

Building India's Maritime Resurgence Through Citizen Engagement

Author: Kapil Narula*
Date: 13 July 2016

A strong push has been given to the maritime agenda in India since the swearing in of Prime Minister Modi. This is evident from the range of initiatives taken by the Indian government such as Maritime India Summit-2016, announcement of 'Sagarmala' project, the push for the 'Blue Economy' agenda, outreach efforts such as Project 'Mausam' and the conduct of International Fleet Review 2016, to name a few. While the intent of the government is evident, a maritime resurgence in India requires the acceptance of the philosophy of being a maritime nation and an involvement by the citizens of India.

Maritime awareness amongst the people of the country plays a key role in building a maritime nation and the maritime thought needs to permeate to the citizens. Building such a maritime culture requires a much larger impetus and effort from the institutions of the country and it is this area in which India needs to improve. Historically India had a maritime outlook and even today 90 per cent of India's international trade in terms of volume and 77 per cent in terms of value is moved by sea. However, it appears that as a nation, the maritime thought is somewhat restricted to the

coastal areas and the people of the heartland have a predominantly continental mindset. The oceans are still seen as being far away, both literally and figuratively from the centre of governance and the seat of power which is concentrated in New Delhi. It is therefore no surprise that the maritime flavour appears in spurts in the policies and initiatives of the Indian government.

World Ocean Day (WOD) celebrated every year on June 08, provides us with an occasion to raise global awareness of the intrinsic value of the oceans and to educate the public on the role and importance of the oceans for life on earth. It is an opportunity to get involved in protecting the oceans by raising consciousness of how human lives depend on the oceans. The theme for WOD, 2015-16 is 'Healthy Oceans, Healthy Planet', which highlights the need to maintain healthy oceans as they are essential for food security, biodiversity, as regulators of climate and are a critical part of the biosphere. Activities such as beach cleanups, educational programs, photography contests, film and seafood festivals are organized the world over to engage the public through personal and community action. This year's theme finds resonance with the freshly minted Sustainable Development Goal 14 by the United Nations on the oceans viz. "Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development".

However, there appears to be a lack of enthusiasm among the civil society and specialised agencies in organising events to engage the citizens of the country. In effect there has been no major event to celebrate the WOD and an opportunity for spreading awareness on the importance of oceans for life on earth may have been missed. In contrast this day was celebrated in countries such as Australia, US, Europe, Southeast Asia and Latin America in support with various aquariums, civil society, the UNESCO and various national governments. The role of social media was also valuable and the event found a significant mention on Twitter, Instagram and online media. Various celebrities including the White House joined in spreading the message of ocean conservation via the visual media such as CNN and the National Geographic. Such dynamism was sadly missing in the Indian context.

The month of June is also important for the maritime community as June 25 is celebrated as the 'Day of the Seafarer'. The campaign theme adopted by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) this year is, "At Sea For All" to highlight the important role of the seafarers in the world economy. In the words of IMO Secretary-General Kitack Lim: "this year, we are once again asking people everywhere to show their appreciation for the seafarers that quietly, mostly unnoticed, keep the wheels of the world in motion". The theme for the 'Day of the Seafarer' this year is aligned with the 2016 World Maritime Day theme, "Shipping: Indispensable to the World" and emphasizes that seafarers serve at sea for providing goods and commodities to all of us – and, consequently, they are also indispensable to the world.

The worldwide population of seafarers in 2015 was estimated to be around 774,000 officers and 873,000 ratings. The total number of seafarers has increased by 34 per cent between 2005 and 2010 and further by 24 per cent from 2010 to 2015, due to the growth of the international shipping fleet and the demand for seafarers is anticipated to further grow over the next 10 years. China, Philippines, Indonesia, Russian Federation, Ukraine and India are the largest suppliers of seafarers who serve on the world merchant fleet of 68,723 ships. India has a registered strength of 62,673 seafarers and contributes significantly to the officer cadre after China and the Philippines. Despite an improvement in recruitment and reductions in officer wastage rates over the past five years, BIMCO manpower report on the global supply and demand of seafarers - 2015 predicts that the deficit in the officer cadre is likely to increase from the current 2.1 per cent to 18.3 per cent by 2025.

This outlook hints that in order to overcome the shortage that there should be a focus on the supply of qualified and competent seafarers in the future which cannot happen without concerted efforts and measures to address key manpower issues. India which has the benefit of favourable demography would do well by generating awareness on maritime issues for the millions of trained English speaking young men and women entering the workforce every year. This also needs to be followed up with sound training with hands on experience for these trainees so as to enhance their employment opportunities on merchant ships. Human capital is also a critical component of the 'Skill

India' mission which will benefit the 'Make in India' drive for production of ships and defence equipment in the country.

The Indian Maritime University (IMU), which was established as a Central University in November 2008, is a small step for providing trained human resource for the maritime sector. Apart from providing quality education and training in various maritime areas such as Nautical Science, Marine and Ocean Engineering, Naval Architecture and Ship Repair, Maritime and Port Management, and short courses there is an endeavour to promote world class research in its associated institutions. Maritime training is also supported by the private sector and there are around 125 training institutes in India which impart sea training.

Universities, specialized institutions and nodal agencies which cut across themes such as engineering, economics, fisheries, environment, trade and ocean governance will enhance the maritime resurgence in India. Collaboration between leading think-tanks, NGOs and planning departments in the ministries with these institutes will also enhance the employability of the workforce. This future generation of seafarers will later become maritime ambassadors and will become catalysts to promote maritime thought and awareness in the country. Apart from this engaging citizen in maritime events is an activity in which the Indian government needs to invest significantly so as to revitalize the maritime resurgence in the country.

*Commander (Dr.) Kapil Narula is a Research Fellow, National Maritime Foundation (NMF), New Delhi. The views expressed are his own and do not reflect the official policy or position of the NMF, the Indian Navy, or the Government of India. He can be reached at kapilnarula@yahoo.com