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From Samudra-Manthan to SAGAR: Civilisational foundations of India's Indo-Pacific vision

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Abstract
India's engagement with the Indo-Pacific is often analysed through strategic and geopolitical frames, yet this lens overlooks the deeper civilisational ideas that have long shaped India's maritime worldview. This paper argues that contemporary doctrines such as SAGAR, Neighbourhood First and India's Indo-Pacific vision draw upon older conceptions of the sea found in ancient texts, myths and historical port cultures. Using a qualitative, interpretive method, the study examines sources including the *Rig Veda*, *Mahabharata*, Sangam literature and Puranic narratives, alongside modern policy statements. It identifies continuities between ancient ideas of cooperation, ethical conduct and oceanic pluralism and India's current emphasis on inclusivity, non-hegemony, capacity building and cultural diplomacy. By linking civilisational memory with maritime strategy, the paper fills a gap in Indo-Pacific scholarship and demonstrates that India's maritime approach is shaped by both contemporary geopolitical concerns and enduring historical worldviews. It also suggests comparative avenues for future civilisational maritime research.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, Indian maritime policy, SAGAR, civilisational memory, Samudra-Manthan, oceanic pluralism, maritime diplomacy

Introduction

For most of its recorded history, the Indian subcontinent has been shaped by the sea. Ancient ports such as Muziris, Tamralipti, and Sopara linked India to Southeast Asia, West Asia, and the Mediterranean. These routes carried goods, ideas, religions, and artistic forms. Early texts from the Rig Veda to Sangam literature portrayed the ocean not as a frontier but as a shared civilisational space (Das, 2024). This long maritime experience produced certain enduring ideas: cooperation among diverse actors, ethical conduct in trade, and the belief that the sea connects rather than divides. Yet contemporary research on the Indo-Pacific rarely acknowledges this older worldview. Most scholarship interprets India's maritime behaviour through strategic frames. The focus lies on China's rise, naval capabilities, chokepoints, and balance-of-power politics. Policies such as SAGAR and Neighbourhood First are thus read largely as instruments of security and diplomacy. This approach is useful, but it remains incomplete.

This paper argues that India's current Indo-Pacific vision is also shaped by deeper civilisational narratives. Concepts embedded in ancient myths, maritime practices, and philosophical traditions continue to inform how India imagines the region. These ideas include the cooperative metaphor of Samudra-Manthan, the norms of Samudra-Dharma, and the pluralism of ancient port cultures. They offer a lens to understand why India emphasises inclusivity, non-hegemony, and shared prosperity in the Indo-Pacific. By linking older maritime worldviews with contemporary policy, this study fills a key gap in existing literature. It shows that India's Indo-Pacific discourse cannot be understood solely through strategic logic. It also draws from a long civilisational memory that continues to shape India's approach to the oceanic region.

Literature Review
Conventional Strategic Interpretations

Scholarship on India's Indo-Pacific strategy largely adopts a geopolitical and security-driven lens. Ahmed & Rahman (2025) [7] describes the Indo-Pacific as a "strategic imaginary"

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shaped by China-US rivalry, placing India within a competitive regional order. Sarjito (2024) [16] similarly frames India as a balancing power whose actions naval modernisation and partnerships with Japan, Australia and France respond to China's expanding presence. Koga (2022) [6] argues that India follows a hedging strategy in minilateral platforms like the Quad to preserve autonomy, while Zhang (2020) [20] also views India's behaviour as shaped primarily by structural pressures rather than normative ideas. Upadhyaya (2019) [15] emphasise traditional maritime concerns such as chokepoints, energy routes and maritime domain awareness. Indian analysts echo this view: Marjani (2024) highlights SAGAR's role in enhancing maritime security and defence diplomacy, and Singh (2025) [17] interprets the move from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR as part of India's broader strategic recalibration. Reports from RUSI (2024) and the Lowy Institute (2025) also underline India's geopolitical motivations in strengthening regional surveillance and logistics networks. Across these studies, the underlying assumption remains that India's maritime conduct is driven primarily by strategic competition and threat perceptions, leaving little room for historical or civilisational explanations.

Civilisational Memory in Indian Foreign Policy
A second body of literature examines how India draws on civilisational identity and long historical memory in its foreign policy. Haug conceptualises India as a civilisational state, showing how policymakers invoke ancient cultural lineages to present India's global role. Chatterjee (2021) [1] highlights the use of public history such as epics, cultural flows and collective memory to legitimise foreign policy choices. Soft-power scholars echo this approach. Mullen (2015) [13] notes India's deployment of symbols such as Buddhism and Ashoka's legacy to cultivate benign influence. Institutional reports such as the VIF Insight Report (2025) document how India promotes archaeological heritage, cultural routes and historical linkages in its outreach to Southeast Asia, the Gulf and East Africa. However, this civilisational literature remains largely land-focused and cultural, emphasising Buddhism, identity, continental linkages and soft power. It does not extend these frameworks to maritime spaces, nor does it consider how ancient oceanic ideas such as cooperation, ethical norms or port cosmopolitanism might shape India's maritime worldview.

Research Gap
Existing Indo-Pacific scholarship overwhelmingly interprets India's maritime behaviour through strategic or geopolitical lenses, focusing on China, naval capability, chokepoints, balancing behaviour and great-power rivalry. Even studies that examine India's maritime doctrines SAGAR, maritime domain awareness networks, and Indo-Pacific partnerships treat them as outcomes of security-driven pragmatism, not as expressions of deeper historical worldviews. Parallel to this, a separate body of literature analyses civilisational memory in Indian foreign policy, emphasising cultural identity, ancient linkages, and normative diplomacy. However, this scholarship remains continental and culture-centric, focusing on Buddhism, soft power, heritage diplomacy and identity politics. Crucially, it does not extend its analysis to India's maritime domain, nor does it explore how oceanic myths, port cultures, or maritime ethical codes

shape contemporary statecraft an absence your document itself notes.
No existing study systematically connects these two strands. There is no research that traces how ancient maritime ideas such as samudra-manthan's cooperative ethos, samudra-dharma's ethical norms, or the pluralism of ancient ports inform modern frameworks like SAGAR, MAHASAGAR, or India's Indo-Pacific vision. This paper fills that gap by demonstrating how India's maritime policy language subtly reflects enduring civilisational memory, a dimension currently missing in Indo-Pacific studies.

Theoretical Framework: Civilisational Memory as an Interpretive Lens
The study employs Civilisational Memory as its core theoretical framework, arguing that India's contemporary Indo-Pacific vision and its governing doctrines, such as SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), are not merely products of *realpolitik* but are deeply shaped by an enduring maritime worldview. This framework is rooted in Maurice Halbwachs's (1992) [5] foundational work, which establishes memory as a fundamentally social phenomenon, continuously recalled and shaped by the present needs of the group. Extending this concept, Jan and Aleida Assmann (1995, 2011) operationalize memory into the enduring Cultural Memory, which is fixed in symbolic forms (texts, myths, rituals). For this research, the Puranic narratives of *Samudra-Manthan*, the moral dilemmas concerning the ocean in the *Mahabharata*, and descriptions of trade in *Sangam literature* constitute this vital repository of India's ancient Cultural Memory. These sources provide the "mnemohistory" history as remembered and interpreted that generates the foundational metaphors and ethics applied to modern maritime engagement.
The framework further integrates S. N. Eisenstadt's (2022) [3] Civilizational Analysis, which focuses on the persistent influence of core cultural programs that guide a civilization's response to external challenges. For India, this program is characterized by a distinctive, deeply historical conception of the ocean. The memory of the ocean as a space of both resource generation (*amrita* from the *Samudra-Manthan*) and shared, pluralistic engagement (ancient port cities as hubs of diverse cultures) forms a meta-narrative that informs contemporary policy. This deep-seated Cultural Memory acts as the crucial interpretive lens, enabling the paper to trace direct continuities between ancient ideas of ethical conduct, non-hegemony, and cooperation, and the current policy emphasis on inclusivity, capacity building, and cultural diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific. By linking these civilisational foundations with contemporary maritime strategy, this theoretical approach fills a gap in geopolitical scholarship, demonstrating that India's strategic outlook is shaped by both immediate geopolitical imperatives and enduring, inherited worldviews.

Mechanisms of Civilisational Influence on Contemporary Maritime Policy
To avoid the risk of merely drawing retrospective parallels between ancient maritime ideas and India's Indo-Pacific strategy, it is necessary to identify the mechanisms through which civilisational memory actually enters modern foreign policy discourse. This influence occurs through three channels: discursive invocation by political leaders,

institutionalisation through cultural diplomacy, and normative embedding within official doctrines and bureaucratic frameworks.

Discursive Invocation in High-Level Policy Speeches

The most explicit transmission mechanism is the incorporation of ancient maritime imagery in speeches delivered by Indian political leaders, especially the Prime Minister. In his Shangri-La Dialogue Keynote (2018) [9], Narendra Modi grounds India's Indo-Pacific vision in a long civilisational engagement with the ocean. He notes that "oceans had an important place in Indian thinking since pre-Vedic times" and refers to the role of Varuṇa, the Vedas, the Indus Valley sealings, and the Purāṇic concept of India as the land surrounded by seas. He also describes Southeast Asia as connected to India in a "geographical and civilizational sense." These references are not interpretations added by scholars; they are primary textual evidence of policymakers framing India's maritime identity through civilisational vocabulary (MEA, 2018) [9]. Similarly, a Press Information Bureau note (2021) [12] explicitly states that India's SAGAR doctrine is rooted in "our civilizational ethos that sees the seas as an enabler of shared peace and prosperity." This direct attribution demonstrates that the Indian government itself links maritime policy to inherited worldviews rather than solely to geopolitical imperatives

Institutionalisation through Cultural-Maritime Diplomacy

Civilisational influence is further embedded through cultural diplomacy initiatives such as Project Mausam, launched by the Ministry of Culture and IGNCA. The official concept note situates the Indian Ocean as an "integrated maritime cultural landscape" shaped by monsoon-driven connectivity, long-distance trade, pilgrimage networks, and shared rituals. It states that identities across the oceanic world are "deeply interwoven with age-old ties" and seeks to revive these connections through research, exhibitions, and a transnational UNESCO heritage nomination (IGNCA, 2014). Project Mausam operationalises the civilisational idea central to your analysis of the Indian Ocean as a pluralistic, interconnected cultural zone. It institutionalises ancient maritime memory not as abstract nostalgia but as heritage diplomacy, complementing strategic initiatives like SAGAR. This reveals how civilisational narratives move from myth and text into state programmes, funding priorities, and diplomatic agendas.

Normative Embedding in Doctrinal and Bureaucratic Frameworks

A more subtle but powerful mechanism is the embedding of civilisationally inflected values into the language of official doctrines. The MEA Indo-Pacific Division Briefs (2020) define India's Indo-Pacific vision as "free, open, and inclusive," emphasising respect for sovereignty, cooperative solutions, and shared security principles resonant with samudra-dharma (ethical conduct at sea) and the cooperative metaphor of samudra-manthan (shared labour across rival groups). These principles are repeatedly invoked in speeches by the External Affairs Minister, Defence Minister, and within the newly created Indo-Pacific Division (MEA, 2020). Modi's 2015 Mauritius SAGAR speech similarly foregrounds "trust, transparency, respect for maritime rules, sensitivity to others' interests, and peaceful resolution of

issues" as the guiding ethos for Indian Ocean engagement values that directly mirror normative traditions found in ancient maritime practices and texts (MEA, 2015)

Over time, these norms become structural features of Indian diplomacy: embedded in policy templates, recurring in joint statements, and institutionalised through programmes like the Information Fusion Centre-IOR and maritime capacity-building partnerships.

Methodology

The study selected ancient Indian texts through **purposeful sampling**, focusing only on sources that contain explicit references to the sea, seafaring norms, port cultures, or oceanic metaphors. This ensured that the corpus directly reflected India's early maritime imagination, consistent with the methodological intent stated in the paper. Accordingly, selected texts included Rig Vedic hymns on Varuṇa's maritime order, Mahābhārata and Purāṇic episodes such as Samudra-Manthan, Sangam poems depicting maritime trade, and normative literature like the Arthashastra and Dharmashastras regulating shipping and commerce. These sources were chosen not for their antiquity alone but for their conceptual relevance to themes of cooperation, ethics, and pluralism at sea.

Interpretation followed a qualitative, hermeneutic approach, reading texts as repositories of civilisational memory rather than literal policy instructions. Each text was thematically coded for recurring maritime ideas such as collective labour, risk-sharing, ethical trade, and cosmopolitan port life. This interpretive lens aligns with the study's theoretical framework particularly Assmann's concept of cultural memory and Eisenstadt's civilisational analysis which treats myths and narratives as carriers of long-duration worldviews.

To link ancient ideas with contemporary policy, the study employed comparative-historical tracing, examining whether the themes identified in ancient sources resonate with modern maritime doctrines such as SAGAR (2015) and India's Indo-Pacific Vision (2018), as outlined in the existing methodology section. The analysis does not claim direct causation; rather, it identifies conceptual continuities that illustrate how inherited maritime worldviews inform India's present-day emphasis on inclusivity, shared security, and non-hegemonic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

Ancient Indian Maritime Civilisational Ideas

Ancient India developed a rich maritime imagination shaped by sustained trade, cultural encounters and long familiarity with the oceanic world. Across Vedic hymns, epic narratives, Sangam poetry and foreign travel accounts, the sea was understood not as a remote or threatening boundary but as a connective civilisational space. Three interrelated ideas *samudra-manthan*, *samudra-dharma* and oceanic pluralism capture key dimensions of this worldview and offer a framework for understanding the deeper historical roots of India's contemporary approach to the Indo-Pacific.

Samudra-Manthan as a Civilisational Metaphor

The *samudra-manthan* narrative, found in the *Vishnu Purana* (1.9.1-27), *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (8.5-12) and the *Mahābhārata* (Adi Parva, 18-19), is one of the most enduring maritime metaphors in the Indian civilisational imagination. In this episode, the churning of the ocean is not possible through the unilateral effort of any one group;

instead, the Devas and Asuras cosmic rivals with conflicting interests are compelled to cooperate. Both bind the serpent Vasuki as a rope around Mount Mandara, set as the pivot, and churn the primordial ocean to retrieve *amṛta* (nectar of immortality). The text explicitly notes that "though opposed, they laboured together for the common extraction" (Vishnu Purana 1.9.7), emphasising a logic of shared labour and mutual interdependence.

Critically, the ocean here becomes a negotiated arena, symbolising a political space where power is dispersed and no single actor can dominate without the participation of others. The metaphor illustrates several principles central to ancient Indian maritime thinking: the necessity of collaboration, the acceptance of rival interests, and the pursuit of common goods through collective effort. The emergence of both benefits (*amṛta*) and dangers (such as the lethal *hālāhala* poison) during the churning also highlights the dual nature of the ocean rich with opportunity yet fraught with risks requiring coordinated management. This duality mirrors maritime realities, where seas offer prosperity through trade and mobility but also demand joint responses to hazards, piracy and instability. Scholars like Romila Thapar (2002) [18] and A. K. Ramanujan (2004) [14] have interpreted the myth as a cosmic allegory of pluralism, noting that it resists binaries of good and evil and instead foregrounds interdependence. Such a worldview significantly shaped Indian engagement with maritime spaces. Historical patterns from multi-guild port governance in Muziris to cross-cultural trade practices visible in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* reflect a practical application of this cooperative ethos. Even ancient navigation manuals, such as fragments of *Yuktikalpataru*, emphasise cooperation between sailors of various regions in mapping monsoons and sea routes.

Thus, *samudra-manthan* functions not merely as myth but as a civilisational template for ocean governance, illustrating that order arises from balancing diverse actors rather than enforcing unilateral control. It symbolises a distinctly Indian conception of maritime stability founded on collaboration, negotiated authority and shared responsibility ideas that continue to resonate in India's contemporary approach to the Indo-Pacific.

Samudra-Dharma (Ethos of Shared Seas)

The concept of *samudra-dharma*, the ethical code governing conduct at sea, emerges from multiple strands of ancient Indian literature, revealing a sophisticated understanding of maritime order. In Vedic hymns, the ocean is not merely a physical expanse but a moral and regulated domain. The *Rig Veda* (RV 7.88.3) describes Varuṇa as the guardian of *ṛta*, cosmic order extending his authority over the "paths of the sea" (*samudrasya pathāṃ*). This association of the ocean with *ṛta* implies that maritime activity was conceived as requiring moral regulation, transparency and adherence to established norms. The *Dharmashāstras* codify these expectations more explicitly. *Manusmriti* 8.294 mandates that rulers ensure honest maritime commerce, protect travellers, and punish fraudulent practices "on land and water alike." *Yājñavalkya Smriti* 2.134 uses the term *samudra-vanija* (sea-traders), recognising maritime merchants as a distinct professional community entitled to state protection. These texts indicate an early articulation of what today might be termed maritime safety norms and consumer protections.

Kautilya's *Arthashastra* offers the most detailed administrative framework. Book 2, chapter 28 prescribes that the *Navadhyaksha* (Superintendent of Shipping) must regulate ports, maintain harbours, oversee the condition of vessels, fix freight rates, inspect cargo and ensure the welfare of sailors and passengers. The text even outlines penalties for overloading ships, improper anchoring and deceptive trade suggesting an advanced form of maritime law. Foreign merchants were to be treated with fairness to sustain long-distance trade, revealing a pragmatic ethic of reciprocity. Crucially, Kautilya recognises the sea as an inherently risky environment and instructs the state to assume responsibility for the safety of maritime actors. Historical practice supports these textual norms. Tamil Sangam works such as *Pattinappalai* and *Akananuru* describe bustling port cities like Kaveripattinam and Muchiri (Muziris), where port chiefs mediated disputes, guaranteed fair pricing and facilitated customs processes for foreign traders. Guilds (*śreṇi*) played a key role in maintaining ethical standards, ensuring reliability across trade networks stretching to Southeast Asia and the Mediterranean. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* testifies that Indian ports were known for predictable customs duties, safe anchorage and protection of foreign merchants, an affirmation of *samudra-dharma* in practice.

Together, these textual and historical strands demonstrate that ancient India viewed the ocean as a shared ethical space requiring rules rooted in justice, reciprocity and the protection of all who navigated it. Maritime stability was thus understood as a collective responsibility, a principle that continues to resonate in India's contemporary maritime diplomacy and Indo-Pacific engagements.

Oceanic Pluralism in Practice

The idea of the Indian Ocean as a plural, interconnected civilisational zone is firmly grounded in historical, archaeological and textual evidence. Far from being peripheral or isolated, ancient Indian ports functioned as vibrant cosmopolitan hubs where diverse cultures, religions, and commercial groups interacted regularly. This "oceanic pluralism" was not merely episodic contact but a sustained and institutionalised pattern of exchange that shaped the Indian subcontinent's maritime ethos.

One of the clearest examples comes from Muziris (modern-day Pattanam in Kerala), a port repeatedly mentioned in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* as a bustling entrepôt where Roman ships annually arrived with gold, wine and coral, and departed with pepper, pearls and fine textiles. Excavations by the Kerala Council for Historical Research and ASI have uncovered West Asian torpedo jars, Roman amphorae stamped with Mediterranean maker's marks, Yemeni ceramics, glass beads, and fragments of Italian fine ware material proof of a dense, multi-directional maritime network. The presence of a Roman gold coin hoard (Augustan-Tiberian period) further indicates organised state-backed trade. Similarly, Tamralipti, located in present-day West Bengal, served as a key embarkation point for Buddhist pilgrims and traders travelling to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Chinese travellers like Faxian (5th century CE) and Xuanzang (7th century CE) describe the port's multicultural landscape and its role in connecting the Bay of Bengal to wider Indian Ocean circuits. The discovery of Chinese celadon ware and Southeast Asian pottery at nearby sites reinforces these accounts. Sopara (Nalasopara,

Maharashtra), referenced in the *Mahabharata* and Buddhist texts, shows evidence of Indo-Arab and Indo-Roman connections, including punch-marked coins, stone anchors, and relics tied to monastic maritime patronage. Its trade links stretched to the Persian Gulf and East Africa, demonstrating the western coast's integration into Red Sea and Arabian Sea networks. Epigraphic data further confirms this maritime pluralism. Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions found at Berenike in Egypt attest to the presence of Tamil merchants abroad, while inscriptions at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka document South Indian guilds operating across the Palk Strait. These travelling guilds (*manigramam*, *ainurruvar*) maintained cross-regional professional codes, ensuring predictable commercial standards across vast maritime distances.

Together, these examples reveal that ancient Indian maritime centres were deeply embedded in a pluralistic Indian Ocean world characterised by mobility, cultural mixing and reciprocal exchange. This long history of cosmopolitan oceanic interaction informs the civilisational memory through which India continues to imagine the Indo-Pacific today as a shared space sustained not by domination but by interconnectedness and mutual engagement.

Contemporary Policy Reinterpretation

India's recent maritime policies are usually interpreted through strategic or geopolitical frameworks. However, many elements of these policies also resonate with older civilisational worldviews about the sea as a shared, cooperative and ethically ordered space. By reading modern initiatives through this lens, continuities emerge between ancient maritime ethos and India's contemporary approach to the Indo-Pacific.

SAGAR through Civilisational Continuity

The SAGAR doctrine "Security and Growth for All in the Region" reflects core principles visible in ancient maritime thought. Its emphasis on shared security, collaborative capacity building and inclusive development echoes the cooperative logic found in the *samudra-manthan* metaphor. Just as the myth portrays the ocean as a space where stability emerges through joint effort, SAGAR frames the Indian Ocean as a collective domain where all littoral states must participate to maintain order. Its non-hegemonic tone aligns with the ethical sensibility of *samudra-dharma*, which called for fair conduct, responsible stewardship and protection of maritime users. Thus, the doctrine can be read not only as a strategic initiative but also as a contemporary expression of an older civilisational understanding of the sea as a shared responsibility.

Neighbourhood First as Reinvocation of Oceanic Cultural Ties

The Neighbourhood First policy reinforces India's historical orientation toward its immediate littoral partners. Prior to modern borders, the Indian Ocean connected coastal societies in South Asia, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Southeast Asia and East Africa. Trade networks, religious journeys and cultural exchanges moved along these routes for centuries. By prioritising connectivity, maritime cooperation, people-to-people ties and regional stability, Neighbourhood First implicitly revisits this older oceanic sphere of cultural affinity. The policy's stress on trust-building, development partnerships and humanitarian support mirrors the ethos of openness and reciprocity that characterised ancient ports such as Muziris or Tamralipti. In this sense, Neighbourhood First can be seen as a political rearticulation of longstanding littoral interdependence.

India's Indo-Pacific Vision

India's Indo-Pacific vision centres on inclusivity, openness, non-hegemonic behaviour and respect for rules and order. These principles align closely with the dharmic conception of maritime conduct. The emphasis on a "free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific," articulated in India's diplomatic discourse, resonates with *samudra-dharma*, which viewed the ocean as a space governed by norms of fairness, transparency and mutual respect. Similarly, the stress on balancing interests without domination reflects the civilisational logic embedded in *samudra-manthan*, where competing actors cooperated to maintain equilibrium. India's preference for multilateralism, maritime capacity building and respect for sovereignty further mirrors the historical ethos of oceanic pluralism that shaped ancient littoral interactions. Thus, India's Indo-Pacific narrative can be interpreted as a modern iteration of a long-standing normative orientation toward the sea as a domain of shared order rather than unilateral power.

Synthesis: Where Civilisation Meets Policy

India's contemporary maritime posture reflects more than just strategic calculations. Beneath the surface of doctrine and diplomacy lie deeper civilisational strands that shape how India conceives the sea, littoral states and regional order. When ancient world-views are mapped onto modern initiatives, the continuity becomes clear through concrete programmes, deployments and cultural diplomacy. The SAGAR doctrine has been a clear example of this. It emphasises five pillars: safety of mainland/island territories, a safe-stable Indian Ocean Region (IOR), deeper economic-security cooperation, capacity building of maritime neighbours and international cooperation. This doctrine underpins multiple engagements: for instance, the IOR-wide deployment of the INS Sunayna under IOS SAGAR in May 2025 involved ten countries such as Comoros, Kenya, Madagascar, Maldives, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles, Sri Lanka and Tanzania to conduct joint exercises and EEZ patrols. India also invests in coastal radar networks and Information Fusion Centre-IOR (IFC-IOR) to enhance surveillance and cooperation. These engagements reflect a cooperative, inclusive mindset aligned with the ancient notion that seas cannot be dominated by one but must be managed collectively mirroring the *samudra-manthan* metaphor of shared churning and mutual effort.

Another dimension is India's non-coercive and developmental maritime conduct. Under SAGAR and its extension MAHASAGAR (Mutual & Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth across Regions, 2025) India emphasises capacity building of smaller littoral states, humanitarian assistance and search-and-rescue. For example, India's naval outreach to island states like Mauritius and Seychelles, and its logistical assistance during HADR (Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief) missions to Maldives and Sri Lanka, reflect a maritime ethic of duty rather than domination. Analysts note that India considers ports, trade routes, marine ecology and littoral economies as part of a shared maritime common. This orientation echoes the ancient *samudra-dharma* concept i.e., fair trade,

safeguarding travellers, shared responsibility in maritime domains.

The third area of linkage is cultural and civilisational diplomacy via the sea. India's Project Mausam (launched 2014 under the Ministry of Culture) seeks to revive the monsoon-driven, cross-littoral routes of the Indian Ocean world and link heritage sites across Africa, West Asia and Southeast Asia. A March 2025 Press Release noted that Project Mausam aims to prepare transnational nominations under UNESCO's tentative list to recognise maritime cultural landscapes. Meanwhile India's engagement with the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and ASEAN reflects emphasis not only on strategic connectivity but also on historical cultural linkages and plural littoral identities. This draws on the port heritage of places like Muziris and Tamralipti, where merchants, sailors, religions and crafts intersected. Thus, cultural diplomacy through maritime heritage revives the older notion of oceanic pluralism: the sea as a space of exchange and shared identity, not only competition.

Together, these linked strands show that India's Indo-Pacific maritime outlook is both strategic and civilisational. It is strategic in responding to geopolitics and power shifts. Yet it is civilisational in imagining the ocean as a shared moral space, in emphasising partnership and pluralism, and in employing cultural memory to shape regional order. India's policies illustrate that seas are not only theatres of power but also conduits of civilisation.

Conclusion

India's role in the Indo-Pacific cannot be understood through strategic considerations alone. This study shows that contemporary maritime policies seen in SAGAR, Neighbourhood First and India's Indo-Pacific vision draw on older civilisational ideas that viewed the ocean as a cooperative, ethical and interconnected space. India's emphasis on inclusive multilateralism, non-coercive security practices and cultural linkages reflects these deeper worldviews and reveals a continuity between ancient maritime ethos and modern statecraft. By integrating civilisational memory into the analysis, the paper challenges the dominant geopolitical reading of India's maritime behaviour and expands the scope of maritime IR. It demonstrates that inherited cultural understandings shape how India imagines regional order and engages with littoral partners.

Future research could compare India's approach with other civilisational states or examine additional historical sources such as coastal inscriptions and regional maritime traditions to further illuminate long-term patterns. These directions underscore the value of viewing the Indo-Pacific not only as a strategic theatre but as a historically layered civilisational space.

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