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## New challenge for ex-major - From army to London School of Economics

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Gopal Mitra. A Telegraph picture

**Siliguri, Nov. 8:** Leading a company of 200 soldiers against the Pakistanis in the Kargil War and winning the Sena Medal for counter-insurgency operations in the Northeast: these can be the dreams of any small-town boy wanting to make it big in the army.

Thirty-five-year-old Gopal Mitra of Hakimpara was no exception, until the former major discovered more “exciting” things in life than gunshots and battle-cries. But that was not before he lost his sight to an explosion during a search-and-destroy sanitisation operation at Kupwara (Kashmir) after Operation Vijay in April 2000.

In a complete shift from his childhood dreams, Mitra is now all set to head the South-Asia operations of a London-headquartered organisation working for disabled persons. The programmes are held in 51 countries. On November 15, he will join as manager, inclusive education (or disability education), at the organisation’s South Asia regional office in Bangalore. “It will be a new experience and I can’t wait to join,” he said.

Initially, National Institute for Visually Handicapped, Dehra Dun, — where Mitra went for a three-month course — refused to recognise his BCom degree and the course at Indian Military Academy. The only options they offered him were basket making and operating telephones. “The army, according to its new recruitment rules concerning battle casualties, offered to rehabilitate me in the administrative department,” Mitra said. “But I wanted to quit the army because, for me, that career meant fighting battles and being at the spot of action. Making baskets and taking calls was something I had never imagined I would do.”

But a chance encounter with **Srirupa Sengupta, a former student of Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai,** and a Siliguri girl who later became his wife in 2003, changed all that.

The same year he joined **TISS for an MA course in social welfare administration** and the army funded his entire course-fee. Mitra, who was just an above-average student in school, came second in the country’s premier institute.

His next stop was London School of Economics (LSE). “After the MA result, a teacher asked me to apply at LSE,” he said. “I applied for MSc in development management and got selected. The LSE funded the entire course fee, which was around Rs 22 lakh. Other expenses were taken care of by the **TISS** and the army.” He quit the army last year for the post-graduation course in London.

“I had options to work in Europe and America, but I wanted to work in developing countries,” Mitra said. Homeland came as a natural choice.

It is a coincidence that his father-in-law J.K. Sengupta is also a former soldier blinded in the 1965 Indo-Pak war.