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Mekong-Ganga Co-operation : India's Focused Role

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India has a long history of cultural and trade links with all five countries of the Mekong-region of the Southeast Asia. India has also been politically active in supporting the socialist regimes in most of these countries (except Myanmar). India has its presence felt in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos through government and through Indian business community especially in Vietnam. India can offer appropriate technology to spur development in all these countries. There is also scope for further expansion of two-way trade and for Indian private investment in most of these countries of Mekong region. India must maintain its advantage of "early presence" in the markets of these countries and should aim to increase its competitive market share of trade with these countries.

In view of India's *Act East* Policy, India has been strengthening its economic integration with Southeast and East Asian countries. Over the years, partnership with ASEAN in general and countries in Mekong region in particular has made considerable improvement. The Early Harvest Scheme with Thailand and the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) with Singapore and

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Malaysia added desired momentum to make further progress in this regard. Initiatives like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) as well as East Asia Summit (EAS) are also parts of this important process. Therefore, in this context, the role of the sub-regional initiative of the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), which was launched in 2000, has immense potential to augment further regional economic integration.

Mekong-Ganga Co-operation (MGC)

MGC was established on November 10, 2000 at Vientiane in the First MGC Ministerial Meeting. It comprises of six Member countries, namely, India, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar and Thailand. The emphasis is on four areas of cooperation, which include tourism, culture, human resource development, and transportation linkage in order to be the foundation for future trade and investment cooperation in the region.¹

The working mechanism for MGC consists of an Annual Ministerial Meeting, the Senior Official's Meeting, and the five Working Groups namely:

1. Working Group on Tourism (Thailand is the lead country).
2. Working Group of Human Resource Development (Education) (India is the lead country).
3. Working Group in Culture (Cambodia is the lead country).

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4. Working Group on Communication and Transportation (Laos is the lead country).
5. Working Group on Plan of Actions (Vietnam is the lead country).

Mekong River : The Mother of Waters

In Lao or Thai languages, the Mekong River is called "Mae Nam Khong". 'Mae' means 'mother' and 'nam' translates as water in the meaning of River. The name 'Khong' derives from the Sanskrit word 'Ganga', which is the name for India's holy river Ganges.² Northern and North-eastern Thais as well as the Lao refer to the Mekong Rivers as the 'Mother River Khong', which literally means "Mother Khong River", In Cambodia, it's called the *Tonle Thom* (great water), and in Vietnam, where it spills into the South China Sea (called the East Sea in Vietnam) after flowing 4,200 kilometres through six countries, it is called the *Cuu Long* (river of nine dragons).

The Mekong River is the world's 10th longest river and discharges 475 km³/114 cu mi of water annually. The estimated length of the Mekong from the Tibetan Plateau to the Delta in Vietnam is 4,350 kilometres. Some of the richest and most endangered habitats on Earth can be found in the Greater Mekong area. The whole region comprises of Chinas Yunnan Province, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.

This unique and interesting landscape of the Mekong River and its surrounding is home to an estimated 20,000 species of plants, 1,200 different kind of birds, 800 species of amphibians and reptiles, and 430 mammals, rare and endangered species,

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such as the Asian elephants, tigers and the critically endangered Javan rhinos. The Mekong River houses at least 1,300 species of fish and in addition the rare Irrawaddy dolphins.³

By proportion and length, the Mekong is the richest river if it comes to biodiversity on the planet. There are more species per unit and area than in the Amazon. Many of these species are endemic to the Mekong. The biodiversity of the Greater Mekong area is of such abundance and importance, that even today, new species continue to be discovered and described by science. Only between 1997 and 2007, at least 1,068 species have been discovered in the Greater Mekong region-this adds up to two new species per week for the period.⁴

However, the mighty Mekong River is under serious threat. Governments of Cambodia, Laos and Thailand are planning eleven big hydropower dams on the Mekong River. If these dams are built along the river, they would block major ways of fish migration and would therefore disrupt the vitality of the Mekong River. Additionally, this will place the livelihood of millions of people at risk who live along the River and depend upon the Mekong River for their food and income.

River Ganges

The river Ganges; Ganga in India languages, is a major river in Northern India. It originates as the Bhagirathi from the Gangotri Glacier in the Utranchal (Uttarakhand) Himalayas and joins the Alaknanda near Deoprayag to form the Ganga. Then on, the Ganga flows across the large plains of North India (called the

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Gangetic plains) and empties into the Bay of Bengal after dividing up into many distributaries. One of them is the Hoogli River near Calcutta (Kolkata), another major distributary being the Padma River that enters Bangladesh. The total length of the river is about 2,507 kilometres. One of the densest human population belts on earth is built around the Ganges. the region encompassing the delta near the Bay of Bengal coast is known as Sunderbans (beautiful forests) - a region of thick mangrove forests, and one of the major habitats of the Royal Bengal Tiger.

Two species of dolphin can be found in the Ganges, the Ganges River Dolphin and the Irrawaddy Dolphin. Several places sacred to Hindus lie along the banks of the river Ganga, including Haridwar and Varanasi. It is believed that taking a dip in the river will wash away one's sins, and that having one's ashes disposed off in the Ganga after death may improve one's next life or even allow *Moksha* to be attained sooner. Devout Hindus make pilgrimages to bathe in the Ganga and to meditate on its banks. According to the mythological legend, Brahma collected the sweat of Vishnu's feet and created Ganga. Being touched by two members of the Trimunthi, Ganga became very holy.⁵

Several years later, a king named Sagar magically acquired sixty thousand sons. One day, King Sagar performed a ritual of worship for the good of the Kingdom. One of the integral parts of the ritual was horse, which was stolen by the jealous Indra. Sagar sent all his sons all over the Earth to search for the horse. They found it in the underworld next to a penitent sage. Believing that the sage had stolen the horse, they hurled insults at him and caused his penance to be disturbed. The sage

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opened his eyes for the first time in several years, and looked at the sons of Sagar. With this glance, all sixty thousand were burnt to death.

The souls of the sons of Sagar wandered as ghosts since their final rites had not been performed. When Bhagiratha, one of the descendants of Sagar by a second wife, learnt of this fate, he vowed to bring Ganga down to Earth so that she could sweep away the ashes to heaven. Bhagiratha prayed to Brahma that Ganga come down to Earth. Brahma agreed, and he ordered Ganga to come down to the Earth and then on to the underworld so that the soul ancestors would be able to go to heaven. The vain Ganga felt that this was insulting and decided to sweep the whole Earth away as she fell from the heavens. Alarmed, Bhagiratha prayed to Shiva that he break up Ganga's descent.

Ganga arrogantly fell on Shiva's head. But Shiva calmly trapped her in his hair and let her out in small streams. The touch of Shiva further sanctified Ganga. As Ganga travelled to the underworld, she created a different stream to remain on Earth to help purify unfortunate souls there.

Mekong-Ganga Initiative

The cooperation between India and the countries of the Mekong basin viz. Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, is only the continuation of ancient, historical, cultural, and geographical ties between these civilizations. Because of an inexplicable distancing, political, strategic, and economic cooperation with India in the recent years has been rather indifferent, even though India was a

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participant in the Mekong development plan of ASEAN and supported all the existing initiatives. Most countries in the Mekong basin are relatively poor and need to catch up with the regional standards of economic prosperity. India is a helping hand in a mutually beneficial manner, given its state of economy. The Vientiane initiative seeks to make new beginning by assisting the countries in the region to promote such badly needed development. This is to be achieved in a step by step manner by making tourism, culture and education, the engines of change and growth. The distances between the countries seem greater than these are, mainly because there is very little interaction on a citizen to citizen basis with India and the road and rail network is virtually non-existent.

The most ambitious component of the new initiative is the transport network- an east-west corridor, and a trans-Asian highway. The framework envisages strategic studies for joint marketing, launching Mekong-Ganga tourism investment guide, facilitating the travel of people in the region, expanding multimodal communication and transportation links to enhance travel and tourism and promoting cultural-religious package tours, acceleration of trade, investment and technology transfer.

Importance of MGC for India

The Mekong-Ganga Co-operation is a sub-regional group initiated by India. India is interested in re-focusing the ancient, historical and cultural relations with the Southeast Asian countries through MGC. On the other hand, after the introduction of the New Economic Policy (1991) and the changes in the international political scenario, India is trying to improve its relations with Far East Asian countries for co-

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ordination and co-operation. For the fulfilment of these goals, India requires such sub-regional group that is familiar with its cultural and historical scenario and has been doing cultural exchanges. India discovered that only countries of the MGC could fulfil its requirements. In such a circumstance, for the togetherness between the Mekong and the Ganges, the two rivers, the two civilizations and the two cultures, MGC has been established. This establishment becomes necessary for India because the boundaries of the Northeast frontier of India border with the Mekong nations; therefore, India sees its own development in the development of these nations.

For this very purpose, India has focused on a few criteria, like education, tourism, culture and transport and communication. The indispensability of this co-operation for India can be described through the following points.

India's Sector-wise Approach to MGC

1.6.1 Tourism: India hosted a delegation of about 100 Buddhist pilgrims from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam from September 5-12, 2007. Due to much untapped potential of tourist inflows from Mekong countries, India has suggested in internal discussions that Ministries of Tourism and Civil Aviation explore the feasibility of flight connections from a tourist spot such as Angkor in Cambodia to India. Furthermore, India offered to host participants from ASEAN countries to the International Buddhist Conclave (IBC) held in Varanasi in October 2016.⁶

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Capacity Building: Under the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI), Centres for English Language Training (CELTs) have been established in Cambodia (August 2007, at the Royal Academy of Cambodia), Laos (June 2007, at the National University of Laos), Myanmar (2009, at the National University of Yangon) and Vietnam (July 2009). The English and Foreign Language Universities (EFLU), Hyderabad, conceptualized and established these Centres and sent its language experts for initiating the training programs. At the ASEAN-India Summit in Thailand in October 2009, it was announced that India would be happy to increase the number of CELTs and EDCs in CLMV countries.

At the 8th ASEAN-India Summit in Hanoi on October 30, 2010, India announced co-operation with ASEAN in the ICT sector.

Under this initiative, India would: (i) Set up centres of excellence in software development and training in CLMV (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) countries; (ii) Set up information technology resource-cum-study centre for ASEAN and CLMV countries at C-DAC, NOIDA; and (iii) Provide assistance in IT curriculum development and IT teachers training to CLMV countries, enhancing IT skills of the workforce in ASEAN through provision of scholarships for ASEAN students, joint training programmes and courses, e-learning, seminars, workshops, exchange of visits of IT experts at CDAC Noida. The total project cost would be approximately US\$ 8,696,010. CDAC is the implementing agency for this project. MoUs in this regard have been finalized with Myanmar and Cambodia, while those

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with Laos and Vietnam are being considered by their concerned authorities. It is expected that the MoUs with all the four countries would be signed soon.⁷

At the 13th ASEAN-India Summit, Prime Minister announced the creation of a Project Development Fund to develop manufacturing hubs in CLMV countries and proposed to commit a Line of Credit of US\$ 1 billion that supports physical and digital connectivity between India and ASEAN.

Under the Initiatives for ASEAN Integration, India would also be setting up a Centre for English Language and IT, comprising of a classroom for English language training and an IT lab, each with a capacity of 25 students, at the Telecommunications University, Ministry of Defence in Nha Trang, Vietnam. Initially, two experts would be sent there for six months each for setting up and operating the Centre.

Subsequently, two experts from the Military College of Telecommunications Engineering (MCTE), Directorate General of Signals, Indian Army would be deputed there for a period of three years each under the ITEC terms, under which the Government of Vietnam would meet the cost of basic medical care, accommodation and local transport. The total cost of the project is US\$ 276,856, which is being funded under the ASEAN-India Cooperation Fund. A MoU to this effect has been signed with the Vietnamese government during the visit of Vietnamese PM to New Delhi on October 28,2014. The project proposal is expected to be approved by the ASEAN Secretariat soon.

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Meanwhile, the VICELT was inaugurated in April 2015. Vietnamese side have also sought 60 additional scholarships during 2015 for IT training at MCTE, which is being considered. Under Phase-II of the project, Vietnam aims to further expand the VICELT into a full-fledged training and research facility at a projected cost of US\$ 20 million, which the Vietnamese side has requested India to provide under an LoC.⁸

Education: India provides scholarships to the MGC countries of an annual basis under the bilateral and multilateral tracks. The scheme is administered by ICCR but it is being budgeted through the ASEAM ML Division.

In pursuance of the decisions at the 3rd Ministerial Meeting of MGC held on June 20, 2003 at Phnom Penh, 10 cultural scholarships to each MGC country (i.e. 50 in total) were extended by India. In view of the MGC countries' request, India decided in the MGC SOM meeting held in May 2005 in Delhi to consider providing international airfare also under the MGC scholarship. MGC scholarships started in the year 2005-06 and international airfare is being provided to MGC Scholars since 2005. The scheme was approved initially for two years and, subsequently, was extended further for another two years with the approval of Secretary (East). The scheme was further extended thrice more, with the approval of EAM, first for two years beyond 2008-09, then for another five years from April 2011 to March 2016 and then for another five years from 2016 to 2021. With the approval of EAM in January 2015, it was decided to increase the number of cultural scholarships to 20 from each MGC country from 2015 onwards (i.e. 100 in total).

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The universities preferred by the MGC students are in Bengaluru, Delhi, Hyderabad, Pune, Warangal, Mysore, Mumbai, Kanpur and Chennai and their preference is for courses such as B.A., B.Sc., M.A., M.Sc., and M.Com. However, some students have preferred professional courses like MBA, LLM, BCA, BBA and M. Tech.

It has also been proposed to provide scholarships to 6 students from CLMV countries to study at Nalanda University (through ASEAN-India Cooperation Fund proposal under consideration of ASEAN Secretariat). A total of 4 students (2 from Laos and 2 from Myanmar) are currently studying at Nalanda University under this scholarship.

More courses under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme for MGC countries to train one representative each from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam in musicology and conservation techniques would be offered. It is hoped that after completion of this training programme, these persons will work in the MGC Museum of Traditional Asian Textiles at Seim Reap, Cambodia, for at least two years each.⁹

Connectivity: India has always supported connectivity corridors especially the concept of the East-West corridors connecting India to the Mekong region. India has taken substantial commitment in the development of the India, Ntabnar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, which connects Moreh in India to Mae Sot in Thailand. CLMV countries would like India to commit to the extension of the Trilateral Highway to Cambodia and Laos and a new highway linking Vietnam.

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India has proposed a Joint working Group on Maritime Connectivity between India, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam to explore maritime cargo route/coastal shipping services between these countries. MGC partners are yet to identify their respective POCs from the line Ministries and share their coordinates for the formation of a Working Group on Maritime Connectivity. This is being pursued under the ASEAN-India connectivity related issues.

Culture: India has constructed the MGC Museum of Traditional Asian Textiles at Siem Reap, Cambodia at a cost of US\$ 1.772 million. The land was given by Cambodia. The stone laying ceremony took place during President of India's visit to Cambodia in September 2010. The construction of the Museum was completed in December 2011 and the Museum was handed over in January 2012 to the APSARA Authority of Cambodia. MGC Museum for Traditional Asian Textiles was inaugurated by Shri Anil Wadhwa, Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs on April 7, 2014. India has provided its exhibits towards the two permanent galleries as well as the travelling exhibits. Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam too have provided their exhibits.¹⁰

Ms. CharuSmita Gupta was appointed as the new Director for the MGC Museum of Traditional Asian Textiles from July 2013 to July 2014 following a selection process comprising of MEA, ICCR and the Ministry of Textiles. The tenure of Prof. CharuSmita Gupta, Director of the Museum was extended by another year on same terms and conditions till July 31, 2017 on the recommendations of Indian Ambassador in Cambodia.¹¹

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The first meeting of the Board of the MGC Museum for Traditional Asian Textiles was held on February 26, 2013 at Siem Reap, Cambodia. Representatives from Cambodia, India, Myanmar and Laos participated in the meeting. Thailand and Vietnam were not able to attend the meeting.

The documentary film on MGC Museum for Traditional Asian Textiles "The Power of 6', commissioned by the Ministry was played at the last MGC SOM held in May 2016 in Luang Prabang, Laos. The documentary was well received by the MGC partners. Copies of DVDs were handed over to the MGC SOM Leaders.

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