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**Chief Editor's Voice****MARITIME SECTOR. SCRIPTING A NEW HISTORY**

India with its coastline that runs into 7515 kilometer spreading across nine coastal states and 1382 islands and with 12 major ports and about 200 non major ports, the nation will script a transformative journey in the maritime sector. The Union Government itself had stated that it is steadfast to make India's ports break into the top 25 ports of the world. The roadmap for a maritime ecosystem has been laid out in the document like "Maritime India Vision 2030" and "Maritime Amritkaal Vision 2047".

Kerala coastline being very close to international sea routes has a very important role to play in Indian maritime trade and industry. The upcoming Vizhinjam International seaport has the potential to showcase its strategic and operational uniqueness and can attract ultra large vessels with its deep draft of 20 m depth. The history has it that even during the Chola, Chera period an ancient port was operational at Vizhinjam to carryout maritime trade from the Red Sea and beyond Far East Asia.

Being India's first Mega Deep Water Container Transshipment Port, when completed, Vizhinjam Seaport will revolutionize India's maritime trade. The specificities of Vizhinjam will propel the nation towards this goal without much delay. It is the only transshipment hub in the Indian sub continent which is strategically located closer to the East, West and Gulf Route. The advantage of this

specificity of Vizhijam caters to liners preference of minimum deviation from their courses when selecting transshipment port. Vizhinjam is a promising location given the position at 6-10 nautical miles deviation (0.2 - 1 hour) from the Suez Route.

Another specificity is that Vizhinjam has a deep draft of 20 m depth. Most mainliners prefer calling at ports with at least 18 m draft. Nearly 75% of India's transshipment cargo is currently handled at foreign ports like Colombo, Singapore, Port Kelang and others. Once the Vizhinjam port becomes fully operational a robust maritime ecosystem will become a reality and will be a game changer in India's maritime trade.

India is ranked third in the world for its maritime strength and its maritime industry is crucial for the country's trade. Almost all goods traded by volume (95%) and significant portion by value (70%) are transported by sea. This includes things like oil, building materials and various dry bulk items such as grains, fertilizers, seeds coal and minerals. The existing number of ports, although substantial, prove inadequate as India experiences substantial cargo traffic. In the fiscal year 2023-24 major ports witnessed an increase in cargo traffic handling by millions of tonnes compared to previous years. In order to meet the growing demands we not only require the expansion of port infrastructure, but also reducing the turnaround time.

There is pressure from the industry to enhance the production of vessels, tankers and containers for global trade shipping. Presently more than half (54%) of all cargo activity in the country is managed by 12 main ports. As we heavily depend on these few ports, it is crucial for the government to help private ports and invest more in improving the existing ports. The escalating trends in e-commerce and global trade underline the pressing need for additional port infrastructure to seamlessly cater to the increasing demands of cargo traffic.

India must boost the production of vessels, containers and tankers to reduce turnaround time and improve operational efficiency. Government support for private production of vessels is crucial to strengthen the Make in India project, reducing the reliance on sourcing units from countries like China. This move will not only benefit shipment owners and businesses but also positively impact global trade dynamics. Green shipping is crucial for the environment and, especially with the ongoing rise in fuel prices, our target of achieving Net Zero, adding pressure on shipping owners managing ports and ships. To address this, India needs to support shipment companies in transitioning to renewable energy resources.

Even before its official commissioning, Vizhinjam International Seaport has made a historic mark by welcoming the largest container ship ever to berth at an Indian port. The MSC Kayley, a massive vessel sailing under the Liberian flag berthed at the Vizhinjam recently making a significant achievement for the seaports deep water capabilities. Another Mediterranean shipping company Claude Giradet is expected to dock at the port soon.

The MSC Kayley has a draught of 16.5 meters, which is one of the deepest ever recorded for a ship docking at an Indian port. This monumental event is seen as a critical test of Vizhinjam's natural depth advantage, which boasts a channel depth of up to 20 meters in certain areas without the need for extensive dredging. The draught of 16.5 meters reached by MSC Kayley is the second highest draught for any vessel docking at an Indian port. The first was at Mudra port in Guajrat with a draught of 17 meters.

The port's deep draft and proximity to major international shipping routes make it an attractive destination route for Ultra Large Container Vessels (ULCVs). These huge ships can carry over 20000 TEUs (Twenty-foot Equivalent Units) are increasingly being used by global shipping lines to reduce costs, environmental impact and improve efficiency. These vessels can carry over 240000 tonnes of cargo in up to 25 layers making them far more efficient than traditional container ships.

Vizhinjam is opening up a new vista of opportunities in global marine trade. Through scripting a new odyssey in maritime trade it can strengthen the supply chain management integrating resource management, production distribution, logistics and marketing. With the introduction of e-commerce and artificial Intelligence informatics the job opportunities in this sector has multiplied in manifolds. A lot of India's trade happens through hubs overseas which typically used the ports like Colombo, Dubai and Singapore. Now Vizhinjam with its most modern facilities is a new hope for future maritime trade from India.