



Maritime History of India: An Overview*

Dr Amit Kumar**

Indian maritime activities have a long history covering a period of about five millennia from the very dawn of the Indus Valley civilization. There was a golden age of Indian seafaring, a major part of it remaining unknown or unexplored. Study and analysis of maritime history, hence, is essential to understand the nature and orientation of India's maritime culture. Maritime history of India, as such, has not been well documented. A grand historical narrative is required to boost support for a maritime build-up. It is also imperative to explain what kind of navy the nation needs and how it should be used. History also helps to define and devise naval diplomacy and strategy.

Introduction

India has a rich maritime past spanning five millennia. The Indus Valley civilisation marked the beginning of the golden age of Indian seafaring, a major part of which remains unknown and unexplored. Through the centuries, India developed a rich maritime culture. There is ample evidence in the historical archives that attests to a seafaring tradition of India. But the records do not contain a coherent narrative of maritime activities and expeditions. India's maritime activities extended through its coast-line from Gujarat in the west to the Kalinga in the east. But even as ancient

*Till the advent of the Portuguese

**The author is an Associate Fellow at the National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi. He can be reached at amitkrs30@gmail.com

Indian civilisations built ships, navigated the sea and monopolised international trade both by sea and land, they do not seem to have left behind written texts of their seafaring achievements. Many contemporary scholars, therefore, wonder aloud about our maritime past. They do not seem to take into account the fact that Indian maritime literature does contain numerous references to sea voyages and sea-borne trade and the constant use of the ocean as the great highway of cultural intercourse and international commerce. There is nothing, they point out, that can be categorised as firm “evidence” of maritime activity.

The unfortunate truth is that India’s maritime history is not well documented. Whatever little historical record existed was largely written and recorded by Western historians. And that probably is the reason why “substantive” references to seafaring skills of ancient Indians appear to be missing from India’s maritime narrative. Admiral Arun Prakash describes this phenomenon as follows: “One of the reasons for our maritime blindness is that as a nation we have been indifferent to the reading as well as writing of history; both our own and that of others. Whatever little history we do study, has been recorded by western historians who have made full use of the literary license to give it the slant that they wished to”.¹

This article is an attempt to examine India’s maritime history since the time of the Indus Valley civilisation and construct a composite narrative of seafaring activity. A grand historical narrative would go a long way in reconstructing our maritime past and strengthen the case for a strong navy – a force that draws sustenance from a tradition of strong maritime might. It would also help in defining and devising naval diplomacy and strategy.

In accomplishing the study, many sources have been referred to including archaeology, art and literature. Although there is reference to some primary sources, this study is largely based on secondary sources. The paper is divided into the following sections: 1) Indus Valley civilisation, 2) Vedic Age, 3) Nandas and Maurya period, 4) Andhras and Kushans period, 5) North Indian Hindu dynasty, 6) South Indian Hindu dynasty, 7) period of Arab Influence, and 8) later Muslim period.

Maritime Activities in Indus Valley Civilisation

Until some years back, many historians believed that the Indus valley civilisation was land locked and its trade to Mesopotamia and Elam² was through Baluchistan and

south west Iran. But some excavations during 1950s brought to light existence of several Harappan ports, revealing the coastal element of Indus civilisation and suggesting a brisk seaborne trade between the Indus people and Sumerians in the late 3rd and early 2nd millennium BC.

In fact, excavation at Lothal – one of the southern-most sites of the Harappan Culture – has changed existing historical notions. The Lothal site, discovered in 1954, was extensively excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in late 1950s.³ This earliest known dock of the world, equipped with berth and service ships, is interpreted to have been a mooring station for merchant vessels, while the settlement itself has been considered an *entrepot* for trade with Mesopotamia.

Lothal, situated at the head of the Gulf of Cambay in the estuary of the Sabarmati and Bhogwa rivers, was the warehouse for the rich rice, cotton and wheat growing hinterland. It was believed that the Indus people exported agricultural and marine products and imported the raw materials such as gemstones and metals needed for domestic consumption and processing industries.⁴ An extensive maritime trade network existed between the Harappan and Mesopotamian civilisations from as early as the middle Harappan Phase, with much commerce being handled by “middlemen merchants from Dilmun” (modern Bahrain and Failaka located in the Persian Gulf). Such long-distance sea-trade became feasible with the innovative development of plank-built watercraft, equipped with a single central mast supporting a sail of woven rushes or cloth.⁵ The dimensions of Lothal dockyard also suggests maritime activities of Indus people. Measurements of the yard (710 feet long and about 120 feet width) suggest that it might have been used either as a dock for large-sized sea going vessels or as a boat pen for a number of small crafts.⁶

The non-availability of fine grained siliceous stones in alluvial belts of the Indus and Sabarmati Valleys necessitated their import from elsewhere. As Chuhudaro and Lothal were two important centres for bead making, they imported agate and carnelian and produced beads on large scale. In addition to bead factories, workshops of coppersmiths have been excavated at Lothal. The occurrence of bun shaped ingots suggests that copper was imported from overseas sources.⁷ Bun shaped ingots have been found at Ras-al-Qala and Persian Gulf islands.

In addition, the difference in ingots found at Mohenjadro and Lothal indicates that they were getting supply of copper from two different sources, and perhaps Lothal was obtaining it from Persian Gulf region through sea route. Further, as most

of the square seals of the Indus origin found at Ur, Kis and Asmar come from Akkadian levels, it is reasonable to believe that Indian ports had direct contact with Sumerian ports in the Akkadin period, though not in the periods after the third dynasty.⁸

There are many other evidences that indicate the maritime activities of Indus people. One among several seals discovered in excavations of Harappan sites portrayed an anchor, indicating the wide usage of anchors and extensive use of sea going deep-water crafts. Two terracotta seals from Lothal also suggest the maritime activities of Indus people. One bears the impression of a seal with image of swastika drawn in multiple lines, similar to seals from Susa, Brak and Sialk.⁹ Historian R.C. Majumdar states: "The representation of a ship on a seal indicates maritime activity, and there is enough evidence to show that the peoples of the Sindhu valley carried on trade not only with other parts of India but also with Sumer and the centers of culture in Western Asia, and with Egypt and Crete".¹⁰

Recent excavation at Padri also indicates maritime activities during the Harappan period. Padri is situated in the Bhavnagar district of Gujarat, just 1 km away from the shoreline. According to the excavating team (lead by the archaeologists of Deccan College, Pune), the site belongs to a fairly mature Harappan period, datable to 2200 BC.¹¹ "There are numerous evidences of exploitation of marine resources at this site. One of the major findings is a large Harappan copper fish hook, which is 14 cm long with barbed point and loop on the other end and weighs 45 g. It is in a very good state of preservation. Such large fish-hooks were probably used to catch large marine fish weighing more than 50 kg. This indicates that the Harappans of Padri had perhaps mastered the technique of deep sea fishing. It is logical to presume that, for this purpose they also used big boats. The excavator of Padri site also inferred that the people there were producing salt and supplying it to the surrounding Harappan settlements".¹²

Dholavira, another Harappan site located in the Great Rann of Kachchh, also suggests some maritime activities in the Harappan age. "Excavations have revealed a long cultural sequence which commences from the beginning of the third millennium B.C., when perhaps a group of people from Makran coast arrived on the island through Kori creek. This assumption is based on the ceramic feature resembling those from the Amerian culture (datable to 3000 BC). Similar pottery has also been reported from other Harappan sites of Kachchh".¹³

Vedic Age

Vedic literature suggests that the Indians built ships, navigated the sea and monopolised international trade both by sea and land routes. The Vedas and Puranas are replete with references to boats, ships, sea voyages and sea-borne trade and the constant use of the ocean as the great highway of international intercourse and commerce. The *Rig Veda* itself contains more than 100 references to ocean (*samudra*), as well as dozens of references to ships, and to rivers flowing into the sea.

In his treatise *A Maritime Tradition of India*, the great Indian historian, K Sridharan, describes maritime references in the *Rig Veda* “There is a mention of Varuna, the Lord of the Sea, who is credited with the knowledge of the Ocean routes which were used by ships”. It is, indeed, appropriate that the Indian Navy of today should have adopted the motto, “O Lord Varuna, be tranquil”.¹⁴ *Rig Veda*’s passage (I.25.7) clearly indicates Varuna having a full knowledge of the sea routes.¹⁵ It also contains several references to sea voyages undertaken for commercial purposes. It is clearly indicated that merchant ships were plying to foreign countries in quest of more wealth.¹⁶ And that the merchants knew no bounds and went everywhere in the ocean in pursuit of gain.¹⁷ The *Rig Veda* also mentions a naval expedition on which Tugra, the Rishi king, sent his son Bhujyu against some of his enemies in the distant islands.¹⁸

Apart from these references, *Rig Veda* also contains a description of a vessel called “Plava”.¹⁹ In the Vedic ages, fairly large boats served the purpose of navigation.²⁰ The Atharva Veda also refers boats which were spacious, well-constructed and comfortable.²¹ Similarly, boats are also mentioned in *Yajur-Veda* – “O royal skilled engineer, construct sea-boats, propelled on water by our experts, and airplanes, moving and flying upward, after the clouds that reside in the mid-region, that fly as the boats move on the sea, that fly high over and below the watery clouds. Be thou, thereby, prosperous in this world created by the Omnipresent God, and flier in both air and lightning”.²²

Like the *Rig Veda*, the *Puranas* have several references to the use of ships and boats and sea-borne trade. The *Markandeya Purana* mentions the vessels tossing about on the sea. The *Varaha Purana* mentions people who sailed far into the ocean in search of pearls and oysters.²³ The same *Purana* refers to a “childless merchant named Gokarna who embarked on a voyage for trading purposes but was overtaken by a

storm on the sea and nearly shipwrecked”.²⁴ K Sridharan wrote “The Purana’s refers to Arjuna of the Haihaya tribe as Sahasrabahu or the ‘thousand armed’ from which we may infer a probable reference to the presence of his fleet of a thousand ships. They are claimed to have been sea farers of repute who had maritime interactions with the Western world. The Atris, another contemporary clan credited with the knowledge of ship building, are said to have built *Saharsrabahu’s* fleet of thousand ships, or perhaps ship with thousand oars”.²⁵

The *Ramayana* also contains the passage which refers to the connection between India and distant lands by sea.²⁶ It has a reference to Yavan Dvipa and Suvarna Dvipa (Java and Sumatra respectively) and to the Lohta Sayara or the Red Sea. In the *Kishkindha Kandam*, “Sugriva, the Lord of the Monkeys, in giving directions to monkey leaders for the quest of Sita, mentions all possible places where Ravana could have concealed her. In one passage he asks them to go to the cities and mountains in the islands of the sea, in another the land of the Koshakarsa is mentioned as the likely place of Sita’s concealment, which is generally interpreted to be China or the land where grows the worm which yields the threads of silken clothes.”²⁷ There is a passage in *Ayodhya Kandam* which describes the preparation for a naval encounter, it indirectly suggest the knowledge of sea and universal use of waterways.²⁸ Construction of Setusamudram (bridge over sea) to reach Sri Lanka, is another example of early navigation, sea exploration and a maritime culture, which spread beyond Indian shores.²⁹ There is also a reference of merchants who trafficked beyond the sea and were in the habit of bringing presents to the king.

The *Mahabharata* also provide some references of boats, ships and sea voyages. The most interesting passage in the *Mahabharata* refers to “a large ship with machinery and all kinds of weapons of war that is able to defy storms and waves”.³⁰ There is a passage in its *Sabha Parva* which clearly indicates that Sahadeva, the youngest brother of the five Pandavas, went to several islands in the sea and conquered the outlying island inhabited by Mlechchha.³¹ In *Drona Parva*, there are some passages which provide references to mariners and large boats. *Karna Parva* and *Santi Parva* also contain some references of boats, ships and sea borne trade.

The famous story of the “churning of the ocean” (Samudra Manthan or Sagar Manthan) indicates the exploitation and extraction of natural resources from the sea by the people of the region. English Orientalist and writer Horace Hayman Wilson

wrote: “the well known story of *Sagar Manthan* in the *Mahabharata* or *Vishnu Purana* is not without significance”.³²

A passage in *Yajnavalkya Samhita* also indicates that the Hindu merchants were in the habit of making adventurous sea voyages in pursuit of wealth. The astronomical works also are full of passages that hint at the flourishing conditions of Indian shipping and shipbuilding.³³ *Brihat Samhita* has several passages of this kind. One of these passages classified shippers and sailors as a class whose health is influenced by the moon. Another passage mentions the relation between planetary combinations and fortune of traders, physician and shippers. Moreover, there is also a passage which mentions the place for an auspicious sea bath and sea port with great flow of gold.³⁴

Manu Smriti, deemed to be the oldest law book in the world, also has several references to sea-borne traffic as well as inland and overland commerce. *Manu* declares a Brahmin who has gone to sea to be unworthy of entertainment at a Shradha.³⁵ *Manu's* code also contains the passage which describes the rule of fixing boat-hire in the case of a river journey and a sea voyage.

Sir William Jones is of the opinion that the Hindus “must have been navigators in the age of Manu, because bottomry (money lender for marine insurance) is mentioned in it. In the *Ramayana*, the practice of bottomry is distinctly noticed”.³⁶ Lord Mountstuart Elphinstone has written: “The Hindus navigated the ocean as early as the sage of Manu’s Code, because we read in it of men well acquainted with sea voyages”.³⁷

Despite several references in *Rig Veda*, *Purana*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Manu Smriti*, *Samhita* and other epics and *Shastras*, there are contentions among historians over the existence of oceanic navigation during the *Rig Veda*. Countering the assertions by many foreign historians, historians like Max Muller, Zimmer, and Lassen feels that there is enough proof of oceanic navigation during the Vedic period.³⁸

Nandas and Maurya Periods

Greek and Roman literary records of Alexander’s India campaign and contemporary events provide ample evidence of maritime interactions and oceanic enterprise during the Nanda and Mauryan periods.³⁹ It is recorded by several Greek writers that shipbuilding industry was flourishing during this period. Ram Prakash Anand wrote:

“the stimulus of its development must have come from the demands of both river and ocean. Alexander himself is said to have been provided in India with a huge fleet of about 800 vessels or more for his forces which went back through the sea”.⁴⁰ Alexander also built a harbour at Patala where the Indus splits into two large parts.

The Roman trade with India, initiated by Eudoxus of Cyzicus in 130 BC, kept increasing in subsequent periods. It is learned from Strabo that Indian ships sailed to Egypt as the thriving maritime routes of Southern Asia were not under the control of single power. The *Periplus Maris Erythraei* describes Greco-Roman merchants selling in Barbaricum (modern Karachi).⁴¹ The Ethiopian kingdom of Aksum was involved in the Indian Ocean trade network and was influenced by Roman culture and Indian architecture. Traces of Indian influences are visible in Roman works of silver and ivory, or in Egyptian cotton and silk fabrics used for sale in Europe.

The Indian presence in Alexandria may have influenced local culture but little is known on the intensity of this influence. Clement of Alexandria mentions the “Buddha” in his writings, while references to Indian religions are mentioned in other texts of the period. Indians were present in Alexandria and the Christian and Jew settlers from Rome continued to live in India long after the fall of the Roman Empire, which resulted in Rome’s loss of the Red Sea ports. These ports were previously used to secure trade with India by the Greco-Roman world since the time of the Ptolemaic dynasty.

The Mauryan Empire (321 to 185 BC) is known to have maintained extensive contacts with the Greek Kingdom in West Asia; such contacts could have been at least partly maritime and facilitated by the Mauryan occupation of the Gujarat, Kathiawar and Konkan coast.⁴² Arthshastra of Kautilya and the writing of Megasthenes provide information about the Board of Shipping and the Commissioner of Ports who supervised sea traffic. There was a post of Navadhyksha (superintendent of shipping) to look after the shipping administration.

During the reign of Asoka, whose empire covered more area than Chandragupta Maurya, India developed a systematic maritime connection with distant states. There is clear evidence of Asoka’s son Mahendra and daughter Sanghamitra having sailed from Tamralipti to Ceylon. The XIII Rock Edict of Asoka indicates that the emperor developed diplomatic relations with “Hellenistic monarchies of Syria, Egypt, Cyrene, Macedonia and Epirus in the West, and Ceylon, Burma, the South East Asian islands and perhaps China in the East”.⁴³ “The edicts of Asoka and other records bear

testimony to the travels of his Buddhist missionaries to far-off lands while his inscriptions provide information about foreign rulers whose lands were sought by Buddhist preachers to propagate their religion”.⁴⁴

Substantial references to sea voyages and sea-borne trade are also contained in Buddhist literature known as the Jatakas. The Baveru Jataka has several references to the existence of commercial contacts between India and Babylon in pre-Asokan days. The Tanaka Jataka talks of a big ship “that was wrecked with all its crew and passengers to the favourite number of 700, in addition to Buddha himself in an earlier incarnation. So also the ship in which Buddha in the Supparaka-Bodhisat incarnation made his voyages from Bharukaccha (Broach) to the Sea of Seven Gems carried 700 merchants beside himself”.⁴⁵ The wrecked ship with a capacity of 500 merchants is mentioned in Valahassa-Jataka. Samudda-Vanija-Jataka mentions a large ship which is able to accommodate a whole village.

The age of Mauryas was followed by age of Andhras (Satavahana) in the south and Kushanas in the north. The Satavahanas reigned supreme in the 2nd century BC and Kushanas gained prominence in the 1st century AD. During the Andhra and Kushan periods, Roman influence on India was at its peak. Both dynasties maintained extensive commercial and cultural contacts with Rome. Imports from Rome included gold and silver in the form of coins, chemicals, high quality pottery, wine and some metal alloys whereas in exchange India was exporting spices, silk, precious stones, and jewellery, etc.⁴⁶

The prosperous reign of Satvahanas is attributed to dynamic trade and commerce carried out with the patronage of the rulers. Trade was not restricted to within India, they had trade relations with far off foreign lands. The occurrence of Roman antiquities of the early historic period at Paithan, Nevasa, Ter, Nasik, etc., suggests maritime interplays between India and the Mediterranean region during Satavahanas rule.

The *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*⁴⁷ mentions many early historic sites in western India as inland trading centres, which were connected to the sea ports at Barugaza, Souppara, Kalliena, Semulla, Mandagora, Palaepatmai, Meliziegara and Buzantion and several other ports on the west coast. However, these sites are only vaguely known and only a few explorations were carried out for locating the ancient port sites.⁴⁸ The towns of Ter and Paithan mentioned in the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* were the best known among the suppliers of export goods to transoceanic commerce.⁴⁹

The figure of a double mast ship found on some Satavahana coins testifies to their engagement in maritime trade and commerce.⁵⁰ Moreover, the discovery of a large number of Roman coins in the Krishna river valley also strengthens the above fact.⁵¹ Roman coins dating from 1st century BC to the 5th century AD were found mainly in the Krishna valley in Andhra and the Coimbatore region in Tamilnadu. Counter-marking with local symbols and the cutting of coins characterise Roman coins found in peninsular India and marks them apart from those found in other regions. K. Sridharan remarks “It is believed that some of these coins were minted to proclaim some naval victory of the Andhras”.⁵²

Kushans had extensive cultural and economic contacts with Greeks. In fact, the Kushans adopted many elements of the Hellenistic culture of Bactria. They adapted the Greek alphabet and issued coinage on the Greek model. During the early Kushan period, they used Greek language legends combined with Pali legends on their coins and in the later period, they used Kushan language legends combined with Greek legends in Pali.

A Prakrit text named *Angavijja*, written in the Kushan period and edited in the Gupta period, also suggests ship-building. This text mentions names of different types of ships, such as Nava, Pota, Kotimba, Salika, Sarghad, Plava, Tappaka, Pindika, Kanda, Katha, Velu, Tumba, Kumba and Dati. Moreover, some of these varieties of ships such as Tappaka, Kotimba and Sarghad have also been mentioned in the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*. In fact, these ships are considered to be very large and capable of sailing in deep seas.

Hindu Dynasties of North India

Archaeological and other evidences suggest that the imperial Guptas and their Hindu successors of the north had quite a fair amount of interests in maritime affairs. Harishena’s inscriptions and Kalidas’ works provides information on Indian maritime ventures in the periods of the Guptas and Harsha. Samudraguta’s famous military march along the coast suggests he had a powerful navy. In the opinion of noted historian R.C. Majumdar, “The march along the coast suggests a joint operation by the navy. Although there is no definite proof of this, we know that many islands of the Indian Ocean were either conquered by the great Gupta monarch, or submitted to him out of fear, thus clearly indicate the possession of powerful navy”.⁵³

Samudragupta also had contacts with many foreign countries. In his Allahabad inscription, it is clearly mentioned that some independent foreign countries did enter into relations with Samudragupta. The Chinese author Wang Hieun-tse relates that the king of Ceylon named Chi mi kiya po mo (Megha-Verman) sent an embassy to Samudragupta's court requesting permission to construct a Buddhist monastery at Bodhgaya for the use of Ceylonese pilgrimage.⁵⁴

Chandragupta II, also known by the name of Vikramaditya, was known for his governance and conquests. His conquest of the peninsula of Saurashtra via the Arabian Sea is considered to be one of his greatest military successes. With the annexation of Saurashtra and Malwa, he opened up several ports in the east and west to facilitate trade and commerce. The opening of western Indian ports such as Dwarka, Porbandar Verawal, Verawal, Ghogha and Cambay greatly revived the India's maritime trade with European and African countries.⁵⁵ According to K. Sridharan, "The increase in overseas trade can be easily deducted from the tremendous inflow of foreign gold and the remarkable number of trade guilds that were in existence".⁵⁶

Fa-Hien, a Chinese traveller who visited India during the Chandragupta II period, mentions that overseas trade and commerce was one of the main reasons of economic and cultural prosperity of the Gupta Empire. There are frequent references of ships and boats in Kalidasa's "Raghuvansam". In Kalidasa's "Sakuntala"⁵⁷ we learn of the importance attached to maritime commerce. The play states that "a merchant named Dhanvridhi who had extensive commercial interests had been lost at sea and had left a fortune of many millions".⁵⁸

Excellent progress in astronomy was achieved during this period. The astronomers Aryabhatta and Varahamihira accurately mapped the positions of celestial bodies and developed a method of computing a ship's position from the stars. "Matsya Yantra", a crude forerunner of the modern magnetic compass was also discovered few years later. References suggest that Harshvardhana had very cordial relations with China. Chinese traveller Hieun Tsang visited India during his period and Harsha reciprocated by sending envoys to China. Harsha's envoys exchanged ideas with Chinese rulers that helped their relations. Inscriptions during the period of Jivitagupta II suggest that Harsha possessed a fleet of war boats.⁵⁹

By around 600 AD, the Saka kings of Gujarat started to look for refuge outside India and made preparation to colonise Java.⁶⁰ Sir Stamford Raffles (1781-1826),

the British Governor of Java, wrote in his book, *History of Java*.⁶¹ “In the year 525 Saka era (603 A.D.), it being foretold to a king of Gujarat that his country would decay and go to ruin, he resolved to send his son to Java. He embarked with about 5000 followers in 6 large and about 100 small vessels, and after a voyage of four months reached an island they supposed to be Java; but finding themselves mistaken, re-embarked, and finally settled at Matarem, in the center of the island they were seeking . . . The prince then found that men alone were wanting to make a great and flourishing state. He accordingly applied to Gujarat for assistance, when his father, delighted at his success, sent him reinforcement of 2000 people . . . From this period Java was known and celebrated as a kingdom; an extensive commerce was carried on with Gujarat and other countries, and the bay of Matarem was filled with adventurers from all parts”. Sir Mountstuart Elphinstone says, “The histories of Java give a distinct account of a numerous body of Hindus from Kalinga who landed on their island, civilized the inhabitants and established an era still subsisting, the first year of which fell in the seventh year before Christ”.⁶²

During the 8th century AD, Arabs are supposed to have launched some sea-borne operations against Indian rulers. This is about the time when some interesting anecdotes about naval exploits off the Sind and Kathiawar coasts took place. The Arabs belonging to the empire of the Caliph, it appears, used to raid India not only by land but also by sea.⁶³ Later, Saindhava Chief, Pushyadeva of the Jayadratha dynasty, faced an Arab sea-borne invasion in 756 AD. In 776 AD, Arabs tried to invade Sind again but were defeated by the Saindhava naval fleet. A Saindhava inscription provides information about these naval actions.

The Saindhavas were known for naval supremacy in the peninsular sea. In fact, it was the Saindhava fleet which saved India from Arab invasion by sea. Noted historian R.C. Majumdar notes: “The credit of saving India from Arab invasion by sea justly belong to the Saindhavas, who are chiefly remarkable as being one of the few powers in ancient India with a distinguished record of naval exploits”.⁶⁴

During the Palas rule, Bengal played a significant role in maritime affairs. Jatakas, *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* and Kalidasa refer to maritime trade and voyages from Bengal. Besides, Bengali poems also throw a great light on then conditions of commerce in Bengal. These references suggest people engaged in shipbuilding activities during that era.

During the reign of Dharmaditya, Satgaon was a hectic trading centre of Bengal and Sonagram was a major harbour in eastern Bengal. Ptolemy described Satgaon as city of immense size. Champa, situated in west Bengal, was one of the major commercial centre from which merchants could sell for Subarnabhumi or the Burmese coast.⁶⁵ Tamalipti, mentioned in many ancient texts, was a major overseas trading port of Bengal. The Chinese traveller I-Tsing wrote of the Bengal port: "Tamalipti is forty yojanas south from the eastern limit of India. There are five or six monasteries: the people are rich ... This is the place where we embarked when returning to China".⁶⁶

There is evidence of shipbuilding activity during the reign of Dharmaditya. References from the Dharmapala Khalimpur copper-plate grant indicates that the king was having a fleet. References also suggest that close contacts existed between the Sailendras (Hindu rulers of the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesia) and the Palas of Bengal. Devapala gave permission to the Sailendras to build a monastery at Bodhgaya. Architectural similarities between the Stupa at Borbadur in Java and the monastery at Paharpur in Bengal indicate the close cultural contacts between the Sailendras and the Palas.

South Indian Hindu Dynasties

South Indian dynasties played a significant role in India's maritime affairs during the ancient and medieval periods. Records suggest that ports on both eastern and western coasts had navigational and trade links with almost all continents of the world. K Sridharan states: "As far back as 1000 B.C., we know that contacts existed between South India and other countries overseas, such as Mesopotamia, Egypt and Palestine".⁶⁷ The Arikamedu excavation reveals the fact that the Dravidian civilization in the 1st century BC maintained very close relations with the Roman Empire.⁶⁸ The Aryans expanded towards the south between 600 BC and during the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, extending their influence even beyond the eastern shore of India, towards the Malay Peninsula and Indonesian Archipelago of Southeast Asia.⁶⁹

The Jataka stories provide accounts of merchant ships bound for Suvarnabhumi. Roman antiquities of the early historic period give evidence of Satavahanas maritime trade with the Mediterranean region. *Kathasaritsagra* and other sources suggest linkage between the Katha-dwipa (Malaya) and the Satavahanas. There is ample

evidence to prove the Pallavas influence over Hindu colonies in the Far East. The Pallavas were responsible for the spread of the Sanskrit language to the Hindu colonies in Far East region. It is also known that the Saivism permeated Kambuja through Pallavas influence.⁷⁰ The Kasakudi plates refer the Pallavas' successful naval expedition against Ceylon during the reign of Narasimhavarman (630–668 AD). A reference from the Vyalur pillar inscription of Rajasimha clearly suggests the extension of Pallavas rule over some distant islands of the sea.⁷¹ Moreover, the inscription from the Vyaghrapurisvara temple at Vayalur contains a reference of extension of Rajasimha rule up to the Dwiplaksham (Lakshadweep).⁷² Post-Sangam work “Manimekalai” also suggest Pallavas earlier maritime trade activities.

Before the advent of the Cholas, the Kalingas played a significant role in the maritime affairs of southern and eastern India. Their influence not only extended to the Far East, but also they maintained contacts with Ceylon. “Kalidas makes frequent references to the Kalinga ports at which vessels with shiploads of spices were anchored”.⁷³

With the emergence of the Srivijaya Empire in the 7th century, Indian influence spread into the islands of the Indonesian archipelago. Unlike in the past, the influence was not only restricted to religion, it surged through culture and politics also. Although India has had extensive contacts with Indonesia from at least from the 3rd century AD, this was largely limited to trade. And perhaps an India seafarer make the first move to established a maritime trade links with Indonesia.⁷⁴ Indian traders were also instrumental in the diffusion of Indian culture “through the dissemination of their wares”.⁷⁵ Archaeologist Michael Flecker notes: “While Hinduism may have been favoured by local royalty as their door to divinity, it is perhaps Budhism that allowed the Indian trades to deal one and one with Indonesians, without the barrier of the caste”.⁷⁶

Srivijaya kings maintained a powerful navy, the Strait of Malacca was under their control, and their authority was extended over many far off islands.⁷⁷ Seas were free from piracy and trade was thriving between the Srivijaya Empire and the Indian kingdoms. Srivijaya kings were closely associated with the Indian kingdoms of the eastern coast.⁷⁸ Srivijaya connection with the Kalinga monarchs of Orissa is well known. In late 8th century, the Sailendra dynasty replaced the kingdom of Srivijaya and established supremacy over Java. By the end of the 8th century AD, Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula also came under the influence of Sailendra. Local inscriptions

and description of Arab travellers clearly indicates that the Sailendra kings had close diplomatic relations with rulers of India and China. The Sailendra maintained a powerful navy, hold most of the islands of the Indian Ocean except Ceylon.⁷⁹

The late 10th century witnessed a remarkable rise of naval activity under the kingships of the Cholas. The first of this line of rulers, Raja Raja began his conquest by the destruction of Chera fleet and he soon made himself, beyond dispute, the Lord Paramount of Southern India.⁸⁰ He built a powerful navy and subdued all the kingdoms of south India with their coastal regions, penetrated into central India, and conquered the offshore islands of Sri Lanka and the Maldives.⁸¹ Raja Raja maintained close cultural and commercial relations with the Sailendras also.

Raja Raja Chola was succeeded by his son Rajendra Choladeva, under whose leadership the power of the Cholas reached its highest and widest extent. Rajendra Chola, after the conquest of the whole of the south India and the flourishing part of the Corromandal and Malabar coasts, occupied Sri Lanka and the Maldives, and then subdued all possible opponents in the eastern coast and finally conquered Srivijaya.⁸² Rajendra's victories over the Srivijaya gave him control over vast tracts of the eastern coastal region of Sumatra, and the central and southern part of the Malaya peninsula by the close of 1025 AD. According to Dr Vijay Sakhuja, "The success of [the] grand foray in Southeast Asia was [the] result of a consistent and aggressive maritime mercantile policy of Chola Kings, particularly Rajaraja I and his Son Rajendra Chola I".⁸³ Harman Kulke wrote: "Rajendra's mighty overseas expedition against Srivijaya was a unique event in India's history and its otherwise peaceful relations with the states of South East Asia which had come under India's strong cultural influence for about a millennium. The reasons for this naval expedition are still moor point as the sources are silent about its exact cause".⁸⁴

In one of his inscription at Tanjaur, Rajendra Chola is praised as follows: "Many ships in the midst of the rolling sea and having caught Sangarama-vijayottungavarman, the king of kadaram, together with the elephants in his glorious army, [took] the large heap of treasures, had rightfully accumulated with noise the Vidyadhara torana at the war gate of his extensive city, Srivijaaya with the 'jeweled wicket gate' adorned with the gear splendour and the 'gate of large jewels'".⁸⁵ Rajendra Chola's successors found it very difficult to maintain their control over the numerous islands which lay far from its mainland. The later period witnessed a series of struggle between the Sailendra and the Chola kings.

The Cheras is another south Indian dynasty that achieved prominence in the early maritime history of India. Armed with its naval might, the Chera king Senguttuvan defeated the Greeks (Yavanas) at sea and conquered Kadambu. There is ample evidence to prove their oceanic enterprises and overseas commercial activities. The Cheras had direct commercial links with the people of the west. The excavation at Ur, dating back to the 6th and 7th centuries, revealed Indian teak and cedar which are believed to have come from the forests of Kerala.⁸⁶ The excavation at Memphis proves early contact (around 200 BC) between Chera and the Greco-Roman world. The ancient Tamil text, *Periplus*, mentions the emergence of the famous port of Muziris, situated on the west coast at the mouth of the Periyar river in Chera country, as an important port of call which the Greeks visited for trade. Recent archaeological evidence suggests that the Muziris port also served as a prominent Indo-Roman trading centre during the early historic period between the 1st century BC and the 5th century AD.⁸⁷ This evidence suggest that the port could have been located at Pattanam, near Paravur, on the south of the Periyar river delta.

Similarly, the Pandyas were also engaged in maritime commerce. In 20 BC, a Pandya king entered into alliance with the Roman emperor August Ceaser.⁸⁸ A Roman trading centre was located at the Alagankulam – at the mouth of the Vaigai river, southeast of Madurai. Alagankulam has yielded a roulette pottery ware that bears a figure of ship on the shoulder portion, which is very similar to findings from a Roman port, Ostia.

The Pandya port Nirkunram is mentioned in *Periplus* as Nelkyanda. The Pandyas had intimate relations with Ceylon and from the early days they were embroiled with the politics of Ceylon. The Pandyas also had trade contacts with Ptolemaic Egypt and China as well. There was great demand of Pandyan pearl and beryl, along with Malabar pepper, in markets of the west. The Pandyas had a strong navy. By about 1310 AD, the Pandyas were ruling over territory running across the Coromondal coast in east, and Cape Comorin to Quilon in west.⁸⁹ They conquered Ceylon and Gulf of Mannar also. The kingdom was at the apex of its glory in the 13th century.

Vijayanagar rose to power under Harisha II. Harisha reigned over whole of the south India. Later, during the reign of Deva Raya I, it emerged as a vast and powerful empire and maintained control over many outlying islands.⁹⁰ Abdur Razaq, a Persian who visited the country in 1442 AD, mentions that the empire

had under its control as many as 300 ports.⁹¹ Epigraphic evidence indicates that the rulers of the Vijayanagar kingdom maintained a fleet and they were acquainted with the art of the shipbuilding industry. Later, the Vijayanagar failed to maintain the political unity of their empire. Other factors such as a lack of sustained overseas commercial efforts, the advent of the Portuguese etc., led to decline of this empire.

The Influence of the Seafaring Arabs

During the Sri Vijaya–Chola age, the Arabs were at the peak of maritime commerce and trade and by the end of Hindu period they gained a monopoly in overseas trade in the region.⁹² K.M. Panikkar has written: “After the downfall of Sri Vijaya and the disappearance of the Chola from the stage of Indian history, oceanic trade in the Indian seas passed almost exclusively to Arab hands”.⁹³ The Arabs were carriers of Indian trade; in fact they were great intermediaries of trade between India and Europe. Before the decline of the Cholas, the Arabs never attempted to exercise a naval power, but neither hesitated to step into the power vacuum in the region exited by the Cholas.⁹⁴

Later Muslim Period

From the 9th century, the Arabs began to take an interest in the richness and abundant wealth in India. Muhammad Bin Kasim, the Arab conqueror of Sindh, reached Dabal in ships with arms and over 500 men.⁹⁵ *Tabakat-i-Akbari* of Nizammudin Ahmed mentions that the seventeenth expedition of Sultan Mahmud was directed against the Jats.⁹⁶ In the 13th century an important naval expedition was led by Ghiyas-ud-din Balban against Tughril Khan, Governor of Bengal.⁹⁷ Abd-er-Razzak has left some interesting accounts on the important harbour of Calicut, which was regarded as one of the greatest shipping centres of the world. Nicolo Conti, a traveller from Italy who visited India in the early 15th century, provides some interesting details about Indian shipbuilding industries. It witnessed brilliant naval fights between the Jats and Sultan Mahmud.

Though there are many references to river crafts, references to navy or naval activity are minimal, which indicates that only the Moghuls had an organized navy. The shipbuilding industry flourished during the reign of Akbar, who also tried to

establish a strong navy. “Akbar seems to have organize an Imperial Navy with the establishment of the office called Meer Bahri (Navy headquarter)”.⁹⁸ The functions of Akbar’s Meer Bahri were divided into four parts: Materiel, Personnel, Internal Waterways and Customs. To counter the attacks from the Muggs, the Arkanese, and the Portuguese, the Moghul navy’s attention was directed towards the Bay of Bengal. Ayen-i-Akbari mentions the details of Akbar’s navy.

Despite having an organised navy, the Moghuls could not appreciate the value of sea power. The Moghuls lack of desire and foresight regarding the mastery of the sea resulted in the neglect of sea power.⁹⁹ In fact, their continental outlook enabled European penetration into Indian subcontinent.

Conclusion

This survey of existing ancient maritime literature clearly suggests that India had a rich maritime tradition during the ancient and medieval periods. Excavations revealed sufficient evidence to support the view that the Indus people were engaged in maritime activities. Evidence also reveals appreciable maritime activities during Vedic Age.

The Nandas and the Mauryas clearly have a robust maritime record. The Mauryas promoted overseas trade and established commercial and cultural contacts with many foreign countries. It was the Mauryas and the Andhras who paved the way for Indian colonisation in Southeast Asia. The Hindu dynasties of the north and south had outstanding maritime achievements. The Chera, Chola and Pandya took a greater interest in maritime affairs. The Chola kings displayed exceptional ability in naval power. Rajendra Chola conquered Sri Lanka, the Maldives and major parts of South Asia.

India had a substantive maritime history during the Hindu period but it could not be sustained further due to various reasons. The Arab entry was purely for commercial purpose and not with any design of contest. Despite having an organised navy, the Moghuls were plainly lacking in a maritime vision. Their laxity in matters concerning the sea helped the Portuguese penetrate the Indian subcontinent.

K.M. Panikkar has rightly said “India never lost her independence till the loss of command of the sea in the first decade of the sixteenth century”.¹⁰⁰ There are lessons

contained in his narrative – lessons we must take seriously and learn from. But it is still not a complete historical record. It is important that we continue to reconstruct the archival and historical records of Indian maritime activities.

Notes

1. A. Prakash, “At Sea about Naval History,” <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/NAVY/History/1600s/Prakash.html> (accessed August 3, 2011). Also see, A. Prakash, *From the Crow’s Nest* (New Delhi: Lancer Publishers, 2007).
2. Elam was an ancient civilisation located in what is now southwest Iran. Elam was centred in the far west and the southwest of modern-day Iran, stretching from the lowlands of Khuzestan and Ilam Province, as well as a small part of southern Iran.
3. A.K. Bansal, “India’s Maritime Heritage,” http://www.maritimetraining.in/documents/Indias_Maritime_heritage.pdf (accessed November 22, 2011).
4. S.R. Rao, “Shipping and Maritime Trade of the Indus People,” *Expedition*, 7, no. 3 (1965): 30–37.
5. *Ibid.*
6. K. Sridharan, *A Maritime History of India* (New Delhi: Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, August 1965), p. 8.
7. Rao, “Shipping and Maritime Trade of the Indus People,” pp. 30–37.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. R.C. Majumdar, *Ancient India* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers Private Ltd., 2003), p. 242.
11. A.S. Gaur and K.H. Vora, “Ancient Shorelines of Gujarat, India, during the Indus Civilization (Late Mid-Holocene): A Study Based on Archaeological Evidences,” Marine Archaeology Centre, National Institute of Oceanography, Goa, <http://www.iisc.ernet.in/currsci/jul10/articles29.htm> (accessed August 23, 2011).
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. Sridharan, *A Maritime History of India*, p. 10.
15. *Rig Veda*, I.25.7.
16. *Ibid.*, I.48.3.
17. *Ibid.*, I.56.2.
18. *Ibid.*, I.116. 3.
19. *Ibid.*, I.24.35 and 36.

20. S.C. Agarwal, *History of Indian Fisheries* (New Delhi: Daya Publishing House, 2006), p. 19.
21. Indian Navy, Available at, http://nausena-bharti.nic.in/maritime_heritage.php (accessed September 28, 2011).
22. Yajur-veda 10.19.
23. *Ibid.*
24. R.K. Mookerji, *Indian Shipping* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1912), p. 65.
25. Sridharan, *A Maritime History of India*, p. 11.
26. "Seafaring in Ancient India," http://www.hinduwisdom.info/Seafaring_in_Ancient_India.htm, (accessed October 1, 2011).
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. Mookerji, *Indian Shipping*, pp. 56–57.
30. W. Buck, ed., *Mahabharata* (New Delhi: The Regents of the University of California, 2004).
31. Mlechchha, also spelled Mleccha, people of foreign extraction in ancient India. A Sanskrit term, Mlechchha was used by the Vedic peoples much as the ancient Greeks used *barbaros*, originally to indicate the uncouth and incomprehensible speech of foreigners and then extended to their unfamiliar behaviour.
32. H.H. Wilson, *The Vishnu Purana: A System of Hindu Mythology and Tradition* (Cambridge: Read Country Books, 2006).
33. Mookerji, *Indian Shipping*, p. 63.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
36. "A Philatelic Overview of the Ancient Maritime Trade," <http://postalhistoryofindia.blogspot.com/2009/07/analytical-study-of-ancient-maritime.html>, (accessed October 21, 2011).
37. M. Elphinstone, *History of India* (London: John Murray, 1849), p. 166.
38. Sridharan, *A Maritime History of India*, p. 15.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
40. R.P. Anand, *Origin and Development of the Law of the Sea: History of International Law* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982).
41. "Roman Trade with India," New World Encyclopedia, http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Roman_trade_with_India (accessed October 30, 2011).
42. R. Barnes and D. Parkin, eds., *Ships and the Development of Maritime Technology on the Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002).
43. Anand, *Origin and Development of the Law of the Sea*.
44. Sridharan, *A Maritime History of India*, p. 16.
45. Mookerji, *Indian Shipping*, p. 29.

46. S.G. Dhopate, "Ancient Coins and Inscriptions: Their Importance in Building the History of Ancient India," Institute for Oriental Studies, Thane, December 16, 2002, <http://www.orientalthane.com/speeches/dhopate/1.html> (accessed December 17, 2011).
47. A book, called the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, written by a Greco-Egyptian sailor in the 1st century AD, gives a very detailed and interesting account of Indian trade from the author's personal knowledge. He came to India and found the Indian coast studded with ports and harbours, carrying on brisk trade with foreign countries.
48. P.R. Rao, *Indian Heritage and Culture* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Ltd., 1988), p. 28.
49. Sridharan, *A Maritime History of India*, p. 18.
50. D.C. Sirkar, *Studies in Indian Numismatics* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2008), p. 13.
51. Rao, *Indian Heritage and Culture*, p. 28.
52. Sridharan, *A Maritime History of India*, p. 18.
53. Majumdar, *Ancient India*, p. 242.
54. R. Mookerji, *The Gupta Empire* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers Private Ltd., 1989), p. 28.
55. Sridharan, *A Maritime History of India*, p. 22.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
57. "Abhijnana-Sakuntalam" or "Sakuntala", a drama composed in seven acts by Kalidasa, is one of the best not only in Sanskrit literature, but in the literature of the world.
58. "Seafaring in Ancient India."
59. *Ibid.*
60. Sridharan, *A Maritime History of India*, p. 23.
61. "Seafaring in Ancient India."
62. *Ibid.*
63. Sridharan, *A Maritime History of India*, p. 23.
64. Majumdar, *Ancient India*, p. 320.
65. Mookerji, *Indian Shipping*, p. 161.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
67. Sridharan, *A Maritime History of India*, p. 26.
68. *Ibid.*
69. *Ibid.*
70. *Ibid.*
71. P. Sanmugam, "Maritime Activities of the Pallavas," in *India and the Eastern Seas*, ed. A. Tripathi (Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 2007), p. 51.

72. *Ibid.*
73. Sridharan, *A Maritime History of India*, p. 31.
74. M. Flecker, "Contacts between India and Srivijaya: The Shipwreck Evidence," in *India and the Eastern Seas*, ed. A. Tripathi (Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 2007), p. 240.
75. *Ibid.*, p. 243. See also, P. Wheatly, *The Golden Khersonese* (Kualalampur: University of Malaya Press, 1966), p. 188.
76. Flecker, "Contacts between India and Srivijaya," p. 243.
77. M. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean* (London: George Mullen & Unwin Ltd, 1945), p. 33.
78. *Ibid.*
79. Sridharan, *A Maritime History of India*, p. 26.
80. Mookerji, *Indian Shipping*, p. 175.
81. H. Kulke, "The Naval Expedition of Cholas in the Context of Asian History," in *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadweepa*, eds. H. Kulke, K. Kesavapany and V. Sakhuja (New Delhi: Manohar, 2010), p. 3.
82. *Ibid.*
83. V. Sakhuja and S. Sakhuja, "Rajendra Chola I's Naval Expedition to South Asia," in *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadweepa*, eds. H. Kulke, K. Kesavapany and V. Sakhuja (New Delhi: Manohar, 2010), p. 77.
84. Kulke, "The Naval Expedition of Cholas in the Context of Asian History," p. 3.
85. *Ibid.*
86. Sridharan, *A Maritime History of India*, p. 36.
87. Armed with an Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) grant to investigate Indo-Roman trade, and with the guidance of David Peacock who heads Archaeology at the University of Southampton, Roberta Tomber worked with local archaeologists in Kerala where she identified the first fragments of Roman wine amphorae found on the south-west coast of India.
88. Sridharan, *A Maritime History of India*, p. 36.
89. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
90. *Ibid.*
91. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
92. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
93. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean*, p. 36.
94. Sridharan, *A Maritime History of India*, p. 43.
95. Mookerji, *Indian Shipping*, p. 186.
96. *Ibid.*

97. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

98. Sridharan, *A Maritime History of India*, p. 48.

99. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

100. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean*, p. 1.