

Address by Shri Sushil Khopde, IPS Additional Director General of Shipping

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a privilege to address this gathering at the Symposium on Seafarer's Recruitment and Welfare today on a subject that lies at the very foundation of India's maritime strength – the integrity of seafarer recruitment agencies, placement, and welfare of Seafarers.

Indian seafarers are the true ambassadors of our nation across global waters. They remain an indispensable workforce sustaining international trade, often under demanding and high-risk conditions. Recent years have reinforced not only their critical importance but also the vulnerabilities they face, particularly during recruitment and placement. Ensuring their welfare is not merely a social obligation; it is a strategic national priority.

India's Maritime Aspirations

India currently contributes approximately 12% of the global maritime workforce. Under the Maritime India Vision 2030, we have set a clear objective to enhance this share to 20% by the end of the decade. Achieving this target depends squarely on the credibility, transparency, and ethical functioning of our recruitment and placement ecosystem.

For every young aspirant entering the maritime profession, the system must provide assurance – that recruitment is free, lawful, and secure; that contracts are genuine; and that institutional safeguards will protect their rights.

Role of the Crew Branch and RPSL Framework

The Crew Branch of the Directorate General of Shipping plays a central role in regulating the entire lifecycle of a seafarer – from recruitment and placement to grievance redressal. Within this framework, **RPSL companies are entrusted with a position of responsibility that directly impacts livelihoods, national reputation, and international compliance.**

However, we must acknowledge that challenges persist in the RPSL ecosystem. Documentation gaps, misuse of digital systems, forged contracts, misleading submissions, and the involvement of unlicensed intermediaries continue to pose risks in RPSL space. These practices not only cause financial and emotional distress to seafarers, as well as RPSL Agencies but also expose India to serious reputational and regulatory scrutiny.

Fraud Risks in Recruitment and Placement

The Directorate General of Shipping has observed a steady rise in fraud cases affecting Indian seafarers, particularly in recruitment and placement. These frauds manifest through fake job offers, illegal charging of placement fees, forged employment contracts, fake CDC endorsements, and illegal deployment on vessels. Increasingly, such frauds are executed through social media platforms and online communications, where agents often disappear after collecting money.

It must be clearly reiterated that recruitment through unregistered or unlicensed agents is illegal. **As per Rule 5 (1, i) of the Recruitment and Placement of Seafarers Rules, 2016, no RPSL-licensed company is permitted to charge any recruitment or placement fee from seafarers under any circumstances.**

Preventive and Digital Safeguards

To prevent fraud at the outset, DG Shipping has strengthened regulatory and digital controls. Instant online verification of RPSL companies is available on the DG Shipping website, enabling seafarers and their families to confirm whether a company is valid, invalid, or temporarily blocked before engagement. This transparency is a critical safeguard and **must be actively promoted by all stakeholders including RPSL agencies** present here.

Every seafarer has clearly defined rights – including the right to free recruitment, engagement only through DG Shipping-approved RPSL companies, and a valid employment contract specifying wages, duration, insurance, and repatriation, in alignment with DG Shipping guidelines and the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006.

Enforcement, Legal Action, and Zero Tolerance

Where fraud occurs, DG Shipping adopts a **strict zero-tolerance approach**. Grievances can be lodged through the DG Shipping e-Governance Portal, and the DG Com Welfare helpline serves as a single point of contact for seafarer assistance.

Where fraud involves criminal intent, cases are examined under the **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, Section 316** relating to **Criminal Breach of Trust**, **Section 143** relating to **Human Trafficking of Persons**, and **Section 318** relating to **Cheating**. In cases of online or digital fraud, provisions of the Information Technology Act, 2000 are also invoked.

Based on the severity of violations, Show Cause Notices are issued to the agencies, and RPSL licences may be suspended, cancelled, or temporarily

blocked, and defaulting entities are listed in Fraud Alerts and Blacklists published on the DG Shipping website. In serious cases, FIRs are lodged, and DG Shipping coordinates closely with State Police and enforcement agencies to ensure accountability.

Strengthening Governance and Systemic Reform

In addition to enforcement, DG Shipping undertakes systemic corrective measures to prevent recurrence. Over the years, DG Shipping has organised symposiums and stakeholder consultations on seafarer recruitment and welfare in cities such as Delhi and Mumbai, where issues faced by seafarers are addressed, grievances are discussed, and compliance expectations are reinforced with recruitment agencies and industry stakeholders.

Looking ahead, the transition of the Directorate General of Shipping into the Directorate General of Maritime Administration under the new Merchant Shipping Act will provide an expanded mandate to close regulatory gaps and realign practices with international conventions. Work is also progressing towards a Seafarers' Rights Charter and Code of Conduct to establish clear standards of accountability across the ecosystem.

Closing

Colleagues,

Every seafarer who places their trust in the Indian maritime system must feel protected, respected, and confident. **The integrity of the RPSL framework is central to this trust.**

Let us collectively reaffirm our commitment to ethical recruitment, transparent processes, strict compliance, and zero tolerance for fraud. By doing so, we **safeguard not only individual livelihoods but also India's standing as a reliable and responsible supplier of maritime manpower to the world.**

Together, we will strengthen recruitment and placement governance, protect our seafarers from exploitation, and ensure a safer and more credible future for Indian shipping.

Thank you. Jai Hind.

RPSL Symposium – 18 December 2025

Speech Pointers

1. Opening and Context

Privilege to address the RPSL Symposium in Delhi

Importance of integrity in seafarer recruitment, placement, and welfare

Indian seafarers as global ambassadors and backbone of international trade

Welfare of seafarers as a strategic national priority, not merely a social obligation

2. India's Maritime Aspirations

India's current contribution of ~12% to global maritime manpower

Maritime India Vision 2030 target of increasing share to 20%

Critical dependence of this goal on ethical, transparent, and compliant recruitment systems

Need for aspirants to feel safe, assured, and fairly treated

3. Role of DG Shipping and Crew Branch

Crew Branch regulating the full lifecycle of a seafarer

Central role of RPSL companies in recruitment and placement

Direct impact of RPSL functioning on livelihoods, compliance, and India's reputation

4. Persistent Challenges in RPSL Ecosystem

Documentation and compliance gaps

Misuse of digital systems and processes

Forged contracts and misleading submissions

Role of unlicensed intermediaries

Operational issues leading to grievances and international scrutiny

5. Fraud in Recruitment and Placement

Rising cases of fraud affecting Indian seafarers

Financial loss, emotional distress, abandonment, and rights violations

Common fraud modes:

Fake job offers

Illegal charging of placement fees

Forged employment contracts and CDC endorsements

Illegal deployment on vessels

Fraud via social media and online platforms

6. Legal Position and Seafarer Rights

Recruitment through unregistered or unlicensed agents is illegal

Rule 4(2) of RPS Rules, 2016: no recruitment or placement fees permitted

Seafarers' rights to:

Free recruitment

DG Shipping-approved RPSL engagement only

Valid employment contracts with clear terms

Alignment with DG Shipping guidelines and MLC, 2006

7. Preventive and Digital Safeguards

Online RPSL verification facility on DG Shipping website

Ability to check valid, invalid, or blocked RPSL status

Importance of verification by seafarers and families before engagement

Transparency as a core preventive tool

8. Grievance Redressal and Enforcement

DG Shipping e-Governance Portal for grievance lodging

DG Com Welfare helpline as a single-point contact

Legal action under:

Merchant Shipping Act, 1958

RPS Rules, 2016

Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (cheating, breach of trust, trafficking)

IT Act, 2000 for digital fraud

9. Zero-Tolerance Policy Against Fraud

Show Cause Notices to defaulting RPSL companies

Suspension, cancellation, or temporary blocking of licences

Publication of Fraud Alerts and Blacklists

FIRs in serious cases

Coordination with State Police and enforcement agencies

10. Systemic Reforms and Future Direction

Stakeholder consultations and symposiums in Delhi and Mumbai

Reinforcement of compliance expectations

Corrective actions against RPSL companies and illegal agents

Transition to Directorate General of Maritime Administration under new Merchant Shipping Act

Progress towards Seafarers' Rights Charter and Code of Conduct

11. Closing Message

Trust of seafarers as the foundation of the maritime system

Integrity of RPSL framework as non-negotiable

Collective responsibility of regulators, RPSLs, and stakeholders

Commitment to ethical recruitment, transparency, and compliance

Safeguarding livelihoods and India's global maritime reputation

Thank you. Jai Hind.