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### **India and the Indian Ocean: A Historical Review**

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#### **Abstract:**

*For much of India's strategic presence in the world today, its position in the Indian Ocean remains important. The waters that wash the three sides of the Indian peninsula have impacted its past and remain dominant in the present times. The interest and presence of world powers makes it a vibrant and significant region for future developments. The ocean that covers almost twenty percent of the earth's surface is bounded in the north by the Indian subcontinent and is the only ocean with the name of a country. It has remained an active water body throughout the history of the region and beyond. Today the Indian Ocean is a major channel for international energy trade. A large amount of the world's commercial ship transport happens through the Indian Ocean. Standing at the crossroads, it connects the economies of the Atlantic and the Pacific countries. It has significant marine and mineral resources. Its dense littoral has some of the world's fastest growing economies. It has important choke points notably the Straits of Hormuz, Malacca, and the Bab-el Mandeb. Piracy, protection of marine resources and environmental sustainability in the Indian Ocean region are shared concerns for the world at large. India has had central commercial and cultural presence throughout the region for centuries and today it depends heavily on the ocean's resources and insists on maintaining conflict free routes of navigation. The paper takes an overview of India's relation with the Indian Ocean through centuries and argues that as one of the world's growing powers the country should play a dominant role in strategizing policies in the region.*

**Key words: India, Indian Ocean, history, trade, strategy.**

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**Introduction:** Oceans connect peoples, cultures and trade. They entail an enormous and complex network of human and commercial circulations that pass through multiple harbours, ports, canals, straits, choke points and which require defined infrastructures and adequate facilities to engage with such transactions. Throughout human history communities have explored regions beyond their immediate quarters as daring navigators, ambitious empire builders and compulsory traders. These have enriched cultures of the coast and the hinterlands some of which developed for and with the trading opportunities at the coast. India's position in the Indian Ocean has influenced its history, defined its

relations with the regions, countries, empires and powers beyond and has played a particularly significant role in the lives of the coastal communities bearing on their sustained cultures. The Indian Ocean basin is the world's third largest ocean basin after the Pacific and the Atlantic Ocean basins<sup>1</sup>. The ocean waters cover almost 20% of the earth's surface. The fluid expanse of this, one of the five oceans on the earth, runs from the east African coast breaking off from the Atlantic Ocean at the Cape Agulhas on the tip of South Africa to the eastern Malay Archipelago, the Sunda Islands and the Australian continent and stretches till the Australian island of Tasmania. It converges with the Southern Ocean at Cape Leeuwin<sup>2</sup>. In the north the ocean is bounded by the Indian subcontinent from where it gets its name and is the only ocean with the name of a country. The Persian Gulf and the Red Sea are its two arms from where much of the traffic flow occurred through the centuries and which continue to remain important channels for movement of goods and trade. The ocean total area includes Andaman Sea, Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, Flores Sea, Great Australian Bight, Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, Java Sea, Mozambique Channel, Persian Gulf, Red Sea, Savu Sea, Strait of Malacca, Timor Sea, and other tributary water bodies.<sup>3</sup> The Straits of Hormuz, Malacca, and the Bab-el Mandeb are significant choke points, controls of which have defined the dominance of a power in the Indian Ocean which is also an argument in the present times in favour of the freedom of navigation in the ocean. Histories of the oceanic world are replete with examples of how the early communities viewed their relations with the oceans both in Euro-Atlantic and the Asian-African regions connecting the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. The histories of communities of the Atlantic, Pacific, Baltic, Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean are similar and different in many ways though maritime history is the oldest thing that the people have been doing.<sup>4</sup> The Greco-Roman tradition was instrumental in the conceptualization of the world's oceans<sup>5</sup> when in the classical age the Greeks referred to maritime affairs of the Mediterranean Sea, the world's largest inland sea and yet unlike the two other large oceans- the Pacific and the Atlantic Ocean, the Indian Ocean was one of the largest hubs of ancient international trade in the classical age with its own inter-regional trade links as also with that of the Mediterranean world. It is seen as the world's oldest long-distance trans-oceanic trading arena, and is often referred to as the "cradle of globalization".

**Early contacts:** The Indus Civilization, for the first time, established overseas trade. The civilization that grew and expanded for over thousand years covered vast countries and seas with its maritime trade and proved the existence of maritime navigation of the Indian Ocean

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<sup>1</sup> Ocean Literacy Portal, UNESCO Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, <https://oceanliteracy.unesco.org/indian-ocean/> accessed on 12 November 2022

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> <https://knoji.com/article/facts-about-the-indian-ocean/> accessed on 11 November 2022

<sup>4</sup> Lincoln Paine, *The Sea and the Civilization: A Maritime history of the world*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Rainer F. Buschmann, "Oceans of World History: Delineating Aquacentric Notions in the Global Past", *History Compass* 2, 2004, WO 068, 1–10.

and the trading voyages of the Indians.<sup>6</sup> Much before the The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea was written, the Indian Ocean was an area of great commercial activity for the Indians, Phoenicians and the Arabs.<sup>7</sup> Trade routes from India lead to Mesopotamia and Elam along Baluchistan and southwestern Iran and there was a brisk sea-borne trade between the Indus people and the Sumerians in the late third and early second millenniums BCE.<sup>8</sup> Todio, Amra and Lakhbawal, Kindarkhera, Prabhas, Kanjetar, Sutka-koh were important Harappan ports of later period but it was Lothal the sheltered harbor in the Gulf of Cambay, developed into a large emporium and servicing station and Bhagatrav that caught the attentions of the modern world as it interpreted the history of the Indus civilization. The Indus civilization was in sync with Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilizations Ur, Dilmun and the Magan civilizations being trade partners. Trade included copper, carnelian, ivory, shell, lapis lazuli, pearls, and spices among other<sup>9</sup>. The Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean became interconnected over a period of time. From the first century BCE until the third century CE Roman imperial trade with the Indian Ocean passed through two major axis- the Red Sea-Nile and the Persian Gulf-Syrian Desert.<sup>10</sup> There was a vast network of ports that dotted the western and eastern coasts of India.

The Greek ambassador at Chandraguta Maurya's Court wrote in Indica about aspects of naval-war and a group that dealt with it in the Mauryan kingdom. Chandragupta's minister, Chanakya, detailed the department of waterways under a Navadhyaksha the Superintendent of the ships in his treatise Arthashastra. Emperor Ashok used sea routes to spread messages of Buddhism. The maritime traditions continued during the rule of the Satvahanas, Andhras, Kushanas and Guptas as in the peninsular India where the Pallavas, the Chalukyas and the Cholas. The foundation of imperial domination of Cholas, was laid by Rajaraja, (985 to 1014) and attained its zenith during the reign of Rajendra Chola, (1014-1044). The Chola navy reached out to Sri Lanka, Madives, Malay peninsula, Sumatra and Java.

According to the Chinese and Arab records in 10th century, It is learnt that since 9<sup>th</sup> -10<sup>th</sup> century there were three trading circles around the Indian Ocean - between China and Southeast Asia, between Southeast Asia and Arabia and the Persian Gulf, and between the

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<sup>6</sup> M. L. Bhargava, *Indian Ocean Strategies through the ages*, Reliance Publishing House, New Delhi, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Hari Sharan Chhabra, "Indo-East African relations through the Ages", *India and the Western Indian Ocean States*, (ed) Shati Sadiq Ali and R.R. Ramchandani, Allied publishers Private Ltd., New Delhi, 1981. The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea (Periplus maris erythraei) was written by a Greek merchant from Egypt during the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, as a guide for the merchants and sailors to sail along the Western coast of the Indian ocean.

<sup>8</sup> S. R. Rao, "Shipping and Maritime Trade of the Indus People", *Expedition*, Vol. 7, Issue 3, 1965. <https://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/shipping-and-maritime-trade-of-the-indus-people/> Accessed 12 November 2022

<sup>9</sup> A. H. Dani and B.K. Thapar, "The Indus Civilization", *UNESCO History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, Vol I ISBN 978-92-3-102719-2, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Eivind Heldass Seland, Seland, Eivind Heldaas. "The Persian Gulf or the Red Sea? Two Axes in Ancient Indian Ocean Trade, Where to Go and Why." *World Archaeology*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2011, pp. 398–409. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41308507>. Accessed 18 Nov. 2022.

Arabian area and east Africa.<sup>11</sup> South Indian colonies were based on Sumatra and Malay Peninsula. The Srivijaya Empire of the present day Indonesia and the Malay Archipelago frequently traded with India and China. It is often argued that the downfall of the Srivijaya kings and the disappearance of the Cholas, Indian Ocean trade in the ancient period passed into the Arab hands.<sup>12</sup>

**The Arabs and the Indians in Indian Ocean:** The Arabs navigated in the Indian Ocean as travellers, navigators and traders long before the rise of Islam. The Arabs were commercial navigators. The spread of Islam after the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE and the conquests of regions witnessed subsequent increase in the dominance of Arabs at the seas and soon got them as intermediaries between the Europe and India trade. Indian maritime activities have been described by Al-Beruni (973-1052), the Persian scientist and traveller, and Ibn Batuta (1304-1377), the Moroccan traveller. In the meantime Omani traders with their great sea faring traditions sailed from the Arabian Peninsula to Indian and Chinese ports trading with Indian goods among others<sup>13</sup>.

The trading circles in the Indian Ocean largely operated following the monsoon patterns and the Indian and the Arab traders were adept at it. A large number of Gujarati and Jewish merchants were associated with the trade but the Arab owned ships dominated the trade in the Arabian Sea.<sup>14</sup> All this however changed with the entry of the Europeans in the Indian Ocean.

**The European Entry:** Cáo Dias Covilha had travelled in the 1480s and the 90s, bringing Portugal closer to the trading world of Asia by sea.<sup>15</sup> It was necessary for the Portuguese to cross the unknown sea that separated the Atlantic world from the trading networks of the Indian Ocean which happened in Mozambique.<sup>16</sup> It is from here that the Portuguese by taking the benefit of the local knowledge Indian Ocean winds and currents moved towards Indian subcontinent.

When Vasco-da-Gama the Portuguese navigator sailed from Lisbon in July 1497, and landed on Calicut in the Malabar Coast in May 1498, circumnavigating the Cape of Good

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<sup>11</sup> Dashu Qin and Kunpeng Xiang, "Sri Vijaya as the Entrepôt for Circum-Indian Ocean Trade Evidence from Documentary Records and Materials from Shipwrecks of the 9th-10th Centuries", *Etudes Ocean Indien*, 2011, p. 308-336 <https://doi.org/10.4000/oceanindien.1379> Accessed 12 November 2022

<sup>12</sup> M. L. Bhargava, *Indian Ocean Strategies through the ages*, Reliance Publishing House, New Delhi, 1990, p.26.

<sup>13</sup> Read more from Samuel Kutty and Sandhya Rao Mehta, *Oman-India ties: Across Sea and Space*, Published by Oman Observer in association Indian Embassy Muscat.

<sup>14</sup> Ashin Das Gupta, *India and the Indian Ocean World, Trade and Politics*, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Webaux, "The India Road, Portugal in the last quarter of the fifteenth century", A text developed from a talk given at the British Historical Society of Portugal's AGM, June 19th 2013.

[https://www.bhsportugal.org/uploads/fotos\\_artigos/files/P\\_TheIndiaRoad.pdf](https://www.bhsportugal.org/uploads/fotos_artigos/files/P_TheIndiaRoad.pdf) and A. R. Disney, *A History of the Portugal and the Portuguese Empire*, Vol, I And II, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 119.

<sup>16</sup> A. R. Disney, *A History of the Portugal and the Portuguese Empire*, Vol., I And II, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 119.

Hope, he was to take the expertise of an Arab or according to some reports an Indian – the Omani Arab Ahmed Ibn Majid and a Gujarati businessman Kanji Malam respectively.<sup>17</sup> This marked the entry of the Europeans in India and their increasing early interference in the Indian Ocean trade and movement. According to Om Prakash, these maritime discoveries of the late fifteenth century integrated “the Indian Ocean in the larger framework of world trade on a scale unimaginable before”.<sup>18</sup>

The Portuguese were followed by the other European powers. In 1602, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) appeared in the Indian Ocean seeking a total monopoly of the oriental spices. It was the British who in 1680, with their British East India Company (founded in 1600), challenged the VOC for control of the trade routes. The first French East India Company was founded in 1664 to catch up with England and the Netherlands. France gradually established a network in the south west of the Indian Ocean but within a century fell to British dominance retaining only few territories.

Around the same time the Maratha power rose under the Maratha Chhatrapati Shivaji Bhosle (1630-1680) who was astute to realize the importance of building a strong navy and developing an efficient system of ships, galbats and ports. He built a strong array of coastal forts and the Maratha navy turned out a strong contender to the Portuguese. Admiral Kanhoji Angre (1669-1729) added to the Maratha sea prowess in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. His navy attacked the Portuguese and the British ships. It was from the Marathas that the British took over final power of India and soon converted the Indian Ocean into a ‘British lake’.

**Indian Ocean and its present significance:** In the present times the significance of the Indian Ocean lies in its strategic location and its resources. It is at the crossroads of Africa, Asia, and Australia, and is the central sea of Afro- Eurasia. It has 51 coastal and landlocked states and is home to one-third of the world's population. It connects the global trade in the Northern Atlantic and Asia-Pacific. 40% of world’s offshore oil production is in Indian Ocean.<sup>19</sup> It has important sea lanes of communication which contribute to Asia’s and the world’s largest economies and it provides major sea routes connecting the Middle East, Africa, and East Asia with Europe and the Americas. It carries a particularly heavy traffic of petroleum and petroleum products from the oilfields of the Persian Gulf and Indonesia<sup>20</sup>. Large reserves of hydrocarbons are being tapped in the offshore areas of Saudi Arabia, Iran, India, and Western Australia<sup>21</sup>. Around 80 per cent of the world’s seaborne oil trade passes through the Straits of Hormuz, Malacca, and the Bab-el Mandeb, the

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<sup>17</sup> English rendering of the text of PM’s address to the Indian Community in Lisbon, Portugal, 24 June, 2017 PIB Delhi, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1494421> Accessed 12 November 2022

<sup>18</sup> Om Prakash, “Europeans, India and the Indian Ocean, in the early Modern Period”, South Asia, Vol XIX, Special issue, 1996, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Indian Ocean Economy 2020, [https://theodora.com/wfbcurrent/indian\\_ocean/indian\\_ocean\\_economy.html](https://theodora.com/wfbcurrent/indian_ocean/indian_ocean_economy.html)

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/oceans/indian-ocean/>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

choke points of this ocean and in that sense it connects the east to the west and remains the world's busiest of the trade and commerce routes.

The countries bordering the ocean have formed groups to address common concerns related to regional growth, security and sustainability. Some of these groups are The Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Southern African Development Community (SADC), Indian Ocean Commission (COI), and The Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) among others.

The ocean remains important for India's growing economy as 90% of India's trade by volume is through the Indian Ocean thus making the country a major stakeholder in Indian Ocean trade and commerce activities in respect of imported crude oil, raw materials, and consumer goods. For the past couple of decades, China has been investing billions of dollars in infrastructure projects across the region as part of its One Belt One Road initiative (BRI). This has certainly encouraged other countries as USA, Japan, including India to raise its concerns for security of lanes and resources and equal opportunity in the ocean waters. The concerns for India and the world in the Indian Ocean are piracy, sustainable marine ecology, protecting the reefs, mangroves and marine species that live in the ocean, curtailing overfishing, coastal degradation and pollution, protection of the blue economy, ensuring security, free trade lanes and to ensure the security of Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs) that are from the Persian Gulf, Europe, and East Asia. The world focus has now shifted from Euro-Atlantic to Indo-Pacific and this brings India's role and contribution in restoring balance in the region.

India is aware that it requires regional cooperation for a more sustainable and inclusive economic growth in the Indian Ocean through the Blue economy. As an economically developing nation India requires the resources of the ocean and ensured security against piracy and terrorism. At the time of India's independence, maritime experts had called for developing advanced naval capabilities and protecting distant oceanic frontiers along with the coast.<sup>22</sup> At the time of India's independence the Cold War had begun. British withdrawal was followed by US and Soviet interests in the Indian Ocean region. India-centric Maritime Strategic thought was reflected in the first plan papers of 1947-1948 prepared by the Royal Indian Navy with inputs from the British and Indian naval officers<sup>23</sup> followed by an ambitious ten year expansion plan. India's preoccupation with land based attack in the early years of independence and "inward orientation and limited external trade

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<sup>22</sup> Kavalam M. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History* London: George Allen and Unwin, 1945 and Keshav Vaidya, *The Naval Defense of India*, Bombay: Thacker, 1949.

<sup>23</sup> Yogesh Joshi, *Nehru's Navy: India's Tryst with Aircraft Carriers*, Occasional Paper, Observer Research Foundation, Issue No. 379 November 2022., [https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/ORF\\_OccasionalPaper\\_379\\_Nehru-Navy.pdf](https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/ORF_OccasionalPaper_379_Nehru-Navy.pdf) Accessed 14 November 2022  
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did not require any extensive maritime presence in the Indian Ocean”<sup>24</sup>. The 1998 Strategic Defence Review (SDR) carried out by the Indian Navy indicated four major roles - sea based deterrence; economic and energy security; forward presence; naval diplomacy.<sup>25</sup>

Thereafter there were changes in the global order with the end of Cold War in 1991 and India liberalizing markets and taking a step towards globalization. The country visualized a change in the economy that within the next two decades was set to be a fast paced economy. The country's demands on security and maritime resources increased. Indian Ocean region was seen as India's major area of national interest. Two documents, the first Indian Maritime Doctrine (IMD), 2004, and the Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy (2007), the first-ever Indian maritime strategy document in the public domain, both underlined the significance of laying strategy for India's maritime power. Indian Maritime Doctrine (IMD) 2004 was replaced by the next edition in 2009. The 2009 edition was updated by the 2015 online edition, “*Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*”, with a focus on India's Maritime Security needs in the Indian Ocean Region.<sup>26</sup> The document provides the core of India's maritime interests as protection of India's sovereignty and territorial integrity; promotion of the safety and security of Indian citizens, shipping, fishing, trade, energy supply, assets, and resources in the maritime domain; Pursuing peace, stability and security in India's maritime zones, maritime neighbourhood, and other areas of maritime interest along with preserving and projection of other national interests in the maritime dimension.

India has now embarked on SAGAR mission - Security and Growth for All in the Region aimed at safeguarding maritime interests of India's mainland and surrounding islands in the Indian Ocean. In 2016, concept was first introduced by India's Prime Minister in Mauritius while addressing all India Ocean Region (IOR) littoral states to promote cooperation and to ensure peace and stability in the region<sup>27</sup>.

**Conclusion:** The Indian Ocean marks a definite identity for India's geography, polity, economy and culture. For much of India's early history, the rulers of the subcontinent remained occupied with land matters. The history of the landlocked northern part of Indian subcontinent was influenced by the travellers, invaders and migrants since the ancient times. Yet the tryst with the Indian Ocean waters was an equally significant phenomenon of the ancient Indian world. The trade contacts of the Indus Valley civilization with Mesopotamian, Sumer, Dilmun and Magan civilizations and the discovery of various ports of those times on the western Indian coast stand testimony to the fact that civilizations maintained continuous contacts through land and oceans. The ruling dynasties in ancient

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Captain Sarabjeet Singh Parmar, “The Indian Navy's Maritime Outlook: The Path Walked since Independence”, Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CL, No. 622, October-December 2020.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-maritime-doctrine-2015-version> Accessed 12 September 2022

<sup>27</sup> IPOI Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative Towards a Sustainable and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region, 2022 <https://www.icwa.in/pdfs/IndoPacificOceansInitiative.pdf> Accessed 12 September 2022.

India as the Mauryas, Satvahanas, Andhras and the south Indian Pallavas and particularly Cholas attained much expertise in naval affairs to reach beyond the boundaries of India. India's geographical position in the Indian Ocean and the connect of the subcontinent to the west and the east made the ocean a vital resource as trade routes intersected and movements flourished, a fact that is not lost in the present times. While mighty empires as that of the Mughals paid scant attention to the prowess at the sea and remained dominant on land the Marathas under Shivaji and later Kanhoji Angre built a strong navy to counter Portuguese, Dutch, French and British might at the seas. The Europeans were keen on capture of the vibrant trade in the Indian Ocean which was largely dominated by the Arabs and Indians before the European entry. India was the jewel in the British crown its protection was a strong impetus for the control of the Indian Ocean trade and coastline on its east and west. Thus began the British controls and conquests In the east African coast, Red Sea and the Persian Gulf region in the west and Burma Singapore among others in the east. Strategic control of ports, enclaves and maritime channels of the Indian Ocean turned it into a British lake with complete British dominance. The rule lasted for more than a century and a half. As India gained independence after much struggle, wars on the northern front and inward economy limited independent India's ocean approach. However post 1991 liberalization process as the country embarked upon economic development, it turned towards the Indian Ocean for vital resources, free trade routes and security. With the rising ambitions of India's close neighbor China in the Indian Ocean and Russian insistence on regaining its lost glory, the world focus has shifted from Euro-Atlantic to Indo-Pacific. This implies that drawing from the pages of history, India reaffirms its central position in the Indian Ocean world to reach out to the regional powers, ensure peace and cooperation for the benefit of the country and the world a large.



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