

An Opinion Piece

DOES THE AIR FORCE HARBOUR AN ANTI-INTELLECTUAL BIAS?

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For a long time a question has lurked in the shadows with no one willing to articulate it openly for a variety of reasons—Is there an anti-intellectual bias in the Air Force?

The answer to the question is complex and vexed, since it would impinge not only on the legacy policies and decisions that have brought the Service to its current juncture but also on the prevailing personnel and promotion policies. Therefore, this opinion piece is not about pointing a finger, but about analysing the question posed as its title and attempting to arrive at some logical conclusions. Further, it also does not claim to providing any recommendations to remedy the situation, if it requires such actions to better the Air Force.

There are two separate factors that need to be viewed individually and then in a combined manner to understand the place of education within the Air Force—one, a line that traces the Professional Military Education (PME) as laid down within the career progression of an individual; and two, the concept of an individual undertaking education outside the ambit of PME, in his own time and volition. Influencing both these factors, much like an overarching umbrella, are some in-built character traits of the Air Force that have not altered for a long time, other than superficially. Training programs are drawn from past experiences and prepares individuals to deal with known situations. Education prepares the individual for complex strategic situations when the limited knowledge gained through training falters or is found to be inadequate. In essence, training is built on ‘telling’ the individual the correct way to address an issue whereas education goes beyond training by supporting and encouraging a questioning mindset in order to arrive at the right solution.

So what are the major characteristics that mould the Air Force to what it is today?

Tactical Excellence and Strategic Leadership

First and foremost is its senior leadership, which is predominated by the ‘war fighters’, since they are the ones who got out to tangle with the enemy and risk death or injury. That is the norm in most Air Forces of calibre. The fundamental reason for this situation is the question of the moral right to command—a completely different topic that needs a separate debate. Air forces by their very basic attribute of being an offensive force are naturally action oriented. It is no surprise that the tactical and operational leadership cadre of such a force invariably see themselves as people (men and women) of action. As they move up the chain of command to the strategic level, they continue to cherish their own images of being ‘action-oriented’ in the mistaken belief that their tactical expertise is what makes them commanders. The image of an action-oriented strategic commander also smooths over the inadequacy in such commanders to think strategically, since they establish themselves in the ‘comfort zone’ of tactical thinking. This is the reason why, at the strategic level of command, the leadership continue to extoll his/her expertise at the tactical level—some going as far as to take credit for tactical innovations done in the field.

There is no iota of doubt that today the Indian Air Force (IAF) is a tactically superior force. The dichotomy rests on the fact that more than half its assets are meant for strategic utilisation. While ‘surgical strikes’ are great as a part of deterrence as well as for morale-boosting chest-thumping, questions regarding its real effectiveness against a determined, well-funded and State supported terrorist organisation need to be asked. Do, even multiples of such strikes, really deter the adversary? An honest answer would be a resounding NO.

By continuing to support a Pakistan-focused security strategy, from which other war plans emanate, the IAF has willingly arrogated to itself a tactical role, relegating the strategic impact of air power to the background. In a completely unbiased assessment, the broader national security apparatus is more than happy to accept this situation, since there is still a lingering ‘fear’ that the strategic use of air power would escalate a deteriorating situation. Not only was this clearly visible in the ‘swept-under-the-carpet’ debacle of 1962, but even during the 1999 Kargil Conflict. The different line of thinking between ‘strategic’ and ‘tactical’ must be clearly understood and articulated. Tactical application of air power should cumulatively project strategic effects and benefits. At the very basic level, all missions are essentially tactical in nature, but the power projection must conflate between tactical and strategic, while drawing the clear line of connection between tactical action and strategic effect. Of course the deeper challenge is for air power to derive tactical missions from strategic planning, a complex undertaking at the best of times. Sadly, the Air Force lacks the intellectual rigour to emphasise the advantages of the strategic use of air power—under these circumstances, by a natural calculus, air power and the Air Force remain purely tactical assets. How is this dichotomy—an Air Force stuck on a tactical rail track, but with great strategic assets—to be redressed in order to make the Air Force take its rightful place as a clearly strategic power projection tool in the national security equation? The answer, perhaps, lies in examining the intellectual ability, or otherwise, of the Air Force and the underpinning factors that make it so.

Professional Military Education

Professional Military Education (PME) has lately become a fad, to be talked about, discussed and even thrown into the conversation at the appropriate time. However, PME in the Air Force means the courses that a person could complete within the military education and training system and does not include education obtained outside the ring of military professional schools. For far too long the professional schools have been considered boxes to be ticked. High academic performance in these institutions, while not considered a discriminator for promotion, is most definitely not given extra consideration for promotion or postings. For example, being rated as a potential Directing Staff (DS) in the Defence Services Staff Course does not carry any extra points for promotion. In fact a posting as a DS to the College may even be viewed as detrimental to normal promotional aspects, in some cases.

The situation in higher colleges is even worse. The Air Force typically sends officers who have already been passed over for promotion, or are seen to have limited promotional prospects, as instructors to these institutions of higher learning. This step-child like treatment of these institutions not only creates a perception of a second-class status for the institution and the education it propounds, but also denigrates the importance of education within the ranks. The better performing officers are kept in the field, while they are permitted to check the appropriate boxes necessary to become eligible for promotion. An attitudinal change is required at all levels of policy making to gradually change the perception vis-à-vis educational institutions. A tenure as

instructor at these institutions must be rewarded by assured promotions to the next rank, not despite the tenure, but because of it.

(For an in-depth analysis of professional mastery and education, with special emphasis on air power, read Sanu Kainikara: *Professional Mastery and Air Power Education*, Working Paper 33 at the Air Power Development Centre, available on-line at <https://airpower.airforce.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-03/WP33-Professional-Mastery-and-Air-Power-Education.pdf>)

There is a distinct difference between PME and pure training. Many senior officers pay lip service for the need for education, while overtly demanding that the educational institution ‘train’ the officers of course. At times this demand is couched under the pretext that PME should be ‘practical’ to be of any use for the Service. This approach to education completely denies the opportunity for officers to think ‘outside the box’—a prerequisite to outthink an adversary as a prelude to out-fight him/her, at all levels of war from the tactical to the strategic. Thinking outside the box is what made the famous ‘40-second Boyd’ espouse the Energy-Manoeuvrability Theory in the early 1960s and subsequently the OODA Loop and John Warden and his Checkmate Team to conceive Operation Desert Storm in 1991.

The fact that a tenure as an instructor in a training institution, for example as a Qualified Flying Instructor, is definitely career enhancing whereas a tenure as a DS in Staff College or the College of Defence Management does not provide any ‘step-up’ is indicative of the relative importance that the organisation places on training and education. Senior officers also tend to play down their own Staff College experiences by joking that they ‘did nothing’ for a year. What they mean by this is that the course did not add anything to enhance their tactical competence.

Intellect and Intellectuals

The Air Force values intellect—the faculty of reasoning, knowing and thinking as distinct from feeling. An intellectual is a person who is able to bring into action intellect or higher mental capacities. In a skewed manner of understanding the connection between the two, the Air Force is wary of intellectuals. While intellect is mostly appreciated, intellectuals, who can often offer an alternate solution through higher level lateral thinking supported by researched knowledge acquired and retained by the individual, normally face resentment and suspicion regarding the manner in which the mind of a person considered an ‘intellectual’ functions. This bias tends to minimise the value added by such a person.

The bias against intellectuals is further emphasised by the policies of a stultified personnel bureaucracy that requires officers to successfully navigate a series of tactically oriented appointments to remain competitive for promotion. The result is that at the earliest stage of select promotions, tactical expertise is rewarded, leaving behind the best strategic minds. The Indian military, along with the Air Force, ensures that all officers attain a minimum undergraduate degree from a reputed university before being commissioned. This is done to ensure that each officer has a firm stepping-stone for continued future academic growth. The paradox, however, is that the Air Force frowns on serving officers devoting time to pursue post-graduate or doctoral studies. This disdain for higher studies is particularly visible when the person concerned is an ‘operator’.

A lifelong commitment to learning and education is somehow considered anathema to excelling in operational activities, the here and now of active service at the tactical level. In the Air Force, tactical excellence compensates for lack of strategic acumen up to the rank of Group Captain (and field command postings as Air Commodores). The lack of strategic understanding of the security

challenges that would have to be addressed is compounded by the condescending attitude adopted by the ‘tactically superior’ officers towards good staff work and strategic considerations, often laughing off these requirements. To state it succinctly, the Air Force harbours an inherent suspicion of someone who spends his own time attempting to better his strategic understanding of issues through intellectual pursuits.

In today’s Information Age, it would not be wrong to assume that the anti-intellectual bias would be fading. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case. The belief that an intellectual would automatically have below par tactical skills, and therefore would not be able to fight or lead, seems ingrained in the Service.

The Tension between the Active and the Contemplative Self

It is not uncommon to notice that in most individuals there is a visible tension between the active and contemplative self. The profession of pilots is such that when unforeseen time-critical emergencies crop up, there is no time to think and act. Therefore, as a by product of this essential requirement, imaginative reflection is actively discouraged by placing that activity as going against the grain of men of action. While men of action are the backbone of a tactical air force, at the policy-making levels of two- and three-star ranks, where education-backed thought process is of the essence, men of action are superfluous. Arguably there would be the need for a few men of action at the higher levels of command, but these positions would be few and far in between.

Therein lies a dichotomy. Since the Air Force is almost completely reliant on men of action for its tactical excellence—which translates to operational success—they are the ones who tend to be picked to move into the higher levels of command through a process of promotional policies weighed fully towards tactical excellence. The Air Force therefore gets straddled by a whole plethora of action-oriented senior officers, who are then placed in inappropriate positions; square pegs bashed into round holes. Where intellectual rigour is critical to individual performance, and in the long term, to the betterment and increased efficiency of the force as a whole, it is seen that intellectually superior officers of potential for senior command roles have already been eliminated in earlier promotion boards. In providing the ‘pool’ of senior officers from which to draw upon for the next rank, career broadening is often seen to be done best by placing officers into managerial posts in areas that require only marginal flying experience or knowledge. A classic example of such appointments is the placement of an officer with nothing more to offer than several thousand tactical flying hours in charge of running a large materiel purchase that commits a fair slice of the nation’s GDP.

A formulaic promotion system, which is dogmatic in its insistence of promoting men of action deprives the Air Force of the intellectual ‘horsepower’ necessary to make meaningful changes to higher level policy. An intellectually deprived force will never be able to dovetail effectively with the Grand Strategy of the nation and is certain to fall short at the most critical circumstances. This challenge is further accentuated by many operators—the men of action—in tactically excellent air forces disguising their intellectual propensities in order to ‘fit in’. They actively suppress the intellectual side of their personality. By the time they reach the levels of command where intellectual adroitness would be an asset, they find that they have not developed that part of their personality sufficiently. The end result is that the force does not have a critical cadre of officers with sufficiently developed intellect to do the heavy lifting needed to establish it as a strategic element of national power capable of contributing directly to national security by dovetailing into the Grand Strategy.

The creation of knowledge and its optimised utilisation towards achieving the strategic objectives laid out for the force is the baseline requirement for all credible air forces. By virtue of a somewhat skewed training and education system, it is seen that an individual adept at one may not be good at the other. The education system needs to be balanced to ensure an appropriate combination of the two, giving equal credence to both the requirements, to create an officer cadre that has equal measure of both these critical capabilities embedded in it. This would seem to be the only way forward to create an agile, evolutionary and winning force.

Conclusion – ‘They will remain behind’

There is irrefutable proof that a fighting force of calibre needs a senior leadership team that has an appropriate balance of strategic and operational thinkers. The appropriateness of the balance must be determined through a continuous shift in favour of strategic thinkers as the seniority of the leadership increases. Of course, at the highest levels there will still need to be operationally adept commanders to guide the force through turbulent operations and campaigns. However, their numbers are fewer compared to the numbers required for strategic thinkers and decision-makers. The need of the hour is a conscious overhaul of the promotion system in the personnel branch. An overhaul that would provide equal importance and weightage for promotion to the ‘academic type’ appointments equal to the field appointments. An alternative would be to create a separate career path for such strategic thinkers at the cusp of their becoming star-ranked officers.

Even a cursory analysis demonstrates that sound doctrinal underpinning, and not procedural rigidity, is the foundation for the employment of a force optimally. This inherent and inbuilt quality can only come from a cadre of intellectually oriented leadership group with a sufficiently deep vertical spread from the top of the hierarchical pyramid. Intellectual agility and the ability to strategically conceive the progress of the force must be the critical qualities that must be emphasised for selection to the highest levels of command and policy influencing positions.

A force that ignores the need for intellectual underpinning for the formulation of higher-level policy directives and are led by purely operational ‘men of action’ is bound to flounder as a tactical force of limited consequence in the national security calculus. Having a higher leadership team predominated by officers who have nothing more than tactical, and at times operational, excellence to offer is not the formula to build credible strategic fighting force. Ibi Remanebunt!

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