

Significance of Civilizational Nautical Narratives in India's Maritime Diplomacy

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Examples of India's cultural and civilizational nautical linkages with the rest of the world built over centuries, have presently come to occupy a prominent place in India's maritime diplomacy. This issue brief tries to understand the reasons for this development. It spells out some of the civilizational and cultural narratives discussed by India's political leadership; and analyses the nature of 'continuum' between these cultural narratives and India's maritime strategy as it is spelt out presently.

The essay argues that most of these civilizational narratives have existed since long; however, it is only now that they are playing a strategic role for India in building relations with its maritime neighbours. This is because of two significant factors. First, they are now operating in the context of a well defined maritime strategy spelt out by a political leadership which has prioritised 'matters maritime'. Policies like SAGAR, SAGARMALA, Project Mausam, Act East and India as 'net security provider' - bring out the centrality of the oceans in a globalised world for India's economic and social development. Their underlying theme is cooperation, collaboration, freedom of navigation and respect for international law among maritime nations to build a 'favourable environment' to address the security challenges and tap economic opportunities related to the maritime domain.

Second, this maritime strategy has to be implemented in a world of uncertainty; and absence of well defined security architecture in the Indo-Pacific.¹ In such a scenario, India's maritime strategy is being emphatically articulated by its political leadership by weaving in the civilizational and cultural narratives which bring out that India as a maritime nation has always had a pervading global maritime influence through centuries. The idea conveyed is that India seeks to continue to influence the maritime debates in the present times too; and this will be done like in the past centuries without any domination or force. The aim is to stress on this historic

‘continuum’ in the Indian maritime narrative which has through centuries been characterised by ‘absence of coercion’, ‘celebrating diversity’, ‘respect for others cultural narratives’; and that India’s influence has always enriched the local people and society through centuries. This is especially significant at a time when competing maritime strategies are presented to maritime nations by countries vying for global leadership and influence. India wants to convey that whatever choices other countries may make, its actions will always be anchored on the values embedded in these civilizational and cultural narratives.

The Narratives

Delivering the keynote address in January 2017 at the 2nd International Conference on ASEAN-India Cultural and Civilizational Links, India’s Minister of State for External Affairs Gen (Dr) V K Singh (Retd.) said that India’s Act East Policy lay significant focus on the third pillar of the ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership which was ‘socio-cultural’; the other two pillars of cooperation being ‘political’ and ‘economic’. The conference was being held in Indonesia and the Indian Minister said that Indonesia had for long been the maritime bridge to South East Asia. He said that 2017 marks twenty-five years of Dialogue Partnership between India and ASEAN and the theme of the commemorative celebrations was ‘Shared Values, Common Destiny’. The theme aptly reflected the close cultural and civilizational links India and the countries of South East Asia enjoyed over the millennia. The Minister spelt out with examples, the civilizational linkages spanning art, architecture, language, religion, music, culture etc dating back to two millennia primarily spread through the seas. This, significantly, was not through conquest but essentially through non-political agents such as merchants and religious men.² Similar thoughts were echoed at the first International Conference on ‘ASEAN-India Cultural Links: Historical and Contemporary Dimensions’ held in New Delhi in July 2015, where India spelt out that it sought to not only strengthen the socio-cultural pillar but also wished to bring it to the forefront of their relationship.³

Earlier in February 2016, at the International Fleet Review in Visakhapatnam, the Indian Prime Minister delivered his speech overlooking the nearly 100 ships from 50 countries anchored off the Visakhapatnam coast. He emphasised that India had always been a maritime nation with a rich maritime heritage. Lothal in Gujarat was one of the earliest sea ports of the world; and India’s ancient Sanskrit texts refer to the oceans as the storehouse of 14 gems. He said that India’s central location in the Indian Ocean had connected the country with other cultures, and shaped not only its Maritime trade routes with Africa; Western Asia; the Mediterranean region; the West,

South East Asia and the Far East but also influenced India's strategic thought and defined its maritime character. In the same address, the Prime Minister also spelt out the economic and strategic importance of the oceans; the traditional and non-traditional security threats connected with the maritime domain; and his governments vision for the Indian Ocean, which he termed as SAGAR ie Security and Growth for All in the Region and which he had first articulated in Mauritius in March 2015.⁴

Much before SAGAR was articulated by India in March 2015, there was an important international conference held in Mauritius in November 2014. This was the International Conference on Indentured Labour Route Project. The indentured labour system had resulted in one of the largest mass movement of the Indian diaspora. Over 2.2 million indentured labourers, mostly from India moved through the seas to more than two dozen countries which included Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, Jamaica, Reunion Islands, Fiji, East Africa, Seychelles. Their descendants continue to make significant contributions in the countries their ancestors settled. In this context, the Indentured Labour Route Project would research and document the hitherto unknown experiences of the indentured labour; preserve and promote important sites; and also, disseminate information about the role played by indentured labour in shaping modern societies around the world. This strong Indian Diaspora spread across Oceans shows that India's cultural footprints stretch across Asia and Africa. ⁵

Mauritius was the first and largest recipient of indentured labour from India which landed over 180 years back. India's relation with Mauritius becomes that much more unique and extraordinary because of this shared historical and cultural heritage. No wonder then that, Modi first enunciated India's Indian Ocean strategy - SAGAR in Mauritius in March 2015. According to this, India with a coastline of 7,500kms would safeguard its mainland; 1,200 islands; and the 2.4 million sq kms Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). India seeks to deepen economic and security cooperation, especially with its maritime neighbours. For this, India would cooperate on exchange of information and coastal surveillance, building of infrastructure and strengthening their capabilities. India believes that it's through collective action and cooperation that peace can be advanced in the region and thus associations like IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) are important. Bringing out the importance and centrality of Blue Economy to India, the Indian Prime Minister said that the blue chakra or wheel in India's national flag represents the potential of Blue Revolution or the Ocean Economy. Lastly, he opined that those who are resident in the region ie the littoral

countries have the primary responsibility for peace, stability and prosperity in the Indian Ocean. ⁶

India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj in her address at an international conference on 'India and Indian Ocean: Renewing the Maritime Trade and Civilizational Linkages' in Bhubaneswar in March 2015, gave many examples of the civilizational linkages in the Indian Ocean region. She referred to the festival of 'Boitha Bandana' in Odisha where ships are worshipped. The practice began centuries earlier for the safe passage of ships, which would embark on long voyages to Sri Lanka, Bali, Java, Sumatra, Bornea, Malaya, Vietnam and also to China. She said that small 'krathongs' or boats on several streets of Bangkok sometime in November, remind one of the Boitha festival; and that similar cultural practises are evident in Indonesia when Mesakapan Ke Tukad is celebrated all across the different islands. The minister referred to many civilisational linkages, one of which was the image of the boat containing a giraffe in the Sun Temple in Konarak which shows India's civilizational linkages with Africa. The Minister then spelt out the importance of the Indian Ocean region for maritime trade and energy security; traditional and non-traditional maritime security issues in the Indian Ocean region; India's role in the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS); the multilateral naval congregation MILAN; the Contact Group on Piracy; the importance of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the six priority areas it has identified for cooperation. She also referred to SAGAR. ⁷

The Government of India's Ministry of Culture launched Project Mausam in June 2014. This was just after Prime Minister Modi assumed office but much before he articulated his maritime vision. Project Mausam aims to understand the manner in which the knowledge of the monsoon winds shaped interactions across the Indian Ocean which led to the spread of shared knowledge systems, traditions, technologies and ideas along maritime routes. Thus, its research will extend from East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Indian Subcontinent and Sri Lanka to the Southeast Asian archipelago. Not only will maritime routes be researched upon and be documented but also the cultural landscapes which arose in the coastal areas and their hinterlands. ⁸

Strategic Continuum in the Cultural Narratives

These narratives should be seen in the larger context of the conduct of foreign policy by the present government which as it says is based on the '3 C mantra' ie Commerce, Culture and Connectivity. Elaborating it, Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj says , "Broadly speaking, sustained dialogue, promoting economic prosperity,

enhancing India's prestige and national honour, bolstering security and promoting India's cultural and civilizational values are the five core principles that animate the foreign policy of our government".⁹ Therefore, it is observed that even in conducting maritime diplomacy, which is but part of the larger conduct of diplomacy there is a deliberate and conscious effort to emphasise the maritime cultural and civilizational linkages.

However, the reference to India's rich maritime tradition and civilizational linkages is not done in a vacuum but in the context of a well defined maritime vision ie Act East Policy; SAGAR; India 'as a net security provider'; SAGARMALA; and Project Mausam. This is to subtly communicate that just like India had been at the centre of maritime activity in the ancient period, presently too it seeks a larger and deeper footprint in the maritime domain. Further, that India aspires to be a leading maritime power and is ready to shoulder greater global responsibilities with commitment to 'cooperation', 'collaboration', 'connectivity', 'respect for International Laws' and 'a shared security architecture'.

Thus, the civilizational narratives are woven into the contemporary maritime vision to emphasize the natural continuum of a rich maritime tradition the country has inherited. Also, there is an effort to institutionalise the cultural linkages to make it relevant to the present time so that they can contribute to building and strengthening modern partnerships. For example:

- India's Act East Policy is contextualised with its civilizational Linkages with South East Asia. Further, the Mekong Ganga Cooperation aims at reviving cooperation between the peoples of the Mekong and Ganga River basins in the field of tourism, education, culture and people to people contacts. The MGC Museum of Asian Textiles was inaugurated to showcase affinities in weaving and textiles in the two regions. Another project is the re-establishment of the Nalanda University where centuries earlier scholars from around the world including South East Asia and India had exchanged knowledge and ideas.
- India relations with Mauritius become extremely special because of the experiences and contribution of indentured labour from India. Thus, India's Indian Ocean vision - SAGAR is first articulated in Mauritius. Also, India wholeheartedly supports the Indentured Labour Route Project.
- The blue colour in Ashoka Chakra in the Indian Flag, India's commitment to Blue Economy and the skill development program for the youth of coastal communities are thus knit together.

- Lothal in India as one of the earliest seaports in the world and India's SAGARMALA programme of port led development¹⁰ are seen as a natural continuum.
- Project Mausam aims to re-trace the ancient maritime routes and re-connect and re-establish communication between countries of the Indian Ocean. However, an important question arises as to - Why should these routes be re-traced? Doing so will help in building modern partnerships as it will emerge that India's maritime civilizational linkages with Africa, Asia and Europe were developed not through military conquest but primarily through traders both Hindus and Muslims; and religious men including Buddhist monks. In this context, India's contemporary maritime strategies will have greater credibility, acceptability and that it is non-hegemon. Most important Project Mausam will celebrate 'connectivity', 'interdependence' and 'diversity' at a time many countries in the West want to retreat from 'globalisation' and are becoming 'inward-looking'.
- Most of the world's shipping transits through the Indian Ocean and ensuring security of ISLs has become important for all countries including India. Thus, when security is available, a favourable and positive maritime environment will emerge where threats are low; and even if they arise they can be prevented and contained. By helping shape a favourable and positive maritime environment, India becomes a 'net security provider'¹¹. The findings of Project Mausam will contribute to India's role as an effective 'net security provider'; for Project Mausam seeks to re-connect and re-establish communication between countries of the Indian Ocean which will then contribute to building positive partnerships and consequently a favourable environment.

Conclusion

The essay brings out the manner in which civilizational linkages and cultural narratives have been strategically woven into contemporary maritime strategy by India to build beneficial global partnerships and claim leadership role in the maritime domain. In its present form, this strategy is heavily dependent on its effective articulation by the political leadership. To overcome this limitation, the academia and stakeholders from the maritime domain should now focus on the strategic continuum between civilizational linkages and maritime strategy. For this, the reports of Project Mausam; Indentured Labour Route Project; Mekong-Ganga Cooperation and many more should be discussed and disseminated. These then will be incorporated into the already present cultural narratives and contribute to the goals of India's maritime strategy.

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