

## APPROACHES TO DEVELOPING MARITIMITY: INTEGRATING FORMAL INSTITUTIONS AND INFORMAL NARRATIVES

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### Overview

The cultivation of maritime consciousness in India is neither a rhetorical flourish nor abstract symbolism; it is a strategic necessity. This article extends the argument outlined in the earlier study, which underscored the value of “*developing maritimity*” while laying down its conceptual underpinnings—clarifying its meaning, purpose, and necessity. Having clarified the *why*, the present article turns to the *how*. It specifically examines the pathways through which maritime identity and awareness can be advanced, structured along two interdependent thrust lines—the *formal* and the *informal*.

The formal thrust line refers to institutional frameworks, bureaucratic structures, and government-led initiatives capable of embedding maritime priorities into the machinery of the state. The informal thrust line, by contrast, embraces cultural, artistic, and social channels through which maritime sensibilities may be normalised and embraced by society at large. Together, these twin vectors suggest that maritime consciousness cannot be achieved through policy alone, nor through culture alone, but through a careful interplay of both.

After introspecting on the fragmentation of responsibility within India’s ministerial architecture and the persistence of “sea-blindness” in public awareness, the article proposes mechanisms for cross-ministerial coordination, the institution of a central symbolic anchor, and the development of a multidimensional evaluative matrix aligned with national vision statements.

Maritime consciousness—an integrated awareness of the ocean’s strategic, economic, ecological, and cultural dimensions—is both a strategic imperative and an educational necessity for India. Historically a vibrant seafaring power, India’s continental preoccupations in the twentieth century engendered a form of collective “sea-blindness,” relegating maritime affairs to technical domains and strategic enclaves.<sup>1</sup> The suggestion further advanced here is that effective maritime consciousness demands the integration of formal institutions—ministries, policy frameworks, and infrastructure programmes—with informal narratives—cultural productions, educational curricula, and community traditions. Only by synchronising top-down governance with bottom-up imagination can India foster a durable, inclusive, and forward-looking maritime identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Captain Ranendra Sawan, “India’s Maritime Identity”, *National Maritime Foundation*, 18 January 2023, <https://maritimeindia.org/indias-maritime-identity/>

This article unfolds in four parts. First, it diagnoses the institutional dilemmas inherent in India's diffused ministerial structure. Second, it examines the contributions and gaps of each relevant ministry within the formal thrust line. Third, it articulates the informal thrust line, focusing on narrative-building, cartographic identity, and community engagement. Finally, it proposes a customised evaluative matrix that integrates quantitative and qualitative metrics.

### **Institutional Dilemmas and Strategic Opportunities**

India's maritime governance is disseminated across a wide constellation of ministries and agencies, each carrying its own slice of the mandate. Broadly, there is the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways; the Ministry of Culture; the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change; the Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying; and the Ministry of Defence, among others.

While this fragmentation ensures specialised attention, it risks undermining holistic policy coherence. The dispersal of maritime responsibilities across ministries can be construed as a polycentric strength—issues as varied as coastal heritage and artisanal fishing find dedicated bureaucratic champions. Yet, without robust coordination, policies risk operating in silos, leading to duplicative efforts, resource misallocation, and, at worst, conflicting priorities.

The absence of a singular authority, however, is not an administrative lapse but a product of India's bureaucratic design, which devolves power to discrete agencies. In his address to 380 Directors and Deputy Secretaries across various ministries and departments in October 2017, the Honourable Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, remarked that “*silos are a big bottleneck in the functioning of the Union Government*”.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, “*he urged the officers to adopt innovative ways to break silos, which will result in the speeding up of various processes of governance*”.<sup>3</sup>

Properly orchestrated, the multiplicity of ministries can generate a polyphonic narrative in which economic, cultural, ecological, and strategic voices harmonise. Realising this polyphony demands three elements—

1. A high-level coordination mechanism endowed with clear authority, resources, and accountability norms.
2. Cross-sectoral working groups focused on heritage, environment, livelihood, and security, with representation from government ministries, academia, civil society, and coastal communities.
3. A central point of reference—whether a symbolic figure, institution, or narrative—that embodies maritime consciousness and galvanises both bureaucratic and public engagement.

Such an architecture would mitigate siloed policymaking, foster shared objectives, and ensure that diverse maritime dimensions coalesce into a coherent national project.

Building on the delineation between formal and informal thrust lines, it becomes evident that each vector offers distinct yet mutually reinforcing avenues for cultivating maritime

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<sup>2</sup> Government of India, Prime Minister's Office, “PM's interactions with Directors and Deputy Secretaries”, *Press Information Bureau*, 18 October 2017, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1507986>

<sup>3</sup> Prime Minister's Office, “PM's interactions with Directors and Deputy Secretaries”.

consciousness. The formal thrust line, anchored in ministerial mandates and statutory responsibilities, has the structural capacity to influence long-term strategic outcomes. Ministries tasked with ports, shipping, fisheries, defence, and trade operate within clearly defined bureaucratic frameworks, equipped with policy levers, budgetary allocations, and programmatic instruments. These mechanisms allow for the operationalisation of maritime priorities—from the modernisation of ports to the promotion of green shipping and the institutionalisation of maritime skill development. When effectively coordinated, such initiatives can transform India’s maritime geography into an engine of economic growth, regional connectivity, and strategic leverage.

Yet the formal thrust line, powerful as it is, is inherently limited by its reliance on institutional logic and procedural channels. Policy directives and infrastructural investments, however ambitious, often remain distant from public understanding, thereby reinforcing “sea-blindness.” It is in addressing this gap that the informal thrust line acquires critical importance. Cultural, educational, and artistic interventions—ranging from digital storytelling platforms and public exhibitions to literature, film, and interactive pedagogies—serve as conduits for translating abstract policy into societal recognition. By embedding maritime themes into collective imagination, these initiatives can generate a receptive environment for formal projects, legitimising infrastructural investments and encouraging civil society engagement. Historical consciousness, evoked through the revival of ancient ports, seafaring traditions, and transoceanic networks, reinforces a sense of continuity, linking India’s maritime present to a civilisational past.

The true potential of these thrust lines is realised when they are integrated rather than pursued in isolation. Cross-ministerial coordination emerges as a critical enabler, ensuring that maritime objectives—whether infrastructural, economic, or cultural—are pursued in a complementary fashion.

Ultimately, the twin thrust lines— formal and informal— are not merely parallel tracks but mutually reinforcing conduits that, if aligned strategically, have the potential to produce a durable maritime consciousness. Their successful integration depends on the orchestration of ministries, the creative use of culture and media, and the adoption of evaluative frameworks capable of capturing both tangible and intangible outcomes. Such an approach reframes India’s maritime strategy not only as a matter of ports and vessels but as a comprehensive civilisational and strategic project, capable of embedding maritime awareness into the very fabric of national identity.

### **The Formal Thrust Line: State and Structure**

The formal thrust line rests on the institutional frameworks and resultant organs of the state. Ministries, agencies, and statutory bodies are not mere administrators of the maritime sector—they are custodians of narratives that shape how citizens perceive the ocean. This section examines four broadly interlinked clusters of ministerial action— **Infrastructure and Connectivity; Security and Strategy; Heritage and Culture; and Ecology and Sustainability**. Together, they constitute the structural foundation upon which oceanic imagination may be built.

## Infrastructure and Connectivity

The **Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways** (MoPSW) anchors India's maritime infrastructure agenda. Through flagship initiatives such as Sagarmala<sup>4</sup> and Maritime India Vision 2030<sup>5</sup>—and, in the longer term, the Amrit Kaal Vision 2047<sup>6</sup>—the Ministry aims to modernise ports, strengthen multimodal connectivity, and develop integrated logistics clusters. On the surface, these initiatives appear purely technical. Yet, each development in this aspect offers an opportunity to bring maritime realities into public consciousness. When articulated effectively, they remind citizens that the sea is not a peripheral space but a lifeline of national prosperity.

Collaboration extends well beyond the MoPSW. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry positions maritime logistics as a strategic lever in global trade, embedding Indian harbours within international value chains and enhancing the nation's competitive advantage. The **Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship** embeds seafaring into India's employment landscape by producing trained manpower for ports, shipbuilding, and maritime services.<sup>7</sup> These interventions signal to families across hinterland India that maritime industries are not remote coastal enclaves but vital sources of livelihood and aspiration.

To enhance visibility, a deliberate strategy—such as pairing the inauguration of new ports with cultural showcases or maritime heritage programmes—could recast infrastructure as narrative. In doing so, logistics would no longer appear as a strictly technical exercise but emerge as a shared emblem of India's oceanic reawakening.

## Security and Strategy

If MoPSW gives India the skeleton of maritime infrastructure, the **Ministry of Defence** provides its muscle. The **Indian Navy** and **Indian Coast Guard** safeguard sovereignty, but their role in cultivating maritime consciousness is equally significant.

When woven into public culture—through naval open days, museum ships, documentaries, and youth outreach—the Navy emerges not only as a warfighting institution but as a visible agent of national presence and stewardship. At the same time, the Indian Coast Guard cultivates maritime consciousness at a more proximate scale. Its rescues, anti-smuggling drives, and environmental patrols bind national security directly to the lives of coastal citizens.

The **Ministry of External Affairs** (MEA) advances maritimism by embedding it within India's diplomatic lexicon. Through the doctrine of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)—recently reformulated as MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for

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<sup>4</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, Sagarmala Programme: Powering India's Maritime Revolution, *Press Information Bureau*, 27 March 2025,

<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2115878#>

<sup>5</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, MARITIME INDIA VISION 2030, *Sagarmala*, <https://sagarmala.gov.in/sites/default/files/MIV%202030%20Report.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, Amrit Kaal Vision 2047,

[https://shipmin.gov.in/sites/default/files/Maritime%20Amrit%20Kaal%20Vision%202047%20%28MAKV%202047%29\\_compressed.pdf](https://shipmin.gov.in/sites/default/files/Maritime%20Amrit%20Kaal%20Vision%202047%20%28MAKV%202047%29_compressed.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, "MoU for skill development in Port and Maritime sector signed between the Ministry of Shipping and the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship", *Press Information Bureau*, 20 August 2020, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1647274>

Security and Growth Across Regions)<sup>8</sup>— India signals an enhanced commitment to regional stability and cooperative security.

## Heritage and Culture

Maritime identity is nurtured not solely through infrastructure and strategy but equally through memory, imagination, and cultural continuity. The Ministry of Culture plays a decisive role in rendering India's seafaring legacy intelligible to the present. The National Maritime Heritage Complex (NMHC) at Lothal stands as a flagship endeavour.<sup>9</sup> The NMHC aspires to be a world-class institution that celebrates India's maritime legacy while inspiring its future. It seeks to weave together the past, present, and future of seafaring through an integrated framework that is both innovative and sustainable. By combining conservation with interactive and experiential learning, the Complex will transform heritage into a living practice— one that educates, engages, and empowers citizens. At its heart, the NMHC is envisioned as a space where knowledge, culture, and participation converge to reaffirm India's identity as a maritime civilisation.<sup>10</sup> Yet its greater significance lies in its capacity to cultivate a living maritime consciousness — where archaeological remnants serve not as inert exhibits, but as conduits linking citizens with millennia-old traditions of oceanic exchange.

Beyond domestic heritage, cultural diplomacy extends India's identity across the seascape of the Indian Ocean world. Project Mausam, for instance, seeks to rekindle historical linkages and foreground shared maritime traditions.<sup>11</sup> Overseas exhibitions, maritime-themed festivals, and India's own maritime weeks project this identity internationally, while simultaneously assuring citizens that India's oceanic narrative is both ancient and contemporary.

Equally vital are the intangible practices of coastal communities— from sea goddess rituals in Tamil Nadu<sup>12</sup> and the *biota bandhana* festival in Odisha<sup>13</sup>. Documenting, digitising, and amplifying such traditions ensures that maritime consciousness is not the preserve of state institutions alone but remains rooted in lived cultural memory. In this way, heritage and culture sustain maritime identity by reminding the nation that its oceanic story is not newly constructed, but deeply inherited.

## Ecology and Sustainability

No conception of maritime consciousness is complete without ecological stewardship. The **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change** (MoEFCC), in collaboration with the

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<sup>8</sup> Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, "Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi announced Vision MAHASAGAR- 'Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions' for the Global South in Mauritius", *Media Centre*, 12 March 2025, <https://www.mea.gov.in/newsdetail1.htm?13355/>

<sup>9</sup> Government of India, Press Information Bureau, Cabinet Greenlights National Maritime Heritage Complex at Lothal: Creating Over 22,000 Jobs While Honouring India's Maritime Legacy, 10 October 2024, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressNoteDetails.aspx?NoteId=153267&ModuleId=3>

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, "Vision and Mission", *National Maritime Heritage Complex Website*, <https://nmhc.in/about-us/#vision>

<sup>11</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Culture, "Project 'Mausam' Launched by Secretary, Ministry of Culture", *Press Information Bureau*, 21 June 2014, <https://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=105777>

<sup>12</sup> Maarten Bavinck, "Placating the Sea Goddess: Analysis of a Fisher Ritual in Tamil Nadu, India." *Etnofoor* 27, No 1 (2015): 89–100. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43410672>.

<sup>13</sup> TOI City Desk, "Boita Bandana: Odisha Celebrates its Rich Maritime Heritage with Colourful Miniature Boats", *Times of India*, 15 November 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhubaneswar/boita-bandana-odisha-celebrates-its-rich-maritime-heritage-with-colourful-miniature-boats-see-pics/articleshow/115323266.cms>

**Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry, and Dairying**, emphasises that the ocean is not merely a resource frontier, but a living, interdependent system. Under India’s G20 Presidency in 2023, the MoEFCC successfully secured the inclusion of the “Blue Economy” as a core theme within the Environment and Climate Sustainability Working Group—a landmark recognition that elevated the oceans within global climate discourse. For the Indian public, this underscored that marine ecosystems are as intrinsic to national destiny as forests or rivers.<sup>14</sup>

At the grassroots level, the Fisheries Ministry connects maritime identity directly to livelihoods. With millions of Indians engaged in fishing and allied activities, this ministry embodies the daily interface between households and the sea.<sup>15</sup>

## Synthesis

These four interdisciplinary and interdependent clusters demonstrate that formal institutions are not inert bureaucracies but active conduits for cultivating maritime consciousness. Only when infrastructure is interwoven with narrative, security with heritage, and ecology with culture can India overcome sea-blindness and reclaim its oceanic imagination as a core element of national identity.

Turning present diffusion into future coherence requires a symbolic and institutional centre of gravity—perhaps a National Maritime Commission or a strengthened inter-ministerial coordinating body under the Prime Minister’s Office. Such an institution could both synchronise policy and serve as a visible emblem of India’s maritime vision. Yet coordination alone cannot suffice.

Heritage is most powerful when animated through living practice. The practice of curation at the National Maritime Heritage Complex, for instance, could be followed by participation—living heritage trails, community festivals, oral traditions, and artisanal workshops can reanimate history as everyday experience. Education and imagination are equally critical. Maritime modules in school curricula, revised atlases foregrounding India’s oceanic geography, and immersive digital projects— from oral history archives to virtual reality expeditions— can ensure that maritime identity is not confined to policy circles but becomes embedded in everyday learning and popular consciousness.

## Informal Thrust Line: Narrative-Building, Cartography, and Culture

Taken together, these efforts highlight that cultivating maritime awareness requires more than infrastructure or institutional programming; it demands cultural expression and everyday practice. It is here that the informal thrust line acquires salience. By advancing narrative-building in creative formats and elevating cultural traditions, it ensures that the ocean is not

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<sup>14</sup> Dr Pushp Bajaj and Dr Chime Youdon, “Towards a Holistic Blue Economy Framework: Adoption of High-Level Principles for Blue Economy by the G20”, *National Maritime Foundation*, 02 March 2024, <https://maritimeindia.org/towards-a-holistic-blue-economy-framework-adoption-of-high-level-principles-for-blue-economy-by-the-g20/>

<sup>15</sup> Government Of India, Ministry Of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry And Dairying, “Year End Review 2024: Department of Fisheries (Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying)”, *Press Information Bureau*, 12 December 2024, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetailm.aspx?PRID=2083813>

merely administered as a resource or security frontier, but also imagined, celebrated, and carried forward as part of India's collective identity.

### **Narrative-Building through Artistic Media**

Artistic expression— whether through cinema, literature, or visual art— serves as a potent medium for cultivating maritime imagination. To embed the sea more firmly within popular consciousness, India could establish a **Maritime Stories Fund** to support filmmakers, create **Literary Fellowships** for writers in residence at port towns and fishing villages, and curate **Public Screenings and Readings** at coastal as well as inland festivals. By pairing such events with discussions involving creators, scholars, and community elders, artistic media would not only entertain but also transmit layered narratives of India's oceanic past and present. Yet narratives alone require cultural anchors if they are to endure; the imaginative must be reinforced by lived practice. This is where festivals and community traditions—already sustained at the coast— can be harnessed.

### **Elevating Coastal Festivals and Community Practices**

Coastal festivals already sustain vibrant maritime traditions, yet they remain largely regional in scope. To elevate these into the national imagination, a **National Maritime Festival Calendar** could be published, systematically linking festivals with heritage institutions such as the National Maritime Heritage Complex. Training **Youth Ambassadors** from coastal schools to curate programmes for inland audiences— whether through travelling exhibitions or virtual exchanges— would extend these practices beyond their locales, allowing them to resonate nationally as shared symbols of India's maritime inheritance. Extending festivals into national circuits, however, is only part of the task. For maritime consciousness to be genuinely embedded, it must infuse the everyday lives of citizens, and not merely appear in moments of celebration.

### **Embedding Maritime Culture in Everyday Life**

If narratives and maps provide the scaffolding of popular imagination, culture supplies its everyday texture. India's coastal communities safeguard a remarkable repertoire of maritime traditions— rituals, cuisines, music, and crafts— which reflect centuries of engagement with the sea. Yet, much of this intangible heritage remains confined to local memory, seldom acknowledged in national discourse. Bringing these practices into the mainstream is essential if maritime sensibilities are to be normalised in the daily lives of citizens.

This process can unfold through multiple, interconnected channels. Coastal festivals and folk traditions should be documented, digitised, and circulated via museums, cultural centres, and digital archives to ensure preservation and accessibility. Culinary festivals that foreground coastal cuisines could be incorporated into national cultural events, drawing attention to the ocean's role in shaping India's foodways. Educational curricula might integrate maritime folklore, rituals, and artisanal practices such as boat-building or shell craft, fostering continuity across generations.

Equally significant are the modern channels of imagination— **illustrated storytelling** and **cinematic representation**— which can project maritime themes to younger audiences in particular, and even the masses in general. Graphic narratives on ancient seafarers, animated

series on folk narratives, or films that foreground India's maritime encounters could complement traditional forms of cultural transmission, embedding the sea more firmly in popular consciousness

### **Way Ahead: Actively Tracking Maritime Consciousness**

For India, maritime consciousness is not a distant aspiration but a project already in motion. To ensure that maritime consciousness evolves into a sustained national ethos, progress could be assessed through a customised evaluative matrix, with *Maritime India Vision 2030* and *Viksit Bharat 2047* serving as milestone benchmarks. Indicators spanning **infrastructure impact, cultural engagement, ecological outcomes, public awareness, and governance** would provide a holistic measure of success.

India's framework for cultivating maritime identity is best understood in layers of strength and synergy. At the strategic apex, vision documents and policy documents such as *Maritime India Vision 2030* and *Amrit Kaal 2047* establish ambitious yet achievable objectives. The middle layer unfolds through two complementary thrust lines. The formal thrust line— led by MoPSW, Defence, Culture, Commerce, Skill Development, and Education, among others — advances tangible capacity through ports, shipyards, regulation, and training. The informal thrust line— driven by culture, academia, media, and civil society— ensures that these advances resonate with society at large.

At the intersection layer, integration amplifies impact— flagship projects become both functional and symbolic anchors; inter-ministerial task forces ensure alignment; and evaluative mechanisms translate outputs into outcomes. Together, these mechanisms allow India to transcend fragmented initiatives and build momentum toward a shared maritime future.

### **Conclusion**

Cultivating India's maritime consciousness requires a broader integration of state mechanisms with the contemporary cultural and social currents that shape collective imagination. Important steps in this direction include establishing a high-level coordination mechanism to overcome institutional silos, embedding maritime themes in education and artistic expression, and developing a robust evaluative matrix to track intended progress.

The ocean is not peripheral but constitutive of India's future. It unites livelihoods, strategy, and memory in ways no other domain can. Infrastructure, heritage, ecology, and narrative each contribute to this vision, yet it is their integration into a coherent whole that promises relatively greater impact.

India, once a confident seafaring nation, is well-positioned to reclaim that orientation. By drawing together the dimensions outlined in this article, the country can move beyond the persistent challenge of sea-blindness and foster a maritime consciousness that is strategically robust, culturally resonant, and widely acknowledged. In doing so, India may affirm itself not merely as a continental power with a coastline, but as a civilisation with deep maritime roots and a future securely anchored in the sea.

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