

A Global Maritime Hub in the making

India wants to be one of the top five shipbuilding countries in the world : Sarbananda Sonowal:

New Delhi: *By 2047, India wants to use ships built domestically and flying the Indian flag for all of its export-import trade.*

Mr.Sarbananda Sonowal, the union minister for ports, shipping, and waterways, asserted this while speaking at a press conference on the sidelines of third edition of Sagarmanthan 2026.

'Blue Geographies, New Aspirations: Trade, Technology, and Trust at Sea' is the theme of the three-day event that brought over 1,200 speakers, delegates, and participants from nearly 75 countries to Delhi. It will conclude on October 9.

"India won't need charter ships by 2047. Our fleet will be our own. It will be raised to the point where we can manage 95% of our EXIM cargo on our own", Sonowal adding, "So that's how India wants to strengthen its maritime power."

The long-term goal is to develop enough domestic capacity to meet the nation's shipping needs and lessen reliance on foreign-flagged vessels, he continued, pointing out that India wants to become self-reliant in shipbuilding. India is targeting a port cargo-handling capacity of 10,000 million tonnes by 2047, a substantial expansion from current levels, as it seeks to position itself as a global maritime hub.

In this sense, the government was creating an environment that would allow Indian shipyards to compete for orders from abroad. For example, Norway, the US, and Germany have placed shipbuilding orders with Cochin Shipyard, he said.

According to Sonowal, India aspires to rank among the top five shipbuilding countries in the world.

On the second day of the event, which also featured plenaries on securing global trade chokepoints, the Global South at the maritime table, AI in maritime, green ports, equity in ocean futures, BRICS+ connectivity, and green shipbuilding, Sonowal declared, "India is ready to work with the world for safer seas, greener shipping and shared prosperity."

Propelling Maritime Excellence

In order to develop the skilled labour force needed to support the sector, the government is building more infrastructure for shipbuilding and repair as well as bolstering maritime education and training.

The median turnaround time for container vessels has decreased from 35 to 23 hours over the past 12 years, while port capacity has increased from 1,561 to 2,817 MTPA, cargo handled from 1,052 to 1,668 million tons, and inland waterways cargo from 29 to 218 million tons.

Skilling for Sagarmanthan

In just twelve years, the number of Indian seafarers has increased from 1.27 lakh to 3.23 lakh, moving India from fifth place in 2015 to the second-largest supplier of seafarers in the world, accounting for over 12% of the world's workforce.

Thanks to the Sagar Mein Samman initiative, the number of active women seafarers increased from 1,599 in 2021 to 7,033 in 2025.

"India's maritime future will be written by the youth," stated Sonowal. Shipyard-ITI partnerships now offer 150 hours of on-the-job training, and a structured six-month onboard program for GP Rating and Maritime Catering trainees bridges pre-sea training and life at sea. Today, more women than ever are choosing careers at sea, and our seafarers are respected and trusted on every ocean.

Global Coalition-Future Forward

India is also working with numerous nations worldwide to develop a strong maritime infrastructure.

Sonowal led the discussions on maritime relations between India and representatives from Belgium, Saudi Arabia, and Bhutan.

Port investments, green shipping, upskilling, inland waterways, cargo handling, shipbuilding collaboration, and creating robust supply chains were all topics of discussion.

The topic of discussion with representatives of the Saudi Ports Authority (Mawani) included potential investments in India's Maritime Development Fund (MDF), shipbuilding, seafarer training, and the development of robust supply chains, in addition to Riyadh's potential involvement in India's future major port projects, such as Vadhvan and Galathea Bay.

A major component of the MoPSW's flagship ₹69,725 crore maritime support package starting in September is the MDF.

Green Shipping Corridor

A green shipping corridor connecting Indian ports with the Port of Antwerp-Bruges was the main topic of discussion with Annick De Ridder, a Belgian lawmaker in the Flemish Parliament who oversees ports and mobility among other portfolios.

Only a few months have passed since the PoAB and the V.O. Chidamabaranar Port, one of the nation's three designated Green Hydrogen hubs, signed an agreement in July to investigate collaboration in capacity building, green port initiatives, and digital transformation for port operations.

Inland Waterways

Sonowal stated that Bhutan is interested in transporting its export goods via India's river ports and inland waterways. In order to give its landlocked neighbors access to maritime trade routes, India is building a network of river ports and inland waterway infrastructure.

Lastly, Sonowal talked about both present and future partnerships with Lyonpo Chandra Bahadur Gurung, Bhutan's minister of infrastructure and transportation.

The two ministers discussed Bhutan's "gateway to global trade" as the Brahmaputra River (National Waterway-2) and the Jogighopa terminal, but they also considered potential maritime opportunities on the Manas and Sankosh rivers.

On the fringes of the event, Union Minister of State (MoS), MoPSW, Shantanu Thakur, also discussed port collaborations, green shipping, seafarer training programs, and other topics with representatives from Greece, Lithuania, Mozambique, and Myanmar.

Seafarers' Plight

Sonowal revealed the extent of the human cost of the ongoing maritime security crisis surrounding the Strait of Hormuz, pointing that attacks and incidents involving commercial vessels have resulted in the deaths of eleven Indian seafarers thus far.

According to Sonowal, there have been 74 incidents involving foreign-flagged ships carrying Indian seafarers that are headed for India, compared to four incidents involving Indian-flagged ships.

According to him, the government has evacuated over 4,000 Indian seafarers from the impacted area. It is also maintaining vessel-level monitoring and staying in contact with seafarers and their families through its maritime security and coordination mechanisms. In the past, the government claimed to be tracking Indian sailors regardless of the flag of their ship.

Given the high number of Indian seafarers working on foreign-flagged ships, Sonowal's most recent statistics show that the security issue goes far beyond Indian-flagged ships. With the second-largest maritime workforce in the world, India's maritime policy places a high priority on the safety of its seafarers.
