From Empire to Liberalisation: The Role of the State and Entrepreneurs in Transforming India's Shipping Business, 1906–1991

Soumyajit Mukherjee[1]

Introduction

Before the intrusion of European naval powers into the Indian Ocean, transoceanic shipping in Asian waters operated within a broadly cosmopolitan framework. Philip Curtin described it as 'ecumenical' in nature[2] and as a 'zone with many…cultural differences' in which 'entry into the system was reasonably free but not without reference to cultural origins'.[3] As Curtin argued, military and naval power could not easily override the cultural bonds that shaped these trading systems. The arrival of the Portuguese nevertheless altered this world. Although Portuguese power never controlled the whole Indian Ocean, it attempted to enforce a state-backed maritime monopoly through the *cartaz* system in the Arabian Sea.[4] Earlier historiography treated this European intrusion as catastrophic, presenting it as the effective destruction of indigenous shipping and merchant business. More recent historians, including Ashin Dasgupta, Michael Pearson, Philip Curtin and Chhaya Goswami, have instead shown the continuing presence of indigenous merchants in Indian Ocean shipping, operating alongside, around and sometimes in partnership with European powers.[5] From the mid-eighteenth century, however, the Indian Ocean increasingly came under British control.[6] Historians have characterised the nineteenth century in the Indian Ocean as 'Pax Britannica'.[7] The formation of the global colonial empire strengthened British dominance in Indian maritime trade. In the twentieth century, several socio-political factors challenged this monopoly. The First World War changed the global balance of power, while the US and

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[1] Soumyajit Mukherjee is a doctoral researcher at Jadavpur University.

[2] P. D. Curtin, *Cross Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.127.

[3] Ibid., p.128.

[4] Similar to the modern-day license system, in which a ship's every detail was recorded, such as the commodities it traded, destination, and routes. With a *cartaz*, issued by the Portuguese authority, a ship could sail the ocean for trade. Cf., J. M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp.150–1.

[5] A. Dasgupta, *The World of the Indian Ocean Merchant,1500-1800* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001); M. Pearson. *The Indian Ocean*, (New York: Routledge, 2006); C. Goswami. *Globalization Before its Time: The Gujarati Merchants from Kachchh* (Gurugram: Penguin Books, 2016).

[6] For a good deal of discussion of the transition from indigenous shipping to British-controlled shipping see, F. Broeze, 'Underdevelopment and Dependency: Maritime India during the Raj' (1984) 18.3, *Modern Asian Studies*, pp.429, 432–41.

[7] After the final defeat of the French navy at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, British power became unrivalled not only in the Indian Ocean, but in all the seven seas of the world. K. M. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History* (first published 1945, reprint edition, New Delhi: Life Span Publishers, 2020), pp.72–81.

Japan entered the Indian Ocean region more forcefully. At the same time, from the second decade of the century, the Indian national movement took a more organised form under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Together, these developments shaped Indian nationalist consciousness and had a deep impact on the environment of the Indian shipping business and on claims about India's maritime heritage.

This article examines Indian shipping from the *Swadeshi* movement of the early twentieth century to economic liberalisation in 1991.[8] It focuses on three connected fields: the growth of the national merchant fleet, containerisation and nautical education. It asks how state policy, private entrepreneurship, technological change and maritime training transformed the sector. Drawing mainly on government, port and business records, it argues that anti-colonial entrepreneurial resistance gave way to state-protected development after independence, before containerisation created new dependencies on global capital, technical expertise and logistical standards.

Earlier studies

Indian shipping has recently attracted renewed attention from historians and policymakers. This attention helps situate the present article within a wider domain and confirms its timeliness.[9] A small but important body of work has documented Indian shipping since independence.[10] Baldev Raj Nayar's important study of postcolonial Indian shipping examined the role of the nation-state in the development of Indian shipping during the 1960s and 1970s, before showing how shipping became more 'marginal' after 1980. For Nayar, the years after independence were marked by 'slow growth'; the period to 1980 formed a 'golden age'; and the years after 1980 again brought slow growth, as world shipping faced recession and stagnation. Nayar paid close attention to containerisation, but his emphasis lay mainly on why India failed to become an advanced container-trading nation. His primary focus was on the nation-state and, to

[8] *Swadeshi* means indigenous, locally made products. Between 1905 and 1911, a trend of nationalist movement called the *Swadeshi* movement emerged in Bengal and gradually spread to other provinces of the British Indian Empire, in which the motto was boycotting the foreign/British-made products, mostly industrialised goods.

[9] In recent times, developing regions – particularly India – have been actively involved in enhancing their 'maritimity' (a concept coined by Bernard Cohen to denote a country's ability to make use of the sea). This is further demonstrated by the Indian government's announcement of the *Maritime Summit* in 2021, which attracted a wide range of stakeholders in the maritime sector, including global and local investors, CEOs of shipping companies, industry experts, policymakers, technology providers, bankers, insurers, and representatives of major ports and shipping lines, with the prime aim of modernising the port and shipping sectors. Moreover, the *Maritime India Vision* (MIV 2023) lists more than 150 programmes, some of which entail modernising Indian ports to better compete with maritime powers such as China in global shipping.

[10] This historiographical survey focuses primarily on scholarly publications and does not include works published by institutional bodies such as shipping companies, export firms, chambers of commerce, maritime academies, and other industry-related organisations.

some extent, the Shipping Corporation of India (SCI); as a result, a micro-history of Indian shipping remains missing.[11] Nayar's work also leaves scope for further analysis of how containerisation created problems on India's waterfronts, produced prolonged tension between government and port trusts, and shaped the role of non-state actors within the nation-state. H. B. Desai, then director of the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade (IIFT), published a companion volume on Indian shipping, collecting articles previously published in *Marine Times* and addressing some of the continuing problems of Indian shipping in the 1990s. In discussing technical and strategic issues, Desai emphasised various UN conventions on liner shipping.[12] He relied, however, on limited evidence when explaining how Indian shipping lost ground in the global container shipping network, chiefly because of the shortage of equipment at Indian ports.[13] More broadly, works on twentieth-century Indian economic and business history reveal a striking absence of sustained evidence for entrepreneurial activity among Indian actors in the shipping sector across the century.[14]

The economic and social history of containerisation has developed rapidly since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Mark Levinson located the container within political economy, economic geography, technology, ports and labour relations, but concentrated overwhelmingly on the US and western shipping.[15] Brian Cudahy likewise traced the emergence of container ships with limited attention to Asia.[16] Lance Hoovestal offered a broader comparison of the US and China, although his account is framed mainly through international relations and strategic theory.[17] Together, these works established

[11] B. R. Nayar, *The State and Market in India's Shipping: Nationalism, Globalization and Marginalization* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1996), pp.282–8.

[12] H. B. Desai, *Current Issues in Indian Shipping* (New Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers, 1989).

[13] Ibid., pp.35–6.

[14] For a well-documented transformation in Indian economic and business history for the twentieth century, see Chinmay Tumbe, 'Globalization, Cities, and Firms in Twentieth-Century India' (2022) 96.2 *Business History Review*, pp.399–423; T. Roy, *A Business History of India: Enterprise and the Emergence of Capitalism from 1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); A. Vaidyanathan, 'The Indian Economy since Independence (1947–70)' in Dharma Kumar and Meghnad Desai (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol.2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); U. Kapila. *Indian Economy Since Independence* (New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2025). Manish Kumar and Praveen Jha, 'India After 75 Years of Independence: Reflections on Development and Persistent Challenges', (2025) 14(2), *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy*; T. J. Byres. *The Indian Economy: Major Debates Since Independence* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); A. Balasubramanian. *Toward a Free Economy: Swatantra and Opposition Politics in Democratic India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

[15] M. Levinson. *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

[16] B. Cudahy. *Box Boats: How Container Ships Changed the World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

[17] L. E. Hoovestal. *Globalization Contained: The Economic and Strategic Consequences of the Container,* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

the importance of containerisation while leaving its development in India largely unexplored.

The relative neglect of India is also visible in broader maritime history. Lincoln Paine's *Sea and Civilization* discusses the effects of containerisation on stevedores, waterfronts and port geography, but remains centred largely on the US.[18] David Abulafia similarly traces the origins and growth of container shipping and its consequences for labour, while offering only limited treatment of the business history of Asian ports.[19] Liam Campling and Alejandro Colás place the container at the centre of the remaking of twentieth-century maritime capitalism, describing it as a 'symbol of the neoliberalisation of logistics', but concentrate more heavily on Southeast and East Asia than on India.[20] Frank Broeze is an important exception. He recognised the strength of India's merchant tonnage relative to other Asian countries before the 1970s, although his principal concern was sailing vessels and coastal trade.[21] The Indian case therefore remains insufficiently integrated into either the general history of containerisation or the wider account of the eastward movement of maritime capacity.

The resulting gaps are clear. The literature remains heavily centred on western and East Asian experience, rarely combines containerisation with the history of Indian entrepreneurship and maritime education, and only intermittently uses sustained archival evidence from Indian ports and commercial bodies.[22] This article addresses those gaps by linking national shipping, labour and training, port development and technological change within a single long-term account.

A note on sources

Primary sources relating to twentieth-century Indian shipping may broadly be classified into three categories: government sources, private or corporate records, and reports produced by international development institutions. Government sources, comprising

[18] L. Paine, *Sea and Civilization: A Maritime History of the World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), pp.582–9.

[19] D. Abulafia, *The Boundless Sea: A Human History of the Oceans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp.901–5.

[20] L. Campling. and A. Colas, *Capitalism and Sea: The Maritime Factor in the Making of the Modern World* (London: Verso, 2021), pp. 240–66.

[21] F. Broeze, 'From Imperialism to Independence: The Decline and Re-Emergence of Asian Shipping' (1987) 9 (2) *The Great Circle*, pp.73–95.

[22] Similar gaps are evident in other studies as well. See F. Broeze, *The Globalisation of the Oceans: Containerisation from the 1950s to the Present* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000); and 'From Imperialism to Independence: The Decline and Re-Emergence of Asian Shipping' (1987) 9 (2) *Modern Asian Studies*; M. B. Miller, *Europe and the Maritime World: A Twentieth-Century History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Brett Neilson et al. (eds), *Logistical Asia, The Labour of Making a World Region* (Switzerland: Springer, 2018); L. R. Fischer and E. Lange (eds), *International Merchant Shipping in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: The Comparative Dimension* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018).

mainly annual reports of various ministries and departments, are available in public libraries in New Delhi and Kolkata. A major difficulty, however, lies in the inconsistency and discontinuity of these records across the available years. Ministerial files, especially those of the Ministry of Shipping and Transport, are available at the National Archives of India, New Delhi. The records of individual major port trusts are also crucial for researching postcolonial Indian shipping. Corporate records include publications of chambers of commerce, shipping companies, export firms, trade associations and shippers' councils. These publications include annual reports, pamphlets and, above all, official journals issued monthly, quarterly or annually. The journals are especially important archival sources because they contain public talks by ministers, proceedings of seminars organised by government and business institutions, research articles on business and shipping by scholars and diplomats, and rare pictures and advertisements from shipping firms. Annual reports, by contrast, mainly record the progress of a particular financial year and the recommendations made by chambers to port trusts and government. They rarely contain extensive statistical data. Beyond the national context, international sources include studies conducted between 1970 and 1990 on Indian ports and shipping under the aegis of government or port authorities. Some of these reports are available in the archives and libraries of the Indian Maritime University (IMU) at Chennai and Kolkata.

This article draws primarily on selected records from each of these categories, reflecting the nature, scope and chronology of the topic. It uses archival records from the Calcutta Port Trust, now Syama Prasad Mookerjee Port, including material from its Maritime Archives and Heritage Centre (KPTMA) and Central Record Documentation Centre (CRDC), both located inside the port complex in Kolkata. It also uses records from the National Archives of India, New Delhi, volumes of the journal of the Indian Merchants' Chamber of Commerce (IMC), held in the F. E. Dinshaw Commercial & Financial Reference Library in Mumbai and the annual report of the Bombay Chamber of Commerce (BCC). For the case study on unit load and containerisation, the article uses proceedings volumes of the Mumbai Port Authority, preserved in its record room, as well as study reports available at the Indian Ports Association (IPA) in New Delhi. Access to shipping company records, however, remains limited, for reasons that are not always clear. The Indian National Shipowners' Association (INSA), Mumbai, long published a journal titled *Indian Shipping*, but its volumes are restricted to internal members. In many cases, companies have also failed to preserve their own records. Two prominent Indian national shipping lines, the Scindia Steam Navigation Company Ltd and Great Eastern Shipping, do not maintain accessible archives. Once their officially commissioned institutional histories were published, their archival records appear to

have been neglected, dispersed or lost.[23] Fortunately, some reports and printed materials survive in chambers of commerce and public libraries, on which scholars must therefore depend. For the pre-1947 section, the article uses local magazines, public talks and government files accessed through the South Asia Archive institutional database (southasiacommons.net).

Taken together, these materials suggest the changing nature of archives in contemporary postcolonial shipping history. The source base is more dynamic and scattered than either institutional or government archives alone would suggest.

Entrepreneurs Who Succeeded – and Those Who Did Not

The opening decade of the twentieth century was a decisive phase in the consolidation of the *Swadeshi* movement and the intensification of anti-colonial nationalism in India. Emerging initially from the political ferment of Bengal after the Partition of Bengal (1905), the ideological vocabulary of Swadeshi rapidly moved beyond regional boundaries and entered diverse socio-economic spheres across the subcontinent. Tuticorin, a port city in far southern India, provides a particularly clear example of this sentiment.[24] There, local merchants mobilised financial resources and in 1906 chartered a ship from a Bombay-based shipping company, the Shawline Steam Company, to trade between Tuticorin and Colombo. The involvement of the influential local landlord Sivapuram appears to have shaped the name of the enterprise, subsequently known as the 'Si.Va. Company'. Yet this initiative proved short-lived. Under pressure from the monopoly shipping line, the British India Steam Navigation Company (BISNC), the Shawline Steam Company took the ship back from the Tuticorin merchants. The episode was nevertheless far from trivial. Rather than suppressing indigenous ambitions in maritime business, it helped lay the ideological and organisational groundwork for later, more sustained Indian attempts to enter the shipping industry.[25]

A second and more substantial attempt followed. V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, known as V.O.C., was a passionate advocate for reviving India's maritime legacy and drew inspiration from ancient Indian history and Tamil literature. Troubled by the decline of

[23] N. G. Jog, *Saga of Scindia, 1919–1969* (Scindia House Bombay: Scindia Steam Navigation Co. Ltd, 1969); D. N. Sanklecha, *Tramping to Success: Story of the Great Eastern Shipping Company Limited* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1994).

[24] Data from 1913–14 reveal that Tuticorin recorded the highest rate of trade growth among the ports of the Madras Presidency, registering an increase of nearly 134 per cent. Ref. South Asia Common Institutional Database (hereafter SAC), *Report of Sir John Wolfe Barry Lyster & Partners on Suggested Developments at the Port of Tuticorin Negapatam Mangalore Malpe and Cocanad*a (Madras: Superintendent Government Press, 1921), p.2.

[25] R. N. Sampath. *V. O. Chidambaram Pillai* (New Delhi: Publications Division, 2017).

Tuticorin merchants in shipping, he sought to restore India's former prominence in maritime trade. V.O.C. understood that the challenge to British maritime supremacy could not be confined to acquiring steamships. It also required a national shipbuilding industry, trained navigational expertise and autonomous commercial infrastructure. Pillai travelled extensively throughout India for this purpose and launched the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company (SSNC) on 16 October 1906, with an initial capital of Rs 10 lakh and around 40,000 shareholders, 'to be held exclusively by Indians, Ceylonese and citizens of other nations of the East.'[26] More significant were its declared objectives, which extended well beyond commercial shipping. It aimed to train inhabitants of Asia, including India and Sri Lanka, in navigation and naval sciences; foster a native shipbuilding industry; establish maritime training institutions; promote pan-Asian solidarity; expand trade networks; and construct coastal shipyards for ship repair.[27]

These declared objectives show that SSNC was conceived not merely as a commercial venture, but as an explicitly nationalist and anti-imperialist enterprise. The company's flag, emblazoned with 'Vande Mataram' ('Praise the Motherland'), symbolised this ethos.[28] Within a year, Pillai, with the intervention of contemporary nationalist leaders Aurobindo Ghosh and Lokmanya Tilak, purchased two French ships, first S.S. *Gallia* and later S.S. *Lavo*. Shortly thereafter, SSNC began trading between Tuticorin and Colombo with S.S. *Gallia*, which could carry 1,300 passengers and 40,000 bags of cargo.[29]

However, SSNC's attempt to establish itself as a transnational shipping enterprise faced numerous obstacles, including the failure to obtain permits for vessels entering and departing ports. Meanwhile, BISNC, the largest British shipping company in the Indian Ocean at the time, reduced its fares on the Tuticorin-to-Colombo route and began offering free umbrellas, food and fancy clothes to passengers as a defensive incentive.[30] Pillai was arrested and imprisoned for sedition in 1908 in connection with the nationalist movement.[31] Although he was released within a few years after an appeal, his removal from active leadership created uncertainty within the company, and its shareholders

[26] R. A. Padmanabhan, *V. O. Chidambaram Pillai* (Delhi: National Book Trust, 1977), p.30.

[27] R. N. Sampath, *V. O. Chidambaram.*

[28] B. R. Nayar, *State and Market*, p.53.

[29] S. Dorairaj, 'Doyen of Swadeshi shipping', *The Hindu*, 6 September 2010.

[30] SAC, B. P. Adarkar, *If War Comes: An Essay on India's Military Problems* (Allahabad: The Indian Press Ltd, 1939), p.164; Seline Augustine, 'Unsung Hero', *The Hindu*, 22 November 2018.
<https://www.thehindu.com/children/unsung-hero/article25548136.ece> accessed 5 May 2026.

[31] Mohamed Imranullah S., 'Remembering July 7, 1908, The Judgement Day', *The Hindu*, 7 July 2014.
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Madurai/remembering-july-7-1908-the-judgement-day/article6185099.ece> accessed 5 May 2026.

gradually began to withdraw their investment.[32] Ultimately, under sustained pressure, SSNC was forced to sell one of its ships to BISNC, leading to its complete withdrawal from India's maritime trade by 1911.[33]

Pillai's efforts were not entirely successful, but the rise and fall of SSNC as a purely indigenous company fostered nationalism and *Swadeshi* awareness among capitalists and businessmen elsewhere in India. In 1919, within a decade of SSNC's collapse, four Gujarati industrialists and businessmen - Walchand Hirachand, Narottam Morarjee, Kilachand Devchand and Lallubhai Samaldas - jointly founded what became one of the most famous and largest indigenous shipping companies of the pre-independence era: the Scindia Steam Navigation Company Ltd (Scindia Steam Navigation), with initial capital of 450 lakh rupees.[34] Walchand and his associates began by purchasing the ship S.S. *Loyalty* from the Scindia family of Gwalior. On 5 April 1919 it set sail for England.[35] Within a few years, Scindia Steam Navigation achieved notable success in transporting commercial goods and passengers across the Indian Ocean.

Scindia's early success alarmed established British lines, especially Peninsular & Oriental and BISNC. Within four years, the company entered a ten-year agreement that restricted its routes largely to coastal trade and limited its fleet to seven vessels; renewed in 1933, the arrangement remained influential until independence.[36] Walchand described it as a 'Slave Bond'. Even within these limits, Scindia expanded. It commissioned the 850-ton S.S. *Jalabala* in 1927, an event presented by Indian political leaders and the press as a milestone for national shipping.[37] [38] By 1924 the company had earned more than 11 lakhs in net profit and established regular services linking Burma, Bombay, Calcutta and Karachi, supported by agencies at important coastal ports.[39] [40] The depression brought

[32] R. N. Sampath, *V. O. Chidambaram Pillai*.

[33] Ahmed Sherrif, 'This Fiery Freedom Fighter From Tamil Nadu Challenged the British Raj on the Seas!', *The Better India*, 2 August 2018.
<https://thebetterindia.com/154337/freedom-fighter-tamil-nadu-chidambaram-pillai/> accessed 5 May 2026.

[34] D. Tripathi and J. Jumani, *The Concise Oxford History of Indian Business* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), p.99.

[35] However, when the vessel was ready to return to Bombay from London after being refitted, the British secretly instructed all shipping agents to avoid making any cargo bookings for the ship. As a result, the Loyalty had to sail back to Bombay empty, incurring significant financial losses.
<https://www.tribuneindia.com/2012/20120406/edit.htm?utm_source=chatgpt.com#6> accessed 10 May 2026.

[36] F. Broeze, 'Underdevelopment and Dependency', p.449; D. Tripathi, *Indian Business*, p.100; T. Roy. *A Business History of India*, p.139.

[37] SAC, *The Indian Review* (August 1927) vol.28, no.8, p.557.

[38] 'Indian Shipping for Indian Companies', *The Economist*, (Bombay) (23 July 1927) vol.CV, no.4378, p.176.

[39] SAC, *The Indian Review* (November 1924) vol.25, no.11, p.709.

[40] SAC, *The Investor's India Yearbook 1926–27*, 14th edition (Calcutta: Place, Siddons & Gough), p.393.

losses of more than five lakhs as coastal freight declined under intense competition from foreign lines.[41] Scindia nevertheless acquired smaller companies and, by the end of the 1930s, participated in the carriage of Hajj pilgrims.[42] Its experience demonstrates both the commercial possibilities available to Indian entrepreneurs and the political and institutional limits under which they operated.

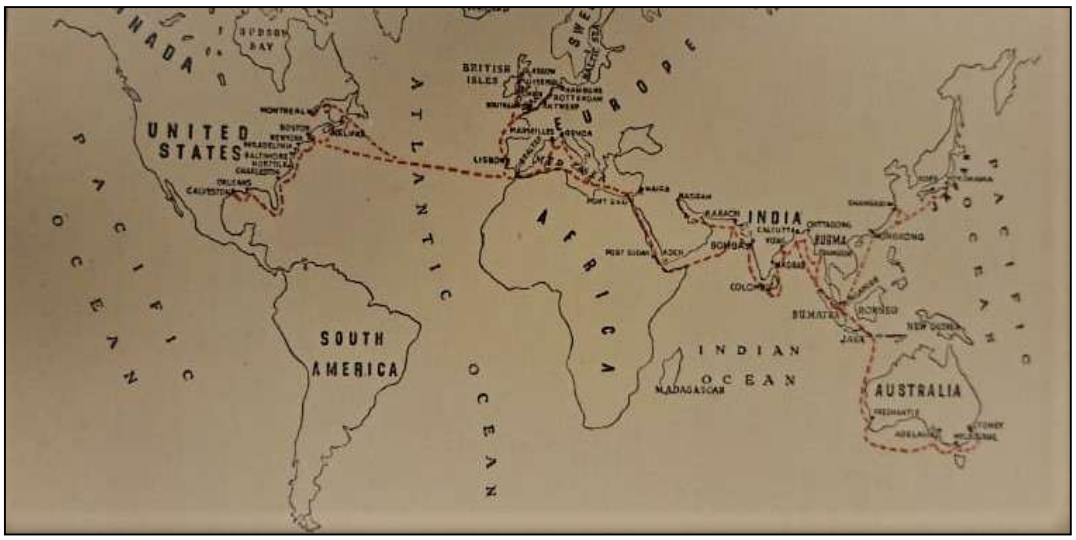

Figure 1: Shipping networks of Scindia Steam Navigation Company Limited, 1950.
Source: Indian Maritime University Kolkata (hereafter IMUK), 'Indian Shipping and Shipbuilding, Problems affecting the Scindia and Associated Companies', Memorandum by Scindia Steam Navigation prepared for Indian Parliament and the Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 15 August 1950.

Scindia Steam Navigation was a strongly nationalist shipping company. It not only challenged British dominance in the Indian Ocean, but also supported other indigenous shipping companies during periods of difficulty. During the economic depression of the 1930s, for example, Scindia provided an emergency loan of 350,000 rupees to the Bengal-Burma Steam Navigation Company, saving it from the control of BISNC. The following year, in 1934, with the help of the then Viceroy of India, Scindia protected four small domestic shipping companies operating along the Karachi-Malabar/West coast from unfair competition by BISNC and allotted them a substantial share of the trade.[43] This

[41] SAC, *The Insurance & Finance Review* (November 1930) vol.1, no.9, p.232.
[42] T. Roy. *Business History*, p.139; A. Mehta. *Indian Shipping – A Case Study of the Working of Imperialism* (Bombay: N. T. Shroff, 1940), p.55.
[43] IMUK, 'Indian Shipping and Shipbuilding, Problems affecting the Scindia and Associated Companies', Memorandum by Scindia Steam Navigation to Indian Parliament and to the Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 15 August 1950, p.4.

resulted in an annual loss of 0.5 million rupees for Scindia, but the company remained firm in its position and accepted the loss 'willingly and proudly'.[44]

Scindia also supported smaller Indian firms. In 1936 it assisted Indian Cooperative Navigation and Ratnagar Steam Navigation against BISNC competition, while its influence helped Indianise the management of Bombay Steam Navigation in 1939.[45] Walchand had already established the Indian National Steamship Owners' Association in 1930 and later promoted a shipyard at Visakhapatnam, although wartime finance and weak government support eventually led the company to request a state takeover.[46]
The company's nationalist standing was reinforced publicly. Gandhi repeatedly cited Scindia as an example of indigenous enterprise,[47] while Vallabhbhai Patel inaugurated Scindia House in Bombay in 1938.[48] Fazlul Huq, Subhas Chandra Bose, Chakravarti Rajagopalachari and Jawaharlal Nehru also presented its growth as part of a wider recovery of Indian maritime capacity.[49]

After independence, Scindia continued to expand. By 1950 as Figure 1 shows, it operated six broad overseas networks, including services to Burma, Ceylon, Pakistan, the Persian Gulf, Europe, North America, the Red Sea, East Asia and Australia.[50] Cabotage protection after 1953 strengthened its position in coastal trade,[51] and it remained a major international carrier until the shipping recession of the 1980s.[52]

[44] B. J. Nayar, *State and Market*, p.70.
[45] IMUK, 'Indian Shipping and Shipbuilding', p. 5; *Achievements of Managing Agency System*, (author name not mentioned), (Calcutta: Employer's Association, 1954), p.77; Cf. 'The Bombay Steam's Reply to Walchand', *The Bombay Chronicle*, 8 October 1938, p.14.
[46] IMUK, 'Indian Shipping and Shipbuilding', p. 6; B. R. Nayar. *State and Market*, pp.71–2; K. B. Vaidya. *The Sailing Vessel Traffic on the West Coast of India and its Future* (Bombay: The Popular Book Depot, 1945), p.26.
[47] R. K. Ray. *Industrialization in India: Growth and Conflict in the Private Corporate Sector, 1914–47* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), p 50.
[48] *The Bombay Chronicle* (24 December 1938) vol.XXVI, no.305, p.1.
[49] *The Bombay Chronicle* (24 December 1938) vol.XXVI, no.305, p.16.
[50] IMUK, 'Indian Shipping and Shipbuilding'.
[51] T. Roy, *Business History of India*, p.139.
[52] Details of the ultimate success of the Scindia Steam Navigation Company in the post-independence period can be found in N. G. Jog, *The Saga of Scindia,* pp.177–85.

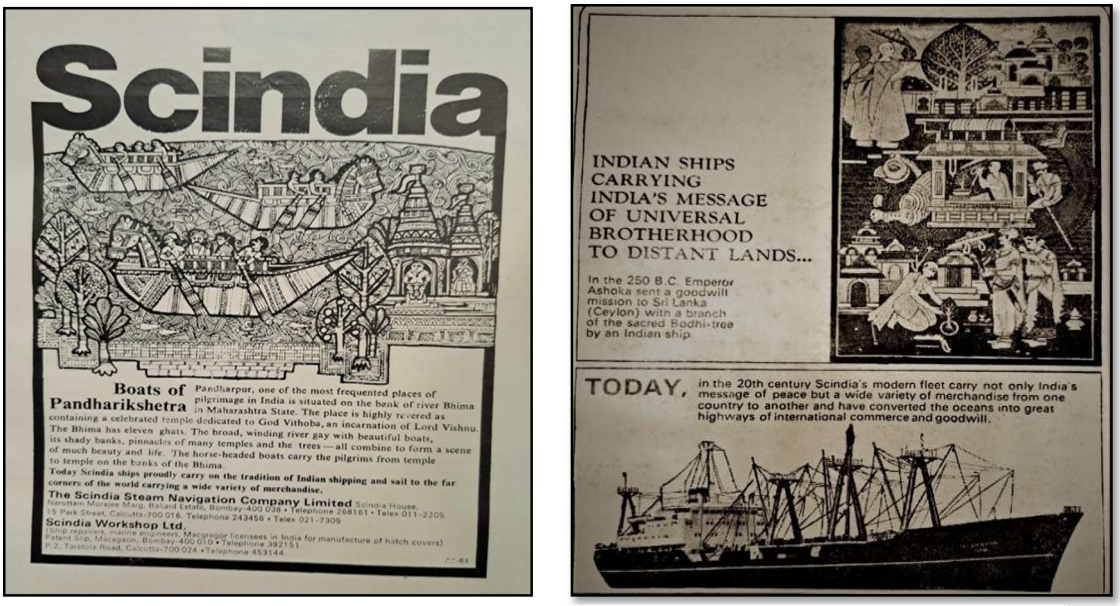

Figure 2: Representations of India's maritime past in Scindia's business promotion
Source: IMC, Journal of the Indian Merchants' Chamber of Commerce, Bombay, January and May 1976.

National Shipping After 1947

In the early years after independence, the infant nation-state's foremost problem was the import of foodgrains. This crisis exposed the fragile and underdeveloped condition of the Indian shipping sector.[53] Both the government and major commercial bodies became increasingly concerned about the economic drain caused by overwhelming dependence on foreign vessels.[54] The national government therefore introduced a series of measures to strengthen the capacity and competitiveness of the country's merchant fleet. First, through a resolution dated 12 July 1947, based on the recommendation of the Policy Committee on Shipping appointed after the Second World War, the government defined the term 'Indian shipping' and set specific guidelines. A ship had to be managed, controlled and owned by Indians, and registered at an Indian port. The post of director also had to be occupied by an Indian.[55] Although foreign capital was welcomed, at least 75 per cent of shares had to be held by Indian nationals.[56] Another important step was to

[53] By 1955, India accounted for less than 0.5 per cent of world shipping tonnage, compared with 2.5 per cent of international trade. Progress towards national tonnage targets was therefore slow relative to countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Italy and Japan, all of which expanded their fleets substantially. See IMC, *Annual Report*, Bombay, 1955, p.xxiii.
[54] IMC, *Annual Report*, Bombay: 1950, 'Shipping', p.ix.
[55] KPTMA, G. P. Ganguly, 'Indian Shipping Industry', *Calcutta Port Annual* (Calcutta: Commissioners for the Port of Calcutta, 1958), p.207.
[56] IMC, *Annual Report*, Bombay: 1958, Appendix 2, 'Bill to Amend the Merchant Shipping Act', p.173.

reserve 100 per cent of Indian coastal trade for Indian shipping lines by August 1950.[57] To further support Indian shipping lines, the government sought to secure 'cargo support', allocating government cargo to national carriers.[58] It also formed a Sailing Vessels Committee to improve the condition of sailing vessels, which remained an important part of Indian shipping, and to 'enable the industry to be placed on a sound footing'.[59] The most significant development was the enactment of the Merchant Shipping Act of 1958, a measure long demanded by Indian shipowners. The Act consolidated and systematised the previously fragmented body of maritime law and facilitated the registration of seagoing vessels under Indian ownership.[60] At the same time, to accommodate the anticipated expansion of overseas trade and shipping, the government initiated some programmes to develop several minor ports, particularly along India's western coast.[61]

	Coastal	Overseas	Total
No of Ships	48	11	59
GRT	1,20,000	70,000	1,90,000

Table 1: India's merchant fleet at independence (*thousand gross registered tons*)
Source: Government of India, Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, Transport Research Wing, Indian Shipping Statistics 2014 (*New Delhi, 2014*), *p.vii; IMUK, A. H. Maru* (*Ex. Deputy Manager of Scindia Steam Navigation Company Ltd*), *Indian Shipping Since Independence* (*Bombay: published by the author, 1969*), *p.25.*

[57] IMC, *Annual Report*, Bombay: 1955, 'Development of Indian Shipping', p.xxii.
[58] The Great Eastern Shipping, in its published official history, provided details about how the government in its early decades following independence favoured the public sector shipping lines instead of private shipping firms while allotting government cargo. For example, during the 1950s and early 1960s, the coal commissioner and director general of Shipping favoured only the 'Shipping Corporation', a public firm for the coastal transportation of coal from Calcutta. Furthermore, the Port of Madras was chiefly assigned to the public shipping lines as a discharging port. Ref., IMUK, D. N. Sanklecha. *Tramping to Success,* pp.216–7.
[59] IMC, *Annual Report*, Bombay: 1949, 'Report of the Sailing Vessels Committee', p.2.
[60] IMC, *Annual Report*, Bombay: 1958, Appendix 2, 'Bill to Amend the Merchant Shipping Act', p.172.
[61] IMC, *Annual Report*, Bombay: 1954, p.3. Cambay for example, was developed with this purpose to meet the demand of the export trade of cotton.

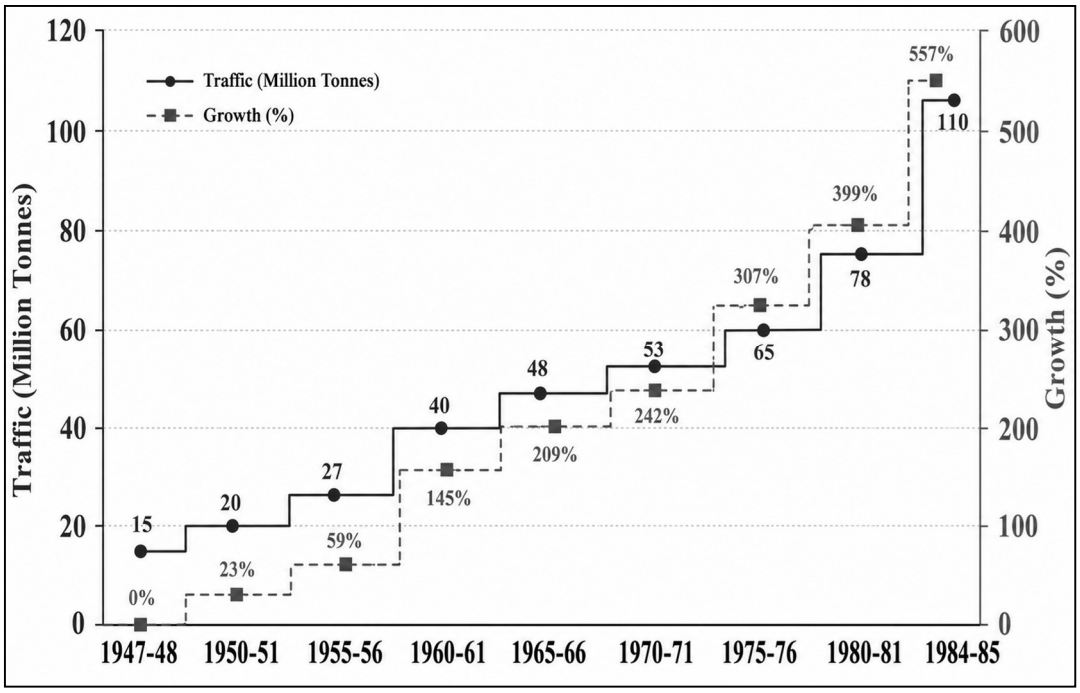

Figure 3: Growth of traffic at India's major ports, 1947–85.
Source: KPTMA, D. K. Guha, 'Growth of India's Seaborne Trade Since Independence', Calcutta Port Annual, 1984–85 (*Calcutta: Commissioners for the Port of Calcutta*), *p.46.*

Both public and private carriers contributed to the expansion of the merchant marine, but from the 1960s the state-owned SCI became India's largest shipping company. By 1987 it carried 56 per cent of the country's seaborne overseas trade.[62] The Shipping Development Fund, established in 1959, provided low-interest loans to shipowners,[63] although large vessel purchases and port projects also depended on finance from international institutions.[64]

[62] IMUK, D. N. Sanklecha, *Tramping to Success*, p.214, quoting *The SCI Story* (Shipping Corporation of India, 1987).
[63] BCC, *Committee Report,* 1978, p.383.
[64] In 1972 the International Development Association (IDA), an affiliate of the World Bank, sanctioned a loan of US $83 million to SCI for the purchase of ships. IMUK, D. N. Sanklecha, *Tramping to Success*, p.218. Also, in 1958, a loan agreement of U.S. $29 million was signed between the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Port of Calcutta to support various improvement schemes.

Nationality	Port of Mormugao (1963-64)		Port of Calcutta (1956-57) Coastal + Overseas	
	No of ships entered	Tonnage	No of ships entered (Port of Calcutta)	Tonnage (import)
Indian	135	381609	320	959648
British (UK)	84	374076	540	1599936
Japanese	124	489475	66	162364
American (USA)	3	21637	51	155891
German	21	94731	26	78169
Greek	51	315420	7	24032
Norwegian	19	107520	55	248101
Russian (U.S.S.R)	n/a	n/a	16	61317

Table 2: Shipping by nationality at Mormugao and Calcutta ports.
Source: KPTMA, Annual Administrative Report of the Mormugao Port Trust, 1963–64, appendix D; D. K. Guha, 'Statistics of Calcutta Port', Calcutta Port Annual (*Calcutta: Commissioners for the Port of Calcutta, 1959*), *pp.59–60.*

Table 2 offers two snapshots rather than a direct comparison, since the ports, years and tonnage categories differ. Even so, it illustrates the growth of Indian shipping from the small fleet inherited in 1947, the continuing importance of British vessels, and the expanding presence of Japanese, Greek and other non-imperial carriers. The evidence suggests that post-war Indian trade was becoming less exclusively tied to the older European maritime powers.

The worldwide shipping recession of roughly 1980–84 produced a severe crisis in India. The government initially played down its scale, but Indian vessels were arrested or auctioned abroad and crews sometimes went unpaid.[65] In 1982, the IMC reported:

> Severe recession and mismanagement have together led a number of small Indian shipping companies to liquidation or near bankruptcy. It is feared that the number of such companies may grow up soon. These companies have not only created problems for themselves and the financial agencies, which helped them buy vessels but also to their employees including marine officers and crew who have not received their wages for months.[66]

[65] IMC, *Journal of the Indian Merchants' Chamber of Commerce*, vol.76, no.8, August 1982, 'Recession hits shipping'.
[66] Ibid.

By 1983–4, 13 leading Indian lines had reported losses of around Rs 11 crores, with contemporary projections warning of a much larger deterioration as operating costs rose and freight earnings fell.[67]

The government considered new loans and cash assistance, granted a moratorium on repayments to the Shipping Development Fund Committee for 1984–6, and explored changes to the Merchant Shipping Act to speed the sale or acquisition of uneconomic vessels.[68] These measures also overlapped with efforts to renew an ageing fleet and prepare ports for containerisation.

The IMC's 1989 summit, 'Challenges and Opportunities Before Shippers and Shipowners in the 90s', brought together public and private actors and treated shipping as a strategic component of trade, competitiveness and integration with the global economy.[69]

By the end of the decade, Indian shipping had recovered from the worldwide recession. In the fiscal year 1987-8, Indian shipping lines showed substantially improved income and profit figures. This recovery reflected several factors, especially the recovery of world maritime trade, which grew by six per cent annually from 1988, and the end of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, which had severely affected the international transportation of crude oil. This stability was reflected in the upward trend in freight rates, which rose by more than 100 per cent during this period. The government began paying closer attention to recovering Indian shipping's GRT, which had fallen from 6.73 million to 5.70 million during the crisis. Another important issue was the need to raise Indian shipping to world standards.[70] Shri H. N. Fotedar, managing director of the Indian Ports Association, an apex body of the Ministry of Shipping, argued that 'Indian ports had failed to transform themselves into a viable modern transport sub-system' and called for an environment that could support new technology in ports and shipping. The summit also acknowledged the need for a 'suitable mechanism' to provide cargo support for Indian shipping lines. Shippers faced high freight rates, inadequate shipping space and lengthy sailing periods, while shipowners objected that Indian shippers did not give preference to Indian shipping. At the same time, the need to increase Indian tonnage and build port

[67] IMCA, *Journal of the Indian Merchants' Chamber of Commerce*, vol.78, no.9, September 1984, 'Shipping Industry's woes', p.42.
[68] Ibid. The crisis coincided with preparations for the full-scale adoption of containerisation. More than half of Indian vessels were then considered outdated, making government support for fleet renewal increasingly difficult to avoid.
[69] IMC, *Journal of the Indian Merchants' Chamber of Commerce*, vol.83, no.6, November-December 1989, 'Shippers' and Shipowners' Summit,' pp.50–1.
[70] Ibid., p.50.

infrastructure was increasingly addressed through joint ventures, because these required substantial capital outlay. Fotedar stated: 'Now is the most opportune time for selective privatisation of ports when port management is faced with the task of investible resources.' To increase the capacity of national shipping lines, SCI intended to increase slot capacity by approximately 160 per cent, at a cost of nearly US$ 200 million.[71]

These debates marked the transition towards liberalisation. The recession exposed the weaknesses of an inward-looking and heavily regulated system, while the capital demands of fleet renewal and port modernisation encouraged new forms of private and international participation.

The immediate consequences of liberalisation were visible in the early 1990s and are treated here as a brief epilogue rather than an extension of the article's principal chronology beyond 1991. Cargo traffic increased at both the Calcutta Dock System and Haldia Dock Complex in 1993–4, with overall trade through Calcutta Port rising by 0.87 per cent. Growth was especially marked in containerised cargo, which increased from 1.104 million tonnes in 1992–3 to 1.487 million tonnes in 1993–4. The number of containers handled rose from 80,925 to 102,018 TEUs, taking Calcutta above one lakh TEUs for the first time. Its 38.66 per cent growth in containerised cargo was the second highest among India's major ports.[72] These figures indicate the direction of change after 1991: closer integration with global trade, rapid growth in container handling and mounting pressure for further institutional and infrastructural reform.

Between State and Private Shipping

The relationship between the postcolonial state and private shipping was neither straightforwardly collaborative nor simply antagonistic. The Shipping Policy of 1947 treated private enterprise as the principal vehicle of maritime development, while allowing mixed ownership. Eastern Shipping Corporation, for example, was established with government and Scindia holdings of 74 and 26 per cent respectively.[73] Support for new routes contributed to an increase in tonnage to 330,000 and the acquisition of 75 ships by the end of the First Five-Year Plan.[74]

Yet, within a decade, the government's posture became more interventionist, seeking to enter the shipping market and regulate it in its own favour. It acquired the

[71] Ibid., p.51.
[72] KPTMA, *Administrative Report of the Calcutta Port Trust*, 1993–9, p.915.
[73] IMUK, 'Indian Shipping and Shipbuilding', p.6.
[74] KPTMA, M. A. Master, 'Reversal of Shipping Policy', *Calcutta Port Annual*, 1961, pp.19, 21; IMUK, 'Indian Shipping and Shipbuilding', p.6.

Visakhapatnam shipyard from Scindia in 1952, took full control of Eastern Shipping Corporation in 1956, acquired the Mogul Line in 1960 and created SCI in 1961.[75] The Industrial Policy Resolution of 1956 also placed shipping in Schedule B under the government's strict control. Nevertheless, an undercurrent of ambivalence towards shipping still persisted within the government, and contributions from private firms to shipping development were being solicited tacitly. Lal Bahadur Shastri, then minister of shipping, enthusiastically stated: 'The public sector in shipping is just in the position of your younger brother, and I assure you that you will always remain the elder brother or the elder sister, whatever you call it.'[76]

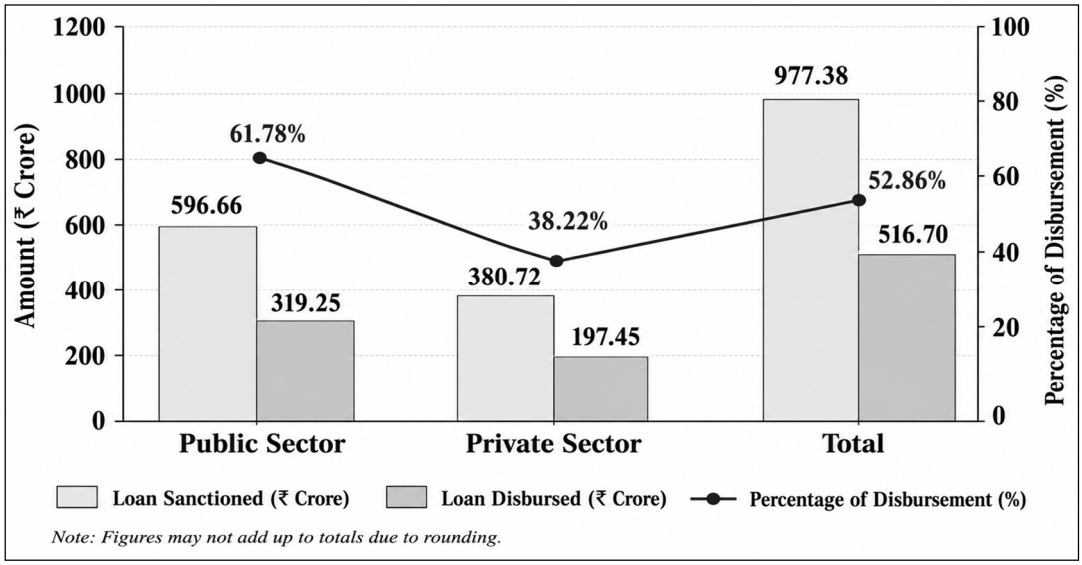

Figure 4: Shipping Development Fund assistance to public and private companies, 1976–7 (Rs crores).
Source: IPA, Annual Report, Ministry of Shipping and Transport, Government of India, 1976–7, p.9.

The 1958–9 Estimates Committee similarly envisaged a complementary relationship in which public corporations entered trades that private companies were unwilling or unable to serve:

> Shipping in the public sector should not run in competition with private shipping companies on routes on which the private shipping companies have established themselves. The corporations should operate only in those trades in which the private shipping companies are unwilling or unable to operate successfully, owing to uncertain prospects, or inadequacy of resources or any other reasons.[77]

[75] F. Broeze, 'From Imperialism to Independence', p.88.
[76] IMUK, *Tramping to Success*, p.208.
[77] KPTMA, M. A. Master, 'Reversal of Shipping Policy', pp.23, 29; IMUK, *Tramping to Success,* pp.209–11.

In practice, government policy increasingly favoured expanding the state's role in the shipping sector. Successive Five-Year Plans consistently prioritised the acquisition of tonnage, the expansion of national fleet capacity, and the enhancement of the state's share in overseas trade. Figure 4 shows that private companies also received substantial assistance, but this was distributed across a larger number of firms, while public-sector lending was concentrated principally on SCI. The gap between sanctioned and disbursed funds in both sectors also underlines the continuing difficulty of financing capital-intensive maritime projects.

The reports for 1977–82 repeatedly revealed rising debt costs and growing pressure on private firms, especially those with limited access to capital and government support.[78] Restrictions on particular trades and access to established liner conferences[79] also prompted shipowners and maritime entrepreneurs to describe policy as 'unduly conservative' and 'ideologically biased against private enterprise', and to call for liberalisation.[80]

Indianisation of Maritime Labour: Autonomy Within Dependency

Maritime education was essential to a trading nation that carried more than 90 per cent of its international commerce by sea. Across post-war Asia, states invested in training and maritime institutions as part of wider programmes of reconstruction and security; Japan's Maritime Safety Agency is one example.[81] Regional geography, piracy and resource constraints also encouraged governments to treat navigational safety and maritime capacity as strategic concerns.[82] India's experience, however, had deeper roots in the effort to create an indigenous merchant fleet.

In India, the nation-state's priorities were reflected in the creation of nautical institutes and the restructuring of curricula. These initiatives carried a strong concern with 'maritimity' and formed part of a deliberate strategy to achieve national self-reliance by

[78] IPA, *Annual Report*, Ministry of Shipping and Transport, Government of India, 1982–83, p.5.

[79] IMUK, *Tramping to Success,* pp.216–17*;* Great Eastern Shipping has documented several incidents in its published history. For instance, in 1956, the company purchased a tanker – the first of its kind in India – but faced stringent regulations. Under these rules, the government could take the tanker under its control in the future if it so desired.

[80] KPTMA, P. N. Talukdar, 'A Shipping Policy for India' in *Calcutta Port Annual*, 1959, pp.91, 93.

[81] J. R. Holmes, 'Japanese Maritime Thought: if not Mahan, Who?' in T. Yoshihara and J. R. Holmes (eds), *Asia Looks Seaward: Power and Maritime Strategy* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2009).

[82] A good discussion about Japan's postwar rise as the 'western Pacific's key maritime leader' and in maritime security in Southeast Asia can be found in J. F. Bradford, 'Japanese Naval Activities in Southeast Asian Waters: Building on 50 Years of Maritime Security Capacity Building' (2021) 17.1 *Asian Security*, pp.79–104; 'Japan Takes the Lead in Western Pacific Maritime Security' (2021) 16.2 *Asia Policy*, pp.81–102; and 'Understanding Fifty Years of Japanese Maritime Security Capacity Building Activities in Southeast Asia' <https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/backnumber/pdf/20180905.pdf> accessed 6 May 2026.

producing skilled manpower for national shipping. The issue of training Indian boys in nautical subjects gained momentum with the First World War, when the question of reserving coastal trade for Indian shipping lines created debate among policymakers and nationalist leaders. The Indian Industrial Commission, in its report of 1918, stressed the need to develop nautical institutes in India so that ships engaged in coastal trade could be handled by Indian personnel. It also emphasised the future potential of the shipbuilding industry:

> There is no reason why India should not be ready to man her own ships when they are built. She has already for many years past provided excellent crews for the ships of other nations; and, given facilities for education in nautical subjects and marine engineering, she should in course of time be able to supplement these crews, at any rate in the coasting trade, with capable officers and engineers. The supply of such men fronv Britain must be very short for many years to come, if not always in future, and facilities for recruitment in India would do much to render her self-supporting in case of another great war.[83]

The report also recommended setting up a special committee and establishing one or more navigation schools and training ships.[84] Between 1920 and 1939, there was growing acknowledgement of the need to develop a skilled cohort of Indian seafarers, an issue substantially articulated in the report of the Indian Mercantile Marine Committee (IMMC). Nearly half of this report was dedicated to maritime education for Indian youth, with the specific aim of building an Indian mercantile marine. The report repeatedly highlighted deficiencies in the management of Indian shipping companies and in the wider Indian shipping industry, and strongly advocated establishing nautical institutes to train Indians in maritime transport.[85]

What is particularly significant is the IMMC's recognition that maritime education was not an end in itself. It was a means of confronting two connected challenges: first, improving the competitive capacity of Indian shipping companies against their European counterparts in overseas trade; and second, encouraging the Indianisation of both ownership and management within the shipping sector. This dual imperative underscores the relationship between educational reform and shipping nationalism, while also inviting closer reflection on colonial policy, indigenous agency and the contested terrain of maritime modernity in colonial India.[86]

[83] SAC, *Report of the Indian Industrial Commission 1916–18,* p.133.
[84] Ibid.
[85] SAC, *Report of the Indian Mercantile Marine Committee* (Delhi: Government Central Press, 1924), pp.21–2.
[86] Ibid.

Although the establishment of nautical schools in India ostensibly aimed to build indigenous maritime expertise, the underlying motivations were not purely altruistic. Non-Indian interests expressed substantial scepticism about Indians' suitability for maritime careers and often advocated their exclusion from maritime opportunities.[87] They argued that Indians, particularly the *bhadralok* class of educated Bengalis, lacked 'sea-consciousness' or 'sea-sense' and were generally disinclined to venture out to sea. The institutionalisation of naval training in 1927, marked by the inauguration of the training ship Dufferin in Bombay, brought these exclusionary practices into sharper focus. Admission criteria were deliberately stringent, and the institution was effectively open only to students of British descent or to those from the upper echelons of society.[88] This selectivity reflected a broader reluctance to democratise maritime training and perpetuated existing hierarchies in India.

Structural barriers persisted even after training. Most British shipping companies were reluctant to appoint ex-cadets of Dufferin as staff or officers on their ships.[89] A 1937 Council of State Debates report shows that Scindia Steam Navigation, an Indian firm, recruited the highest number of officers who had passed out from Dufferin compared with other shipping lines.[90] This problem is captured clearly in a remark made by an official in correspondence with the IMMC:

> It would be wrong to raise hopes that boys trained on an Indian training ship would be readily taken by British companies trading all over the world, instead of British officers trained on the "Conway" and "Worcester", etc. That means to say that such boys would have to look for their employment at the best and for many years in boats on the coasting trade of India. Even if in that term you include ports as far away as Singapore and Basrah, there are only some 75 or so boats so employed. Allowing 4 Deck Officers to a boat, you come to something under 300 officers. The officers at present employed are not going to be dismissed to make way for raw boys just through a training ship. Even if no more British officers were appointed to those ships, which is pretty nearly unthinkable, yet, allowing for 30 years ' service at sea, it would only take about 10 apprentices a year entirely to Indianize the whole of that fleet, as present officers retired.[91]

[87] Sir Charles Innes, an ICS officer, delivered an unsympathetic speech in which he discouraged in every manner the idea of a sea-career for Indian youth.

[88] SAC, Gaganvihari Lallubhai Mehta, '*Shipping in India*', Career Lecture Series, p.12.

[89] Ibid., p.15; SAC, Indian Chamber of Commerce, Calcutta (hereafter ICC), *Annual Report*, 1935, p.77.

[90] National Archives of India (hereafter NAI), Home Department, Political, File no.24/12, 1937, 'Council of State Debates, vol.II, no.3, Official Report, p.47.

[91] NAI, Ministry of Surface Transport, (Transport Wing), File no.238-S-35-B, 1928, Report by Captain M. B. Sayer, R.N.R., 'Captain Superintendent of the Training Ship 'Worcester' on the scheme for the establishment of a Training Ship in India', from the Hon'ble Mr D. T. Chadwick, C.S.I., to Mr J. A. Richey, C.I.E., 4 January 1926, p.6.

The inadequate infrastructure for marine engineering in India was another obstacle. Before the establishment of Dufferin, the entire subcontinent had no more than four Indians holding a captain's certificate.[92] Aspiring marine engineers faced further hurdles because a four-year apprenticeship in workshops was essential for professional advancement. Such positions were difficult for Indians to secure because of the dominance of foreigners, primarily the British, in the shipping sector. The absence of a shipbuilding industry and dockyards in India further reduced employment prospects for Indian youths trained in marine engineering.[93, 94]

The British Indian government nevertheless introduced some financial assistance for Indian students studying aboard Dufferin. Each year, 15 scholarships were provided to assist Indian students undertaking nautical training.[95] Boys whose parents could not support their education aboard Dufferin received Rs 25 in monthly government assistance.[96] Alongside government support, Indian shipping companies also took initiatives to create employment opportunities for Indian students in the maritime sector. The largest national shipping company of the period, Scindia Steam Navigation, made a significant contribution by recruiting these students as officers and engineers on its own vessels and, in many cases, sending them abroad for advanced training in shipbuilding. These efforts had results. By 1922, 33 of 63 officers had been recruited from India. The following year, this figure rose to 41.[97] Yet reliance on external sources persisted, and indigenous shipping companies continued to import officers from England. At the seventh annual general meeting of the Scindia Steam Navigation Company in Bombay, chairman Narottam Morarjee stated:

> A question was raised as to why the Company imported officers and engineers from England if it was the avowed policy of the Company to man their steamers with Indian officers and engineers. The critics, however, forget that the Company is helpless in the matter. It is extremely difficult to obtain Indian officers with

[92] Ibid., p.17.

[93] Ibid., p.16.

[94] KPTMA, File no.6775, 'Indian Mercantile Marine Committee', From Supdt of Machinery Office, to the Chairman, Port Commissioner, Calcutta, Letter no.5133, dated 15 February, 1923. A letter sent to the Port Commissioners in Calcutta in 1923 revealed the extremely limited participation of Indians in marine engineering careers; indeed, Indian participation in the profession was almost nil at that time.

[95] NAI, Ministry of Surface Transport (Transport Wing), File no.238-S-35-B, 1928, p.17.

[96] NAI, Home Political, File no.51-8/37-POLL, 'Two Years of Provincial Autonomy in Bengal', Report of the work done by the Government of Bengal from 01 April 1937 to 31 March 1939, Published by the Director of Public Information, August 1939, p.128.

[97] SAC, 'The Speech of Mr Narottam Morarjee on 8th ordinary general meeting of the Scindia Steam Navigation Company Ltd', cited in *The Modern Review*, November 1927, p.607.

> foreign going certificates and consequently the Company has no alternative but to import these officers from England.[98]

Thus, attempts to cultivate native Indian expertise in maritime shipping were constrained by exclusionary policies, institutional biases and infrastructural deficits, all of which helped maintain colonial dominance over Indian shipping. Within a colonial economy, building a robust national merchant fleet depended not only on capital and entrepreneurs but also on human resource management and the cultivation of a skilled workforce capable of operating national fleets. This was also important for reducing the outflow of wealth through wages paid to foreign officers in foreign currency. In this process, Scindia claimed that it received substantial support from the coastal states of British India, especially from Bengalis, while training Indian boys in nautical subjects.[99] This support produced an important result: by 1937, the Bengal Pilot Service, a key European maritime institution, had undergone complete Indianisation.[100] In 1941, the *Calcutta Municipal Gazette* recognised it as one of the most skilled pilot workforces in the world.[101]

Maritime education in independent India initially evolved under the auspices of the nation-state and moved in two directions. During the first two decades after independence, the government recognised the need to develop a skilled Indian workforce for Indian shipping lines. The rapid expansion of those lines required a continuous supply of trained seamen and engineers. Estimates of a need for around 100 nautical engineers annually pushed the government to overhaul existing training structures. This was reflected in the policies adopted soon after independence. The central government established the Merchant Navy Officers Training Committee to examine the status of training facilities for mercantile marine officers and possible ways to expand them.[102] The committee gathered information by circulating questionnaires to educational institutions nationwide.[103] In its initial phase, it formulated a blueprint for nautical training for young Indians.[104] An even more significant contribution, in

[98] SAC, 'Scindia Steam Navigation Company Ltd on Indianisation', *Welfare* (edited by Ashoke Chatterjee), vol.V, no.3, March 1927, Calcutta, p.200.
[99] SAC, 'The Speech of Mr Narottam Morarjee', *The Modern Review*, November 1927, p.607.
[100] SAC, *Proceedings of The Council of State*, July–December 1937, Simla (dated 29 September), p.64, in *The Indian Annual Register An Annual Digest of Public Affairs of India*, 1937.
[101] SAC, Bhujanga Bhusan Mukherjee, 'The Battle of the Cities A Geographical Study', *The Calcutta Municipal Gazette Seventeenth Anniversary Number*, 6 December 1941, p.12.
[102] SAC, *Constituent Assembly of India* (*Legislative*) *Debates*, 23 March 1948, Official Report, vol.IV, no.3, reply by the Honourable Minister Moulana Abul Kalam Azad to Basanta Kumar Das, pp.2562–4.
[103] SAC, Minutes of the Syndicate for the year 1947, University of Calcutta, 28 November, Calcutta University Press, p.3178.
[104] SAC, *Indian Affairs*, vol.II, November 1949, p.165.

accordance with the proposals and recommendations of the government's standing committee, was the restructuring of the existing training ship Dufferin.[105] Its curriculum was overhauled and a more integrated approach to training was adopted. Under the new regulations, trainees first undertook a three-year workshop apprenticeship before studying at a residential college in Calcutta, which emphasised both practical and theoretical competencies. Cadet intake capacity increased from 25 to 80.[106] In 1948, a nautical college was established in Bombay, but such institutions soon faced a severe manpower crisis, particularly in teaching staff and instructors. To address this, the Indian High Commissioner in the UK was asked to help recruit suitable instructors for vacant positions.[107] Alongside Dufferin, the government also proposed establishing a shore-based training centre for marine engineers.[108]

The central government also proposed establishing a nautical school and college in West Bengal to train personnel for the marine sector. Responsibility for training crews engaged in inland and island water transport was often left to provincial government. In 1949, the Government of West Bengal planned to introduce a short-term training scheme for this purpose, producing around 400 trainees through a three-month programme.[109] Several technical marine institutes were then established. These were divided into two categories: pre-sea training institutes and post-sea training institutes. The Directorate of Marine Engineering and Training (DMET) and T. S. Dufferin were the two most prominent pre-sea institutes. DMET was established by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in Calcutta in 1953.

Marine engineers appear to have had an unusually high employment rate, with minimal job-market insecurity. By 1966, for example, 930 cadets had completed training at DMET and all had been absorbed by shipping companies.[110] Established in 1948, the Lal Bahadur Shastri Nautical and Engineering College in Bombay emphasised the need to prepare a trained workforce for the Ministry of Transport. Students from neighbouring countries also took admission and were entitled to benefits.[111] In some cases, shipping lines supported the establishment of nautical schools so that trained Indian marine

[105] SAC, *The Eastern Economist*, vol.XI, no.12, September 17, New Delhi, 1948, p.490.
[106] SAC, *The Eastern Economist*, vol.XI, no.17, October 22, New Delhi, 1948, pp.702–3
[107] Ibid., p.702.
[108] SAC, *Constituent Assembly of India* (*Legislative*) *Debates*, Part-1, vol.III, no.8, March 28, comment of K. C. Neogy, the Honourable Minister of Commerce, 1949, p.1881.
[109] Central Secretariat Library, New Delhi, *Two Years Since Independence: A resume of the activities of the Government of West Bengal*, 15 August, 1947-49, published by the director of publicity, West Bengal, p.109.
[110] IPA, *Annual Report*, Ministry of Transport and Shipping, Government of India, New Delhi, 1966–7, p.19.
[111] IMUK, H. M. Trivedi, 'Nautical and Engineering Training Facilities in India', speech on College Day at Bombay, 15 March 1975, in *Indian Shipping in Perspective* (Ahmedabad: Vikas Publishing House, 1980), p.429.

professionals could serve their emerging fleets.[112] These measures, intended to generate manpower for India's national fleets, achieved substantial results within decades. The Annual Report of the Ministry of Shipping and Transport for 1982-3 provides supporting data from the Seamen's Employment Office, Bombay, where 24,782 trained seamen were registered for employment, compared with 10,071 in Calcutta. Available jobs on foreign-going vessels numbered 14,200 in Bombay and 4,306 in Calcutta. Although these figures relate to seamen available for foreign-going ships, they indicate that nautical training infrastructure significantly reduced India's reliance on recruiting manpower from abroad.[113]

From the 1960s, the emphasis widened from nautical technique to port management and cargo handling. Labour disputes,[114] congestion and the arrival of multimodal systems encouraged curricular reform,[115] while Indian Institutes of Port Management (IIPMs) were established in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras.[116] An International Association of Ports and Harbors (IAPH) survey of India's major ports in 1968 recommended that foreign experts train personnel in India rather than sending officials abroad.[117] It stated:

> It is suggested that a far more productive and efficient training mode would be for foreign experts to be brought to India and specifically assigned to train Indian personnel in their own ports. We believe that it would be far more efficient for a foreign expert on a three-to-six month assignment, to train a group of Indian port personnel in new methods, procedures…The Team therefore recommends equipment, etc., at their own port. The Team therefore recommends that instead of sending officials abroad for training, that selected experts be invited to India to train personnel in the actual ports where the problems exist.[118]

[112] Ibid. For example, in 1948, the Scindia Steam Navigation Company, the then most prominent Indian shipping firm, financially supported the establishment of Lal Bahadur Shastri Nautical and Engineering College in Bombay.
[113] IPA, *Annual Report of the Ministry of Shipping and Transport*, 1982–3, Government of India, New Delhi, p.17.
[114] For a recent study on labour disputes in Indian ports at the time of independence, see Prerna Agarwal, 'The War at the Workplace: Calcutta's Dockworkers and Changing Labour Regime, 1939–1945' (2022) 67.3, *International Review of Social History*, pp.407–34.
[115] IMUK, H. M. Trivedi, 'Nautical and Engineering Training Facilities in India', p.430.
[116] This period witnessed a massive influx of containers into Indian ports, creating severe congestion for the authorities as they continued to rely on outdated cargo-handling techniques. The problem was further compounded by the location of major Indian ports within densely populated metropolitan cities. Narrow road networks and the acute shortage of backup storage space significantly restricted the easy movement of containers. These mounting logistical pressures compelled Indian port authorities to address port management and infrastructural modernisation more seriously than ever before. The establishment of management training institutes in three major ports during this period further reflects this shift in priorities.
[117] NAI, Ministry of Shipping, File no.9-PGA (17)/73, 1973, from K. K. Ray, chairman, Calcutta Port Commissioners, to A. D. Granger, director, International Labour Organisation, DO no.7439/D (enclosed copy of 'Draft Request for Technical Assistance'), 15 May 1973, p.119.
[118] Ibid., (Appendix 1), p.123.

A 1971 ECAFE survey, conducted with British and ILO assistance, reached similar conclusions. It identified training needs across Asian ports, especially in cargo handling, and recorded repeated requests for UN support.[119] P. R. Subramanian, ECAFE's regional port adviser, subsequently recommended management divisions at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras and proposed the Calcutta institute as a regional centre for India and neighbouring countries.[120] He envisaged:

> The Management Division should be headed by a management expert and deal with all management problems and especially material management, time and motion studies, traffic forecasts, berths utilization and should carry out intensive management studies on operational problems as they arise.[121]

These proposals linked administrative reform directly to new cargo-handling systems. ILO involvement brought expertise and finance, but plans to place foreign personnel in senior posts could provoke resistance, as at Bombay, where disagreement stalled implementation.[122] The episode illustrates the tension between international assistance and domestic control.

From 1980, the UNCTAD TRAINMAR project supplied funding and international links to the IIPMs, with particular emphasis on container operations.[123] The World Maritime University in Malmö likewise offered courses for developing countries with support from European governments and shipping companies, while US institutions contributed language training, library resources and equipment.[124] Indian firms also invested directly: Great Eastern Shipping founded a cadet academy and launched the residential training ship *Jawahar* in 1975.[125]

Foreign support had several motives. International carriers sought lower-cost, technically trained Asian crews, while Indian seafarers were often attracted to foreign-

[119] NAI, Ministry of Shipping, File no.9-PGA (17)/73, 1973 (United Nations Economic and Social Council) Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, Transport and Communications Committee, Water Transport Sub-Committee Tenth Session 31st October–7th November 1973, Bangkok, pp.159–61.

[120] NAI, From K. K. Ray, chairman, Calcutta Port Commissioners, to K. Sivaraj, joint secretary, Ministry of Shipping and Transport, DO no.7439/D, 14 May 1973, p.117.

[121] NAI, Ministry of Shipping, File no.9-PGA (17)/73, 1973, p.164.

[122] Ibid., p.13.

[123] TRINMAR, *Handbook on Containerised Shipping Management*, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development in Collaboration with Narottam Morarjee Institute of Shipping, Bombay, 1990, pp.1.1–1.4.

[124] 'World Maritime University Opens in Malmö, Sweden: Advanced Training will Promote Shipping by Developing Countries and Safety at Sea', *WMU News*, 1.1.1979, pp.2–3. The Maritime Commons, The Digital Repository of the World Maritime University.
<https://commons.wmu.se/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1118&context=wmu_news> accessed 25 January 2026.

[125] IMUK, D. N. Sanklecha, *Tramping to Success,* pp.253, 98.

flagged vessels.[126] Indian companies still relied on foreign specialists for senior posts, and port authorities needed expertise to operate increasingly complex cargo-handling systems. American President Lines'(APL) early container operations at Indian ports illustrate how training, technology and foreign commercial participation became intertwined.[127]

Important limitations remained. George Mamphilli argued in the 1990s that western-designed curricula did not always match Indian port conditions and that manpower development had not been treated as integral to port efficiency.[128] Maritime education had reduced one form of dependence, but new technologies generated further reliance on international institutions and expertise.

Towards Unit Load

The preceding sections show that the state could protect national shipping through law, credit and ownership, but could not independently provide all the capital, infrastructure and expertise required by containerisation. Unit load therefore tests the limits of state-led development and brings port trusts, private carriers and international actors more directly into the analysis.

Before containerisation, Indian shipping was shaped mainly by domestic policy, commodity flows, foodgrain imports and established trade routes. Containers embedded the sector more deeply in foreign investment, global shipping lines, technical standards and international demand. India's debt constraints and cautious planning limited large-scale port modernisation, making adoption uneven and contested. Correspondence among port trusts, government departments and commercial bodies, together with feasibility studies, shows how this external technology was negotiated within domestic institutions.

The annual reports and proceedings for 1947-60 of influential Bombay- and Calcutta-based commercial bodies, notably the IMC, BCC, and Bengal Chamber of Commerce & Industry (BCCI), reveal persistent institutional anxiety about the deteriorating condition

[126] The exodus of Indian officers to foreign-flagged vessels led to a significant shortage of personnel in Indian shipping lines, particularly in senior positions such as chief engineer and master. By 1995, this shortage had reached 40 per cent. Ref. KPTMA, S. P. Mohile, 'Focus on Human Element in Shipping', *Indian Shipping* (Journal of Indian National Shipowners' Association, Bombay), vol.47, no.3, November 1995, p.24.

[127] Mumbai Port Authority Archives (hereafter MPA), *Proceedings Volumes of the Bombay Port Trust*, various years (1970–5). In the early stages of container shipping at the Port of Bombay, the APL not only invested in infrastructure (often bringing the necessary equipment with them) but also in the workforce. They even supplied highly skilled personnel to handle standardised cargoes, such as containers and pallets, in the port complex.

[128] KPTMA, George Mamphilli, 'Training of Port Personnel in India', *Indian Ports*, vol.XXV, no.3, 1992, pp.15–16.

of cargo movement within the port system.[129] Problems of loading and unloading general cargo on Indian waterfronts became more pronounced after independence, with western ports such as Bombay attracting relatively early attention.[130] Congestion at Bombay port sometimes became so severe that foreign shipping lines trading with the port imposed extra surcharges.[131] American steamer agents, for example, imposed a 25 per cent emergency surcharge on cargo shipped to Bombay from 1948 until conditions returned to normal. UK and continental lines did the same in July 1949.[132] These reports repeatedly emphasised the widening gap between the rapid expansion of maritime trade and the stagnant growth of dockside infrastructure, mechanised handling facilities and storage capacity, as well as continuing labour unrest. Although containers could reduce transit time and handling costs through door-to-door delivery, they became popular in Atlantic ports more rapidly from the 1950s, while Indian ports only began to use them at the beginning of the 1970s. Until the 1960s, as Table 2 indicates, Indian maritime trade was closely tied to the UK and Japan[133], with limited engagement with America.[134] The UK's participation in containerisation also began in the 1960s and gained momentum in the 1970s.[135] As Table 3 shows, both the number of terminals and container movements by rail increased after 1965. During and after the Vietnam War, containerisation also spread to Japanese ports, beginning in 1965.[136] Thus, trade direction and trade partners were important determinants of containerisation in India.

[129] BCCI, *Abstract of Proceedings,* November 1952, 'Congestion in the Port of Calcutta', p.4.

[130] During the annual general meeting, Mr A. D. Finney, the president of the BCC, expressed his concerns. He said 'I would like to say that Bombay is not the only port where shipping meets with serious delays. In fact, I could name two regions in which the situation is or has been worse than in Bombay, namely, the East African Coast and South America. Even so, all who take a pride in this city should maintain unceasingly their efforts to improve the situation.' Ref. BCC, *Committee Report*, 1948, p.xxvii.

[131] For a recent study on congestion at Bombay Port and its connection with the creation of a satellite port at Nhava Sheva, see M. Maruschke, *Portals of Globalization: Repositioning Mumbai's Ports and Zones, 1833–2014* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), pp.177-90.

[132] BCC, *Committee Report*, 1949, p.xxvii.

[133] SAC, *India 1953 Annual Review* (published by the Public Relations Department of the High Commission of India, India House, London), p.108. In the first decade following independence, the UK was the largest consumer of Indian goods.

[134] KPTMA, *Administrative Report of the Bombay Port Trust*, 1963–64. Appendix D.

[135] IMU, 'Seminar on Ports and Shipping in Developing Countries', 8 October, 1986 – New Delhi Sponsored by: Government of India, Ministry of Transport Department of Surface Transport in association with Indian Ports Association., p.29.

[136] J. P. DiMoia, 'Reconfiguring transport infrastructure in post-war Asia: mapping South Korean container ports, 1952–1978' (2020) 36(3–4) *History and Technology*, pp.382–99.; also 'From Occupation to Containerization, 1945 to Early 1970s' <https://asiacenter.harvard.edu/events/occupation-containerization-1945-early-1970s> accessed 12 June 2026.

Year	Terminals in Operation	Containers Forwarded	Capacity of Train Loaded
1965 (2 months)	2	408	20%
1966	6	27,286	45%
1967	16	102,027	53%
1968	24	268,846	54%
1969	32	397,420	60%
1970	30	480,095	61%

Table 3: Growth of rail container movements in the UK, 1965–70.
Source: IMUK, 'Seminar on Ports and Shipping in Developing Countries', New Delhi, 8 October 1986, sponsored by the Government of India, Ministry of Transport, Department of Surface Transport, in association with the Indian Ports Association, p.29.

India's move towards unit load became explicit in the 1970s. Bombay provides the clearest case study because the records of the port trust preserve detailed exchanges among port officials, central government and commercial interests.

The Bombay Port Trust began to consider container shipping seriously in the 1970s. Here, two contradictory positions emerged. When the Master Plan for the development of Bombay Port was being prepared, together with a survey report by consulting engineers M/s Bertlin & Partners, the central concern was how docks with poor and outdated technology could handle bulk cargo transported in larger and standardised units such as pallets and containers. The Master Plan boldly proposed remodelling the existing docks. Yet draft limitations left little scope for remodelling existing Bombay docks, which were, according to the report, 'handicapped by draft limitation and bottlenecks due to saturating traffic'. At the same time, the idea of establishing a satellite port on the eastern side of Bombay Harbour, at Nhava-Sheva, was being conceptualised. M/s Bertlin & Partners therefore placed greater emphasis on export trade and suggested constructing three berths at the new satellite port: two for bulk cargo such as sulphur, sugar and fertilisers, and one specifically for containers.[137] While M/s Bertlin & Partners favoured container shipping at Bombay Port, another study team, IAPH, took the opposite view. Rather than investing large sums in a new satellite port, it favoured making use of existing Bombay Port facilities and argued that government investment should be guided by

[137] MPA, *Proceedings Volume of the Bombay Port Trust, 1970*, 'Trustees Special Board Meeting', 21 July, 'Future Development of Bombay Port', pp.1358–9.

current traffic trends.[138] IAPH's assessment rested particularly on the composition of trade and the uncertain future of foodgrain imports through Bombay.[139]

This uncertainty over feasibility created a divide within central government over capital investment in dock modernisation. The delay in government approval for investment in containerisation at Bombay Port enabled foreign shipping companies to enter and increasingly dominate the port's containerisation process. A foreign shipping line, APL, expressed interest and agreed to invest in the port to develop container-handling facilities.[140] The total cost was Rs 71.7 lakhs, excluding customs. The proposal was approved by the Port Trust[141] on the grounds that 'it would enable this port to promote Containerisation without having to risk a heavy investment, particularly in the initial development stage of the new technique in this country'.[142] This endeavour did not, however, receive sufficient support from the government; the proposal to waive customs fees on imported equipment was not approved by the central government. Another potential obstacle was the government's support for national shipping lines. The government was not ready to allow a foreign shipping line to invest in the port without first hearing from prominent national shipping lines on whether this might harm their interests. Responses varied. SCI was initially willing to participate but later changed its position.[143] In a letter, the managing director of SCI argued that APL's proposal on containerisation would serve only its own shipping service and would not benefit other Indian shipping lines.[144] Some early measures were nevertheless taken by the government and the port trust, including the port's establishment of a Unit Load Advisory Committee in June 1967 and a seminar on containerisation held in Bombay in December 1968.[145]

The port trust continued to press for Nhava-Sheva. When its inclusion in the Fifth Plan appeared doubtful, the chairman convened a special meeting and cited support from manufacturers, chambers of commerce, shipowners and export-import associations.[146]

[138] Ibid.

[139] Ibid.

[140] APL was the first shipping line to begin container trade with the Port of Bombay.

[141] MPA, *Proceedings Volume of the Bombay Port Trust, 1973*, 'Trustees Board Meeting', 30 January, 'Memorandum from the Additional Chief Engineer', no.HF.481C/1/688 dated 15 November, p.303.

[142] Ibid.

[143]MPA, *Proceedings Volume of the Bombay Port Trust*, 1971, Trustees Special Board Meeting held on 26 October, 'Administration Report', 1970–71', p.781.

[144] Ibid. (letter no.213/DD/101/177 dated 9/13 September 1972).

[145] Ibid.

[146] MPA, *Proceedings Volume of the Bombay Port Trust*, 1973, Trustees Special Board Meeting held on 23 August, 'Inclusion of Nhava Sheva Project in the Fifth Five Year Plan-Letter from S. R. Kulkarni', p.268.

Other bottlenecks extended beyond the port. India's first inland container depot opened at Bangalore only in 1981, while the 1989 RITES perspective plan showed that ICDs remained poorly connected to major seaports.[147] Weak road links, customs procedures and the delayed legal framework for multimodal transport increased time and cost. The Multimodal Transport Act followed in 1993, and a 1996 Indian Chamber of Commerce conference argued that existing transport and customs law should be adapted rather than creating further restrictions.[148] These post-1991 examples indicate the practical consequences of liberalisation and the institutional work still required to make it effective.

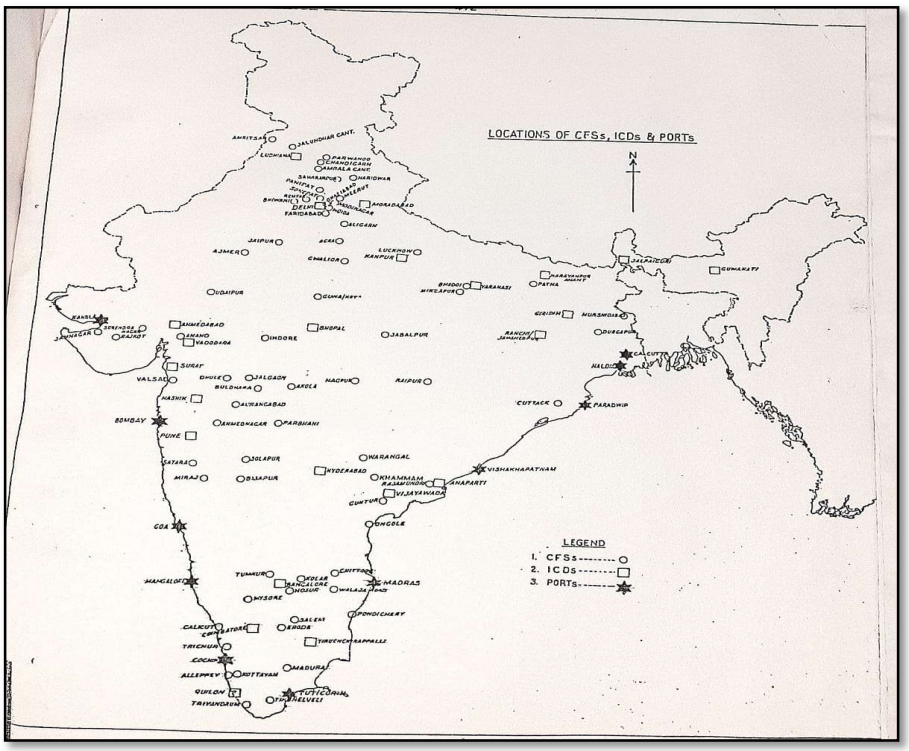

Figure 5: India's container logistics network: inland container depots, container freight stations and ports.
Source: IPA, A Perspective Plan for the Development of Containerisation in India, part II, report submitted by RITES, Ministry of Commerce, Government of India, March 1989.

[147] IPA, *A Perspective Plan for the Development of Containerisation in India* (*Part-II*), Report Submitted by RITES, Ministry of Commerce, Government of India, March 1989.
[148] KPTMA, *Proceedings of the National Conference on Private Sector Participation for Competitiveness for Indian Ports, jointly organised* by the British Deputy High Commission and Indian Chamber of Commerce, 10 October 1996, pp.28, 32.

Containerisation also expanded the role of the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and foreign commercial partners. Capital shortages encouraged joint ventures, private container freight stations and imported equipment, especially as export promotion and liberalisation gained importance in the 1980s. International finance and expertise thus became not an incidental supplement but part of the operating structure of modern Indian ports.

India adopted container berths more slowly than Asian competitors such as Singapore, despite favourable projections from several international studies. Government caution and repeated feasibility exercises delayed investment, while correspondence from Bombay shows persistent disagreement between the port trust and central government over planning priorities.[149] Port infrastructure improved, but international shipping companies retained control over much of the long-distance container trade.[150]

The absence of a major domestic hub also kept Indian cargo dependent on feeder services through Colombo, Singapore and Dubai. More than 70 per cent of Colombo's cargo was estimated to consist of transhipped Indian containers by the end of the century. Jawaharlal Nehru Port was developed near Bombay partly to reduce this dependence; later estimates suggested savings of Rs 6,084 per TEU and 48 hours compared with transhipment through Salalah.[151] These later outcomes underline the consequences of choices made before liberalisation rather than extending the article's main chronology beyond 1991.

[149] Since 1975, Indian shipping companies have faced significant challenges, primarily, but not limited to, cash flow issues, exacerbated by the onset of the global financial recession. This situation became increasingly complex in the 1980s due to the overproduction of shipping capacity, which far exceeded demand for shipping services. Consequently, numerous Indian shipping companies were unable to repay their foreign loans, as they required foreign currency remittance. This time, the Indian government extended help by granting subsidies and assistance to those firms to liquidate their foreign loans. This was unanimously approved and recommended by the National Shipping Board at its meeting in Cochin in 1978. It is very interesting to note that these years saw an official push towards containerisation, with the establishment of study groups and the conduct of government-initiated feasibility reports, all reflecting an institutional shift towards the modernisation of cargo-handling techniques in the country. It is assumed that, as in the global situation, the shipping crisis did not impede container trade in India. India's move to containerisation during a period when shipping companies faced cash-flow difficulties may serve as a strategic mechanism to circumvent the ongoing crisis. Foreign purchasers of Indian products were increasingly favouring the receipt of their consignments in containers. Both Indian ports and shipping companies may have sought to capitalise on this market to address the prevailing shipping crisis. Ref. NAI/PMO/File no.17, from the chairman of the National Shipping Board to the Prime Minister, D.O. no.CH/NSB/78, 6 October 1978.

[150] Singapore's container shipping company, the Neptune Orient Lines, occupied a considerable share in India's container shipping. It had established networks with major ports such as Bombay and Madras, and by 1982, it began operating in trade between South Asia and Europe. Ref. National Library Singapore (Reference Section Closed Stack Collections)/, *Neptune News,* Published by the Neptune Orient Lines (NOL), May/June 1982, p.1.

[151] KPTMA, Capt. Jimmy Sarbh, 'JN Port: The Future Hub Port of India', *The Link, Global Trade and Freight Review,* vol.VII, no.11, November 2002, pp.46-8.

Contribution to the Literature

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasised the twentieth-century movement of shipping and shipbuilding away from their traditional European centres. Stig Tenold has been especially influential in explaining the growing penetration of non-European actors into international shipping and the diffusion of maritime capacity beyond Europe. He links this shift to the two World Wars and the rapid industrialisation of Asian economies from the 1970s, although his account of the 'East' is represented principally by Japan, South Korea and China. Nicholas White similarly emphasises the rise of national shipping and the diffusion of containerisation across the eastern hemisphere, and uses BISNC to show the difficulties faced by British companies in the Indian Ocean during decolonisation, partition and the growth of protectionist shipping policies. By placing India at the centre, this article broadens the literature beyond accounts of European decline or East Asian success. It shows how anti-colonial entrepreneurship, postcolonial state developmentalism and global technological change interacted within a major South Asian economy, and how these forces redistributed maritime power without producing straightforward national autonomy.

The article also contributes to Indian business history by treating shipping as a mixed system rather than a simple contest between state and market. Nationalist firms emerged through confrontation with colonial policy; after independence, public ownership, protection and private enterprise developed together; and from the 1970s the capital and technical demands of containerisation opened the sector more fully to international actors.[152] Linking these changes to maritime education shows that national capacity depended on skills and institutions as well as ships and finance.

Conclusion

Indian shipping developed from an early entrepreneurial nationalism that challenged colonial power but depended on capital, technology and trained labour. After 1947, private shipowners remained important, while the state moved from protection and partnership towards direct ownership and regulation. This expansion constrained some private initiative, but did not eliminate it: national development continued to rely on private carriers, international finance and technical expertise. Containerisation exposed

[152] A good deal of discourse is documented in T. Roy, *A Business History of India*, pp.154–67. Roy said 'Indian big business contributed money and leadership to the movement that hastened an end of colonial rule. And yet, instead of rewarding them with unrestrained capitalism, post-independent India reserved large fields of investment for the state and regulated private enterprise.' (p.154) He further added that after the Second World War, the role of the world economy in driving the economic development of post-colonial India was diminished. On the contrary, a set of Marxist interpretations argued about 'the monopoly of power of big business'. See A. L. Levkovsky, *Capitalism in India* (Delhi: Peoples Publishing House, 1972); C. Bettelheim, *India Independent* (New York: Monthly Review, 1968).

these dependencies most clearly because its infrastructure and operating systems exceeded what the state or domestic firms could readily provide alone.

Across national shipping, containerisation and maritime education, the article therefore identifies a shifting triangular relationship among nationalist private capital, state planning and global technological-logistical systems. India's engagement with international shipping revealed the limits of economic autonomy, but also the persistence of domestic institutions, port authorities, firms and commercial lobbies in shaping policy. Liberalisation in 1991 did not begin this transformation so much as formalise pressures already visible in the shipping crisis, port modernisation and internationalisation of the preceding two decades. The Indian case suggests a broader model for understanding maritime development in other postcolonial economies.

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