

September 19, 2023

Chennai Port Authority: Rating reaffirmed

Summary of rating action

Instrument*	Previous Rated Amount (Rs. crore)	Current Rated Amount (Rs. crore)	Rating Action
Long-term – Term loan	1,775.00	1,775.00	[ICRA]AA-(Stable); reaffirmed
Total	1,775.00	1,775.00	

*Instrument details are provided in Annexure-I

Rationale

For arriving at the ratings, ICRA has taken a consolidated view of Chennai Port Authority (ChPA) along with its wholly-owned subsidiary Kamarajar Port Limited (KPL), given the financial and operational linkages between the two entities, although KPL operates as a separate limited company.

The rating reaffirmation factors in the strategic importance of ChPA and its subsidiary, KPL, as they are among the 12 major ports in India, and the sovereign ownership of ChPA, which is under the direct administrative control of the Ministry of Shipping (MoS). As per the Major Ports Authority Act (MPAA) dated November 3, 2021, the Chennai Port Trust has been renamed Chennai Port Authority and it no longer falls under the purview of TAMP, giving it tariff flexibility. With the MPAA in effect, ChPA's board has the authority to set the scale of rates.

The ratings consider the diversified share of cargo with the ports handling coal, petroleum, oil and lubricants (POL), automobiles, containers, etc. Coal remains the major cargo being handled at KPL and POL in the case of ChPA, apart from the containers handled at both the ports. The container terminals at ChPA and KPL are operated by reputed global and domestic port logistics players with revenue share and minimum guaranteed volume clauses in their contracts. The two ports together accounted for ~23% of India's container share in FY2023.

The rating factors in the increasing volumes at KPL (growth of ~12% YoY) and the steady volumes at ChPA. KPL's volumes are expected to grow further with the completion of dredging, general cargo berth II and other capital expenditures. The volumes at ChPA are expected to remain stable in the near to medium term. The rating also factors in the vast industrial hinterland catered to by the two ports and the operational synergies between the ports that have lowered competition and streamlined capacity planning in the Chennai region.

The rating continues to be constrained by the impact of a debt taken by ChPA to acquire KPL on the capital structure and debt coverage indicators of the consolidated entity. ChPA had availed a Rs. 1,775-crore debt in FY2020 to acquire KPL for Rs. 2,380 crore. In view of the limited cash generation from operations, ChPA's debt will be serviced by the dividend payments from KPL, although the liquidity profile is supported by a 15-year repayment tenure.

ChPA also maintains a 3-month DSRA for debt servicing, and all dividend payments from KPL will be routed through an escrow account for debt servicing. Further, due to the high pension obligations and salary outgo for ChPA, the profit margins of the consolidated entity are constrained. ICRA also notes that ChPA's standalone adjusted net worth is negative because of large unfunded pension and other retirement liabilities, which weaken the consolidated entity's net worth.

Further, there is high competition and overcapacity in the container segment at the Chennai cluster; although the risk is partly mitigated by captive customers for certain cargo segments as well as by the minimum guaranteed volume commitment and revenue share from container terminal operators. ICRA also notes the congestion issues at ChPA. However, the risk should be mitigated by the completion of some of the connectivity projects currently under implementation. ICRA also notes the large

amount of contingent liabilities in KPL's accounts due to the claims raised by one of the BOT operators and any developments on the same will be monitored.

The Stable outlook on the [ICRA]AA- rating reflects ICRA's opinion that the consolidated entity will continue to benefit from the sovereign ownership of the parent entity and its strategic importance to the Government of India (GoI), the favourable location of the ports, the long-term revenue share contracts with reputed global and domestic BOT concessionaries and the high captive cargo of KPL.

Key rating drivers and their description

Credit strengths

Strategic importance and Government linkages – ChPA, together with KPL, is strategically important to the GoI for the economic growth of the country as they are among the 12 major ports in India. The GoI earlier held a 66.7% stake in KPL and the remaining was held by ChPA. In March 2020, ChPA acquired the GoI's stake in KPL, making it a wholly-owned subsidiary. The acquisition provided operational synergies in the form of lower competition and streamlined capacity planning. Further, ChPA is under the direct administrative control of the Ministry of Shipping (MoS) with board representation from the ministry, the Department of Customs, the Government of Tamil Nadu (GoTN) and the Mercantile Marine Department, which reflects strong government linkages. The trust has also received moderate financial support in the form of grants from the MoS to part fund some of the capex programmes undertaken by the authority.

Favourable location of ports with adequate draft and access to large hinterland - Both the Chennai and Kamarajar ports are all-weather ports on the south-east coast of India and the north-east corner of Tamil Nadu. Present along the international shipping route, both the ports operate as an attractive port of call. Further, the draft available at the ports are adequate in the range of 13-18m, which allow them to handle bigger vessels with higher economies of scale, resulting in significant cost advantages for the end users. Both the ports have access to the vast hinterland of Tamil Nadu, and parts of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, handling a variety of cargo comprising containers, coal, liquid and break-bulk cargo.

The Chennai Port had traditionally been a bulk port handling coal, iron ore, liquid and dry bulk and catering to the needs of power generators, oil refineries and the steel/ aluminium plants. However, after the commissioning of the container terminals in 2001 and 2009 along with the shift of coal and iron ore cargo to the Kamarajar Port in 2012, following the High Court's orders citing pollution and hazardous risks for citizens living near the port, the ChPA has become predominantly a container handling port, while KPL mainly handles coal and other break-bulk cargo.

Diversified cargo handled with strong market position in container segment – The ports handle diversified cargo such as coal, petroleum, oil, and lubricants (POL), automobiles, containers, etc. Coal remains the major cargo handled at KPL and POL in the case of ChPA, apart from containers handled at both the ports. The container terminals at ChPA and KPL are operated by reputed global and domestic port logistics players with revenue share and minimum guaranteed volume clauses in their contracts. The two ports together have a strong market position in the container segment, accounting for ~23% of India's container share in FY2023. Chennai International Terminals Private Limited and Chennai Container Terminals Private Limited operate the container terminals at ChPA, whereas Adani Ennore Container Terminal Private Limited handles the container terminal at KPL.

Credit challenges

Credit profile of consolidated entity impacted by large debt-funded acquisition of KPL - In March 2020, ChPA had acquired the remaining 66.7% stake in KPL for Rs. 2,380 crore. The acquisition was funded through a debt of Rs. 1,775 crore and the remaining from internal resources, including cash and large advances from its customers. While the acquisition is expected to provide operational synergies to ChPA by reducing the common expenses, lowering competition and streamlining capacity planning in Chennai, the large interest and principal obligation have put some pressure on the capital structure and the coverage indicators of the consolidated entity.

The repayments at ChPA are supported through the dividends received from KPL as the cash accruals generated at ChPA at a standalone level is insufficient to service the debt obligations. ChPA also maintains a 3-months DSRA account during the period of debt. The repayment period is spread over 15 years with a ballooning structure and the dividend payments from KPL will be routed through an escrow account. The financial profile of KPL has remained strong on the back of healthy profitability over the years, driven by its landlord port model and high revenue share from its concessionaires. KPL paid a dividend of Rs. 270 crore for FY2023.

Further, while the capex plans for ChPA are limited related to only land acquisition, rehabilitation and resettlement (LARR) for the Port-Maduravoyal elevated road project, KPL has lined up a large capital expenditure of Rs. 310 crore in FY2024 for a second general cargo berth and capital dredging and breakwater strengthening projects, which are planned to be funded by internal accruals.

KPL's contingent liability was Rs. 1,899.5 crore as on March 31, 2023, due to arbitration proceedings by one of the BOT operators claiming various delays by KPL. The contingent liabilities also include the claims raised by contractors towards contract/supply work. The developments on such liabilities will be monitored.

Profitability impacted by large pension liabilities and high employee expense of ChPA – ChPA is one of the oldest operating major ports in India; at the standalone level, it has a large employee base of 3,161 and 14,633 pensioners as of March 2023. The large annual employee and pension expenses adversely impact the operating profitability of the consolidated entity. In addition, the large total deficit position of Rs. 2,445.86 crore as of March 2023 in the pension, leave encashment and gratuity funds of ChPA (compared to actuarial estimates of liabilities) necessitates regular contribution from the P&L account to these funds, which further impacts the operating profitability. Moreover, the net worth position adjusted for the deficit is negative on a standalone basis for ChPA, impacting the capital structure. Although the pension payment to retirees and the employee expenses are expected to moderate gradually in the medium to long term, the deficit position in the pension fund of ChPA is likely to continue over the next 10-15 years and reduce gradually upon regular contribution from the revenue account.

High competition and cargo volatility - ChPA and KPL face competition from other ports in the vicinity, such as the Kattupalli and Krishnapatnam ports. Nonetheless, the risk is mitigated for the consolidated entity by expected synergies, presence of captive cargo (like Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation Limited for KPL and Chennai Petroleum Corporation Limited for ChPA) and the long-term contracts with reputed domestic and global container terminal operators with minimum guaranteed volumes and revenue share. Further, with coal accounting for nearly 55% of KPL's cargo, the performance of the port and the consolidated entity remains susceptible to the volatility in coal demand.

Congestion issues - ChPA faces congestion issues, which impact cargo evacuation from the ports and in some cases have also resulted in diversion of cargo to competition. However, the congestion is expected to reduce over the next few years upon the completion of road connectivity projects that are currently under construction.

Liquidity position: Adequate

While ChPA's (standalone) fund flow from operations have been weak over the years due to the large employee and pension expenses, the port authority has generated positive free cash flows, aided by healthy non-operating income in the form of interest from cash balances and interest and dividend from KPL. ChPA made a prepayment of ~Rs. 113 crore in FY2023 and the scheduled repayment is Rs. 71 crore in FY2024 and Rs. 115 crore in FY2025 with a ballooning repayment structure. Further, with ChPA having a moderate capex requirement, its liquidity profile is likely to be adequate, supported by expected dividend inflow from KPL, unencumbered cash balances and liquid investments (~Rs 549 crore as of March 2023).

At a consolidated level (including KPL), the cash flows improved in FY2023 and are expected to improve further in FY2024 and FY2025, aided by higher volumes and the healthy profitability of KPL. The debt repayments are ~Rs. 89.5 crore (KPL) and Rs.71 crore (ChPA) in FY2024. There is a large capex requirement of Rs. 310 crore for KPL and minor capex requirements for ChPA in FY2024. However, the Group's liquidity profile is likely to remain adequate, supported by healthy fund flow from operations and unencumbered cash balances.

Rating sensitivities

Positive factors – ChPA's rating could be upgraded if the consolidated entity can demonstrate steady cargo growth, leading to higher revenues and cash accruals on a sustained basis, while maintaining profitability and a stable working capital intensity. A specific credit metric that could lead to an upgrade is TD/OPBDITA <2.00 times for the consolidated entity on a sustained basis.

Negative factors – Pressure on ChPA's rating may arise if the consolidated entity's financial profile weakens due to lower cash accruals with a significant drop in volumes or margins, on a sustained basis, owing to competition or adverse economic trends. A larger-than-expected debt-funded capex weakening the liquidity profile will also affect the ratings. Moreover, a reduction in the sovereign ownership of the authority or dilution in strategic importance may trigger a downward rating revision.

Analytical approach

Analytical Approach	Comments
Applicable rating methodologies	Corporate Credit Rating Methodology Rating Methodology for Ports
Parent/Group support	The rating derives comfort from the sovereign ownership of ChPA and its strategic importance to GoI
Consolidation/Standalone	For arriving at the rating, ICRA has taken a consolidated view of Chennai Port Authority and Kamarajar Port Limited. The rating is based on the consolidated financial profile of ChPA and KPL

About the company

Chennai Port Authority:

Formerly known as Madras Port, Chennai Port Authority (ChPA) officially commenced operations in 1881, although maritime trade started much earlier in 1639 on the undeveloped shore. An artificial and all-weather port with wet docks, Chennai port is the third-oldest port among the 12 major ports of India and is a major hub for containers, automobiles and project cargo in the eastern coast of India. While the port had traditionally been a bulk port catering to the needs of power generators, oil refineries and the steel/aluminium plants in the primary hinterland of southern India, it handled coal, iron ore, liquid and dry bulk as majority of its overall cargo mix. However, in the last decade, following a shift of coal and iron ore cargo to the Kamarajar Port and the commissioning of container terminals, the port has predominantly become a container handling port followed by liquid and other break-bulk cargo. At present, the port has two container terminals operating under the landlord concept, run separately by DP World Pvt. Ltd. and Singapore's PSA International Pte Ltd., with a combined capacity to handle 2.5 million TEUs a year. The port trust also functions as a terminal operator for some its berths handling general cargo, including liquid, dry bulk and break-bulk.

Subsequent to the Major Ports Authority Act, the Chennai Port Trust has been renamed Chennai Port Authority and the act vests the administration, control and management upon the board of ChPA.

Kamarajar Port Limited:

Kamarajar Port Limited (KPL; erstwhile Ennore Port Limited), incorporated in 1999, is a major port located 24km north of Chennai. It was declared a major port under the Indian Ports Act in March 1999 and was the first major port to be incorporated under the Companies Act, 1956. The port was dedicated to the nation in February 2001 and commenced operations from June 2001 with two dedicated coal berths handling thermal coal for the power stations of Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation Limited (TANGEDCO). The Ennore Port was originally conceived as a satellite port to the Chennai Port, primarily to handle thermal coal to meet the requirements of TNEB (now TANGEDCO); subsequently, its scope was expanded to enable KPL to handle other cargo. The port largely functions under the landlord concept, wherein new terminals are developed through the BOT model by private operators. Earlier, the GoI held a 66.7% stake in KPL with the remaining stake held by ChPA.

However, on March 27, 2020, ChPA acquired the entire stake from the GoI, and KPL became a wholly-owned subsidiary of ChPA.

Key financial indicators (audited)

Chennai Port Authority Standalone	FY2022	FY2023
Operating income	833.76	968.77
PAT	113.11	156.06
OPBDIT/OI (%) *	-4.5%	-4.4%
PAT/OI	13.6%	16.1%
Total outside liabilities/Tangible net worth (times)	1.3	1.1
Total outside liabilities/Tangible net worth (times)#	-33.2	-88.7
Total debt/OPBDITA (times)	-42.8	-34.0
Interest coverage (times)	-0.3	-0.4

PAT: Profit after tax; OPBDIT: Operating profit before depreciation, interest, taxes and amortisation; Amount in Rs crore

*adjusted for pension expenses #TNW adjusted for deficit in pension liabilities

#ChPA's books are maintained under the mercantile system (accrual basis) of accounting. The trust had formed the Pension Fund Trust and Gratuity Fund Trust as separate entities and the financial statements of these trusts are excluded from the financial statements of the Chennai Port Trust. While the pension payments for employees retired before November 2002 are recognised in the Chennai Port Trust account, the pension payments of employees retired after November 2002 are made through pension and gratuity funds. ICRA has consolidated all the three accounts and has adjusted the asset-liability position considering the corpus and liabilities of the pension and gratuity funds. Further, ICRA has treated the pension expenses and contribution to pension and gratuity funds as operating expense.

Chennai Port Authority Consolidated	FY2022	FY2023
Operating income	1,666.37	1951.49
PAT	313.3	259.6
OPBDIT/OI (%)	38.2%	39.7%
PAT/OI	18.8%	13.3%
Total outside liabilities/Tangible net worth (times)	0.74	0.72
Total outside liabilities/Tangible net worth (times)#	4.97	4.39
Total debt/OPBDIT (times)	3.30	2.42
Interest coverage (times)	4.0	4.7

PAT: Profit after tax; OPBDIT: Operating profit before depreciation, interest, taxes and amortisation

Status of non-cooperation with previous CRA: Not applicable

Any other information: None

Rating history for past three years

Instrument		Current rating (FY2024)				Chronology of rating history for the past 3 years			
		Type	Amount rated (Rs. crore)	Amount outstanding as on March 31, 2023 (Rs. crore)	Date & rating in FY2024	Date & rating in FY2023	Date & rating in FY2022	Date & rating in FY2021	
					Sep 19, 2023	Sep 20, 2022	Oct 05, 2021	Sep 14, 2020	
1	Term loans	Long term	1775.0	1466.56	[ICRA]AA-(Stable)	[ICRA]AA-(Stable)	[ICRA]AA-(Stable)	[ICRA]AA-(Stable)	

Complexity level of the rated instruments

Instrument	Complexity Indicator
Long-term fund-based – Term loan	Simple

The Complexity Indicator refers to the ease with which the returns associated with the rated instrument could be estimated. It does not indicate the risk related to the timely payments on the instrument, which is rather indicated by the instrument's credit rating. It also does not indicate the complexity associated with analysing an entity's financial, business, industry risks or complexity related to the structural, transactional or legal aspects. Details on the complexity levels of the instruments are available on ICRA's website: [Click Here](#)

Annexure I: Instrument details

ISIN	Instrument Name	Date of Issuance	Coupon Rate	Maturity	Amount Rated (Rs. crore)	Current Rating and Outlook
-	Term loan	Mar 2020	8.50%	Mar 2035	1775.0	[ICRA]AA-(Stable)

Source: Company

[Please click here to view details of lender-wise facilities rated by ICRA](#)

Annexure II: List of entities considered for consolidated analysis

Company Name	ChPA Ownership	Consolidation Approach
Chennai Port Trust	100.00% (rated entity)	Full Consolidation
Kamarajar Port Limited	100.00%	Full Consolidation

Source: ChPA annual report

Note: ICRA has taken a consolidated view of ChPA and its subsidiary Kamarajar Port Limited.

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