

Draft Speech for Seafarers Recruitment and Welfare

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great privilege to address this gathering today on a subject that truly defines the strength and spirit of our maritime community – the welfare of our seafarers.

Seafarers are the true ambassadors of India across the world's oceans. They are the invisible workforce who ensure that global trade flows seamlessly, even in the most difficult and unpredictable circumstances. The pandemic years reminded us how vital, and yet how vulnerable, our seafarers can be. Their welfare is not just a social responsibility – it is a strategic priority for the nation.

India's Aspiration under Maritime India Vision

At present, Indian seafarers account for about 12% of the global supply of maritime manpower. Under the Maritime India Vision (MIV) 2030, our goal is to enhance this share to 20% by the end of this decade. This is an ambitious leap, but a very achievable one – provided that our systems for recruitment, placement, training, and welfare work smoothly, transparently, and ethically.

For this to happen, we must ensure that every young aspirant who dreams of a maritime career feels safe, supported, and assured of fair opportunities.

Role of the Crew Branch – Lifecycle of Seafarers

The Crew Branch of the Directorate General of Shipping is at the heart of this mission. It regulates the entire lifecycle of a seafarer – from recruitment, placement onboard, and eventually the resolution of service-related grievances.

Challenges in Recruitment and Placement (RPSL)

Despite progress, we continue to face persistent and serious challenges in the RPSL space. Issues in the eMigrate system – including incorrect Form-1 entries, misuse of Application Reference numbers, and manipulation under the non-seafarers' category – point to persistent process vulnerabilities. We also encounter frequent cases of fraud and misrepresentation: forged insurance certificates, doctored contracts, tampered air tickets, falsified company letterheads, and misleading Form-1 submissions that end up placing seafarers on vessels different from those recorded in the system. Another pressing concern is the unchecked involvement of touts and intermediaries. Many seafarers are charged anywhere between ₹15,000 and ₹25,000 simply for a Form-1 entry, even when no formal linkage exists between the RPSL agency and the shipowner.

Further challenges include sign-on numbers exceeding vessel capacity, which compromises both compliance and safety, and irregularities during annual and renewal audits, where delays or open-ended observations hamper regulatory credibility. Seafarers also continue to raise serious grievances – unpaid wages, incorrect vessel assignments, lack of timely redressal, and even abandonment cases. Families of seafarers who face abandonment or fatalities often wait years for settlement and compensation. Moreover, there is a notable lack of structured pre-departure orientation; many seafarers leave for airports or ports without being adequately briefed on their rights, responsibilities, and the risks of fraudulent practices. Added to this are highly sensitive cases of asylum misuse, where the seafarer recruitment channel has been exploited by individuals seeking illegal entry into foreign countries. Such incidents tarnish India's international image. We have also encountered reports of criminal activities at sea, from crew members being implicated in the sale of fuel or restricted goods to instances leading to foreign detentions. Lastly, the absence of a codified Seafarers' Rights Charter and Code of Conduct—publicly accessible on the DGS platform—remains a critical gap that affects trust and transparency.

Strategic Insights & Roadmap Forward

First, we are strengthening the digital integrity of recruitment through closer integration of the eMigrate system, direct linkage of Form-1 entries with shipowners, and traceable validation procedures. Second, we are adopting a zero-tolerance approach to fraud, with penalties, suspension of privileges, and blacklisting of agencies involved in malpractice. A strong precedent was set on 10 May 2025, when the Crew Branch blocked online privileges of 97 RPSL agencies that were found guilty of fraudulent practices, over-recruitment, and abandonment cases. These sanctions prevented new sign-ons but allowed safe sign-offs while investigations and show-cause notices proceeded. Third, to protect seafarers from exploitation, transparent regulation of service charges is being enforced, ensuring seafarers know what costs are legitimate and what are not.

We are also investing in discipline for audits, with digital dashboards to track compliance and enforce strict closure of audit observations. From a welfare perspective, we are advancing reforms in pre-departure briefings, structured grievance redressal, and time-bound mechanisms for handling abandonment and death cases. International alignment remains crucial; DGS is ensuring that Indian practices fully meet international obligations under ILO and MLC conventions, thereby strengthening India's reputation as a responsible manpower source. Finally, we are in the process of developing a Seafarers' Rights Charter and a Code of

Conduct, which will be published on the DG Shipping website, ensuring transparency both for seafarers and the industry.

Closing

Colleagues, Every young seafarer who entrusts their future to the Indian maritime system must feel secure, valued, and proud of their decision.

The path ahead will demand vigilance, transparency, and above all, collaboration between regulators, RPSL agencies, shipowners, and seafarers themselves.

Let us recommit ourselves today:

- To protect our seafarers from exploitation.
- To strengthen recruitment and placement integrity.
- To make India a global benchmark for ethical maritime manpower supply.

Together, we will not only achieve the targets of Maritime India Vision — but also create a safer, fairer, and stronger future for every Indian seafarer.

Thank you. Jai Hind.