

Education as a Pivot in India's Cooperation with BIMSTEC Countries

VIVEK MISHRA AND SURANJAN DAS

ABSTRACT This brief discusses the education component of cooperation between India and the countries of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). It argues that nurturing the education link within BIMSTEC can play a transformative role in augmenting people-to-people contact and cementing a more fruitful regional connectivity. While progress has been achieved—to which India has contributed considerably—there remains plenty of unfulfilled potential. India should be more proactive in helping BIMSTEC address these gaps in the coming years to make it a more dynamic regional grouping.

Attribution: Vivek Mishra and Suranjan Das, "Education as a Pivot in India's Cooperation with BIMSTEC Countries," *ORF Issue Brief No. 418*, November 2020, Observer Research Foundation.

Observer Research Foundation (ORF) is a public policy think tank that aims to influence the formulation of policies for building a strong and prosperous India. ORF pursues these goals by providing informed analyses and in-depth research, and organising events that serve as platforms for stimulating and productive discussions.



To know more about
ORF scan this code

INTRODUCTION

Education and culture have historically provided essential links of connectivity between India and the member states of BIMSTEC. The Jataka tales, scriptures, inscriptions, palm-leaf records and accounts of foreign travellers testify to Takshashila, Nalanda and Vikramshila attracting scholars from the region in ancient times.¹

Following Independence, India became the world's second-largest provider of higher education and continued to attract students from the BIMSTEC countries: 26.88 percent of its foreign students are from Nepal, 4.38 percent from Bangladesh, and 3.82 percent from Bhutan (2018–19).² Various political leaders of some BIMSTEC countries, too, received their higher education in India, including Nepal's former Prime Ministers B.P. Koirala and Babu Ram Bhattarai, Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi, Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk, and former Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay.³

This brief outlines the different facets of educational cooperation between India and the BIMSTEC nations. The expansion of educational opportunities will enable India to use soft-power diplomacy to strengthen its links with its BIMSTEC partners, four of whom are in South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka) and two are in Southeast Asia (Myanmar and Thailand).⁴

Bhutan

Approximately 4,000 Bhutanese students currently study in undergraduate courses in Indian universities. These students are either self-financed or dependent on Indian government scholarships. New Delhi offers 450 undergraduate slots annually to Bhutanese students and 90 fully funded scholarships for professional courses such as medicine, engineering, nursing and agriculture.⁵ The Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) earmarks 20 funded slots for Bhutanese students. Additionally, the India–Bhutan Foundation, established in August 2003, promotes educational cooperation between the two countries. In 2010, the prestigious Nehru-Wangchuk Scholarship was instituted, enabling talented Bhutanese nationals to study at selected premier Indian educational institutions. At the 2010 Calcutta University convocation, then crown prince of Bhutan, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck was awarded an honorary D. Litt degree. Following this, undergraduate seats were reserved for Bhutanese students at that university. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2019 visit to Bhutan, he further emphasised the importance of education in India-Bhutan ties.⁶

Bangladesh

“Education for All,” outlined in the Statement of Intent of 7 June 2015,

made India and Bangladesh allies in education.⁷ A high-level India–Bangladesh Education Dialogue, with representatives from the government, academia and business, promotes strategic institutional partnerships in science, engineering, social sciences, humanities, and gender studies. There is also cooperation between India's National Assessment and Accreditation Council and Bangladesh's National Board of Accreditation. The joint declaration, issued following Prime Minister Modi's visit to Bangladesh in June 2015, refers to “Notun Projonmo–Nayi Disha” and highlights education as critical to India-Bangladesh bilateral relations. India has announced a second Line of Credit (LoC) worth US\$2 billion for Bangladesh, to aid 15 development projects in different sectors, including education.⁸

India-Bangladesh education cooperation has been particularly strong in West Bengal, given its geographical proximity to Bangladesh and the cultural ties that bind the regions. Since 1971, leading higher education institutions of West Bengal and Bangladesh have organised student and teacher exchanges as well as collaborative research projects and seminars. In Visva-Bharati, Dhaka has established the “Bangladesh Bhavan,” which has become a centre for bilateral education and cultural activities. The Government of Bangladesh has now proposed to establish the “Bangabandhu Chair” in a leading West

Bengal university, in memory of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who studied at Maulana Azad College, Calcutta University.

Myanmar

Myanmar's traditional education link with India has been through the people of Indian origin who inhabit its two main cities, Yangon and Mandalay. Yangon University has traditionally hosted leading Indian scholars: Bengali novelist Sarat Chandra Chatterjee spent several years in Myanmar. The Mekong Ganga Cooperation project included education as an area of collaboration.⁹

In 2012, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Myanmar explored stronger educational cooperation between the two countries.^a India proposed a new LoC of US\$500 million to Myanmar for fostering bilateral linkages, partly to support educational links and assist Myanmar in capacity-building. On this occasion, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Calcutta University and the Dagon University of Yangon, making them the nodal centres for fostering India-Myanmar collaboration in higher education. However, Myanmar colleagues cited considerable difficulty in securing permission from their government to undertake visits to India. In 2013, the Calcutta University hosted the centenary session of the Indian Science Congress, and

a One of the authors of this chapter (Das) accompanied the former prime minister on this visit.

an invitation was extended to a Myanmar delegation; however, bureaucratic hurdles in Myanmar prevented their attendance. India must do more to help Myanmar improve school education and develop English-language teaching, about which interest was expressed during the visit.

In 2020, the president of Myanmar visited India, following which the Advanced Centre for Agricultural Research and Education (ACARE) was established at Naypyidaw under an MoU.¹⁰

Nepal

India and Nepal share a strong cooperation in the field of education.¹¹ PM Modi's August 2014 visit to Nepal—the first in 17 years by an Indian premier—strengthened this link. Following the visit, New Delhi rolled out funding for Indian universities to host Nepalese students to expose them to Indian culture and promote interaction with Indian experts in diverse fields of knowledge. In February 2016, an MoU was signed on the utilisation of the grant of US\$250 million, allocating US\$50 million to education.¹²

Through the Indian embassy in Kathmandu, India provides around 3,000 scholarships/seats annually to Nepalese nationals, for studying at plus-2 level, as well as for undergraduate and postgraduate courses in engineering, medicine, agriculture, pharmacology, veterinary sciences, computer application, business administration, music, and fine arts.¹³ In 1991, the bilateral B.P. Koirala

India–Nepal Foundation was set up to further educational cooperation.¹⁴ In 2019, Nepal received INR 3 crores from India for building an educational institute in the Udayapur district.¹⁵

Sri Lanka

India and Sri Lanka have a history of cooperation in education. The Government of India offers 50 training opportunities Scheme in diverse fields under its Colombo Plan Technical Cooperation.¹⁶ The India–Sri Lanka Cultural Exchange Programme offers 60 annual scholarships to pursue undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses in India. Moreover, the ICCR's South Asian Regional Cooperation Scholarship Scheme annually awards one fellowship and two scholarships at the postgraduate level, in economics, education, environment, agriculture, mass communication, language, literature, sociology, transport engineering, applied economics, business administration, biochemistry, social work, food technology and home science. Scholarships are also granted for research and non-formal courses. India offers special training programmes for Sri Lankan Tamils. However, no scholarships are available for Sri Lankans in medicine. This gap is yet to be addressed.

An “India-Sri Lanka Knowledge Initiative”¹⁷ was launched following Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa's visit to India during 8–11 June 2010. Under this, the University of Colombo proposed a Centre for Contemporary Indian Studies with Indian support; the English and

Foreign Language University (Hyderabad) was linked with the Sri Lanka–India Centre for English Language Training in Kandy; new Indian scholarships were introduced to address the “special needs of Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka;” and Indian technical assistance was extended for agricultural research in the island. India offered Sri Lanka the use of its satellites for societal services.

Following the 2016 Sri Lanka visit of India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, India agreed to establish a Civil and Mechanical Engineering Complex and Skill Development Centre on the Kilinochchi Campus of the University of Jaffna; set up English Language Laboratories in all provinces of Sri Lanka; renovate 27 schools in Tamil-dominated Northern Province; and construct the Rabindranath Tagore Memorial Auditorium at the Ruhuna University and the Mahatma Gandhi International Centre in Matale.¹⁸ Annual Indian education fairs in Sri Lanka were also proposed.

Thailand

Indo-Thai education exchanges have long nurtured bilateral historical cultural ties, particularly after former Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's visit in 2003. During this visit, both countries proposed to establish cultural centres in each other's territories. An Indian Studies Centre at the Thammasat University and a Sanskrit Centre at the Silpakorn University have already been set up to disseminate

knowledge of Indian culture.¹⁹ Following the Thai prime minister's India visit in 2005, a joint working group was established to broaden bilateral education linkages in Information Technology and Computer Science.

By 2017–18, the Government of India was offering 75 scholarships to Thai students under its various schemes (ITEC: 40, TCS of Colombo Plan: six, ICCR sponsored schemes: 20, and Hindi Scholarship: nine). Additionally, there are Thai students who fund their own studies in India. India's Ministry of Education (earlier Ministry of Human Resource Development) sends eight professors every semester to the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), Bangkok.²⁰ On 17 June 2016, India and Thailand signed an agreement to promote collaboration between Nagaland University and Thailand's Chiang Mai University.²¹ About 1,500 Thai scholars and monks have already completed their studies in science, engineering, philosophy, Buddhism and Sanskrit in institutions located at Pune, Darjeeling, Bengaluru, Kolkata and Delhi.²²

THE WAY FORWARD

BIMSTEC was conceived as a regional grouping to “provide a fertile ground for cooperation” and be “a source of sharing and learning among members of the group,”²³ for which educational cooperation remains the *sine qua non*. Unfortunately, a viable and effective mechanism is yet to be developed for cooperation between the BIMSTEC nations within a regional

framework. This brief examined trends and mechanisms at the bilateral level to extrapolate the benefits of cooperation amongst the BIMSTEC nations in the area of education, and explore the unfulfilled potential of such linkages.


Following the experiment with BRICS, BIMSTEC should aim to become a more viable regional forum for sharing knowledge, expertise and best practices in the education sector. India could start a new initiative for education cooperation within the region, drawing lessons from the bilateral education relationships that already exist within the group. Such educational links will not only contribute to sustainable development in the region but also aid cultural reconnection. Former BIMSTEC Secretary General Sumith Nakandala stressed this when he remarked: "... we are not reinventing the wheel ... [but] just rediscovering the common heritage around the Bay of Bengal."²⁴ Commemorating the 20th anniversary of the organisation in June 2017, Prime Minister Modi, too, underscored the cultural binding force of the organisation as well as its geostrategic importance for India:

BIMSTEC not only connects South and South-East Asia, but also the ecologies of the Great Himalayas and the Bay of Bengal. With shared values, histories, ways of life, and destinies that are interlinked, BIMSTEC represents a common space for peace and development. For India, it is a natural platform

to fulfill our key foreign policy priorities of "Neighbourhood First" and "Act East".²⁵

CONCLUSION

New Delhi could begin regarding BIMSTEC as an alternative to SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), whose progress is stalled by tensions involving Pakistan. This is particularly required at a time when China is seeking to draw in its net four of India's BIMSTEC's neighbouring partners—Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. It was perhaps in this context of this perceived necessity for India to provide a leadership to BIMSTEC that analyst C. Raja Mohan remarked that "the moment for turning the Bay of Bengal into a zone of regional cooperation may finally be with us."²⁶

In this context, fostering educational cooperation within the BIMSTEC can play a transformative role in enhancing people-to-people contact, as well as creating closer and more constructive regional links. New Delhi must recognise this and take corrective measures, so that the current share of 47,427 foreign students among the 37.4 million enrolled students in the country's higher education sector can be significantly increased, especially from the BIMSTEC countries.²⁷ The imperative is to make BIMSTEC a dynamic regional grouping whose successes can produce a multiplier impact on world politics. 

This brief is based on the findings of the research project on “Look East and Act East: Implication of Indian Foreign Policy” pursued at the Netaji Institute for Asian Studies, Kolkata.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Vivek Mishra, currently on lien from Netaji Institute for Asian Studies, Kolkata, is Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, Delhi. **Suranjan Das** is presently Vice-Chancellor, Jadavpur University, Kolkata and Honorary Director, Netaji Institute for Asian Studies.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Ancient Education System of India, NCERT., <http://ncert.nic.in/textbook/pdf/heih111.pdf> (Accessed July 02, 2020).
- 2 *All India Survey on Higher Education 2018-2019* (New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India 2019), see the section on `Key Results of the AISHE 2018-19, p. II. Available at: <http://aishe.nic.in/aishe/viewDocument.action;jsessionid=72316A7191B8C6929229CC4ABDD19C37?documentId=262> (Accessed July 02, 2020).
- 3 "Only three serving world leaders studied in India, compared to 58 in US". *Hindustan Times*. August 16, 2018. Available at: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/only-three-serving-world-leaders-studied-in-india-compared-to-58-in-us/story-W8yCiW8ZOtZVtQbv77Q9zH.html> (Accessed July 03, 2020).
- 4 V.P. Haran, `Challenges in India's Neighbourhood Policy', Distinguished Lectures. July 14, 2017. *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*. <https://www.mea.gov.in/distinguished-lectures-detail.htm?674> (Accessed July 03, 2020).
- 5 "India-Bhutan Relations". Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bhutan_March2017.pdf (Accessed July 04, 2020).
- 6 "PM lists space, education as new areas of cooperation with Bhutan". *Live Mint*. 18 Aug 2019. <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/pm-lists-space-education-as-new-areas-of-cooperation-with-bhutan-1566150339659.html> (Accessed July 04, 2020).
- 7 "Statement of Intent between the People's Republic of Bangladesh and the Republic of India on Educational Cooperation". High Commission of India in Dhaka, Bangladesh, https://www.hcidhaka.gov.in/pdf/Statement_of_Intent_between_Bangladesh_and_India_on_Education_Cooperation.pdf (Accessed July 04, 2020).
- 8 "Joint Declaration between Bangladesh and India during Visit of Prime Minister of India to Bangladesh- " Notun Projonmo – Nayi Disha"". June 07, 2015. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. https://mea.gov.in/bilateraldocuments.htm?dtl/25346/Joint_Declaration_between_Bangladesh_and_India_during_Visit_of_Prime_Minister_of_India_to_Bangladesh_quot_Notun_Projonmo_Nayi_Dishaquot (Accessed July 04, 2020); "India-Bangladesh Relations". *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Bangladesh_bilateral_brief_dec_2018.pdf (Accessed July 04, 2020).
- 9 "India-Myanmar Relations". Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, <https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/myanmar-july-2012.pdf> (Accessed July 05, 2020).
- 10 "India-Myanmar Joint Statement during the State Visit of the President of Myanmar to India (February 26-29, 2020)". Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. February 27, 2020, <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/32435/IndiaMyanmar+Joint+Statement+during+the+State+Visit+of+the+President+of+Myanmar+to+India+February+2629+2020> (Accessed July 05, 2020).

- 11 Tanu M. Goyal, "India's Development Assistance to Nepal: Case of the Education Sector"(New Delhi: Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, 2018) www.icrier.org/pdf/India_Nepal_Development_Assistance.pdf, (Accessed on 04/08/2020).
- 12 <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/26376/list+of+agreements+and+mous+exchanged+during+the+state+visit+of+prime+minister+of+nepal+to+india++february+20+2016>
- 13 <https://www.indembkathmandu.gov.in/page/about-education-and-scholarship/> (Accessed on 04/08/2020)
- 14 "India-Nepal Relations". Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Nepal_Bilateral_Brief_September_2019.pdf (Accessed July 05, 2020).
- 15 "India extends 30 million aid to Nepal to build educational institution". May 20, 2019, <https://www.jagranjosh.com/news/india-extends-30-million-aid-to-nepal-to-build-educational-institution-149217> (Accessed July 05, 2020).
- 16 "India-Sri Lanka Educational Relations". Consulate General of India, Hambantota, <https://www.cgihambantota.gov.in/eoi.php?id=educational-relations> (Accessed July 02, 2020).
- 17 <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/4087/IndiaSri+Lanka+Joint+Declaration>, accessed on 26 July 2020
- 18 "India, Sri Lanka step up cooperation in education, health sectors". February 6, 2016. India Writers Network. Also see <https://www.indiawrites.org/diplomacy/india-sri-lanka-step-up-cooperation-in-education-health-sectors/>; https://mea.gov.in/pressreleases.htm?dtl/26330/Visit_of_External_Affairs_Minister_to_Sri_Lanka_February_56_2016#:~:text=Visit%20of%20External%20Affairs%20Minister%20to%20Sri%20Lanka,9th%20Session%20of%20the%20India-Sri%20Lanka%20Joint%20Commission. (accessed on 26/7/2020)
- 19 <http://newdelhi.thaiembassy.org/en/education-cooperation-en/>, accessed on 26/07/2020, see the section on Cultural and P2P Cooperation.
- 20 "India-Thailand Cooperation". Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Thailand_Brief_Dec_2018.pdf (Accessed July 05, 2020).
- 21 "India, Thailand signed 2 agreements on cooperation in culture and education sectors". *Jagran Josh*. June 20, 2016,: <https://www.jagranjosh.com/current-affairs/india-thailand-signed-2-agreements-on-cooperation-in-culture-and-education-sectors-1466418124-1> (Accessed July 05, 2020).
- 22 <http://newdelhi.thaiembassy.org/en/1990/01/1st-meeting-of-thai-students-in-india/>, accessed 03 August 2020.
- 23 Shyam Saran, 'Forward', to *BIMSTEC: The Road Ahead* (Delhi: Research and Information System for Developing Countries, 2016)
- 24 Cited in Constantino Xavier, 'Bridging the Bay of Bengal: Toward a Stronger BIMSTEC' (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018), URL:<https://www.jstor>.

org/stable/resrep16974.6, p.7, downloaded 11 June 2020.

25 Cited in *ibid.*, p.10.

26 Cited in *ibid.*, p.8

27 *All India Survey on Higher Education 2018-19*, see the section on 'Key Results of the AISHE 2018-2019', p. II.



Ideas • Forums • Leadership • Impact

20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005.
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org