

India's first maritime museum coming up at Lothal

Underwater or marine archaeology in India is all set to get a boost with the government deciding to establish a National Maritime Heritage Museum at Lothal, a Harappan site on the Saurashtra coast in Gujarat.

The museum will also be an independent research centre of underwater archaeology for reconstruction of maritime history, archaeology of boat building and materials traded. It will have on display salvaged material from shipwreck sites in the Indian Ocean waters. The museum is being set up with technical help from the Portuguese Maritime Heritage Museum. The central government has appointed the first Director General for the museum which will be attached to the Maritime Board of the Gujarat government. Lothal is the site of one of the oldest ports in India dating to the Bronze Age.

Underwater archaeology is a specialized branch of archaeology that involves recovering submerged remains such as ports, shipwrecks and studying proxy records of maritime activity from archaeological excavations as well as archival and historical records. There are an estimated three million undiscovered shipwrecks lying on the ocean floor, according to the Unesco. Between 1824 and 1962, over 12,000 sailing ships and war vessels were lost at sea. Many of them got wrecked in Indian coastal waters.

In India, shipwreck studies were initiated in 1989 off Sunchi Reef in Goa waters. Later on, shipwreck were excavated and studied off St George's Reef, Ameer Shoals of Goa as well as in Poompuhar, Konark and Lakshadweep waters by the marine archaeology centre at the Goa-based CSIR-National Institute of Oceanography (NIO).

These studies have vast potential, given the fact that India has a rich maritime history. Archaeological evidence from the Persian Gulf and Southeast Asia shows that Indian maritime voyagers ventured into western and eastern seas of the Indian Ocean some 4000 years ago, according to researchers Sila Tripathi (NIO) and Ravi Korisetar (UGC Emeritus Fellow, Karnataka University).

The Indian marine studies have covered wooden and steel hulled shipwrecks off Sunchi Reef dating back to the 17th century Indo-Portuguese trade and commerce network. The St George's Reef shipwreck dates to the 19th century. The Ameer shoals shipwreck was probably of British origin, dating to the 1880s or later. Steam engine shipwrecks have been explored and documented in the Minicoy waters. An 18th century wooden hulled shipwreck has been explored off Poompuhar in Tamil Nadu. Details of a shipwreck off Konark coast of Odisha are still being reconstructed, according to a series of research papers published in journal *Current Science*.

"Archival records have revealed a series of wreckages off the coast of Goa that occurred probably owing to a collision with reefs, sand bars and storm over the sea. The Portuguese records of 1497-1612 mention that 806 ships sailed from Lisbon to India. Out of these 20 ships ran aground, 66 were shipwrecked, the enemy captured four, six were burnt, 285 remained in India, and the rest returned to Portugal," researchers said.

Portuguese ships that were wrecked include *S. Cristovam* which was caught in a storm on 17 August 1594; *nau Santo Andre* which capsized off Goa coast in May 1608; *Nossa Sra Dos* and *Remedios* were hit by a severe storm and sank on 28 January 1616. Another 12 Portuguese ships enroute to Calcutta from Goa, were reported sunk near Aguada Bay due to an unseasonable storm in 1648.



Remains of timber from the wrecked vessel on St. George's Reef (Picture: CSIR-NIO)

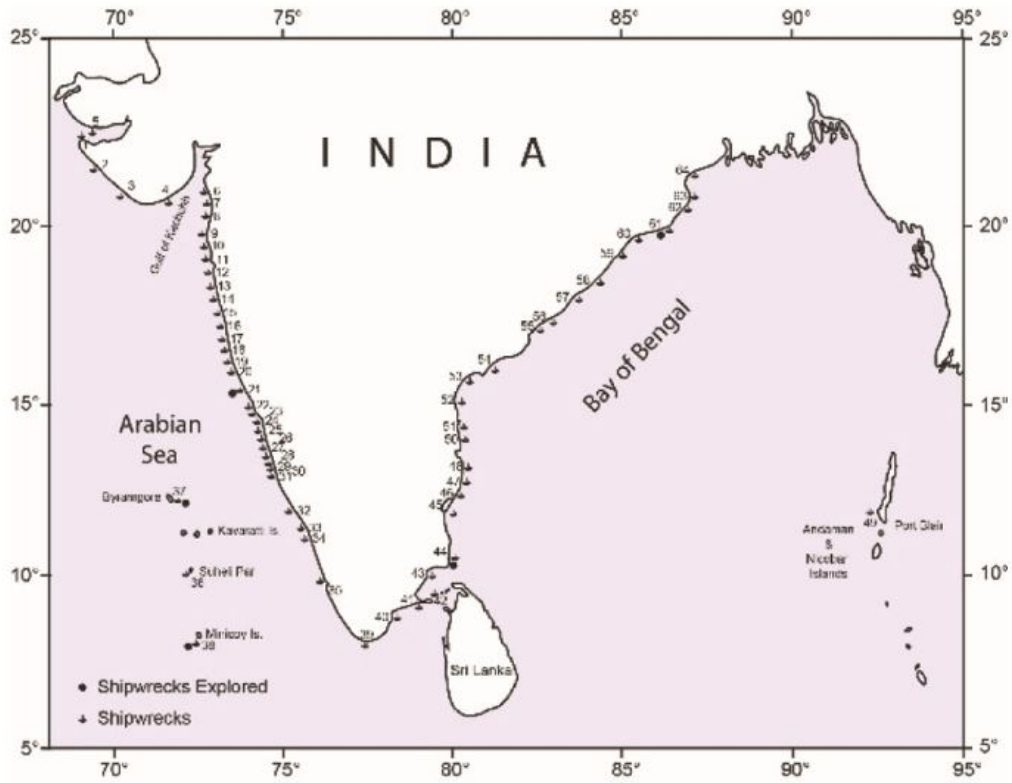
“All the documented shipwrecks belong to the 17 to 20th centuries. This period is the transition phase between wood to iron and sail to steam. The hitherto discovered shipwrecks, namely the Konark, Vizag and Poompuhar, deserve further studies for reconstructing their detailed history,” pointed out Tripathi and Korisettar.

Experts have called for greater collaboration among marine archaeologists in India. “I would like to see collaboration between marine archaeologists based in NIO and those from NIOT in Chennai and the department of marine Archaeology at Tamil University in Thanjavur. The artefacts collected through underwater survey at Dwarka, Poompuhar-Kaveripattinam, Mahabalipuram, Tranquebar, Lakshadweep, Konark and in the Goa waters are with the NIO, but only a few of them such as stone anchors are on display due to lack of facilities and preservation conditions,” Korisettar told *India Science Wire*.

Studying sunken ships could also fill the gaps in India's maritime history and trade links with other countries. Some shipwrecks are of great of historical importance, researchers said. The *Dart Mouth* belonging to the East India Company, for instance, was carrying treasure when it is said to have sunk off Masulipatnam in 1719. *Governor Keating*, carrying King's Stores sank in a storm in 1812 near Nellore,

Andhra Pradesh. Some Indian ships are also lying in foreign waters, such as *P&O Liner Indus* which carried the Buddhist sculptures of Bharhut stupa and is known to have sunk in 1882 to the seabed of Sri Lankan waters.

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Map showing the shipwrecks in Indian waters (CSIR-NIO)