

'Call me Chippy'

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Tarun Das

It was spring of 1968. In Bombay. Our first meeting. All of 40 years ago. The Indian Engineering Association (IEA), one of the CII's two predecessor bodies, was falling apart. East and West were fighting. East Controlled IEA, West wanted to share. Sanjoy Sen, newly elected President of IEA said to me — "let's go to Bombay. Let's meet the West Leaders. Let's talk. Let's listen. Let's understand." The Chairman in the West was Rear Admiral B. A. Samson, then CMD of Mazagon Docks Ltd, a PSU mammoth.

We met in the office of the Bombay Chamber. I recall being apprehensive, even fearful — very nervous. He was wearing a cream silk suit. Sanjoy Sen and I shook hands with him. 'Happy to meet you, Admiral.' His response 'Call me, Chippy'. From that moment on, the three of us 'connected', became friends for life. The IEA's constitution was redrafted. Shared leadership was assured. Sanjoy Sen, at Chippy's insistence, became President, again, and the Admiral became the Vice-President. A year later, he was the President.

These two friends, Sanjoy Sen and Chippy Samson, then supported the merger of IEA with EAI and the creation of AIEI (CII's earlier name) in April 1974. They stepped back to let others lead — Bodie Nanda and Mahendra Jhavar.

Country first, self last

What was special about Chippy Samson was that he put the country first, the institution next and self last. A rare Indian then. They don't make them like him anymore. Another amazing quality was his forthrightness. Straight-talking, clear, articulate, no mincing of words.

And, yet, he was charming. He could 'sweet-talk' anybody, anywhere, anytime. The charm offensive was always ready. Always connecting him to people who then just loved this amazing personality. Full of humour, usually cracking jokes at himself, ready for a laugh and making everyone around him feel the happiness of being with him.

This multi-sided person had the unique quality of courage and determination, perseverance and patience, underneath the humour, the charm and the light-hearted banter. Building ships in Mazdock or commanding the NDA or a fleet, he was a flag bearer of courage.

So, necessarily, in today's world, when people speak of Values, he was a role model. He did not know any other way than to be honest, to be a person of the highest integrity, to be absolutely upright in all his dealings. So, where does one find such a man? "The Complete Man". Combining in himself so many qualities and strengths. If we had even one of these, we would be fortunate. Not just the complete man, but a great man. A man to follow, to love, to respect and to admire.

Sometimes, such people are not family-minded, only driven by career and work. Not so, Chippy Samson. His family was his first love and a source of immense pride. When his daughter, Leela, an outstanding Bharatanatyam dancer was asked to head Kalakshetra, his happiness knew no bounds. And, his two sons, Dick and David, though living across the seas, were always in his heart and mind.

I remember this man of many parts especially for his incredible role of leadership in the CII, of the CII in the 1970s and 1980s. We were few then. All soldiers, no "Generals". We worked side by side, through the most difficult years to build a different kind of institution. Going beyond industry, being national, engaging the world, creating partnerships and building up brick by brick. He held our hand and lifted our spirits And his pride in the institution, and all of us in it, was limitless. He gave of himself, took nothing. Let us draw strength from this giant whose byline was 'Call me, Chippy'. A truly great man has passed.

(The author is a former Director-General, CII.)

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