

Report on Maritime Knowledge Lecture Series

Enabling Ship Leasing and Chartering



CMEC
Centre for Maritime Economy
and Connectivity
समुद्री अर्थव्यवस्था व संयोजन केंद्र



RIS
Research and Information System
for Developing Countries
विकासशील देशों की अनुसंधान एवं सूचना प्रणाली



आरआईएस – आईएचसी विमर्श

विषय

मैरीटाइम इंडिया: शिप लीजिंग और चार्टरिंग को सक्षम बनाना

वक्ता: श्री दीपक कुमार शर्मा
सह-संस्थापक और प्रबंध निदेशक, बेनब्रिज नेविगेशन

अध्यक्ष: श्री अमित ओझा
निदेशक, एस्ट्रामार शिपिंग एंड ट्रेडिंग सर्विसेज, भारत

शाम 7:00 बजे, सोमवार 19 जनवरी, 2026
गुलमोहर हॉल, भारत पर्यावास केन्द्र, नई दिल्ली

RIS - IHC talk on

Maritime India: Enabling Ship Leasing and Chartering

Speaker: Mr Deepak Kumar Sharma
Co-founder and Managing Director, BainBridge Navigation

Chair: Mr Amit Oza
Director, Astramar Shipping & Trading Services, India

7:00 pm, Monday 19 January, 2026
Gulmohar Hall, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi

- Chair** – Mr. Amit Oza, Director at Astramar Shipping and Trading Services
- Speaker** – Mr. Deepak Kumar Sharma, Co-founder and Managing Director of Bainbridge Navigation
- Moderator** – Dr. Shishir Shrotriya, Coordinator, Centre for Maritime Economy & Connectivity (CMEC)

The Maritime Knowledge Lecture Series session on “*Maritime India – Enabling Ship Leasing and Chartering*” convened policymakers, industry practitioners, economists, academics and young researchers at a critical juncture in India’s maritime reform trajectory. Organised under the aegis of the Centre for Maritime Economy and Connectivity (CMEC) at the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) and hosted at the India Habitat Centre, the lecture formed part of a sustained capacity-building effort aligned with the Maritime India Vision 2030 and the Maritime Amrit Kaal Vision 2047. As the thirteenth lecture in the series and coinciding with the foundation day of CMEC, the session underscored the growing recognition that commercial shipping, leasing and chartering are not peripheral activities but central to India’s maritime sovereignty, foreign exchange management and long-term economic resilience.

The introductory remarks by Dr. Shishir Shrotriya (CMEC) set the context by highlighting a structural paradox in India's maritime sector. Despite handling over 95 per cent of its external trade by volume through sea routes, India's share in global ship ownership, chartering and leasing has historically remained marginal. This imbalance has resulted in substantial freight outflows and strategic dependence on foreign-flag vessels and overseas leasing hubs. Recent legislative developments, particularly the enactment of the updated Merchant Shipping Act, 2025 and the formal recognition of bareboat charter-cum-demise arrangements, were presented as a watershed moment that could correct this imbalance by enabling domestic tonnage expansion, ship finance and operational autonomy.



The lead speaker, Mr. Deepak Kumar Sharma approached the subject from a practitioner's perspective, addressing ship leasing and chartering within the broader commercial architecture of the maritime supply chain. Emphasising that vessels, whether built or acquired, must ultimately generate sustainable revenue, he argued that ship operating and chartering represent the commercial intelligence layer of shipping. Drawing on Bainbridge's **Asset-light operating model**, he explained how operators act as intermediaries between asset-focused shipowners and cargo-focused charterers, managing risk across vessels, cargoes, fuel and financial derivatives.

This evolution, he noted, reflects a global shift in which ship ownership has increasingly become an asset-play business, attracting hedge funds, banks and institutional investors, while operational risk and market exposure are managed by specialised operators.

The lecture highlighted that ship operating is fundamentally a skill-intensive and scale-dependent business. Operators must navigate extreme market volatility, bid competitively for both cargoes and vessels and still retain margins through superior market intelligence and risk management. Global diversification across regions such as the Pacific, Middle East and Atlantic, combined with bunker procurement strategies and the use of freight forward agreements, was presented as essential to hedging cyclical risks.

These capabilities, Mr. Deepak Kumar Sharma argued, are largely absent within India's domestic ecosystem, forcing Indian operators to base decision-making and trading activities offshore. Thus, there is an immediate need to build these capacities.

A central theme of the discussion was the economic value proposition of onshoring ship leasing and chartering. The retention of freight earnings within India was identified as a critical macroeconomic benefit. Large volumes of coal, iron ore, crude oil and other bulk commodities generate significant freight payments that currently accrue to foreign operators and financiers. Locating commercial control in India, denominating transactions in domestic currency where feasible and aligning Indian flag tonnage with Indian trade flows could meaningfully reduce foreign exchange leakage. Beyond foreign exchange savings, the localisation of decision-making was shown to have strong multiplier effects by catalysing ancillary sectors such as ship finance, bunker trading, derivatives markets, maritime law, insurance and arbitration.

The lecture also linked chartering capabilities to India's expanding role as a global trader rather than merely a destination or origin market. As Indian firms increasingly engage in third-party and cross-trade transactions, freight rates often determine deal viability. The absence of domestic chartering expertise and commercial control constrains India's ability to optimise trade margins and exercise influence over supply chains. In this context, ship operating was framed not only as a business activity but as a strategic enabler of trade competitiveness.

However, the speakers were candid in outlining the challenges inhibiting this transition. Persistent counterparty defaults, heightened geopolitical risks, volatile freight markets, shifting trade routes and an oversupplied global fleet were identified as structural pressures. More fundamentally, India's tax and regulatory frameworks were described as misaligned with the realities of international shipping, making it difficult for India-based entities to compete for non-Indian cargoes. The absence of a mature maritime ecosystem encompassing banking, derivatives exchanges, insurance underwriting and specialised legal services has forced operators to rely on overseas jurisdictions governed by English or Singapore law. This ecosystem can also be enabled at International Financial Services Centres IFSC, GIFT city, very effectively.

These issues were further contextualized by the Chair, Mr. Amit Oza, who traced the historical evolution of India's shipping ecosystem. He linked the offshore migration of chartering and trading activities to earlier foreign exchange controls under FERA, the gradual liberalisation under the

FEMA and the unintended consequence of Indian capital and talent establishing global hubs abroad. While these reforms enabled Indian firms to succeed internationally, they also hollowed out domestic commercial shipping capabilities.

The discussion positioned the emergence of the International Financial Services Centre at GIFT City as a structural response to this legacy. By creating a FEMA-neutral zone regulated by the International Financial Services Centres Authority, India has sought to replicate global best practices in ship leasing, finance and trading while retaining Indian ownership and employment. The activation of ship leasing within this framework and the rapid registration of multiple operators were presented as early indicators of ecosystem formation, analogous to the development trajectories of Singapore and Dubai.

Strategically, chartering was framed as essential for macroeconomic management and trade resilience. The experience of blank sailings during the pandemic was cited as evidence that without domestic chartering expertise, even large economies can be exposed to external shocks. Control over chartering also enables participation in third-party trades, particularly for energy commodities, where India possesses strong upstream relationships but limited intermediary capabilities.

The session concluded on a cautiously optimistic note, emphasising that regulatory reform, ecosystem building and human capital development must progress in parallel. **Aligning tax and legal frameworks with global standards, fostering both asset-heavy ship ownership and asset-light operating models and investing in structured training were identified as immediate priorities.** The overarching recommendation was that enabling ship leasing and chartering is not merely about replicating foreign models but about embedding commercial maritime capabilities within India's economic architecture.

Achieving the ambitions of Maritime Amrit Kaal Vision 2047 will require India not only to move cargo but to control the commercial logic that governs how that cargo moves, ensuring that value, skills and strategic leverage are retained within the country.