

Mekong - Ganga Cooperation- A Brief Overview

By

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India's notable presence in the global arena can be evidently discerned from its dynamic foreign policy orientation as well as from a number of enterprising collaborative ventures with other nations. In the early nineties the then Indian Prime Minister P.V.Narsimha Rao initiated a new chapter as the 'Look-East Policy' in Indian foreign policy paradigm. The Look-East Policy portrays a strategic shift in India's vision of the world and India's position in the rapidly developing global economy. ⁱ Since from the time of inception of the Policy India and ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) have embarked upon multiple bilateral, regional and sub-regional initiatives for the flourishing pursuit of the Policy. The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative is one of the momentous outcomes of such joint endeavours.

The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation was launched with the Vientiane Declaration on November 10, 2000 in the capital city of Laos, Vientiane with the primary thrust to expand solidarity, harmony and cooperation in the fields of tourism, culture and education for the purpose of rapid social and economic development of the Mekong region countries. India and the five South-East Asian Nations - Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar were the signatories of that decisive endeavour. The notion of the Project was first proposed by Thailand's Foreign Minister Dr. S. Pitsuwan. Since Ganga and Mekong are regarded as two of the greatest rivers in Asia the idea of the Project bloomed out of the need to

create a linkage between the two civilizations. It ought to be feasible because of the prevailing parity between the masses of both the regions in physical appearance, social ideals, religious traditions as well as their food habits. The motive of that drive was also to render a new definition to the member countries in the new global economy, without actually distorting their native identity. Initially the name of the initiative was Ganga-Mekong Swarnabhoomi Project but it graduated to Mekong- Ganga Cooperation due to some discrepancies among the member countries. After the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), a regional grouping launched in 1997, this project was another collaborative venture by India with its South-East Asian neighbours.

With these regional initiatives India is trying to penetrate the ASEAN markets by enhancing the mutual economic benefits, transportation and infrastructural development and energy security. The East-West Corridor project and the Trans-Asian highway are some of the pioneering maneuvers undertaken by the six countries to promote transport facilities. When completed the Asian highway project is expected to link up Singapore with New Delhi in South Asia via Kuala Lumpur, Ho Chin Minh city, Phnom Penh, Bangkok, Vientiane, Chiang Mai, Yangon, Mandalay, Kalemmyo, Tamu, Dhaka and Calcutta. India has already taken the first step in this direction and is involved in building the road linking Tamu (Manipur) to Kalemmyo, a key communication junction in the centre of Myanmar.ⁱⁱ The project has also initiated certain innovative measures to improve air connectivity and for India it is providing ample opportunities to promote the linkages.

The thriving of the Project will endow India with substantial scopes of creating and developing the pillars of linkages and connectivity. For example, a flight from Delhi to Hanoi takes just four hours whereas a flight from Delhi to

Colombo takes over three hours and it is a pointer to proximate locations and the potential this factor holds.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is noteworthy to mention that the development of India's North-East Region is of paramount importance for India's Look-East Policy to achieve far-reaching success and the Brahmaputra Valley is a key aspect in making the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Project effective. If trade and industry flourish in the entire region overland trade via Myanmar to many MGC countries will promote India.^{iv} India is quite optimistic about the prospects of Mekong- Ganga Cooperation Project and is convinced about the efficacy of the underlying initiatives in harvesting favorable social and economic gains.

The grouping has decided to promote joint research in the fields of dance, music and theatrical forms and organise round-tables for journalists, writers and experts in literature, performing arts, women's empowerment, health and nutrition and the conservation, preservation and protection of heritage sites and artifacts. The Mekong Ganga Cooperation Project consented to encourage the establishment of networking and twinning arrangements among universities in the region, translates classics of Mekong Ganga Countries into other Mekong region languages and assured the participation in book fairs in member countries on a commercial basis. ^v The member-countries also agreed upon to "strengthen cooperation in the development of IT (Information Technology) infrastructure and networks" and "promote cooperation in air services and linkages in the region". ^{vi}

In the tourism field, the MGC decided to conduct strategic studies for joint marketing, launch the Mekong-Ganga Tourism Investment Guide, facilitate the travel of people in the region, expand multi-modal communication and

transportation links to enhance travel and tourism and promote cultural-religious package tours.^{vii}

The goal of Mekong Ganga Cooperation was to make the international community aware of its political determination and inclination to solidify the bonds of cooperation among the member countries possessing nuances of multifaceted political, economic, cultural and historical background. India being in the privileged position should always be energetic in translating the goals into realities and would in no way let it suffer due to bureaucratic reluctance.

Implementation of the undertaken projects and multiple agreements is imperative for the optimum realisation of the Project. The proper exercise of the Mekong-Ganga Project demands the utilisation of the existing and available natural resources in their best possible way with the motto to cater to the benefits of the inhabitants of the less developed Mekong river basin area in order to reduce the widening gulf with other regions. To trigger off the Project all the member countries should widen their cooperative gestures and build a sound edifice of mutual confidence.

So, it can be acknowledged that integration and collaboration among the member countries of Mekong- Ganga Cooperation Initiative are cardinal for successfully driving the Project and reaping the tangible benefits out of it. In the voyage towards cooperation they might have to confront a number of obstacles hindering the magnitude of solidarity but if mutual confidence, mutual trust and mutual understanding among them persist, the dream of the Founding Fathers of the Project will certainly gain its proper shape. Enduring development and sustainability can be gained through cooperative and enthusiastic gestures based on dialogue stimulating mutual urge to focus on the aspects that unite the regions.

Endnotes

ⁱ Reinforcing 'Look East' Policy {An article by Minister of State for External Affairs Mr.E.Ahamed}, The MEA website, accessed electronically at

<http://www.meaindia.nic.in/interview/2006/01/17in01.htm> on 6.06.09.

ⁱⁱ *India in the Mekong-Ganga: Cooperation Initiative*, accessed electronically at

<http://www.news.indiamart.com/news-analysis/india-in-the-making-6691.html>

on 5.06.09.

ⁱⁱⁱ Chandan Irom, *Whatever happened to India's Look East Policy? The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation*, accessed electronically at

<http://www.manipuronline.com/Features/January2002/mekongganga19.htm>

on 5.06.09.

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v Amit Baruah, *Mekong-Ganga Cooperation in place*, The Hindu, Chennai, dated November 11, 2000, accessed electronically at www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/200011/msg0005.html on 7.06.09.

^{vi} Amit Baruah, *Looking East*, accessed electronically at

www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl1724/17240490.htm on 6.06.09.

^{vii} *Ibid.*
