

Bay of Bengal Community to accomplish Regional Cooperation: Rhetoric and Reality!

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Abstract

The Bay of Bengal (BoB) region is one of the world's least integrated regions, as the borders of littoral states have turned bulwarks against the mobility of people, capital, goods and ideas, resulting in abysmal levels of trade, connectivity and cooperation. This region has for long confronted with a variety of transnational threats, including some of the most non-traditional security threats to the extent of disrupting regional stability. As much as the growing interest of the extra-regional powers, China's forage into the Indian Ocean has pushed BoB to be a fulcrum of the wider geopolitical space of the Indo-Pacific. The placid sea of BoB tends to turn into turbulent waters rendering the regional cooperation rhetoric!

As much as the shared values, histories and ways of life, BoB has the distinction of accounting for about one-fourth of world population and handling one-fourth of global trade annually. Given the untapped natural resources including the fishing stocks, reserves of gas and other sea bed minerals, BoB littorals are destined to evolve as a distinct community through trans-regional cooperation-initiatives transcending the national frontiers and unwarranted competition. The region's discernible commonality and perceptible complementarity in many aspects are conducive to sharing technical know-how and pursuing dependable trading relations. Significant disparities in mineral wealth and industrial production are at the base of interdependence testifying to symbiotic modality, as underscored by the BIMSTEC. Justifiably, mutual interests and common concerns are ordained to promote the linkages rather sustainable partnerships among the BoB littorals as to turn the regional cooperation into a reality.

Keywords: Regional Integration, BIMSTEC, Bay of Bengal, Human Geography, Trade, Connectivity, India, Cooperation

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Regional Cooperation, a Ubiquitous Pursuit

Region-building has been central to many of the debates and a salient feature of the international system; and the regional organizations are thus regarded as a natural outgrowth of international cooperation. Regionalism, despite its distinction of promoting regional and international communities, has many positive qualities as well as negative and worrying aspects. If regionalism is a policy or project; regionalization, a process of cooperation led by markets, is both project and process; but both regionalism and regionalization are clearly global phenomena (Fawcett 2004). The fallacy in the region-forming efforts has given credence to an exoteric adage that the ‘regions are good servants, but bad masters.’ Regionalism does not end by itself; it further approaches the next phase-- regional cooperation which entails regional integration. Regional integration, though obviously broader in its scope than regional cooperation, tends to subsume the latter; and both are mutually reinforcing. Regional integration undertakes a process in order to enhance regional cooperation through regional institutions and rules (Asian Development Bank 2006). In fact, regional integration prompts the institutions/organizations to embark on collective policies and initiatives that would create new forms of organization, co-existing with traditional forms of state-led organization at the national level. In the final analysis, regional integration assumes the form of an association of states based upon location in a given geographical area, for safeguarding or promotion of the participants, rather an association whose terms are fixed by a treaty or other arrangements. Hypothetically, a degree of homogeneity forms the common denominator in various region forming factors based on historical legacy, political development, cultural semblance, economic pattern and physical similarity. Be that as it may, the regions carved out of physical attributes do have a greater degree of homogeneity and sustainable economic linkages, unlike the cultural, conceptual (geopolitical), ill-demarcated political and geostrategic regions which hardly possess the spirit of regional cooperation. Such relatively homogenous regions associated more with common concerns than with the compulsions tend to evolve as macro-regions, as elucidated by Saul B. Cohen, author of *Geopolitics of World System* (2003) and *Geopolitics: the Geography of International Relations* (2008). Cohen had earlier depicted the macro-regions as to “have closer political, cultural and economic ties with some communities than with others and ...would get united on account of complementarity in their outlook / behaviour and would exhibit potentialities for further integrations” (Cohen 1964). It is in this background that the Bay of

Bengal community /forum, as a regional entity, is justifiably a logical proposition; and the idea of regionalism surrounds the Bay of Bengal (BoB) in multiple ways.

Salience of the Bay of Bengal Region's Physical Setting

Bay of Bengal, the semi-enclosed in its form encompassing an area of 2,173,000 square km, lies between 5° and 22° N latitudes and 80° and 90° E longitudes. BoB is bordered by Sri Lanka and India to the west, Bangladesh to the north, and Myanmar (Burma) and the northern part of the Malay Peninsula to the east (Thailand). Alongside these littoral states (Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand), the land-locked Himalayan states of Nepal and Bhutan, which by virtue of their drainage system flow into BoB, constitute the Bay of Bengal Community or Bay of Bengal Forum. The Malacca Straits is the strategic ingress/ outgress connecting the BoB with the South China Sea of the Pacific Ocean. With a maximum width of about 1600 km, the southern boundary extends from the southern end of Sri Lanka in the west to the northern tip of the Indonesian island of Sumatra in the east. This shallow embayment of the north-eastern Indian Ocean has an average depth of more than 2600 metres. As one of the largest bays in the world, BoB is comparable to the San Francisco Bay, the Bay of Pigs (Cuba), Hudson Bay (Canada) and Chesapeake Bay (Maryland and Virginia) (*Waterencyclopedia.com*).

Not merely the geographical contiguity, but also the broad correspondence in the physical setting characterizes the regional framework of BoB. The set of commonalities (based on the physical attributes like geological formations and mineral wealth, landforms and soils, hydrography of the rivers, climatic pattern and biodiversity) and the complementarities (as being the product of historical processes and geographical factors) form the cynosure of the debate on the prospects of regional cooperation in the BoB region. As much significant variations as the geographical area of the littorals of BoB are the differential coastlines of the littoral States, as could be gleaned from the data (Table - 1). The Coastline/Area ratios, as could be simply computed by any inquisitive scholar from the basic data on coastline and land area, indicate no relationship with the areal extent; instead they serve to evaluate the degree of accessibility. The higher ratios, essentially due to lengthier coastline and smaller areal extent, mean higher the benefit of accessibility. Despite being smaller than the other littoral states, Sri Lanka (64,740 sq. km. of area vs 1,585 km of coastline) is credited with highest ratio (2.44 per cent) vis-à-vis India (2973, 190 sq. km of area) with the lowest ratio of 0.25 per cent. As the

oceanic transportation is limited to the southern part of BoB, development of several trading ports all along the lengthy coastline offers the scope for a wide range of maritime activities including the trade.

Table - 1: Coastline/Area ratios, a measure of degree of Accessibility

Country	Area (sq. km)	Coastline Length (km)	Coastline/Area Ratio (as %)
India	2,973,190	7,500	0.25
Myanmar	657,740	2,300	0.35
Thailand	511,770	2,960	0.58
Bangladesh	133,910	654	0.49
Sri Lanka	64,740	1,585	2.44

Figures pertaining to coastline compiled from: Bird E.C.F. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the World's Coastal Landforms* (Springer: Dordrecht, 2010), at <https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-1-4020-8639-7_202>

Coastline/Area Ratios are author's own computation.

The BoB region has its strategic significance, largely due to its location not merely in relation to the configuration of land and water body, other states, and accessibility; but equally owes to its position almost closer to the geographic centre of the Indo-Pacific region, rather at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region. By virtue of being part of the Indian Ocean, BoB offers the vital sea lines of communications (SLOCs) for a good proportion of the east-west trade with about 50,000 vessels passing through it annually; and one fourth of the world's traded goods crosses BoB every year. Its importance in global trade and energy-supplies is well evident from the fact that this region accounts for 50 % of the world's oil production, 55 % of the world's known-oil reserves and 40 % of the world's known-natural gas reserves. Given allowance to marginal variations, around 80 % of China's oil imports, perhaps 90 % of South Korea's, and up to 90 % of Japan's as well as about 68 % of India's oil and 25 % of US oil are shipped from the Middle East and/or Africa through the Indian Ocean (US Department of Defense 2014; McDaniel 2012: 3).

Human Geography at the base of Bay of Bengal as a Regional Entity

It is not simply the spatial homogeneity in terms of mere geometical location (geographical proximity) that sustains the functional viability of this nascent regional grouping; instead, certain historical developments manifesting in complementarities have been predisposed to geographical factors, what it is to be understood as geographical determinism on historical momentum (Yagama Reddy 2004). Justifiably, the hope for a new regionalism lies in recognizing that the BoB's history, as much as its ecology, transcends national frontiers. This observation gains credence from the viewpoint of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi that the BoB region represents a common space for peace and development given the shared values, histories, ways of life, and destinies that are interlinked. Monsoon rhythm had also been of tremendous historical significance of human geography of this region. The commercial and cultural contacts spanning over two millennia were accomplished across the BoB which posed no major climatic obstacles to the early mariners. Alongside the historical and cultural ties that are connecting people across national borders, the network of land and riverine communications as well as climatic correspondence in this region have led to the evolution of a unique ecosystem and a composite culture providing a common basis for the norms and lifestyle of all segments of civil society. If reckoned as being tantamount to BIMSTEC, the BoB region is home for 1.6 billion people accounting for 28 per cent of the world population and has a combined GDP of over US \$ 2.8 trillion, as per the study conducted by Col Rajeev Kapoor, a Senior Fellow at The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (Kapoor 2018).

Coincidental Regional Variations

For all the parallels among the countries of the BOB region, there are pronounced regional variations subscribing to complementarity, which, in turn, testifies to interdependence owing to surplus or deficit of goods. Not only are there significant disparities in the geographical size, arable land, cropland, crop production and yields, but also variations are conspicuous in demographic characters (population size, density, growth rate, life expectancy and literacy) and human development. Interestingly, Sri Lanka is far ahead of other littorals of BoB in human development index (with a global rank of 73) and life expectancy; while Thailand is much higher than others in gross national income (Table - 2).

Of much significance is the great disparity in the GDP among the countries of the BoB region, with India being at the top and Bhutan as the lowest. The littorals are at variance with each other in their GDP-sector-wise composition, viz., the share (%) of agriculture, industry and services to the GDP. Nepal (30.7%) hits the top in the agriculture-sector-contribution to GDP, as opposed to Sri Lanka at the bottom (10.2). Thailand (45.3 %) and Bhutan (41.6 %) have the highest share of industry in the GDP, while it is Bangladesh (58.3%) that claims the highest share of services to the GDP, closely followed by India, Sri Lanka and Nepal (Table - 3).

Table: 2 - Bay of Bengal Region: HDI, [@] Life Expectancy and GNI,*2015

Country	HDI		Life Expectancy at Birth (years)	GNI per Capita (\$)
	Value	Global Ranking		
Sri Lanka	0.766	73	75.0	10,789
Thailand	0.740	87	74.6	14,559
India	0.624	131	68.3	5,663
Bhutan	0.607	132	69.9	7,081
Bangladesh	0.579	139	72.0	3,341
Nepal	0.558	144	70.0	2,337
Myanmar	0.556	145	66.1	N.A.

[@]HDI = Human Development Index; *GNI= Gross national income.

Source: HDI-Nations Online Project, *Human Development Index 2016*, at <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/human_development.htm> (Accessed 18 July 2019).

Table – 3: Bay of Bengal Region- GDP Sector-Composition, 2014

Country	GDP		Share (%) in GDP		
	(million US\$)	Global Rank	Agriculture	Industry	Services
India	2,048,000	10	17.9	24.2	57.9
Thailand	380,500	32	12.2	45.3	44.5
Bangladesh	186,600	58	15.2	26.5	58.3

Sri Lanka	71,570	71	10.2	33.1	56.7
Nepal	19,640	114	30.7	13.6	55.7
Bhutan	2,086	185	14.4	41.6	44.0

Source: *World Factbook (GDP-sector composition)*, January 2015, at <http://statisticstimes.com/economy/countries-by-gdp-sector-composition.php> (Accessed 29 November 2017).

Lacklustre Trading Pattern

Lack of trade complementarity entails competition in their export markets in certain products - particularly in textiles and apparel and other light manufactured goods. Besides long indifference to the notion of regional integration, import-substituting industrialization swayed over the economies of the littoral states. This is a gloomy picture corroborated with the facts and figures from the following Table - 4, given the fact the BIMSTEC states is coterminous with the littoral states of BOB. There is substantial gap between the actual and potential exports with respect to India's exports to Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand as well as the exports from these countries to India (Table - 4).

Table: 4 - Bay of Bengal: Actual and Potential Export (US \$ billions)

Exporter	Importer	Actual Export	Potential Export
India	Bangladesh	5.67	35.58
India	Myanmar	1.14	14.55
India	Sri Lanka	4.12	15.38
India	Thailand	2.96	192.76
Bangladesh	India	0.68	38.11
Myanmar	India	1.04	10.63
Sri Lanka	India	0.75	9.79
Thailand	India	5.12	208.48

Source: *FICCI Reinvigorating BIMSTEC Report 2018*.

Understandably, the intra-regional trade, according to the Credit Research Foundation, is minuscule rather dismal, especially in the case of India and Thailand (with a paltry share of 3.0 % each), save Myanmar (36.1%) and Nepal (59.1%). The size of intra-regional trade with respect to Sri Lanka (18.4 %) and Bangladesh (11.6 %) is markedly low (<https://www.crfonline.org>). The data on the trade intensity index for the period 2005-2017, compiled from yet another authentic source (<https://www.unescap.org/>), conforms to the same gloomy picture. All the countries without any exception have shown declining trend in their indices of intra-regional trade. Though the land-locked countries of Bhutan (in the range of 34.78 to 24.18) and Nepal (26.08 to 17.32) have fairly good share of the intra-regional trade, the other countries (Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar) in 2017, for instance, are poor in their performance (in the range of 3.05 to 5.32); and India and Thailand hovered around 1.0 (Table -5).

Table: 5 - Trade Intensity Index among the Bay of Bengal Littorals and its share in the World Trade

Year	Bangladesh	Bhutan	India	Myanmar	Nepal	Sri Lanka	Thailand	World
2005	4.58	34.78	1.45	16.18	26.08	7.40	1.08	4.77
2008	4.13	29.60	1.00	14.47	21.63	5.98	1.11	4.66
2011	3.28	22.00	0.87	9.05	18.68	5.52	1.04	4.74
2014	3.00	25.04	1.11	6.83	18.40	4.86	1.12	5.56
2017	3.05	24.18	1.11	5.32	17.32	4.96	1.10	6.00

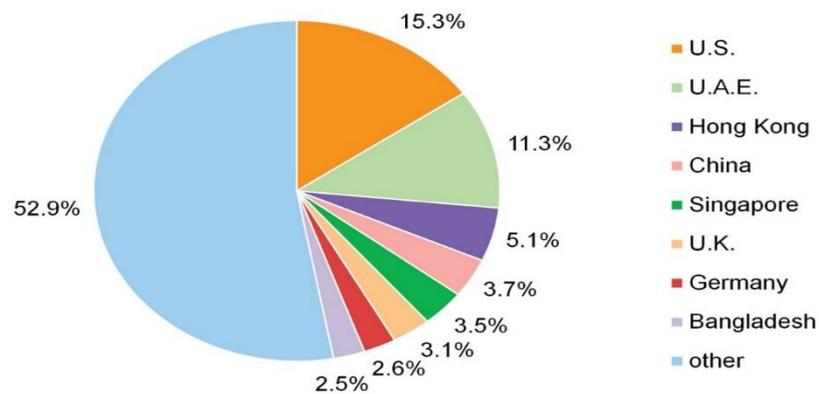
Source: Chandrima and Biswajit Nag, 2011 (November), “Impact of India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement: A cross-country analysis using applied general equilibrium modelling,” *Asia-Pacific Research and Training Network on Trade*, Working Paper Series # 107.
 <<https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/AWP%20No.%20107.pdf> >

For all its assumed status as a major power in the BoB region, India in 2016-17 had no major export-destination or major import-source country in this region (Fig. 1A and 1B). Over three-fifths (61.3 %) of Indian exports in 2017 were delivered to the 15 trade-partners, of which Bangladesh (2.6 %) and Nepal (1.9 %) figured with insignificant status (worldstopexports.com /1). India’s top 10 exports accounted for 59.4% of the overall value of its global shipments

(*worldstopexports.com /2*). India’s top 10 imports accounted for almost four-fifths (78.2%) of the overall value of its product purchases from other countries (*worldstopexports.com /3*). The other countries too find themselves in the same boat sailing as India in their trade-basket-composition and trading partners. Definitely, BoB with all its immense potentialities are found enduring lacklustre trading pattern, may it be the lackadaisical attitude or commodity-competitiveness owing to similar production regimes. Given the single case of the India-Thailand FTA, it is high time the BoB littorals to seek the prospects of promoting intra-regional trade through establishing FTAs and Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreements and setting up Regional Trade and Investment Areas.

Fig. 1A – India’s Major Export Destinations and Major Import Sources, 2016-17

India major export destinations (2016–17)



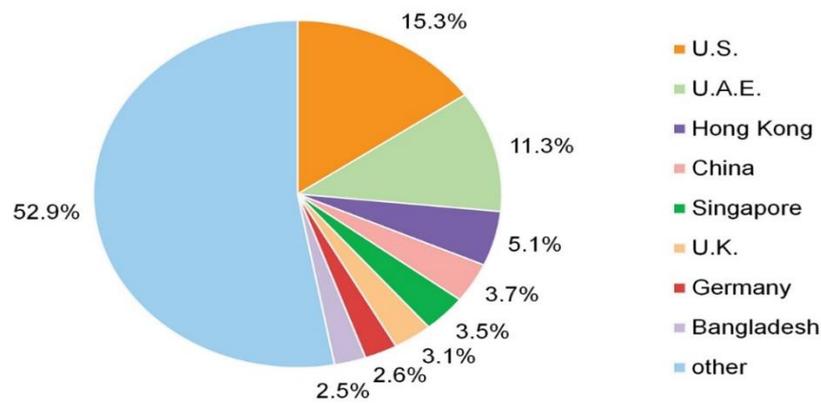
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<https://www.britannica.com/place/India/People> (Accessed 30 January 2021)

Fig. 1B– India’s Major Export Destinations and Major Import Sources, 2016-17

India major export destinations (2016–17)



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<https://www.britannica.com/place/India/People> (Accessed 30 January 2021)

The rationale for increased economic co-operation among geographically contiguous countries has been a dominant feature of the global political economy and strengthened further in the 1990s by the emergence of regional trading blocs like EU and NAFTA. Be that as it may, free trade and market economy are discarded and borders turned into bulwarks against the mobility of people, capital, goods and ideas in the BoB region. Intra-regional trade among the BoB littoral states is reported to have been less than 5 %, compared to 29 % among the ASEAN countries, 58 % in EU, and 62 % in NAFTA. High transport costs and logistic costs owe much to lack of transport connectivity and other infrastructure constraints including energy crisis impinge on the prospects of intra-regional trade and investment flows.

Incidental Poor Connectivity

Besides minuscule trade, the BoB region is one of the world's least integrated regions, inasmuch as the poor state of connectivity, integration and cooperation points to big stumbling blocks and barriers inhibiting the free movement of goods and people, but mounting deep-rooted suspicions and differences (Nasir 2012). Preoccupation with the intra-state conflicts and inter-state crises has almost restrained the littoral states to achieve adequate degree of complementarity of interests and regional economic cooperation and thereby regional cohesion. Differential power-potentials coupled with divergence and apathy has eventually resulted in trust-deficit to the extent of inhibiting the spirit of regional cooperation. Inter-state

relations are marred by mistrust, mutual threat perceptions, confrontation and hostility. Issues of political and ideological character, coupled with the issues of strategic conflict and military balance, have perpetuated the inter-state conflicts which probably are the highest compared to any other regional blocs. Negative perceptions and misapprehensions have been there impinging on the prospects of regional cooperation. The basic apprehension has stemmed from India's geographical size, demographic and economic potential and political weight. Smaller states view India as both a saviour and as part of the problem and are reluctant to work with India; on the other hand, India has its own fears of its neighbours in terms of their possible union to oppose the country's interests. All said and done, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a pertinent appeal to the leaders of the BIMSTEC nations to move fast on regional connectivity initiatives-- beginning with easing coastal shipping and trans-border movement of vehicles, and envisaged a plan for "seamless connectivity."

Inherent Resource Potentiality

As the world's largest bay, it is also rich in untapped natural resources, with some of the world's largest fishing stocks, reserves of petroleum and natural gas as well as other sea-bed minerals, including terrigenous deposits. BoB has proven hydrocarbon resources, placer deposits (off north-eastern Sri Lanka), rare earths (off north-eastern India), heavy mineral sands (Tamilnadu offshore and coastal areas round Vishakhapatnam of Andhra Pradesh). Yet, the BoB littorals have substantial variations in their mineral resources and exploitation as well as in industrial production. These differential levels in resource-endowments entail complementarities paving the way for the application of symbiotic modality based on mutual interests and common concerns that would ultimately promote "business opportunities" and "linkages" in the region (Roy and Chakravarty 2001). In fact, there are quite a few promising areas of mutual economic cooperation like food and energy security, infrastructure, human resource development, oil & natural gas, agro-chemicals, fertilizers, health care, tourism, pharmaceuticals and automobiles. Given the trade complementarities in such areas as textile, cotton, cereals, apparels, cane sugar, plastic and chemical goods (IPCS Panel Discussion 2007), the region is perceived as a 'geo-economic unit' becoming conducive to promoting regional cooperation and thereby regional economic integration. The services sector is potentially a major driver of economic integration; and India's pre-eminence in information technology (IT) is capable of triggering profitable affiliations with neighbouring countries. Even on the flipside, BoB has certain distinct common

features, as evident from extreme poverty, mega-urbanization, immense disparities between rich and poor, and fundamental problems in the areas of infrastructure, energy and the environment, besides high levels of internal conflicts and political instability within the region (Delinic 2011).

Extra-regional Powers inclination to the Bay of Bengal Region

Thanks to its strategic centrality in the broader Indo-Pacific region, the BoB region has attracted an increasing interest from the extra-regional powers. Like its Pacific ‘twin,’ the South China Sea, Bay of Bengal is also a key transit zone between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the main route for trade in energy to East Asia, as has been elaborated earlier in this study. As expected, security of the SLOCs becomes imperative for many countries including Japan, China, Europe and the US, besides the littoral state of India (Kitazume 2011; Rumley 2013). As much as India’s involvement in developing a river-road transport corridor to its landlocked northeast states via Myanmar’s port of Sittwe, Japan in May 2014 announced the ‘BIG-B’ initiative (Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt) for Bangladesh, which includes the development of an economic corridor from Dhaka to the sea and new deep-water port facilities (Brewster 2014). The FAO-led Global Environment Facility has also offered US \$ 15 million grant for the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem (BOBLME) project to promote sustainable fishing, reduce marine pollution and improve the lives of approximately 400 million people who live along its coasts (Gupta 2018). In order for the BoB littoral states to revive the region as a distinct community, they need to build appropriate institutions that provide a framework for engaging with extra-regional powers and building havens of cooperation, especially in tackling a variety of transnational threats, including some of the most challenging non-traditional security threats, such as smuggling, trafficking, and illegal fishing, which can disrupt regional stability. Besides their preparedness to invest in cooperative programs for capacity-building, the widespread interest among major powers to promote regional integration and the availability of multiple sources of funding would serve as a rare opportunity to come up with practical ideas for advancing the agenda on connectivity, commerce and sustainable development of the littorals.

Prospects and Potentials of Cooperation

There is no gainsay the nostalgia in the protagonists of the glorious past of the Indian culture and euphoria of success through Look East and Act East Policies; instead the regional

initiatives like Bay of Bengal Forum / Community would attest the age-old spirit of India's cooperative approach that has never subscribed to the tendencies like political domination and economic exploitation. India needs to pay serious attention to the *modus operandi* of its commitments towards regional cooperation in the BoB region, instead of pondering such other initiatives as Mercosur (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela) and Kunming Initiative (also known as BCIM=Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar). Perplexingly, Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN), sub-regional grouping is superfluous rather redundant, for they are all part of BIMSTEC, which constitutes the Bay of Bengal forum / community.

Of much significance is the semblance in the riverine hydrography of BoB region that offers an added advantage to India for the development of river valley projects, especially in the riparian states of Himalayas (Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar). The incidence of similar bioclimatic zones among the BoB littorals is of tremendous significance in the field of agronomy. India's proven expertise in agricultural typology, irrigation practices and watershed management are also of immense practical utility in replacing the rudimentary farming methods in the mountainous terrains and plateaus of the other countries in the region. In doing so, India shall also derive benefit in the form of importing agricultural produce to meet the exigencies and providing relief to its farming land becoming exhausted in its carrying capacity as well as to bring about changes in the cropping pattern being cost-intensive and irrigation-reliant (Yagama Reddy 2010).

The semblance in physical setting (geology, landforms, climate and biodiversity), agricultural systems and farming typology and well-acquainted historical development of the region would serve as a common denominator for the littorals to have better understanding developed on the prospects and potentials of cooperation than any other far-off country. Further, this understanding would phase out the stigma of commodity-competitiveness; instead would pave the way for symbiotic modality rather a mutually dependable relationship entailing complementarity in their economic and commercial relationships, besides facilitating the transfer of technical know-how among the littoral states themselves. It is high time for the littorals to think in terms of joint ventures or strategic alliances in the agro-sector, irrigation, food processing & packaging, energy sector, technical education, textiles, tourism and health. Simply it is a sort of centrifugal activities embarking on the lines of transferring the primary products from agriculture and mining in a country/s for subsequent processing in the industries

by setting up in some other countries having the technical expertise and wherewithal for capital-investment, and finally the marketing to be handled by other countries. This would accomplish the process of establishing “a new family, in a get-together” which is simply strengthening the concept of “extended neighbourhood.” Further, as has been repeatedly underscored at various levels, physical connectivity and high-quality infrastructure would facilitate greater regional flows of goods & services. Trilateral Highway connecting India and Thailand through Myanmar is on its way to establishing connectivity between India and Southeast Asian countries. The Kathmandu Declaration adopted at the Fourth summit of BIMSTEC at Kathmandu (August 30 to 31, 2018) is expected to set the stage for agricultural technology exchange, gradual reduction of the impact of climate change, increases trade and investment and ease in visa processing for the people of member states. This conforms to the principle of mutual trust and collective participation as to accomplish regional cooperation and thereby regional integration a reality rather than rendering it rhetoric.

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