

## HAL — A Sad Story of Incompetence and Non-accountability

[indrastra.com/2019/02/HAL-itself-Needs-Complete-Overhaul-005-02-2019-0007.html](http://indrastra.com/2019/02/HAL-itself-Needs-Complete-Overhaul-005-02-2019-0007.html)

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A conversation with late *Air Chief Marshal (ACM) Mushaf Ali Mir* of *Pakistan Air Force (PAF)* sometime around 2002 comes to my mind, wherein he was seldom praising our *Hindustan Aeronautics Limited's (HAL) Light Combat Aircraft (LCA)* project. Perhaps it looked all rosy for him; especially considering the state that his country was in at that time. Also, one did not choose to correct his impression for reasons which were but obvious.



*Image Attribute: A helmet of one of the pilots of ill-fated Mirage 2000 Trainer which crashed at HAL Bangalore facility on January 31, 2019.*

The **recent untimely crash of Mirage 2000 trainer aircraft** at HAL's Bangalore facility and the consequent fatalities of two invaluable Test Pilots need to make our policymakers sit up and think. From my early memories, one knows about the below par performance standards maintained by the HAL, from HF24 to Gnats to MiG 21s to MiG 23/27s, MiG 29s, the Sukhois and now even the Mirages.

And to think that recent political furor over the Rafale deal talked about NOT giving HAL it's due. Also, Dassault had refused to have any truck with this inefficient organization and for good reason. The company has done many "*acceptance flights*" over the years at HAL's Ojhar facility (*near Nashik*) and also, seen the operational dynamics of HAL Bangalore. One can easily understand the financial year end frenzy at these establishments and the slipshod slippages in timeframes, poor quality of overhaul and support which are alike across the board, for aircraft and equipment. Lack of competition within the country and nonparticipation of the civilian sector have virtually sounded the death knell for this behemoth white elephant which comes under the list of non-performing *public sector undertaking (PSU)* category.

## Valid Doubts

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Whilst most such enterprises in the world such as the *Turkish Aircraft Industry (TAI)* and *Israel Aircraft Industry (IAI)* have progressed by leaps and bounds in their capabilities, on the other hand over the recent decades HAL got bogged down by inferior Soviet-era technology and its own trade union culture. And with such unproven capabilities, it is no surprise that HAL is found missing from most prominent global air shows such as the Farnborough Air Show. And to think that this body is going to be tasked with more and more new platforms such as the Avro replacement CN 235, advanced attack helicopters such as the American Apaches or perhaps even the *Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA)* Rafale at some stage. Transfer of Technology normally entails the valuable transfer of expertise, experience, and innovative quality control norms. The HAL has definitely not learned much from its earlier debacles with the MiG and Sukhoi series. Book adjustments from captive clients such as the IAF, the *Indian Navy (IN)*, and *Indian Army (IA)* have kept their coffers strong, regardless of recent motivated media outbursts about the poor state of its order books.

## Redefining the Leadership

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Leadership (at HAL) has been a worry for sure. For a venture with such a precarious national security charter, we need to see a dynamic leader at the top. Past attempts at bringing in IAF functionaries such as ACMs like Lal, Mehra, Katre, and Air Marshal Wollen come to mind.

Such appointments were systematically scuttled later on by the techno-bureaucratic war machine, leaving promotees and political appointees as CEOs. It's high time for the government; it needs to re-consider deploying the serving IAF functionaries at higher management levels to enhance accountability. Also, meritocracy should be brought across the hierarchy to ensure value for money spent. With the launch of the Defence Industrial Corridors, the government should actively promote a combination of *Public-Private Partnership (PPE)* and invite renowned foreign players (*such as IAI, Lockheed or BAE*) to participate with HAL at strategic levels (*of course, the FDI clause has to be tweaked case-to-case basis*).

## Way Forward

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The reorganization of HAL needs to be undertaken on a war footing, ensuring a seamless transition to higher outputs and state of the art capability.

IAF *Base Repair Depots (BRDs)* need to be upgraded to take on major servicing and upgrade challenges related to avionics and other weapon systems.

To overcome the knowledge gap, Ex-IAF personnel and direct entry candidates are called for. Performance-based appraisal and promotions need to be incorporated.

A high-level study on the lines of the **Kargil Review Committee (KRC)** should be instituted forthwith to identify and remedy problem areas.

HAL's is a sad story of incompetence and nonaccountability. The malaise that afflicts HAL would be applicable to many such as factories owned by *Ordnance Factory Board (OFB)*, some of which have recently had **unexplained fire accidents**. These defense PSUs need to be treated at par with the Defence Forces, their rules of engagement and company laws rehashed to cope with those amenable to a war-driven organization, lest we find ourselves like a toothless tiger in today's competitive strategic environment.

### **About the Author:**

**Group Captain (Retd.) Murli Menon** served in *Indian Air Force (IAF)* for 32 years, transiting its tactical, operational, strategic and conceptual appointment spectra with credit. He was India's Air Advisor to Indian High Commission at Islamabad, Pakistan (2000-2004). In his second avatar, he served for 8 years with India's Cabinet Secretariat, including a stint as Consular at Ankara, Turkey from 2008-2011.



He was one of the pioneers in the IAF's Doctrine Think Tank – "*Air*

*War Strategy Cell*" that produced India's first Air Power Doctrine, the IAP 2000 in 1995. His interests include strategic studies and post-retirement, he contributes to various think-tanks based out of New Delhi, India.

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