

INS Khukri: The Loss, the Finding, and the New Controversy

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Background [*Ravi Rikhye*]

Vice Admiral S.N. Kolhi
FOC Western Naval Command (Bombay)

14TH FRIGATE SQUADRON
Captain M.N. Mullah

INS *Khukri* (Flag)
INS *Kirpan*
INS *Kuthar*

The squadron sailed for Karachi on December 2, 1971, as part of the Western Fleet. The Fleet had several tasks in the Arabian Sea. Among them was the strike at Karachi, the attack on Gwader, and a restrike at Karachi. The Fleet also was tasked to blockade Pakistan's Makran Coast, seize merchant shipping heading for Pakistan, block any Pakistani surface/submarine attack against the Indian coast and coastal shipping all the way from the Kutch to Cochin.

Included in the Fleet was the Karachi strike force, composed of 4 Osa I missile boats escorted by two Peyta frigates.

On December 4, as the force approached the outer limits of Karachi's air defenses (about 250 kilometers to sea), Kuthar suffered an engine-room explosion. It was decided Kirpan would tow her back to Bombay. One of the Osa missile boats also became disabled, and a fleet tanker with the task force was detailed for her tow. Khukri was to escort the 4 ships, providing protection against Pakistan Navy submarines known to be in the general area.

This was a serious setback for the Western Fleet, and its impact on the rest of the war has never been appropriately discussed or analyzed. One setback was



the Western Fleet was forced to return to Bombay by a circuitous route to evade enemy submarines, and it did not reach port till December 13. This may have been a factor in delaying readiness of the replenished/refueled/repaid main fleet, if we can call it that, until it became known that Pakistan Eastern Command had decided to surrender, and only haggling over terms remained, and also Pakistan was fully alert and looking for the Fleet, the next operation was abandoned.

Nonetheless, Khukri's presence proved beneficial: on December 5 she chased off a sonar contact by firing her depth charges, and she shepherded her charges into Bombay on December 6 without further incident.

On December 8, Khukri and Kirpan were ordered out to counter Pakistani submarines known to be in the area, and to provide cover for the withdrawing main fleet.

On the night of December 9/10, Khukri fell to a Pakistan submarine about 35 nautical miles SW of Diu. The official unpublished history says three torpedoes hit the frigate – Sandeep Unnithan's account, written in 2005, provides a different picture and has the benefit of additional sources.

What was not revealed at the time was that Khukri, despite the known presence of Pakistani submarines, did not undertake evasive action and was sailing a straight course. No reason other than careless has been adduced to date.

Ironically, one of the warships assigned to the search for survivors and to hunt the Pakistani killer was Kathur. Either the boiler-room damage had been repaired or she sailed partially impaired because of the urgency.

An immediate consequence of the sinking was the hotly opposed decision by the commander of the Mysore task group to abandon its attack on Gwader. Other ships' captains tried to persuade the Flag to press on to Gwader; but of course it was his decision to make. There was considerable internal criticism within the Navy of the decision. Yet, who can say what would have happened if Mysore had pressed on. Likely it would have made to Gwader and back, as Pakistan's three Daphne boats were in the northwest corner of the Arabian Sea. At the same time, Mysore's escorts were old, and the Daphnes were modern and capable. The ease with which the Pakistani submarine had disposed of Khukri would definitely impose caution. Mysore herself was a large and sturdy warship, and could have survived multiple hits. But the escorts would not have been so lucky.

Eighteen years later a new Khukri joined the Fleet, as the first of the Indian-built Type 25 Corvettes. With a displacement similar to that of her predecessor, the new ship carries a crew only a third as large.

Khukri's Loss, Finding, and the New Controversy

It was December 9, 1971. The Indian Navy had just fired the first two devastating salvos

of the Indo-Pak war, launching missile attacks on Karachi, sinking and crippling Pakistani warships and merchantmen and setting the port ablaze. Hundreds of miles south of this naval battle, off Diu, two anti-submarine frigates had been sent on a mission to search and destroy a Pakistani submarine lurking in the vicinity.

Shortly after 8 p.m., Shiv Bhagwan, a sailor on watch duty on the frigate *INS Kirpan*, looked out to his left and saw the *Kirpan*'s sister ship *Khukri* cruising in the pitch black night with her lights switched off. But he wasn't the only one looking. Five kilometres away, some 60 m under water, lieutenant commander Ahmad Tasneem of the Pakistan Navy began to slide into the water. There was panic. Even as crewmen from the *Khukri* leapt overboard, the *Hangor* fired a third torpedo at the *Kirpan*, which dashed away into the night quickly avoiding it.



One hundred and ninety four crewmen, including the *Khukri*'s captain Mahendra Nath Mulla died . Only 67 crewmen could be pulled out of the sea when the *Kirpan* returned the following morning

For 33 years since that fateful night, the *Khukri* has continued to be the nation's sorrow. India's single largest wartime casualty lies at the sandy bottom of the Arabian Sea, covered by a thick layer of silt deposited on it over three decades. This was perhaps one reason why at least three expeditions in the past five years could not locate her.

This included the most exhaustive attempt at locating the wreck when the survey ship *INS* images thus obtained was of a huge silt-covered hump on the seabed some 80 m under water, close to the *Khukri*'s last reported position, more than 40 km south of Diu. It was no ordinary lump of silt as the magnetometer which ran over it confirmed the presence of steel inside. The object was nearly 300 ft long, had a north-east south-west orientation and seemed to be sitting on its keel with its mast sticking out of the silt. "The orientation, length and breadth of the sonar image lead us to believe that we have the *Khukri*," says a senior naval officer. It was a fitting discovery for the Hydrography Department which is celebrating its golden jubilee this year. The exact location of the wreck is being kept a secret to protect it from private divers, as the navy debates what exactly it wants to do with the wreck: dive and explore, or leave it undisturbed.

How significant was the sinking of the *Khukri*? For one, it prevented the western fleet from launching a third debilitating missile attack on Karachi. All fleet assets were instead thrown into Operation Falcon, the unsuccessful hunt for the *Hangor* which lasted till the war ended. The *Khukri*'s sinking, one of only two warships to have been

sunk by a submarine since the Second World War, has heavily influenced naval strategies on both sides. While the Pakistan's Navy has continued to invest heavily in submarines, the Indian Navy has accorded priority to the anti-submarine warfare capability of its surface ships.

To be able to even see the wreck of the 1500-tonne frigate first, divers would have to clear the silt using water jets. This is where concerns have been raised by a section of naval brass. The wreck is a war grave holding the remains of crewmen. Diving on it and clearing the silt would mean disturbing the grave. Admiral S.M. Nanda, who was navy chief when the ship sank, says firmly, "Leave the *Khukri* as she is." Vice-Admiral Vinod Pasricha, however, advocates raising the wreck. "After all, the (Russian submarine) *Kursk* too was raised. Such an operation can give us insights into salvaging a sunken warship." "We know she was torpedoed but you must remember that warships are built for watertight integrity. Even with one hit she should have been able to limp back to port," says former chief of navy staff (CNS), admiral Ram Tahiliani. But the *Khukri* did not. She went down quickly leaving mysteries relating to its sinking: where exactly did the torpedo strike the fatal blow? And, how did a ship at action stations—which meant all watertight compartments were shut to prevent flooding—flood and sink so quickly on a single hit?

"One must never disturb the dead," says former CNS admiral O.S. Dawson, "however, it is worth sending a recce dive to see where and how much damage was caused by that torpedo." The knowledge gained from such an expedition could potentially outweigh such sentimental sacrilege by influencing future ship building, particularly regarding the watertight integrity of surface ships. The *Khukri*, in its death, could well be the source of some life saving lessons. ■