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Vision of Act East & 20 Years of Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC)

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Webinar Outcome

Document

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Building on Ancient Ties for New Prosperity



The vision for the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), to use to a very apt description of India's relationship with this region and the wider ASEAN area made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in an exclusive interview he had given to the Bangkok Post in 2019, is "Building on ancient ties for new prosperity."

With this rich and unique region India has always had deep civilisational bonds and a resilient and ever-renewing cultural contact. This relationship was a mutually enriching partnership, it was multidimensional - cultural, commercial, economic and spiritual. Prime Minister Modi himself best describes it:

It is well-known that India's is an ancient civilisation with enormous richness and diversity. Till a few hundred years ago, India contributed a major chunk of global growth. It has contributed to the development of science, literature, philosophy, art and architecture. In doing all this, it did not seek to dominate others but built lasting ties across seas and oceans.

This past potential and commitment to collective prosperity has now again renewed itself into a commitment for global growth and development, as Prime Minister Modi observed, "Today, India is one of the largest contributors to global economic growth and development. The people of India have amply demonstrated that they are second to none, if they get the right environment policies that enable them to realise their true potential."

The driving aim therefore of the MGC platform is to keep renewing that commitment and to develop wider partnership and engagement frameworks. Prime Minister Modi described the MGC framework equally eloquently and succinctly when he said, that:

India has a long history of maritime, trade, cultural and civilisational links with the countries of the region. In today's world, we have renewed these links and forged new regional partnerships. The establishment of the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation initiative 19 years ago is one such step... There is ample scope for the multifarious regional groupings in the Mekong sub-region to harmoniously coexist and seek synergy for progress and prosperity of the region and also its external partners.

The vision thus is to seek "synergy for progress and prosperity" for the region and also that beyond it.

The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) was launched in Lao PDR in 2000 by five countries of the Mekong subregion, namely, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, and India, connecting civilizations across Ganga and Mekong rivers. MGC has completed 20 years of its establishment. Former Indian Prime Minister late Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee referring to the MGC had emphatically stated that "We recognize the pragmatic logic of pursuing specific socio-economic goals in the region through sub-regional groupings. We therefore strongly support Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, bringing together Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and India" (Annual Singapore Lecture, April 9, 2002).

At the 10th MGC ministerial meeting last August (2019) India's External Affairs Minister, Dr S. Jaishankar, had observed that "The MGC is as much a celebration of our long and rich history of trade, cultural and people-to-people exchanges as it is a vehicle to advance modern day cooperation to bring progress and prosperity to our peoples." This continues to be the MGC's uniqueness, a sub-regional platform committed to rejuvenating civilisational ties while moving towards a multi-dimensional and modern cooperative framework.

In the last two decades, MGC has delivered many path-breaking initiatives, particularly in the area of people-to-people linkages. The Coronavirus pandemic has brought the MGC countries together to cope up with the new challenges and revival of the economy. We strongly believe together MGC countries can scale new heights and deliver more regional benefits and that therefore there is a continuous need to keep discussing the various dimensions and possibilities of this very interesting framework.

This international webinar organised by Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation (SPMRF) entitled “Vision of Act East and 20 Years of Mekong-Ganga Cooperation” was thus an effort to further engage, assess and explore the MGC initiative in its twentieth year. Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee, statesman, educationist, parliamentarian par-excellence and free India’s first Minister for Industry was a visionary advocate of the Asian century. In his role as the President of the Mahabodhi Society of India, Dr Mookerjee had undertaken a dynamic outreach to the MGC region and had received wide support and had elicited positive response. In Prime Minister Modi’s articulation and vision of the Asian century one perceives the strands of that vision – a vision which promotes cooperation, compassion, commitment and emphasises growth, prosperity and progress for all in the region.

I am grateful to all the speakers and participants of this international webinar, especially to Dr Vinay Sahasrabuddhe, Member of Parliament and President, Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) for delivering the keynote address. I am especially grateful to Dr Prabir De, Head, ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), RIS at New Delhi for his unstinting support, cooperation and inputs for making this webinar a success. With his wide and deep knowledge of the region, with his intensive study of the various dimensions and aspects of the countries of this region, Dr De is a veritable repository and his work in shaping the narrative of the webinar has proved crucial in giving it a direction and a purpose.

Dr Anirban Ganguly

Director

Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation, New Delhi

Webinar Summary

The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) initiative, launched in Vientiane, Lao PDR, in 2000, turned twenty in 2020. To commemorate two decades of MGC, the Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation (SPMRF) organised a webinar on the theme “Vision of Act East and 20 Years of Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) on July 20, 2020. The webinar, attended by over 150 participants, reviewed the MGC’s achievements and its recommendations for strengthening the initiative over the next decade. The major recommendations were as follows:

1. There is a pressing need for the government to expand media outreach by both the government and the private sector. The aim would be to beam television and radio signals across the region (although this approach is required for other regions too) with content designed to contribute to mainstream discourse in target country or countries. Such content must be developed in the local language with the help of local scholars/journalists to enhance appeal among common people.
2. This is the right time to project India’s soft power and exploit the dent to China’s international image on account of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in the region. The perception issue as regards to India’s regional economic partnership capabilities with countries like China can be addressed through effective media outreach. Our media needs to be more proactive in projecting India’s massive assistance commitment in the region to capture local imagination.
3. The involvement of local journalists/scholars in developing content would help strengthen people-to-people relationships and generate fresh ideas for our cooperation programme as the wider community gets included in the feedback loop. It would also help in preparing content keeping local sensitivities in mind.

4. Need for improved joint collaboration in the arts, culture, literature and philosophy to facilitate exploration of own national identities. A lot can be done through inexpensive IT and “virtual” interactions amongst scholars and artists. For example, the Angkor Vat temple restoration work can be developed into a process through inter-disciplinary/inter-domain efforts, to bring alive the socio-economic and political life of those times, greatly attracting local, Indian and other foreign tourists.
5. There is huge scope for deploying modern museological techniques and methods such as “virtual reality” models and GPS-enabled historical/general commentaries about tourist sites, urban centres, etc. Similarly, there are dance forms, inexhaustible reserves of folk tales, versions of the Ramayana, etc., which provide scope for close artistic/intellectual interaction, cross-fertilisation of art forms and aesthetics, and philosophies. Such interactions will generate scholarly output and popular culture products of wider appeal to communities in MGC countries.
6. Upgrading of ministerial meetings to the summit level. A meeting of MGC countries at the heads of state/government level would strategically be a significant step forward.
7. Joint interdisciplinary projects involving scholars of all MGC countries could be undertaken to study migration patterns in the historical context.
8. India should renovate monuments at historical places (Buddhist monasteries, temples, etc.), wherever located to intensify pilgrimage tourism. For example, the Myanmar monastery in Sravasti, or the Central Kolkata Monastery and the House on Merchant Street in Yangon where Rabindranath Tagore stayed during his second visit in 1924 could be renovated.
9. Considering Bengal’s rich historical relationship with Myanmar, it is proposed that a Myanmar Centre (with lecture programmes, cultural performances, social interactions, etc.) should be established in Kolkata.

10. The MGC Plan of Action (2019-2022) envisages water resources management as an important area of cooperation. Future efforts in this direction would require a stronger coordination mechanism. There is a strategic significance to this also which the MGC should not ignore. The Mekong region like the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna region is a lower riparian region and the common upper riparian country is China. It will be helpful to think about a lower riparian coalition of countries for harmonisation and management of river water policies, develop legal and regulatory water regimes and where possible put diplomatic pressure on upstream China to engage in fresh dialogue for cooperation on water issues.
11. A thorough understanding of the river delta's long-term dynamic is, therefore, crucial for informed management of water resources. It is, therefore, critical that both regions exchange knowledge on deltas and gain international attention.
12. Vietnam and Cambodia see water management of the Mekong River as a priority. In the case of water management in the Mekong region, the US, Japan and Australia have joined the forum. India may consider joining or establishing a multilateral mechanism on water management in the Mekong region where it can be a development partner.
13. In the field of archaeology and heritage conservation, India has demonstrated a commitment for assistance and collaboration – notably at Angkor Wat (1986-1993) and Ta Prohm in Cambodia, and My Son in Central Vietnam. These collaborations need to be made more visible through digital documentation. Such assistance should be extended to more areas with the help of advanced technological innovations and sharing such as non-invasive LiDAR, etc.
14. Collaboration in higher education needs to be increased substantially to make it possible for students from other countries to study in Indian universities, at least in areas such as archaeology, history, art history, heritage conservation, etc. Faculty and student exchange programmes need to be promoted further for lasting impact.

15. The digital turn in Museum Education, Exhibition and Outreach needs to be exploited. Despite a rich repertoire of objects, monuments and archives, India is yet to host an exhibition of art objects from the Mekong-Ganga region to highlight shared cultures. Such an exhibition and scholarly engagement in the form of publications and academic exchange would undoubtedly generate greater interest among the younger generation to understand the potential of engaging more deeply with each other.
16. Shared histories of colonisation, decolonisation, independence and post-independence also means shared problems in the heritage domain such as theft of antiquities out the country and the consequent need for legal intervention to facilitate repatriation of antiquities. MGC countries should jointly strengthen related laws and policies towards this end.
17. Greater communication by opening up corridors of connectivity is necessary to take relations forward. Of equal necessity is the involvement of experts in training and exchange of human resource for promoting religious and cultural tourism across the region.
18. Lao PDR and Cambodia are yet to receive projects under the Quick Impact Project (QIP) from India. India should invest (all kinds) in these two countries to counter-balance China. Joint projects with the US, South Korea, Japan and Australia should be considered.
19. India should join Japan and others to improve road connectivity from India's Northeast region to countries in the Mekong-Ganga region and the Southern Economic Corridor. Timely completion of the Trilateral Highway and its extension towards Mekong would strengthen the MGC.
20. We need greater understanding and collaboration between universities or the think tanks through studies, language training, short term scholarships, faculty exchange, etc.
21. MGC has a common heritage. There is a lot that India can share with them in the field of democracy and federalism in particular. Myanmar is struggling

with federalism and we can really share and help. At the same time there is so much we can learn from these countries in terms of water management, MSME, etc.

22. Barring Thailand, most MGC countries (pre-Covid phase) are not directly connected with India. Air connectivity in MGC must be improved.
23. Countries are undergoing paradigm shifts in the way of doing business. For example, there is a great opportunity for Indian exports to Mekong countries to diversify into areas such as health (medical) products, climate-smart goods and services, pharmaceuticals, technology products and services, eco-friendly automobiles, digitally-traded services, etc. in addition to existing items like minerals, chemical products, and electrical machinery (accounting for over 50 percent of total exports to ASEAN). Similarly, there is an opportunity for MGC countries to attract businesses away from China given the emerging geopolitical scenario.
24. No country can fight the pandemic single-handedly and, therefore, there is a need for a coordinated and cooperative response. Overall, the new normal calls for a shift in the understanding and nuances of how to strengthen cooperation and collaboration by leveraging each other's, as well as situational, opportunities, leading to higher prosperity and stability for MGC countries.
25. MGC countries must encourage language training. For example, in India, in several universities we have departments of French, Mandarin, Japanese and other languages, but no department of 'Bhasa Indonesia'. So this is required and, therefore, we need to bring language into consideration so that there are departments of ASEAN or Mekong country-related languages in India and also Indian languages are taught in those countries.
26. Countries face similar challenges in governance and, therefore, we must encourage knowledge creation in areas of governance.

27. There is less knowledge about Southeast Asia's influence on Indian language, literature, fine arts, culinary, patterns of agriculture, or any other activities that constitute part of the way of life of the people. There is a need for joint research on those aspects by scholars from India and those countries to get a holistic and balanced approach to those issues.
28. MGC countries can develop a programme for exchange of teachers, students and youth leaders and link it up with schools, colleges and universities in each other's country as part of their cultural exchange initiatives to build better understanding with each other.
29. India must explore the possibility of exchanging technologies related textiles. India has organised textile exhibitions and cultural activities to emphasise common cultural traditions and revive old linkages, including helping to build an Asian Traditional Textile Museum (ATTM) in Siem Reap. By synthesising each other's traditions and techniques, it would be worthwhile to create a common motif and present to the world a MGC model of textile printing, besides evolving a mechanism by which it can be marketed jointly as a symbol of common heritage and joint ownership.
30. Similarly, each of the MGC countries has a common Ramayana tradition, but sometimes quite distinct from each other. An attempt can be made to craft a common Ramayana Ballet and present it as the MGC Ramayana Ballet where each country participating in this venture feels equal and can show the world a new form of regional cooperation and capacity-building.
31. The idea of a common Archival Resource Centre at Nalanda University as part of the Action Plan is also quite laudatory and it can be complemented by opening branches in all member countries so that they can also have some common archival materials and do not need to travel to Nalanda to have access to them. This would involve providing training to archivists, and build their capacities to enable them to avail the best practices in the preservation of historical and cultural monuments.

32. Cooperation in the field of print, electronic and digital media is an indispensable element for fostering mutual understanding. Media can explore commonalities and bring communities closer, promote good neighbourly relations and meaningful cooperation among MGC countries which are bound by ties of history and culture.
33. Training foreign journalists in India should be encouraged. It will allow them to experience the country's full complexity, and thus, ensure more objectivity and consideration when they portray India to their audiences. By coming into contact with journalists of a guest country, Indian journalists can acquire a better understanding of complexities and sensitivities and identify areas that need capacity building and training.
34. One innovative measure India can take to promote cultural and religious tourism is to organise an annual event on the birthday of Lord Buddha in Bodh Gaya and in other Buddhist circuits, giving adherents of Buddhism an opportunity to have religious experiences that could bring them culturally and emotionally closer to India. To organise such an annual event, infrastructures like connectivity, hotels and various other services would have to be improved. Private players and tour operators should be incentivised to undertake such infrastructure projects once they have the confidence to know that such initiatives will have not only economic dividends, but also employment opportunities for local people.
35. A significant part of culture is education, which needs to be given higher priority than any other kind of cooperation that exists between these countries. While the Action Plan highlights promotion of training in the traditional system of medicine (Ayurveda, Homeopathy, Unani and naturopathy) as well as Yoga, emphasis should be given to cooperation in fields like technology, space, engineering and information technology. This can contribute to capacity-building and prepare the youth in those countries to face the modern world and solve social, political and economic problems.

36. India should project itself as an alternative destination for higher education and open some of its leading institutions of learning and universities to attract bright students from MGC countries. India is much cheaper compared to Western countries, both in terms of fees and cost of living. The quality of education in some of our institutions, including in some private-run ones, is as good as in many western universities.
37. Efforts should be made to expand people-to-people interactions not only at the official level, but also other levels such as the youth and the student community to get a better understanding and appreciate each other's culture and way of life. Most universities and some schools have annual educational tours. With better connectivity and direct flights it should not be very difficult for our students as well as theirs to travel to each other's country, as the distance is not much. India can work with MGC countries to introduce a discount air fare for such exchange programmes. The benefit would be much more than the costs.
38. The next POA of the MGC should consider (i) Conducting a mid-term review on the Plan of Actions; (ii) Promote people-centred and culture-driven development cooperation and (iii) Invest more in public health and cooperation between SMEs.

Annotated Transcript of Webinar

The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) initiative, launched in Vientiane, Lao PDR, in 2000, has turned twenty in 2020. To commemorate two decades of MGC, the Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation (SPMRF) organised a Webinar entitled “Vision of Act East and 20 Years of Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) on July 20, 2020. This webinar, attended by over 150 participants, reviewed the MGC’s achievements of the last two decades and designed a strategy to strengthen it for the next decade.

Participants were welcomed by Dr Anirban Ganguly, Director, SPMRF, New Delhi. The event was chaired by Prof. Baladas Ghosal, Secretary General, Society of Indian Ocean Studies (SIOS) and former Dean of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi. Dr Vinay Sahasrabuddhe, Member of Parliament, and President, Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), New Delhi, delivered the keynote address, while Shri Shakti Sinha, Hon. Director, Atal Bihari Vajpayee Institute of Policy Research & International Studies, MS University, Baroda, delivered the valedictory address. The panel discussion was addressed by senior scholars from the MGC region.



Dr Vinay Sahasrabudde

I may bring it to the notice of the participants that this year in a way is a very special year because we will be celebrating the 100th death anniversary of Lokmanya Tilak, a freedom fighter or rather the father of Indian Renaissance, who was imprisoned and kept for six long years in Mandalay in Myanmar where he wrote the Gita Rahasya, and, therefore, this year for all of us, it is a special year.

Since Lokmanya Tilak was in Mandalay, I believe that makes today's discussion more relevant. At the same time, many of you are aware that when the Britishers imprisoned former royal rulers in Myanmar (when the country used to be known as Burma) they were kept in Ratnagiri in Maharashtra, which is also associated with the life of Lokmanya Tilak.

While the Act East Policy (has) focused on covering wider areas than just ASEAN, I mean right at the beginning of the activist policy, it was very clear, and, it now fits with the change of narrative from East Asia to Indo-Pacific also, all those students of world affairs, I am sure are conscious of this as it lays greater emphasis on defence and security cooperation with the nations of the east than any time before without compromising on the classic triad of commerce, culture and connectivity, that is, socio-economic and cultural cooperation, which in a way, is the mainstay of Ganga- Mekong cooperation.

The policy has a stronger focus as I understand on the role of the northeast region which is also very remarkable in building relations with the ASEAN. Maybe some of us are aware that it was very recently, I mean after 2014, that direct international flights were started between Guwahati and Bangkok and, therefore, especially in the CLMV (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam) component, this is acknowledged widely as well.

In this context, questions such as the place of Bangladesh in active policy, the understandable tendency to view Myanmar both as an immediate neighbour and as a Southeast Asian nation, and the enhanced investment in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technological and Economic Cooperation, which is popularly known as BIMSTEC, as a platform, I think these are things of common knowledge and we need not emphasize very elaborately on them.

The replacement of the word ‘Look’ by ‘Act’ has sent out a very important signal that, at the higher level, the emphasis is on implementation and not just on adopting a particular policy perspective, but, basically working on implementing, translating it into reality and, therefore, I think that ‘Act East Policy’ certainly opens a new chapter in so far as India’s relations with all our eastern neighbours are concerned.

I understand as a student of international relations that there are three components of this ‘Act East Policy’, or in a way, the Mekong cooperation and, I believe, that all three require some kind of periodic review, which I am sure diplomats must be undertaking from time to time.

The first one is, of course, culture, then, of course, there are other components like for example, tourism, education and, everybody knows about it, but what I would like to emphasize here since we are reviewing the MGC after two decades, that we need to add certain new dimensions to this MGC as well.

Let me, before I reflect on that, bring it to the notice that cultural and civilisational linkages between India and the Mekong countries, which is certainly very critical and, in a way, it also provides us the foundation for further cooperation. Both the Ganga and Mekong are civilisational rivers and the MGC initiative aims to facilitate closer contacts among the people inhabiting across the two major river basins.

Probably no other country has had such strong links with the Mekong region as much as India by way of religion, language, culture and importantly, civilisation. People in Southeast Asia seem to enjoy the treasure of feelings of this closeness, this proximity because of the sharing.

As I said, we share the ethos as well as the cultural influence which (has) flowed both ways. I must emphasize here that in enriching India's shared geographical and cultural traditions, Southeast Asia has also contributed.

On the one hand, Mekong countries and India inhabit a shared geographical and cultural space, while, on the other, each country retains its distinctiveness and unique identity. It is this celebration of unity and diversity which underlines the Mekong-Ganga Corporation (MGC).

As all of us understand, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, two great epics that originated in India, (has) had a strong influence in the entire Mekong region, and not just Mekong region, but other regions in Southeast Asia as well. I am happy to share here that immediately after the MGC was taken to a different level with the 'Act East Policy' adopted by the government under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, immediately thereafter, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) took upon itself to organise the Ramayana festival every year.

Since 2015, every year dozens of troupes from all ASEAN countries have been coming to India for the performance. Of course, the Mekong countries are a part of that and presenting Ramayana-related dance performances and they have become extremely popular. In fact, last year, we took them to other places also, including, of course, Ayodhya, where they had a grand performance right at the birthplace of Lord Rama, and, therefore, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata provide us a very important kind of bridge between India and Southeast Asia.

The popularity and influence of these epics, I believe, has no geographical limitations as such, and, therefore, with this kind of a setting which has been there for the mutual cooperation between the Mekong countries, I believe sky is the only limit.

Therefore, I would suggest that apart from the often discussed issues like cultural cooperation, cooperation in tourism, cooperation in education and all those features, including public health and traditional medicine, agriculture, water resources management, I believe there are certain areas which require additional emphasis and I am just bringing these areas to your notice for your consideration before I conclude.

Before elaborating on those areas, let me emphasize here that when the foundation is in culture, in a traditional system for multi-country agreements or platforms for cooperation, simply we cannot depend upon government machinery and, therefore, I believe what is required here is that we need to strengthen our diplomacy.

Therefore, the MGC countries need to evolve a mechanism to facilitate the greater involvement of the private sector. Simply by signing papers in government corridors and exchanging documents, and then making some proclamations and announcements, we are not going to move further. It will have to be from people-to-people angle, we must encourage these kinds of initiatives from the people, handled by the people, managed by the people.

The challenges that we face in India and the challenges that are being faced by Mekong countries, there are huge number of similarities and, therefore, if we identify those areas where we can really convert our development diplomacy into some kind of a regular mechanism of exchange of people.

As there was a reference of exchange of technologies, there are relics of the ancient times and we know what kind of historical value they have, whether they are temples or all other things which maybe millennia old and there comes the importance of the science of conservation of these historical monuments.

And, recently, I am aware that the Government of India has engaged with several countries through a kind of technology manpower know how insofar as conservation of archaeological sites for these historical monuments are concerned. So, these are new areas and we can definitely move further.

Before I conclude, three areas which I believe are critical. First, we must encourage language training. For example in India, in several universities we have Departments of French, Mandarin, Japanese and several other languages we teach, but, I do not find any Department of 'Bhasa Indonesia'.

So this is required and, therefore, we need to bring language also into our consideration so that there are Departments of ASEAN or Mekong country-related languages being taught in India and also Indian languages taught in those countries.

At the same time when it comes to culture, there are new vistas which we need to definitely touch upon and there was a reference in Prof. Ghoshal's address before to have or explore the possibility of exchanging technologies related to textiles. I am happy to make a mention over here that the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) has decided to commemorate the 150th birth anniversary of Father of Nation Mahatma Gandhi through organising an assembly of Asian artisans, especially those who are working in the sectors of textile and pottery in Varanasi sometime in the month of October. Of course, this with 19 related issues are there.

If we are not able to do it in October 2020, we must try to organise it before the end of this financial year. We will have at least 100 artisans coming from Asian countries and the focus will be of course Southeast Asia, sharing their knowledge, their technologies and also exploring areas where we can hold each other's hands; tap new markets and understand the rich artistic traditions from India and the Mekong countries.

I believe culture is not just about music and dance. All other aspects of culture are also required to be brought forward with greater emphasis on our agenda. So this is the second area, and, the third of course, is governance, because in the governance sector also, most of these countries are facing similar challenges and, therefore, there are mechanisms.

For example, during the last six years, the Government of India has ensured what is known as last mile delivery. I would say these kinds of mechanisms which the government has thoughtfully cultivated, whether it is welfare programmes or any other programmes through direct benefit transfer mechanisms.

I think all these definitely contribute to the process of knowledge creation in the areas of governance. I am sure similar efforts are happening in Mekong countries as well and we need to learn from each other's experiences, and that is how we can definitely add great value to the governance mechanisms in these countries. I am sure, as I said, sky is the limit, many more areas also could be discussed but these are the three principal areas which I think are required to be given some priority. Once again, I thank the organisers for allowing me to share my thoughts.



Prof. Baladas Ghoshal

To assess the achievements, challenges and future agenda in the 20th year of the existence of Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC), it is important to look at the goals and objectives set forth by the members of the organisation.

Without going too much backward, it would be worthwhile to focus on the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) Plan of Action (2019-2022) that was adopted on 2 August, 2019 after a review of its past actions. The Plan of Action implements the goals and objectives of the MGC Partnership for the next three years (2019-2022) by laying out activities to be undertaken by all parties to further deepen and enhance cooperation in the MGC priority sectors, including tourism and culture, education, public health and traditional medicine, agriculture and allied sectors, transport and communication, MSMEs and water resources management.

The objective obviously is to build capacities in the member countries that require support, synergy and cooperation in areas that strike a chord and resonate with the people, particularly the youth, who are going to be the future leaders and major actors in every sphere of life.

Any cooperation to be meaningful and beneficial to the recipients, has to involve areas that contribute directly to their overall social, cultural, political and economic development, or indirectly prepares them to avail those capacities that help them to achieve those goals.

The Action Plan identifies valuable and important areas of cooperation, contains pragmatic measures to fulfil them. In my exposition, I will not repeat them or deal with areas in which other panellists have greater expertise than mine. I will focus specifically in the areas of cultural and educational cooperation that can improve both the quantity and quality of cooperation and widen its breadth and depth.

Before I do that, I need to stress an important fact of diffusion of culture, which is never a one-way traffic, the arrow moves both ways. It may be a fact that there has been a greater diffusion of Indian culture in the countries of Southeast Asia, including the member countries of MGC, but the contribution of the recipients in improvising that culture to make it more familiar and relevant to the local societies cannot be underestimated.

Many other scholars have laboured on that point. For another, there is less knowledge about Southeast Asia's influence on Indian language, literature, fine arts, culinary, patterns of agriculture, or any other activities that constitute part of the way of life of the people.

That leads me to the need for joint research on those aspects by scholars from India and from those countries to get a holistic and a balanced approach on those issues. That is first recommendation.

Second, while we speak about cultural cooperation between India and the member countries, those are driven basically at the level of inter-governmental cooperation and quite inadequate at the level of people-to-people, business-to-business, academics-to-academics, journalists and civil society-to-civil society interactions, resulting in a wide gap of knowledge about each other's people and their societies in the contemporary period.

This gap needs to be filled in to have a better understanding of each other, to be able to appreciate their orientation and capacities. There are number of ways this gap can be reduced for fruitful interaction and create a niche for India-MGC countries cooperation.

One of the ways it can be done is to follow the ASEAN practice at the initial stages, which was to build greater understanding of each other through academic and student exchange programmes under which teachers from one (country) could go on a visiting assignment to another and teach in their universities, including a special course on the country of his origin, helping recipient countries not only to know more about another country and its perspectives, but also to knowing each other better and develop academic cooperation and collaboration.

For the ASEAN, however, the Ford Foundation supported this programme financially for a number of years. The MGC countries can approach either the Japan Foundation or any of the European foundations dealing with regional cooperation to support such a programme initially to give it a start and undertake the obligation to support such initiatives by themselves.

Additionally, the MGC countries can develop a programme for exchange of students and youth leaders and link it up with schools, colleges and universities in each other's country as part of their cultural exchange initiatives and build a better understanding of each other.

India has organised textile exhibitions and cultural activities to emphasise common cultural traditions and revive the old linkages that helped build an Asian Traditional Textile Museum (ATTM) in Siem Reap. By synthesising each other's traditions and techniques, it would be worthwhile to create a common motif and present to the world a MGC model of textile printing and also evolve a mechanism by which it can be marketed jointly as a symbol of common heritage and joint ownership.

Similarly, each of the MGC countries has a common Ramayana tradition, but sometimes, quite distinct from each other. An attempt can be made to craft a common Ramayana Ballet and present it as the MGC Ramayana Ballet where each country participating in this venture feels equal and can show the world a new form of regional cooperation and capacity-building.

The idea of a common Archival Resource Centre at Nalanda University as part of the Action Plan is also quite laudatory and can be complemented by opening branches in all member countries so that they can also have some common archival materials and do not need to travel to Nalanda to access them. This would involve providing training to the archivists; build their capacities, to enable them to avail best practices in the preservation of historical and cultural monuments.

One of the Action Plan goals is cooperation in the field of radio and television broadcasting through the exchange of content and programmes; exchange of

personnel for training purposes, sharing of technical experience and expertise, and production of documentaries that enable promotion of cultural tourism among MGC countries.

Cooperation in the field of print, electronic and digital media is an indispensable element in fostering mutual understanding, by exploring commonalities and bringing communities closer; promote good neighbourly relations and meaningful cooperation among member states which are bound by ties of history and culture.

Training foreign journalists in India allows them to experience the country's full complexity, thus ensuring more objectivity and consideration when they portray India to their audiences. By coming into contact with journalists of the guest country, it also helps Indian journalists to understand them better; to appreciate their complexities and sensitivities and the areas where they need capacity building and training.

China uses such training programmes to its full advantage in promoting their soft power diplomacy in countries of Asia and Africa. In an article in the China Daily in August 2016 titled "China Boosts Soft Power by Training Foreign Journalists," it narrates how leading journalism schools in China train journalists from other countries and particularly, how the Communication University of China (CUC) provides practical training in new and innovative techniques such as media convergence, big data, smart solutions and next generation network technology. The lectures are in English.

To quote a beneficiary of the programme: "On a recent Saturday morning in Beijing, Win Tin, 66, a veteran journalist from Myanmar, was enthralled by a lecture at the Communication University of China on the setting up of a digital studio, from floor layouts to overhead light temperatures to software. Two months ago, Tin, with 25 years of experience in journalism, started an online news outlet, Northern Light Media, but realised he knew little about online media. So he jumped at the offer to join a 10-day media workshop provided by the university's China-ASEAN Centre of Training that targets media executives and journalists from Southeast Asian countries."

Beijing regularly invites journalists from the countries of Asia and Africa to be trained in their premier institutions and universities so that China gets favourable media coverage in their press and electronic media. To put more bluntly, it is buying good press in foreign countries. The Communist government spent six billion dollars in 2018 to buy good press in foreign countries.

Given China's global ambitions, Xi Jinping wants to make foreign media complicit in his agenda. China runs a fellowship program for Asian and African journalists to convince them to propagate Chinese ideals in their countries. Since 2016, every year, 100 journalists, mostly from poor South Asian and African countries, get 'training' under the fellowship program.

India need not follow Beijing's devious path, but as inheritors of long years of rich English and vernacular journalism, with a democratic press, can surely share its experiences in this regard with the journalists from the countries of MGC and ASEAN and help them to build their own capacities. The outcome undoubtedly will be goodwill and an extra bonus of a better appreciation of India.

India has a number of fine mass communication and journalism centres like the Indian Institute of Mass Communication and the Mass Communication and Media Course at the Jamia Millia Islamia University, to name a few. New Delhi will earn great dividend if it reserves a few slots for journalists from those countries either through scholarship programmes, or attracting those who can afford on their own to come and study in these institutions.

Budget could be a problem for India to offer too many scholarships, but it can always work out with big media houses to support such programmes for exchange of journalists between India and the countries of MGC. After their training is over they can work in newspapers in India, which would also benefit them in their own reporting on developments in their respective countries by having someone from there to report on them.

The Advanced Media Course of two months duration that is conducted by the Satyajit Ray Film and TV Institute (SRFTI) is based on the assumption that media

power is a hard and not a soft power, and that a nation endowed with it, can punch beyond its pay grade.

The essential idea behind this program was to train 15 mid-career journalists from the Third World countries (Vietnam to Cuba) so that apart from exposure and training in a modern, multi-media environment, these journalists can be cultivated to carry a positive image of India in their own country that serves our long term interests.

The ostensible purpose - as a major democracy with free media, India is rightly positioned to offer advanced media training, promote India's image as an effective democracy. SRFTI has trained two batches of 15 each. Some senior journalists like Subir Bhomick were involved with this programme.

Other leading mass communication institutes should also run similar programmes like the SRFTI to broaden their scope and target as many countries in Asia as possible. As part of projecting our democratic credentials, we should also expand our programme for training parliamentarians from MGC countries.

Promotion of tourism among MGC countries is another focus of the Action Plan – organise trips of travel agencies and media familiarisation visits to prominent Buddhist sites in MGC countries. One major challenge in attaining this objective is the absence of direct flights or fewer flights between India and the MGC countries, making the journey of long hours more expensive and, thus, less attractive, impeding the normal flow of tourists.

Such impediments need to be removed by introducing direct and increasing the number of flights between India and the MGC countries. Thailand is the only exception, having not only direct flights, but also, a larger number of flights with practically all major cities in India.

Vietnam has now started direct flights from both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to New Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata, opening up opportunities for a larger number of tourists, particularly for those Buddhists who want to undertake their pilgrimage to Buddhist circuits.

One innovative measure India can take to promote cultural and religious tourism is to organise an annual event on the birthday of Lord Buddha in Bodh Gaya and other Buddhist circuits, giving an opportunity to adherents to have religious experiences and bringing them culturally and emotionally closer to India.

For organising such an annual event, infrastructures like connectivity, hotels and various other services have to be improved. Private players and tour operators can be incentivised to undertake such infrastructure projects once they know that such initiatives have not only economic dividends, but also, employment opportunities for the local people.

A significant part of culture is education and that needs to be given higher priority in any kind of cooperation between countries. While the Action Plan highlights promotion of training in the traditional system of medicine - Ayurveda, Homeopathy, Unani, and Naturopathy and Yoga, emphasis should be given to cooperation in modern higher education, in fields like technology, space, engineering and information technology which can contribute to capacity building and prepare the youth of those countries to face the modern world and solve social, political and economic problems.

India has instituted several scholarships by Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) under the ITEC programme, but this is not enough. India should project itself as an alternate destination for higher education and open some of our leading institutions of learning and universities to attract brighter students from MGC countries to study here on their own.

India is much cheaper compared to the Western countries, in terms of fees, cost of living and the quality of education. Some of our institutions, including some private run ones are as good as many Western universities. Students, who generally come on scholarship programmes, are not the best ones, as they have no choice in selecting the institutions where they would get slots.

If we open our institutions like IITs, IIMs, JNU, DU and many other leading schools, they would have a choice and will surely be attracted to come on their own.

Training mediocre ones do not offer much of a dividend. The brighter ones are going to be the future decision makers in those countries in every field, and having their goodwill and attention will help us to get critical elites as a support base for our foreign policy goals.

Of course, some policy decisions need to be taken to initiate such measures as well as some major investments in the infrastructures of our universities, but it is worth taking those innovative changes in view of New Delhi's desire to emerge as a major actor in the strategic and economic scenario in the Indo-Pacific.

Even if India introduces more scholarships to attract brighter students, it can work with some foreign foundations like the Japan Foundation or some European foundations. The alternative is to leave open the field to China, which is already doing it and reaping enormous dividends.

Finally, efforts should be made to expand people-to-people interactions not only at the official level, but also at all other levels, including the youth and students community, to know each other better and appreciate each other's culture and way of life to be able to learn from each other.

Most universities and some schools have annual educational tours. With better connectivity and direct flights it should not be very difficult for our students and theirs to travel to each other's country, as the distance is not much. India can work with countries of the MGC to introduce a discount fare for such exchange programmes, for a greater volume of such travels will automatically make such discounts economically viable. The benefit is much more than costs.



Shri Shakti Sinha

When we talk about the common cultural space, we need to understand the amount of give and take that has happened throughout history. I think a very good point was made in the beginning of today's dialogue that this is the time to look back twenty years. It is also the time to take critical views of the whole thing, as also the plan of action and to look at what we have done, what we have not and what the potentialities were.

The first thing that strikes me is that there has been uneven political commitment from the countries concerned, let us be frank about it. We (have) had several ministerial meetings in the past. Private sector also has to move. Governments have to facilitate the private sector movement and, if nothing else, they must remove the obstacles for movement of the private sector. There are tremendous obstacles in terms of laws and processes that need to be looked at.

Connectivity is very important, and many people have raised the point. Roads are required. The Trilateral Highway project is there and, of course, Myanmar (has) had some difficulties in funding it, so India is funding a part of it, building the bridges and the culverts in the Myanmar portion also.

But to my mind, roads and railways lines are like connecting cement and steel and brick to build a house, but, it does not become a house by itself. So, roads alone will not guarantee movement and will not guarantee connectivity unless you deal with what are behind the border issues like banking links, custom processes and standardisations so that there is mutual recognition of standards, etc.

I am glad that the Sittwe-Kaladan project is finally started. Once ready, I think it will develop lots of local linkages like linkage with an SEZ nearby, linkage with other industrial areas nearby. A project must deliver more than just

linkages to Mizoram and the North East. Of course, they are important but, if we develop local linkages, it will make the project much more viable.

Does the Sittwe port require cranes for moving big containers, for example? These are the kind of questions we should be asking about, not just general topics. We need serious discussions on trade. There are wide gaps which have widened instead of reducing.

I am not saying India is correct, others are not. I am not saying Vietnam is correct and India is wrong either. All I am saying is that we need far greater understanding, far greater amount of discussion with each other, understanding each other and trying to bridge the gaps. And, I would think for that, we need as many people to raise the point, far more intensive academic exchanges.

Our people-to-people contacts must cover people from all sectors -- culture people, trade people, electronics people, commerce people, etc., and, of course, the political people. We need more attractive arrangements for the media

There is considerable mutual ignorance and in academic discipline, we need a much greater amount of understanding through studies, language training, short term scholarships, faculty exchange, etc. I mean in the sense that we do not understand the great importance that the universities or the think tanks can actually play in this because of the ability to subtly mould public opinion, subtly mould government policies, review government policies, I think we really need to reduce this amount of ignorance we have about each other and develop better understanding.

We have a common heritage. We definitely need better air linkages. There is a lot that India can share from them in the field of democracy and federalism, in particular. Myanmar is struggling with federalism and that is something that we can really share. At the same time, there is so much we can learn from these countries in cases like water management, MSME, etc. This is what we have to learn from each other more.



Dr Vijay Chauthaiwale

I would like to focus on two major areas where there are ample opportunities for collaboration and cooperation. I would like to specifically focus on healthcare. What we need to do today is to rediscover ourselves and reemphasize on the healthcare system.

It is too expensive, inadequate and not reaching in many regions, where it is required the most. So, we have to re-emphasize our health system and make it affordable in the entire region. Therefore, we need to collaborate on how healthcare not only becomes affordable but also accessible. These questions are very common in MGC countries and therefore, we need to work out a collective solution in this area. This collaboration can be expanded to cover immediate needs such as vaccine production in the era of Covid-19 pandemic and also immunization of kids so that they are immune to certain infections and definitely the supply of affordable medicines. So these are certain areas where our countries and regional cooperation can make a fundamental difference. India has certain strengths in terms of both R&D as well as manufacturing. Therefore, the entire region can get tremendous benefit out of it. I am also aware that Vietnam has made certain innovations in pharmacy and healthcare sector and the collaboration between the two can make a vast difference.

Second area which is also very close to my heart and is equally important is the area of innovation. We all know that future of economy and prosperity depends on innovation. Companies which used to be nowhere 5 or 10 years back are now world's largest companies. No one had heard the name of TESLA 15 years back, but now it has become one of the most important companies in the world. In India we have started the special programme under leadership of Prime Minister Modi, known as the Atal Innovation Mission. This innovation mission is a kind of grass root activity meant to inculcate the culture of innovation

among the people. This has been an enormous success. We have opened close to 10,000 tinkering labs in those schools of India where the science education is in a very poor state. And we also gave the school children opportunities to design their robots, and to work with 3D printers, etc. And it has generated tremendous curiosity among the school kids as they are themselves now coming out with very frugal and inexpensive innovations at the school level. We have also funded startup incubators and also lot of community driven innovation programmes so that the culture of innovation goes at every level. And this is what shall drive Indian economy and India's growth in the next decade or so. That is what we believe in. Looking at India's experience in this area, this entire vision of Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) can be enormously beneficial and may even replicate some of these initiatives from India and from the Atal Innovation Mission. We shall be more than happy to collaborate with all of you if there is a research requirement.



Prof Swapna Bhattacharya

Highlighting the contribution of Calcutta University's academic tradition of close contact with Yangon University, Swapna Bhattacharya called for a more intensive academic exchange programme and transmission of knowledge by creating the Guru-shisya-parampara tradition between India and MGC countries. She said such exchanges need not be confined only to the field of Pali, Buddhist Studies and Oriental Studies, but must also target various disciplines taught at Indian and MGC academic institutions.

Sharing her own experiences of working in a collaborative program under an MoU signed in 2012 between Dagon University and Calcutta University (under the aegis of two respective governments), Bhattacharya recollected the contribution of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, Sir Asutosh Mookerjee, Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee, Pe Maung Tin, Suniti K. Chatterjee, Niharranjan Roy and many other Indian and western scholars in making this “Bridge of Knowledge” a solid platform.

She said: “We should look at MGC countries and India as a single linguistic/ethno-linguistic realm where the Mon-Khmers (Cambodia), Mons (Myanmar and Thailand) and their counterparts in India (Munda group of people in Bengal, Central India and Odisha), the Tai-Chinese (Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar in particular and partly in Assam and Arunachal), the Sanskritic people of the Indo-Aryan family (elements present in India and Southeast Asia), the Tibeto-Burmans of the Sino-Tibetan family (Myanmar, Assam, Northeast India) and the Dravidian (South Indian states and their kins in Southeast Asia), learnt from each other through migration and integration.”

Thus, joint interdisciplinary projects involving scholars of all MGC countries could be undertaken with India's financial support to study migratory patterns in

the historical context. Indian students and the young generation at large should know what India learnt from the Mekong-Irrawaddy river-based countries; handicraft, managing water sources, etc.

Myanmar, in particular, has played a significant role in the resurgence of Buddhism, both at popular and academic levels in modern India. In Northeast India, we can see that many cultural assets were brought back to India (e.g. the Tai Khamti script, Khamti language, Theravada Buddhism), which were lost to India. This truth of cultural “continuum” and “give and take spirit” that has existed from early times should be the guiding force for India’s Act East Policy in the days to come.

Bhattacharya cited linguistic (phonetic similarity and meaning of the words themselves), parallels from Mon-Khmer, Sanskrit and Mon (Ref: Taw Sein Ko, The Burmese Sketches) languages and explained the length and breadth of the concept of the Holy Land of the Brahma, the supreme God of the Hindus, worshipped by Buddhists as well.

Thus, she explained the ethos that worked behind the concept of Brahmadesh (Myanmar) and the Brahmaputra Valley. The writings of P.C Bagchi, Gordon Luce, Syleven Levi and the French school (Ref: E. Guillon, The Mons: A Civilization of Southeast Asia, The Siam Society, Bangkok 1999) actually upheld the centrality of this landscape stretching from eastern and coastal India to South Vietnam. From another level, academic engagement by Indian scholars should also focus more on lower Myanmar, the regions of Pegu, Bassein, Martaban, Syriam, etc. in the Asian perspective with their rich commercial and cultural backgrounds.

Coming to the question of identity and integration among Indians living in Myanmar, the spiritual power of the waters of the Irrawaddy (Mother Ganga of Myanmar) flowing in Prome (heartland of the Brahmadesh) was explained.

Arguing that Hinduism-Buddhism make a single and the same system of life and knowledge, it was reiterated and argued by other esteemed speakers that

India's foreign policy continues to be based on a strong platform of knowledge, culture and identity. Though India's relationship with Myanmar has always been solid and independent, it has prospered further in recent times. In view of the above, it is suggested to renovate all monuments and historical places (Buddhist monasteries, temples, etc.), wherever located. To intensify pilgrimage and tourism, the Myanmar monastery in Sravasti, the Central Kolkata Monastery and a House on Merchant Street in Yangon, where Rabindranath Tagore stayed in 1924, could be renovated.

Considering Bengal's rich historical relationship with Myanmar, it was proposed that a Myanmar Centre (with lecture programmes, cultural performances, social interactions, etc.) should be established in Kolkata.

For further information, one can refer to Bhattacharya, Swapna (2019) Rabindranath Tagore and Myanmar: India's Act East Policy and India-Myanmar Relations, Firma KLM, Kolkata.



Amb. Yogendra Kumar

For an organisation epitomising a powerful civilisational connect, its © public profile does not have a commensurate salience either in India or in the other member countries. In one opinion, Mekong means “Mother Ganga” in the Khmer language. The ancient Khmer kings were Hindus and Buddhists who closely followed Hindu cosmology and used Sanskrit widely. This organisation can provide an alternate vision for the Mekong sub-region in contrast with the ecological ravages resulting from the strong-armed exploitation of its upper riparian advantages by China.

In this respect, the organisation can serve as a platform for the projection of the land version of the alternate vision for the Indo-Pacific region, as articulated by the Indian Prime Minister in his Shangri-La speech on 1 June 2018, which is also being fleshed out in the Quadrilateral Dialogue platform involving India, the US, Japan, and Australia.

MGC covers diverse fields of cooperation, which are being constantly improved upon. To the four existing areas of cooperation, namely tourism, culture, education and transport and communications, additional areas such as SMEs, conservation of rice germ plasm, health, archival centre at Nalanda University and quick impact projects for Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam were included in 2012. Under the India-ASEAN Connectivity Programme, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is planned to be extended to Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam. The government’s focus is both on development and connectivity, within the bilateral and multilateral (MGC and ASEAN) frameworks in addition to strengthening our civilisational connect.

There is a pressing need for government policy to promote outreach by Indian government’s media, both TV and radio, where the private sector would also need to be involved. The aim would be to beam TV and radio signals in

the region – although this approach is required for other regions as well – with content designed to contribute to the mainstream discourse in the target country or countries. Such content would need to be developed in local languages with the help of local journalists/scholars so as to make it appealing to ordinary people. Therefore, an impactful policy can help shape national narratives in these uncertain times. The emphasis may be on social, economic, and cultural issues. Given the nature of the regional governments, political issues may need to be handled with high sensitivity. In any case, this approach would be effective with a lighter touch. The infrastructure for such telecasts/broadcasts can be based on our own resources as also those of local service providers.

The content delivery so far has not been planned as to its intended impact. Private TV channels target Indian Diaspora with their usual fare, but there is no attempt on their part to target local populations. The interest in India – and, the “India story” – remains high; yet, presently the signals from a lot of Indian TV channels are tapped by local service providers in a rather haphazard manner.

It is the right time to project Indian soft power due to the dent in the international image of China on account of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aggressive behaviour in the region.

The perception issue as regards Indian regional economic partnership capabilities vis-a-vis countries like China can be addressed through an effective media outreach policy. Our massive assistance commitment in the region does not capture the local imagination in comparative terms because of the absence of our media to project it.

The involvement of local journalist/scholars in developing content would help strengthen people-to-people relationships and generate newer ideas for our cooperation programme as the wider communities get included in the feedback loop. It would also help to prepare content keeping local sensitivities in mind.

Scope for cultural cooperation

The scope is inexhaustible. As an illustration, a place of Buddhist pilgrimage like Bodh Gaya can be easily compared in terms of its importance with the Vatican but, it presents a painful contrast in terms of the kind of infrastructure and the facilitation for meditation and contemplation by devotees. Upgrading its infrastructure for easy access by air, rail, and road, and a thorough decongestion of the holy site, would go a long way in India capturing the centrality of place in the Buddhist world. Similar upgradation would need to be done in respect of the other Buddhist holy sites in India. It bears keeping in mind that China and Nepal are developing competitive Buddhist pilgrimage circuits with significant funding commitments for crafting a different narrative to suit their own geopolitical objectives. Such activities, or influence operations, are evident in other South Asian countries as well.

A more thorough joint collaboration in the arts, culture, literature and philosophy is important as these countries are exploring their own national identities. A lot can be done through quite inexpensive IT and “virtual” interactions amongst scholars and artists. For example, Angkor Vat temple restoration work can be developed into a process, through interdisciplinary/inter-domain efforts, to bring alive the socio-economic and political life of those times, which will greatly attract not only local, but also, Indian and other foreign tourists.

There is also huge scope for deploying modern museological techniques and methods, such as “virtual reality” models and GPS-enabled historical/general commentaries about tourist sites, urban centres etc.

Similarly, there are dance forms, inexhaustible reserves of folk tales, versions of the Ramayana, etc. which provide scope for close artistic/intellectual interaction for cross-fertilisation of art forms and aesthetics and philosophy. Such interactions can generate both scholarly output and popular culture products for wider appeal among communities in MGC member countries.

These can be easily used to generate content for the media outreach. These activities would require not inconsiderable funding support from the Indian side, but there is considerable commercial scope as well.

Upgradation of meetings to the summit level is also another proposal which should be followed up seriously. A meeting of the MGC member countries at the level of the heads of state/government would be a strategically significant step forward. A useful future sphere of cooperation could be for the realisation of the SDGs (Sustainable Developmental Goals) with a special focus on ecology. Such policy intervention would strengthen the Indian Prime Minister's alternate vision for the region as India gears its regional diplomacy for the post-COVID future. In most of the suggested programmes above, there is also considerable scope for like-minded foreign partners of India. Their geopolitical significance cannot be over emphasized.



Dr Uttam Sinha

We have often looked at rivers as marking boundaries and in relation to the historical and political landscape. But, rivers are also rich spaces for potential integration bringing peace, prosperity and cultural fusion. The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) in that sense emphasizes the value of river cooperation. It is not, therefore, surprising that the MGC Plan of Action 2019-2022 envisages water resources management as an important area of cooperation.

Dr Surin Pitsuwan, the former Secretary General of ASEAN and Foreign Minister of Thailand, who was a key initiator of the MGC, delivered a speech at the Samvaad II at the Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF) in August 2017. During his distinguished career, Dr Surin resolutely stood for social cohesion and democratic values. He passed away a few months later. The commonalities in terms of such values – the democratic, the social and the political are strong drivers of the MGC. These values, in the context of water cooperation, become even more significant.

On the waterfront

Cooperation on water resources essentially includes the efficient use of water, water harvesting, water data collection, flood and drought management, disaster reduction, groundwater management, water quality monitoring, etc. In the last two decades of the MGC, India's involvement in water cooperation through Lines of Credit (LOC) in irrigation projects, storage dams and hydro-power projects in the lower Mekong region has been noticeable. Some have been completed and some are ongoing. India has now offered to conduct training programmes and workshops in water resource management and community farming.

Future efforts on water cooperation will require building a stronger coordination mechanism. There is also a strategic significance to this which

the MGC should not ignore. The Mekong region like the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna region is a lower riparian region and the common upper riparian country is China. It will be helpful to think about a lower riparian coalition of countries on these rivers so as to harmonise water policies, develop legal and regulatory water regimes and, where possible, put diplomatic pressure on upstream China for fresh dialogue and cooperation on water issues.

There already exists a global 13-member delta coalition that includes Vietnam, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Apart from various water cooperation listed, cooperation on deltas is also important. The Mekong has a vast delta and the Sunderbans is the world's largest delta system formed by the great rivers of South Asia.

These deltas are critical hotspots of food production. Vietnam's Mekong delta alone supplies almost 20 percent of the world's rice. The Sunderban delta is a unique ecosystem, the largest mangrove forest in the world. Both of these are fast becoming impacted by socio-economic development, climate change-induced sea level rise and flood pulse changes due to upstream water diversion, and need great attention.

A thorough understanding of the river delta's long-term dynamic is, therefore, crucial for the informed management of water resources. It is, therefore, critical that both regions exchange knowledge on deltas and gain international attention. It is abundantly clear that rivers can build a sound edifice of mutual confidence and open further spaces of cooperation on commerce, connectivity, culture and climate change.



Prof Surat Horaichakul

I discuss here India's role in the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC). So I would be focusing more on India's role rather than the Mekong region. I have only three points to make. My first point is that what India has done so far since the inception of the MGC is exceptionally good. The second point is India needs to seriously consider the fact that the greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) has become strategically important than before. India has to think strategically by taking all its relations with Southeast Asia into account, whether it is BIMSTEC, Indo-Pacific, ASEAN, etc. And of course, how do you categorize or prioritize them is up to the government, but I think this is something very important. My third point is that India needs a new narrative of the MGC. Although many programmes in past have benefitted the ordinary people, the new narrative, however, will help a lot. The new narrative should encompass both short term and long term goals. It has to understand the need of counter-balancing the great powers of the region, and of course all countries prefer to strike a balance somewhere. Cultural linkages are unquestionably important but there are also important aspects of cooperation. We need to see most of India's strategic investment especially in ICT and many other aspects because India's strategic investment in this area is really crucial. India's innovation in ICT is of particular importance to this region. At the same time, India should also work through the channel of other sub-regional organizations especially ACMECS. From my point of view, the new narrative that India could put in would be called as Innovation, Infrastructure and Sustainability. India can do very well in these three areas and there is enough room to include many aspects of cooperation including health, education, tourism, etc.



Prof. Amarjiva Lochan

I am using this forum to propose something concrete because we are talking about vision. Apart from my awareness in this area, one has to revisit the entire MGC. So I propose some important points which might be successful in taking this initiative further. We do share a common heritage. In this regard, the Trilateral Highway is going to be one of the game changers. There have been 5 to 6 rallies and 5 to 6 safaris coming from Cambodia, down to Thailand and India, thrice in a year. I have been keenly watching those and have found that within 1 to 2 years the road will be very much motorable, therefore bringing them to Bodh Gaya or other places including Delhi and Taj Mahal.

I found that in 2007, under this project, it was proposed that Loc Ninh in Vietnam would be connected with India. Today, the road from Phnom Penh to Loc Ninh is ready. The only thing is that the connectivity has to be worked out and we are running late by almost 13 years.

It is also important to know that in 2018, there was one new project introduced by the government under this MGC project. Quick Impact Project (QIP) had been utilized in 2018. We have done only 3 in Lao PDR, 2 in Myanmar and 5 projects are running in Cambodia and Vietnam. We must increase the number of QIPs in MGC.

Next point is that we do not have any Bahasa language department. We do not have Thai study centre. One more thing is that literary heritage, comparative dance and culture, etc. should be accompanied with lecture cum demonstration type of teaching. It becomes important because in Cambodia we have a great hope of reviving the Cambodian dance because Cambodian damsels were not allowed to dance and many of them lost their legs during the Pol Pot regime. In order to connect these dances with Indian dances, we must extend support under this MGC project. Why not we include Bangladesh into this Mekong-Ganga Cooperation? The moment the Ganga enters Bangladesh, the name changes to Padma. I think Bangladesh has been a great miss in this MGC.



Dr Parul Pandya Dhar

The deep history of contact among countries of the MGC is a well-established fact. It is imprinted in art, architecture, epigraphy, archaeology written, oral, and performative traditions of South and Southeast Asia. It is crucial at this stage to review how we can take these connected histories forward in ways that tie-up more directly with larger contemporary concerns. It is important to move beyond sentimental nostalgia to more innovative and sustainable relationships.

In the field of archaeology and heritage conservation, India has demonstrated a commitment for assistance and collaboration in scientific excavations and heritage conservation – notably at Angkor Wat (1986-1993), Ta Prohm in Cambodia and My Son in Central Vietnam.

These collaborations need to be made more visible through digital documentation. They also need to be extended to many more areas through advanced technological innovations and sharing such as non-invasive LiDAR, etc. India is in a position to take the lead by introducing a more transparent and open approach with minimal bureaucratic delays.

Collaborations in higher education need to be increased substantially to make it possible for more students to study in Indian universities, at least in areas such as archaeology, history, art history, heritage conservation, etc., where we share concerns and past ties. Faculty and student exchange programmes need to be built further for lasting impact.

The digital turn in museum education, exhibition and outreach needs to be exploited. Despite a rich repertoire of objects, monuments and archives, India is yet to host an exhibition of art objects from the Mekong-Ganga region to highlight their shared culture. Such an exhibition and scholarly engagement

to go along with it, will undoubtedly generate greater interest in the younger generation and make them understand the potential for engaging more deeply with each other.

Shared histories of colonisation, decolonisation, independence, and post-independence, also means shared problems and concerns in the domain of heritage, such as siphoning of antiquities out of the country and the consequent need for legal intervention and repatriation of antiquities. MGC countries should jointly strengthen laws and policies to meet these ends.

Pilgrimage circuits and cultural tourism are areas that are already being highlighted. However, greater communication facilitated by the opening up of corridors of connectivity is necessary to take it further. Of equal necessity is the involvement of experts in the training and exchange of human resource for leading and guiding the operation of religious and cultural tourism across the region.

Three recommendations are (i) Conduct a mid-term review on the Plan of Actions; (ii) Promote people-centred and culture-driven development cooperation; and (iii) Invest more in public health and SME cooperation.



Dr Vo Xuan Vinh

MGC is a framework between India and five Southeast Asian countries. Under the Quick Impact Projects (started from 2014), India provides special focus on Cambodia, Lao PDR, Vietnam and Myanmar. However, Lao PDR and Cambodia are yet to receive projects under QIP from India. India should invest in these two countries to counter-balance China. Joint projects with the US, South Korea, Japan and Australia should be considered.

India has its own strategy for the region, which is good. But it should coordinate and cooperate with other major powers having interests in the region. For example: Japan has revived the East-West Corridor connecting the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea. However, Japan has not done well so far. India should coordinate with Japan to promote the project. At the same time, India should partner with Japan (may be others) to build road connection from India's Northeast region to countries in the region and the Southern Economic Corridor.

Water management is an important field that India has explored in the MGC and this should be considered as a focal point. Vietnam and Cambodia see water management of the Mekong River as a priority. Regarding water management in the Mekong region, the US, Japan and Australia have joined the forum. India may consider joining or establish a multilateral mechanism on water management in Mekong region where it can be a development partner.



Dr Vannarith Chheang

The MGC has completed 20 years of establishment and it is a great opportunity for countries in this region to scale up relations. In last 20 years, MGC countries have gained experiences in regional integration. However, a lot more can be done in areas of trade, investment, connectivity, agriculture, public health, people-to-people linkages, etc.

To unlock the MGC's vast potential, I propose three recommendations. First, countries should conduct a mid-term review on the Plan of Actions (POA). Second, countries should promote people-centered and culture-driven development cooperation. Third, countries should invest more in public health and SME cooperation.



Dr Khin Maung Nyo

Today, the MGC has less than its potential realisation. Myanmar, for example, is the gate to ASEAN, or ASEAN's gateway to India. But Myanmar has been treated as a transit country. Look East or Act East means beyond Myanmar. However, we can change the perception.

A strong economic relation between India and Myanmar is required. There has been substantial improvement when India adopted border trade to normal trade. However, trade can only happen if and when transport and border connectivity is improved. Today, there is no direct flight between India and Myanmar. Bus service between Imphal and Mandalay is not yet ready.

Some of the major constraints are the small size of the market and excessive bureaucracy. At the same time, Myanmar has low confidence to deal with Indian businessmen (low understanding of the legal system of Myanmar). India supported development projects cannot meet the deadline for various reasons.

While in Moscow, Myanmar's Gen Hlaing met Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and explored Myanmar-India defence cooperation. The two sides also discussed security cooperation to ensure successful implementation of the India-funded Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project.

The project aims to open sea routes and a highway transport system linking the eastern Indian seaport of Kolkata with the country's landlocked north eastern state of Mizoram through Myanmar's Rakhine and Chin states. The Sittwe Port, also made by India, as part of this project, is ready for operation.

In May, the Myanmar government handed over 22 rebels from north eastern states to the Indian government. The rebels belonged to groups that have bases along the border in Myanmar's Sagaing region.

Myanmar received its first submarine from India last year, a Russian-made Kilo-class diesel-electric attack submarine and India continues to provide technical support for the vessel.

Finally, a strong bilateral relation between India and Myanmar is essential to drive the MGC.



Dr Prabir De

Over the last two decades, India has steadily engaged with the extended neighbourhood eastward through a series of regional and sub-regional forums. Starting in 2000, the MGC initiative is one of the oldest of such measures. It is a sub-regional cooperation organisation comprising India and five ASEAN countries namely, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.

MGC is a multi-dimensional initiative which deals with not just economic aspects of regional cooperation, but also with a host of cultural issues important for building an inclusive and prosperous society.

Launched in Vientiane in 2000, the MGC has completed 20 years of its journey. MGC's member countries include Cambodia, Lao PDR, India, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. The MGC's prime areas of cooperation are tourism and culture, education, public health and traditional medicine, agriculture and allied, transport and communication, MSMEs, water resources management, science and technology, skill development and capacity building

While there has been slow progress in the MGC since its inception, the last couple of years have witnessed a greater engagement by India and other member countries. India, under the rubric of 'Act East' policy, which is an upgraded form of India's Look East policy, has taken several measures to strengthen the relationship. Today, the MGC is looking forward to scaling new heights in its third decade.

The MGC's focus has always been on cooperation in tourism, culture, education and transport and communications. The MGC connects two great civilisations across the Ganga and Mekong rivers. Since the establishment of the MGC, India's trade with Mekong countries has increased substantially, rising from US\$ 1 billion in 2000 to US\$ 25 billion in 2019 (a nearly 25-fold increase in two decades).

The areas of cooperation have since been expanded and now include tourism and culture, education, public health and traditional medicine, agriculture and allied, transport and communication, MSMEs, water resources management, science and technology, skill development and capacity building. There has been a steady rise in trade between India and MGC member countries over the years.

In more recent times, the 10th MGC Ministerial Meeting in Bangkok, Thailand, in 2019, adopted the new MGC Plan of Action (2019-2022) that envisages project-based cooperation, among other things.

The MGC Plan of Action (POA) 2019-2022 lists eleven priority areas to further deepen and enhance cooperation: cultural cooperation, tourism, education, public health and traditional medicine; agriculture and allied sectors, water resource management, science and technology, transport and communication, MSMEs (Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises), skill development and capacity building and quick impact project schemes. Each area has envisioned focus areas to implement these strategies. India has also joined the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) as a development partner in 2019 and announced a US\$ 1 billion Line of Credit for connectivity projects in ASEAN.

The COVID-19 pandemic in very recent times has had a devastating impact on countries and geographies across the world. Not only the economy, COVID-19 has affected our strategies, relationships and approaches, and has brought in a new normal.

Countries are undergoing paradigm shifts in the way of doing business. For example, there is a great opportunity for Indian exports to Mekong countries in ASEAN to diversify into areas such as health (medical) products, climate-smart goods and services, pharmaceuticals, technology products and services, eco-friendly automobiles, digitally-traded services, etc. in addition to mineral products, chemical products and electrical machinery (accounting for over 50 percent of total exports to ASEAN).

Similarly, there is an opportunity for MGC countries to put in a concerted effort towards attracting businesses that are highly likely to relocate from China in the emerging geopolitical scenario.

No country can fight the pandemic single-handedly and a coordinated and cooperative response is the way forward. Overall, the new normal calls for a shift in understanding how to strengthen both cooperation and collaboration by leveraging each other's, as well as situational, opportunities to lead to higher prosperity and stability for the MGC countries.

[This annotated transcript of webinar presents brief extraction of speeches delivered by the speakers at the MGC webinar, which was held on 20 July 2020. The selection of speeches, full or part, has been done by the editor of the proceedings keeping in view with the theme of the webinar. However, the full-length transcripts of speeches are available on-request with the SPMRF. Usual disclaimers apply.]

Webinar Agenda

Time	Particulars
1.30 – 2.00 pm	Registration / Log-in to Webinar
2.00 - 2.05 pm	Welcome by Dr Anirban Ganguly, Director, SPMRF, New Delhi
2.05 – 2.10 pm	Remarks by Chair: Prof. Baladas Ghoshal, Former Dean, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi
2.10 – 2.20 pm	Keynote Address by Dr Vinay Sahasrabuddhe, Member of Parliament, and President, Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), New Delhi
2.20 – 2.30 pm	Special Address by Dr Vijay Chauthaiwale, Member, Atal Innovation Mission, Govt. of India and In-charge, Foreign Affairs Department, BJP
2.30 – 2.40 pm	Remarks by Dr CheangVannarith, President, Asian Vision Institute (AVI), Phnom Penh
2.40 – 2.50 pm	Remarks by Prof Khin Maung Nyo, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Economic and Social Development (CESD) and Vice-Chairman, Myanmar Economic Association (MEA), Yangon

2.50 – 3.00 pm	Remarks by Prof. Surat Horachaikul, Director, India Study Centre, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok
3.00 – 3.10 pm	Remarks by Dr Vo Xuan Vinh, DDG, Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), VASS, Ha Noi
3.10 – 3.20 pm	Remarks by Dr. Parul Pandya Dhar, Associate Professor, Delhi University, Delhi
3.20 – 3.30 pm	Remarks by Dr Swapna Bhattacharya, Former Professor, Calcutta University, Kolkata
3.30 – 3.40 pm	Remarks by Prof. Amarjiva Lochan, Dy. Dean. International Relations, Delhi University, Delhi
3.40 – 3.50 pm	Remarks by Dr Uttam Sinha, Senior Fellow, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi
3.50 – 4.00 pm	Remarks by Dr Prabir De, Head, ASEAN-India Centre, RIS, New Delhi
4.00 – 4.15 pm	Q&A
4.15 – 4.25 pm	Valedictory Address by Shri Shakti Sinha, Director, Atal Bihari Vajpayee Institute of Policy Research & International Studies, Gujarat
4.25 – 4.30 pm	Closing Remarks and Vote of Thanks by Dr Anirban Ganguly, Director, SPMRF, New Delhi, and end of the webinar

List of Speakers

Dr Vinay Sahasrabuddhe

Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha

President, Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), New Delhi

Dr Anirban Ganguly

Director, Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation, New Delhi

Prof. Baladas Ghoshal

Former Dean, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU)

Secretary General, Society of Indian Ocean Studies (SIOS), New Delhi

Shri Shakti Sinha

Director, Atal Bihari Vajpayee Institute of Policy Research & International Studies, MS University, Baroda

Dr Vijay Chauthaiwale

Member, Atal Innovation Mission Government of India, &
In-charge, Foreign Affairs Department, Bhartiya Janata Party
(BJP), New Delhi

Amb Yogendra Kumar

Former Ambassador of India to Tajikistan & Philippines &
Former High Commissioner to Namibia

Dr Chheang Vannarith

President, Asian Vision Institute (AVI), Phnom Penh

Prof. Khin Maung Nyo

Vice-Chairman, Myanmar Economic Association, &
Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Economic and Social
Development (CESD), Yangon

Prof. Surat Horachaikul

Director, India Study Centre, Chulalongkorn University,
Bangkok

Prof. Vo Xuan Vinh

Deputy Director General, Institute for Southeast Asian Studies
(ISEAS)
Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS), Hanoi

Prof. Amarjiva Lochan

Dy. Dean (International Relations), Delhi University, Delhi

Dr Parul Pandya Dhar

Associate Professor, Delhi University, Delhi

Dr Swapna Bhattacharya

Former Professor, Calcutta University, Kolkata

Dr Uttam Sinha

Senior Fellow, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi

Dr Prabir De

Professor and Head, ASEAN-India Centre, RIS, New Delhi

Webinar Flyer

Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation

Webinar

Vision of Act East & 20 Years of Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC)

Welcomes Address: Dr. Anil Kumar Singh, Director, MGRF

Chair: Prof. Subhojit Chakrabarti, Director, MGRF

Keynote Address: Dr Vinay Sahasrabudhhe, Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India

Subsidiary Address: Shri Shakti Sinha, Director, East Asian Region, Institute of World Affairs, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India

Speakers: Dr. Vikram Chandra, Prof. Kishu Mehta, Dr. Anand Kishore, Dr. Ho Sun Goh, Dr. Phan Thanhbinh, Prof. Ananya Lakshmi, Dr. Parul Shukla, Dr. Manoj Kumar Sinha, Dr. Vinay Sinha, Dr. Pradyot

MGC - Connecting Civilizations

- Connected to Vietnam in 2001, expanded to seven
- Member countries: Cambodia, Laos, PDR, India, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam
- Connecting civilisations across Ganga and Mekong rivers
- Areas of cooperation: Trade and culture, Education, Public health and traditional medicine, Agriculture and allied, Transport and communication, Wildlife, Water resource management, Science and technology, Skill development and capacity building.

Date: Monday, 20th July 2020



Select Photographs



PM Narendra Modi with his Cambodian counterpart Hun Sen during his visit to New Delhi.
(source: www.narendramodi.in)



PM Narendra Modi with Myanmar President Htin Kyaw during his visit to Myanmar.
(source: www.zeenews.india.com)



PM Narendra Modi meets Myanmar's State Counsellor, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in Thailand during 35th ASEAN Summit. (source: www.dnaindia.com)



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the President of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Tran Dai Quang, in Hanoi, Vietnam. (source: www.indianexpress.com)



PM Narendra Modi with Thailand's Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha.
(source: www.indiatoday.in)



PM Narendra Modi with Prime Minister of Lao PDR Thongloun
Sisoulith. (source: www.narendramodi.in)



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