

DEVELOPING MARITIMITY IN INDIA

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Understanding 'Maritimity'

'Maritimity' is a concept that has been evolved to highlight the deeper philosophical underpinnings, and historical roots, of the people's affinity to the seas.¹ It lies at the foundation of a collective's maritime identity (here this collective would be the *Indian* populace). A nation's maritime identity is key to developing a sense of direction concerning its statement of policy. Since the policy, in turn, guides the initiatives that are in line with national interest, developing a sense of maritimity and refining the seaward gaze is essential to heighten awareness on a policy level. In short, to wield power at sea, a nation must identify itself with it.

Historically speaking, to the Indian mind, building an identity around its oceanic expanse is not a foreign idea. In fact, India's case is quite peculiar as the concept of 'maritimity' or maritime consciousness is not an altogether novel concept, but one that merely needs to be resurrected and revived in the minds of the people. Historical records, originating from both India and abroad, provide substantial evidence to support the hypothesis of a collective maritime consciousness that extended its sway across waters that surround the subcontinent.

However, it is difficult to deny the merit in arguments put forth by scholars who point out that *contemporary* India, despite its rich heritage, still suffers from an inexplicable sense of sea blindness.² Saul Cohen, for instance, highlights that the geostrategic realm, imagining a certain conceptual model to scaffold the global hierarchal order, would be placed on the highest level as actions on the geostrategic plane have far-reaching global repercussions. He iterates that the strategic land and sea passageways are the only constants that bind people, goods, and ideas by virtue of their circulations along these routes. Having painted this image, Cohen does not shy away from bringing out India's stunted progress, marred by several factors, which has affected its trade and general outlook in the modern world. The Indian outlook, he states, has remained essentially continental.³

¹ Saul B Cohen, "Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations" (3rd Ed), (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 41.

² Arun Pratap Singh, "Sea-blindness Led to Colonisation of India: Admiral Arun Prakash (Retd)", *Keynote Address by Admiral Arun Prakash at the Welham Boys' School Military History Seminar, Garhwal Post, 13 October 2024*. <https://garhwalpost.in/sea-blindness-led-to-colonisation-of-india-admiral-arun-prakash-rettd/>

See also: Captain Kamlesh K Agnihotri, "Holistic Maritime Security Challenges Facing India: Mitigation Imperatives And Options", *National Maritime Foundation Website, 31 March 2022*. <https://maritimeindia.org/holistic-maritime-security-challenges-facing-india-mitigation-imperatives-and-options/>

³ Cohen, "Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations"

However, there is an inescapable dichotomy which comes into play in Cohen's work as he juxtaposes what used to be called the "Asia-Pacific" region (which term has been comprehensively replaced by the term "Indo-Pacific"), and India as a singular nation-state.⁴ While he portrays Asia-Pacific as a progressive region characterised by a dynamic oceanic space, India is seen as a nation that is still caught up in land-centric narratives.

This statement in and of itself is more than a little oxymoronic for the Indian peninsula, realistically speaking, can hardly be divorced from the vast oceanic expanse that surrounds it. However, as was mentioned earlier, there is merit in such an argument if one were to base it upon contemporary thinking of the Indian polity and its leadership. The reason behind India's sea blindness can, perhaps, be best described as a theoretical fissure caused by the failure to reconcile its land territory with the seas. In other words, to subsume the seas within the common definition of what constitutes the nation's '*territory*'. A nation's sovereignty extends beyond its land territory to the immediate waters surrounding it (and even its airspace). This is a well-known fact on paper, yet it somehow fails to translate into conceptual understanding and imagination, thereby hindering the very initial stages of policy-making and academic debate. Therefore, it is germane to recognise that a nation's identity constitutes the building blocks for ideating its policy, and subsequently its interests and strategy on a global scale.

The Influence of Geography upon Strategy: Where Does 'Maritimity' Feature?

The influence of geographical factors on a nation's affairs is undebatable. Cohen yet again features in this discussion as he details the precise nature of geography's influence, dependence, and inter-relationship with strategy. Being rather particular about his choice of words Cohen states that geography, in fact, does not influence strategy. Instead, he insists that it is *man's knowledge of geography*, and what influence it has on the human condition, that shapes strategy.⁵

The determinants of geopolitics at play, however, constitute an interesting mix of variables. To begin with, it is somewhat obvious to state that economics lies at the grassroots of geopolitics, and not the other way around. At this point, it may be crucial to note that every country has a set of geoeconomic and non-economic goals which, together, dictate the strategies that must be set in place to attain these goals.⁶ A nation's geoeconomic interests are of great consequence in determining how it develops its policy, as it pivots its strategy in concurrence with its policy to achieve these goals. Therefore, subsumed within the larger structure of what constitutes 'geopolitics', India's maritime objectives may be understood as a consequence of the aforementioned strategy which seeks to attain specific geoeconomic goals and non-geoeconomic ones, as well. These objectives are then pursued based on plans made in concurrence with the wider strategic understanding.⁷

Judging and analysing the scope of India's strategic realm would be a futile exercise if its maritime objectives are not taken into account. It must be noted at the outset that, while the military constitutes an important aspect of the maritime domain, the scope and activity of the Navy are clearly a subset of maritime affairs.⁸ India is greatly reliant upon the seas for its trade

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ Saul B. Cohen, *Geography and Strategy: Their Interrelationship*, Naval War College Review, Volume 10, No. 4, (U.S. Naval War College Press: December 1957), 1-31, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/44640470.pdf>

⁶ Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan, "Geopolitics", *Lectures at the National Maritime Foundation*, 04 March 2024.

⁷ Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan, "The Indian Navy in the Changing Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific", 31 August 2023, <https://maritimeindia.org/the-indian-navy-in-the-changing-geopolitics-of-the-indo-pacific/>

⁸ Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan, "Geopolitics", *Lectures at the National Maritime Foundation*, 04 March 2024.

and commerce; With about 95% of its trade volume (77% by value) flowing through the seas, it is incumbent upon the nation to cultivate a maritime identity to claim the promising potential of its seapower.⁹ Seapower in this context can be understood as an amalgam of maritime capacities and capabilities, both military and civilian. As scholars such as Sir Julian Corbett have often highlighted that “*the real point of seapower is not so much what happens at sea, but how that influences the outcome of events on land*”.¹⁰ Sir Corbett’s statement is quite interesting as it, yet again, supplements the aforementioned argument for the need to subsume the oceanic expanse into the wider definition of a nation’s territory.

Tackling Sea Blindness: Formal and Informal Approaches

Basic maritime awareness can be facilitated through a combination of government initiatives, educational programs, community outreach, and media engagement. These initiatives can be organised and segregated along formal and informal lines of effort. While the government must realise and engage with the maritime aspect of policy-making, it is equally essential for the people of a nation to have an inclination towards maritime affairs. It is pertinent to note that various scholars are also of the opinion that unless the masses are awakened to the importance of maritime power, the potential underlying many such efforts may lie unrealised.¹¹ Therefore, enhancing maritime consciousness must necessarily be an inclusive, all-encompassing, and holistic effort. Not only is public awareness crucial in addressing the need for maritime awareness in a top-down approach, that is from national-level institutions to the grassroots level, but it also feeds into the loop the other way around. Public participation, when used as an instrument to aid policy-making, incorporates the interests and concerns of the masses in the process.¹² Citizens thereby become a part of the process, not as passive bystanders, but as active contributors and catalysts in a solution-oriented chain.

Understanding that maritimity is a multifaceted concept comprising various elements, it is important to note that the process of formally developing maritimity in India involves several key steps. The need for cultivating a sense of maritime consciousness is addressed to government institutions across the board, and on all levels. The first step, therefore, is to identify and prioritise those ministries whose involvement is of great consequence in the creation and sustenance of maritime consciousness. Institutions can either be exclusively dedicated to this purpose or partially connected to the field. This does not merely entail the ministries that have near-absolute congruence in terms of their active scope (such as the Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways) but also those that have a far-reaching impact on the masses (for instance, the Ministry of Education).

In India’s case, particularly from the period of colonialism to independence and thereafter, education has played a key role in developing and shaping thoughts and perceptions in the minds

⁹ Government of India, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Department of Commerce, “Negotiating Group on Maritime Transport Services – Communication From India – Response to Questionnaire on Maritime Transport Services”, <https://www.commerce.gov.in/international-trade/india-and-world-trade-organization-wto/indias-gats-schedule-for-commitments-and-offers/negotiating-group-on-maritime-transport-services/negotiating-group-on-maritime-transport-services-communication-from-india-response-to-questionnaire-on-maritime-transport-services/>

¹⁰ “*Defining Seapower*”, in *Seapower: A Guide to the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Geoffrey Till, Cass Series: Naval Policy and History, (Routledge: London and New York, 2009), 21-22.

¹¹ Captain Ranendra Sawan, “*India’s Maritime Identity*”, 18 January 2023, <https://maritimeindia.org/indias-maritime-identity/>

¹² Khatibi, F.S., Dedekorkut-Howes, A., Howes, M. *et al.*, “Can public awareness, knowledge and engagement improve climate change adaptation policies?”, *Discov Sustain*, Volume 2, Article 18, 2021 (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-021-00024-z>), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s43621-021-00024-z>

of the people. While “thought”, in the most basic sense, may be understood as a precursor to action, there is much more to it than just that. Thought has the power to shape the mind. Thought has the ability to become a vehicle for change as it holds the capacity to engage the mind and create visions, perceptions, and ideals. Our thoughts shape us as much as we shape them. By revising the standard and medium of education, the British colonial authorities could establish an asymmetrical dynamic with the native Indian population. It is also pertinent to note that such changes were not brought about in a vacuum and had, in fact, replaced the existing native knowledge systems by relegating them to the background.

It is not uncommon to hear people in modern India talk about two rather conflicting systems of knowledge in our country. This often-quoted dilemma is addressed in different ways and the commonly used keywords to describe these opposing systems are ‘traditional’ and ‘Western’. While these are broad categories, they allow us to envision these two streams of knowledge that are extremely intertwined in people’s lives today. However, it is precisely this intermingling of thought that has been the basis of much discussion. Therefore, the initial foray into developing a more maritime-centric curriculum in contemporary India would require scholars to locate the point of collision, an obvious state of friction, between the Western and indigenous knowledge systems during the colonial experience. An analysis of the evolution of educational perspectives would organically reveal the persistence of various ideas and assumptions that continue to shape and influence contemporary Indian maritime thought. The framework of maritime consciousness helps in recognising such Eurocentric perspectives which would further provide the ability to disengage and deviate from the current state of sea blindness. The initial conception of this dilemma as an outward confusion which hindered perception then turns inward, and shines light on the question of consciousness and the power of purposely inculcated thought in the process of creating narratives that may have lasted well beyond the colonial experience.

In a similar vein, many initiatives can be pursued in an informal manner, that is, outside of government structures directly involved in— and often solely addressing— policy matters. Such efforts may involve institutions that indulge in a myriad of activities ranging from field studies to film-making. The idea behind distinguishing between formal and informal institutions is to augment the sphere of action by allowing for different mediums of information to express the central notion of maritimity. Such an approach would allow for a flexible framework which would bring in various actors who can collaborate to generate meaningful traction. For instance, the think tank community (that is NGOs), and individual experts and independent scholars can collaborate to encourage research to develop maritimity. Field studies aimed at engaging and interacting with coastal communities can contribute immensely to existing knowledge platforms, as they provide insights into local perspectives, practices, and challenges, which foster a deeper understanding of the socio-economic and cultural dimensions of the human aspect involved in the maritime domain. This research can also be propagated through visual depiction (films, documentaries, bite-sized videos on social media) as well as audio-based information dissemination tools (podcasts and radio). While such mediums could be classified under “entertainment”, they nevertheless serve the purpose of involving the Indian masses in a creative fashion. A direct involvement with the citizenry is far more plausible through this approach.

Public campaigns can leverage technology to attract public attention. These campaigns can incorporate virtual reality (VR) experiences to enable individuals to explore maritime environments, along with augmented reality (AR) applications to offer interactive educational

content. More accessible mobile applications designed to disseminate real-time information on maritime activities and safety protocols could also generate interest.

The experience at exhibitions can be significantly transformed by leveraging and integrating advanced technologies to enhance the visitor's experience. Holographic displays, interactive touchscreens, and immersive virtual reality experiences can create more engaging and dynamic environments. Extending beyond the traditional display of artifacts and models, these innovative platforms can offer an additional range of immersive experiences. Such initiatives may include virtual explorations of contemporary ships and ports, detailed simulations of maritime operations, and interactive modules focused on environmental stewardship to significantly enrich the visitor's engagement. In sum, such initiatives are important as these institutions can drive both academic progress and practical governance to strengthen and develop maritimity.

Conclusion

The need for establishing a narrative concerning India's maritime identity must be addressed urgently so as to steer policy-making in a new direction. Maritime history is an integral element— not only of the discipline at large but also of matters such as national identity— which not only acts as a catalyst but also provides a reliable foundation for the philosophy that is contained within the term 'maritimity'. It aids the scope of the term while giving it direction. Therefore, the theory surrounding maritimity and its essential nature, particularly in India's case, is greatly validated by its history. The policy outlook would then initiate viable formal efforts, both short-term and long-term, to generate results. This shift in mindset would encourage the masses to indulge in various other informal efforts that can contribute to the cause. The engagement of the masses and the resulting public interest must not be easily dismissed as it carries implications that dictate the success of these initiatives, whether formal or informal, aimed at enhancing maritime consciousness.

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Ms Priyasha Dixit is a Research Associate at the National Maritime Foundation. Her area of focus is the enhancement of maritime consciousness in India— a theme that incorporates multiple issues of seminal importance including, inter alia, India's maritime (seafaring) history (incorporating ancient Indian knowledge systems), the maritime history of the Indian Ocean, India's maritime heritage and its underwater cultural heritage, as also the MAUSAM initiative of the Government of India. She may be contacted at indopac8nmf@gmail.com.