

# Operation Sadbhavana: Winning Hearts and Minds

Aditi Malhotra

**A**sone enters the Drug-mulla Awam complex in Kupwara, the welcoming sight of Udaan, a school for special children, brings delight and optimism to the mind. The school is an initiative by the army under Operation Sadbhavana and aims to train and provide basic education to differently abled children. Inflicted with insurgency for decades, Kupwara has been one of the worst-affected districts of J&K. The volatile situation in the district crippled the elementary education system and the presence of special schools in such a remote area was unthinkable. The opening of the school has been welcomed by the local authorities, especially the parents who praise the army for such a noble project. This illustrates the progress that the army has achieved in realigning the perspectives of the local population that once viewed them with hostility.

The doctrine of sub-conventional warfare of the Indian Army lays immense emphasis on Winning Hearts and Minds (WHAM) in counter-insurgency operations. The army's concept of Operation Sadbhavana began with small-scale goodwill actions at battalion and company level by holding medical camps and providing basic goods in remote areas during the early years of insurgency in the north-eastern states. Sadbhavana activities commenced in J&K with the deployment of army units in early 1990s to limit insurgency in Kashmir. The Northern Command utilised Operation Sadbhavana to extend a helping hand in rebuilding schools that had been destroyed by the militants and other developmental activities. The

aim was twofold—to wrest the initiative from the terrorists and to reintegrate the population into the national mainstream.

For many years, the army has acted as a facilitator and catalyst for developmental projects that are identified jointly with the state administration and the people. The army has throughout actively assisted in planning, technical assistance and arrangement of specialised equipment, and undertaken supervision. Maximum use is made of local labour, craftsmen and material. It is ensured that the money spent on the projects is pumped into the local economy. Completion of projects in a laid-down timeframe is ensured.

The WHAM drive is an informal approach mechanism for the officers and soldiers to interact with the local population. The activities have also helped the army to showcase its genuine concern and interest in the welfare of the local population. Although the process has added to the responsibilities of the army, it has certainly helped salvage its image. The unending list of demands placed on army units, which actually ought to be fulfilled by the civil administration, proves the efficacy of army's efforts.

Spending almost Rs. 500 crore, the force focused on four core areas of education, health care, community development and improvement in infrastructure. The army has set up numerous Army Goodwill Schools and has also sponsored a number of students to study free of cost at various other army public schools within the country. The army's health-care facilities, in the form of medical, dental and veterinary camps, have benefitted a large segment of society that did not have access to basic health care. Women empowerment centres were created as part of vocational training centres where skills such as

computer knowledge, knitting, tailoring, shawl weaving, carpet weaving and fashion designing are imparted.

The army has assisted in establishing community development centres in a large number of villages. Although the initiatives under Operation Sadbhavana have fostered positive perceptions about the army, the best course of action would be to slowly transfer the responsibilities to the civilian administration. Recently, M M Ansari, the Centre's Interlocutor for Jammu and Kashmir, stated that the much-applauded Operation Sadbhavana was producing unintended results. He further asserted that the key to the government's J&K policy should be to strengthen the state and local body administration and withdraw the army's presence from delivery of basic public services, a responsibility the army has proudly handled till date.

The positive impact of army's involvement in developmental projects is illustrated by the fact that in many far-flung areas, people have urged that army should be given the Planning Commission's allocation for developmental activities. The local people have become increasingly cooperative in the completion of the projects and, more importantly, people who once harboured militants are now actively engaged in helping the security forces to apprehend them. The change in local perceptions can also be gauged by the fact that the local youth are now queuing up to join the armed forces and the police. As an elderly person remarked after the completion of a water-supply project, "Till today, I thought that the Indian Army was our adversary. Now I understand they are our friends."

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