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What is the Central govt and Navy's new project to reconstruct an ancient 'stitched ship'?

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Union MoS for Culture Meenakshi Lekhi during keel laying ceremony of a stitched ship reminiscent of vessels that sailed on India's ancient maritime trade routes, in Goa on Sept. 12, 2023. Member of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister Sanjeev Sanyal is also seen. (PTI Photo)

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In another move among the series of steps taken by the government "to reclaim India's long-lost heritage in different sectors", the Centre now plans to revive the ancient maritime heritage. The Ministry of Culture has recently joined hands with the Indian Navy and Goa-based Hodi Innovations to reconstruct an ancient stitched ship – reminiscent of the ships that sailed the oceans on India's ancient maritime trade routes as many as 2,000 years ago.

We look at the specific project, the voyage the stitched ship will undertake and the bigger objective behind the move.

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The Project

The project entails collaboration across several ministries and departments. **While the Indian Navy is overseeing the ship's design and construction and would also be sailing the ship along ancient maritime trade routes, the Ministry of Culture has fully funded the project. The ministries of Shipping and External Affairs will be supporting the project in its execution stage. The project was approved by the National Implementation Committee, chaired by Home Minister Amit Shah, in December 2022.**

The stitching work will be undertaken by a team of traditional shipwrights led by Babu Sankaran, considered an expert in the stitched ship technique.

As per officials, **this age-old technique involves shaping the wooden planks using the traditional steaming method to conform to the shape of the hull. Each plank will then be stitched to another using cords/ ropes, sealed with a combination of coconut fibre, resin, and fish oil – akin to the ancient Indian shipbuilding practice. The project is set to cost Rs 9 crore and is expected to take around 22 months to complete.**

Officials say Sankaran has been roped in for the project since he is considered as a master craftsman who has recently built ships using the stitching technique in the Gulf countries. The most famous of them is the Jewel of Muscat, built for Oman, which sailed from Oman to Singapore.

The Voyage

Once the ship is ready, the voyage with a seam of 13 Indian Navy crew from Odisha's Cuttack will be sent to Bali in Indonesia, in November 2025, to coincide with Kartik Purnima, on the full moon night of the Kartik month as per Hindu calendar. Officials say that the voyage will be a part of the initiative to revive and honour India's old maritime trade routes.

This also fits in with the larger decolonisation project undertaken, in the run-up to 2047, when independent India turns 100. Officials say the ancient stitching technique almost became extinct after the Britishers came to India, where the wooden planks were nailed to support the recoil of canons.

The earliest known example of a sewn boat is the 40+ metres long funerary boat in Egypt; dating back to 2,500 BC. Later finds in other parts of the world include some

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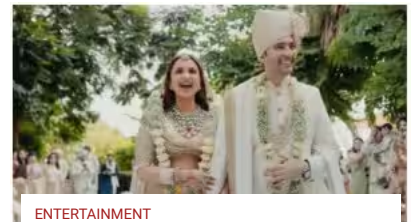


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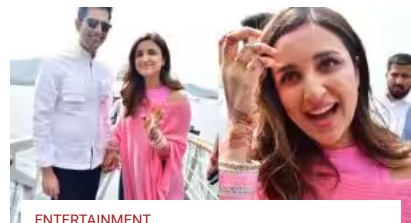
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early Greek ships. In Finland, Russia, Karelia and Estonia, small sewn boats have been constructed more recently, until the 1920s.



The reconstructed "solar barque" or vessels of Khufu, Egypt, c. 2500 BC. (Via Wikimedia Commons)

Sewn boat construction techniques were used in many parts of the world prior to the development of metal fasteners, and continued to be used for small boats to reduce construction costs where metal fasteners were too expensive.

Earlier this week, the keel laying ceremony of the ship was held in Goa. Presently, the ship's design is in progress, which will be followed by extensive model testing. After the completion of model testing, the actual construction of the ship would commence. The navigation techniques used for the voyage will also be in consonance with old times, also aiming to show the sophistication India had achieved in this field at the time.

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Project Mausam

Officials say this initiative is in synergy with the Ministry of Culture's Project Mausam, which aims to reconnect and re-establish communications between countries of the Indian Ocean world, to create an understanding of cultural values and concerns. In fact, initiated by India Project Mausam aims to rebuild maritime cultural connections with the 39 countries bordering the Indian Ocean.

As per experts in the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), naval trade on the Indian Ocean dates back to the 3rd century BC, when residents of the Indus Valley opened maritime trading with Mesopotamia, Egypt, East Africa, and the Roman Empire. Through these maritime trade networks, many goods were exchanged, including medicine, aromatics, spices, wood, grain, gems, textiles, metal and stones. The trade, in turn, facilitated the exchange of religions, cultures and technologies, contributing to the expansion of Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism, they say.

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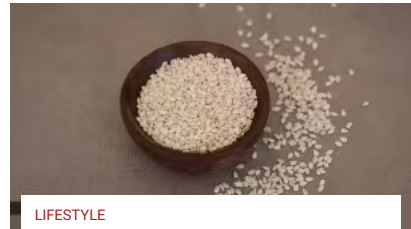
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Project Mausam is said to be India's answer to the Maritime Silk Road of China, and India plans to move for UNESCO to award transnational heritage status to Project Mausam, which was launched by India at the 38th World Heritage Session at Doha in June 2014. Several countries including the UAE, Qatar, Iran, Myanmar, and Vietnam have expressed great interest in this multifaceted cultural project.

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