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Evolution of Service Selection Board (SSB) in India: An overview

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Abstract

The way military officers are selected has never been simple. It is not just about looking at how much a person knows, but also about the kind of personality he or she carries. That is why psychological testing has always had a special place in the process. In the Indian case, after independence, the Service Selection Board (SSB) was created to manage this job, and its structure drew quite a bit of influence from the British War Office Selection Boards that were used during the Second World War.

Over time, the SSB has not kept its methods fixed. The system has kept on changing with the needs of the armed forces, the growth of psychology as a science, and the recognition that leadership is not one single quality but a mix of many traits. In the early period, tests like the Thematic Apperception Test and the Word Association Test were at the centre of the testing process. Later, however, more organized tools were brought in to measure qualities such as adaptability, emotional balance, and resilience.

In recent years, there has also been some talk about adding newer methods, like technology-based tasks, artificial intelligence tools, and even simulation exercises. This paper makes a small attempt to place the Indian SSB in a wider frame by comparing it with officer selection systems in other countries. It also tries to point out some of the problems that exist and to suggest where improvements might be made. In the end, the argument remains clear; psychological testing continues to matter a great deal in finding suitable leaders for the armed forces.

Keywords: Service Selection Board (SSB), Second World War, adaptability, emotional balance

Introduction

The work of choosing officers for the armed forces has always been treated as something very serious, almost like a matter of national security in itself. The type of people selected makes a big difference to leadership, to the way units function, and even to the morale of soldiers. Unlike many civil jobs, where grades and technical skills can be enough, here the system is supposed to check whether a person is suitable in a more complete sense. That means looking at a whole range of things together not just intelligence, but also physical fitness, mental toughness, decision-making ability, and showing the leadership when it is really matters.

Military life is very different from civil life. The environment is stressful; situations can change suddenly and dramatically. The officers are expected to keep calm and act quickly. They need to have courage, flexibility and ability judge that work under pressure. Because of this, countries across the world have slowly moved away from simple exams or interviews and now follow more complex methods. These usually involve a mix of psychological tests, group tasks testing, and structured interviews. The aim is always the same i.e. to try and spot the people who will be able to carry out the hard responsibilities of an officer once they join the service.

Global Practices in Officer Selection

When we look at how different countries have selected their officers, we find that the two World Wars played a very big role in shaping the methods. In the First World War, armies suddenly needed huge numbers of officers. The old ways, which mostly checked education levels or basic physical strength quickly showed their limits. Many of those selected did not really fit the demands of battlefield hardship.

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By the time of the Second World War, lessons had been learnt. Several nations realized that officer selection could not be left to guesswork or simple tests. More systematic and scientific approaches were needed. In Britain, this led to the creation of the War Office Selection Boards (WOSBs). These boards became a turning point. They did not just look at papers and interviews, but also used psychological tests, group exercises, and situational tasks to see how a candidate behaved under stress and how they worked with others and if they could take charge when required.

The WOSB idea did not remain only in Britain. It spread to Europe and North America. The United States, for example, introduced the Army Alpha and Beta tests during the war years. These were used to measure basic intelligence, and later on the Americans also brought in personality assessments to check for qualities like adaptability and resilience. Israel and many modern armed forces followed the suit as well; psychological and situational testing has become a normal part of the officer selection process. The common message across all these examples is that leadership is not just about knowledge or fitness, it is also about personality and the ability to deal with people and pressure.

Service Selection Board (SSB): The Indian Context

In the years before the Second World War, the British Indian Army used a fairly simple way to recruit officers. The system depended mainly on written tests and interviews which were carried out first by Provincial Selection Boards and then by a Central Board. On the surface, it looked efficient, but in practice, it did not really succeed in finding the best leaders. Few candidates who passed these tests and became officers later turned out to be unfit for the role, leading to what was termed as “high wastage rates.” This made it clear that the traditional methods, which leaned heavily on academics and formal interviews, were not enough.

The Second World War changed everything. The sudden need for a large number of capable officers forced the system to adopt new methods. In 1942, psychological testing was introduced as a more scientific way of testing leadership qualities and personality traits. Soon after, in February 1943, an Experimental Selection Board was set up at Dehradun. This was designed on the lines of the British War Office Selection Boards (WOSBs). For a short period, candidates had to appear before both the Central Interview Board and the new Selection Board. But a review done by the Defence Consultative Committee found that the new board was performing much better job. It was able to deal with larger groups and gave a broader picture of a candidate's ability. Because of this, the Central Interview Board was removed and replaced by the General Headquarters Selection Board (GHQ SB), which worked under the Directorate of Selection of Personnel in the Adjutant General's Branch.

By 1945, India already had a fairly wide system of boards. There were five boards for the Army, one for the Air Force, one for the Navy, and one even an Independent Board for women candidates. These boards did not just look at new applicants but also tested serving officers who had been reported by their superiors as “misfits.” After the war, when Emergency Commissions ended, the same boards shifted focus to permanent and short service commissions and also to selecting candidates for the Joint Services Wing (JSW),

which later became the National Defence Academy (NDA), and the Indian Military Academy (IMA).

In 1948, a special government committee reviewed the working of the boards. It concluded that the system was “sound and best suited” for India. Based on its advice, psychological interviews were discontinued and in place of it a new Psychological Research Wing (PRW) was created to give more scientific base to testing. In 1962, this wing was upgraded as the Directorate of Psychological Research and later developed into the Defence Institute of Psychological Research (DIPR) under DRDO. Even today, the DIPR continues to design, monitor, and improve the psychological tests used at the SSB, showing the long-lasting importance of the changes introduced during that time.

Evolution of Psychological Testing in the Indian SSB

The Indian SSB pattern was built on the British model but it shaped itself to fit local requirements. From the beginning, it became the main body for selecting officers for the Army, Navy, and Air Force. In the following years, when the number of applicants kept growing more SSB centers were opened across the country. Today, there are 13 in total—five for the Army (Allahabad, Bhopal, Bangalore, Kapurthala, and Kolkata), four for the Air Force (Dehradun, Gandhinagar, Mysore, and Varanasi), and four for the Navy (Bhopal, Bangalore, Coimbatore, and Kolkata). This rise in numbers was meant to make the system more accessible and to deal with the large intake.

Every board has a President, who is usually a senior officer, a Brigadier in the Army, a Commodore in the Navy or an Air Commodore in the Air Force. The evaluation itself is not left to one person but is divided among three main assessors. The Interviewing Officer (IO) evaluates candidates through semi-structured interviews. The Group Testing Officer (GTO) checks their leadership abilities, initiative, and cooperation by using group tasks and outdoor activities. The Psychologist, on the other hand, conducts tests such as the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), Word Association Test (WAT), Situation Reaction Test (SRT), and Self-Description (SD). Each assessor forms an opinion independently, and then, at the end, they all sit together in a conference to compare notes and reach a common decision.

A very important part of this system is the work done by the Defence Institute of Psychological Research (DIPR), which functions under DRDO. The DIPR designs and keeps updating the psychological tests used at SSBs. It also does research on officer-like qualities (OLQs), leadership behavior, stress handling, and emotional balance in military life. Another job of DIPR is to train the psychologists who are sent to the boards so that the methods stay uniform and scientifically sound. In recent years, the institute has even tried out newer approaches such as computer-based testing, simulation exercises and some uses of artificial intelligence. This shows how its role keeps expanding with time.

The way the SSB is organized, therefore, makes sure that officer selection in India is not random but carried out in a structured and fair way. By combining the views of IOs, GTOs, and psychologists trained by DIPR, the system is able to balance different perspectives. This three pillar approach, psychology, group testing, and personal interview has remained the special identity of the SSB and is often seen as one of the most complete models of officer selection anywhere.

The service selection board assessment framework

The effort to bring more structure into officer assessment began in 1950, when the Psychological Research Wing (PRW) created the first Officer Quality Rating Scale. To prepare this, opinions were collected from a wide group 167 serving officers, 38 members of the selection boards, and also PRW researchers. Their feedback produced a long list of 187 traits that were seen as desirable in an officer. Of course, such a long list was not easy to use in practice, so the categories were brought down and grouped into 29 qualities. This became the first proper framework for testing officer potential in India. A few years later, in 1956, more studies and statistical analysis were done on these qualities. The result was a further refinement. The 29 qualities were cut down to 15, which were then called the Officer-Like Qualities (OLQs). These have stayed at the centre of the SSB system ever since. The OLQs were grouped into four broad factors to cover different areas of personality and leadership. These were:

- **Planning and Organizing:** This included traits like intelligence, reasoning, and the ability to organize work.
- **Social Adjustment:** It covers adaptability, cooperation, and responsibility.
- **Social Effectiveness:** It includes initiative, self-confidence, the power to influence, and liveliness.
- **Dynamic Qualities:** They focus on courage, stamina, and determination.

This shift was very important. It allowed assessors to move away from depending only on personal impressions and instead use a structured and common model across all boards. The OLQs improved consistency and made predictions about officer potential more reliable. Even today, these 15 OLQs remain the standard benchmark, showing how much impact the early work of the PRW still has.

The actual SSB assessment framework is built around testing these OLQs in different ways. The process includes:-

- **Screening Tests:** This test includes, intelligence tests, both verbal and non-verbal, followed by group discussions.
- **Psychological Tests:** It includes test like the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), Word Association Test (WAT), Situation Reaction Test (SRT), and Self-Description Test (SD). These tests are meant to uncover deeper aspects of personality and leadership potential.
- **Group Testing Officer (GTO) Tasks:** This test includes, group planning, progressive tasks, and command tasks that bring out cooperation, initiative, and leadership in action.
- **Personal Interview:** It is a semi-structured conversation to see the candidate's motivation, values, and OLQs more closely.
- **Conference:** In Conference all assessors sit together to discuss and make the final call on whether the candidate is suitable.

Importance of psychological testing in officer selection

Within the different stages of the SSB, the role of psychological testing stands out as especially important.

Physical fitness and even mental sharpness can be improved with practice and short-term training, but personality traits are harder to change. Psychological tests which are employed during service selection board are meant to touch these deeper layers of a person the parts that usually remain stable over time. Tests like the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), Word Association Test (WAT), and Situation Reaction Test (SRT) are designed in such a way that they cut through surface level answers. They often reveal hidden motivations, attitudes, and tendencies that a candidate may not even be fully aware.

The logic behind this is simple but powerful, leadership in a military setting cannot be captured by marks or muscles alone. An officer has to remain calm when under pressure, adjust quickly to unexpected conditions, and also handle people in a way that inspires trust. Qualities like emotional balance, adaptability, sensitivity to others, and the ability to motivate a group are just as important as raw intelligence or physical stamina.

By using psychological assessments, the SSB tries to pick out individuals who can not only pass training but also keep performing once they are in the field. It is not just about academic capacity, but about being steady, dependable, and effective in difficult circumstances. In this sense, psychological testing adds a vital dimension to officer selection one that ensures the armed forces get leaders who can handle both the technical and the human side of command.

Current Challenges in Psychological Testing at SSB

There are several issues that make psychological testing at the SSB a difficult area. One of the problems that is often pointed out is that the tests like the TAT, WAT, and SRT depend heavily on how the psychologist interprets the answers. This gives room for detailed insights into personality, but at the same time, it also opens the door for subjectivity. Different assessors may read the same response in different ways, which can lead to bias, unevenness across boards, and results that are not fully consistent.

Another concern is that the main test battery used in the SSB has hardly changed in decades. While these tests have been useful in identifying officer-like qualities, some experts argue that they do not fully match up with modern psychometric standards. Other countries have moved ahead with computerized systems, simulation-based exercises, and even AI-driven tools that can offer more consistency and objectivity. This makes the Indian approach look somewhat traditional in comparison.

There is also the question of predictive validity. The SSB is supposed to select people who will not only do well in training but also prove effective as officers later on. However, there is still not enough long-term data to prove that performance in SSB tests always matches actual success in service. Without stronger evidence, the credibility of the system can be questioned.

A lot also depends on the assessors themselves. Even though SSB psychologists go through specialized training, their personal style, level of experience, and even unconscious biases can affect judgments. That is why regular refresher training, peer reviews, and updated guidelines are needed to keep standards uniform across boards. On top of this, the growing industry of SSB coaching has added a new complication. Many candidates now arrive well prepared with the answers or practice

material for the psychological tests. Projective methods were originally designed to draw out spontaneous and natural responses, but with so much information available online, the authenticity of answers is sometimes doubtful.

Lastly, the SSB finds itself at a crossroads. On the one hand, the traditional approach has worked for many years and seems well-suited to India's diversity. On the other, change is necessary if the system is to remain transparent, reliable, and trusted in the future. Balancing these two side tradition and modernization is perhaps the biggest challenge that lies ahead.

Conclusion

The evolution of psychological testing in the Indian SSB can be seen as one of steady change, adjustment, and also continuity. It began by borrowing from the British War Office Selection Boards during the Second World War, but over time it developed its own identity. From the very beginning, the Indian SSB did not stop at checking academic records or physical strength. It placed psychological testing at the core of the process, making it one of the key filters for officer selection. The creation of the Psychological Research Wing (PRW), and later its growth into the Defence Institute of Psychological Research (DIPR), gave this system a strong scientific base and ensured that it kept evolving with new research.

One of the most important steps in this journey was the development of the Officer Quality Rating Scale in 1950, which was later shaped into the 15 Officer-Like Qualities (OLQs) in 1956. These 15 OLQs, grouped under four broader factors, continue to serve as the central framework for judging candidates even today. This structure helped the SSB move away from depending too much on personal impressions and gave the process more objectivity and fairness.

At the same time, the SSB has not been without its problems. The risk of subjectivity in assessment, the relatively slow pace of modernization in its test tools, and the increasing role of coaching classes all remain points of concern. Yet, the system has also shown that it can adapt. In fact, the very strength of the SSB lies in its ability to mix tradition with scientific improvement, while keeping a distinctly Indian character.

Looking ahead, it seems clear that psychological testing will remain the cornerstone of officer selection. Modern warfare is becoming more complex, and the qualities demanded from leaders are growing too. Resilience, adaptability, calmness under pressure, and integrity will only become more important in the years to come. In that sense, the emphasis on psychological testing in the SSB is not just a legacy of the past, but also a tool for shaping the future leadership of the Indian armed forces.

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