

Forging a Bay of Bengal Community is the Need of the Hour

By Sabyasashi Dutta

Locating the Bay of Bengal

The Bay of Bengal, the world's largest Bay, is strategically located in the Indian Ocean. On its western rim, lies the coastline of the Indian Peninsula and to its south, the island nation of Sri Lanka. To the east the bay connects key parts of Southeast Asia including Myanmar, Indonesia, Thailand as well as the Andaman Sea and the Malacca straits. At its very northern cusp lies Bangladesh, which is also the delta of the great rivers of Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna. These rivers connect the Bay in a unique "mountain to sea" ecosystem with natural connectivity to the Bay for the landlocked states of North Eastern India and the Himalayan nations of Nepal and Bhutan. In turn, the monsoon currents which regulate the climate of the Bay of Bengal gather moisture from the bay and dictate precipitation patterns in the mountains and plains in the hinterland. The hills of Meghalaya in North Eastern India record the highest rainfall in the world as they are first hit by the monsoon clouds that gather moisture from the Bay. An interlace of snow and rain fed rivers, their basins, and their estuaries at the Bay nurture a large diversity of aquatic and terrestrial wildlife flora and fauna (e.g., the Sunderban mangroves spanning parts of Myanmar, India and Bangladesh) and offer a great diversity of agricultural produce. The Bay and the countries along and connected by its littoral are a compact maritime sub region connected at the level of economy and ecology, having an enormous impact on the hundreds of its inhabitant who live on its coasts and in its hinterlands.

The Bay of Bengal Connects the Maritime Sub Region

Due to its strategic, integrated location, historically the Bay has been a connector for the diverse peoples of South and Southeast Asia via trade and cultural interactions. These connections extended from the present day North West frontier province in Pakistan to Burma (today's Myanmar), including sea-faring communications lines extending to Penang and Singapore. The bay also boasted the highest GDP among all the British Indian Presidencies and reportedly earned over a third of Imperial Britain's crown revenues. A complex multimodal mesh of shipping routes that combined sea-lanes, coastal highways and inland waterways, along with rail and road connectivity in the hinterland connected the region and powered trade and the economy of the region. This "connectedness" was disrupted post World War 2. The partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 and the advent of new nation states changed the narrative of the naturally contiguous region from "connected" to "divided by political boundaries".

The Bay of Bengal's Role in the Indo Pacific

The wheels of time have come full circle as the epicenter of geo politics shifts to the Indo-Pacific. After decades of neglect, the Bay of Bengal is today reassuming strategic and economic salience. By becoming reconnected, the Bay of Bengal region could help address common economic, ecological, and security challenges. Today, the Bay of Bengal can be seen as a crucial part of the Indian Ocean with growing strategic interest and importance to global actors. This great 'middle bay', bridging the Indian Ocean

Sabyasachi Dutta, executive director of Asian Confluence, explains that "Historically the Bay has been a connector for the diverse peoples of South and Southeast Asia via trade and cultural interactions."

with the Pacific Ocean is a maritime sub-region notably free from maritime boundary disputes making it an integral building block of the vision of a free, open and prosperous Indo Pacific. It lies at the convergence of two major geopolitical blocs: the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The time is ripe for the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which promotes regional engagement in the area to gain much more wind in its sails; becoming more productive and outcome-directed.

Upgrading and reviving the multimodal network of marine highways, coastal highways and inland waters with better last mile land connectivity around the Bay of Bengal littoral, particularly between the landlocked and bay-facing nations will be critical to achieve the goal of a vibrant Bay of Bengal community. Several projects of connectivity are already underway: Inland waterways on the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers between India and Bangladesh are being revived. The remote border state of Tripura in India is now connected via the newly built bridge over the Feni river to adjoining Bangladesh and the port of Chittagong. Pre-partition rail links are being revived. Converting these connectivity corridors to economic corridors will require innovative solutions in facilitating simpler protocols at international land borders and developing off-border clearance protocols to keep the borders congestion free.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has brought out several contradictory challenges to the Bay of Bengal nations: On the one hand it has underlined the further need for multilateral cooperation as the way forward to deal with such common challenges such as the pandemic, natural disasters, the challenges of ocean waste, looming impact of climate change, and forging a blue economy around the Bay. But, it has also made nations look inward: the economic pressures placed on the internal economies by the COVID-19 pandemic brings in uncertainty on the level of investment the member nations can make in connectivity and allied technologies to facilitate greater economic integration of the Bay of Bengal. The lackluster performance of BIMSTEC, India not signing the RCEP, the loss of democracy in Myanmar, and disagreements within ASEAN itself are factors that are going to play out. In this context there are predictions that investment in regional connectivity, in spite of all the promise it offers will have to stay on the backburner. The region is further mired by tensions arising from aggressive posturing by China. There are concerns in the strategically located smaller countries such as Sri Lanka that they could be swept up and carried away in the midst of larger power rivalries and should tread carefully between the big powers and build internal resilience and capacity.

In spite of all of this, the need for a Bay of Bengal community will only further grow. The positive returns from reviving the historical trading networks across the Bay and extending to the larger Indo Pacific are compounded by the consequences of not doing so. A welcome trend was shown at the last virtual summit of the QUAD partnership which gained new dimensions transcending the security lens. Initiatives such as the QUAD vaccine partnership, the QUAD climate change working group and the QUAD Critical and Emerging Technology Working Group were recently announced at the QUAD virtual Summit held on March 12, 2021. These initiatives can find first roots in their pilot implementation in the Bay of Bengal region. Nearly 1.4 billion people live along its coastline and almost a fourth of the world's total population calls this region home. The new normal of a post pandemic era presents many lessons and opportunities for the Bay of Bengal community: Will it be able to seize the moment to regain its ancient glory?

Sabyasachi Dutta is Executive Director of Asian Confluence. He can be contacted at director@asianconfluence.org.

APB Series Founding Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye | APB Series Coordinator: Peter Valente

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