

Inter Services Ethos

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The day I retired, 30 November 1987, my successor as Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee, in a letter complimented me on institutionalising the spirit of Tri-Shakti. He went on to add that among a host of other things, this had been my outstanding contribution to the Armed Forces. As I have said in many forums since, my dear departed friend late Air Chief Marshal Lakshman Katre (who died in office on 1 July 1985 after only 10 months as Chief of the Air staff), had set the ball rolling for the Tri-Shakti spirit, and truly that compliment should go to him. Why do I say this?

In the post Independence era, a career in the Armed Forces has not been considered the preferred choice by some of the nation's best talent. It was felt that the lack of promotion prospects compared to that in the civil services was one of the main reasons for this; hence the cadre reviews of 1980 and 1984. I always believed that cadre reviews devalued rank, and a surer way was to persuade the powers that be to de-link pay from rank, and have a running pay band so that the officer corps had something to look forward to with increasing years of service, even when limited vacancies did not permit many promotions. Fortunately, the Fourth Pay Commission was constituted in mid 1984, and all Government services were asked to send their recommendations to the Pay Commission. The Army and the Navy made common cause and asked for a running pay band. When Baba (as Air Chief Marshal Katre was affectionately known) became the Air Chief on 4 September 1984, I explained to him that unless the Air Force made common cause with the other two Services, we would all lose out. The big man that he was, he immediately sent for his Air Officers Commanding in Chiefs and explained why it was necessary to withdraw the Air Force Memorandum and make common cause for the greater good of all the three Services. Most readers may

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not know that the scales of pay enjoyed by the Flying Branch of the Air Force were higher than their Ground Duty colleagues, and of the Army or the Navy. The Flying Branches stood to lose with the running pay band, which would be common to all.

The first lesson of a good inter Service ethos is that the greater good of the many, must take precedence over the interests of the few. Happily for the Armed Forces, we got the running pay band. A passed over Major would get the pay scale of Rs 5,700 in the 25th year of service, when the starting pay for a Joint Secretary was only Rs 5,900. Likewise, a Brigadier on promotion would get Rs 6,150 or Rs 6,300 depending on his years of commissioned service.

Putting the clock back a bit to when I was Flag Lieutenant with the then Chief of the Naval Staff (CNS), Vice Admiral Cartill, I would carry the files when CNS went to meet the Defence Secretary to discuss some problem. After a couple of such visits, I asked CNS why he did not invite the Defence Secretary to his office now and again, when the need arose, as he was senior in the warrant of precedence? I have never forgotten his reply. "Flags", he said, "I see my Army and Air Force colleagues going to see the Defence Secretary. I am British. I can sit in my office, but the Navy's cause will suffer." I realised then that Chiefs go to the Defence Secretary's office to ensure their Service gets its share of the Defence budget cake.

Lesson number 2 is that the Chiefs must stand solidly united, and do this for the sake of their Services, as we were able to do in the mid 1980s. I had my Vice Chief deal with the Defence Secretary. I interacted mostly at the political level. My colleagues soon followed suit. In the early 1980s, I have known instances when Chiefs openly squabbled in the Defence Secretary's office. This was totally avoided, and such differences as we three had were discussed frankly, during the second half of the Chiefs of Staff meeting each week, always held in my office, without the staff or outsiders being present. No minutes were kept, nor was an agenda planned. It was essentially, a get-together to iron out differences.

Till 1984, each Service had its Commanders and Senior Officers conference by itself. I thought it odd that while senior civil servants were invited by individual Services, the other two Chiefs were not invited. For the first time in 1985, I invited the Army and Air Chiefs when the Prime Minister (PM) inaugurated the Naval Conference. The next year, we had a combined inaugural for all three Services by the PM. Even the customary meal in Navy House, with the PM and his lady, included senior officers of all three Services with their wives. All this could not have happened without the active cooperation of my Army and Air Force colleagues.

Large scale exercises involving all three Services were conducted each year with a Unified Commander. In 1985, the Navy provided the commander because the setting was largely over ocean spaces. In the following year, it was the Army, with actual para-drops and so on. In 1987, the Air Force provided the Unified Command. The exercise orders were written by the newly created Defence Planning Staff, which reported to the Chiefs of Staff Committee. We three Chiefs went together everywhere - for briefings, de-briefs and actual observation of the exercises.

The Defence Planning Staff did a great job in improving the inter Service ethos. Led by Lieutenant General BC Nanda, and then Air Marshal PK Dey, they brought about true joint Service thinking. No Service could be accused of fighting for its turf. The task was assigned to whoever was best suited to handle the job, with real economy of effort and resources. The briefing for Air Force participation in the exercises was done by the Army Deputy in the Defence Planning Staff, for the Army part by a Navy man, and so on. They wore their individual Service uniform, but their thinking became truly tri-Service. I dreamt that this ethos would grow and provide the joint Services Headquarters staff to assist a Chief of Defence Staff, whenever one was appointed. Two decades on, that dream has remained just that — a dream only. Why is this so?

The main reason for this is our less than adequate higher defence apparatus, which remains headless without a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). The reorganisation of the Defence Ministry (Arun Singh Task Force), which was approved by the Group of

Ministers and subsequently by the Cabinet has not been seen to its logical conclusion. A huge Integrated Staff has been put together, with many Flag rank appointments at the top. It is like a hockey team without a Captain! Lieutenant General PS Joshi, the former Chief of Integrated Defence Staff admitted publicly that the new organisation had been able to do no more than the old Defence Planning Staff of the mid 1980s. In a three member Chiefs of Staff Committee, if one of them does not share the concept of jointmanship wholeheartedly, you have a no-win situation. In a four member team, with a CDS being more equal among equals, the lone dissenter can be persuaded, and if need be, over ruled. In the mid 1980s, all three gentlemen at the top happened to share the commitment to jointmanship. A two day cruise, with our spouses in a naval tanker from Port Blair to Indira Point and back in 1985, and a similar one to Lakshwadeeps the following year, did much to foster the spirit.

Some time in 1987, our first tri-Service sailing expedition, which circumnavigated the globe, returned. In my capacity as President of the Yachting Association of India (YAI), a reception was held for these outstanding young people in Kotah House. As is natural, at the end of the evening, the sailors started singing. After regaling the audience with typical ditties, there was a chorus demanding a song from the Chiefs. The three of us complied, singing a popular tune. Everyone seemed delighted except a young Commander, who had a worried look. "Sir, what will the Government think", he said, as we got ready to leave, "What will the Government think if they come to know that the three Chiefs have been singing together!" I turned around and told him, "If the Government has any sense, they will be happy that the Chiefs are singing together, not squabbling among themselves."

The single most important rationale for a good Tri-Shakti spirit is this bonding. If you cultivate and nurture it, the entire uniformed fraternity comes out winners. If you do not, and waste energy and resources in inter Service turf war (often overt, and generally covert), the only winners are the civil services who have no accountability when the chips are down. It is always the Services who pay the price, calling for the supreme sacrifice from our brave young officers and jawans.