

Research Paper

## Achievement Motivation and Resilience among Services Selection Board (SSB) Candidates —The Role of Selection Outcome and Number of Attempts

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### ABSTRACT

The Services Selection Board (SSB) is widely recognised as one of the most psychologically demanding pathways for entry into the Indian Armed Forces; yet the psychological characteristics of its candidates remain largely unexplored in the empirical literature. The present study investigated achievement motivation and psychological resilience among SSB candidates ( $N = 73$ ), comparing those who were rejected with those who were successful, and examining the role of number of SSB attempts across both groups. A cross-sectional quantitative design was employed. Achievement motivation was assessed using the Achievement Motivation Scale (Deo & Mohan, 1985) and resilience using the Brief Resilience Scale (Smith et al., 2008). Independent samples  $t$ -tests revealed no significant difference between rejected and successful candidates on either achievement motivation or resilience. However, Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant positive association between achievement motivation and resilience across the full sample. The number of SSB attempts was found to have a significant positive correlation with resilience across the full sample, with this association being particularly pronounced among successful candidates. These findings represent the first empirical evidence on the psychological profile of SSB candidates in India, and underscore the need for further research in this understudied population. The study offers implications for candidate mentoring, psychological support, and the development of interventions aimed at fostering resilience and perseverance among defence aspirants.

**Keywords:** *Achievement Motivation, Resilience, SSB Selection, Number of Attempts, Rejection*

The Services Selection Board (SSB) is a holistic, multi-dimensional selection procedure used by the Indian Armed Forces to identify candidates with the qualities required of a commissioned officer. Unlike conventional examinations that assess academic knowledge alone, the SSB evaluates candidates comprehensively across three domains rooted in the ancient Indian framework of *Manasa*, *Vacha*, and *Karmana* — that is, thoughts, words, and actions, through a structured five-day assessment process comprising psychological tests, group tasks, and personal interviews (*Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 2020*). The qualities sought, collectively referred to as Officer-Like Qualities

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(OLQs), encompass four factors – Planning /Organizing, Social Adjustment, Social Effectiveness, and Dynamic qualities. Every year, thousands of defence aspirants across India appear before SSB boards with the aspiration of serving the nation as commissioned officers. However, the selection rate remains significantly low, only a minimal proportion of candidates are finally recommended, rendering the process one of the most competitive and psychologically demanding in the country (*Sharma & Singh, 2020*).

The journey of an SSB candidate rarely ends with a single attempt. A substantial number of aspirants undergo repeated cycles of preparation, appearance, rejection, and reappearance investing years of hard work, discipline, and emotional commitment in the pursuit of a defence career. This continuous engagement with high-stakes evaluation, often in the face of repeated non-recommendation/ rejection, places considerable demands on the psychological resources of candidates. The experience of SSB rejection is not akin to failing a written examination; for many aspirants, service in the armed forces represents a core aspect of personal identity, shaped over years from childhood through physical training, structured programmes such as the National Cadet Corps (NCC), and a deep-seated sense of duty and aspiration (*Markus & Nurius, 1986*). Therefore, rejection in this context affect not only immediate emotional states but also long-term motivation, self-concept, and goal orientation in ways that have not yet been empirically examined.

Against this backdrop, psychological constructs such as achievement motivation and resilience emerge as particularly relevant to understanding the SSB candidate experience. Achievement motivation refers to an individual's drive to attain excellence, accomplish meaningful goals, and persist in the face of challenge and uncertainty (*Atkinson, 1957; McClelland, 1961*). Individuals with high achievement motivation tend to set higher standards for themselves, demonstrate sustained effort in the face of obstacles and have a strong focus towards personal growth and accomplishment. Research has consistently linked achievement motivation to academic success, occupational performance, and sustained engagement in competitive and demanding pursuits. In the Indian context, Deo and Mohan (1985) developed a validated conceptualisation of achievement motivation that identifies approach and avoidance dimensions, both of which are relevant to how defence aspirants navigate the SSB selection journey. Whether SSB outcome or the number of attempts is associated with differences in achievement motivation remains an unexplored question.

Equally relevant is the construct of psychological resilience — the capacity to adapt positively and recover from adversity, failure, and stressful life experiences (*Smith et al., 2008*). Resilience does not denote an absence of distress; rather, it reflects the ability to maintain psychological functioning and return to equilibrium following significant setback (*Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000*). Resilient individuals are more likely to view failure as an opportunity for learning rather than evidence of personal inadequacy, a disposition that may be especially protective in the context of repeated SSB rejection. Research in competitive environments has demonstrated that resilience moderates the effect of failure on psychological wellbeing and supports continued engagement with high-demand activities (*Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013*). Whether the process of repeatedly facing the SSB, irrespective of the outcome, cultivates resilience over time is a question of both theoretical and practical significance that this study seeks to address.

Despite the psychological weight of the SSB experience for hundreds of thousands of young Indians yearly, no published empirical research has examined achievement motivation or

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resilience specifically within this population, nor has the role of repeated board appearances in shaping these constructs been explored. Studies in educational, occupational and athletic contexts have demonstrated the significance of these constructs for persistence, adaptability, and goal-directed behaviour; however, the SSB candidate who routinely encounters high performance pressure, repeated evaluation, and the possibility of sustained rejection remains absent from the academic literature. The present study addresses these gaps through a quantitative comparative design, guided by the following objectives and hypotheses.

### *Objectives of the Study:*

1. To compare achievement motivation and psychological resilience between SSB-rejected and SSB-successful candidates.
2. To examine the relationship between achievement motivation and psychological resilience among SSB candidates.
3. To investigate whether number of SSB attempts is associated with achievement motivation and resilience within and across both groups.

### *Hypotheses:*

- **H1:** SSB-successful candidates will score significantly higher on achievement motivation than SSB-rejected candidates.
- **H2:** SSB-successful candidates will score significantly higher on psychological resilience than SSB-rejected candidates.
- **H3:** There will be a significant positive correlation between achievement motivation and psychological resilience among SSB candidates.
- **H4:** Number of SSB attempts will be significantly and positively correlated with psychological resilience among SSB candidates.
- **H5:** Number of SSB attempts will be significantly and positively correlated with achievement motivation among SSB candidates.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Achievement Motivation*

Since Atkinson's (1957) seminal expectancy-value model, which proposed that individuals are motivated to pursue tasks based on their expectation of success and the value they assign to that success, achievement motivation has been a central construct in psychological research. Building on this foundation, McClelland argued that individuals high in achievement motivation actively seek challenging tasks, demonstrate sustained effort in the face of hurdles and derive satisfaction from the process of striving itself rather than from external rewards alone. This disposition has since been linked to superior performance across a range of demanding and competitive context (McClelland, 1961; Elliot & McGregor, 2001).

Within the Indian context, Deo and Mohan (1985) developed a culturally validated conceptualisation of achievement motivation that identifies two functionally distinct dimensions: approach motivation (characterised by an active drive toward success and mastery) and avoidance motivation (driven by the fear of failure and a tendency to withdraw from evaluative situations). This two-dimensional framework is particularly relevant to competitive selection contexts, where candidates must sustain goal-directed effort across prolonged periods of uncertainty and potential failure. Research employing this framework has demonstrated that approach motivation is positively associated with persistence,

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resilience to failure, and continued engagement with challenging goals, while avoidance motivation is linked to task withdrawal, performance anxiety, and reduced long-term achievement (*Deo & Mohan, 1985*). Dweck's (2006) related work on implicit theories of intelligence further supports these findings, demonstrating that individuals who adopt a growth mindset — conceptually aligned with high approach motivation — are more likely to view setbacks as informative feedback and to sustain effort over time, even in the face of repeated difficulty.

### ***Psychological Resilience***

Psychological resilience has been defined as the capacity to overcome setbacks, adapt positively to significant challenge, and return to effective functioning following stress or failure (*Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Smith et al., 2008*). Critically, resilience is not characterised by an absence of distress or immunity to the emotional consequences of adversity; rather, it reflects a dynamic process of positive adaptation that enables individuals to maintain psychological equilibrium and continue functioning purposefully during hard times (*Luthar et al., 2000*). Resilient individuals are not those who do not struggle, but those who recover and research demonstrates that resilience is both developable and context-sensitive, shaped by individual, relational, and situational factors over time (*Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013*).

In competitive contexts, resilience has been shown to play a particularly protective role. Fletcher and Sarkar (2013), in a comprehensive review of resilience in elite sport, found that resilient athletes were better able to interpret pressure as a challenge rather than a threat, maintained higher levels of motivation following failure and demonstrated more effective coping strategies in high leverage situations. In occupational and military contexts, resilience has similarly been associated with sustained performance under pressure, reduced burnout, and greater psychological recovery following operational stress (*Bonanno, 2004*). Of particular relevance to the present study is the concept of adversarial growth, which proposes that facing repeated challenges can help individuals develop greater resilience through adaptation and learning (*Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004*). This theoretical position raises an important empirical question: whether candidates who face the SSB process across multiple attempts develop greater resilience than those who appear only once.

### ***The Relationship between Achievement Motivation and Resilience***

A growing body of research has examined the relationship between achievement motivation and resilience, highlighting their conceptual overlap and mutual reinforcement in demanding contexts. Individuals with high achievement motivation tend to interpret failure not as evidence of personal inadequacy but as a challenge to be overcome a cognitive appraisal pattern that is functionally aligned with the resilience process (*Dweck, 2006; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013*). Studies in educational and occupational settings have corroborated this relationship, finding that achievement-oriented individuals demonstrate greater adaptability, higher tolerance for ambiguity, and more sustained engagement with long-term goals following adversity (*Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Morgan, Fletcher, & Sarkar, 2013*). In the context of SSB preparation and repeated selection attempts, this relationship may be particularly pronounced — candidates who maintain strong achievement motivation across multiple board appearances may simultaneously develop the psychological bounce-back capacity that defines resilience.

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### *The SSB Context and the Need for the Present Study*

The Services Selection Board process occupies a unique position in the landscape of competitive selection in India. In spite of the psychological intensity of this experience which involves sustained preparation, performance under evaluative pressure, and the repeated management of success and failure, there are no published empirical study examining achievement motivation or resilience specifically within the SSB candidate population. The absence of such evidence represents a meaningful gap, particularly given the scale of SSB participation in India and the psychological significance of the selection experience for the hundreds of thousands of young aspirants who engage with it annually.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Research Design*

The present study employed a cross-sectional quantitative design to compare achievement motivation and psychological resilience between two independent groups of Services Selection Board (SSB) candidates: those who had been rejected by the board and those who had been recommended. A survey-based method was adopted using standardised, validated psychological instruments administered through an online platform.

### *Participants*

A total of 93 responses were received. Following data screening, 20 participants were excluded from the primary comparative analysis. These were candidates who had received an SSB recommendation but had not subsequently joined the armed forces due to reasons including merit list placement, medical grounds, or other administrative factors. As their selection outcome was neither a straightforward recommendation leading to service nor an outright non-recommendation, their inclusion in either group would have introduced interpretive ambiguity. Their descriptive data are reported separately. The final sample for analysis comprised 73 SSB candidates ( $n(\text{rejected}) = 43$ ;  $n(\text{successful}) = 30$ ).

Of the final sample, 44 participants were male (60.3%) and 29 were female (39.7%). Participants were drawn from across India and represented a range of age groups: candidates aged 17–21 years, 22–25 years, and 26 years and above, with the majority falling within the 22–25 years age range. The SSB-successful group comprised candidates either currently waiting for the joining letter ( $n = 23$ ) or serving as commissioned officers ( $n = 7$ ). Both subgroups were retained within the successful group as they shared the defining psychological outcome of interest: recommendation by the SSB board.

### *Sampling Method*

Purposive snowball sampling was employed to recruit participants. The survey was distributed through WhatsApp groups dedicated to SSB aspirants and defence preparation, SSB coaching centres, National Cadet Corps (NCC) networks, and social media platforms including Instagram. Given the specificity of the target population — individuals with direct personal experience of the SSB process — this approach was considered the most appropriate and feasible method for reaching both groups within the available timeframe.

### *Instruments*

Three instruments were used for data collection: a demographic information sheet and two standardised psychological scales.

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Demographic and SSB background sheet: This demographic sheet gathered information on participants' age range, gender, SSB outcome, total number of SSB attempts, service type (e.g., Indian Army, Indian Navy, Indian Airforce, Indian Coastguard), time elapsed since most recent SSB, NCC background, and a self-rated emotional impact score on a scale of 1 to 5.

Achievement Motivation Scale (AMS; Deo & Mohan, 1985). The AMS is a 50-item, Indian-validated measure of achievement motivation comprising two dimensions: approach motivation, reflecting the drive toward success and excellence, and avoidance motivation, reflecting the fear of failure and withdrawal from evaluative situations. Items are rated on a five-point scale ranging from Always, Frequently, Sometimes, Rarely, to Never. The scale has been widely used in Indian educational and competitive contexts and demonstrated strong internal consistency in the present sample (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .843$ ).

Brief Resilience Scale (BRS; Smith et al., 2008). The BRS is a 6-item measure of psychological resilience, assessing the ability to recover from stress and adversity. Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Items 2, 4, and 6 are reverse-scored prior to summing, yielding a total score ranging from 6 to 30, with higher scores indicating greater resilience. The BRS demonstrated acceptable internal consistency in the present sample (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .763$ ).

### ***Procedure***

Data were collected during May 2026 through an online survey administered via Google Forms. The survey comprised the demographic and SSB background sheet followed by the AMS and BRS in that order, and required approximately 12 to 15 minutes to complete. Prior to accessing the survey items, all participants were presented with an informed consent statement detailing the purpose of the study, the voluntary and anonymous nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Only participants who provided explicit consent proceeded to the survey. A debriefing statement including mental health helpline information was provided at the conclusion of the survey, in recognition of the potentially sensitive nature of questions relating to rejection and emotional impact.

### ***Data Analysis***

All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 27. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed to assess the internal consistency of both scales. Descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, and range were computed for all variables across the full sample and separately by group. Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine whether SSB-rejected and SSB-successful candidates differed significantly on achievement motivation and resilience total scores; Levene's test for equality of variances was examined prior to interpreting *t*-test results. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed to examine the relationships between achievement motivation, resilience, and number of SSB attempts across the full sample and within each group separately. The alpha level for statistical significance was set at  $p < .05$  for all analyses.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Indian Psychological Association (IPA). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior

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to data collection. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were explicitly informed that declining to participate or withdrawing at any point would have no consequence. No personally identifiable information including names, phone numbers, or email addresses was collected at any stage. A mental health support and helpline information sheet was provided to all participants at the conclusion of the survey as a debriefing and safeguarding measure.

### RESULTS

#### *Preliminary Analysis*

Prior to hypothesis testing, data were screened for missing values and response quality. No missing values were identified in the final analytic sample ( $N = 73$ ), and all cases were retained for analysis. Reliability analyses were subsequently conducted to assess the internal consistency of both scales within the present sample. The Achievement Motivation Scale (AMS; Deo & Mohan, 1985) demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .843$ ,  $N = 73$ , items = 50), and the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS; Smith et al., 2008) demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .763$ ,  $N = 73$ , items = 6). Both values exceeded the conventional threshold of  $\alpha = .70$  (Nunnally, 1978), supporting the reliability of both measures in the present sample.

Descriptive statistics for achievement motivation and resilience across the full sample and by group are presented in Table 1. Across the full sample ( $N = 73$ ), the mean AMS score was 148.71 ( $SD = 15.99$ , range = 100–188) and the mean BRS score was 23.12 ( $SD = 4.30$ , range = 13–30). Visual inspection of group means indicated that the SSB-rejected group reported a numerically higher mean AMS score (151.09) compared to the SSB-successful group (145.30), while BRS scores were near-identical across groups (23.00 vs. 23.30). Whether these observed differences were statistically significant was examined through hypothesis testing.

**Table No 1 Descriptive Statistics for Achievement Motivation and Resilience by Group**

Variable	Full Sample M (SD) N = 73	SSB Rejected M (SD) n = 43	SSB Successful M (SD) n = 30
Achievement Motivation (AMS)	148.71 (15.99)	151.09 (15.64)	145.30 (16.13)
Resilience (BRS)	23.12 (4.30)	23.00 (4.55)	23.30 (3.98)

*Note.* AMS = Achievement Motivation Scale (range: 50–250); BRS = Brief Resilience Scale (range: 6–30). M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

#### *Hypothesis Testing*

Hypotheses 1 and 2 predicted that SSB-successful candidates would score significantly higher than SSB-rejected candidates on achievement motivation and psychological resilience respectively. Independent samples  $t$ -tests were conducted to examine these predicted group differences. Levene's test for equality of variances was non-significant for both AMS,  $F(1, 71) = 0.04$ ,  $p = .846$ , and BRS,  $F(1, 71) = 2.79$ ,  $p = .099$ , indicating that equal variances could be assumed for both variables; the equal variances assumed rows were therefore interpreted.

Results did not support Hypothesis 1: no significant difference was found between SSB-rejected and SSB-successful candidates on achievement motivation,  $t(71) = 1.54$ ,  $p = 0.129$ ,  $d = .37$ . The null hypothesis of no group difference in achievement motivation could not be

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rejected. Although the rejected group reported a numerically higher mean AMS score than the successful group (151.09 vs. 145.30), this difference did not reach the threshold for statistical significance. The effect size was small-to-medium ( $d = .37$ ), which suggests a modest trend that may warrant examination in future research with a larger and more diverse sample.

Similarly, Hypothesis 2 was not supported: no significant difference was observed between groups on psychological resilience,  $t(71) = -0.29$ ,  $p = .771$ ,  $d = .07$ . The null hypothesis of no group difference in resilience could not be rejected. The near-identical mean BRS scores across rejected ( $M = 23.00$ ) and successful ( $M = 23.30$ ) candidates, combined with a negligible effect size ( $d = .07$ ), indicate that SSB selection outcome is not associated with meaningful differences in resilience between the two groups. Results of the  $t$ -tests are presented in Table 2.

**Table No 2 Independent Samples  $t$ -test Results for Achievement Motivation and Resilience**

Variable	Rejected M (SD)	Successful M (SD)	t	df	p	Cohen's d
AMS Total	151.09 (15.64)	145.30 (16.13)	1.54	71	.129	.37
BRS Total	23.00 (4.55)	23.30 (3.98)	-0.29	71	.771	.07

*Note.* AMS = Achievement Motivation Scale total score; BRS = Brief Resilience Scale total score. Cohen's  $d$  was computed as the mean difference divided by the pooled standard deviation. Neither result reached statistical significance at  $p < .05$ . Two-tailed tests reported throughout.

### Correlational Analyses

Hypothesis 3 predicted a significant positive correlation between achievement motivation and resilience across the full sample. Pearson correlation analysis supported this hypothesis: a statistically significant positive relationship was observed between AMS and BRS total scores,  $r(71) = .245$ ,  $p = .037$ , indicating that candidates with higher achievement motivation also tended to report higher levels of psychological resilience. This association was of small-to-medium magnitude.

Hypothesis 4 predicted a significant positive correlation between number of SSB attempts and resilience. This hypothesis was supported: a statistically significant positive correlation was found between number of attempts and BRS total scores across the full sample,  $r(71) = .272$ ,  $p = .020$ , indicating that candidates who had appeared for the SSB a greater number of times reported higher resilience overall. Hypothesis 5, which predicted a significant positive relationship between number of attempts and achievement motivation, was not supported: the observed correlation was negligible and non-significant,  $r(71) = -.005$ ,  $p = .970$ ; the null hypothesis of no relationship between attempts and motivation could not be rejected. Full correlation results for the complete sample are presented in Table 3.

**Table No 3 Pearson Correlation Matrix for Achievement Motivation, Resilience, and Number of Attempts (Full Sample,  $N = 73$ )**

Variable	1	2	3
1. Achievement Motivation (AMS)	—		
2. Resilience (BRS)	.245*	—	
3. Number of Attempts	-.005	.272*	—

*Note.* \*  $p < .05$  (two-tailed).

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Within-group Pearson correlation analyses were conducted separately for SSB-rejected and SSB-successful candidates to examine whether the relationship between number of attempts and resilience differed as a function of group membership. Results are summarised in Table 4.

Within the SSB-rejected group ( $n = 43$ ), a significant positive correlation was observed between AMS and BRS total scores,  $r(41) = .365$ ,  $p = .016$ , indicating that among candidates who were not recommended, those with higher achievement motivation also reported greater psychological resilience. Number of attempts was not significantly associated with either AMS,  $r(41) = .153$ ,  $p = .327$ , or BRS,  $r(41) = .171$ ,  $p = .272$ , within this group; the null hypotheses of no relationship were retained for both.

Within the SSB-successful group ( $n = 30$ ), a significant strong positive correlation was found between number of SSB attempts and resilience,  $r(28) = .454$ ,  $p = .012$ , indicating that successful candidates who had required more attempts before receiving a recommendation demonstrated substantially higher resilience scores. This represents the strongest correlation observed in the present study. No significant associations were found between number of attempts and AMS,  $r(28) = -.045$ ,  $p = .811$ , or between AMS and BRS,  $r(28) = .081$ ,  $p = .671$ , within the successful group.

**Table No 4 Within-Group Pearson Correlations between Number of Attempts, Achievement Motivation, and Resilience**

Correlation Pair	SSB Rejected (n = 43)		SSB Successful (n = 30)		Significant?
	r	p	r	p	
AMS × BRS	.365	.016	.081	.671	Rejected only*
Attempts × AMS	.153	.327	-.045	.811	Neither
Attempts × BRS	.171	.272	.454	.012	Successful only*

Note. AMS = Achievement Motivation Scale; BRS = Brief Resilience Scale. \*  $p < .05$  (two-tailed).

### Summary of Hypothesis Outcomes

Table 5 presents a summary of hypothesis outcomes. Of the five hypotheses tested, two were supported (H3 and H4) and three were not supported (H1, H2, and H5). Notably, while group differences in motivation and resilience were not statistically significant, meaningful correlational patterns emerged, particularly the strong positive association between number of SSB attempts and resilience among successful candidates ( $r = .454$ ,  $p = .012$ ) and the significant motivation–resilience link among rejected candidates ( $r = .365$ ,  $p = .016$ ). These findings are discussed in the following section.

**Table No 5 Summary of Hypothesis Outcomes**

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	Successful candidates score higher on achievement motivation	Not Supported ( $p = .129$ )
H2	Successful candidates score higher on resilience	Not Supported ( $p = .771$ )
H3	Achievement motivation positively correlates with resilience	Supported* $r = .245$ , $p = .037$
H4	Number of attempts positively correlates with resilience	Supported* $r = .272$ , $p = .020$
H5	Number of attempts positively correlates with motivation	Not Supported ( $p = .970$ )

Note. \*  $p < .05$ .

## DISCUSSION

The present study investigated achievement motivation and psychological resilience among SSB candidates, comparing those who had been rejected by the board with those who had been recommended, and examining the role of number of SSB attempts across both groups. Five hypotheses were tested. Two were supported — those pertaining to the positive relationship between achievement motivation and resilience (H3) and between number of attempts and resilience (H4) — and three were not supported. The discussion that follows addresses and situates them within existing theoretical and empirical literature and considers their practical implications for candidates, mentors, and the broader defence selection ecosystem.

### *Absence of Group Differences in Motivation and Resilience*

The absence of significant group differences in achievement motivation and resilience between SSB-rejected and SSB-successful candidates is perhaps the most striking and theoretically meaningful finding of this study. It was anticipated, based on prior research linking positive selection outcomes to higher motivational and psychological functioning, that recommended candidates would score significantly higher on both. The data did not support this prediction. Both groups demonstrated comparable levels of achievement motivation and resilience, irrespective of the SSB outcome.

This finding challenges the assumption that selection failure is associated with diminished psychological functioning. Rather, it suggests that SSB candidates as a population may be epitomised by a significantly high and relatively stable level of achievement motivation and resilience that is not easily disrupted by the outcome of a single or even repeated selection event. This interpretation is consistent with Dweck's (2006) growth mindset framework, which states that individuals who orient themselves toward achievement tend to maintain motivational investment in their goals even following setbacks. The comparably high AMS scores across both groups support the view that SSB candidates, by virtue of their sustained engagement with the selection process, may already represent a motivationally selected sample.

The small-to-medium effect size for achievement motivation (Cohen's  $d = .37$ ), while not reaching statistical significance in the present sample, is worthy of note. The direction of this effect (with rejected candidates scoring numerically higher than successful ones) is counterintuitive and merits cautious interpretation. One possible explanation is that candidates who continue to engage with the SSB process following rejection may sustain or even intensify their achievement motivation as part of a goal-reaffirmation process (Markus & Nurius, 1986), whereas candidates who have been recommended may experience a partial reduction in motivational urgency following the attainment of their primary goal. This interpretation requires empirical examination in future research with larger and more representative samples.

### *The Relationship between Achievement Motivation and Resilience*

Hypothesis 3 — predicting a significant positive relationship between achievement motivation and resilience across the full sample was supported. This finding is consistent with a body of literature depicting the conceptual and empirical overlap between these two constructs in competitive contexts. Individuals characterised by high achievement motivation tend to interpret adversity as a challenge to be overcome rather than a threat to be avoided (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Elliot & McGregor, 2001). In the SSB context, this

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relationship is particularly meaningful: candidates who maintain a strong drive toward excellence and goal attainment may simultaneously draw on those motivational resources to recover from the emotional impact of rejection and continue participating in the selection process.

Notably, this motivation–resilience relationship was significant within the SSB-rejected group but not within the successful group. This differential pattern suggests that achievement motivation may function as a particularly important psychological resource for candidates facing rejection, serving as a buffer that supports resilient responding in the context of failure. Among successful candidates, the attainment of the goal itself may provide an alternative source of psychological equilibrium, reducing the degree to which resilience depends on motivational drive. This interpretation is speculative but theoretically coherent, and offers a promising direction for future research examining the mechanisms through which motivation and resilience interact across different outcome contexts.

### ***Number of Attempts as a Predictor of Resilience***

The most compelling finding of the present study is the significant positive association between number of SSB attempts and psychological resilience, both across the full sample and most strikingly, within the SSB-successful group. This provides empirical support for the theoretical proposition that exposure to repeated, manageable adversity may strengthen resilience over time through a process of progressive psychological adaptation (*Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004*). In other words, it is not the outcome of SSB participation (being recommended or rejected) but the cumulative experience of engaging with the process across multiple attempts that is most strongly associated with resilience.

Among successful candidates specifically, the strength of the attempts–resilience correlation suggests that candidates who required multiple attempts before receiving a recommendation demonstrate substantially greater resilience than those who were recommended on their first appearance. This finding challenges the cultural tendency to privilege first-attempt success as the ideal outcome, suggesting instead that the journey through repeated SSB engagement may itself constitute a developmental experience that boosts the psychological strength. This is broadly consistent with adversarial growth theory (*Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004*) and with research in elite sport demonstrating that the path to high-level achievement, rather than the achievement itself, is the primary site of resilience development (*Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Morgan, Fletcher, & Sarkar, 2013*).

This effect not being replicated within the rejected group warrants careful interpretation. One possibility is that for candidates who continue to face rejection across multiple attempts, the resilience-building potential of repeated SSB engagement may be attenuated by the absence of eventual goal attainment — a moderating role of success that the present study was not designed to test directly. Alternatively, the smaller sample size may have limited statistical power to detect a relationship of similar magnitude. Future research employing larger samples and longitudinal designs would be well-positioned to disentangle these possibilities.

### ***Number of Attempts and Achievement Motivation***

Hypothesis 5 — predicting a positive relationship between number of SSB attempts and achievement motivation was not supported. The near-zero correlation across the full sample, replicated in both groups individually, suggests that the number of times a candidate appears

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for the SSB bears no meaningful relationship to their level of achievement motivation. This finding may reflect the fundamentally stable nature of achievement motivation as a dispositional trait, one that does not fluctuate substantially as a function of the number of selection attempts undertaken (*McClelland, 1961*). These interpretations, while theoretically plausible, remain speculative in the absence of longitudinal data.

### ***Practical Implications***

The findings of this study have several meaningful implications for candidates, mentors, coaching centres, and those involved in supporting defence aspirants through the SSB journey. First, the absence of significant differences in motivation and resilience between rejected and successful candidates provides empirical validation for the psychological robustness of the SSB candidate population as a whole (a finding that may offer reassurance to those who fear that rejection symbolises a fundamental psychological deficit). SSB rejection does not appear to be associated with lower motivation or resilience; candidates who are not recommended are psychologically comparable, on these dimensions, to those who are.

Second, and perhaps most practically significant, the strong positive association between number of attempts and resilience among successful candidates furnishes data-backed support for encouraging candidates to persist through repeated attempts. Mentors and coaching centres can draw on these findings to reinterpret repeated SSB appearance not as a symbol of failure but as a developmental experience that builds psychological strength — a reframing that may itself support the motivational and emotional wellbeing of candidates navigating multiple rejection. The present findings suggest that the road to recommendation, including its setbacks, may be precisely what prepares candidates psychologically for the demands of commissioned service.

Third, the finding that achievement motivation and resilience are significantly linked, particularly among rejected candidates, suggests that interventions aimed at sustaining achievement motivation following rejection may simultaneously support resilient responding. Post-rejection psychological support programmes, psychoeducational resources, and mentoring frameworks that target motivational reaffirmation and goal re-orientation may therefore have a dual benefit: supporting both continued aspiration toward defence service and the psychological wellbeing of candidates in the aftermath of rejection. The current absence of any formal psychological support structure for SSB-rejected candidates represents a meaningful gap that these findings help to substantiate.

The scalability of such support is a critical consideration given the number of candidates who face SSB rejection annually. Digital mental health platforms and AI-assisted psychoeducational tools offer a promising avenue for providing motivational and resilience-focused support to SSB-rejected candidates at scale, complementing rather than replacing human intervention.

### ***Limitations***

First, the specialised niche and relatively difficult-to-access nature of the target population, including SSB-recommended candidates and defence personnel, posed challenges for participant recruitment. As a result, the sample size, although adequate for the analyses conducted, remained relatively modest, particularly within the successful subgroup ( $n = 30$ ). This may have reduced statistical power to detect smaller effects and limits the extent to

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which the findings can be generalised to the broader population of SSB candidates. Accordingly, the results should be interpreted with appropriate caution and verified through future studies employing larger samples. Second, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference: while number of attempts was associated with resilience, the direction of this relationship cannot be established from the present data. It is possible, for example, that candidates with pre-existing higher resilience are more likely to persist through multiple attempts, rather than resilience being built through repeated attempts itself. Third, the SSB-successful group comprised candidates at different stages of their service journey (those currently in training and those already commissioned) which may introduce some heterogeneity within the group.

### *Directions for Future Research*

The present study opens several doors for future research. A longitudinal design tracking candidates across multiple SSB attempts would allow to examine causal relationships between attempt number, motivation, and resilience better and would permit direct assessment of whether resilience is built through the experience of repeated attempts or whether pre-existing resilience predicts persistence. Future research might also examine the impact of SSB outcomes on the psychological wellbeing of the candidates including purpose in life, self-acceptance, and personal growth. Additionally, qualitative investigation of the subjective experience of SSB rejection and repeated attempts would enrich the quantitative findings reported here. Further, the development and evaluation of structured post-rejection support interventions grounded in the present findings represents a practically significant research priority. The potential role of digital mental health platforms in delivering scalable post-rejection support is inevitable in the contemporary times. Future research should examine whether AI-assisted psychoeducational interventions designed around the constructs of achievement motivation and resilience can effectively support SSB-rejected candidates in maintaining psychological wellbeing and goal engagement following rejection. The integration of evidence-based content within accessible digital platforms may offer a feasible and scalable complement to traditional mentoring and counselling, particularly in a context where formal psychological support for SSB candidates is currently absent.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study set out to examine two questions - whether SSB selection outcome is associated with differences in achievement motivation and resilience among SSB candidates and whether the number of attempts have an influence on these constructs. Despite its theoretical and practical significance, this has been an area which is largely unexamined in the research domain. The central finding is both clear and counterintuitive: SSB outcome alone does not determine the psychological strength of candidates. Rejected and successful candidates are comparable in their levels of achievement motivation and resilience, suggesting that the SSB candidate population as a whole is characterised by a robustness that persists across selection outcomes. What does matter is the number of times a candidate engages with the SSB process. Greater persistence through repeated attempts is associated with higher resilience, an effect that is particularly pronounced among those who eventually receive a recommendation. Achievement motivation and resilience move together, especially among those who face rejection, pointing to the protective role of motivational commitment in the aftermath of rejection.

These findings carry a message that extends beyond the SSB context: Repeated engagement with the SSB process is associated with higher resilience. For the hundreds of thousands of

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defence aspirants who engage with the SSB process annually — many of whom will face rejection — this study offers something the academic literature has not previously provided: empirical evidence that their effort is not without psychological consequence, and that the road they travel, regardless of where it ends, leaves them stronger. Future research should build on these foundations to develop the evidence base for candidate support, post-rejection intervention, and the broader psychology of high-stakes selection in India.

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***Conflict of Interest***

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