

WEAPONIZING NARRATIVES: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF PROPAGANDA TACTICS IN THE INDIAN MILITARY

Gunika Nakra

B.A. International Relations, Flame University, Pune, 412115 India

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ABSTRACT

Propaganda is an important tool in shaping public opinion and its presence can be felt in the various forms of media surrounding us from the news coverage to the movies we watch. This paper explores the existence of military propaganda in the Indian armed forces. While there has been extensive study on American military propaganda, this research paper attempts to further the study of Indian military propaganda and fill the gaps in the literature. Many public opinion surveys emphasise the importance of the military in India and the positive image associated with it which is invoked through news, movies and advertisements. The research examines army recruitment advertisements and movies based on the Indian military to show what information they aim to spread. It points out the other side of the armed forces which can be considered seemingly more negative showing how advertisements and movies often invoke a positive image of the military while ignoring various challenges and drawbacks. The paper identifies the prevalent propaganda in these advertisements and movies and emphasises the need for further study on the military and its implications to inform the public of its realities.

Introduction

Cambridge Dictionary defines propaganda as the diffusion of information and ideas that present only one side of the story in order to influence people's opinions. Nowadays we hear this word often on social media and it's usually associated with certain political issues or motives. But how do we know that some information we come across on the internet or in real life is actually propaganda or just information? One way to distinguish between education and propaganda is the kind of information available to people (Smith, 2023). If someone is trying to educate you, they will present as many sides of the issue as they can whereas propaganda focuses on one side of the matter, usually, the one benefitting the propagator.

J. Fred MacDonald describes propaganda as an omnipresent and integral aspect of all modern

civilisations (Crumm, 1996). He argues that all mass communication in the modern world is meant to be persuasive; everyone, from politicians to cartoonists depicts some form of propaganda. National anthems and pledges of allegiance are all some sort of rituals of propaganda to chain people to their nations and encourage a nationalistic spirit. MacDonald says that the rise of propaganda took place in the 20th century when the common man took charge of the public sphere which led to the establishment of a tool to control the 'mass man' so according to his definition, propaganda acts as a social adhesive which sustains the social order.

If propaganda is everywhere then why would it be missing in the movies we watch, the songs we listen to or the political advertisements we drive past every day? Since a certain majority with a motive manages these aspects, there are bound to be biases and the spread of select facets of information. The military is an important part of the state which has been strife with propaganda since the very beginning. Whenever one thinks of the army, certain images or symbols related to the subject pop up in their head but who is to know where these images came from or if they even present the big picture of the army of a country and what they do, or just what they get to know through different forms of media. This paper explores the prevalent military propaganda and its influence on public opinion with the help of military/war movies, army recruitment advertisements and news coverage of conflicts in which the military was involved.

Literature Review

American military began using propaganda during the American Revolution, which was considered to be the first war waged by the people (Crumm, 1996). During the war, Benjamin Franklin wrote numerous letters under fictitious names to change the global opinion against the British government. George Washington also utilised propaganda to exaggerate the number the enemy casualties to prevent public discouragement. Even during the American Civil War, Confederate Gen Albert Sidney Johnston spread fake information about his Kentucky army's strength and strategies to intimidate the enemy.

According to Claudia Springer, American military propaganda reached a new stage during the Second World War when Hollywood directors collaborated with the government to create dramatic documentaries to rouse certain emotions in the viewers. George Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff General was dissatisfied with the prevalent methods of indoctrinating the troops so he hired director Frank Capra to make a series of seven films named *Why We Fight* which were mandatory for everyone in the military (Springer, 1986). Capra's films have various propaganda techniques like the sweeping generalisation of the world between the good and the evil wherein the enemy is shown to be evil with a fanatic thirsty for world domination. The use of children in the films is constant to evoke feelings of sympathy and outrage. The movies became progressively subtler and more sophisticated with the rejection of drama and the introduction of

pseudoscientific evidence and ethnographic images. Propaganda films for the Vietnam War like *Why Vietnam?* still attempts to in still fear of the enemy but instead of showing the enemy's point of view, it places them in shadow and represents them as a constant threat in order to build up the uncertainty of the danger.

While there are various academic sources on American military propaganda with a special focus on the world wars, the Indian military still remains quite unexplored with limited literature, which is what this paper aims to delve into.

Propaganda in India

Propaganda is not a new concept in India as it has been effectively employed throughout history, especially by external powers. During World War I, Britain used widespread propaganda programs to ensure Indian participation and positive attitudes of the British public towards Indian troops. They distributed posters and newsletters in India to invoke public support for the fight 'for India and for Empire'. Moreover, they showed propaganda films to British viewers as a sign of an alliance between the Empire and its 'citizens.' The propaganda methods not only garnered Indian support but also solidified the Empire's image as benevolent leaders, especially after the compassionate care given to Indian soldiers at the Brighton Royal Pavilion hospital.

Even Germany utilised journals to influence Indian prisoners of war to foster nationalistic sentiment while assisting anti-British revolutionary organisations. At that time, the Indian government also used propaganda to oppose any revolutionary and Khilafat sentiments among soldiers ("India and the Great War").

During the Civil War, when India opted for non-alignment, external propaganda from the US and the Soviet Union again arose to influence the country to tip the scales in their direction. The Soviet Union spread its influence through the Communist Party of India, official state institutions and front groups while the US also used the latter two. To counter the propaganda from the two superpowers, India also launched its own brand of propaganda through the External Affairs Division or the XP Division which attempted to provide an alternative perspective on the Cold War internationally (Pullin, 2017).

Military Propaganda

In terms of propaganda, this paper specifically focuses on the military as it plays a huge role in Indian society. In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, 53 per cent of Indians favour a military rule which is one out of a total of four countries in which a majority supports such a form of government; the others are Vietnam, South Africa and Indonesia (Chandran, 2017). A study conducted by Azim Premji University (APU) and Lokniti showed that about 77 per cent of

people place utmost trust in the military while 54.8 per cent trust the Supreme Court the most (Paliath, 2018). Therefore, Indians place a significant amount of trust in the military and their ability to handle responsibility.

Moreover, Indians view the armed forces in a positive light where they associate positive sentiments with the personnel in the armed forces and consider them heroes. To understand the public opinion on the Indian military, I conducted a short survey where, when asked to mention the first words that come to mind when someone mentions the Indian army, most responses mentioned ‘bravery’ and ‘courage’. 65.7 per cent of the people who were a part of the survey considered soldiers as ‘heroes’ as shown in Image 1. There are various well-known reasons for joining the military that have added to its appeal like job security and economic stability. Since it is a government job, it offers a permanent position and a definitive source of income through pension even after retirement. The families of military personnel also get many advantages like free schooling, free medical services, good accommodation etc. People also associate a certain level of respect and honour with being a part of the Indian armed forces which also ensures good physical health due to the continuous training the personnel goes through (Singh, 2019).

Do you believe that soldiers are heroes?

35 responses

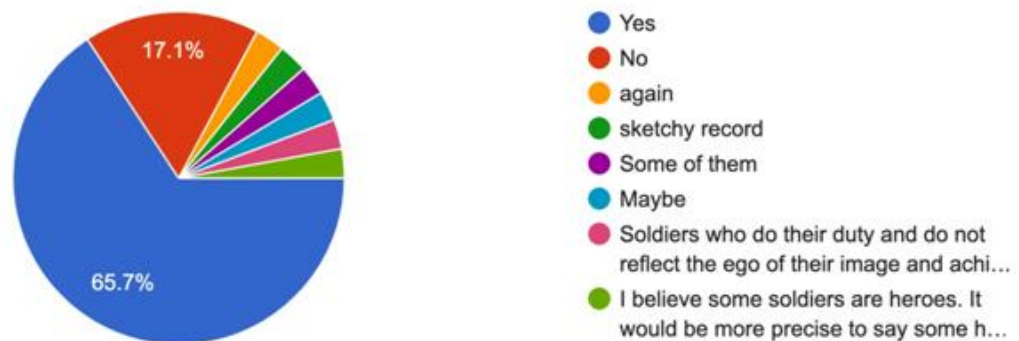


Image 1: Pie Chart from Survey on Public Opinion on the Indian Military

The positive image of the military doesn't appear out of thin air but rather all forms of media aid in its formation and solidification. The armed forces particularly focus on appointing the youth of the country due to their strength, stamina and skills. The General Commanding Officer of the Dakshin Bharat Area, A. Arun stated that the youth is the most important tool in a modern battlefield where the soldiers need to be tech-savvy or tech-friendly to make use of the innovations in society and technology (“India needs tech-savvy”, 2022).

In a survey by Reuters, it was seen that news distributed by social media reaches is consumed

more by the youth compared to news broadcasts and digital platforms (Chatterjee, 2022). Thus, it is important to see how non-traditional sources of information like movies and advertisements influence public opinion especially the young people since they are the main focus of the armed forces. Furthermore, it is also necessary to explore how these sources can be a form of propaganda to place the military in a particular light that only shows specific aspects which can contribute to the perspective of the people.

Military Advertisements

Military advertisements are one way to show what the military is made of and it is a direct call for people who would want to join. One can run into these advertisements while driving, on cable television or on the internet. These focus on their target groups while showing the advantages of being a part of the military.

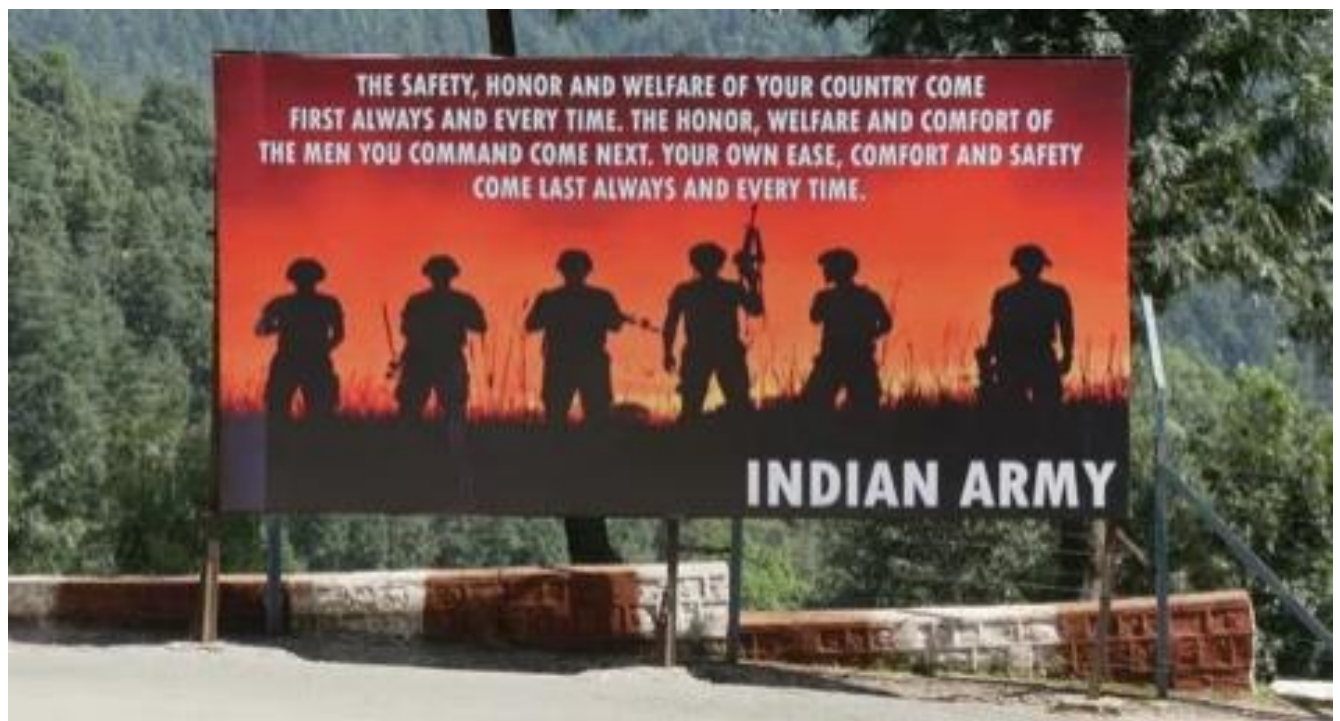


Image 2: Indian Army Billboard (1)

In Image 2, one can see the appeal to the nationalist and patriotic tendencies of people to influence them. There is a certain sense of sacrifice also that comes with joining the armed forces where an individual is expected to put themselves last while working for the country which the above advertisement especially focuses on. It is limited to the sacrificial nature of joining the Indian Army.

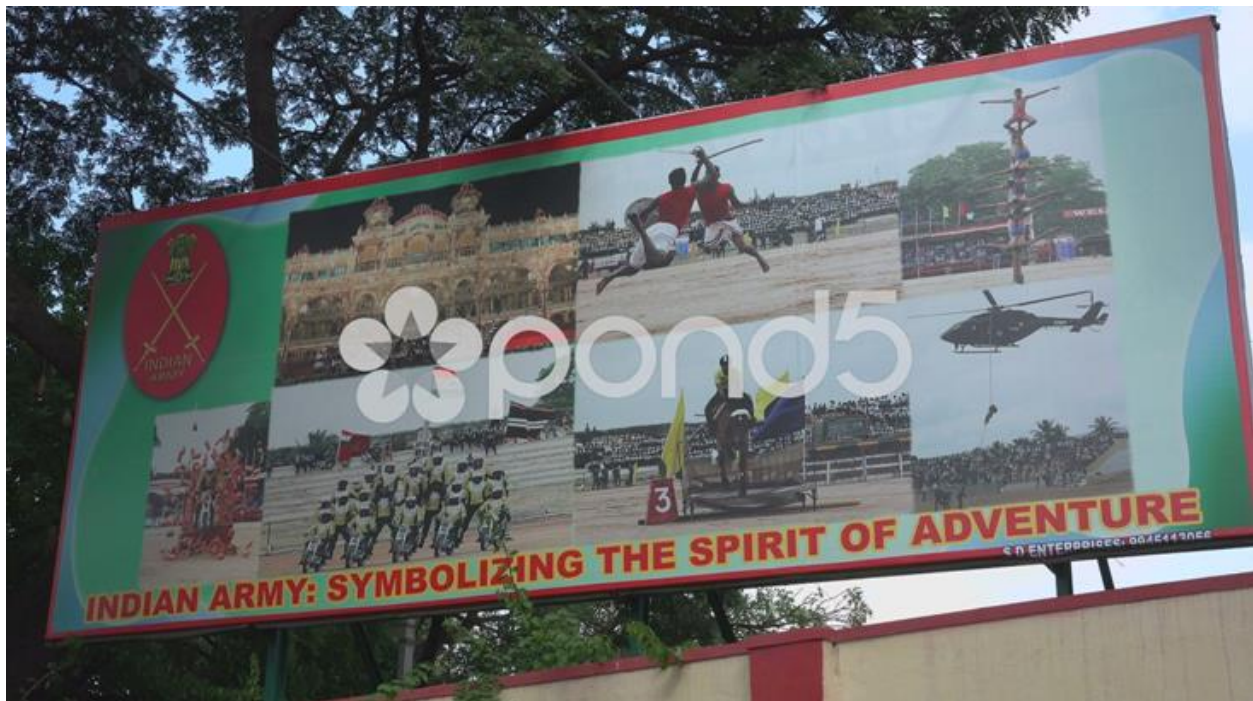


Image 3: Indian Army Billboard (2)

Image 3 focuses on another aspect of the military lifestyle which is the spirit of adventure. For example, the Indian Air Force emphasises the importance of adventure in training which aids in invoking courage and determination while fostering leadership qualities among individuals. The advertisement plays into the desires of youth to partake in adventure activities. Young people especially participate in adventure sports like sky diving and bungee jumping so when shown that these activities and more could a part of their daily lifestyle in the military, they can become attracted to the armed forces (Nigam, 2022).

The official YouTube channel of the Indian Army uploaded an advertisement 7 years ago about the lifestyle of the army to encourage people to apply. The video depicts the 'extraordinary' lifestyle of army personnel where they scale mountains and glaciers to protect the country, they climb down buildings or play basketball in the middle of a snowy, isolated landscape, which distinguishes itself from the 'ordinary' lifestyle of everyone else in the country. This is again a call to the sense of adventure of people to influence them to enlist. The advertisement also invokes the patriotic spirit of the viewer as it depicts how the army allows an individual to serve the motherland.

Through an analysis of military advertisements, it can be seen that they aim to play into certain emotions of the public especially patriotism and the sense of adventure in order to recruit. They

offer a specific image of the Indian military for the people to accomplish their goals.

Military Movies

Movies are another source of portraying the Indian military through a specific lens. There has been a rise in military movies in Bollywood with many famous ones becoming very successful at the box office. Kargil War alone has been captured in eight famous box-office hit movies with the addition of Shershaah. With the increasing militarism in the country especially with the onset of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration, war movies have increased in recent years (Palat, 2019). For the analysis, I have chosen three movies to capture different aspects of the military they attempt to show: URI: The Surgical Strike (2019) and Shershaah (2021).

URI: The Surgical Strike is a blockbuster hit movie based on the surgical strike carried out in 2016 after the terror attacks on the army camp base in Uri. The movie is political in nature with the constant presence of the Prime Minister or the National Security Advisor shown as the mastermind behind the surgical strike. The movie is a clear praise for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration who was in power at the time of the actual event. But the surgical strike's success was under question because Pakistan claimed that it had not done anything significant while Indians claimed that the strike was a lesson and a warning for Pakistan (Khan, 2016). As the movie is from India's perspective, it confirmed the surgical strike. The movie was released in January 2019, right before Modi's reelection to the PM's position which calls into question the film's purpose as a military movie.

The movie shows how soldiers are honoured and the grand treatment they receive from the PM. It also has a strong backdrop of sacrifice with the protagonist Vihaan Shergill leaving his family and early retirement behind to fight for the country. The message of self-sacrifice is strengthened when the PM tells him that the country is his mother too that he needs to take care of. The movie portrays the URI attacks where Shergill's brother-in-law dies leaving his young daughter and pregnant wife behind depicting how soldiers lay their lives on the line for the country. It also invokes strong emotions when the child screams '*Shaurya Daksham Yudhhe, Balidan Param Dharma*' which can be translated as 'Bravery, weaponry skills and war, sacrifice is the utmost duty.

The movie illustrates a stark difference between Indian and Pakistani officials with the latter always complemented by a Pakistani flag to show the difference. The Pakistani officials are depicted as volatile, burping incompetents who insult India at every opportunity and are violence-oriented. On the other hand, Indian officials are disciplined, smart and strategic. Thus, it creates a specific image of both sides for the viewer. The movie was immensely successful at the time with one of its dialogues becoming a viral meme. The line 'How is the josh? High, sir' was

used in the film by the protagonist and the team working under him to invoke enthusiasm or ‘josh.’

Shershaah was another successful movie that came out in 2021 based on the life story of Vikram Batra who became a war hero amid the 1999 Kargil War. Similar to Uri, it shows how soldiers lay everything on the line to protect the country. Batra sacrifices dreams of riches and luxuries in his youth for a life in the army. He is shown as someone who chose a soldier’s life since his childhood and always participated in acts of bravery. In the movie, he is portrayed as the lieutenant in the Indian Army risking his life to save everyone around him.

In Shershaah, the soldiers view Kashmiris with suspicion and always expect betrayal. It contributes to the overall depiction of them as untrustworthy or terrorist sympathisers while the Pakistanis are portrayed as violent, volatile blood-thirsty villains. Movies have an influential impact on the minds of viewers as seen in the public opinion survey in Image 4. 68.6 per cent of the respondents felt patriotic upon watching movies depicting the military which shows how the films affect the audience emotionally which may also hold power over their opinions on real-life instances captured on-screen like in URI or LOC Kargil.

Have you ever felt more patriotic or nationalistic after watching military movies or army-related advertisements?

35 responses

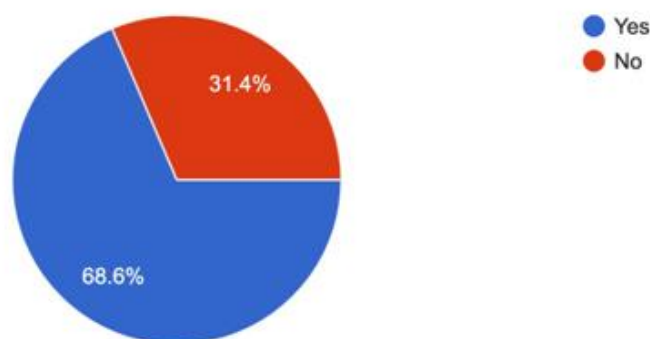


Image 4: Pie chart to analyse the impact of movies on patriotism

The Missing Information

Military advertisements represent a one-sided view of the armed forces that always depict them in a positive light. They point out the advantages of recruitment and the benefits of becoming a soldier but they fail to give a well-rounded image of the military to anyone who wants to join. What it does is encourage people to join without acknowledging the disadvantages and struggles

that would come their way later.

Similarly, the movies also show a specific part of a soldier's life and the nuances of conflict. Since these are Bollywood movies made for an audience that looks for drama, there is a static characterisation of black and white, good and evil. India is shown as the good side while Pakistan or any other 'enemy' country automatically becomes the villain. They fail to capture the perspective of both sides which immediately tarnishes the complex nature of conflict in which each side thinks that it is right in its actions.

Due to the portrayal of the armed forces in a positive light, these forms of media unsuccessfully capture the entire picture of the Indian defence. While Indian soldiers sacrifice their lives for the country, there are many reports of Indian armed forces perpetrating unethical activities that put the lives of civilians in danger whom they are meant to protect. In Nagaland, the army allegedly open-fired on people killing 14 civilians in 2022 which brought into question the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) which shelters the forces against judicial proceedings. It gives free rein to soldiers to arrest people without warrants to kill anyone without consequences which goes against the laws and rights of citizens. Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) carried out an investigation on the encounters in Pathribal village in Jammu and Kashmir in 2000 which they termed as cold-blooded murder ("Killings in Northeast", 2022). Rajya Sabha provided a report which showed the existence of 116 complaints against the Indian Army and the Air Force on grounds of alleged human rights violations between 2017-2022 ("116 complaints of human rights violations", 2022).

Even internally, the armed forces especially the army face various issues. The public image of senior officers in the military is tarnished even among army veterans (Asthana, 2017). The former Chief of Army Staff (COAS), Bipin Rawat faced criticism for various actions like praising Major Leetul Gogoi who used a Kashmiri man as a human shield tied to his jeep, ordering army engineers to build foot over-bridges or not criticising the mistreatment of veterans during their eviction from Jantar Mantar.

The issue of equivalence is another heated debate within the armed forces. Some within the military believe that senior military officers own a set of abilities and leadership skills that are on par with those civilian posts within the bureaucracy like the Indian Administrative Services (IAS) thus they should receive comparative compensation. On the other hand, few veterans and low-ranking officers believe that these demands focus on the career progression of senior officers letting them overlook the armed officers working under them (Asthana, 2017). Another issue is the privatisation of some of the aspects of the military which some believe would free up space and attention for the main combative and defence purpose of the armed forces while others think it would put many soldiers out of jobs and may impact the national security if important

responsibilities like Army Postal Services are handed to private entities (Asthana, 2017).

Moreover, the promotion system within the armed forces is more authoritarian as the superior officers are responsible to promote the officers under them without any input from other subordinates. The superiors may be unaware of the complete skill set and the abilities of the soldiers which their peers might know better thus, impacting the process of promotion (Asthana, 2017).

Moving to issues faced by soldiers, a report by the United Service Institution of India (USI) shows that more than half of the Indian Army is under stress from various operational and non-operational stressors. The study also showed that prolonged exposure to counterinsurgency and counterterrorism erodes their mental health and contributes to stress. While Junior Commissioned Officers (JCO) and Other Ranks (OR) show pride and job satisfaction, officers comparatively face more stress due to a lack of trust in leadership (Peri, 2021). Some stressors include frequent dislocations, overwork, excessive commitments, absence of transparency in promotions, deterioration of pay and status, ungranted leaves etc. which lead to increased occurrences of indiscipline low morale and motivation which affect the ability of the personnel to prepare for combat and perform properly. The stressors are leading to more and more suicides, fratricides and loss of personnel over the years. In a report, Home Ministry states that bullying is one of the major reasons behind fratricide and suicides. There have been 29 incidents of fratricide in the paramilitary forces from 2018-2022 while 436 suicide occurrences were reported (Lama, 2023).

Conclusion

The reality of the armed forces presents a grim picture against the glorification of a soldier's life in military movies and advertisements which are forms of propaganda to show the public that all is well within and to also encourage the youth to join the armed forces. While the soldiers make many sacrifices, their image is not all white with a clean record. They are also humans and like humans there are both good and bad sides to their existence. In a similar way, recruitment to the armed forces comes with its glories but there are various struggles and problems from questionable authority to bullying which go unaccounted for within these military movies and advertisements.

The sacrifices made by the armed forces are considered their responsibility but they also may add to the stress they face like lack of family support. Soldiers live away from their families in high-tension areas or within threatening conditions, especially around bullies or harassers, the stress levels get worse due to the unsupportive environment. These add to the struggles faced by people in the military which are less likely to be known in the mainstream.

Therefore, these military movies and advertisements, seemingly propaganda, lack an all-rounded picture of the armed forces and the lives of soldiers living within which not only presents limiting knowledge to people interested in joining the military but it also leads to the undisputed glorification of the armed forces. There needs to be a comprehensive study of the military to understand its advantages and disadvantages, thus providing the public with a complete picture of an important aspect of the country that they rely on for their safety.

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