

INTERNATIONAL FLEET REVIEW (IFR) SERIES

Visakhapatnam and the Indian Navy: An Enduring Relationship

Author: G.Padmaja*

Date: 14 January 2016

The city of Visakhapatnam on India's east coast in the state of Andhra Pradesh stands on the threshold of history. Its name will be etched forever in golden letters in world maritime history when it hosts the International Fleet Review (IFR) in February 2016. Interestingly, the city and the Indian Navy have always had an enduring relationship. The Eastern Naval Command with its Headquarters located in Visakhapatnam is the symbol of that continuing permanent relationship. This is poised to get stronger with India's 'Act East Policy' and the primacy being given to maritime diplomacy in addressing India's national interests. In fact the city had its tryst with destiny way back in December 12, 1939 when the first naval establishment in the Eastern seaboard was set up in Visakhapatnam by the colonial British Indian Government. This article revisits some of the naval milestones since then and argues that the city is poised to play a much greater role post IFR 2016.

The Milestones

The first naval establishment in the Eastern seaboard was set up in Visakhapatnam during the British colonial era. This was an assembly point for convoys and was commissioned at Visakhapatnam on December 12, 1939. It was christened as HMIS Circars on April 12, 1942. Realising the strategic importance of this naval establishment, the city was bombed by the Japanese during the Second World War in 1942. In 1943, a year after the Japanese

bombardment, the British colonial government established an ordinance transit depot and a repair yard at Visakhapatnam. Following India's independence, HMIS Circars was rechristened INS Circars. The Platinum Jubilee of INS Circars was celebrated on December 12, 2014 and was marked by many events and activities in the city.¹ Presently, INS Circars continues to provide administrative and logistics support not only to afloat and shore units but also to all naval personnel and their dependents residing in naval residential colonies stretching from Dolphin Hill to Naval Coast Battery on the Beach Road in Visakhapatnam.²

Significantly, the first four submarines of the Indian Navy which arrived between July 1968 and May 1970 were based in Visakhapatnam.³ INS Kalvari, Navy's first submarine entered Visakhapatnam on July 6, 1968. It was here that the submarine arm of the Indian Navy was first established along with their support and training infrastructure. The city also has a submarine museum, the first of its kind in South and Southeast Asia. It is named Kurusura Submarine Museum after INS Kurusura, a Soviet built I-641 class submarine which was inducted into the Indian Navy on December 18, 1969. It was one of the first four submarines acquired by Indian navy and saw action in 1971 war. The same was decommissioned on 28, February 2001 after 31 years of service to the nation. This submarine has been transformed into a museum and is placed on the Beach Road in Visakhapatnam since August 2002.⁴

The Eastern Naval Command (ENC) came into being on March 01, 1968 and its Headquarters is located at Visakhapatnam. This command is responsible for safeguarding India's interests in the geopolitically strategic eastern seaboard and beyond. The Eastern Naval Command is unique on two counts in that it is the largest geographical command of the Indian armed forces extending from the Sunderbans in the North, to the Gulf of Mannar in the South; and it is the only command that operates nuclear propelled platforms. The ENC today is characterised by a strong and balanced blue water Eastern Fleet, a modern flotilla for local naval defence, a powerful submarine arm, a formidable air arm, a versatile dockyard and various other outposts spread across the East coast, all operating seamlessly to further India's maritime interests.⁵

Visakhapatnam also has the War Memorial at R.K. Beach Road to pay a fitting tribute to mark the supreme sacrifice that led to the 'Victory at Sea' during the 1971 Indo-Pak conflict. The Eastern Fleet which was set up barely a month before the war played a key role in the Eastern theatre. This included not only the bombardment of strategic targets in

the erstwhile East Pakistan but also amphibious landings, sinking of the submarine PNS Ghazi, blockade of ports and cutting off escape routes for troops that may have fled by sea to the west. Indian naval ships also contributed to minesweeping efforts after the war to keep the ports open for trade.⁶

The ENC has always been working for the citizen's welfare, safety and security in difficult situations faced by the city. On September 14, 1997, a massive 'open vapour explosion' and fire at Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited (HPCL), Visakhapatnam resulted in flames and toxic smoke that led to a state of emergency at the refinery. The ENC responded immediately and was at the forefront of firefighting operations which helped avert a major calamity. The ENC also played a major role in the relief operations in the city in October 2014, following the widespread devastation caused by super cyclone 'Hudhud' where wind speed crossed 235 km per hour.

India's Maritime Diplomacy and Visakhapatnam

Presently, the Asia –Pacific region is considered as the growth engine of the world. However, this region has many unresolved questions and historical differences regarding maritime boundaries which raise concerns regarding unhindered access to the seas and oceans. The region is also seeing the emergence of new powers giving it fluidity and leading to instability. India is collaborating with many countries in this region, building strategic partnerships and convergences on the issues of maritime security. Nearly 50% of India's trade passes through this region, and in a globalised world, India wants to ensure an enabling external environment which is supportive of India's growth, development and security. India's Look East policy which has been upgraded to 'Act East' policy reflects these interests. ASEAN and the East Asia Summit are at the centre of India's increased engagement with this region. India is part of 26 dialogues mechanisms of ASEAN and India enjoys an irritant free relation with all the 10 ASEAN countries. India maintains that following international laws and norms is important for peace and stability in the maritime domain and the 1982 UN Convention on Law of the Sea, should be the basis for resolving disputes peacefully. Further India was hopeful that the efforts to conclude a Code of Conduct on the South China Sea by a process of consensus would soon be successful.⁷

In such a scenario, collective and collaborative approaches to respond to maritime challenges have assumed greater importance. The Eastern Naval Command thus has an important role in implementing these collaborative approaches. Consequently the city too

has come into limelight and has benefitted from such approaches. Most notable of these been the bilateral exercise named AUSINDEX off Visakhapatnam in September 2015, which saw the participation of Australian surface and submarine combatants for the first time. The Australian warship and submarine also entered harbour for familiarisation, did joint exercise planning ashore and engaged with the Eastern Naval Command shore units, indicating a high level of mutual confidence and bonhomie. The ships of various navies have regularly visited Visakhapatnam. In May 2014, two Chinese Navy ships - the training ship *Zeng He* and the latest missile frigate *Wei Fang* – docked at the city and interacted with the personnel of the Eastern Naval Command. The French navy also showcased its capabilities of amphibious warfare and Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief (HADR) potential along with a practical demonstration. The Singapore naval landing ship *Endeavour* visited Visakhapatnam in September 2015 and gainfully interacted with the Indian naval professionals.⁸

Visakhapatnam - Host City of International Fleet Review 2016

The tradition of fleet review began in the 15th century in Great Britain and has since been followed by many countries. These events are a show of naval strength, an assurance to the supreme commander that the navy will safeguard the security of the country, and in democracies like India they also symbolise that power lies with the people. Traditionally, the President of India reviews the Indian naval fleet once during his tenure in office. For the citizens of the city chosen for such fleet reviews, it is a moment of great pride. So far, India has held 10 Presidential reviews of the fleet. Except the ninth Presidential Fleet Review (FFR) which was held on February 13, 2006 in Visakhapatnam, all have been held on the western coast off Mumbai.

The IFR on the other hand is an international event. It serves to provide a platform for participating navies to interact with each other, strengthen bridges of friendship, discuss the maritime challenges facing them and explore the mechanisms to address them through a united approach. The first International Fleet Review (IFR) in India was held in 2001 in Mumbai. The IFR to be held in Visakhapatnam in February 2016 will be the second such event in India. The theme of the International Fleet Review (IFR) is ‘United Through Oceans’. Naval ships of more than 50 countries will be docking in Visakhapatnam. The President and Prime Minister of India, the Governor and Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Central and State ministers, along with innumerable national and international dignitaries

will visit the city. Several events are planned for the general public which include performances by naval bands of various countries at a number of venues in the city. Besides, an IFR village and innovation pavilion at the Andhra University (AU) Engineering grounds, and the operational demonstration and international city parade at Beach Road would be the other highlights. Slated to be the biggest event hosted by the city so far, this international event will boost the city's tourism and economy and will forever put Visakhapatnam's name not only in the nation's maritime history but also in the maritime history of the world.

Conclusion

As India's maritime diplomacy for cooperative and collaborative approaches in the Asia Pacific increase, ENC will become more active and consequently the city of Visakhapatnam will host international naval delegations. The city will be part of the critical global maritime narratives and debates. It is believed that the city got its name after the 'God of Valour', 'Visakha', the son of Shiva and Parvati and ruler of the planet Mars and the God of War⁹. The Eastern Naval Command too symbolises, 'valour'. IFR is the crowning glory which marks a continuum to the spirit of 'valour' and a beginning of another glorious chapter for the city and for the Indian Navy.

* G.Padmaja is Regional Director, National Maritime Foundation, Visakhapatnam Chapter. The views expressed are her own and do not reflect the official policy or position of the NMF. She can be reached at sri2003ja@yahoo.com

Notes and References

¹ "Chronicling Visakhapatnam's little known facts from the past", *The Times of India*, November 18, 2013, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/visakhapatnam/Chronicling-Visakhapatnams-little-known-facts-from-the-past/articleshow/25963017.cms> , (accessed on November 25, 2015) This establishment borrows its unique name from the title of the Nizam of Hyderabad, who ruled this land and were addressed as 'Circars' (His Highness). Areas under the Nizam's jurisdiction were collectively referred to as a Circars or belonging to the 'Circar'. The first naval establishment on the Eastern Seaboard was named 'Circars', a title befitting a depot ship.

² 'Eastern Naval Command to Celebrate Platinum Jubilee of INS Circars', *Press trust of India*, July 28, 2014, <HTTP://WWW.NDTV.COM/INDIA-NEWS/EASTERN-NAVAL-COMMAND-TO-CELEBRATE-PLATINUM-JUBILEE-OF-INS-CIRCARS-594943> (accessed on November 21, 2015)

³ The Submarine Arm (chapter 16), in "Transition to Triumph", Published by Indian Navy, <http://indiannavy.nic.in/book/submarine-arm> (accessed on November 19, 2015)

⁴ G.S.Subrahmanyam, "Man behind submarine museum felicitated", *The Hindu*, September 10, 2014, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/man-behind-submarine-museum-at-visakhapatnam-felicitated/article6397941.ece> (accessed on November 21, 2015) ; Visakhapatnam Urban Development Authority (VUDA), Kurusura Submarine Museum, "Kurusura Submarine Museum- the Underwater Experience on Surface".

http://www.vuda.gov.in/kurusra_submarine_museum.html (accessed on November 20, 2015)

⁵ The Eastern Shield, A Pictorial Essay on the Eastern Naval Command, (Published by Headquarters, Eastern Naval Command), 2014, Visakhapatnam. Pg 12.

⁶ Commodore Srikant B Kesnur, 'A Navy that Dares, a Navy that Cares', *The Times of India*, December 4, 2015, Visakhapatnam edition, pg 6

⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Prime Minister's Remarks at the 9th East Asia Summit, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar", November 13, 2014, <http://www.meaindia.gov.in/Statements.htm?dtl/24238/Prime%20Ministers%20remarks%20at%20the%209th%20East%20Asia%20Summit%20Nay%20Pyi%20Taw%20Myanmar> , (accessed on November 14, 2015)

⁸ Commander Kamlesh K Agnihotri, 'Looking East, Indian Maritime Diplomacy', *The Times of India*, December 4, 2014, Visakhapatnam edition, Navy Day Supplementary, pg 2.

⁹ Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) , Visakhapatnam chapter, "History of Vizag," <http://www.intachvizag.org/historyofvizag/index.html> (accessed on November 22, 2015)