

'General' ignominy carries a message

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By Sidharth Mishra



The past few weeks have been bad for at least three former chiefs of staff of the armed services – Army, Navy and Air Force. In the case of the first, former chief of Indian Army General VK Singh ended up blaming the media for an embarrassment he caused to the government. In the second case, a former chief of the Indian Navy, Admiral L Ramdas was unceremoniously booted out as the internal Lokpal of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). Finally, it is only a matter of time before Air Chief Marshal SP Tyagi is taken into custody for his alleged role in a defence scam.



While SP Tyagi's case is related to corruption, both VK Singh and L Ramdas have managed to heap ignominy upon themselves thanks to their political ambitions. General VK Singh's term as the chief of army staff was riddled with controversy. During Singh's tumultuous tenure he had a running battle with the previous government and his agenda was not exactly for the good of the soldier. Singh's personal ambitions and preferences got the better of his demeanour and duties as army chief. This ambition, some would argue, was reflected in the personal vendetta he showed towards his peers and colleagues. That VK Singh had political ambitions became very clear when he joined the India Against Corruption 'tamasha',

to use the sobriquet recently used by Medha Patkar. He took 'giant strides' thereafter, joining forces with Narendra Modi. Singh soon became a member of parliament on a Bharatiya Janata Party ticket. In fact in these columns I recall having written about what Singh's massive victory in Ghaziabad meant. People supported the party for its agenda, which Modi had set and backed VK Singh, who had managed to create an image of honesty.

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Winning the elections did not exactly open the doors of power for Singh. For someone who had made 'breaking news' for sharing the dais with Narendra Modi at an ex-servicemen rally in Haryana, to become just a junior minister in the Union Cabinet was not exactly representative of a meteoric rise. His position was further downgraded after the first cabinet reshuffle, when he was made to give up the charge of Ministry of North East Affairs. To cap it all, a controversy emerged about Singh's presence at the Pakistan Day reception hosted by the Pakistan High Commission last week.

He tweeted his disgust at being asked to attend the reception, at least that is what those on the micro blogging site understood from his statement. This hugely upset the government, which told Singh in no uncertain terms the embarrassment and controversy his tweets caused and the way a simple protocol issue was mishandled by him. Thereafter, he came out with a media statement clarifying his position, denying his disgust and in the process losing all public respect which he may have previously commanded.

Similarly Admiral L Ramdas, who post-retirement has been involved with several initiatives to improve people-to-people relations with Pakistan and also cleanse public life of many of its ills, committed the sin of entering politics. Little did he or for that matter several other social sector activists and corporate honchos realise that politics was, as Amitabh Bachchan once famously said -- a cesspool.

The Admiral, who once commanded the strongest fleet in the Indian Ocean, was stopped in his tracks by a mere text message from a cell phone by a functionary of a small-time political party. It did not stop there. The next day he was unceremoniously removed as the internal Lokpal of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). Ramdas's removal came the day after he was sent an SMS, asking him not to attend the National Council meeting to avoid "confrontation". Following the snub, he wrote a letter to the Political Affairs Committee criticising the leadership. Ramdas said he had come all the way from his village in Maharashtra to attend the meet. How sad, Admiral!

Who is to blame for the state of misery in which the General and the Admiral find themselves in? Eminent citizens can command respect of the polity without being part of it. They can be of great help to the society by joining social initiatives in backward areas, encouraging people towards economic and cultural emancipation. This may not get them media attention; but they would surely have the satisfaction of having done their bit for the nation.

In this context, I recall the annual trip which VK Singh's little remembered (in media) predecessor General Vishwa Nath Sharma makes to his alma mater, the Rashtriya Indian Military College in Dehradun. An octogenarian now, Sharma, every year on a nippy March morning, proudly wearing his cap and medals, leads the main wreath laying function at the martyr's memorial. He is escorted by the 12-year-olds in olive green uniform, equally proud of

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their lineage and motivated to walk on the foot-steps to their illustrious school seniors.

Leaders in military uniform, especially those who hold top positions in the armed forces, command unparalleled respect in the eyes of the civilian population. It is incumbent upon them to safeguard this respect. How they do it, should be left to them. Personally I find it very demoralising to see a spectacle being made out of General VK Singh or Admiral L Ramdas.

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