

Revitalising BIMSTEC through Cultural Connectivity from Northeast India

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ABSTRACT India's Northeast has often been described as the region where South Asia and Southeast Asia meet. Indeed, sharing much of its border with neighbouring countries, the northeastern states are economically and culturally integrated with Southeast Asia. This brief examines the role of India's Northeast in strengthening the country's relations with its partners in BIMSTEC (or the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral and Economic Cooperation). It makes the case for treating the northeast states as a starting point of India's BIMSTEC engagement, and in particular, through efforts that will nourish cultural connectivity.

Attribution: C. Joshua Thomas, "Revitalising BIMSTEC through Cultural Connectivity from Northeast India," *ORF Issue Brief No. 405*, October 2020, Observer Research Foundation.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, many analysts and scholars have devoted their time to studying the subject of regional and sub-regional integration. After all, the waves of regional and sub-regional cooperation have swept across the globe and are deserving of scrutiny. In Asia, in particular, the Greater Mekong Sub-Region (GMS), Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic Cooperation (BCIM) have attracted the attention of scholars across various disciplines in different countries.

However, there remains a paucity of research on the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), established in June 1997 to secure “rapid economic development” and accelerate “economic growth and social progresses” of the sub-region.¹ More than two decades since the group’s inception, stakeholders are facing the challenge of reinforcing BIMSTEC’s strengths while addressing its weaknesses, so that it can fulfill its mission more effectively.

For India, BIMSTEC has a significant role to play in its renewed ‘Look East to Act East’ policy, even as it also emphasises the centrality of the ASEAN in its relations with the countries of Southeast Asia. BIMSTEC received much needed support from Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his address during the 20th anniversary

of BIMSTEC, where he described the sub-regional grouping as “a natural platform” for fulfilling India’s key foreign policy priorities of Neighbourhood First and Act East. The group also got a new momentum in October 2016, when India hosted the BIMSTEC members at Goa during the BRICS Outreach Summit.² Such displays of India’s willingness to be a key pillar in BIMSTEC’s growth is viewed as a pragmatic step—merely a demonstration of its potential to play the role of a regional leader, which is an aspiration that had been instrumental in its decision to revitalise its ‘Look East’ policy to ‘Act East’.

This brief examines the role of India’s Northeast region (NER) in strengthening the country’s relations with its partners in BIMSTEC. To be sure, there have been rapid changes in the NER over the past two decades, with a multitude of stakeholders contributing to such transformations: the Union and state governments, the private sector, and non-government organisations have all played a part in the region’s growth in recent years, particularly in the infrastructure and connectivity in the ‘3R’s+1A’ (road, railways, river and air connectivity).³ Consequently, there has been increased attention on the region in recent years. Distinguished Indian diplomat, Ambassador Rajiv K. Bhatia once referred to NER as “where four countries – Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Myanmar - ‘meet’, and where South Asia and Southeast Asia also intersect.”⁴

The rest of this brief will discuss the challenges facing BIMSTEC, and outline a

set of recommendations for strengthening cultural connectivity amongst the member countries.

ONGOING CHALLENGES TO BIMSTEC'S GROWTH

BIMSTEC's seven countries around the Bay of Bengal are home to around 22 percent of the world's population. These countries recorded a combined GDP of US\$ 2.7 trillion in 2016, and have sustained average annual rates of growth between 3.4 and 7.5 percent from 2012-2016. One-fourth of the world's traded goods cross the Bay every year.⁵ Since the time of its birth, BIMSTEC has been viewed as having tremendous potential to promote the progress of cooperation, development, and peace in Asia. It can play a key role in nurturing regional common prosperity, connecting the people across the South Asian and Southeast Asian regions, and exploring the centuries-old economic and cultural linkages for economic and other benefits for the people of the region. In the process, the landlocked region could open up and transform into a *land-linked* region, providing huge developmental gains for the entire sub-region. BIMSTEC is an important vehicle for promoting regional cooperation and economic integration in a range of areas. As Shashi Tharoor, Member of Parliament, once described BIMSTEC: "(it) is a unique link between South-Asia and South-East Asia. From the very beginning, it has been considered a powerful mechanism to promote opportunities for trade, investment and tourism between these two regions.

Societies within BIMSTEC are pluralistic; our languages are rich and diverse and we have a shared cultural heritage."⁶

By sheer geography, India's Northeast region has served as the starting point of the country's engagements with BIMSTEC. There is a great deal of discussion on the principle of 'connectivity' in the context of the NER and its relations with India's immediate and extended neighbourhood. Connectivity encompasses various domains, including: physical, connectivity, connectivity, telecommunication and digital, and cultural connectivity.

'PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE' AS PILLAR OF A REVITALISED BIMSTEC

People-to-people engagements can play a pivotal role in deepening the relations between BIMSTEC countries. As Amb. Bhatia has argued, the current imperative for stronger regional cooperation is "diplomacy for development".⁷ Taking a cue from this, the following facets of diplomacy should be prioritised for the promotion of cultural connectivity amongst the BIMSTEC states.

a. Academic/Education Diplomacy

- Exchange of students to spend a number of weeks during school holidays to attend a counterpart educational institution in another BIMSTEC country, while staying with a host family.
- Exchange of research scholars from universities and research institutes.

- Strengthening institutional linkages with universities and other institutions of higher learning, research institutes, and think tanks.
- Organising joint research projects, seminars and conferences, to examine and discuss issues most relevant to fellow BIMSTEC countries.
- Exchange programmes for professionals like teachers, media practitioners, scientists, health workers, artists, entertainers, administrative officials, in a similar pattern as that of the International Visitors Programme of the United States.
- Medical relief projects.
- Language diplomacy: programmes to promote the learning of each other's languages should be explored.
- Capacity building, especially in strengthening human resource, by preparing them for opportunities that will open up in commerce, tourism, and service sectors.

b. Tourism Diplomacy

Close contacts amongst the people of BIMSTEC countries help in strengthening relationships by providing avenues for rediscovering shared roots, understanding common and different histories, and learning each other's cultures. M.P. Bezbaruah's work on tourism can be an eye opener.⁸ There are various aspects of

tourism that have the potential to bring the people of BIMSTEC countries closer, including: religious tourism; adventure tourism; heritage tourism; eco-tourism and wildlife; and medical tourism.

To facilitate increased rates of tourism, policymakers should prioritise the easing of requirements for obtaining visas, even perhaps implementing visa-free travel or visa-on-arrival schemes for certain destinations. Efforts need to be made to showcase India's Northeast as a tourism hub in order to create newer gateways for people-to-people contact which can prove instrumental in opening up the landlocked Northeast and driving its growth.

In 2017, the Union government set targets to double the tourism growth rate in the Northeastern states, from the 5.2 percent that they recorded between that year and 2020. Although the Ministry of Tourism has taken steps with BIMSTEC and ASEAN countries to devise packages to increase tourist inflow in India's Northeast, the results are yet to be seen. In 2017, the Northeastern states, combined, received 7.7 million domestic (Indian) tourists and 160,000 foreign tourists.

c. Festival Diplomacy

Pupul Jayagar's idea of organising a "Festival of India"⁹ in Europe may be a pointer. Such festivals can be organised in BIMSTEC countries more frequently, to showcase, for instance, the Northeast's food and cuisine, music, sports, films, and arts and craft. There are various examples of how, if given

the chance, elements of cultural life in the Northeastern countries can have a receptive audience in other countries. The Shillong Chamber Choir, for instance, has a wide following amongst music lovers across the globe.

Various cultural events of the people of the Northeast—like the *Hornbill festival* in Kohima, the *Sangai festival* in Imphal, and the *Cherry Bloom festival* of Shillong—will no doubt attract visitors from the BIMSTEC countries. During the period January 14- 27, 2017, the North-Eastern Council sponsored an event called North-East India Cultural Festival - *Namaste Nepal* at Kathmandu,¹⁰ which proved to be a great success in showcasing the cultures of the region. Similar initiatives can be organised periodically in the BIMSTEC countries to nurture deeper appreciation and understanding of each other's cultures.

d. Publications Diplomacy

There should be no let-up in the publication of a BIMSTEC Journal akin to the China Report published by the Institute for Chinese Studies (ICS) in New Delhi; or *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, by the ICWA, New Delhi; and also *Man and Society: A Journal of North-East Studies* of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, North Eastern Regional Centre (ICSSR-NERC) in Shillong. The BIMSTEC Secretariat should be more proactive in making innovations to these publications, and devise ways by which to disseminate

them widely. It could explore channels for seeking the cooperation of leading think tanks in the member countries.

e. Health and Medical Diplomacy

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the fragilities of most countries' health systems; this is also true for India and its fellow BIMSTEC states. India should connect its Northeast region to the BIMSTEC states in the area of health and medicine.

A WAY FORWARD

BIMSTEC is now two decades old, and important reforms are overdue in various aspects of institutions, policies, and sectoral thrusts. In the process of implementing these transformative measures, the group must build the BIMSTEC brand by expanding the arc of public awareness regarding not only its role in the subregion, but also its requirements. Although many have often dismissed BIMSTEC as little more than a “talk-shop” that accomplishes little concrete action, its potential cannot be altogether ignored.

India's Northeast region could play a significant role in the country's relations with South East Asia, and with regional groups such as ASEAN and BIMSTEC. The Northeast has long been viewed as strategically important with regards to India's Act East Policy. Thus, it should be treated as the starting point of India's ASEAN and BIMSTEC engagement.¹¹

Further, BIMSTEC can act as a bridge between SAARC and ASEAN. For example, Bengal-Bangkok connectivity can create a whole new economic, social and cultural paradigm. Bangladesh and Myanmar can be accommodated to share the benefits of such arrangements. In such an arrangement, Northeast India would benefit immensely. Further, it is expected to boost commerce, connectivity and culture in the ASEAN-India trade area, as well as with the rest of South East Asia, more particularly with Vietnam's East-West Economic Corridor.

BIMSTEC and Northeast India should nurture a symbiotic relationship that would bring mutual benefits through the various endeavours that are carried out by them. Because of the regions' shared cultural and historical ties, this subregional organisation should work in a manner that will lead to gains for all stakeholders coming under its purview. People-to-people contacts, or cultural connections, are significant elements in the trust-building required to take BIMSTEC forward.

BIMSTEC regional cooperation has the potential to promote growth in South Asia and South East Asia. Despite all the expected advantages, however, the relationship between India's Northeastern region and the BIMSTEC countries has yet to reach its full potential owing to various factors such as weak connectivity, lack of development in the region, and the challenges posed by security-related issues. To create such a symbiotic relationship, all the governments in the region should


develop a coordinated approach towards BIMSTEC. For India, in particular, if all the eight states in the NE region are to be integrated into the BIMSTEC, then the initiative has to come from the people of the region. This will facilitate greater political will to commit themselves and their people to the need for greater integration with their BIMSTEC neighbours.

CONCLUSION

The Government of India should consider with renewed interest the BIMSTEC, BBIN and BCIM groupings as avenues for the development of the region. To be sure, the BCIM subregional initiative appears to have been relegated to the backburner. However, the other two, BIMSTEC and BBIN, continue to be treading in the right direction. Together they can help synergise relations between India and BIMSTEC countries and develop the landlocked peripheries and make them a land-linked, prosperous region.

As B.G. Verghese, an erudite scholar on India's Northeast, once wrote: "A border is not a dead end but marks a cultural, economic and environmental zone, a continuum divided by a political boundary. Culturally and ethnically, the Northeast is truly a part of South East Asia. This logic should drive Policy."¹² BIMSTEC provides an excellent opportunity for India to deliver development, peace, progress and prosperity to its landlocked, peripheral Northeastern region. Certainly, BIMSTEC could be a potential game-changer as

countries in the subregion, along with the Northeast, are bound by geography and linked by history and heritage. This should enable India to invest more intensely in its policy with BIMSTEC. Further, for the

Northeast to play a bigger role in India's Act East Policy, as it should, connectivity projects must be implemented as a priority. 'Act East' will need to look *through* the Northeast. 

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ENDNOTES

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- 2 Suhasini Haider, "BIMSTEC a Sunny Prospect in BRICS Summit at Goa," *The Hindu*, October 15, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/south-asia/BIMSTEC-a-sunny-prospect-in-BRICS-summit-at-Goa/article16072254.ece>.
- 3 The Union and State governments have taken various initiatives for the overall development of the Northeastern states, like the transformational infrastructure project – the Bogibeel Bridge, rail-cum-road Bridge at 4.94 km. This bridge facilitates the quick movement of vehicles and economy access for the people of Dhemaji to Dibrugarh in the state of Assam. It also provides direct connectivity from Dibrugarh to Itanagar and its railway track will reduce the travel distance by 705 km. It was inaugurated on 25 December 2018. (See, *The Assam Tribune*, 25 December 2018). The renewed thrust on India's Act East Policy and on ASEAN has given the region an important position in India's foreign policy. Further, the 'NITI Forum for North East' was constituted in February 2020 to ensure sustainable economic growth of the region, as outlined in five development missions for promoting sectors like, horticulture, tourism, food processing, bamboo-based handicraft, and medium-scale industries with focus on 'Make in Northeast'. The focus of these development projects, according to NITI forum, is the concept of HIRA –Highways, Internet ways, Railways and Airways. (See, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/policy/niti-outlines-five-development-missions-for-northeast/articleshow/63698967.cms?from=mdr>).
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- 5 BIMSTEC, *The Road Ahead*, op.cit.
- 6 Shashi Tharoor, Keynote address at the international seminar on North-East and BIMSTEC- A Retrospect" held at ICSSR-NERC & NEHU, Shillong. 9th April 2010, <https://hcidhaka.gov.in/che?id=eyJpdil6Ik5UaEUwNGJyTHhrakhHV0VJdnZuakE9PSIsInZhbHVlIjojOTFHcUlxb1hScjBRbjdraGlMS0tyUT09IiwibWFjIjojNGM3MjczNDMwN2YyMDhiMjAzYzYzN2YwMGlwN2I2OTdiMGUzZGM0ODU2ZDRhNGE2NzQ5MWI1YjhlMWU3MmN>.
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- 8 M.P. Bezbaruah was a civil servant from Northeast and headed the department of tourism at the Government of India. He wrote widely on issues related to the promotion of tourism in Northeast India, and his book, *Indian Tourism Beyond the Millennium* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1999) is widely referred to by the government.
- 9 Pupul Jayakar (1915 – 1997) was a distinguished cultural activist and writer, best known for her work on the revival of traditional and village arts, handloom, and handicraft in post-

independence India. She organised a series of Indian arts festivals in the 1980s in France, the US and Japan that helped popularize Indian arts in the West. She was a founder and trustee of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) (1985), and the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) (1990). See, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pupul_Jayakar

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