

PATHWAYS FOR INDIA–SPAIN COLLABORATION ON UNDERWATER CULTURAL HERITAGE

Priyasha Dixit and Suraj Palavalsa

Contemporary Developments

India and Spain have jointly designated 2026 as the “*Year of Culture, Tourism, and Artificial Intelligence*.”¹ This development marks an important step in broadening the cultural dimensions of their bilateral partnership. The cultural lens lends a unique perspective through which both countries can deepen cooperation while simultaneously strengthening maritime consciousness, historical narratives, and societal bonds. Beyond symbolic significance, this year provides a timely opportunity to explore converging areas of interest for both nations wherein heritage, technology, and diplomacy intersect. One such area is Underwater Cultural Heritage (UCH).

Nick Collins, author of the book “*How Maritime Trade and the Indian Subcontinent Shaped the World: Ice Age to Mid-Eighth Century*”, observes:

*“Global Warming pessimists predict catastrophic weather if sea levels rise. A meter would drown Bangladesh, Holland and the Maldives. Further rise would threaten Tokyo, Shanghai, Calcutta, Mumbai, London, New York and Los Angeles – Imagine a world in 10,000 years if these predictions come true. Archaeologists could study sites in Moscow, Denver, Chamonix, Delhi, Johannesburg and Las Vegas. They would get a favour of life and its different characteristics but would miss how today’s world actually worked, that over 95 per cent of world trade is by sea. The world’s most important ports, its most populous cities, would be lost to them”*²

Collins’ observation also informs — if not defines — the focus of this article. Current approaches may particularly benefit from applying this idea through a process of retrodictive reasoning. This notion of “*lost narratives*” is reminiscent by nature. It reveals that the study and preservation of UCH represent more than an archaeological endeavour. It is, instead, an effort to recover and safeguard the historical record of maritime interactions that helped shape human civilisation but have since faded from collective memory. Preserving material evidence of past connectivity helps most notably in three aspects: it *reconstructs* previously unknown historical contexts; it *enriches* contemporary understandings of the maritime past; and it *enables* a more informed appreciation of the societies, technologies, and exchanges, which once linked distant regions. In doing so, it contributes not only to the preservation of knowledge but also to ensuring that the historical actors and networks that facilitated these connections receive their rightful place in the historical narrative.

¹ “What is the Spain-India Dual Year 2026?”, Spain-India Council Foundation, 07 Jan 2026, https://www.spain-india.org/en/dual_year_article/what_is_the_spain_india_dual_year_2026.

² Nick Collins, *How Maritime Trade and the India Subcontinent Shaped the World: Ice Age to Mid-Eighth Century* (Yorkshire – Philadelphia: Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 2021): 20-21.

A variety of initiatives undertaken jointly by the two nations offer evidence of a joint recognition that there is a substantive correlation between cultural engagement, technological innovation, and public diplomacy. The inclusion of tourism and artificial intelligence, alongside culture, suggests an appreciation that digital technologies, public outreach, and the preservation of heritage, need not be treated as separate policy domains. Instead, all these can be approached as mutually reinforcing instruments of contemporary cultural diplomacy.

Such opportunities are particularly relevant at a time when the maritime domain is increasingly being reassessed through perspectives that extend beyond economics and security. While contemporary maritime discourse remains dominated by concerns relating to strategic stability, the historical and cultural dimensions of the maritime domain play an equally important role in the long-term construction of maritime identity and a sustained understanding of seapower. Beyond material capabilities alone, they provide the narratives and evidence-driven foundations through which societies understand, legitimise, and sustain their relationship with the sea.

Against this backdrop, this article examines the viability of UCH as an area for India-Spain cooperation. In doing so, it explores both the convergences and divergences that may shape such collaboration while also assessing the resulting opportunities and challenges.

India-Spain Bilateral Frameworks and Existing Agreements

Although UCH has yet to emerge as a distinct pillar of India-Spain relations, previous developments in the bilateral relationship have created a favourable foundation upon which future cooperation may be built. Among the more consequential of these developments was the adoption of the “Cultural Cooperation Programme (2024-2028)” during the visit of Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez to India in October 2024.³ Designed to strengthen exchanges across culture, academia, museums, literature, festivals, and related fields, this programme provides an important institutional framework through which heritage-oriented initiatives may be pursued. While UCH is not explicitly addressed within this programme, many of its objectives intersect with broader concerns relating to heritage preservation and public engagement. Equally noteworthy was the joint decision by the leaders of both countries during their meeting in 2024 to designate 2026 as the “India–Spain Year of Culture, Tourism and Artificial Intelligence”, which is now unfolding in the current year (2026).⁴

These initiatives complement an even wider network of bilateral agreements encompassing cultural cooperation, academic exchanges, scientific collaboration, audiovisual partnerships, and

³ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, “List of Outcomes: Visit of the President of the Government of Spain, H.E. Mr. Pedro Sanchez, to India (October 28-29, 2024)”, 28 October 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents?dtl/38475/List_of_Outcomes_Visit_of_the_President_of_the_Government_of_Spain_HE_Mr_Pedro_Sanchez_to_India_October_2829_2024.

⁴ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, “List of Outcomes: Visit of the President of the Government of Spain, H.E. Mr. Pedro Sanchez, to India (October 28-29, 2024)”

technological engagement.⁵ Collectively, they create an enabling environment for future cooperation in maritime heritage; The absence of dedicated provisions on UCH should therefore not be viewed as a limitation.

The prospects for India-Spain cooperation in this field are best understood through an intentional recognition of both, *shared maritime characteristics* and *differing levels of institutional development*. Both countries possess extensive coastlines, rich maritime histories, and cultural legacies shaped by centuries of interaction across the seas. Both are active participants in international efforts aimed at safeguarding cultural heritage and face comparable challenges relating to the protection of shipwrecks, illicit trafficking of artefacts, commercial salvage activities, and the long-term conservation of underwater archaeological sites. These commonalities provide a natural basis for cooperation.

At the same time, India and Spain have approached the governance and management of UCH along markedly different institutional trajectories. Spain has gradually developed a comprehensive ecosystem encompassing specialised institutions, dedicated management strategies, technical expertise, and legal mechanisms for the protection of underwater heritage. India, by contrast, remains in the process of consolidating its institutional, legal, and policy architecture in this domain. Interest in UCH has grown gradually within India's maritime discourse over the past few decades. Archaeological investigations, particularly along the coasts of Gujarat⁶ and Tamil Nadu,⁷ have revealed important evidence of historical seafaring activity and highlighted the potential of underwater archaeology to deepen understandings of India's maritime past. Parallel initiatives, such as Project MAUSAM, have sought to revive and reconnect the historical networks of exchange and interaction that once linked the broader Indian Ocean "world" — extending from East Asia to the Eastern Mediterranean.⁸

This divergence highlights a policy space that remains largely unexplored. Existing frameworks provide the institutional scaffolding upon which more specialised forms of cooperation could be developed. These may include dedicated heritage dialogues, joint research programmes, museum partnerships, or collaborative initiatives focused on maritime archaeology and underwater heritage preservation.

Comparative Insights from Spain

Within this context, Spain offers a particularly valuable point of reference. Owing to its extensive maritime engagement across both the Atlantic and Mediterranean worlds, Spain has accumulated considerable experience in the identification, protection, conservation, and

⁵ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, "List of Outcomes: Visit of the President of the Government of Spain, H.E. Mr. Pedro Sanchez, to India (October 28-29, 2024)"

⁶ AS Gaur and Sundaresh, "Maritime Archaeology of Gujarat: Northwest Coast of India", *The Museum of Underwater Archaeology*, <http://www.themua.org/collections/files/original/a6f3e32439d4becf520fd118f5f28a4f.pdf>.

⁷ Sundaresh and AS Gaur, "Marine Archaeological Investigation on Tamil Nadu Coast, India: An Overview", *The Museum of Underwater Archaeology*, <http://www.themua.org/collections/files/original/d7a46a40fffd7b7c0efe02709b5a81c1.pdf>.

⁸ Government of India, Ministry of Culture, "Project 'Mausam' Launched by Secretary, Ministry of Culture", PIB, 21 June 2014. <https://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=105777>

interpretation of UCH. The scale and complexity of this heritage — shaped by centuries of maritime activity, naval operations, and transoceanic exchange — necessitated the gradual development of specialised legal, institutional, and technical capacities.

Examining the Spanish experience, therefore, serves two complementary purposes. First, it helps identify practical areas in which India and Spain may pursue cooperation and develop bilateral mechanisms. Second, it offers comparative insights that may prove useful as India continues to strengthen its own UCH ecosystem.

However, any comparison between the two countries must remain attentive to important historical differences. Spain’s maritime heritage institutions evolved within the historical context of a former imperial and colonial power with extensive overseas maritime networks, whereas India’s effort to enhance maritime consciousness is shaped by its experience as a post-colonial State seeking to recover, preserve, and reinterpret its own maritime past. These differing historical trajectories require approaching collaboration with sensitivity, mutual respect, and an appreciation of the distinct historical experiences that inform each country’s understanding of heritage and identity. Some thoughts in this regard are set forth in the succeeding paragraphs.

Legal and Governance Framework

Spain’s approach to UCH protection is supported by a well-developed legal framework that combines international commitments, national legislation, and regional governance mechanisms. Over time, this framework has enabled Spain to move beyond the protection of individual archaeological sites towards a more comprehensive system.

An important component is Spain’s ratification of the “2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage”. Having ratified the Convention on 06 June 2005,⁹ Spain has emerged as one of its strongest supporters and has actively promoted its principles at both the national and international levels. The Convention emphasises the preservation of heritage *in situ*,¹⁰ encourages scientific research and international cooperation, and rejects the commercial exploitation of underwater archaeological resources. For Spain, the Convention has provided an internationally recognised framework for managing UCH while strengthening its ability to address legal and diplomatic questions relating to shipwrecks and maritime artefacts associated with its extensive maritime history.

At the national level, the “Spanish Historical Heritage Act 1985” is foundational to Spain’s heritage protection regime.¹¹ Article 15 of this legislation extends legal protection to

⁹ Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, “State Parties”, Legal Affairs, UNESCO, <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-protection-underwater-cultural-heritage>.

¹⁰ Underwater Cultural Heritage 2001 Convention, “Principles of the 2001 Convention”, UNESCO, 20 Aug 2024, <https://www.unesco.org/en/underwater-heritage/principles-2001>.

¹¹ Gobierno de España (The Government of Spain), Official Bulletin, “The Spanish Historical Heritage Law 16/1985”, European University Institute, 25 June 1985, <https://www.eui.eu/Projects/InternationalArtHeritageLaw/Documents/NationalLegislation/Spain/law16of1985.pdf>.

archaeological resources located beneath the sea (extending up to its territorial seas) and provides authorities with powers to regulate exploration, excavation, conservation, and recovery activities.¹² Notably, the Act recognises underwater archaeological remains as an integral component of Spain's historical heritage rather than as isolated maritime objects. This has enabled the development of legal mechanisms aimed at preventing unauthorised excavations, treasure hunting, and the illicit removal of artefacts.

Spain's governance framework is further strengthened by the role played by its *Comunidades Autónomas* (autonomous communities). Regions such as Andalusia, Catalonia, the Canary Islands, the Basque Country, and the Balearic Islands have adopted additional heritage legislation and management mechanisms tailored to local archaeological conditions and conservation requirements. As a result, responsibility for UCH protection is shared across multiple levels of government. This multi-layered system has allowed Spain to combine national oversight with regional implementation, creating a governance structure that is both flexible and responsive to local circumstances while maintaining broader policy coherence.

Another considerable feature of Spain's approach is the integration of UCH within wider maritime governance frameworks. Through its "Maritime Spatial Plans" (*Planes de Ordenación del Espacio Marítimo* or POEM), Spain incorporates underwater archaeology and cultural heritage into Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) processes.¹³ This reflects the expansion of a cultural concern into a component of ocean governance. By recognising heritage alongside activities such as shipping, fisheries, renewable energy development, and environmental protection, Spain has sought to ensure that archaeological resources are considered within broader decision-making processes relating to the use of maritime space.

This feature is relevant to India, too, given that its maritime heritage is similarly distributed across numerous coastal states and union territories, each characterised by distinct historical traditions, state-level administrative bodies or interest groups, and actual conservation capacities. The aforementioned examples reassuringly demonstrate how a decentralised political system can develop coordinated mechanisms for maritime heritage protection while also integrating cultural heritage considerations into the wider ocean governance framework.

Institutional Mechanisms and National Planning

While legal frameworks provide the foundation for heritage protection, their effectiveness ultimately depends upon the institutions responsible for implementation. Spain's success in the field derived from the development of specialised institutions and long-term planning mechanisms capable of translating legal principles into practical outcomes.

¹² Gobierno de España (The Government of Spain), Official Bulletin, "Article 15: The Spanish Historical Heritage Law 16/1985", European University Institute, 25 June 1985.

¹³ Gobierno de España (The Government of Spain), Ministry of Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge, "Maritime Spatial Plans", Ministry of Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge (MIETCO), the Government of Spain, Feb 2023, 28, <https://libreria.miteco.gob.es/media/miteco/files/book-attachment-68.pdf>.

A central pillar of Spain's institutional architecture is the “*Museo Nacional de Arqueología Subacuática*” (National Museum of Subaquatic Archaeology or ARQVA), established in 1982 in Cartagena.¹⁴ ARQVA functions as far more than a conventional museum; it serves as Spain's principal institution for UCH, combining archaeological research, conservation, documentation, education, public outreach, and international cooperation within a single organisational framework. This integrated approach has enabled Spain to connect scientific research and heritage preservation with public engagement and maritime awareness.

The ARQVA represents a thorough model of heritage governance. The institution bridges the gap between archaeological discovery and societal understanding by linking aspects of research and conservation with efforts pertaining to public engagement. In doing so, it contributes to the cultivation of maritime consciousness by making underwater heritage accessible to wider audiences and demonstrating its relevance to national history and identity.

Spain has further strengthened its institutional framework through the development of a dedicated “National Plan for Underwater Cultural Heritage (2005)”.¹⁵ The plan provides a strategic framework for the identification, documentation, conservation, and management of underwater cultural resources across Spanish waters. It emphasises coordination among museums, research institutions, government agencies, and regional authorities, while establishing long-term priorities for archaeological investigation and heritage protection. The existence of a dedicated national strategy distinguishes Spain from many countries that manage underwater heritage through fragmented or *ad hoc* mechanisms. This plan provides continuity, ensures resource allocation, and promotes long-term thinking regarding maritime heritage protection.

For India, this dimension of the Spanish experience is particularly relevant. Although institutions such as the “Archaeological Survey of India” (ASI)—and its “Underwater Archaeological Wing” (UAW)—the “National Institute of Oceanography” (NIO), the Indian Navy, and various state archaeology departments, have all contributed significantly to underwater archaeological research and documentation, their activities often operate within separate structures as intersecting yet independent entities.

UNESCO Cooperation and Policy Development

A particularly important dimension of India-Spain cooperation concerns engagement with UNESCO mechanisms. Spain's experience as a State party to the UNESCO 2001 Convention provides valuable insights for countries seeking to strengthen underwater heritage governance. Although India has not ratified the convention, cooperation with Spanish institutions could help Indian policymakers better understand the practical implications of its principles and implementation mechanisms. This would enable the development of a comprehensive policy

¹⁴ Government of Spain, Ministry of Culture, “National Museum of Underwater Archaeology (ARQVA)”, Acciona Culture, <https://www.acciona-cultura.com/projects-and-collections/projects/national-museum-of-underwater-archaeology-arqva>.

¹⁵ Government of Spain, Ministry of Culture, “The National Plan for the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage”, 2005, <https://www.cultura.gob.es/planes-nacionales/dam/jcr:c68be0f7-c2c9-4122-920d-075212765770/14-patrimonio-subacuatico-eng.pdf>.

architecture aligned with internationally recognised standards while respecting India's domestic legal and administrative requirements. Such cooperation would not necessarily require immediate ratification of the Convention but could nevertheless significantly contribute to greater convergence with global best practices.

Further, Spain could also support India in engaging with UNESCO programmes, capacity-building and capability-enhancement initiatives, and international heritage networks. Participation in joint UNESCO-related projects would enhance India's visibility within global discussions on UCH.

Future Areas of Collaboration

Capability Enhancement. Spain's experience in training underwater archaeologists, conducting maritime excavations, managing heritage sites, and operating specialised museums could significantly contribute to India's institutional development. Exchange programmes involving archaeologists, museum professionals, conservation specialists, and maritime historians would help strengthen professional expertise while facilitating the sharing of best practices in underwater heritage management.

Capacity Building. The protection and management of UCH increasingly depend upon advanced technological tools, including remote sensing, sonar mapping, photogrammetry, digital modelling, and artificial intelligence. Spain's expertise in digital heritage management could support India's efforts to develop 3D mapping capabilities for underwater archaeological sites. Digital twinning technologies could also enable the creation of virtual replicas of submerged heritage sites, allowing interested researchers or the general public to access archaeological resources that are otherwise difficult to obtain.

Conservation Science. The conservation of shipwreck materials, ceramics, metals, and organic remains requires highly specialised technical expertise and laboratory infrastructure. Spain's extensive experience in this field could support the development of advanced conservation capabilities and specialised training programmes within India. Such cooperation could strengthen India's ability to preserve artefacts (especially *in situ* conservation).

Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP). Spain's integration of UCH within its Maritime Spatial Plans (POEM) demonstrates how heritage protection can be incorporated into ocean governance. Initiatives undertaken in Puducherry¹⁶ and Lakshadweep¹⁷ and the recent rollout of Marine Spatial Planning in Odisha¹⁸ indicate a growing recognition of the need for coordinated

¹⁶ "Marine Spatial Planning Framework, Country's First, Launched in Puducherry", National Centre for Coastal Research (NCCR), Aug 2018, <https://www.nccr.gov.in/sites/default/files/th14feb23.pdf>.

¹⁷ Government of India, Ministry of Earth Sciences, "India and Norway agree to conduct marine spatial planning in Lakshadweep and Puducherry", *Press Information Bureau*, 03 March 2021, <https://www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1702137®=48&lang=2>.

¹⁸ Sujit Bisoyi, "Odisha becomes first state to launch Marine Spatial Plan. Here is what to know", *Indian Express*, 18 April 2026, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/marine-spatial-planning-odisha-10643575/>.

ocean governance. In this context, Spanish experience could provide valuable insights into how UCH considerations can be incorporated into future Indian MSP initiatives.

Museum Cooperation. Partnerships between the National Museum of Subaquatic Archaeology (ARQVA) and Indian maritime museums could facilitate joint exhibitions, collaborative research projects, travelling displays, and educational initiatives. Such cooperation would not only enhance professional capacities but also increase public awareness of maritime heritage in both countries. These efforts align directly with the objective highlighted in the India-Spain Joint Statement of 2024, which states:

*“During the year, both sides will make the maximum effort to boost the cultural presence of the other in their museums, art, fairs, film, festivals, literature, meetings of architects and circles of debate and thought.”*¹⁹

The recent decision to transform the decommissioned Indian naval vessel the *Guldar* into India’s first underwater museum and artificial reef presents a promising avenue for initial collaboration.²⁰ India could gain insights for the development and long-term management of the *Guldar* project. Further collaboration between Spanish heritage institutions and Indian stakeholders could assist in designing visitor experiences, digital interpretation tools, conservation protocols, and educational programmes.

Artificial Intelligence. AI-assisted documentation systems can improve cataloguing, pattern recognition, predictive analysis, and archival management. Joint projects focused on AI applications in maritime archaeology would once align closely with the objectives of the “India-Spain Year of Culture, Tourism, and Artificial Intelligence”. As was highlighted in the Joint Statement (2024):

*“In accordance with the G20 New Delhi Leaders Declaration, India and Spain can play a very important role for the use of AI for good and its positive implementation in many fields. Both countries commit to hold during the year, events to foster positive use of AI and will work for the practical implementation of new advances in the field of AI in the productive economy.”*²¹

Conclusion

The growing importance of maritime heritage within cultural diplomacy presents a promising, though largely unexplored, avenue for India-Spain cooperation. Spain’s experience in developing

¹⁹ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, “India-Spain Joint Statement during the visit of President of Government of Spain to India (October 28-29, 2024)”, 28 October 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents?dtl/38476/IndiaSpain_Joint_Statement_during_the_visit_of_President_of_Government_of_Spain_to_India_October_2829_2024

²⁰ Government of India, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, “India’s First Underwater Museum and Artificial Coral Reef to Be Developed Around INS *Guldar* in Maharashtra”, *Akashvani News*, 10 June 2025, <https://newsonair.gov.in/indias-first-underwater-museum-and-artificial-coral-reef-to-be-developed-around-ins-guldar-in-maharashtra/>.

²¹ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, “India-Spain Joint Statement during the visit of President of Government of Spain to India (28-29 October 2024)”.

legal frameworks, specialised institutions, and international partnerships for UCH protection offers valuable lessons for India as it continues to strengthen its own heritage ecosystem. Existing cultural, academic, and scientific agreements already provide a foundation for collaboration. Collaboration under this theme offers a practical means of advancing several priorities identified in recent India-Spain bilateral engagements.

About the Authors

Ms Priyasha Dixit is a Research Associate at the National Maritime Foundation. Her area of focus is the enhancement of maritime consciousness in India— a theme that incorporates multiple issues of seminal importance including, inter alia, India’s maritime (seafaring) history (incorporating ancient Indian knowledge systems), the maritime history of the Indian Ocean, India’s maritime heritage and its underwater cultural heritage. The scope of her research is widening and now encompasses evaluations and analyses of maritime geopolitics within the Indo-Pacific. She may be contacted at indopac8nmf@gmail.com.

Mr Suraj Palavalsa is a Research Associate at the National Maritime Foundation. He has a Bachelor’s degree in Sociology, History, Political Science, and Economics (Ancillary) from Banaras Hindu University (BHU), and earned his MA degree in International Relations (South Asian Studies) from Pondicherry University, Puducherry. His current research focuses on reviving India’s maritime consciousness, as also on ports and maritime connectivity, adopting an interdisciplinary approach to both areas. He can be reached at emc1.nmf@gmail.com.