

Army Aviation in Future Battle Space

VAYU

Interview with

Lt Gen PR Kumar,
Director General Army Aviation



The Army is increasingly looking to aviation as a tactical support asset and mobility enhancer

Lt. Gen. PR Kumar

VAYU: Could you please enumerate on salient features of the AAC's plan formulated for 2027-2030. What will be the operational shape and size of the Corps by 2030 ?

DGAA : The pace of Army Aviation modernisation has been synchronised with overall growth of the Army. Substantial progress has been made over the past 27 years, wherein Army Aviation has grown from the erstwhile Reconnaissance and Observation roles utilising the Chetak and Cheetah helicopters. The Long Term Perspective Planning (LTPP) of the AAC has been envisaged to make the Arm a matching component of the Combined Arms Team to operate in full spectrum of operations. In addition to the Reconnaissance and Observation capability, the Arm will also have capability of providing attack and

lift capability in the battlefield. The Arm is structured to provide each of these capabilities as an integral component at the operational level in each Corps.

VAYU: It has been stated by an analyst that "the present force structure of the Army Aviation Corps inhibits it from being able to perform the roles envisaged". What are the essential roles envisaged by the Corps and what measures are afoot to achieve capability to perform them ?

DGAA : Within the overall operational context of the Indian Army, Army Aviation has been entrusted with Combat, Combat Support and Combat Services Support roles that would effectively integrate the aviation resources in the combined arms team. It will combine speed, mobility, and firepower in the attack and assault forces,

while moving and sustaining combat power at decisive points on the battlefield with its cargo/utility helicopters. It is self-evident that Army Aviation needs platforms for reconnaissance and surveillance, utility/lift platform for mobility of ground forces in Tactical Battle Area and attack assets for fire support and direct attack roles in support of ground forces. The LTPP 2027 has harmonised requirements of Army Aviation to execute these roles.

VAYU: With its genesis in 1986, the AAC has already celebrated its Silver Jubilee and is proud of an enviable record of performance, not only in battle but also in relief and rescue operations from time to time. Yet, it has been pointed out, its surge towards becoming a full-fledged air arm of the Army is being thwarted

HAL



Indian Army Aviation faces unique challenges, such as the constraints of high altitude operations

by “certain factors”. What are these stumbling blocks, if any, and what is the strategy to overcome them ?

DGAA : The future battle space envisages integrated employment of all arms, based on combined arms concept, in order to develop an optimal combat power. The field force commander will be required to ‘Look Deep’ and ‘Strike Deep’ by harmonising all the combat resources at his disposal in the Tactical Battle Area (TBA). This will place a high premium on Effect Based Operations (EBO) which calls for massing of effects (fires) and forces (manoeuvre) at decisive points through the depth and

extent of the Tactical Battle Area. Army Aviation primarily operates in the ‘ground regime’ as part of the combined arms team of the ground forces. Its missions, operational concepts and tactics are all terrain-independent and closely follow the operational considerations of the ground forces. Look at it this way : Army Aviation ‘attack’ assets (including Attack Helicopters, Rudra and Light Combat Helicopters) contributes to fire support together with Artillery, tanks and Infantry weapons; its ‘tactical and logistics lift’ assets are superior to a High Mobile Vehicle and faster, being terrain-independent, and its reconnaissance

and surveillance assets provide an elevated vantage point to commanders to look on ‘the other side of the hill’. It may be understood that all Army Aviation assets are primarily directed towards and meant for ground operations by using medium of the air. A perceptive assimilation of this concept has been acknowledged by all stake-holders. With vesting of ownership of attack helicopters to the Indian Army, this indisputable basic requirement of the Army has been resolved.

VAYU : Is development of the Army Aviation Corps from its present status being modelled on its counterparts in ‘developed countries’, or is it driven by indigenous considerations and philosophy ?

DGAA : India as an emerging regional power needs matching military capability to meet all challenges through the entire spectrum of conflict. Army Aviation is an ideal terrain-independent manoeuvre arm which will be a major force multiplier both in war and peace. Development of a long term growth plan is always a comprehensive, all inclusive exercise which assimilates the trends worldwide to find a pragmatic solution to own specific requirements. Towards that end, it is imperative to analyse strategic and operational concepts, operational methodologies and equipment



HAL-built Lancer and Dhruv helicopters on exercise

Eurocopter



Army Aviation has benefited greatly from indigenous programmes such as the HAL Dhruv ALH

philosophy not only of advanced armies in their unique operational context, but also analyse threats posed by assets held by our likely adversaries. This is then followed by own threat perception and operational doctrine to arrive at a suitable development model. Hence, the Army Aviation development plan is a balanced mix of all these practical considerations.

VAYU : Kindly review the AAC's overall plans to acquire new assets? The Government's stress being on seeking indigenous sources for equipment, will HAL be able to meet most of the requirements and undertake manufacture through transfer-of-technology (TOT) route in case of equipment not being manufactured by it at present?



Lt Gen PR Kumar, DG Army Aviation



Increased mobility and air assault operations will be a tremendous asset to future Army operations

DGAA : As brought out earlier, Army Aviation has developed a very pragmatic and balanced growth plan which will be implemented by a judicious mix of indigenous and Transfer of Technology (TOT)/ MTOT routes. In today's era of highly integrated global industrial landscape, the boundaries between indigenous and foreign equipment are blurring to the vanishing point. Government stress on indigenous sources of equipment is a right step which in the long run will give flexibility to upgrade and modify the equipment based on operational requirements. Presently, most of the AAC equipment is being sourced from HAL. At the same time, the Army also plans to acquire some helicopters through global procurement with TOT/MTOT likely being entrusted with HAL or any other suitable aviation industry. Encouragement of Public- Private partnership is a stated policy.

VAYU: The first HAL-Rudra Squadron has recently been raised for eventual deployment in the battlefield. Are there plans to raise more Rudra Squadrons?

DGAA : The first 'Rudra' squadron has commenced raising. It is a landmark event which will bring in 'offensive capability' in Army Aviation to effectively integrate within the combined arms team. This is also a harbinger of significant enhancement in the operational bandwidth of the Army Aviation Corps. The Army plans to raise a number of more such units to meet operational requirements as enshrined in the LTPP 2027.

VAYU: Although Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) are presently placed under command of Artillery units, is it not more practical to have these operated by the AAC in keeping with its exclusive responsibility to manage the 'air' rather than the 'ground' aspect of Army operations? If so, what steps are being taken in this direction?

DGAA : UAV as an aerial platform is more organic to Army Aviation than to any other Arm. However, the prime task presently being undertaken by the UAVs is surveillance, which is one of the primary roles of Artillery. Therefore, there is a case to place this equipment either with Artillery or Army Aviation, as per the perception of various armed forces in the world. While some have placed UAVs under Army Aviation, in India, these are placed under the Artillery. However, Air



Transport of materiel and personnel is a vital role for Indian Army Aviation



Ageing HAL Cheetah helicopters have been due for replacement for over a decade



HAL Krishak AOP aircraft, operated by No. 12 AOP Flight under the redoubtable Atma Singh, were prominent in the epic Laungewala Battle of December 1971.

Air Force played their roles effectively. This battle holds an important lesson for our military leaders to carefully delineate the roles/missions based on requirement of 'Integrated' and 'Integral' capabilities to be provided at various levels. At operational strategic level, we need joint operations by integrated forces consisting of elements of all three Services. While at the tactical level within TBA, we need integral assets under command of TBA Commander to significantly increase responsiveness in a highly mobile and fast-paced battlefield. As is evident from the success at 'Laungewala', it is Army pilots who are completely well-versed with infantry/armoured tactics and have excellent knowledge of the terrain, and could effectively direct Indian Air Force fighters to decimate enemy tank forces.

Space Management of all aerial assets in the Tactical Battle Area up to 100m has been entrusted to Army Aviation.

VAYU: In the 1971 Indo-Pak war, an Army Observation Post Flight flying Krishaks commendably directed IAF Hunters in the Laungewala area for attack on and decimation of Pakistani armour. What are the lessons in this epic battle for the future ?

DGAA: The epic battle at Longewala which decimated a Pak Armoured formation was a copy-book exponent of jointmanship and a prominent example of combined air land battle in which both Infantry and Army Aviation of Indian Army and Indian



The Army is receiving a boost to its combat aviation capability with acquisition of HAL Rudra gunships (photo: Angad Singh)



Helicopters remain one of the most crucial assets in demanding high altitude environs



The Indian Army is going to be one of the largest operators of the HAL Dhruv and its variants



Lt Gen PR Kumar, DG Army Aviation is also Colonel Commandant of the Regiment of Artillery

VAYU: Considering that Army Aviation is basically officer-centric, it has been learnt that owing to limited promotional prospects there is minimal incentive to volunteer for joining Army Aviation. How do you ensure that the career prospects and promotion to higher ranks of aviators are commensurate with those of officers serving in other arms?

DGAA : Army Aviation is a relatively younger arm which is officer heavy by virtue of its operational requirement. It is also a relatively smaller arm in terms of units/formations. The emotional and aspirational needs of the officers are well understood and are being adequately addressed.

The DG Army Aviation : Lt Gen PR Kumar VSM

Lt Gen PR Kumar, VSM is an alumni of the National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla, and was commissioned into the Regiment of Artillery on 15 December 1976, and during his long and illustrious career, has held a variety of sterling and balanced portfolio of Command, Staff and Instructional assignments. After early years of regimental service, he attended the Air OP, LGSC courses and graduated from the DSSC Wellington, as also attended the High Command and NDC courses. He has been awarded the M Phil (Defence and Strategic Studies) degree from the Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya Indore and Madras University.

Lt Gen PR Kumar is an aviator and has commanded the 316 Medium Regiment in the western sector, 80th Infantry Brigade on the LoC, 23rd Infantry Division and then the vital Strike Corps in the South Western sector, 'Strike One'. The General thereafter took over the Army Aviation Directorate, and is the Colonel Commandant Regiment of Artillery and Colonel Commandant Army Aviation.

Apart from an extremely successful Army career, Lt Gen PR Kumar is also a keen sportsman with a current focus on golf.

