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Interview Report: Lt Gen Dr Mohan C. Bhandari

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Abstract
An interview of Retd. Lt. Gen. Mohan C. Bhandari, PVSM, AVSM & Bar, Veteran of 1971 and 1999 Indian wars. Colonel of the Garhwal Riffles (01.03.2003 - 31.08.2006).

KM: What was the nature of your participation in 1971?
MCB: In 1971, I was a young company commander fighting on the western front, in the area of Chhamb Jaurian, where a very difficult war was fought with Pakistan. The war started on the 3rd December, 1971 till Bangladesh was created. India declared its ceasefire on 16th December. On the western front, the battle was fierce. We had tank battles as well as the strong participation of the Air Force. We were able to capture about 40- 50 square kilometres of area in the Indian territory. The famous village of Chhamb was captured back. So, today, the boundary between India and Pakistan has come along Manawar Tawi River. The delineation of the boundary was done after the Shimla Agreement signed in Shimla, Himachal Pradesh by Indira Gandhi, Prime-Minister of India and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, President of Pakistan.
KM: Sir, in the two world wars, the Indian military was used as a strategic global reserve. What are your comments on that?
MCB: Let me also tell you, the second world war was won on US Dollars. The UK had become bankrupt. That is why today…there were two poles of power, at that time, after World War II. One was the US and the other was the Soviet Union, USSR. The USSR is finished, so now the unit pole of the world is the USA only. But now China is creating problems…What I am trying to tell you is that over all these years, we came under British rule. Why we have a problem with China is because China still feels and talks that India has been under the influence of the British. It is for this reason they will not accept any treaty…. we used to have so much trade from that area, even when the British used to trade from there. Britishers were essentially traders on this land. They were Baniyas.
In the international relationship, there are no permanent friends and foe. There is only permanent interest. Now you tell me why has America come so close to India today? Why? These are the same people who have given weapon systems to Pakistan in 1971 war. And today America comes to us, why? Because we are a very big market. So, in international affairs, your supreme national interests are always there to guide you and they will vary with the circumstances. They will vary with the geopolitical affairs. Just see what has happened in Afghanistan.
So, in any military, the international relations take an important place. And when you talk about international relations, start up with geopolitics. Today the major maritime trade goes through the Indian ocean, therefore the Indian subcontinent has become important.
KM: Is the army apolitical; if yes, how?
MCB: There is no religious or caste divide within the army. Army is beyond religion. We are not Ram's

sena or Hanuman's sena. Nothing like that. We have got no time for such things because we have a very distinct definition of the work schedule that is given to us. For us, it doesn't make a difference on who is controlling. Whether it is Congress in power or Mayawati in power or whether it is Modi in power. It impacts the civilian officers. We are not bothered who is in power. *Kuch ni hai* (Nothing is there for us). We work for the nation. Once the decision has been made by the supreme council of India, that is the Cabinet Committee of Policy Affairs and Security- that is the Apex committee.

KM: During the World War II, few stories reflecting the detrimental impact of colonialism on the Indian soldier's psyche have come up. For instance, during the Malaya Campaign of 1941, Britain was quick to abandon its colonial subjects at foreign lands. Not only that, the complex relation between the master and the subject had adversely affected the identity of the subject as many Indian prisoners-of-war (POW) would line up at British POW centres and not the Indian POW centres. Among the Indian POW, such Indian soldiers were called the "anglicised soldiers" who would view themselves as British officers.

MCB: These are abbreviations. The Indian army fought shoulder to shoulder with the British troop. The Indian army contribution in the Malaya Campaign and in Burma War has been tremendous. Field Marshal Slim, Commander of the 14th army came and changed the tide. He changed the war from defeat into victory. You must read his book- *Defeat into Victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India 1942-1945.* Today's situation in the North-East has been created by the Britishers- the inner line, the outer line, the airports and others. These are abbreviations. These are nothing. Initially the Indian army faced a lot of setbacks there. The famous Battle of Tennis Court, outside Kohima and the Battle of Admin Box in Arakan, Burma is a testimony to how Indian soldiers participated in the second World War. The famous epithet is inscribed in the Kohima War Cemetery *"When You Go Home/ Tell Them Of Us And Say/ For Your Tomorrow/ We Gave Our Today."*

KM: Can you talk a little bit about your participation in the 1999 Kargil War?

MCB: I can't talk much about my contribution but I was involved in the direction of the war. I was controlling the military operations from Delhi. The whole thing started on the 4th May 1999, when Pakistanis started intruding in the Indian territory. Slowly, they started becoming bigger and bigger, finally more than 1500 people sat on top of the hill at the height of 16,000ft -18,000ft. This happened immediately after Vajpayee had gone to Lahore to talk to Nawaz Sharif. In fact, he (Vajpayee) told me that "*meri peeth pe khanjar usne thok diya"* (Sharif has stabbed me in the back). The Indian army had controlled the insurgency to such a level that the Musharraf army wanted to rebuild the environment in the international world that things are not normal in J&K. Exactly what they are doing now. Because Modi wants to conduct the G-20 Conference in Srinagar. The activities in Rajouri and Poonch are done purposely by Pakistan. Today in J&K, in Kashmir valley, not even 100 terrorists are there. When I was there it was about 700-800. Then, they wanted to cut the road to the Siachen belt and take over Siachen. Musharraf wanted that we sit on the table and that they take Siachen. The Indian army suffered a lot of casualties but we gave them a run for their lives, they left their dead bodies there. More than 250 dead bodies. Finally, I had gone to them along with the DGMO to the Atari border.

KM: The Pakistani army did not even claim the dead bodies as regular army soldiers for a long time.

MCB: That's what I am saying. We buried their dead bodies with proper Muslim burial rituals. To be frank, they are a useless army!

KM: There is a difference in how the political and military leadership is one in Pakistan, right? Also, a difference in the chain-of-command and the military culture exists between the Indian army and the Pakistani army.

MCB: *Vaha kuch ni hai*. (There is nothing there). There is nothing as political leadership. They are all put in political seats by the *Fauj* only. Why Pakistan is bankrupt today is because of the budget. Eighty percent money goes to the armed forces. The Navy and Airforce are separate. Even today, in Pakistan, every parent wants their daughter to be married to an army officer. *Itna dabdaba hai vaha* (Pakistan Military has immense power in the country). The problem with the Pakistan army is that the officers do not behave properly with their JCO's and lower ranks. They use them. Their JCO told me *"Huzoor! Everyone in my army says that jawans should be Pakistanis and the officers should be from India."* I was shell-shocked. They hold us in such high esteem. They say: *"You are fortunate to interact with one another the way you do."* In our army we take care of one another. There is nothing known as the Union party in the Indian army. There is no special welfare committee or policy for officers. It is the welfare for men. We live by *"One for All, All for One"* camaraderie. I can give my life for my jawan.

KM: How do injuries during war or training affect a soldier's mindset?

MCB: I was just a second lieutenant and I was undertaking a high-altitude skiing course in Khilan. I topped that course and on the last day, I participated in a race. Unfortunately, my one ski opened up. With the high speed of 80-90 km/hr, when one ski cannot be controlled; I somersaulted and got stuck into the snow. Broke my leg. While being air-lifted, the helicopter which was carrying me crashed. I was again stuck in the snow and couldn't open my seat-belt. Everybody nearby was evacuating since there was the danger of the helicopter catching fire due to the malfunction. I asked them to run, too. Later, it was the civilians who saved me and the next helicopter flew me to Srinagar. But it made no difference to me. Where was the difference, I could walk, talk and everything. It is all because of the strength that you get over the years of training and values that you have learned in the army.

KM: What is your view on war? Do you see it as an inevitable phenomenon or do you have a different philosophy attached to it?

MCB: Human beings from the time of Adam and Eve have fought. People will fight. Even the history of Uttarakhand, every place that you find has been a part of battle. Man will fight. It is a natural instinct. So, nation-states will fight. When does war occur? War is when the supreme interests of the nation are threatened. Secondly, war is not a good thing to happen. Nobody wants war. But you said the right word- war becomes inevitable. When your supreme interests are at stake, war becomes inevitable. *Tab koi vikalpa nahi rahta hai na* (Since there is no other solution left).

Ultimately, after the war, when so many thousands have died, you sit on the table to talk of peace. *Toh pehle kyu ni baithte baat karne ke liye?* (Why couldn't that have happened before?) Therefore, war is a very complex phenomenon. War starts from where? It is a state of mind. National security is a very complex issue. National security is a state of mind. Don't forget this!

With Pakistan, we have ideological, historical, political, territorial, religious and geographical problems. The seventh problem is that it has become a proxy by China and other Muslim states. There are several problems reflecting the issue. It is incapable of solving by itself. Same thing is with China today.

KM: What motivated you to join the army?

MCB: In my family, my uncle and my cousin (Bua's son) were the motivating force. My uncle died in the 1962 war. And so did my cousin. At that time, I was in a hostel in Pantnagar. I went to my Advisor to seek leave for my interview. I was selected and called for an interview in Allahabad. Motivation was there from the beginning, as the local Kumaon Centre used to practice early morning running and exercising. But when 1962 happened, it was a turning point in my life. So, I packed my bags in the hostel and went to Allahabad. I used my last chance and got selected.

This was how I joined the army. I did not join because of any other motivating factors. I was highly motivated by my family. My grandfather's brothers were in the Kumaon Regiment in very illustrious positions. My uncle joined and raised 4 Kumaon and received the Presidential honour in 1962. The President came to Ranikhet and presented Kumaon colours. As a child, I accompanied General Thimayya for *shikkar* (hunting). Well, such an environment is enough to motivate you.

Till today, I don't feel like I have retired. I tell everyone, nobody gets retired in life. I am not tired. In the army, you get infatuated by a feeling to serve the nation. Without any politics, caste, creed, without any religion. Nothing like that among the boys. My superior is my boss. If he asks me to jump in the well, I will jump. I will not question him. That is the difference between the Indian army and any other army. We trust each other. The JCO will lead you. Even in battle, the first bullet will be on him. The jawans understand this and therefore follow the leader. *Automatic ni hai kuch* (Nothing happens automatically). These are the values and honour codes inculcated only in the military culture.