

‘Vikrant’ to ‘Vikrant’ — The extraordinary journey

This piece discusses India’s indigenous aircraft carrier programme from the beginning and how India’s carrier ambition took place post independence.



IAC-1 Vikrant with INS Kolkata (D63) during sea trials

The 2 September 2022 was a red letter day for India as the Prime Minister Narendra Modi commissioned the first indigenous aircraft carrier INS Vikrant. During the same event he unveiled the new ‘Naval Ensign’ as well. It is the fourth carrier ever operated by the navy and the largest warship ever made in the country indigenously. Designed by the Warship Design Bureau and constructed by the Cochin Shipyard Limited (CSL), the INS Vikrant has a displacement of around 45,000 tonnes. The 262 meter long ship can carry 30 aircraft and features STOBAR (short take-off but arrested recovery) configuration.

The strategic requirement of an aircraft carrier was articulated in the first Naval Plans Paper of 1947! Under the fifteen year plan for refurbishing post Independence, four fleet carriers were recommended to maintain India’s dominance at sea and protect maritime interests. However, several

reasons soon forced the navy to abandon the highly ambitious plan in favour of a much approachable a revised six year plan and only a single light fleet carrier was planned by 1954. Just for the reference, for a time a second carrier had also been planned to be procured by 1956 but was abandoned. The need of a carrier was accepted in 1956 and navy eyed a British Majestic Class platform, the HMS Hercules. The procurement was approved on 30 April 1957 and renamed as Vikrant. INS Vikrant was commissioned into on 4 March 1961 and it entered the Indian waters on 3 November same year only to witness war of ‘Goa Liberation’ from the Portuguese colonial power. Thus the first aircraft carrier of Asia, in a post WW 2 era, saw military action in the bud of its service! Ten years later it would lead operation in the Bay of Bengal paving the way for Indian victory and liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. At that time it featured CATOBAR (Catapult Assisted Take-Off But Arrested

Recovery). The navy got her second aircraft carrier when a British Contour Class vehicle, the HMS Hermes was sold to India in 1986. HMS Hermes was a Vertical/Short Take-Off and Land (V/STOL) configured platform. The Vikrant would later be modified to this configuration in 1989. Vikrant was commissioned by the Indian Navy on 12 May 1987. Since then it witnessed several military operations. India got her third carrier on 16 November 2013 when INS Vikramaditya was commissioned. Originally known as Admiral Gorshkov, an ‘Aircraft Cruiser’ as the Soviet’s called, had been modified and sold to the Indian Navy on 20 January 2004. It became the first carrier in India to feature STOBAR (Short Take-Off But Arrested Recovery) system followed by indigenous INS Vikrant in coming years. But in the meantime two earlier carriers bid adieu to the service. INS Vikrant was decommissioned on 31 January 1997 and Vikramaditya on 6 March 2017. So