From Lothal to Modern Container Ports
Tracing India’s rich maritime heritage

(The Maritime Heritage Museum, built in the shape of a container ship, with the interiors resembling a Spanish Galleon, on display at the Maritime India Summit in Goregaon depicts the 5000 year history of India’s rich maritime heritage. Right from the days of Lothal, the earliest known dockyard of the world, to the modern day technological prowess depicted in the form of a scale-down model of the indigenous aircraft carrier, the Museum is a treat for the eyes. Paintings and photographs, replica of Harappan seals, ancient maps, maps of forts, navigation equipment, ship models of different era are on display. The Museum was inaugurated by the Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi on April 14, 2016. Post Maritime Summit (April 14-1), there are plans to house this museum at the Jawaharlal Nehru Port in Nhava Sheva.)

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“Hark, now hear the sailors cry,
Smell the sea, and feel the sky
Let your soul & spirit fly, into the mystic...” — Van Morrison

The boundless ocean with its mysteries has always called out to man. It was a call that he could never resist, one that compelled him to conquer the seven seas. Man formed settlements near a river or stream, which provided food and water in abundance. The first boat that was built was made from a hollowed tree trunk, meant to navigate the streams, during the Stone Age.
India’s rich maritime heritage can be traced to the ancient Indus Valley Civilization. The earliest impression of a riverboat was found on a seal in 3000BCE. In order to further understand the story of ship building in India, one has to turn to archaeology, literature and painting. It is therefore simple to infer from evidence found from the 5000 year old Indus Valley Civilisation, that India’s maritime history predates that of the western civilization. The Indus valley people were therefore traders by nature and began perfecting the art of trade with the passage of time. Early trade can be traced between Indus Valley and Mesopotamia by a simple carving found in the low stratum at both the sites.

The archaeological excavations of Lothal found near the Gulf of Cambay, in present day Gujarat at the estuary of the river Sabarmati and Bhogawa furthers our evidence to show how advanced maritime trade was practiced in 2500 BCE. Lothal was the first tidal dockyard built by the Harappans. It was the warehouse of cotton, rice and wheat growing hinterland. The Harappans exported agricultural and marine products and imported gemstones and metals used by the people in our domestic industries. Further evidence shows that there are signs of trade that were carried out between ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia at that point. The Harappans had a deep understanding of engineering as they had created a hydraulic system at that time. It is said that the then dockyard could hold 30 ships of 60 tons each or 60 ships of 30 tons each.

The Vedic era laid down the foundation of Hinduism and other cultural dimensions of early Indian society. Little evidence is available of Indian shipping in this era, as it was only in the later Vedic Age that we have references to voyages across the sea.

The Mauryan Empire was unarguably one of the largest Empires of Ancient India. Under Chandragupta Maurya, agriculture and internal and external trade thrived. The Mauryans divided shipbuilding between the state and the private companies and encouraged the people to enter this industry with tax rebates. They also set up a Naval Department under ‘Navadhyaksha’, which administered the shipping and the trading activities, during that period.
During the Kushan period the sea going routes were linked with the silk routes to expand trade. Silk was brought to Rome and several urban centres were also set up. The Roman writer Pliny complains that, “so many gold and silver coins passed in this trade that Rome’s gold reserve was being rapidly depleted.” The Romans thus had to impose a ban on the import of pepper and steel from India.

The Satvahanas were a dynasty based in the Deccan region. This was a golden era in terms of industrial and maritime activity and the area between Godavari and Krishna were dotted with ports. The coins used during this period had impressions of a boat which further reiterated that it was a prosperous period for trade. According to archaeological excavations, items such as Chinese coins, knobbed wear, beads of semi precious stones only to name a few were found along the coast of Bengal, Orissa, Andhra and Tamil Nadu.
The hallmark of the Chola Dynasty was their strategic use of power to set up a naval fleet in the 10th and 11th century. The Cholas encouraged maritime trade through missions, sea routes and use of land routes through their expansive heartlands. They connected themselves to important trade centres like the Mediterranean and Persia in the West and Malay, China and Sumatra in the East. Further evidence found in the recent excavations has given us an interesting insight into the Coast of Palk Bay where several ports existed. Till this day, the traditional form of shipbuilding is practiced in this area in a limited form.

The opening of trade routes aroused intrigue amongst sea farers. This gave rise to “the age of exploration” when the tales of the mysterious lands of the East reached those of the West. There were many men who tried to cross the land and seas to witness these tales but there were very few who succeeded. One of them was Marco Polo, who became a confidant of Kublai Khan.

Marco Polo traveled through the silk route and returned to tell the tale to his people. In 1292 CE, when Marco Polo came to India, he described Indian ships as “built of firm timber, having a sheath of boards laid over the planking in every part, caulked with iron nails. The bottoms were smeared with a preparation of quicklime and hemp, pounded together and mixed with oil from a certain tree which is a better material than pitch." He further writes: “Ships had double boards which were joined together. They were made strong with iron nails and the crevices were filled with a special kind of gum. These ships were so huge that about 300 boatmen were needed to row them.

Portuguese explorer Vasco-da-Gama was commissioned by his country to come to India and measure its wealth for trade. He, with his fleet of four ships was the first to cross through the Cape of Good Hope, using the knowledge of the monsoon breeze to arrive at the coast of Calicut (now Kozhikode). The Portuguese were also the first to introduce the importance of naval power as they carried cannons on their ships. Till this juncture, trade was practiced with respect amongst the different clans. But the Portuguese practiced trade with coercion. They established a base in Goa and ruled it for 460 years. They also traded in spices from the coast of Malabar, through which major wealth was created for a small country like Portugal.
By the Mughal era, India had a well developed and efficient waterways network where boats would transport foodstuff and textile for regional trade. The coast of Coromandel had become a centre of textile production and had brisk trade with Gujarat, which was the entry point to foreign goods. Cloth like Malmal and silk were much sought after by the foreign traders, while pepper from the coast of Malabar was also highly in demand. It is estimated that at the end of the 17th century India had a 25% market share for cloth in the world market. In contrast, today it merely stands at 1%.

The 17th century saw the arrival of the British East India Company. They set up a factory in Surat and British settlements grew in Madras, Bombay, Calcutta, Hooghly and many other places. The Portuguese had limited access to the inlands and were confined to Goa and the French to Pondicherry and Chandernagore.

In the annals of history the Marathas played a significant role during the 17th century in the formation of a strong naval fleet, to keep the East India Company at bay. Chhatrapati Shivaji was a visionary and was aware of the power that lay in the seas. He built several forts to protect the Maratha Empire and also forts like Sindhudurg along the coastline. At the end of Shivaji Maharaj’s rule he had built 370 strong forts to protect his Empire. According to Maratha chronicles, Kanhoji Angre first rose to power when Sambhaji handed him the fort of Suvarnadurg in 1688. The British East India Company was threatened by Angre and it plotted an attack against him on the island of Kandheri situated at the mouth of the Bombay Harbor. The death of Angre in 1729 left a vacuum in the Maratha Empire, which eventually lead to the decline of their naval power.

During the British Period Indian ships were well known for their grandeur all over the world. Ships like the Gogha had a capacity of carrying 1500tons in comparison to the European ships, which carried only 600tons. Indians used durable wood for shipbuilding like teak, sal and rosewood. In 1735 the shipbuilding yard was transferred from Surat to Bombay under an Indian foreman. It was under the supervision of this Indian foreman that the Indian artisans built nine ships of the line, seven frigates and six smaller vessels for the Royal Navy during the 18-19th century.
According to a report by Col. Walker, it was statistically cheaper to build ships in India than in London. The shipbuilding magnates in Britain were therefore threatened by the demand and popularity of the Indian ships. Investigations were carried out in this regard in 1811. Despite disagreements, a law was passed in 1814 where Indians lost the right to become British sailors and it was necessary to employ three fourths British sailors on British ships. A ship without a British master was not allowed to enter their waters.

In the year 1819, the first steamboat, built for pleasure, appeared on Indian waters, for the Nawab of Oudh. The second landmark year was 1919, when the first and largest, Indian steamship company i.e. the Scindia Steam Navigation Company was established. There were two shipping companies that came into the foray at this point- the Wadias and the Scindias; they changed the face of Indian shipping in the times to come.

The Wadias were a shipbuilding family that hailed from Surat. Lovji Norozji Wadia had an impeccable reputation as a master ship builder. It was in 1736 that the British secured the workmanship of Lovji for building the Bombay dock yard and ships for their own fleet. There was no turning back for Bombay, as it became a viable port that conveniently connected the trade routes of the East to the West. Lovji has rightly been called the founder of shipbuilding in Bombay. He passed away in 1774 and his sons Maneckji and Bomanji then carried his legacy forward who further built on Lovjis reputation of integrity and ability. The Wadia family ships sailed the seven seas, from the shores of the new world to those of the old. Some of their most renowned ships were HMS Trincomalee, HMS Cornwallis and HMS Minden.
The Scindias were also pioneer ship builders during this period, the company was owned by Shri Walchand Hirachand and Shri Narottam Morarjee who formed the Scindia Steam Navigation Company in 1919. The first ship that was built under the British Raj under a swadeshi flagship was SS Loyalty, heralding the entry of India into shipping. SS Loyalty sailed on the 5th of April 1919, despite pressure tactics from the British. This day is marked as the National Maritime Day in India.

Walchand Hirachand also founded the first Indian shipyard at Vishakhapatnam. In the days when it was unthinkable of a foundation ceremony to be laid by anyone other than British officials, patriotic Walchand decided to break the tradition and the foundation stone for the shipyard was laid by Dr. Rajendra Prasad on 21 June 1941. The yard was launched in 1948 and inaugurated by then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

The need of the hour to improve port efficiency and keep up with changing times the only way forward to secure bulk cargo from theft or loss was containerization. India answered this challenge with the setting up of the Jawaharlal Nehru Port at Nhava Sheva.

However, over the years the maritime sector and the water transportation received less than deserved attention registering below par growth rate. But the tides of the time are set for a change, as with the launch of the ambitious Sagarmala project, the nation is setting sail to a brighter and promising tomorrow.