

# History of India: Maritime Supremacy

Indian naval supremacy enabled them since ancient period to cross the oceans to trade and build empires in distant lands. Western scholars have **underestimated India's achievement** with regard to commerce, ship-building, navigation, and sea travel. The colonist bias against Indian culture is fully matched by the Indian 'Marxist historian' bias against culture.

## Shipbuilding and Marine Technology

- Indus Valley Civilization built the **world's first dock** equipped to berth and service ships was built at Lothal (2400 BC). Modern oceanographers observed that they must have knowledge of hydrography and maritime engineering to build such a dock.

- Sanskrit and Pali literature has innumerable references to the Indian **maritime activity and ship building**, one such is **Yukti Kalpa Taru**, compiled by **Bhoja Narapati**. The treatise explains a variety of ships such as for trade, warfare, royalty and even explains how to furnish the interior for passenger comfort. Ships are distinguished according to their length and the position of cabins



Model of a Chola (200–848 CE) ship's hull

- **Contrived mariner's compass** was used by Indian navigators nearly 1500 to 2000 years ago and is called **Maccha Yantra (Fish Machine)** as suggested by shipbuilding expert Mr. J.L. Reid. It is possible that the Maccha Yantra was transmitted to the west by Arabs. An Indian naval pilot, named **Kanha**, was hired by Vasco da Gama to take him to India!

- **Francois Balazar Solvyns** (1760-1824) a French maritime painter, wrote "In ancient times, the **Indians excelled in the art of constructing vessels...** that the English, attentive to everything which relates to naval architecture have borrowed from the Hindus many improvement which they have adopted with success to their own shipping.... The Indian vessels unite elegance and utility and are models of patience and fine workmanship". Contrary to colonialist portrayals that Indians knew only coastal navigation, **deep-sea shipping** had existed in India. **Indian ships** had been sailing to islands such as the **Andamans, Lakshadweep and Maldives**, around 2,000 years ago. **In the medieval period, Arab sailors purchased their boats in India. The Portuguese also continued to get their boats from India, and not from Europe. Shipbuilding and exporting was a major Indian industry, until the British banned it.**

- **It is worthwhile to take note of similar treatment of Chinese seafaring advancement.** The Chinese built the largest ships in the world. New evidence shows Chinese explorers had discovered most parts of the world by the mid-15th century, which Western historians previous had credited to later European explorers. Fact of how much Europeans had learned from the Chinese, Arabs and Indians about maps, navigation and shipping never came into limelight.

**Columbus** sailed to America (**ship length 85 feet**) in **1492**. **Zheng He** sailed from China to many places throughout South Pacific, Indian Ocean, Taiwan, Persian Gulf and distant Africa in seven epic voyages from **1405 to 1433** some 80 years before Columbus's voyage (**ship length 400 feet**). See picture of ship size.



## Naval Territorial Expansion, Diplomacy and Military Power

- The **Mauryan empire (322–185 BCE)** navy continued till the times of emperor Ashoka, who used it to send massive **diplomatic missions** to Greece, Syria, Egypt, Cyrene, Macedonia and Epirus.

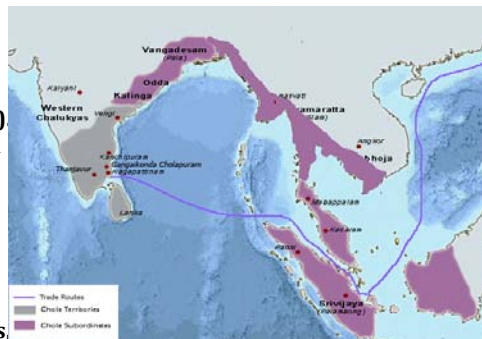
- It was by **naval supremacy** that enabled Indians to colonize the islands in the Malay Archipelago (South East Asia). Towards the end of the **9th century, the South India kingdoms** had developed **extensive maritime and commercial activity**.

- The **Chola Empire** in particular became a military, economic and cultural power in Asia under **Rajaraja Chola I (985–1014)** and his son **Rajendra Chola I (1012–1044)**

- In **1025, the massive Chola Navy** crossed the ocean and attacked the powerful Hindu Srivijaya kingdom (cause unknown) possibly due to attempts by Srivijaya to throw some obstacle on the flourishing trade between China and the Cholas.

- **Rajendra's territories** extended coastal **Burma, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands,**

**Lakshadweep, Maldives, conquered Srivijaya (Sumatra, Java, Malaysia and Singapore in South East Asia)** and **Pegu islands** with his fleet of ships. He defeated the **Palas** of Bengal and Bihar and exacted tribute from kingdoms in **Thailand** and of **Khmer (Cambodia)**.



## International Maritime Trade

- **R. C. Majumdar** says "Indians of old were keenly alive to the **expansion of dominions, acquisition of wealth, and the development of trade, industry and commerce.** The material prosperity they gained in these various ways was reflected in the luxury and elegance that characterized the society... There was a **mercantile colony** of Indians in an island off the **African coast** in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. The adventurous spirit of the Indians carried them even as far as the **North Sea**, while their caravans traveled from one end of Asia to the other."

- As early as 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, there was regular **trade relation**, both by land and sea, between India and **Mesopotamia, Arabia, Phoenicia, and Egypt.** Excavations and world literary findings confirms that Indians from before BCE period had establish large volume of maritime trade relation with **China, Philippines, Malay Peninsula, Indonesia, Indo-China, Arabia and the Hellenic world** as far as African coast.

- Indians also had organized corporations to manage naval trade.

## Creating Empires Oversea and Hindu & Buddhist Missionary

- **Sir Aurel Stein (1862-1943)** a Hungarian, whose valuable researches have added greatly to our **knowledge of Greater India**, remarks: "The vast extent of Indian cultural influences, from **Central Asia in the North to tropical Indonesia in the South**, and from the **Borderlands of Persia to China and Japan**, has shown that ancient India was a radiating center of a civilization, which by its religious thought, its art and literature, was destined to leave its deep mark on the races wholly diverse and scattered over the greater part of Asia."



World largest Hindu temple in Cambodia

- Like the Western world, the **Indian world stretches far beyond its border**, though **India has never used any violence to spread her religion and built colonies.** R. C. Majumdar observed: "The Indian colonies in the Far East must ever remain as the high watermark of maritime and colonial enterprise of the ancient Indians." It has been proved beyond doubt that the **Indians of the past were not, stay-at-home people, but went out of their country for exploration, trade and conquest.**

- The **Pallavas, Cholas, Pandyas, Keralas Chalukyas, Kalinga and Pala** took their civilization beyond the seas and founded **Hindu kingdoms and settlements in Cambodia, Vietnam, South China, Laos, Malaysia, Indonesia, Borneo and others.**



Ancient Indian ocean-going ship arriving at Java, from Borobudur stupa.

- **Ancient Indians went oversea as missionaries of Hinduism & Buddhism to foreigners.**

- **On the Western side of India**, Sita Ram Goel says "The cradle of Hindu culture on the eve of its Islamic invasion included what are at present the **Sinkiang province of China, the Transoxiana region of Russia, the Seistan province of Iran and the sovereign states of Afghanistan**".

- **India became the first power to defeat a European power in a naval battle - The Battle of Colachel in 1742 CE.** The ruler of Travancore (Kerala), Marthanda Varma, routed an invading Dutch fleet; the Dutch

commander, Delannoy, joined the Travancore army and served for 35 years; the Dutch never recovered from this debacle and were never again a colonial threat to India.



Indian ship called Ghrab

**Shivaji (reign 1664-1680)** maintained a navy under the charge of general Kanhoji Angre (served 1698-1729). The initial advances of the **Portuguese** were checked by this navy, also effectively relieved the traffic and commerce in India's west coast of

Portuguese threat. The **Maratha navy** also checked the **English East India Company**, until the navy itself underwent a decline due to the policies of general Nanasaheb (reign 1740-1761).



Mahratta ghrabs and gallivats