

INDIA'S MARITIME IDENTITY

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To the average Indian, the sea might evoke a sense of adventure, occasionally a thrill of the unknown, or even a streak of philosophical musing arising from the seemingly infinite expanse of the ocean. For many, especially those dwelling in the coastal states, the sea may represent a more intimate relationship with Nature's elements – a source of livelihood and, perhaps, a vignette of their daily lives. However, it would be nigh impossible to say, with any reasonable degree of assurance, that the Indian public shows a sustained interest in oceanic affairs, in the belief that India's future greatness lies on the sea — something that KM Panikkar, at the dawn of the nation's independence, had exhorted in his seminal work *India and the Indian Ocean*.¹ This is surprising, given the fact that India has had a rich maritime tradition for much of her glorious history.

India, whose dependence on the sea for merchandise trade is nearly absolute, is poised for a giant leap in the maritime sector. The Government's "Maritime India Vision 2030" (MIV-2030) and 'Project SAGARMALA' (which has now been subsumed within the MIV-2030) exemplify India's conscious endeavour towards port-led development and boosting performance and productivity in the maritime sector. However, as Panikkar had observed, citing the examples of Turkey and France, it is not sufficient for governments to merely realise the importance of maritime power if "*the public as such had no enthusiasm*".²

The 'sustained interest in oceanic affairs' of the public to which Panikkar has alluded, is similar in some respect to the 'National Character' that the American Admiral Mahan referred to as one of the six conditions that determined sea power.³ Mahan compared how the English and the Dutch, characterised by him as "*nations of shopkeepers*";⁴ were, amongst other things, driven by their tendency to trade, which involved the necessity of producing something to trade with, and were thus able to use their seapower to propel their nations to prosperity and greatness. On the other hand, Spain, with its characteristic pride and "*supercilious contempt for peaceful trade*", — and France, with its vanity — turned away from commerce, and eventually failed to capitalise their seapower over the long term.⁵

This concept of 'national character' can be extended to identity, and, in the context of maritime affairs, a 'maritime identity'. Therefore, it may not be incorrect to say that while the English 'national character' was 'trade and commerce', their maritime identity was perhaps defined by the

¹ KM Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean*, George Allen & Unwin (India), (1945: London), 99.

² *Ibid*.

³ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1883*, Little, Brown, and Company, (1890; Boston), 50-52

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 52–54.

⁵ *Ibid*, 53-54

Royal Navy or naval prowess in general which, to quote William Blackstone, was England's "greatest defence and ornament...the floating bulwark of our island".⁶ Admittedly, it is hard to find a definition of 'maritime identity', and therefore, the term must be understood in a broader, loosely aggregated form. In so doing, it would be useful to examine the possible constituents that could define this term.

In some ways, maritime identity may be understood as a cultural connection with the sea — the extent to which the sea influences the way of life a people. For example, many cultures revere the earth. The connection is so strong, that to them, their land personifies a collective 'mother' (or 'father'). Similar instances of deep cultural bonds can be found with the forest, the desert, the rivers, the mountains, and indeed, the sea as well. This connection is reflected in mythology and folklore, art and architecture, rituals and tradition, lexicon and such other things that make up 'identity'. Another aspect is a society's sustained interest in oceanic affairs, which could also define how well it identifies with the sea. This is measurable through the frequency of occurrence of public debate and discourse in mainstream media, the importance accorded to maritime subjects in schools and colleges, and the number of educational institutions that run curricula on these, the volume of literature on maritime themes, and its readership. Another feature of 'maritime identity' is the 'sea-friendliness', or the ease with which a people take to the sea. This should, of course, be substantiated by tangible manifestations such as the number of professionals in the marine sector, boat-ownership among the citizenry, and the quality and extent of marine infrastructure.

However, perhaps the most significant constituent — one that encompasses within it almost all other aspects of maritime identity — is what some authors have called 'maritime consciousness'. It is an inherent knowledge a people possess and demonstrate of a history that is rooted in the sea, and of a future that is inextricably linked with it. In the case of Australia, for instance, some authors have limned the dichotomy of an island nation that celebrates the bush and the outback,⁷ and have lamented its "absent maritime identity".⁸ Yet, by most metrics, Australians cannot be called 'sea-unfriendly' — as a people, they take to the sea for recreation, almost all of their commerce is transacted through the sea, and they certainly have a modern and capable navy. All this notwithstanding, they nevertheless lack maritime consciousness.

Clearly then, for a nation to be said to have a 'maritime identity', it is not sufficient to have a strong navy or even a teeming maritime sector. Indeed, historically, many nations, that were strong land powers, such as Germany, France and Russia, took to the sea, not out of any natural affinity, but simply because their geopolitical ambitions required seapower to complement the role of their armies.⁹ On the other hand, even though the island nations of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific never developed any naval power of consequence, they could be said to have a strong maritime national character by virtue of their dependence on the sea and the value that those nations attach to it.

⁶ <https://www.azquotes.com/quotes/topics/royal-navy.html>

⁷ Michael Evans, Australia's Maritime Identity, *Quadrant*, 17 November 2013, <https://quadrant.org.au/magazine/2013/11/challenge-australian-maritime-identity/>

⁸ Royal Australian Navy, 'Australia's Absent Maritime National Identity', *Semaphore*, Issue 13, November 2003, https://www.navy.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Semaphore_2003_13_0.pdf

⁹ Michael Evans, Australia's Maritime Identity, *Quadrant*, 17 November 2013, <https://quadrant.org.au/magazine/2013/11/challenge-australian-maritime-identity/>

The obvious question which arises, therefore, is “*does India have a maritime identity?*” Many authors — Indian and foreign — have declared that India, for a long time, has had a continental mindset. In the ‘continentality-maritimity’ construct, they have placed India squarely within the ‘continentality’ box.¹⁰ Others, while extolling India’s maritime heritage, have rued India’s “*maritime-blindness*”¹¹ and lamented the fact that Indians had “*deluded themselves into believing that India is a continental power*”.¹² Most of these comments tend to view ‘maritimity’ or ‘maritime identity’ in terms of power, without considering a synoptic sense of the term.

The question of India’s maritime identity, therefore, does not permit an easy or forthright answer, which is why it is necessary to flip back to the earliest pages of our history when our ancestors sang hymns in praise of *Varuna*, the Lord of the Oceans¹³ and verses were dedicated to the goddess *Aditi*, invoking her benediction for safe sea voyages. Maritime trade — as archaeological evidence shows — was a predominant characteristic of early Indians, dating as far back as 1200 BCE. So, too, was cultural and ideological exchange through the medium of the sea, a fact borne out by the overseas missions sent by the Mauryan emperor Ashoka, and later, the foundation of the Hindu kingdoms in Southeast Asia, such as in Funan (Kamboja) by a Brahmin named Kaundinya.¹⁴ Ancient Indian shipbuilding, as embodied in the sixth century treatise, the *Yuktiukalpataru*, was highly sophisticated and enabled long mid-ocean voyages to distant ports. Yet, India’s magnificent maritime past in the halcyon centuries of what can truly be called as the ‘Golden Age’ of her history, gradually, but ineluctably, dwindled to a mere reminiscence, and the maritime prowess of her people was rendered dormant. India’s maritime history, therefore, offers invaluable insights into her maritime identity, the peripeteia in her oceanic glory notwithstanding. History also establishes, indubitably, a strong maritime tradition in India.

What about the contemporary collective maritime consciousness of Indians? Deeply embedded in mythology, India’s cultural and religious traditions continue to venerate the ocean. Each year, millions take pilgrimage to the coastal towns of Gangasagar (Sagar Island), Rameshwaram, and Dwarka, and hundreds of other smaller, yet not less significant, locations. India’s coastal communities, spread over 70 districts with a population of over 170 million,¹⁵ have readily adopted the sea in their daily lives, cuisine, and culture. The monsoon, which originates in the Indian Ocean, is deeply imprinted in the Indian consciousness, and dictates a significant slice of Indian lifestyle. If language is any reasonable measure of identity, then Indian languages quite evidently reflect the influence of the sea in words such as *navgati* in Sanskrit (from which, possibly the Latin word ‘navigatus’, and the English word ‘navigation’ are derived) and *kattumaram* (catamaran)¹⁶ in Tamil.

¹⁰ Saul Bernard Cohen, *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations*, Rowmann & Littlefield, (2015: London), 41.

¹¹ Commodore C Uday Bhaskar, “Crucial Maritime Space”, *Hindu*, 16 September 2008, quoted in James R Holmes et al, *Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-first Century*, Routledge, (2009: Oxon), 14.

¹² Admiral Arun Prakash, ‘Maritime Challenges’, *Indian Defence Review* 21, No 1, January 2006, 49-52, quoted in James R Holmes et al, *Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-first Century*, Routledge, (2009: Oxon), 14.

¹³ Panikkar, *A Survey of Indian History*, National Information and Publications Limited, (1947: Bombay), 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 86-87.

¹⁵ Commander Himadri Das, *Coastal Security: Policy Imperatives for India*, National Maritime Foundation, (2019: New Delhi), 281.

¹⁶ Vice Admiral MP Awati, ‘Maritime India: Traditions and Travails’, *Maritime India* ed Vice Admiral KK Nayyar, Rupa & Company, (New Delhi: 2005), 3

The sea, as in ancient India's literary tradition in religious texts, has been celebrated in the poems of Tagore and Sarojini Naidu,¹⁷ and continues to inspire contemporary literature, albeit not necessarily in the medium of English. It is also reflected frequently in contemporary popular music and cinema in India.

The more tangible aspect of maritime identity is, of course, sea power — a term that includes not only a military component, but also an economic one. To begin with, the visible manifestations of India's maritime military power are the Indian Navy and the Indian Coast Guard. Both forces are technologically advanced, modern, and credible. More importantly, they draw manpower almost equitably from the coastal states and the hinterland, emphasising once again, India's maritime identity. With a fishing population of about four million,¹⁸ India is the third largest producer of fish globally. In comparison, the fisheries industry in the EU employed a mere 160,000 people in 2019.¹⁹ Indian seafarers currently account for a healthy 12-13 per cent of the global seafaring community.²⁰ India also has a dynamic shipping sector and a burgeoning maritime trade. Even in terms of the sea as a grand arena of adventure, Indians are (quite literally) embarking upon voyages of 'rediscovery' rather than ones of 'discovery'. Writing about the dismally low proportion of Indians who take to the sea for adventure or recreation, Vice Admiral MP Awati, in 2005, had lamented that "an Indian has yet to sail around the world".²¹ That lament may be put firmly to rest. In 2010, Captain Dilip Donde (Retd) successfully undertook the first unassisted solo circumnavigation under sail,²² and three years later, in 2013, Commander Abhilash Tomy became the first Indian yachtsman to circumnavigate the globe nonstop *and* solo²³. These two magnificent solo achievements were temporally bracketed by two successful team-endeavours — one in 1985-87 by an all-male team from the Indian Army's Corps of Engineers,²⁴ and the other (the most recent one) being by an all-women crew of six intrepid Bravehearts of the Indian Navy.²⁵

And yet, all that has been written above — and much else that has been omitted for the sake of brevity — regarding the traditional and contemporary facets of maritime India, still does not complete a definitive picture of India's maritime identity. Beyond the limits of the horizon that might be visible from the shoreline, the 'mental map'²⁶ of most Indians is a large expanse of

¹⁷ Illustrative examples include Rabindranath Tagore's, "I Cast My Net into the Sea" (<https://allpoetry.com/I-Cast-My-Net-Into-The-Sea>); "Gitanjali 60" (<https://poets.org/poem/gitanjali-60>); and Sarojini Naidu's "Coromandel Fishers" (<https://allpoetry.com/Coromandel-Fishers>);

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Fishery_statistics&oldid=558861

²⁰ Dinakar Peri, "Indian Seafarers Ensured Global Supply Chains Operational During Pandemic: Minister", *The Hindu* (online), 05 April 2022. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/indian-seafarers-ensured-global-supply-chains-operational-during-pandemic-minister/article65293123.ece>

²¹ Vice Admiral MP Awati, 'Maritime India: Traditions and Travails', *Maritime India* ed Vice Admiral KK Nayyar, Rupa & Company, (New Delhi: 2005), 8.

²² Dilip Donde, "The First Indian – The First Indian Solo Circumnavigation Under Sail: 2 (Making Waves)" April 2016

²³ Joanna Rebello Fernand, "Journey to the Edge of the Earth: True Adventure of Naval Officer Abhilash Tomy: February 2022

²⁴ Dom Moraes (1987). "Trishna", Bombay, India: Perennial Press

²⁵ Shilpa Sebastian R, "Through the Peril-fraught Navika Sagar Parikrama, These Women Sailors Completed 21,600 Nautical Miles", *The Hindu*, 08 March 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/life-and-style/six-women-sailors-who-circumnavigated-the-globe/article26464820.ece>

²⁶ The term 'mental map' has been described by Alan Henrikson in "The Geographical 'Mental Maps' of American Foreign Policy Makers", *International Political Science Review* Vol 1 No. 4, 1980. A continental society's mental map remains incomplete, in effect containing "blank" areas in place of the seas.

blank areas. There is also no gainsaying that the maritime thought, discourse, discussion, and debate in India has not permeated the different social strata, which otherwise actively participate on other issues, and is largely restricted to a thin slice of Indian society. Perhaps, one of the reasons why this is the case is because of India's primary focus toward its northern borders. Fighting four wars with Pakistan and China, as also battling terrorism and insurgency for decades in areas bordering these countries, has shaped the nation's psyche with a continental bias, which is justifiable to a large degree because survival and sovereignty are the core vital interests of any country. This might well be the reason why India's leadership is so often preoccupied with the security of its land boundaries, even though it is, almost exclusively, the sea that drives India's economic growth.

This leads to the *continentality-maritimity* debate, which is often presented as if it were purely a binary system in which nations must choose one side or the other. It would be evidently puerile to imagine that nations are either 'continental', or, 'maritime'. Most nations retain both, a continental as well as a maritime focus, although they would often be biased towards one or the other outlook. Similarly, India has, and must have, a continental and a maritime outlook, and there is a need to reconcile India's continental focus — an offshoot of the immutable fact of geography — with her maritime consciousness, which, of course, is in need of revival. Further, the vast geographic expanse of India must necessarily be considered. People have a natural tendency to orient themselves to their surroundings and take affinity to what is proximate to them. To expect a community in the hills of Kumaon or in the forests of Chhattisgarh to inculcate a maritime consciousness within them would be as far-fetched as expecting someone in the Czech Republic to do so.

Even though India has demonstrated an admirable and sustained economic growth in the last three decades, much remains to be achieved as far as the maritime sector is concerned. Domestic shipbuilding and shipping industry must grow in tandem with the country's ports and waterways. So, too, must the hundreds of ancillary industries that are necessary to support these primary industries and sectors. There is also a need to review the existing legislative framework that governs India's maritime zones and the maritime sector. India's education policy should provide the necessary focus in school and college curricula to promote greater knowledge and awareness among the younger generation on matters maritime. India's foreign policy, which has finally begun tacking towards the ocean, must continue to extend India's reach seaward.

It might appear that it would devolve upon the Government to rebuild or reinforce the nation's maritime identity. Indeed, much of the onus does, indeed, rest with policymakers because it is they who have the wherewithal, through various mechanisms, to facilitate the public's orientation towards the sea. In this context James R Holmes and others write that India's strategic leadership needs to orient the people, the government, and the armed forces seaward; and the hardest task among these would be managing popular sentiments.²⁷ Much as India's strategic or national leadership can shape public perception and outlook to a large extent, it simply cannot contrive a *deus ex machina* that would immediately and magically create a maritime identity amongst the people. What the leadership could, however, do is to sustain the current impetus which has been accorded to maritime policies, infrastructure, and connectivity. The Government could also consider reviewing the 'Maritime India Vision' to include additional

²⁷ Holmes *et al*, *Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-first Century*, 10.

thrust areas such as education and research in maritime subjects, holistic maritime security, marine environment and ecology, ocean sciences, and incorporate Project Mausam in the vision.

It is true that India has been a land of seafarers, maritime traders, and shipbuilders. It is equally true that India has also been a land power, whose influence across South Asia has been remarkable. India's maritime identity, must therefore be reinforced, as also harmonised with the nation's continental outlook. As the nation progresses through the twenty-first century, a multipronged and focussed effort, cutting across the various aspects of the maritime domain, must be made in order to reinvigorate India's maritime consciousness.

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