

VIVA VINDHYAGIRI

Commodore Srikant B Kesnur



Introduction

If good news comes in small discreet packages, the 'not so good' news also often come in silently, unobtrusively and delivers a sucker punch. Earlier it was the dreaded telegram, these days it is the omnipresent email. An innocuous one in my inbox said it all – INS Vindhyagiri to be decommissioned on 10 Jun 12. A simple one line that seemed to reverberate across my entire being and send me in deep shock even though there was a sense of the approaching end. A single line that was the trigger for a million memories of my wonderful time on board. They all come back in a flood now, as though I want to cherish them once more as though I want to hold onto them forever. I do not know where to begin and how to end but try I must to give my final salute to the beautiful lady. Invariably such thoughts come in a jumble, with little coherence or logical progression except for the fact that they are all underpinned by the Vindhyagiri experience.



So, dear reader, I ask you to bear this as you would bear the speech of a slightly tipsy speaker trying to make sense of a sudden new development.

By Naval standards, I had a long tenure of 20 months in Command - from Jul 2004 to Mar 2006 - and consequently was able to see a full Ops cycle, take her through a Normal Refit (NR) and then get her out to participate in the President's Fleet Review (PFR). There were many highs, an annual inspection after almost a decade in which we came out with flying colours, the first operational deployment of the UAVs in conjunction with our sister ship Taragiri, PFR 2006 in Vizag and so on and so forth. But life would be one-dimensional if we simply looked at the operational salients. I am thankful for the many other small but significant things that the ship gave me – the friendship and association with some of the finest Officers and men, a long legacy and history of many illustrious predecessors, fine lines that were a joy to behold when seen at anchorage or from the air, perfect shiphandling characteristics that made novices and amateurs feel less intimidated and a firm deck that did not shudder at the slightest swell. In short, she had the knack of, simultaneously, making you feel comfortable and yet possessing the aura of a warship.

They say that a first Command is like the first love of your life - no matter what happens subsequently, you will never forget 'pehla pyaar'. I remember, as cadets on board the old Beas in mid eighties, of the experience when Taragiri and Vindhyagiri visited Kochi. We watched open mouthed as they approached, they seemed so huge and graceful. We were awe struck by their equipment, ops room, AIO (DS 22) and missiles (Sea Cat) when we were taken on a conducted tour. The COs were senior Captains, much looked up to and they seemed to walk on air, not ground. As they departed, they did so in a spectacular swashbuckling manner (possibly to impress) leaving behind a permanent impression in our minds. These memories came back when, nineteen years later, I assumed Command of

Vindhyagiri. In fact a close friend reminded me of those 'awe struck' impressions when he came on board and we had a nostalgic walk down the memory lane. It made me feel simultaneously proud and humble, savouring the present while murmuring a silent 'thank you' to the past.

For long the preserve of four-strippers, I was the second Commander to be at the helm and naturally there was a humungous sense of excitement, a sort of dream come true quality to the first few days I spent on board. While the mundane day to day activities soon took hold thereafter, that sense of excitement never ceased until the last day. It was, therefore, natural that when I came home on the last day after handing over, I suddenly felt empty and jilted and did not know what to do.

The refit during my time saw a whole lot of the initial ops rooms equipment (DS 22) taken out for new Nav and EW systems. With the UAV control suite she had a handsome and leaner look about her. The refurbished wardroom, mess decks and re-done alleyway spaces provided for snazzy interiors. There was an interesting sidelight to this – Viraat was in refit at the same time and Navy had recently adopted the practice of outsourcing the refurbishment of mess decks to private agencies albeit within certain budgetary constraints. In our exuberance and eagerness we bid for the same package in our sailors' mess decks as planned for the aircraft carrier. The ASD was concerned enough to ask me - Who do you think you are, Billoo Chauhan (the then CO Viraat and now VAdm and Commandant INA)? I had to summon up all my nerve to tell him that while I could not hold a candle to Capt Chauhan there is no reason my sailors deserved less than his. To cut a long story short, and happily for us, the ASD agreed and we were able to provide the best for our men. The one Captain's privilege I sought and got was to have a chair installed in the mast just below the crow's nest consequent to some old equipment being removed. The LO was kind enough to provide a microphone connection to the bridge and armed with that I would spend hours in the nook particularly during independent sorties with many books and a thermos full of coffee for company. From there one got to see





the sea in myriad moods, to ruminate life's existential dilemmas and otherwise to simply shoot the breeze. I associate many such unique and serendipitous experiences with Vindhyagiri. Like the time we were in Porbandar for Navy day 2004. Multitudes thronged the ship when it was kept open for visitors. But the most poignant scene was when a group of visually handicapped students visited the ship. I was wary and wondered how my crew would conduct their visit, for not everyone can be sensitive to such situations and any inadvertent slip up would boomerang badly. But the men responded so wonderfully that each of the visitors was given a detailed description (running commentary would be more apt) of the ship and allowed to run their hands on the upper deck equipment they fancied. My prize memory is of one who lovingly caressed every inch of the ship's bell and later told me that the men had brought the ship alive in their imagination. When the students left the ship they did an impromptu jig singing songs praising the ship's company.

I can think of many such incidents – each one indelibly embellished in mind. One can go on but many of these need to be saved for a fireside chat with likeminded friends. What is it that brings a group of men together, puts them through good and tough situations and brings out their many qualities? While leadership, training, background, etc are the intangible attributes in any situation, the glue is provided by the environment, by the ship and all that it engenders. For any Navy man, ultimately, it is about what vibes the ship radiates and what secret little things she whispers. Vindhyagiri, that beautiful dame, had radiance all around, a sort of friendly vibe that took anyone who stepped on her into her bosom and

bestowed much love and affection. For many, including me, she has been an incredibly lucky ship. To me, it was this luck, this charm, this magnanimity, which made it possible for everybody to be safe after the accident last year. To our relief and many others' amazement, despite being felled by an unkind cut, she also rose to the occasion, one last time to command a befitting farewell.

A twist of fate, a quirk of destiny has hastened her end. It might seem cruel (Ah! The cruelty of it all!) to send her as a target to end up in Davy Jones locker. My heart will weep at the thought that there will be no remnants of her in any form. But looked at it the other way, she is spared the ignominy of heartlessly being towed to the breaker's yard and ending up in your shaving kit. Even in her last breath she would be of service to the Navy. She will go down in her natural surroundings at sea, having served more than 30 years for the Indian Navy. What more can one ask of her?

Goodbye, my fair lady, goodbye. Tread softly and gracefully as you always did. The 'mournful sound of waves will accompany you to the boundless depth of oceans'. And while, in the words of Tennyson, 'you may hope to see your pilot face to face' there will indeed be 'sadness and farewell as you embark on your final journey beyond limits of time and space.' But redemption is at hand. We Indians believe in rebirth and karma. We are sure that the new 'Vindhyagiri' is already a gleam in the eye of the creator. We wait to welcome her and to see in her, all your good qualities. Until then, for all that you did and gave to us; here is a grateful final salute from one of those blessed to serve on board. Alvida, farewell thee and may the force always be with you.

BONNE BOUCHE

- ★ I was going to look for my missing watch, but I could never find the time.
- ★ A hole has been found in the nudist camp wall. The police are looking into it.
- ★ Atheism is a non-prophet organisation.





ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Commodore Srikant B Kesnur, an alumnus of the National Defence Academy, Khadakvasla was commissioned into the Indian Navy on 01 July 86. A specialist in Naval Communications and Electronic Warfare, he has held numerous operational and sea going appointments including the command of INS Vindhyagiri, an Anti-Submarine frigate from 2004 to 2006. He holds Masters Degrees in History, Telecommunications, Defence and Strategic Studies and Philosophy as well as a Post Graduate Diploma in Mass Communications from various Indian universities. A graduate from the Defence Services Staff College where he won the Lentaigne Medal, he attended the 20th NHCC at the College of Naval Warfare, Mumbai. He has also been the Directing Staff and Head of Naval Training Team at the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington. Prior to his current assignment as the Deputy Commandant and Senior DS of the Naval War College, he was the Defence Advisor at Nairobi, Kenya. A frequent writer in several in-house journals and magazines, he has also edited several of them including two Coffee Table books for the Navy. He has presented many professional papers at various fora and is presently pursuing his PhD from Mumbai University.

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