

# The Indian Navy – Challenges of a ‘Cinderella Service’

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*La marine nationale de l'Inde, souvent connue sous le nom de « service Cendrillon » dans son propre pays – compte tenu de sa petite taille d'environ cinquante mille d'effectifs, contrairement à l'armée forte d'un million – est des plus crédibles parmi les marines du littoral de l'océan Indien et s'est vue transformée en une force modeste mais équilibrée au cours des soixante dernières années. Délaissant formellement l'appellation « royale » en janvier 1950, le service a eu des liens étroits avec la marine royale britannique et partage cette hérédité avec d'autres marines du Commonwealth. Malgré sa situation géographique particulière qui définit l'océan Indien, la culture stratégique de l'Inde a été relativement indifférente au domaine maritime, et la brève guerre terrestre avec la Chine en 1962 a obscurci davantage le bref regain de croissance de la première décennie de la marine indienne. Cet article examine l'évolution mouvementée de cette marine et son profil actuel, ainsi que les défis complexes qu'elle doit relever au début du 21ème siècle.*

The commissioning of the indigenously designed and built stealth frigate, the Indian Navy Ship (INS) *Shivalik*, in Mumbai on 29 April 2010 is an appropriate temporal and ceremonially imbued event to review the trajectory of the Indian Navy (IN) over the last 60 years – since January 1950 when the service dropped the “Royal” prefix and became one of the three armed forces of the fledgling Indian republic. A layered symbolism is embedded in the commissioning of the *Shivalik*, and when disaggregated these diverse strands offer a useful perspective to reflect over the challenges facing the IN – the metaphoric Cinderella service in India.

The word ‘Cinderella’ is used to describe the IN since it is the smallest of the three services in independent India and has been long neglected, not least by the powers that be in post-1947 India. This is a trait with which the navies of many democratic nations have had to grapple in their own manner, but the Cinderella-index for the IN may be more heightened and distinctive given the enormous opportunities with which the maritime domain has endowed India. It may be averred that a very noticeable characteristic of India’s strategic culture is the reactive manner in which the Indian state has dealt with macro-military power over the long cycle of history. The Indian entity since days of yore has been ‘surprised’ by the adversary, and this was as true in the medieval period when marauding hordes descended into the plains of India from central

Asia, as it was in November 2008 when the city of Mumbai was attacked by a group of terrorists who came from the sea.

## **Historical Background**

Peninsular India's geography is naturally maritime in nature, but the vicissitudes of history and the strategic culture referred to earlier have made it a more land-focused power since the advent of modernity (that is, since the time of Vasco de Gama and the arrival of the ocean-going sail-ship). It is often noted that India's political evolution of the last 500 years may have been different if it had better appreciated the potential that sea-power accords to a state – but part of the current challenge for the IN is the obduracy of the Indian state and its inability to learn the appropriate lessons from the historical experience of the past.

While the antiquity of the Indian maritime tradition goes back several millennia to the period of Mohenjodaro-Harappa (c. 2500-1500 BC), later history records the manner in which extensive maritime contact was established by peninsular India with modern Southeast Asia from about the second century AD for almost a millennium by local rulers linked to the Satavahana, Sri Vijaya and Chola dynasties. The Bay of Bengal at one point was referred to as a “Chola lake”, and it was through the maritime medium that deep trade and cultural links were established along the Indian Ocean littoral and beyond to lands as far as China and Japan, particularly as regards the spread of Buddhism.

The advent of the Mogul dynasty in India in 1526 witnessed the beginning of what is often described as the “sea-blindness” of Delhi – a trait that is yet to be effectively redressed half a millennium later. For a variety of reasons related to the strategic culture of the ruling elite at the time, Mogul India shunned the seas – and the ignominy of empire (if it may be so described) was that the Great Akbar, emperor par excellence, opted to pay a ransom to pirates when one of his wives was abducted while on a Haj pilgrimage, as opposed to using the military option of rescue and reprisal. One can search in vain for ‘lessons learnt’ by the Moghul security establishment from this experience.

Be that as it may, the arrival of the first European traders to India in the early seventeenth century led to the laying of the politico-military foundation for the long colonial contestation that was to follow. Over the next two centuries, the Portuguese, Dutch and the French were differently defeated – or confined to pockets of direct control – while Britain consolidated its hold on an empire over which thereafter the sun never set. The Royal Navy and Britain's astute comprehension of the need to maintain control at sea enabled this strategic victory over the sub-continent, and Indian history records the relevance of this naval-maritime asymmetry in some detail. The writings of Pandit Nehru (as the prime minister was known for his scholarly work) and Sardar Pannikar among others testify to this sequence of events – and the ‘lessons’ to be imbibed – but again to limited effect.

It is instructive to recall that the origins of the IN go back to the period when the first Europeans set foot on Indian soil – or waded through its territorial waters. Great

Britain formed the Indian Marine in Surat (on the west coast of India in modern Gujarat) on 5 September 1612, and the nomenclature of the service underwent many changes until finally becoming the Royal Indian Navy (RIN) in 1934. At the time, the strength of the service was 114 officers and 1,732 ratings. However, the compulsions of the Second World War led to a dramatic increase in the war effort among the colonies, and British India contributed as many as 2,500,000 total personnel, military and civilian (of these, a total of 87,000 Indian military casualties were sustained in the overall Allied effort). In this effort, the Royal Indian Navy swelled more than tenfold to a total of 25,000 officers and men by VJ-Day in August 1945. Despite its relative lack of sea-legs and diminutive size, the RIN acquitted itself creditably and there are many tales of heroism and courage that have been handed down over the decades. The most famous perhaps is the manner in which His Majesty’s Indian Ship (HMIS) *Bengal*, a 730-ton minesweeper, sank a 10,500-ton Japanese raider off Diego Garcia in November 1942.

### **Post-1947 Developments**

After the August 1947 partition of British India into different political entities, the combined military forces were divided, largely to the new states of India and Pakistan. The RIN was a motley service – comprising a total of 19 credible warships (four old sloops, two frigates, one corvette and twelve minesweepers) – but it had fairly ambitious plans. The “1948 Plan” paper envisaged a balanced two-fleet navy built around two light carriers with an appropriate mix of surface combatants and submarines. In the immediate aftermath of August 1947, the Indian military – the army and the air force in particular – were called upon to defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity against the Pakistani challenge to the merger of Jammu and Kashmir into the Indian Union (a campaign which did not entail a major maritime dimension). State sponsorship of non-state terrorist elements had just begun its long challenge to the Indian state – though it was not so-identified at the time – and its maritime variant would manifest itself only in the early-1990s, peaking in the Mumbai attack of November 2008.

The period 1948 to 1961 is in many ways the golden thirteen years for the Indian Navy – and it was a heady beginning which alas could not be sustained. Beginning with the introduction of the cruiser INS *Delhi* in 1948 (this was the old HMS *Achilles* of River Plate fame), it peaked with the commissioning into the IN of the first carrier, the INS *Vikrant* in 1961 (an old Royal Navy carrier that had been moth-balled after the war). In a very short span, the Indian Navy was making waves. Independent India’s trans-border military capability had received a fillip with one ‘flat-top’ and two six-inch cruisers, and Prime Minister “Pandit” Jawaharlal Nehru embarked upon a very successful voyage to Indonesia in June 1950 on a naval ship, the recently acquired INS *Delhi*.

### **Post-1962**

The brief 1962 border war with China dramatically altered India’s security and foreign policies. The fiscally modest but professionally ambitious naval plan paper of 1948 was put on hold, and India focused on building up its army and air force to deal with the worst case two-front exigency that would bring China and Pakistan together in

embarking upon a military offensive against their common adversary. This was the beginning of the distortion that was to push the IN to its Cinderella status. The budgetary allocation for the IN, which was moving up to about ten percent of the overall defence budget, plummeted to a low of four percent and the post-1962 years were 'lean' ones for the IN.

But gradually the support for the IN was restored, again in a modest manner. The accretion of force levels was enabled to a great extent by the support provided by the then Soviet Union (USSR). As techno-strategic punctuations go, the fleet restructuring in the late-1960s attendant with the induction of the Petya/Kamorta-class patrol ships, the Osa-class missile boats, and the Foxtrot-class diesel submarines was a significant development. The IN had again become the most credible navy in the Indian Ocean littoral – but it was a very insular service. India's option to follow non-alignment as a policy meant that the IN's engagement with other navies – whether the annual Joint Exercise Trincomalee (JET) exercises off Sri Lanka where Commonwealth navies came together or in other groupings – was on hold. Admittedly, India had a modest but capable navy, but it was not very evident as to what relevance it had for the larger national interest. Neither the naval staff nor the national security apex of government was able to fill the 'tasking void'.

It was the 1971 war for Bangladesh that saw the IN rising to the challenge of becoming relevant in the national security calculus. In that war, the IN was deployed in both theatres – namely in the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal – and the daring manner in which the small missile boats were towed and then used to target Karachi has been acknowledged as professionalism of a high order. Over the next 20 years – that is, by the end of the Cold War in December 1991 – the IN was able to consolidate its inventory, and two events in the late 1980s drew attention to the profile and potential of the IN.

In 1987, the IN acquired its second aircraft carrier, the INS *Viraat* (the former HMS *Hermes* of Falklands fame), and a year later (in early 1988) the Soviet Union leased a nuclear propelled cruise missile firing submarine to India, the Charlie-class SSGN INS *Chakra*. Later that year the Indian military, alerted by the IN whose ships were sailing in the area, was able to foil an attempted mercenary coup in the distant Maldives. This swift response by IN ships *Godavari* and *Beas* was noticed even by the White House with President Reagan at the helm, and it appeared as if the IN had become a force to reckon with as far as the Indian Ocean region was concerned.

But this again was a misleading perception, notwithstanding the fact that in April 1989 TIME magazine put the IN on its cover and dramatically suggested that India was the next rising superpower. In the early 1990s India had to deal with an unprecedented fiscal crisis – so much so that the country had to lift its gold to London – and to embark upon a gradual process of economic liberalization. Defence budgets in the 1990s were placed on hold or money returned as unspent. The Indian military was pushed towards block obsolescence as far as its major platform inventory, acquisition and modernization were concerned. In short, the 1990s were a period of stasis for the Indian military generally and the IN in particular, given the capital-intensive nature of the latter.

## **Current Profile**

The Indian Navy was and remains the proverbial Cinderella service with the lowest personnel strength and the smallest allocation of the total defence budget. The manpower ratio of the army, air force and navy now stands at 22:2:1, and in overall terms the 50,000-plus naval strength is dwarfed by the million-plus Indian Army. And predictably the fiscal allocations follow the same pattern, with the navy receiving the smallest share of the defence cake.

The budget figures of the last two years are instructive. In the financial year 2008-09, the total Indian defence expenditure was budgeted at Rs 105,600 crores (US\$22.95 billion at current exchange rates) and the naval share was Rs 18,797 (US\$4.1 bn). This works out to a share of 17.8 per cent, which is an improvement from the single digit figures of earlier decades, particularly post-1962. However, in 2009-10, while the total defence expenditure has gone up to Rs 141,703 crores (US\$30.8 bn), the total naval allocation has been pegged at Rs 19,656 crores (\$4.27 bn), 13.8 per cent of the total Indian defence outlay.

This modest budgetary support has its impact on the creation of appropriate naval capacity when seen in a larger global context. While the IN can take legitimate credit for gradually becoming, first a builders’ navy (the first naval ship, the survey vessel *INS Darshak* was built in 1964) and thence steadily making commendable progress as far as ship-design is concerned (the latest example being the stealth frigate *Shivalik*), the overall track record as far as ship-building is concerned compares very poorly with the prevailing global benchmark.

Creation of appropriate naval-maritime capacity (both material and human) is the biggest and most complex challenge to India and the IN at this point – and as noted earlier in this paper, the inflexible and deeply embedded reactive nature of Indian strategic culture needs a radical review. Successive governments in India since May 1998 – when India became a declared nuclear weapon power – have been seeking to redress this inadequacy, but my own sense is that this institutional change will take more time and perseverance than anticipated.

The Mumbai attack of November 2008 revealed India’s vulnerability to low intensity conflict and related terrorism emanating from the sea routes, and some immediate reviews and augmentation of assets have been initiated. The IN remains the lead agency for co-ordinating all coastal maritime security, and the Indian Coast Guard (ICG, formed in 1985) has been authorized an increase in its personnel by as much as 50 per cent along with more platforms. The challenges of low intensity conflict and internal security (LIC-IS) for India and the southern Asian region is a complex subject which need not be examined here, except to note that in a vibrant democracy like India the common man will expect the navy to be accountable for ensuring a modicum of security from terrorist threats that have a maritime linkage. Yes, unanticipated events such as the Times Square bombing attempt in New York just the week before this conference (on 1 May 2010) will occur, but the challenge for the democratic dispensation in a post-9/11 global context is to examine what kind of collective maritime response is possible. One

thought is to see if the Commonwealth can be a consensual umbrella for LIC-IS and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR).

### **The Indian Ocean Region (IOR)**

Navies and democracies have a testy relationship in which the ‘silent service’ has to bear the cross of acquiring broad spectrum capability with limited political and fiscal support. Hence the IN, like its more enabled peers, is seeking to acquire a range of versatility, from the strategic role of maintaining the nuclear deterrent at sea to dealing with pirates in distant waters by deploying high-tech platforms that cost ‘an arm and a leg’. The launch of the indigenous nuclear-propelled submarine *Arihant* in Visakhapatnam in 2009 is a case in point, even as the IN deals with tsunamis, Mumbai-type attacks, and piracy.

But as the hard-nosed professional is only too aware, navies are not created or sustained to deal with the lower but rather the more visible higher end of the national security challenge. The strategic underpinning is the principal driver, and as challenges go for a Cinderella service it is appropriate to dwell briefly on the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the manner in which this domain poses an abiding challenge to the IN and the navies of like-minded nations. The principal interlocutors in this region are the US, India and China. Given its overwhelming naval superiority, the US remains the lead presence in the IOR and will seek to retain its advantage in the navigable oceans of the world. The Peoples’ Republic of China (PRC) is the rising power of the early twenty-first century and is driven by the same logic of great powers that preceded it – the inviolable tenet that a major power with global aspirations must be able to straddle at least two of the three navigable oceans of the world.

The global strategic maritime focus inexorably has shifted from the Atlantic-Pacific axis of the Cold War to the Pacific-Indian oceanic combine in the post-9/11 system, and Beijing is investing in the IOR in a very determined manner. ‘String of pearls’ is a phrase often invoked to describe the PRC’s investment in regional ports, formerly in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and now also in Bangladesh, the Maldives and the Seychelles. This investment ostensibly is triggered by China’s “Malacca Dilemma” – first voiced by President Hu Jintao, that is, the certitude in Beijing that the Hormuz-Malacca oceanic arc concurrently is both the new Silk Route and the Achilles heel for the rise of China. The maritime vulnerability of all major economies dependent on hydrocarbon imports through the oceanic route is axiomatic – but who can threaten this attribute in a significant manner? Not the ubiquitous pirate – whether off Somalia or the Malacca – but the determined action of a state with credible blue water naval capability.

The US, Japan, India and China are naval powers of varying capability, and Beijing’s deepest fear is the possibility of long-term triangular maritime co-operation with strategic overtones among the three democracies. Consequently, China has been making a concerted attempt to legitimize and enhance its IOR presence, and the Somalia piracy issue has enabled this initiative. In late March 2010, ships of the Peoples’ Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) arrived in Abu Dhabi – the first such visit by Chinese

naval units – after a 100-day anti-piracy deployment in the IOR, and this has been interpreted as the beginning of a long-term Chinese presence in the region. Not so veiled references by a PLAN admiral and a well-known Chinese academic, about the need for China to maintain a presence in the IOR and to have overseas bases, have only strengthened the view that Beijing plans to stay in the IOR for the long haul, along with Washington.

Will China contribute to the ‘common good’ in a status quo manner or detract from it through determined revisionism that seeks to either weaken or hobble the US? This is the core question, the answers to which will shape the contours of the complex contestation leavened in the geopolitics of the IOR that were first animated by the disparate ‘tectonic’ events of 1979: the Iranian revolution and with it the advent of political Islam; the terrorist attack on the holy city of Mecca, presaging also the arrival of militant Islam; and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, giving rise eventually to the birth of jihadist Islam.

## **Conclusion**

Maritime security for a nation like India cannot be predicated on the mere accretion of platforms and personnel. The trans-border and inherently flexible nature of the maritime medium calls for a texture of leadership that is dynamic, confident and innovative in its ability to respond to situations as they arise. It is instructive that in December 2004, when a tsunami unexpectedly ravaged the southern Indian Ocean, India’s maritime response was exemplary yet little noticed. Indian ships and assets were the first to arrive in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka even while providing succour nearer home. This was enabled by the close coordination between the naval higher command and the highest levels of the national security apparatus. However, this element failed in Mumbai in November 2008.

Thus the abiding challenge for managing India’s complex and wide-spectrum maritime security challenges will be to hone these institutional skills and acquire that elusive, pro-active, maritime/naval ethos at the national level and into higher defence decision-making, before the next exigency arises, so that the collective response is appropriate, affordable and effective.

In the fairy-tale, Cinderella had a happy ending, but it is moot if the Indian Navy will be similarly transformed.