

**Interview with Capt. Bharat Verma,  
Editor Indian Defense Review and Lancer Publishers.**

*Capt. Bharat Verma, an ex-Army Officer edits the Indian Defence Review since 1986. The IDR is a quarterly journal read by most of the leading policy makers at senior bureaucratic, political and military levels. It is renowned as the "most quoted Indian defense publication". Capt Verma is also the founder and current editor of the Lancer Publishers, a publishing house dedicated to defense and security matters.*

*Claude Arpi meets Capt Verma at a time India encounters serious threats on its borders and the procurement policy faces a series of setbacks. Capt. Verma speaks of his vision of a strong and confident India and the importance of bringing national security matters to the Indian public.*

*Claude Arpi: Could you tell us how one becomes the first defense publication in the country. How did you start? What difficulties did you encounter?*

Capt Bharat Verma: When I was in a young subaltern in the Army, we were posted in the Thar desert. This was during the Simla summit [1972]. My Commanding Officer wanted young officers to deliver lectures. When he asked me to give a talk on desert warfare, I told him: "where is the Indian defense literature on the Thar desert?" I was a cavalry officer and if we had to move in this desert during war, I needed to know how to go about it, how do I gather intelligence about people and tribes living in this area. Who will be with us? Who will be against us? He answered: "Forget it! Indians do not read and do not write. You better read Rommel or Montgomery and deliver your lecture, otherwise your whisky rations may be cut." This was the tradition in the Regiment.

When I left the Army as a Short Commission Officer, I thought to set up a business. I had realized that there was no literature in India on defense matters,

we were still reading foreign publications. We were looking at the globe (and India) with foreigners' eyes. Our security perceptions were what somebody else told us. Analysis came from Russia or the West, it was not Indian. We decided to set up an Indian publishing house to encourage Indian military officers to write. It is how in 1979 the first defense dedicated publishing house in India (Lancers Publishers) was set up. In 1986, we took one step further by encouraging strategic thinking and starting the *Indian Defense Review* (IDR). The first issues were bi-annual with hard covers. When we launched the first issue, there was no patronage or support from anywhere; it was the publishing house which supported the IDR. It was a passion for me. I thought, it had to be done for India; strategic thinking had to come to the common man in the open domain and this could only be done by the private sector.

CA: *Was the government ready to collaborate?*

BV: No, in January 1986, when we published the first issue, we carried an article by Lt. Gen Kathpalia, a former Director General of Military Intelligence. He wrote that in 1971, there was no intelligence about the enemy; the Indian Army fought the war almost blindly, particularly in the Western sector. The story was released to PTI who flashed it worldwide. Delhi was not used to this type of story. 1971 environment was very closed, secluded. As far as national security was concerned, everything was a government's monopoly. When *The Hindustan Times* published our release, I got a call at 10:30 pm from the Director of Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses (IDSA): "What the hell is happening, Bharat, I have North Block [defense ministry], South Block [ministry of External Affairs], intelligence agencies sitting on my head, where is this Review?". It was 5 days from the official release. I told him, "It is published by Bharat Verma, not IDSA". His response was "How is it possible that the IDR is published outside the government". This was the kind of atmosphere we were struggling against. Our very pacifist society never understood military power. It was surprising that after 1000 years of slavery and domination, India had not learnt any lesson.

Then the government threatened to cancel the pension of the General who wrote the story. Of course, it did not materialize, but this is the kind of obstacles we faced when we started the IDR. It was a pioneering work. Today a lot of military officers, intelligence officers, police officers, diplomats write for us. It is healthy for the nation.

*CA: But documents like the Henderson Brooks report (of 1962 war) are still kept secret by the government. Official reports of 1962, 1965 or 1971 wars are still 'restricted'? One still has to go to London or Washington to know the history of India.*

BV: As far as national security is concerned, Delhi looks at the globe from London, Washington, Thimbu, Moscow or Paris. Not from Delhi. That is India's tragedy. The Henderson Papers is a sad thing, a horrible thing.

Let me tell you the story of Lt. General Harbaksh Singh who wrote his 1965 "War Dispatches". These are the actual dispatches of an Army Commander as they were sent every day to Delhi. He asked me: "Bharat, for 20 years, I have asked the Ministry of Defense for permission to publish them, they have never replied or responded. Will you publish them?". I am one of those who thinks "Publish and be damned. We will see the consequences later". These "War dispatches" which were classified, top secret documents were published. It has done extremely well and ironically people who have been opposing publication of the IDR or "War Dispatches" are today reading them. In India, "War Dispatches" or the IDR are today recommended reading by the Army, Air Force or Navy. Things have changed to a certain extent, but bureaucracy remains bureaucracy whether it is in Paris, New York or London. Perhaps, we are worse than others!

*CA: Is IDR read worldwide?*

BV: IDR is read by all think-thanks and governments interested by the sub-continent. There was a vendor who used to buy 70 copies of each issue the IDR.

He would go to my wholesaler and buy them. During a book fair in Delhi, he asked if he could buy directly from us and get more discount. I said "Fine, as long as he puts the cash on the table, as we do not know him, we can't give him credit". He came to get the next issue from our office. He looked a poor man. He said that he had no cash, but added, "You send your man with me and when I deliver these copies, I will give your man the cash". We agreed and after a couple of hours, our man came back with the cash. I asked him where he had gone. He said: "Pakistan Embassy". Since years they buy the IDR. It goes to the Army Head Quarters, the Army Commanders, the Corps Commanders, Foreign Office, etc. That is the way they operate. We should learn from them.

On our side, when I asked for the registration of the IDR. The licensing authorities sent it to Army HQ. The Director General of Military Operations, who later became the Chief, called for a cup of tea. He said: "Why are you publishing this?" I said: "For the Indian Armed Forces and for the civilians who come from a pacifist background, for them to understand the use of military power and the threats faced by India". He replied: "Bharat, Indians don't read. Only foreigners will read it." He told him: "It is the tragedy, foreigners read Sanskrit, you can get degree on our culture in their own universities and we don't read! This is what has to change." For 25 years, I have been pushing for national security to come in the public domain. Today, I find a lot of interest in the younger generation who read about foreign relations and international affairs. They try to interpret it from an Indian view point and see what is suitable for India.

*CA: Tell us about the procurement policy. It seems that it has been a bad year for Army, with many deals stalled? Do you see a way out?*

BV: The last few years have been bad.

*CA: Do you see the origin of the cumbersome new regulations in the Bofors scam?*

BV: My take is different. The government has been very shortsighted. When such thing happens, we immediately blacklist the manufacturer. {In the case of guns}, there are only a few vendors who can make the guns we need, may be 4 or 5 only. If you blacklist 3 or 4 out of them with whom are you going to do business?

*CA: What about the spares?*

BV: Yes, also. You can see how shortsighted it is? Second take, if the money [bribe] is given by the manufacturer to somebody in Delhi, this person should be considered guiltier than the manufacturer. After all he does not part with his money unless he finds that without giving money he can't do business. It is terribly wrong to put the onus on the manufacturer only. If we do not have integrity in the ministry or amongst politicians, the fault is ours. Scams should be investigated without stopping the modernization of the Indian armed forces. My third take, and this is particularly relevant to India, if you want to destroy a country, you create a scandal. We are a democracy surrounded by a wall of totalitarian regimes on our land borders. If anybody does not want us to be strong, they can intervene using the open media that India has, or use a lobby, create a scandal and stop the modernization of the Army. They do not have to go to war with India, they just have to stop the modernization. They can also use insurgency, infiltrations or demographic assaults to subvert the system. There is a cost/benefit ratio for a country like China, not to go to war with India when they can subvert through other means.

*CA: Does the Army or the politicians realize that enemies of India can subvert the Indian defense preparedness through these tactics?*

BV: They are waking up to it, because a lot of this is coming out in the media. The changes are very slow. They need to be faster. Our country faces a different type of challenge on its borders, it is not happening with anybody else. India is a democracy, China does not like it; India is

multicultural, pure Islamic countries do not like it. If India is successful, they won't be able to continue their own way.

[For the procurement], the solution is: India has to invite foreign countries to manufacture in India. For example, India can have joint ventures with trusted countries like Russia or some Western nations.

*CA: Do you mean collaboration as for the Brahmos missiles?*

BV: Yes, Like *Shakti* developed with SAFRAN or Boeing, for a large maintenance facility or Airbus or the *Scorpene* with Thales. The West has financial muscle and technology, but not the younger generation which today means the cutting edge in research. I visited a satellite manufacturing facility in Paris, there were only 2 guys checking the panels. It is a cumbersome process. The CEO told me, "if they go on leave we are behind schedule for a month. We don't have the young population that we need like you". In India, we have them.

*CA: Another point for the European manufacturers: it is becoming too expensive to produce in the Euro zone due to the dollar parity?*

BV: Yes. In India you have also the brain power, it is an acknowledged fact. Further, there is a lot of synergy between the democratic, liberal values of the West and ours. Before American friends used to tell me: "You are with Soviet Union". I did not agree (I was in the Army at that time). When we went to the West, particularly with the US, nobody gave us the type of weapons we needed. The Soviet Union said: "Take what you need".

*CA: What about the French?*

BV: The French were selective. For example, you could not get missiles. But the Russians would give them. The Germans would give you something for the Navy, but not for the Army, because of the [land] equation India-Pakistan.

After we exploded the nuke in 1998, we had an Indo-French strategic seminar in Paris. I talked to the Admiral who was in charge of the strategic cell in the French Defense Ministry. At that time, he told me: "Name what you want, we will give it, tell your government". They have been more like Russia though they have their own restrictions with the Western Alliance. It is fair enough. They even offered to help with nuclear submarines or an aircraft carrier (unfortunately we did not take up the offer). It is in India's interests to modernize and move up.

*CA: Mr Rao Inderjit Singh, the Minister of State for Defense mentioned that the government was thinking to have 'registered' middlemen. What do you have to say?*

BV: Middleman is a normal trade practice. Even if the government says, "no middlemen", it is impossible. Every business in the world is conducted with a middleman. If you go to the church, the priest is the middleman; the poojari is the middleman in the temple. Nothing moves without a middleman.

*CA: Particularly with the Government of India?*

BV: I never agreed with this [no middleman] business; we wrote about it in the IDR. I am glad that the government is rethinking about its stand. It is a good thing. The problem is that since 1947 we have been too emotional and not pragmatic enough on national security issues. We need to shift to pragmatism.

*CA: Do you see the US coming in the Indian defense sector in a big way?*

BV: The Americans are the best at marketing. They work very hard at it, wining, dining, hype and sales. Next to them are Germans who are good at it. The British knew India better than everybody else, but this does not help so much today. French and Israeli (even if the latter don't speak much) are in India in a big way.

We need so much technology transfers and joint ventures that all these countries can get something. [These contracts] can also be a leverage on other issues. I have proposed to government officials that we should immediately move from 26% to 49% FDI in defense sector. I see how the factories of SAFRAN or Boeing could be allowed to pack off and leave India [in case of a conflict]. They will not be. Why are we not confident to deal more maturely on this issue? Let these foreign companies set up shop in India, let them increase their stake in the Indian market, so that neither party will want to run away from each other.

*CA: About the intrusions in Ladakh and Arunachal. Why does the Army deny the intrusions?*

BV: All armies in the world say what their government says. They can not be different foreign policy centers. For example, when a senior officer recently made remarks against Russia, it was not correct. There can't be two foreign policy centers. The Army has to inform its government very clearly and internally (and to my knowledge they are doing it). Whatever incursions have taken place have been recorded with the Ministry of Defense.

Today, the country is going through a major transition. The younger generation has just started taking over. This will be completed by 2012. Then India will not be as 'pacifist', it will be more assertive. The problem is that New Delhi is still ruled by people born under foreign domination, they have never been used to analyze for themselves. Today, the younger generation is freer, they are thinking, they have been trained abroad, they are well educated. A change, for example in our policy with China, be will apparent by 2012.