



India's Maritime History

For Prelims: Tankai method, [Project Mausam](#), [Lothal](#), [Jataka Tales](#), [Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust](#), [Maritime Vision 2030](#).

For Mains: India's History of Maritime Trade, Current Status of Maritime Transport in India.

Source: IE

Why in News?

A 21-meter-long ship, constructed using [ancient stitched shipbuilding method](#) (Tankai method) is set to embark on a voyage from Odisha to Bali in Indonesia in November 2025.

- Manned by a crew from the [Indian Navy](#), this project **not only showcases India's maritime tradition but also sheds light on its seafaring history.**
- This initiative is also in **harmony with the Ministry of Culture's [Project Mausam](#)**, which seeks to **reestablish maritime cultural ties** and foster cultural understanding among the **39 countries bordering the Indian Ocean.**

What is India's History of Maritime Trade?

- **Early Evidence of Maritime Trade:**
 - **Indus Valley and Mesopotamia:** The earliest known instances of people from the Indian subcontinent engaging in sea trade date back to **around 3300-1300 BCE.**
 - The dock at [Lothal](#) (in present-day Gujarat), shows the civilisation's deep understanding of the **workings of tides and winds.**
 - **Vedic and Buddhist References:** The Vedas, composed between 1500-500 BCE, contain **vivid tales of seafaring.**
 - Additionally, the [Jataka Tales](#) and [Tamil Sangam literature](#), spanning from 300 BCE to 400 CE, offer further insights into ancient Indian seafaring activities.
- **Intensification of Maritime Activity:** By the **1st century BCE**, movement through the deep seas intensified, partly driven by the **Roman Empire's demand for Eastern commodities.**
 - Harnessing the **power of monsoon winds** became crucial for completing long journeys, and **Roman commerce** played a significant role in promoting such voyages.
 - Romans acquired products from the [Coromandel Coast](#) - such as **horses, pearls, and spices.**
- **Diverse Boat-Building Traditions:** Ancient Indian boat-building traditions were **diverse and included the coir-sewn tradition of the Arabian Sea, the jong tradition of Southeast Asia,** and the Austronesian tradition of outrigger boats.
 - These traditions often employed stitching instead of nails for construction.
 - Different types of wood were used for shipbuilding, with **mangrove wood being ideal for dowels and teak for planks, keels, stem, and stern posts.**
 - Evidence of these wood usages can be found in coastal communities and archaeological sites across the Indian Ocean.

- **India as the Center of Trade:** By the Common Era, the Indian Ocean had become a vibrant "trade lake," with India at its heart:
 - **Western Trade Route: India connected to Europe through the Middle East and Africa**, with ports like **Bharuch and Muziris** serving as vital trade hubs.
 - **Eastern Trade Route:** Evidence of Indian artifacts in **Hepu, China**, dating back to the 3rd century BCE, suggests a **maritime route linking India to China and Malaysia**.
 - **Tamralipti in Bengal** played a significant role in this trade.
 - These maritime networks **facilitated the movement of people from various backgrounds**, fostering cultural exchanges.
 - Artifacts of Indian origin have been discovered as far as **Berenike in Egypt**, including **Hindu gods' representations** and inscriptions in Sanskrit.



What is the Current Status of Maritime Transport in India?

- India is the **16th largest maritime country** in the world. Currently, Maritime transport in India handles **95% of the trade by volume and 68% by value**.
 - **India is one of the world's top 5 ship recycling countries and holds 30% share in the global ship recycling market.**
 - India also owns over **30% global market share in the ship-breaking industry** and is home to the largest ship-breaking facility in the world at **Alang, Gujarat**.
- As of December 2021, India had a fleet strength with a **Gross tonnage (GT) of 13,011 thousand**. However, the **Indian fleet is just 1.2% of the world's fleet in terms of capacity** and carries only 7.8% (for 2018-19) of India's EXIM trade ([Economic Survey 2021-2022](#)).
- In 2017, the government launched the ambitious **Sagar Mala Program** with the vision of port-led development and growth of logistics-intensive industries.
 - India has currently **12 major and 200 non-major/intermediate ports (under state government administration)**.
 - **Jawaharlal Nehru Port** Trust is the largest major port in India, while **Mudra is the largest private port**.
- The [Maritime India Vision 2030](#) has identified over **150 initiatives to boost the Indian maritime sector**.

