a lien on their parent service and have the option of being sent back to the parent service if they become a liability to the R&AW or, on occasion, if the home state asks for their return. This 'revolving door' mechanism provides a means to secure a release and move to greener pastures to the detriment of the R&AW. There is little incentive for the deputed officers for committing themselves to the goals and vision of R&AW.

Another major factor which breeds inefficiencies is the network of political connections and other bureaucratic linkages that an officer on deputation brings with her. The network is comprised of cadre-wise links with other services and nationwide connections through batch and service affiliations. An internal cadre officer by contrast does not have these connections and loses out as various pulls and pressures are created.

Between 1971 and 1977, and again from 1985 to 1987, the RAS cadre was recruited from the open market loosely fashioned on the practices adopted by Britain's MI-6 and the United States' CIA. These agencies, principally the MI-6, used University dons to recommend names of prospective talent which was then examined and short-listed. In India, given the small number of recruits (four initially, every alternate year) in relation to the number of graduates every year, the means of recruitment involved serving officers who would suggest names. This list was

vetted and tested before it was presented to a board comprising heads of various services. Inevitably, there were complaints of nepotism and the first phase ended with the recruitment of 15 officers over four batches in 1971, 1973, 1975 and 1977 all of whom have since retired. (Of these 15, one died and the services of one other was terminated, both during their probation period. Five of the remaining 13 officers retired at the apex scale and another five as Additional Secretaries).

This system changed subsequently and to give it a Union Public Service Commission's imprimatur, recruitment is now limited to the successful civil service candidates who qualify every year. This, however, has failed to attract suitable talent. Moreover, at the current rate of retirement, the RAS must target recruiting at least six new officers every year but as the staffing deficit indicates, the organisation has failed to meet this target.

While the idea behind recruiting from the Civil Services is well-intentioned, it is not necessarily the best way to fulfil the staffing requirement. For instance, the average age of entry into the civil service as of today (January 2019), is 29 years. If an officer were to do their initial training with the parent service before joining the RAS, the average age of a new recruit to the RAS moves to 32 years. Professionally, to be inducted as an intelligence operative overseas they would need to be eligible to go out as a First Secretary (which prescribes a minimum of eight years of service) when they are close to 37 years of age. This would mean five years in which to learn a foreign language, the tradecraft required and experience in handling area desks at an age that is not ideal to acquiring these competencies in a short period of time.

The agency also lacks the required personnel with area knowledge and advanced language skills, particularly in Arabic, Chinese, Burmese, Sinhala and minor Pakistani languages. In both the senior and the junior executive cadre, language skills should be the primary requirement of an external intelligence agency. Without language expertise, raising sources overseas is near impossible. Therefore, learning languages, for a couple of hours every day, while holding down a desk job is not the best way and certainly not ideal when the candidate is in her mid 30's.

Another large skill-set which is lost to intelligence is the use of retired intelligence officers who have skills, expertise and domain knowledge. Most foreign agencies outsource some aspects of intelligence gathering to companies who employ retired intelligence officers for the same. This is a low-cost possibility and could marry in well with open source intelligence collection and analysis.

Recommendations

As outlined above, capacity and capability constraints of human resources limit the R&AW's performance. This human factor lies at the core of intelligence agencies across the world. Success of an intelligence operation is defined by the capability of officers conducting the operation and the analysts to efficiently use the intelligence collected. There exist lessons that can be adopted from other intelligence agencies to address the problem of insufficient capacity and capability of intelligence officers in India.

1. Find the Right People

In order to build a stronger community, India's intelligence agencies should engage individuals from different backgrounds with diverse skills and education experiences to fill positions. This cannot be achieved through haphazard and disconnected efforts. Workforce Planning is essential. Workforce Planning involves identifying people with the desired skills and competencies to do a job. It includes following a comprehensive process of staffing decisions based on the organisation's mission and financial resources available.⁷

A. Pre-Recruitment Planning

Pre-Recruitment Planning involves necessary processes before the actual scouting of applicants. Forecasting vacancies, opting for an appropriate recruitment method and following a well-calculated time-frame are elements essential to a good plan. Accurate forecasting to gauge the possible vacancies in a given year helps assess staffing needs and simplifies targeted recruitment.

B. Privatising Recruitment

Political and bureaucratic meddling in promotions has resulted in creating a clear distinction between the two recruitment systems within the agency and caused confusion in cadre management. While the role of personalities has to be restricted, opening the recruitment process to the free market offers a worthy solution. The CIA provides suitable evidence of hiring professionally qualified executives from the private sector – in economics, languages, marketing and business management – who have been attracted by the prestige and excitement of a career in intelligence.⁸

There is no disputing the merits of a specialised cadre. Intelligence demands a specific skill-set which is not available with a generalist cadre on deputation. The

Indian experience, be it in space technology, nuclear science or armed forces, is that there is greater accountability with a better marshalling of resources and higher technical competence. The existing practice of recruiting and training persons without technical specialisations and proficiencies leads to inefficiencies, particularly when candidates with these skills are available in the open job market. Collection of open source intelligence, provision of technical support in specialised domains like cyberespionage, professional translation, monitoring of social media, profiling and evaluation, writing of propaganda pieces, are some sections of intelligence work that can be tasked to professionals in private industries. Additionally, establishing an interface with private industries could create openings both in collection of intelligence and in providing non-diplomatic cover for postings in target areas. Engaging contractors who provide analytical or technical support (goods or services) in exchange for monetary compensation is an option that should not be dismissed without exploration.

C. Partnering with Talent Spotters

Besides hiring experts, skills can be nurtured by partnering with a number of other stakeholders. The CIA absorbs the best talent from universities like Harvard, Johns Hopkins⁹ and others in the Ivy League by employing the process of targeted recruitment. India too can adopt a similar practice of utilising university deans (or retired officers) as talent spotters for campus recruitment. These deans can easily identify students who have a flair for foreign languages, are articulate in speech and writing and display strong interpersonal skills. By relaxing the element of secrecy, the agency can increase direct intake of young talent from reputed universities. Increasing student engagement by offering internships and asking retired officers to take on teaching assignments will allow intelligence agencies to tap into the university talent pool. The deficiency in language expertise can be overcome by partnering with language schools in the country. Mumbai University, for instance, hosts a Confucius Institute that offers advanced degrees in Mandarin. Tezpur University, which is emerging as a leading university, has students enrolled in similar language programmes. In addition, R&AW could sponsor its recruits to undergo advanced language training at institutions in India in addition to its in-house facilities.

2. Cancel the Crash Courses

Senior officers hold unmatched institutional knowledge and experience that are developed over the course of a career. Hiring new employees or promoting junior employees more rapidly does not necessarily cover the gap created by retiring

senior officers. Instead, individuals may simply be placed in senior positions before they are ready—creating an entirely different challenge. Revamping the training that officers are made to undertake during each stage of their career will not only develop individual talent but deepen the capability of the agency.

A. Longer Training, Sharper Skills

The unintended consequence of the acute staff shortage in recent years is a shortened training period which has hampered the skill development process of officers. At present, training of fresh R&AW recruits is divided into two components – basic and advanced – and the entire training lasts for an approximate period of six months. This time period is grossly insufficient for new hires to hone the finer skills required for espionage. The training period is even shorter for those on permanent secondment. On-the-job training is no doubt highly valued but it is not necessarily favourable in all the skills necessary for intelligence gathering. Little attention is paid to ensuring that those in the R&AW gain expertise in languages or even on area specialisation.

The initial batches spent close to three years in training before they were permitted to take up desk assignments following which they were inducted into the field. After a couple of years, that is after eight years of service, they were sent overseas to function as intelligence operatives. Area specialisation often saw some spending two to three decades studying a particular subject. Today, it is rare to find anyone with even with five years of expertise. Officers on permanent secondment are disadvantaged at the very start. There is no one from the deputation side in the department who has any competence in language and consequently lack one of the essential requirements for agent recruitment. Mere competence in man-management is simply not sufficient.

It can be argued that certain characteristics cannot be taught, and are instead innate. However, some virtues can be acquired and sharpened through training. A focused approach to training and honing analytical skills used to be the *sine qua non*. These skills are now lost. The initial set of officers who were recruited did their basic training in a para-military institute, attended physically arduous courses in guerrilla warfare at another secretive organisation, learnt the art of defensive driving – a requirement needed in certain neighbouring countries and is something very few intelligence officers are now trained in – and in foreign languages. Language was a particular focus. At the inception of the service, a recruit spent two years in a language school in India with later batches learning the language on the ground in foreign countries.

Recruitment of the best minds would require a well thought-out orientation and training process that invests in new and young recruits for the aptitude to learn a language and to sharpen skills when young.

B. Learning from the Masters

If the linchpin of the success of an intelligence agency is raising of a source - by definition, one who is paid to do your bidding and, in effect, to betray his country, the success of the Indian agencies is inadequate. It is all too common to find officers, particularly those on permanent secondment, who have very little to show in this area during their stint in the agency. Consequently, the focus on TECHINT which, while excellent, is only a stop-gap arrangement. A paid source can reveal information at the planning stage itself as opposed to the officer learning about it after implementation.

There exists a misconception on linkages between intelligence and policing. This linkage exists in the areas of domestic intelligence or even in counter-terrorism where law enforcing agencies have a role. In external intelligence there is no linkage and, in fact, the officers operate outside the ambit of the law.

The R&AW has excellent resources at its disposal to train officers about the technicalities of espionage. What it lacks at the moment is providing an on-campus learning experience. At Fort Monckton, the secret service training base just outside Gosport, Hampshire, new recruits to Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (SIS or MI-6) still get taught the art of pistol shooting by retired sergeant-majors.¹⁰ Receiving training from senior retired officers with deep expertise in an environment conducive to learning will help the fresh breed of officers to sharpen their skills. Another suggestion would be to explore the feasibility of establishing a "research park" similar to the CIA's ¹¹, where new hires can do unclassified analytical work and receive training on critical thinking and analytical writing.

3. Develop the Individual

Having a sufficient number of trained mid-career officers is necessary to sustain agile agency that is able to meet evolving national security objectives. Using the methods described below can help build a strong leadership for the future.

A. Project Management and Leadership Training

Training is not and should not be limited to the initial stages of an intelligence officer's career. As officers rise to higher positions, they must be trained in managerial skills such as project management and leadership. Israel's AMAN has

invested many resources into forming special courses that address key components of intelligence leadership.¹² Through additional training, specially designed courses, and numerous workshops in which notions of leadership were discussed, AMAN made great efforts to prepare intelligence officers to become leaders. R&AW officers are trained as analysts and have few prior managerial responsibilities during the initial stages of their career. But as they move up the ladder, the number of managerial activities increase and the lack of proper training can pose a serious challenge to the functioning of the agency. A transition period devoted to instilling in analysts a sense of leadership is highly recommended.

B. Making Friends and Influencing People

While the art of influencing people is often attributed to personality of an officer, there are ways to cultivate it as well. The initial training to RAS officers, for instance, included Golf lessons for this is one game which helps build up interpersonal skills and competencies that will ultimately lead to beneficial associations. Resources for training of these skills need not belong to the agencies. Outsourcing the training for non-classified aspects to contractors would prove to be more effective.

C. Cadre Management

Managing the supply-side of the workforce equation is not limited to recruitment and training but also includes retention and career progression of officers. The R&AW remains deeply divided by resentment within the RAS recruits who complain that the IPS officers on deputation are given better opportunities despite some of them having little or no past intelligence skills. There is also a complaint that limiting permanent secondment to All India Services has resulted in an IPS take-over of the department since IAS officers are unwilling to come on deputation to the R&AW. This, in addition to the fact that officers on deputation often earn promotions on the basis of work done by them in the past as part of their parent departments in an entirely different environment. This needs to be reviewed to ensure uniformity of practice and a balance between merit, objectivity, and performance over a period of time. The sole measure offered by Annual Conference Reports are often at variance with the actual work done by the officer thus undermining the actual assessment process.

In its place a Seven-Year Review process can be introduced. In this system, an officer is personally interviewed by seniors once every seven years and given an incentive subject to performance. If an officer underperforms, they are given a

two-year window to improve their work before being reviewed once again. If it is found that an officer has underperformed on two consecutive accounts, they should be released from the agency.

Another complaint is that officers are brought in from the IB (often at senior levels) ostensibly to fill in gaps. This is to the detriment of the career prospects of cadre officers. The IB officers come with no experience or tools to operate overseas as there are many dissimilarities in operations - the focus of the internal service is more on security intelligence and internal political activity, that of the external service is political and military; the IB operates on home soil, with the full protection of the state whereas the R&AW operates overseas with no formal protection; the IB operates as the IB whereas the R&AW operates under cover; analysis skills are different as well as domain knowledge; operational methods are vastly different particularly in communicating with assets.

Cadre Management is therefore, not only essential to quantitative needs of the agency but also the quality of the manner in which its functions are conducted.

4. Engage the Masters

It is not a simple task for an officer to cut-off entirely after having spent a lifetime in the service. This occupational hazard poses one of the major challenges for any intelligence agency - to prevent the exposure of confidential information by retired officials. One way of going around this is gradual distancing. Teaching and training new recruits is one manner of engagement that will prove to be mutually beneficial. Another suggestion is for retired officers to work for, or set up, business concerns that have dealings overseas. These would serve the dual purpose of acting as a safe haven for officers while the shop-front will help identify and raise sources.

As mentioned earlier, senior officers carry with them deep institutional knowledge that too, can be useful in strategic guidance of the agency.

Conclusion

1. Finding the right people for the job requires understanding both the demand and supply of the workforce.
2. Regular analysis of the status of human resources – staff numbers, competencies, retirement rate etc. is necessary to forecast recruitment and design effective training.
3. The building is only as strong as its foundation. Developing capabilities requires training spread over a long period of time with a focus on essential skills.
4. Investing in the leadership will ensure that the agency is able to adapt quickly to changing national security priorities.

Immediately after the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai, the Home Ministry reportedly began working on putting together a mechanism to effectively monitor the sharing of and action on intelligence. This was the third major exercise since independence undertaken to restructure India's intelligence community. The notion that intelligence reform is an ongoing process and not a knee-jerk response to calamities is critical to bringing about pioneering solutions.

There is also a tendency to believe that intelligence agencies can be reconstructed to perfection. If policymakers continue to function by holding on to this line of thought, it will hinder the process of thinking creatively about reforms. It would be easier and more sensible to begin with incremental changes like fine-tuning the recruitment and training processes instead of diving right in and overhauling the entire system.

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