

SEA-BLIND INSTITUTIONS: HOW COLONIAL LEGACIES WEAKEN MARITIMITY IN INDIA

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Establishing Background

India presently aspires to invoke its civilisational oceanic heritage to be a leading maritime power, projecting influence in multiple dimensions of cooperation across the Indo-Pacific. Yet, its institutions remain structurally, if not inherently, sea-blind. India's prospects in the maritime domain, particularly those which require a strong resonance with a maritime identity and affinity to the seas, remain largely constrained due to the deeply embedded colonial legacies that have created institutionally sea-blind governance structures. Gaps in institutional memory concerning maritime consciousness have impaired India's ability to consolidate its maritime potential, leaving it landlocked in mindset even while its geography places it at the heart of the Indian Ocean.

Therefore, India has the additional responsibility to overcome colonial legacies, post-independence inertia, fragmented governance, and the exclusion of indigenous knowledge systems. This paper undertakes a diagnostic inquiry into institutional sea-blindness caused by the colonial experience, tracing its historical roots, examining its continuities, and judging policy potential in certain aspects by comparing the success of similar best practices adopted extra-nationally. It argues that unless India reforms its legal and institutional frameworks to integrate maritime heritage and knowledge systems, its oceanic ambitions will remain fragile. The method applied generates a revised analysis—drawing from an array of archaeological evidence, comparative maritime governance studies, and contemporary policy frameworks—that seeks to demonstrate that India's oceanic aspirations require a fundamental transformation, wherein a certain line of effort would be rooted in its indigenous maritime heritage.

Colonial Extraction and Maritime Subordination

The notion that Indian seafarers or mariners were inferior in knowledge, and only gained considerable experience and valuable scholarship under colonial powers, fortunately stands debunked at this point in present. The colonial foundation of India's maritime weakness may, in fact, extend far deeper than previously understood. It has been established through archaeological evidence from Harappan civilisation sites that Indian mariners possessed sophisticated knowledge of monsoon navigation, seasonal sailing patterns, and deep-sea fishing techniques as early as 2500 BCE.¹ Similarly, ancient and

¹ Sila Tripathi, "Early Users of Monsoon Winds for Navigation", *Current Science* 113, No 8, 25 October 2017, 25 October 2017, 1618-1623.

medieval Indian texts contain numerous references to the sea—the techniques of shipbuilding and seafaring—to demonstrate that Indian seafarers were equipped with skills derived from indigenous knowledge and experience long before the arrival of any colonial power.²

The unfortunate turn, however, is the loss of credit for such knowledge. The degree of the loss is so profound that claims opposing the status quo—prominent beliefs in the discipline in this context—become a matter of controversy rather than academic discovery. Maritime archaeology, for example, occupies a marginal position. Discoveries at sites like Lothal or Dwarka still tend to be framed as heritage curiosities of rare occurrence, not as living repositories of maritime knowledge. For centuries, Indian coastal communities cultivated deep expertise in navigation, shipbuilding, and monsoon-based seafaring. Yet these traditions are relatively underrepresented in modern policy frameworks.

The Deep Roots of Maritime Marginalisation

A significant and decisive rupture in India’s maritime history coincided with the onset of colonial rule. The trajectory of colonial authority, when viewed through a maritime rather than terrestrial lens, assumes a different chronology. While the British remain central to narratives of India’s subjugation under conquering powers, the maritime perspective reaches back to the Portuguese arrival on Indian shores. From this point onward, India’s maritime knowledge—once rich and deeply embedded in its economic and cultural fabric—was steadily weakened.³

Colonial policies were primarily oriented towards extraction for imperial advantage, thereby sidelining and undermining indigenous maritime capabilities, and leaving an impression of being a dependent power with diminished agency at sea. Equally significant was the colonial psychological project. Maps, censuses, and revenue policies reinforced a land-centric governance model. Rivers, railways, and territorial borders were meticulously surveyed, while the sea was treated as a void—useful only as a route for imperial trade. Coastal communities that once preserved vibrant oceanic networks were relegated to the margins of the mainstream discourse, and maritime traditions became “folklore,” stripped of their policy relevance.⁴

The arrival of European colonial powers in the Indian Ocean world had a threefold impact—economic, cultural, and political. Their monopoly was neither accidental nor incidental; it was deliberately designed. The conquest of the seas and of the territories along the dominant trading routes was orchestrated to serve their economic ambitions.

Mueller and Ayello, in examining the decline of the Portuguese Empire in Asia relative to the ascendancy of the British, highlight institutional and cultural factors that help explain the differing trajectories of these colonial enterprises. Their insights shed light on how each power’s approach

² Sila Tripathi, “Early Users of Monsoon Winds for Navigation”.

³ Joyti Prakash, “Colonialism and Its Lasting Impact on Indigenous Cultures”, *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews* 6, No 3, March 2025, 2234-2239.

⁴ Joyti Prakash, “Colonialism and Its Lasting Impact on Indigenous Cultures”.

See Also: Charles E Nowell and Harry Magdoff, “Mercantilism”, *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Western-colonialism/Mercantilism>

translated into distinct patterns of impact on local societies. They note that the Portuguese, upon their arrival, did not seek to direct trade exclusively to their ships but rather established dominance through protection rackets. As they observe—

“...By strategically controlling straits, ports and islands they diverted local sea-borne trade to the areas they controlled, charging cartazes (safe conducts) from all non-Portuguese ships, as well as customs, duties and much pillaging. As a result, though they remained the only European power in the region for nearly a century, they ‘did not introduce a single new element into the commerce of southern Asia’ (van Leur, 1955, p. 118). True discontinuity and the ‘rise of capitalism’ was not introduced by the Estado da India – the Portuguese empire in Asia – but by the Dutch and English Companies much later in the 17th century.”⁵

Building on Godinho’s work, Mueller and Ayello explore the relationship between violence and commerce in the Portuguese case. They argue that Portuguese reliance on violence was not incidental but rooted in the cultural ethos of the time—

“...Portuguese expansionism in the 15th century was strongly motivated by the notion of crusades and enrichment through war and pillage. This was a highly stratified society where ascension was achieved through birth and enhanced through arms and violence. The fidalgos (aristocrats) and cavaleiros (warriors) looked down on commerce, manual labor, and the notion of living within one’s means. But the very expansionism that was propelled by this view of the world, opened up opportunities for commerce and trade that required very different values and outlooks.”⁶

By contrast, the British approach leaned more heavily toward commerce in this “violence–commerce” spectrum of colonial strategies. Yet, from an Indian vantage point, this distinction is less meaningful. Both violence and economic exploitation were inseparable elements of colonial rule, regardless of whether the power in question was Portuguese, Dutch, or British. What differed was not the presence of violence or exploitation, but only the forms and intensity through which they were deployed.

In essence, colonial administration deliberately reoriented India's economy away from maritime commerce toward land-based extraction. The celebrated railway system, rather than connecting ports to productive hinterlands, was designed to funnel raw materials from the interior to select imperial ports.⁷ This infrastructure created a land-centric administrative mindset that persisted well beyond

⁵ Yale Department of Economics, Bernardo Mueller and João Gabriel Ayello, “How the East was Lost: Institutions and Culture in 16th Century Portuguese Empire”, 26 August 2016,

https://economics.yale.edu/sites/default/files/how_the_east_was_lost_aug_26_2016.pdf

⁶ Bernardo Mueller and João Gabriel Ayello, “How the East was Lost: Institutions and Culture in 16th Century Portuguese Empire”, 12-13.

⁷ Anand J C, “The Truth Behind British Railways in India: Economic Exploitation and Control”, *Economic Times*, 14 August 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/transportation/railways/the-truth-about-colonial-railways-did-the-british-infrastructure-really-benefit-india/articleshow/102691944.cms?from=mdr>

independence. The colonial suppression of indigenous shipbuilding centres, combined with restrictive navigation laws, effectively destroyed India's oceanic institutional memory.⁸

Therefore, the author contends that the structures inherited upon independence did not merely reflect the imprint of colonial administration but may have also perpetuated its epistemic orientation. The sea was never integrated into the nation's developmental imagination in the way rivers, railways, or agrarian reforms were. As the newly sovereign state embarked on institution-building, its guiding frameworks revealed a striking absence of maritime vision.⁹ The oceans were relegated to relatively scattered regulatory mentions rather than being conceived as strategic or developmental frontiers. In this sense, India did not begin its postcolonial journey with a tabula rasa but rather with an inherited framework that had already consigned the maritime domain to a peripheral status.¹⁰

The result was a paradox. India—which possessed nearly 7,516 km of coastline—now officially revised to 11,098.81 km¹¹—along with thousands of years of seafaring heritage, and a prime location astride the Indian Ocean's most critical sea-lanes, struggled to situate itself as a prominent and *ancient* maritime power in the global narrative for the longest time. This institutional dispersion, therefore, deserves closer scrutiny. India's maritime space is presently governed by a multiplicity of ministries and departments, each exercising partial jurisdiction—the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways oversees infrastructure; Agriculture for fisheries; Culture for underwater archaeology; Environment for coastal regulation; Ministry of Defence for security; Science and Technology for oceanography. The challenge is to arrive at effective coordination mechanisms and initiatives which prevent policies from being made in isolation. The stitched ship project, which was the result of a tripartite agreement involving two crucial ministries, is a promising step in this direction.¹²

In the contemporary geopolitical landscape, several nations with distinct roles in the course of world history—Japan, France, and Singapore, for instance—have sought comprehensive frameworks in this regard. Japan's Basic Act on Ocean Policy, for instance, integrates scientific research, environmental stewardship, and economic exploitation into a single statutory vision.¹³ Singapore has demonstrated how ports can evolve beyond infrastructure into drivers of national identity and hubs of regional diplomacy.¹⁴ France has leveraged its maritime history and overseas territories to craft a global

⁸ Lucas Sérougne, "Teak conquest: Wars, Forest Imperialism and Shipbuilding in India (1793-1815)", *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 399, No 1, 2020, 123-152. https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_AHRF_399_0123-to-conquer-teak-wars-forest.htm

⁹ Mujeeb Kanth, "Ordering the Post-Colonial Oceanic Space(s): K. M. Panikkar and the Making of an Indian Maritime Consciousness", *Global Studies Quarterly* 5, No (3), 17 July 2025

¹⁰ Kanth, "Ordering the Post-Colonial Oceanic Space(s)".

¹¹ Government of India, Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, Transport Research Wing (CIRCULAR), "Subject: Change in length of coastline of India - reg.", MR-14011/1/2024-TRW (S), 29 April 2025.

https://shipmin.gov.in/sites/default/files/Length%20of%20Indias%20Coastline%20Circular_0.pdf

¹² Government of India, Ministry of Defence, Press Information Bureau, "Indian Navy to Induct Traditionally Built 'Ancient Stitched Ship'", 20 May 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2129794>

¹³ Government of Japan, "Basic Act on Ocean Policy", Act No 33 of 2007, Japanese/English Law Translation, 05 December 2024, <https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/4770>

¹⁴ Izzah Sarah Binte Omer Ali Saifudeen, "Anchors of identity: Integrating maritime heritage into Singapore's Urban Authenticity", *Journal of City: Branding and Authenticity*, JCBAu 2 (2): 105-120.

See Also: USC Center on Public Diplomacy, "Singapore and Public Diplomacy", University of Southern California, 06 July 2021, https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/sites/default/files/Singapore%20and%20Public%20Diplomacy_7.6.21.pdf

oceanic presence, linking naval strength with marine sciences and cultural diplomacy.¹⁵ Each of these cases reflects a unifying principle—the sea is not an afterthought to national life but a crucial medium of economic, ecological, and cultural existence. It is tempting to call for wholesale transplantation of such international models. Yet caution is necessary. Fortunately, India’s socio-economic priorities and developmental scale resist simple imitation. Still, comparative insights remain useful.

The most significant challenge lies in bridging conceptual gaps from a nascent stage of Indian education. The ocean continues to be imagined narrowly as a security theatre or a logistical channel, rather than as an integrated field of policy where trade, culture, ecology, and diplomacy converge. To overcome this limitation, India requires not only institutional reform but also a shift in intellectual frameworks. The marginalisation of indigenous maritime knowledge is symptomatic of this deeper disjuncture. Furthermore, the neglect of indigenous traditions has consequences for contemporary sustainability. Coastal communities across India have practices attuned to ecological rhythms. These practices represented early models of sustainability, balancing human use with natural cycles.¹⁶ In an era where climate change and rising sea levels demand adaptive strategies, the loss of these indigenous practices represents a missed opportunity.

However, the *persistence* of sea-blindness in modern India’s institutional structures cannot be explained solely by colonial legacies or by the inertia of governance. It reflects the absence of a consistent intellectual and cultural engagement with the sea across dimensions in modern nation-building. Unlike ancient or early modern periods—when maritime traditions shaped commerce, religion, and community—postcolonial India relies on different means to advocate for its national interests, and rarely articulates the ocean as a locus of identity. The national imagination has drawn heavily from agrarian and territorial symbols so far—from village economies to the Himalayas, while the maritime dimension was relegated to the background. This absence of cultural anchoring has left maritime affairs vulnerable to sporadic policy initiatives rather than the notion of being a maritime nation embedded in the national fabric.¹⁷ However, the current transformation in India’s strategic thinking must also be given due credit; The Hon’ble *Raksha Mantri* of India, Shri Rajnath Singh, has remarked that while “...we were once known as a ‘landlocked country with sea shores’, but now we can be seen as an ‘island country with land borders’”.¹⁸

¹⁵ Government of France, "Maritime Limits Context", Maritime Limits, 15 May 2024, <https://maritimelimits.gouv.fr/context>

See Also: Céline Pajon, "France's Contributions to Pacific Maritime Governance", *East-West Centre Asia Pacific Bulletin*, No 729, 20 February 2025, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/apb_729_france_s_contributions_to_pacific_maritime_governance.pdf

¹⁶ Aashna Gupta, Coastal Custodians: India’s Local Communities Driving Climate Resilience, Forum for Global Studies, 13 November 2024, <https://forumforglobalstudies.com/coastal-custodians-indias-local-communities-driving-climate-resilience>

¹⁷ Aniruddh S Gaur and Kamlesh H Vora, "Maritime Archaeological Studies in India", in *The Oxford Handbook of Maritime Archaeology*, eds Ben Ford, Donny L Hamilton, and Alexis Catsambis (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2012). <https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/40217/chapter/345154798>

¹⁸ Government of India, Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, “Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh inaugurates new Administrative & Training building at Naval War College, Goa”, 05 March 2024. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2011563>

Comparative examples from actors at the other end of the geopolitical spectrum further reinforce the case for change. China, though also burdened with a historical land-centric worldview, has in recent decades deliberately cultivated a maritime narrative to underpin its rise. Through scholarship, heritage reclamation, and systematic integration of maritime consciousness into its strategic culture, Beijing has repositioned the sea as an essential element of national destiny.¹⁹ Similarly, Türkiye has adopted a strategy which relies on projecting itself as the “*Mavi Vatan*”, which translates to “Blue Homeland”.²⁰ Yet again, such examples are seldom for the purpose of replications as India’s situation differs markedly—the democratic pluralism of its polity, the competing demands of its domestic development agenda, and the diversity of its coastal communities prevent a centrally orchestrated cultural project of similar scale. Attempting to replicate any such model would risk distortion, erasure, or instrumentalisation of India’s indigenous traditions. The challenge, therefore, is not to emulate but to adapt—drawing on India’s own maritime civilisational resources while engaging with global best practices selectively.

Institutional sea-blindness also reveals itself in the compartmentalisation of knowledge. Academic work on India’s maritime past, from archaeological findings at Harappan sites to records of medieval trade guilds, often circulates in disciplinary silos—archaeology, history, cultural studies—without significant transmission into policy discourse. It is, therefore, essential to generate mechanisms that can effectively integrate maritime history and research into contemporary policymaking by fostering sustained channels of communication between academia and government. India’s challenge is to create such integrative pathways without imposing rigid institutional templates imported from elsewhere.

Equally significant is the neglect of coastal communities as repositories of knowledge. Generations of fishers, boat-builders, and navigators hold traditions of seafaring that remain under-documented and under-theorised. Taken together, these observations suggest that India’s maritime future hinges less on material investments alone and more on a reassessment and recalibration of concerned institutions and knowledge systems. Overcoming this gap requires cultivating intellectual and cultural foundations that make maritime identity inseparable from national identity.

Recognising the centrality of coastal communities and indigenous traditions underscores that India’s maritime future cannot be secured through narrowly technocratic approaches alone. It requires a genuinely integrated perspective—where science and technology are interwoven with ecological wisdom, historical awareness, and cultural imagination—to build a holistic maritime consciousness. This shift demands moving from diagnosis to design—from identifying the historical neglect of maritime traditions to crafting actionable pathways that embed them into education, training, and governance.

¹⁹ Tabitha Grace Mallory, Andrew Chubb, and Sallie Lau, “China’s Ocean Culture and Consciousness: Constructing a Maritime Great Power Narrative,” *Marine Policy*, 144, October 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2022.105229>

²⁰ Capt Andrew Norris, USCG (ret.) and Alexander Norris, “Turkey’s “Mavi Vatan” Strategy and Rising Insecurity in the Eastern Mediterranean”, Centre for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC), 18 September 2020, <https://cimsec.org/turkeys-mavi-vatan-strategy-and-rising-insecurity-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>

The following recommendations translate this imperative into specific initiatives aimed at integrating indigenous expertise, strengthening institutional frameworks, and cultivating a maritime consciousness that is both historically grounded and strategically forward-looking with ample contemporary relevance.

Policy Recommendations

The establishment of an **Indigenous Seamanship and Monsoon Navigation Programme** that formally integrates indigenous navigation techniques into the training of mariners and naval cadets could prove beneficial. This initiative would serve a dual purpose by safeguarding cultural continuity and strengthening practical, climate-adaptive navigation skills, especially as seafaring communities face increasingly volatile marine conditions. Equally important is the recognition that India's maritime traditions were never confined to commerce alone but extended into cultural and ecological spheres.

A **Coastal Community Knowledge Repository Project** should be established to document, preserve, and integrate indigenous maritime traditions into contemporary practice. This initiative would bring together academic researchers, industry practitioners, and coastal communities to create a centralised, accessible archive of seafaring techniques, boatbuilding skills, navigation methods, and ecological practices. By safeguarding oral histories and craft knowledge, the repository would not only honour community custodianship but also provide practical insights for sustainable fisheries, climate adaptation, and heritage tourism. Linking traditional wisdom with modern science and policy would create a living resource that informs education, industry standards, and cultural programming. In doing so, the project would ensure that India's coastal knowledge systems remain active contributors to its maritime future.

A "**Blue Curriculum**" should be embedded across NCERT and UGC to address India's sea-blindness. NCERT must revise textbooks and atlases to feature India's EEZ, sea-lanes, and historic ports, supported by map-based projects and field visits to ports and maritime museums. At the university level, the UGC should establish minors in **Maritime Studies**, introduce interdisciplinary courses on law, heritage, ecology, and trade, and fund "**Blue Fellowships**" to document indigenous seamanship. **Digital immersion**—through VR expeditions of ancient dockyards and shipping routes, along with online repositories of oral histories—should complement classroom learning.

Conclusion

Together, these strands— archaeological heritage, navigation practices, and cultural maritime knowledge— illustrate a multifaceted maritime past that cannot be reduced to trade alone. They reveal a civilisation whose engagement with the sea was infrastructural, empirical, and cultural, with each dimension strongly reinforcing the others. Reviving these traditions is not a matter of nostalgic reproduction, but of conserving and propagating adaptive principles that speak directly to contemporary challenges—designing climate-resilient ports, fostering sustainable seamanship, and advancing ecologically responsible management rooted in cultural knowledge. The recommendations offered here provide pathways for anchoring maritime policy in indigenous knowledge while engaging global parallels. Yet caution must be exercised as they serve as comparative references, encouraging

context-specific applications that are rooted in India's own material and cultural legacy. The goal, ultimately, is to reposition India's maritime past not as a relic of antiquity but as an active resource in shaping a resilient maritime future.

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