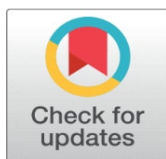


# SOME VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF SHIP BUILDING AND NAVIGATION IN ANCIENT INDIAN ART

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## ABSTRACT



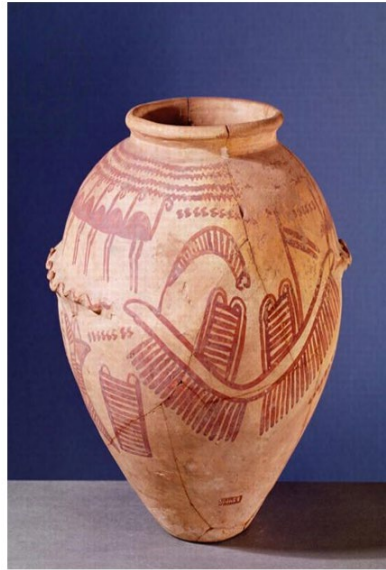
The maritime heritage of the Indian subcontinent is deeply rooted in its extensive river system and vast network of coastlines, which enabled communication, trade, and cultural interaction from ancient times [Ray \(2018\)](#), [Tripathi \(2011\)](#). Although historical texts and archaeological findings have traditionally been the main sources for understanding this seafaring past, visual depictions of vessels in early Indian art present a unique and often overlooked form of evidence. This study investigates these artistic representations across a wide timeframe—from the Indus Valley Civilization through to the early medieval era—using an interdisciplinary approach that integrates archaeology, art history, and cultural analysis.

By examining images found on terracotta items, seals, sculpted reliefs, and murals, the research considers how such depictions convey knowledge about shipbuilding, trade routes, symbolic systems, and societal customs linked to maritime activities [Ray \(2018\)](#), [Chakrabarti \(2001\)](#). These visual records are interpreted not simply as ornamental or storytelling devices, but as significant reflections of everyday life, spiritual beliefs, and economic conditions. Additionally, they reveal regional differences in vessel design, navigation methods, and the ways maritime imagery was incorporated into religious and artistic contexts [Deloche \(1994\)](#), [McGrail \(2001\)](#).

**Keywords:** Ship Figurines, Maritime Archaeology, Ancient India, Visual Representations, Terracotta Art, Cultural Symbolism, Trade Networks

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The extensive artistic heritage of India encompasses a wide range of themes. Art forms such as paintings, seals, terracotta, pottery, sculptures, panels, reliefs, and coins have portrayed various aspects of human life. The rich maritime historical tradition of ancient India experienced a significant resurgence in maritime activities [2 \(m.indianetzone.com- Indian Maritime History\)](http://m.indianetzone.com).



The Indian subcontinent's location, bordered by the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the Indian Ocean, has long supported a dynamic maritime culture. Major rivers like the Indus, Ganga, and Godavari contributed to internal communication networks, facilitating the exchange of goods, populations, and ideas [Chakrabarti \(2001\)](#). Evidence from archaeology, literature, and inscriptions consistently highlights the central role of seafaring in the development of ancient Indian society [Ray \(2018\)](#), [Tripathi \(2011\)](#).

Yet, despite the range of available sources, visual depictions of ships and boats remain a less-studied area. Such images appear across various art forms—terracotta artifacts, carved seals, stone carvings, and wall paintings. Unlike textual accounts, which frequently reflect elite perspectives, visual representations can provide more direct insight into practical maritime activities and technical expertise [McGrail \(2001\)](#), [Deloche \(1994\)](#). [Ray \(2018\)](#).

Trade is also the part of our cultural legacy. In ancient times, the joys and challenges of travel were influenced by geographical conditions. The portrayals of navigation across different artistic mediums highlight the importance of shipping and navigation since around 6000 years ago. The term navigation is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Nav.' Both literature and art indicate that India had established its own shipping practices in ancient times. ([hinduonline.co/shipbuilding](http://hinduonline.co/shipbuilding) and navigation)

Some sketchy evidence of boat sailing throughout the prehistoric and protohistoric eras was shown by Indian artists. The surface of the pots and the walls of the caverns served as canvases for the expression of the local culture. Both Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa were important economic hubs, and trade contributed to the civilization's cultural growth. ([www.thoughtdots.com](http://www.thoughtdots.com)) Indus Valley Civilisation: Trade & Culture The Sindhu civilization's seals show how shipbuilding and navigation were at their peak in India around 6000 B.C. The earliest documented tidal port in the world was constructed by the Harappans around 2400 B.C. The lengthy coast line offered all the facilities required for shipping. Perhaps the first example of marine engineering created by humans is the dock that was excavated from Lothal, which is located near the Gulf of Khambhat, is particularly significant due to the presence of a dockyard-like structure, reinforcing interpretations of maritime and riverine trade. The boat depictions from this period

suggest familiarity with both inland and coastal navigation. Although the figurines are schematic, their standardized forms indicate shared conventions and technical understanding Gujarat. The trade could not have been conducted without navigation skill. (India's\_Maritime\_Heritage-www.maritimetraining documents).



The witness of Indian maritime merchants is described by the employment of a magnetic compass. According to the detail investigation, the ship was constructed of wood. The masts indicate that they were used for seafaring. Graffiti and seals on potsherds from the Harappa site provide direct proof of the earliest sailing ships in Bronze Age art. Numerous excavations from the Harappan site demonstrate the use of enormous ocean-going ships and tiny, flat boats for cultural and communication purposes. ([www.maritimeheritageofindia.com](http://www.maritimeheritageofindia.com))

The Mohenjo-Daro three-sided moulded terracotta amulet features a flat-bottomed boat with a cabin in the middle. Large protrudes from the back of the boat, and two "disha kak" birds that face each other are seated on the deck. They helped the sailor locate the land. The other two side of the seal have symbols of Indus script and a figure of snout nosed 'Gharial' with fish in its mouth. Some terracotta toy boats are also found from the Harappa site. ([www.harappa.com](http://www.harappa.com))

"The representation of ships on seal indicates maritime activity and there are enough evidences to show that the people of Sindhu Valley civilization carried on trade not only with other parts of India but also with Sumer and the centers of culture in Western Asia, and with Egypt and Crete" (R.C. Majumdar 1952)



The Rigveda contains numerous mentions of ships used to navigate the Samudra. The Atharv Veda refers to well-constructed and spacious boats. The ancient text Yukti KalpTaru outlines the process of shipbuilding and provides comprehensive details about different types of ships. Marco Polo noted the comfort, convenience for passengers, and the decoration and embellishment of Indian vessels. Precious metals like gold, silver, and copper were commonly used for decorative purposes. ([hinduonline.co/shipbuilding](http://hinduonline.co/shipbuilding) and navigation)

The Mauryan, Chola, Satavahana, and Gupta dynasties made significant contributions to maritime endeavors. ([m.indianetzone.com](http://m.indianetzone.com)) The cultural exchanges between India and Southeast Asia were closely linked to maritime trade, craftsmanship, art, and literacy. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian\\_maritime\\_history](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_maritime_history))

The panel reliefs of Sanchi, Bharhut, and Amravati depict the presence of shipping in ancient India.

“There are passages in Indian works which prove the early existence of the Indian Ocean and the somewhat later occurrence of trading voyages undertaken by Hindu merchants to the shores of Persian Gulf and its rivers. No commerce can thrive unless fostered by national shipping” ([hinduonline.co/shipbuilding](http://hinduonline.co/shipbuilding) and navigation)

In Indian art not much representation of boats and ships are found after Indus civilization. The little evidences lost costal city Poompuhar (it is believed that this port city washed away from repeated flood and erosion) describes about the antique pottery and other remains of 450 B.C. E Cholas Dynasty. ([www.maritimeheritageofindia.com](http://www.maritimeheritageofindia.com))



After 11th century B.C. Bharhut, Sanchi and Amravati have some carved panels on maritime activities. In the panel of the Bharhut, three sailors are sailing the ship raked at both ends. The ship is of primitive style. Coconut fiber is used for sewing the timber together. A big fish (monster) is attacking and swallowing the travelers fallen into the sea. D. Barua suggested the scene as rescue of Vasu Gupta from the mouth of whale. [Chandra Moti. \(1997\)](#)



After the 2nd century B.C., carved panels depicting maritime activities can be found at Bharhut, Sanchi, and Amravati. In one of

panel at Sanchi The artists depicted a boat with a Shardul face and the tail of a fish turned upward. The cabin is centrally located, and a man is seen rowing the boat. The decorative elements indicate that it is a royal ship. [Chandra Moti. \(1997\)](#)

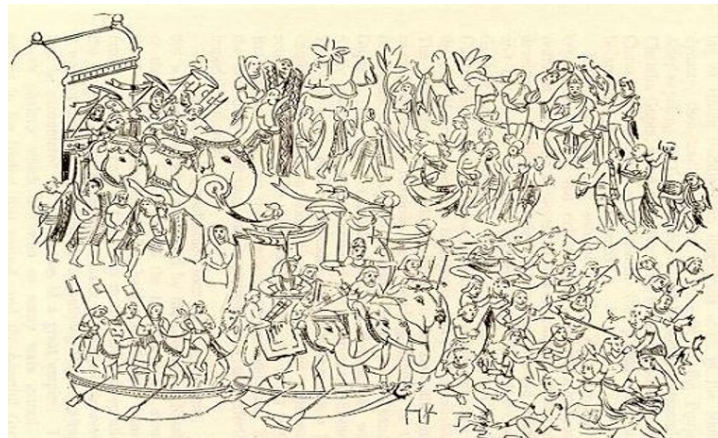


The panel of the pillar from Amravati also has the cabin or Mandap in the middle in which the sacred symbol of Lord Buddha is placed on Throne. The bottom of the ship is flat and the bow is squares. A Buddhist monk is seated nearby with folded hands. [Chandra Moti. \(1997\)](#)

In the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. A.D. maritime activities were also appeared on the coins of Andhra-Satvahan Period. King Gautamiputra Yajnasri satkarni issued the coins having ship motifs. The ships represent the contemporary characteristics of ship building. The deck of the ship is flat, flag and the two masts can be seen. Also, ore were used to steer the ship. (Tripathi Alok,2006)



Some masterpieces representations of Indian ships are painted in Ajanta caves. There are two large panels Purnavandan of cave 2<sup>nd</sup> and Sinhavalandan of cave 17<sup>th</sup>. In cave 2<sup>nd</sup> the boat has three masts and sail. The bow and stern of the ship are marked with the symbol of eye. In cave 17<sup>th</sup> the Vijay's voyage to Shri Lanka, the boats are represented in the shape of bowl with the three masts. The bow of the boat is in 'Makar' shape. (Tripathi Alok,2006)

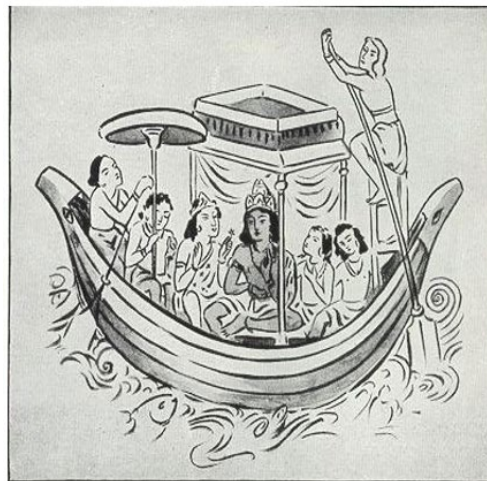


In cave 11nd the ship with three masts and four sail is depicted. On the stern the square frame is fluttering from an oblique. Twelve pots are kept in a shaded pavilion. The symbol of the eye on bow and the stern of the ship are visible. Fishes and Mermaids are swimming in the sea. (Tripathi Alok,2006)

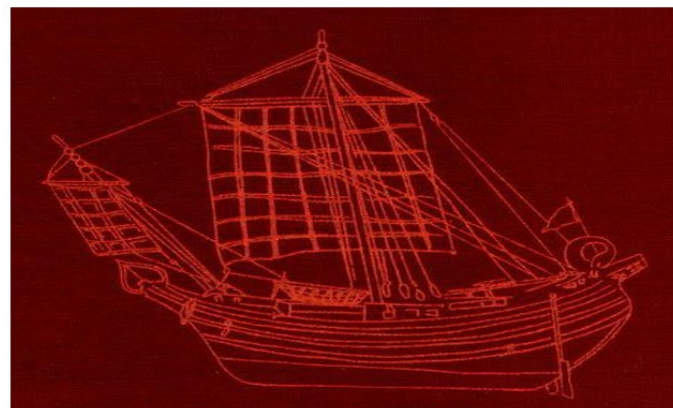


The third one seems as a pleasure boat. The shape of the boat looks like a basket, having the symbol of the eye on bow and stern. A curtained Mandap is located in the center. A royal man with his courtesans is seated; one of them is holding an "Chatra". The two boats men owe the boat from the both ends. Some fishes are shown around the boat. The painting seems to be of Gupta- Vakatak period of 4<sup>th</sup> -6<sup>th</sup> cent A.D. [Chandra Moti. \(1997\)](#)

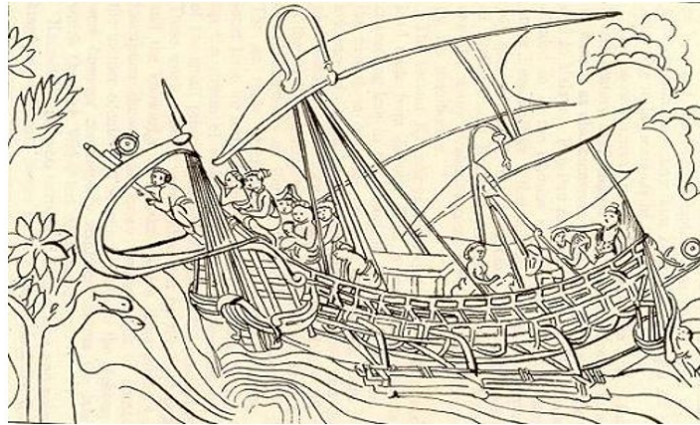
'Amva Vilas Bihara, a manuscript on 'Talpatra' (Palm) leaf of 5<sup>th</sup> cent B.C.E. depicts the traditional boat building technique of that time. [Chandra Moti. \(1997\)](#)



The evidence of ship and boat figurines becomes more regionally diverse. Terracotta boat models from sites such as Chandraketugarh (West Bengal), Ahichchhatra (Uttar Pradesh), and Amaravati (Andhra Pradesh) display increased complexity, including multiple passengers, oars, rudders, and sometimes sails.



These developments coincide with the expansion of long-distance trade networks, particularly Indo-Roman trade.



Archaeological finds of Roman coins, amphorae, and luxury goods at Indian ports strengthen the argument that these figurines reflected real maritime practices.

In riverine regions, especially the Ganga–Brahmaputra delta, boat figurines emphasize flat-bottomed designs suitable for shallow waters, highlighting regional adaptations. Such details provide indirect evidence of environmental knowledge and technological innovation.

The Chola dynasty (200-1279) reached the peaks in foreign trade and maritime activity. Their influences were extended overseas to China and South East Asia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian\\_maritime\\_history](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_maritime_history)

Indian marine engineering and shipbuilding were well established before the arrival of Europeans. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian\\_maritime\\_history](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_maritime_history)

“There was a mercantile colony of Indians in an island off the African coast in the first century A.D. The adventurous spirit of the Indians carried them even as far as the North Sea, while their caravans traveled from one end of Asia to the other” (R.C. 1952.)



The panel of sun temple Konark reveals the trade linkages with other part of the world. The panel depicts giraffe shows that animals were brought from Africa. [www.maritimeheritageofindia.com](http://www.maritimeheritageofindia.com)

Goods and ideas from India began to play major role in extending the influence and transmission of cultural heritage, religion, art & craft, social customs etc. Hindu and Buddhism travelled and established alongside maritime trade. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian\\_maritime\\_history](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_maritime_history)

“The studies of Ocean and sea basin are attracting increased interest at present. For some they offer novel perspectives of the economic, cultural and biological exchanges and networks that are vital for the understanding the modern world”. [Lamberent Visit et al. \(2006\)](#)

## 2. CULTURAL AND RITUAL SIGNIFICANCE

Beyond their artistic and archaeological value, ship and boat figurines carried deep cultural meanings. Water in Indian thought is associated with fertility, purification, transition, and cosmic order. Boats, as vehicles that traverse water, naturally acquired symbolic associations with transformation and protection.

Some figurines may have functioned as votive offerings, dedicated to deities or river spirits to ensure safe journeys or commercial success. Ethnographic parallels can be observed in contemporary practices such as offering miniature boats during river festivals or immersing symbolic vessels during ritual ceremonies.

Boats also appear in association with kingship and power. Control over waterways implied economic strength and political authority. Figurines and visual representations of ships may thus have reinforced royal ideology and the importance of trade networks.



## 3. CONCLUSION

The images of Ships and boats in ancient Indian art are essential for reconstructing historical seafaring practices shedding light on technological development, commercial systems, and symbolic interpretations [Tripathi \(2011\)](#), [Ray \(2003\)](#). This work highlights the importance of integrating visual materials with physical archaeological data in maritime studies. Future research could build on these findings through digital reconstructions and comparative studies across cultures.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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