



BIMSTEC from an Ecological Point of View

This editorial is based on [“A Subregional Grouping That Must Get Back On Course”](#) which was published in The Hindu on 29/03/2022. It talks about the ecological concerns arising in the Bay of Bengal region.

For Prelims: BIMSTEC, SAARC, Bangkok Declaration, Bay of Bengal Maritime Dialogue (BOBMD), Sustainable Fishing, Blue Economy, Illegal - Unreported - Unregulated (IUU) Fishing.

For Mains: India's Relations with BIMSTEC countries, Regional and Global Groupings - BIMSTEC, Environmental and Ecological Concerns in Bay of Bengal Region, Challenges of Fishing in the Region - Unsustainable Fishing, IUU Fishing, Fishermen's Issues.

The [Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation \(BIMSTEC\)](#) is a grouping of seven countries that emerged as the **“preferred platform”** for regional cooperation in **South Asia** after the [South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation \(SAARC\)](#) failed to ensure mutual cooperation among the member states.

BIMSTEC **connects the ecologies of the Great Himalayas and the Bay of Bengal**. However, from the past years, the BIMSTEC countries are suffering from several climate and ecology related challenges which, due to lack of coordination among the members, are constantly going unaddressed.

The **upcoming summit is an opportunity for BIMSTEC** leaders to go beyond generalised statements and **take concrete steps to address critical challenges** confronting the region.

What is BIMSTEC?

- BIMSTEC is a **sub-regional organisation** that came into being in **1997** through the Bangkok Declaration.
- It includes the littoral states of **India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar** (Thailand is a member too) and the land-locked states of **Nepal and Bhutan**.
 - Initially, it was formed with four Member States with the acronym **‘BIST-EC’** (Bangladesh, India, Sri-Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation) and became **‘BIMST-EC’** after the inclusion of Myanmar.
- BIMSTEC has identified 14 pillars for special focus - trade and investment, transport and communication, energy, tourism, technology, **fisheries**, agriculture, public health, poverty alleviation, **counter terrorism and transnational crime, environment and disaster management**, people-to-people contact, cultural cooperation and **climate change**.

What is BOBMD?

- A **Bay of Bengal Maritime Dialogue (BOBMD)** organised recently by the **Centre for**

Humanitarian Dialogue and the **Pathfinder Foundation** brought together government officials, maritime experts, and representatives of prominent think tanks from Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia.

- Participants called for stepped up efforts in areas such as,
 - **Environmental protection**
 - **Scientific research**
 - Curtailing **Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing**, and
 - The development of SOPs that could **govern interaction between fishing vessels of one country** with maritime law enforcement agencies of another.

What are the Key Issues Highlighted by BOBMD?

- **Climate Concerns:** As per BOBMD, the Bay of Bengal is home to a large network of mangrove forests of around 15,792 square kilometres and coral reefs of around 8,471 sq.km.
 - The two, however, are receding, the **annual loss of mangrove areas** is estimated at **0.4% to 1.7% and coral reefs at 0.7%**.
 - It is predicted that the **sea level will increase 0.5 metres in the next 50 years**.
 - Moreover, there have been **13 cyclonic storms in the last five years**.
- **Challenges to Fishing:** The Bay is an important source of natural resources for a coastal population of approximately 185 million people.
 - Around 4,15,000 fishing boats operate in the Bay and it is estimated that 33% of **fish stocks are fished unsustainably**
 - According to the [Food and Agriculture Organisation \(FAO\)](#), the Bay of Bengal is one of **IUU fishing hotspots in the Asia-Pacific**.
- **Threats to Marine Lives:** Other pressing challenges include:
 - Emergence of a **dead zone with zero oxygen** where no fish survive
 - [Leaching of plastic](#) from rivers as well as the Indian Ocean
 - **Destruction of natural protection against floods** such as mangroves
 - Sea erosion
 - Growing **population pressure and industrial growth** in the coastal areas and consequently, huge quantities of **untreated waste flow**.
- **Security Concerns:** Threats such as **terrorism, piracy** and tensions between countries caused by the **arrests of fishermen** who cross maritime boundaries are additional problems.
 - There also exists the problem of [fishermen crossing into the territorial waters](#) of neighbouring countries affecting India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar (and also Pakistan on the west coast).
- **Limited Cooperation Among Countries:** At present, there is limited cooperation among countries of the region in **marine research**.
 - Most BIMSTEC countries have premier institutions and excellent scientists but their **interaction with the West is far more than within the region**.
 - The use of modern technology and improved fishing practices can go a long way in restoring the health of the Bay.

What Can Be The Way Forward?

- **Harnessing the Blue Economy Potential:** The [blue economy](#) potential of the Bay of Bengal is huge, there are many opportunities to **develop maritime trade, shipping, aquaculture and tourism** which, however, require coordinated and **concerted action by governments, scientists and other experts**.
 - The upcoming BIMSTEC Summit must create a new regional mechanism for coordinated activities on maritime issues of a transboundary nature.
 - It must initiate urgent measures to **strengthen fisheries management**, promote sustainable fishing methods, **establish protected areas** and develop frameworks to prevent and **manage - pollution, agricultural waste as well as [oil spills](#)**.
- **Protection of Marine Environment:** **Marine environmental protection must become a priority area** for cooperation in the Bay of Bengal. Enforcement must be strengthened and information shared on best practices.
 - **Regional protocols** need to be developed and **guidelines & standards on pollution control** be established.

- There is a need for **greater scientific research on the impact of climate change** in general and on fisheries in particular.
 - Decision-making for such issues must be based on science and reliable data, information and tools.
- **Sustainable Fishing:** Home-grown solutions need to be created based on capabilities of local institutions and for **mutual learning through regional success stories**.
 - There is also a need to create **regional frameworks for data collection. Participatory approaches** must be evolved for near-real-time stock assessment and the creation of an **regional open fisheries data alliance**.
 - The **Bay of Bengal Programme (BOBP)**, an inter-governmental organisation based in Chennai, is one similar initiative that is working to promote sustainable fishing.
 - A **Bay Of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem (BOBLME)** project is also being launched by the **FAO** with funding from the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) and others.
- **Prohibiting IUU Fishing:** The upcoming BIMSTEC Summit shall mandate officials to come up with measures to curtail unsustainable as well as IUU fishing. **IUU fishing can be restricted by:**
 - Setting up an **international vessel tracking system** and making it mandatory for vessels to be **equipped with automatic identification system (AIS) trackers**.
 - Establishing a **regional fishing vessel registry system** and publishing **vessel licence lists** to help identify illegal vessels.
 - Increasing **monitoring**, control and **surveillance** in IUU fishing hotspots
 - Establishing **regional guidelines** on how to deter and prevent IUU practices.
 - Improving the implementation of **joint regional patrols**, and regional fishing moratoriums and **outreach programmes targeted at fisherfolk**.
 - Also, the laws and policies in littoral states must be harmonised and the **humanitarian treatment of fishermen** must be ensured during any encounter with maritime law enforcement agencies.

Conclusion

The challenges that confront the Bay of Bengal region brook no more delay. **BIMSTEC must arise, awake and act before it is too late.** The summit must set in process regular meetings of officials, supported by scientists and experts, to **tackle illegal and unsustainable fishing** as well as prevent the further environmental degradation of the Bay of Bengal.

Drishti Mains Question

Environmental and ecological concerns arising in the Bay of Bengal region call for the BIMSTEC to adopt a more serious and regular engagement of the member countries. Comment.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Q. India maintained its early cultural contacts and trade links with Southeast Asia across the Bay of Bengal. For this pre-eminence of early maritime history of Bay of Bengal, which of the following could be the most convincing explanation/explanations? (2011)

- (a) As compared to other countries, India had a better ship building technology in ancient and mediaeval times
- (b) The rulers of southern India always patronised traders, Brahmin priests and Buddhist monks in this context
- (c) Monsoon winds across the Bay of Bengal facilitated sea voyages
- (d) Both (a) and (b) are convincing explanations in this context

Ans: (d)

Q. At which one of the following places do two important rivers of India originate, while one of them flows towards north and merges with another important river flowing towards Bay of Bengal, the other one flows towards Arabian Sea? (2009)

- (a) Amarkantak
- (b) Badrinath
- (c) Mahabaleshwar
- (d) Nasik

Ans: (a)

Q. Two important rivers - one with its source in Jharkhand (and known by a different name in Odisha), and another, with its source in Odisha - merge at a place only a short distance from the coast of Bay of Bengal before flowing into the sea. This is an important site of wildlife and biodiversity and a protected area. Which one of the following could be this? (2011)

- (a) Bhitarkanika
- (b) Chandipur-on-sea
- (c) Gopalpur-on-sea
- (d) Simlipal

Ans: (a)