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## THE “ATMANIRBHAR” CLARION CALL & THE “MEHAR BABA COMPETITION” FOLLOW THROUGH

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### The Clarion Call<sup>1</sup>

Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, during his address to the nation on May 12, 2020 announced a special economic package to stimulate the country's economy adversely affected by the ongoing COVID crisis. Of even more significance, was the intent of giving a new impetus to the “Make in India” initiative. The PM's call for “Atmanirbhar Bharat” is the new mantra to achieve self-reliance, with the insistent need for Indian industry to position itself as a significant contributor to global supply chains.

Earlier, on March 20, 2020, the Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh had unveiled the draft Defence Procurement Procedure (DPP) - 2020. The aim of the new procedure was also described by him as “*make India a self-reliant and a global manufacturing hub*”.<sup>2</sup>

The DPP-2020 which has been prepared by a committee set up in August 2019 headed by DG Acquisition, Ministry of Defence, has been in public domain since then, and suggestions had been invited from various stakeholders. A significant part of the DPP-2020 is the intent of promoting innovative solutions for meeting key operational requirements of the armed forces.

### Draft DPP-2020

One of the categories introduced in the draft DPP is the procedure for procurement under ‘make’ and ‘innovation’ sub-head. This category has been further sub-divided into two major sections titled “Make” and “Innovation” categories.<sup>3</sup> The intent is to involve the private sector in gaining crucial military and strategic advantage through generation of innovative approaches and solutions to the problems faced by the armed forces. An additional aim is to ensure control over the concepts and the Intellectual Property

(IP) so generated. At the same time, the procedure allows for significant freedom to the Forces themselves. Under the “Innovation” section, through an “open competition” approach, the respective Vice Chiefs have been vested with necessary financial authority to ensure a “user-led” process to discover innovative and “out-of-box” solutions. One of the earliest examples of such a thought process has been the Indian Air Force (IAF) sponsored “Mehar-Baba Competition”<sup>4</sup>.

### **“Mehar-Baba Competition”: The “IAF-Atamnirbhar-DPP” Connect**

“Mehar Baba Competition”<sup>5</sup> was an open competition with generous provisions of development funds of up to Rupees 10 crores to be made available to the successful participants. It was to be held as per provisions and guidelines released by the Air War Strategy Cell, Air HQ (VB) in October 2018.<sup>6</sup> The stated aim was to stimulate “out-of-box” thinking and harness emerging technologies of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and collaborative and autonomous Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAVs) towards enhancing IAF’s response capabilities in its Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief Operations (HADR). The key specifications for demonstrated flights included operations in GPS/internet enabled as well as GPS/internet denied operating environments.

Chapter III of the draft DPP-2020<sup>7</sup> describes the procedure for procurement under

“Make” and “Innovation” categories. The procurements under the “open competition” approach are also a part of this chapter and so are the terms and conditions for participation in these competitions.<sup>8</sup> This was also the exact methodology which was adopted by the Indian Air Force when it held the “Mehar-Baba Prize Competition” in October 2018.<sup>9</sup>

The competition was formally launched on Air Force day on October 08, 2018 and participation was restricted to “*only Indian citizens and Indian registered entities, made by Indian citizens*”. The additional conditions permitted Indian registered “for-profit” companies, entities, academic institutions and teams of Indian citizens eligible for participation.<sup>10</sup>

Significantly, certain terms and conditions closely resembling those of “Mehar Baba competition” have also been included in the draft DPP-2020 (Chapter III, Appendix ‘M’). This by itself is a feather in the cap of the IAF’s “out of the box” thinking. However, the actual measure of success of the pioneering IAF effort would be the disbursement of prize money to the declared winner.

### **“Mehar- Baba Competition”- Status & Follow Through**

The competition had evinced a huge amount of interest and attracted participation by 154 companies/entities. Out of these, the committee formed by the IAF selected 54.<sup>11</sup> By April 2019,

20 of these companies participated in trials at Pokhran for checking the capability of the individual systems along with their technology parameters.<sup>12</sup> The results of the competition have not been released in the public domain. However, as per the initial planned timeline, the final awards ceremony was to be held on July 26, 2019.<sup>13</sup>

Even though the current status of the competition is not known in the open domain, the outlook for more such open competitions remains optimistic, as the format has also been included in the draft DPP-2020.

Importantly, this IAF-led approach has had a clear impact on India's efforts at achieving goals of self-reliance. It is also an example of the measure of the responsiveness of the regulatory environment to the "out-of-box" approaches opted by individual services to meet their key technological challenges.

The key point to note here is, even though there is much to celebrate, however, the actual "Atmanirbhar" quotient of "Mehtar-Baba competition" would be measured by it yielding tangible results. This is only possible if the clarion call of the "Atmanirbhar Bharat" push provides the necessary impetus for a finished product, which is technologically current, specifically tailored and future ready to be inducted in the inventory of the armed forces. Thus, the "Mehtar Baba Competition" is an opportunity for IAF to script a pioneering and a

unique success story, however, the process must be resilient enough to overcome all setbacks.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> PIB, GoI, "PM Gives Clarion call for Atmanirbhar Bharat", <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1623391> accessed on June 14,2020

<sup>2</sup> PIB,GoI, "Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh unveils draft of Defence Procurement Procedure 2020", <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1607400> accessed on June 14,2020

<sup>3</sup> MoD,GoI, "Draft DPP-2020", Chapter III, [https://mod.gov.in/dod/sites/default/files/draftdppnew200320c\\_0.pdf](https://mod.gov.in/dod/sites/default/files/draftdppnew200320c_0.pdf) accessed on June11,2020

<sup>4</sup> Sandeep Unnithan, "Search for Drone Acharyas: Rs 100 crore contract if you win this Air Force contest", India Today, October 28,2018, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/up-front/story/20181105-the-search-for-drone-acharyas-1374995-2018-10-26> accessed on June 15,2020

<sup>5</sup> Wg Cdr BS Nijjar, "The RUAV & the "Mehtar Baba" Prize", October 08,2018, [http://capsindia.org/files/documents/CAPS\\_Infocus\\_BSN\\_20.pdf](http://capsindia.org/files/documents/CAPS_Infocus_BSN_20.pdf) accessed on June 15,2020

<sup>6</sup> Air War Strategy Cell, Air HQ (VB), "Competition for Mehtar Baba Prize", <https://www.scribd.com/document/396275246/Mehtar-BABA> accessed on June 09,2020

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, n.3

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, n.3, Chapter III para 105 (m)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. n.6

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. n.6

<sup>11</sup> TNN, "IAF Holds Competition to Select Drones for Relief Operations", Times of India May 1,2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/jaipur/iaf-holds-competition-to-select-drones-for-relief-ops/articleshow/69121315.cms> accessed on June 15,2020

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid,n.6