PAHALGAM 2025

A PAKISTANI TRAP FOR INDIA, JUST LIKE PULWAMA IN 2019

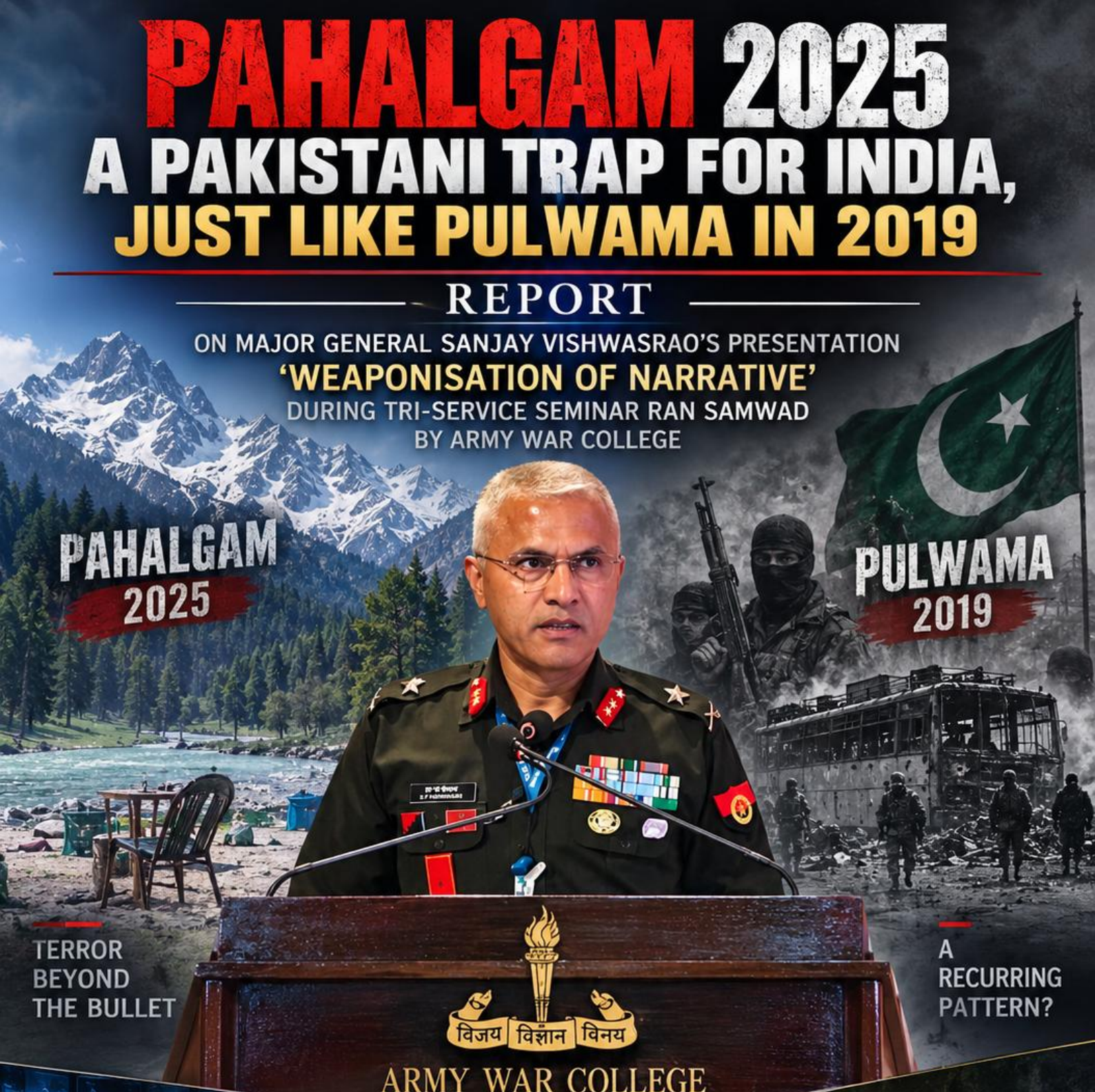
REPORT

ON MAJOR GENERAL SANJAY VISHWASRAO'S PRESENTATION

'WEAPONISATION OF NARRATIVE'

DURING TRI-SERVICE SEMINAR RAN SAMWAD

BY ARMY WAR COLLEGE



TERROR BEYOND THE BULLET

A RECURRING PATTERN?

विजय विज्ञान विनय

ARMY WAR COLLEGE



WEAPONISATION OF NARRATIVE

SHAPING PERCEPTIONS
FUELING CONFLICTS
AIMING FOR STRATEGIC GAINS



TRI-SERVICE SEMINAR

RAN SAMWAD

BY ARMY WAR COLLEGE

INDIAN ARMY | INDIAN NAVY | INDIAN AIR FORCE

SUB THEME 1(C): WEAPONISING THE NARRATIVE: TECHNOLOGICAL CATALYSTS IN MODERN INFORMATION WARFARE

BY MAJ GEN SP VISHWASRAO, SM**



1. The speaker began by extending gratitude to the Chief of Defence Staff for the opportunity to present before an esteemed audience. He opened his talk by outlining the catalysts of modern information warfare, grouping them under four broad heads — **Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act (OODA loop)** — emphasising that this framework was central to the conduct of warfare through weaponised narratives. He pointed out that while **information technology, software, social media and tactical tools** are widely available and extensively exploited by marketing agencies, the armed forces have not harnessed them effectively due to multiple constraints.

2. To reinforce his point, the speaker highlighted data from social media usage. He referred to the official accounts of HQ IDS and the three Service Headquarters, showing that these accounts collectively had approximately 1.24 crore followers, constituting 0.8% of India's population and 41% of the nation's total social media users. However, he noted that these handles were largely confined to public relations updates such as announcing events, personnel changes or ceremonial occasions which offered limited perception value. He stressed that these official channels required support from individual officers' accounts to gain traction. As an example, he described how investment in X (Twitter) increased follower subscriptions and how Instagram reels were effectively used to reach wider audiences despite comparatively fewer followers.

3. The speaker then defined the term ***weaponised narrative***. He explained it as the use of story-based communication to foment political and **social schisms, to subvert institutions, culture and collective will**. Using the model of *means, ways*

and ends, he elaborated that communication serves as the **means, schisms represent the ways and altering the adversary's will becomes the ultimate end**. He applied this construct to the Pahalgam incident and Operation Sindoor, explaining that the attack itself was a communication. Statements like "Go and tell Modi" were deliberately crafted messages, while the killings of 26 individuals based on religion were designed to deepen political schisms.

4. He highlighted how **Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations** (ISPR) exploited **weaponised narratives in Kashmir**. In 2018–19, the Turkish drama serial **Ertugrul Ghazi**, based on a fabricated history, had a profound impact on families, with parents even naming their children after characters from the show. The speaker warned that such narratives dangerously influence culture, identity and willpower.

5. To illustrate what weaponised narratives include, he presented the example of Kashmir in 2021–22 during the **Tricolour Revolution**. He displayed a photograph of General and Mrs. Pandey, then Corps Commander, at Lal Chowk on Independence Day and explained that such imagery represented an offensive narrative. Another example was shown where Lt General D.P. Pandey (Retd) invited the Army Commander (now Chief of the Army Staff) to the same location, with the speaker himself photographing the event to preserve its narrative value. He noted that weaponised narratives encompassed all aspects of strategic communication and information warfare, far beyond routine public relations.

6. The speaker invited the audience to review his former Twitter handle ***#LageRahoKashmir***, which was used in 2021–22 to demonstrate narrative-building efforts in Kashmir. He quoted an NRI observer in the U.S., who remarked: *"It is not war over information, it is war by information for influence. The most convincing storyteller will win by achieving influence domination."* Drawing from the Mahabharata, he likened the Pandavas' choice of Yudhishthira to declare "Ashwatthama hathah" as a deliberate act of narrative credibility. He also referenced political leaders like President Bush and Donald Trump, whose storytelling influenced public perception.

7. Another quote he shared warned: *"If we change the information environment, we can change society."* He linked this to real-life campaigns such as *#IndiansForGaza*, where youth adopted traditional Indian attire to project solidarity and influence perception. Transitioning to the Kashmir conflict, he presented data on terrorist casualties in Jammu and Kashmir from 1993 to 2025, dividing the timeline into phases:

7.1. **2003–10**. Pakistan learned lessons from global colour revolutions. While India fortified the LC fence with the Anti-Infiltration Obstacle System, the introduction of cellular networks inadvertently shifted the information environment, enabling Pakistan to instigate the 2008 Intifada.

7.2. **2014–19**. Pakistan observed Russian interference in elections worldwide. Following the Uri surgical strike and the release of the movie *Uri* in

2019, Pakistan anticipated that Article 370 might be revoked, leading to the **Pahalgam attack** as an attempt to influence India's democratic process.

7.3. **2021–25**. After Article 370's abrogation, Pakistan observed India's firm stance at Galwan, the Tiranga Revolution in Kashmir, and India's push for *Viksit Bharat 2047*. The speaker assessed that Pakistan, facing Taliban and Baloch unrest, sought to derail India's trajectory, possibly through episodes like Pahalgam.

8. He argued that since Operation Vijay, Pakistan has consistently subordinated hard power to soft power through weaponised narratives, making hard power a *slave* to soft power. He urged senior commanders to debate this assertion, reiterating that the identification of the **centre of gravity (CoG)** is central to planning wars of narratives. Quoting **Clausewitz**, he described the **CoG as the source of strength, purpose and will** and stressed the need to destroy the adversary's CoG while reinforcing one's own.

9. To illustrate, he used analogies such as a wooden stool's nails being its CoG. He posed hypothetical scenarios, asking the audience to identify the CoG in cases like the anti-India nexus in Kashmir, in Manipur or the polluted Yamuna River. Finally, he outlined the design of a narrative strategy, emphasising analysis not of terrain but of **people's will and perceptions**. He advocated identifying **gaps and vulnerabilities** in public perception, determining critical requirements of the CoG and thereafter shaping a holistic strategy.

10. The speaker elaborated on how a strategy around weaponised narratives should unfold. He explained that strategic, operational and tactical messaging must align as part of an **offensive narrative effort**. He related this to recent Indo-Pak conflicts, stressing that if Pakistan's centre of gravity was the concept of *Azadi*, India's strategy should not only counter it defensively but also instigate discontent within Pakistan against its own military. He reminded the audience that the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) had earlier mentioned how 15% of his time during Operation Sindoor was spent countering fake news, a clear reflection of the need for proactive narrative dominance.

11. The speaker introduced the concept of **neocortical warfare**, defined as warfare that aims to control or shape enemy behaviour by **targeting the brain's neocortex through language, images, and information**. The objective, he explained, was to assault morale, alter will and achieve victory without necessarily destroying physical forces. He emphasised that this form of warfare represented the highest skill in modern conflict. Drawing on **Chanakya's dictum** that "**the wise win before fighting**," and **Sun Tzu's** counsel to "**win the battle before fighting the war**," he provided four case studies from his own experiences that illustrated how weaponised narratives had been effectively employed:

12. **Case Study 1: Assam**. During General Bipin Rawat's tenure as Corps Commander, tribal communities in Assam were engaged in violent clashes. The armed

forces intervened by targeting the cognitive domain, launching the campaign *#AllTribesOneIndia*. Through this narrative effort, the first Kuki village was resettled in a Naga-dominated area after 20 years, without firing a single bullet. Eventually, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) was lifted in Dima Hasao in 2023, marking a significant success in narrative-driven reconciliation.

13. **Case Study 2: Kashmir**. The speaker recalled how Kashmiri Muslims were once seen burning the national flag and hoisting Pakistani flags in Srinagar's Lal Chowk. Through sustained narrative efforts, the situation was reversed, with Pakistan's own symbols being targeted. This demonstrated how weaponised narratives could reorient public perception and reclaim symbolic spaces.

14. **Case Study 3: National Cadet Corps (NCC)**. On assuming responsibility for the NCC, the speaker was surprised to find a culture of ragging, which he argued was incompatible with the vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047*. A narrative shift was initiated by introducing the hashtag *#OnceACadetAlwaysACadet*, establishing selfie points, encouraging cadets to use Instagram positively, and launching a podcast studio. Weekly cadet podcasts further reinforced the positive culture. The campaign gained traction, culminating in the NCC achieving runners-up position among 17 directorates at the **Prime Minister's Rally**. Even the **Prime Minister** mentioned NCC in his **Mann Ki Baat**, demonstrating the reach of the narrative.

15. **Case Study 4: Yamuna River**. The Yamuna's continued pollution despite repeated clean-up drives was traced to the weakening of cultural and spiritual links between the river and the people over centuries. Recognising this as the **centre of gravity**, a campaign was launched across 550 schools and colleges in Delhi involving 50,000 cadets. A song and video were created to revive people's emotional connection with the river. The speaker pointed out that both the Prime Minister and the Chief Minister of Delhi subsequently echoed similar messaging, showing how narratives can restore cultural consciousness.

16. The speaker then transitioned to his **final recommendations**. He emphasised that post-Operation Sindoor, Pakistan was facing both psychological and physical dislocation, creating a **strategic opportunity for peace**. He compared this to the period after the revocation of Article 370, quoting Bilawal Bhutto's admission that while Pakistan once aspired to take Kashmir, it now struggled to defend Muzaffarabad. He asserted that **soft power must become an integral part of India's military arsenal**, not a peripheral tool. He called for theatre- and adversary-specific **neocortical warfare strategies**, tailored to exploit adversary vulnerabilities and protect India's strengths. Finally, he urged officers and institutions to cultivate the mindset of *Agnayodhas*, modern warriors who wield narratives, information, and ideas as effectively as traditional weapons.

17. The talk concluded with his invitation for questions and answers, after which the session moved into an interactive discussion.

INTERACTIVE SESSION (QUESTIONS & ANSWERS)

18. **Col. Abhishek Poddar,** a Course Member of Higher Command Course, raised a question concerning **misinformation campaigns** within broader information operations. He observed that while misinformation might lend temporary positivity when targeting an enemy audience, such campaigns often cascade into fake news, **undermining credibility** and operational integrity. He sought clarity on how to strike a balance, especially in operations short of war, such as Operation Sindoor and whether a different strategy was required during conventional war. **The speaker** responded that an overall **offensive narrative strategy** was essential. In the OODA loop of narrative warfare, initiative must always be retained. If forces restricted themselves to merely countering fake news, they would remain reactive and defensive. He argued that whenever fake news was countered, it had to be embedded within a compelling storyline, as stories, not raw facts, gained traction. Referring to surgical strikes, he stressed that Pakistan always integrated hard and soft power from the outset. He asserted that India had done this better during Operation Sindoor, and that hard and soft power must be integrated from the very beginning.

19. **Mr. Snehesh**, a media personnel, posed two questions. First, he asked whether, by **reacting militarily after Pahalgam**, India had inadvertently fallen into **Pakistan's trap**, given the suggestion that Pakistan might have sought a surgical strike. Second, he queried whether protests such as those by farmers or in regions like Kuki areas should be seen as extensions of **enemy-driven narrative-building**. **Maj Gen Vishwasrao** replied that he could not comment on the decision-making within South Block during Operation Sindoor, but he noted that parallels between Pulwama, Pahalgam and even Operation Vijay suggested **deliberate adversarial provocation**. On the second point, he affirmed that mobilising populations against governments was a hallmark of **weaponised narratives**. He pointed to examples in Bangladesh, the 2008 and 2016 Kashmir Intifadas and recent farmers' protests in India, stressing that such movements were often exploited as part of adversarial information campaigns. He added that while the armed forces could act under AFSPA provisions, political-level responses were required in other contexts.

20. **Col Richie**, a Course Member from Higher Command Course, commented on the limited impressions gained by official Tri-Service social media handles. He observed that effective narrative campaigns could not be conducted by the armed forces alone and required a **whole-of-nation approach**, integrating media, government, and technology. **Maj Gen Vishwasrao** responded by reminding the audience that the AFSPA mandate in Jammu & Kashmir required not only counter-terrorism but also **countering secessionism and protecting national symbols**. He urged serving officers to contribute to narrative efforts, citing examples of General D.P. Pandey and General Shankar, who had made significant contributions to narrative-building, even after retirement. He suggested that senior leadership review restrictive media policies, as officers were often the best storytellers.

21. The next speaker asked a provocative question about whether internal narratives within the armed forces such as **attaching mythological or historical references to indigenous weapon systems** risked undermining rational assessments of military capability and eroded the military's apolitical and secular reputation. **Maj Gen Vishwasrao** declined to address the question directly, stating it was **outside the scope of his presentation**. He remarked that such trends might be part of decolonisation within the armed forces but deferred the question to the CDS for comment.

22. Another attendee raised concerns about **coherence when encouraging every soldier** to become an enthusiastic "social media warrior." He noted that algorithms were not designed for **unified messaging** and that varying levels of maturity could result in disjointed narratives. He asked how coherence could be ensured. **Maj Gen Vishwasrao** recounted his own experience as a GOC, during which 72 social media accounts were run under his command across platforms. **Coherence** was maintained under direct supervision of the GOC and no major mistakes occurred over two years, barring a single minor incident of trolling. He stressed that, like standardised procedures in firing or manoeuvre, coherence in narrative campaigns could be inculcated through training and oversight. He cautioned against a "whole-of-society" approach, pointing out that Pakistan's ISPR had created a PTI troll farm that ultimately turned against them. Instead, he recommended **expanding the pool of trained officers** who understood storytelling, ensuring discipline and coherence.

23. The **Chair** intervened to highlight the positive contributions of officers like Lt Gen. D.P. Pandey, Lt Gen. Sahi, Maj Gen. Vishwasrao and Gen. Ajay Mehta in Kashmir. He noted that their collective efforts, supported by formations such as Drishtikon, had formed the nerve centre of successful narrative campaigns.

24. **Major Saurabh** sought guidance on ensuring **coherence between the three key stakeholders, government, media and veterans** in narrative campaigns. He likened narrative-building to weaponisation and asked how a "safety lock" could be placed to avoid misalignment. **Maj Gen Vishwasrao** replied that coherence was possible through **institutional mechanisms**. He referred to the National Security Council Secretariat, which led initiatives and held regular meetings, including more frequent sessions during Operation Sindoor, to ensure unified narratives. He cited an example of 15 Corps Twitter handle wishing the Prime Minister on his birthday, which drew criticism. Lt Gen. D.P. Pandey shielded the young officer operating the handle, ensuring accountability remained with command. He stressed that coherence was achievable through training, discipline, and vision. As guidance, he advised: *"What we don't do in the mess, don't do on Twitter."*

25. **Air Vice Marshal Bahadur (Retd)** offered a cautionary perspective. He warned that **excessive openness on social media** could dilute relevance, likening it to "method in madness." He urged restraint, arguing that constant posts could trivialise military messaging. Another speaker raised concerns that narratives could blur the line between truth and propaganda. He asked whether relentless storytelling risked

pushing India into the same pattern as Pakistan, where lies and fabrications dominated. **Maj Gen Vishwasrao** acknowledged the concern but clarified that **narratives must remain truth-based** to endure. He cited Kashmir campaigns where the consistent theme was exposing Pakistan's "lies, deceit, and deception." He explained that credibility could not be sustained through falsehoods; only narratives grounded in truth could succeed in the long term.

26. **Lt Gen Satish Dua (Retd)** observed that while warfare was considered too serious to be left to generals, **information warfare** was now too significant to be left solely to them. He suggested bringing in **professionals**, as India lagged behind adversaries. He pointed out that Pakistan employed multiple PR and law firms abroad, while India was still focused on trending hashtags and internal PR. He argued for systemic professionalisation of information warfare.

27. Another **speaker** highlighted that the cognitive domain required a **national architecture**, noting that China had an integrated, party-driven structure cascading down to theatre commands. In contrast, India lacked cohesion at the national level. He asked whether India had even begun to establish effective narratives against Pakistan and China. **Maj Gen Vishwasrao** responded cautiously, acknowledging that Pakistan's narratives relied on deception but were not sufficiently exposed by India. He emphasised the need to apply the principles of **saam, daan, dand, bhed** in exposing adversaries. Regarding China, he refrained from detailed comment, stating that such assessments were beyond his rank. He explained that his presentation aimed to stimulate thought and debate rather than provide final solutions.

Concluding Remarks

28. The **Chair** concluded the session by reiterating that **strategic communication must be a national effort**, with the armed forces contributing as integral participants. He praised Maj Gen Vishwasrao for drawing on his operational experiences to provide valuable insights into the conduct of narrative warfare. Referring to the Mahabharata example of Ashwatthama, he reminded the audience that narratives have long shaped outcomes in both myth and history.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

29. **Weaponised Narratives as Strategic Tools**. Weaponised narratives are story-based communications designed to create political and social schisms, subvert institutions, weaken culture and erode collective will. Communication serves as the *means*, schisms as the *ways*, and change in will as the *end goal*.

30. **Pakistan's Narrative Strategy**. Since Operation Vijay, Pakistan has subordinated hard power to soft power, using military action as a slave to narrative-building. Pakistan's ISPR has effectively deployed cultural tools (e.g., *Ertugrul Ghazi* serial) to influence identity and societal values. Episodes like the 2008 Intifada, 2019 Pahalgam, and post-Article 370 unrest show Pakistan's continuous narrative interference in Kashmir and India's democratic processes.

31. **India's Challenges and Gaps**. Official social media handles of IDS and Service HQs are restricted to PR messaging, limiting their perception value. India's narrative efforts remain fragmented, over-reliant on "reactive countering of fake news" instead of driving proactive offensive narratives. Lack of a national architecture for information warfare leaves India behind Pakistan and China, who have integrated state-driven approaches.

32. **Neocortical Warfare**. It is defined as warfare targeting the brain's neocortex to shape behaviour, morale and will without physical destruction. This represents the highest level of skill in modern conflict.

33. **Case Studies of Narrative Success**

33.1. Assam: Campaign *#AllTribesOneIndia* reconciled tribal conflicts, leading to AFSPA removal in Dima Hasao (2023).

33.2. Kashmir: Sustained narrative work transformed Lal Chowk symbolism from Pakistani flag-burnings to Indian dominance.

33.3. NCC: Initiatives like *#OnceACadetAlwaysACadet* and cadet podcasts reshaped culture, gaining recognition in PM's Rally and *Mann Ki Baat*.

33.4. Yamuna: Campaign reconnecting people to the river's cultural significance mobilised 50,000 cadets and influenced both PM and CM messaging.

34. **Recommendations by Speaker**

34.1. Exploit post-Sindoor opportunity: Pakistan's current psychological dislocation offers India space for peace and dominance.

34.2. Institutionalise soft power as a formal component of military capability.

34.3. Develop theatre- and adversary-specific neocortical warfare strategies.

34.4. Officers and institutions must embrace the role of Agnayodhas — warriors wielding narratives and information as weapons.

35. **Interactive Session Insights**

35.1. Misinformation vs Credibility: Narratives must remain truth-based for credibility; lies will collapse over time.

35.2. Whole-of-Nation vs Military Role: While a national effort is essential, serving officers must actively contribute; soldiers are better storytellers than civilians.

35.3. Coherence in Messaging: Achievable through command oversight, training and discipline; caution advised against uncontrolled mass participation.

35.4. Professionalisation: Senior veterans stressed the need to induct professionals into India's information warfare ecosystem, as adversaries have already done so.

35.5. China's Edge: China operates with a unified, party-driven cognitive strategy, whereas India's approach remains fragmented.

Concluding Reflection, 2026: A Strategist's Case for Winning the War of Narratives

An addendum written for corporates, government ministries, policy institutions and think tanks

This presentation at Ran Samwad was not a one-off academic exercise; it was the distilled record of four decades spent designing and running narrative campaigns from the ground up — in Kashmir, Assam, Manipur, the National Cadet Corps, in a village named Kangundi and along the Yamuna and Godavari Rivers— each one tested against a live adversary/ status quo of hopelessness, not a classroom scenario. The Print's report on this talk, headlined around my assessment that Pahalgam 2025 mirrored Pulwama 2019 as a Pakistani-engineered trap, reached a national readership precisely because the analysis was built on pattern recognition across a documented, twenty-year timeline of Pakistani narrative strategy — not speculation.

A Student of Pakistan, Not Just a Soldier Against It

Two years spent in the High Commission of India in Islamabad, over 1,100 intelligence reports filed on Pakistan from there, and a book manuscript on its use of lies, deceit and deception give this analysis a depth that generic South Asia commentary rarely reaches. The 2003–25 phase-wise breakdown of Pakistan's narrative evolution — from the 2008 Intifada through the Uri and Balakot years to the post-Article 370 period — is not a slide prepared for the occasion; it is a working framework I have used to brief senior military and diplomatic leadership for two decades.

Geopolitical Analyst and Narrative-Warfare Subject Matter Expert

The concepts introduced in this talk — neocortical warfare, the centre of gravity applied to public will rather than terrain, and the OODA-loop discipline of offensive narrative design — are not borrowed theory. They were built and field-tested across four separate campaigns: the Assam tribal

reconciliation helped lift the Armed Forces Special Powers Act from Dima Hasao without a single bullet fired, the reversal of separatist symbolism at Srinagar's Lal Chowk, the cultural transformation of the NCC into a Prime Minister's Rally runner-up team of 36,000 cadets, staff and officers, and the Yamuna river-revival campaign that reached 50,000 cadets across 550 institutions. Each is a case study in translating narrative strategy into measurable, on-the-ground outcomes — the exact currency that government ministries, policy institutions and corporate boards need from an advisor, not just a commentator.

What I Offer Ministries, Think Tanks and Corporates

— **As Strategist and Advisor:** designing offensive narrative strategy anchored to properly identified competing centres of gravity — for a government department countering disinformation, a corporation defending brand trust, or a think tank shaping policy discourse.

— **As Geopolitical Analyst:** reading adversarial intent through pattern recognition across decades of Pakistan-watching, applicable equally to national-security clients and to corporates operating in contested geographies.

— **As Narrative-Warfare / Strategic-Marketing SME:** training institutions to run coherent, large-scale messaging — the same discipline that kept 72 social-media accounts under my command free of major missteps for two years — without surrendering coherence to uncontrolled mass participation.

— **As Speaker and Educator:** converting hard-won operational lessons from Kashmir, Assam, the NCC, the Yamuna, Kangundi and Ran Samwad itself into frameworks institutions can actually adopt, not merely admire.

"It is not war over information, it is war by information for influence. The most convincing storyteller will win by achieving influence domination."



Was Pahalgam a trap by Pakistan to lure India into a conflict? An Army officer thinks so

Speaking at tri-service seminar, Major General SP Vishwasrao also said farmers' protest, anti-CAA agitation & situation in Manipur was part of 'larger ploy' to destabilise India.

SNEHESH ALEX PHILIP 26 August, 2025 05:39 pm IST

The Print, 26 August 2025 — "Was Pahalgam a trap by Pakistan to lure India into a conflict? An Army officer thinks so," by Snehesh Alex Philip, reporting on this presentation.

(https://theprint.in/defence/was-pahalgam-a-trap-by-pakistan-to-lure-india-into-a-conflict-an-army-officer-thinks-so/2729385/)