

The case for regional cooperation

Till 1947, this part of undivided India, comprising present-day eastern India, Bangladesh and India's northeast region, was always an integrated political, economic and cultural space. As the pioneering region in India's industrialisation, it was the country's richest and most prosperous region. Today, sadly, it is among the least developed.

RAJIV SIKRI

GEOGRAPHY dictates that the destinies of India and Bangladesh are inextricably intertwined. This is what makes Bangladesh and India very special neighbours. There is great benefit in the two countries working very closely together. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India in January 2010 clearly revealed that leaders in both countries recognise this.

Overcoming poverty is the most important common challenge. Both countries should be

take advantage of the numerous mutual synergies in the fields of economy, culture, history, language and society. This will open the doors for this region to once again play a leading role in South Asia -- in politics, socioeconomic development and intellectual debate. If India and Bangladesh act boldly and imaginatively, this region will be transformed from being a relatively underdeveloped periphery of the subcontinent to the centre of a thriving and integrated economic space, linking the dynamic and growing economies of South and Southeast Asia with a network of highways,

Chittagong and Mongla ports by India, Nepal and Bhutan; making the India-Bangladesh Inland Water Transport and Transit Protocol more effective; and construction of an Akhaura-Agartala railway link. Perhaps the next step should be for Bangladesh to develop, with India's assistance, regional projects like a deep-sea port at Chittagong that can handle container traffic from India to the rest of the world, instead of it being routed through Dubai, Colombo or Singapore.

Of course, India as a whole, and the northeast region in particular, is a natural market for Bangladesh's products, which should be given much freer access to the Indian market. In addition, sharing many complementarities with India, Bangladesh can become globally competitive if it can take full advantage of its geographical proximity to India. It could exploit India's competitive advantages, such as easy availability of raw materials, economies of scale of a huge production base and a large market. Bangladeshis understand India well, and are

region on Bangladesh and Myanmar considerably reduces India's preponderance in the grouping. Moreover, the absence of Pakistan will prevent Bimstec from getting bogged down in sterile bickering of the India-Pakistan variety that characterises Saarc meetings. Bimstec already complements and supplements India's engagement with Asean. With five of its members from South Asia, Bimstec could become a practical and desirable bridge between South Asia, as a whole, and Asean. This would benefit both Bangladesh and India.

In recognition of the critical role that improved transportation and communication linkages and greater connectivity play in ensuring more effective regional cooperation, Bimstec and ADB have conducted a study on transport infrastructure and logistics that has identified the bottlenecks and suggested ways to overcome them. These should be seriously examined and followed up. Bangladesh should be commended for joining the Trans-Asian Railway and the Asian Highway Network. It should now consider joining the Trilateral Highway Project, linking India, Myanmar and Thailand, which could become a Bimstec project. Bimstec cooperation should also be accelerated in the other agreed priority areas, like energy, fisheries, agriculture, public health, poverty alleviation, counter-terrorism and transnational crime, environment and natural disaster management. Bimstec would acquire dynamism once a secretariat is set up. Dhaka would be an ideal location, and hopefully, all Bimstec member-states would see merit in this.

Apart from Bimstec, the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), with its focus on areas like education, culture, tourism that promote people-to-people linkages, is another supplementary to India's 'Look East' policy and one more building block in the process of Asian economic integration. Bangladesh may find it in its interest to become a member of MGC. This would help to revive the organisation and give Bangladesh one more bridging mechanism for its gradual step-by-step integration into a larger Asian community.

The optimal success of India's economic integration with the East Asian economies requires Bangladesh's cooperation. Bangladesh cannot and should not be kept away from the larger Asian integration process. In publicly articulating India's long-term vision of an integrated Asia, from the Himalayas to the Pacific, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has made it clear that India is conscious of this imperative. The need now is for practical steps to demonstrate that India is both sensitive and generous towards its neighbours.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's recent visit to India has certainly achieved a momentous breakthrough in India-Bangladesh bilateral relations. It could also fundamentally change the way India and Bangladesh work together in the larger process of Asian economic integration.

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Regional unity starts at the border.

greatly concerned that South Asia's eastern regions have a lower level of development than the already low South Asian average. Till 1947, this part of undivided India, comprising present-day eastern India, Bangladesh and India's northeast region, was always an integrated political, economic and cultural space. As the pioneering region in India's industrialisation, it was the country's richest and most prosperous region. Today, sadly, it is among the least developed. Where Kolkata and Dhaka were once flourishing commercial and economic centres, today they have fallen far behind many other South Asian cities. This regrettable situation is primarily the result of decades-long shortsighted policies that ignored the region's interdependence, complementarities and commonalities.

If this region's enormous natural wealth and human resources are to be unlocked, both India and Bangladesh must sincerely and resolutely

railways, pipelines and transmission lines crisscrossing the region. Should we not dream that one day it will be possible to drive, or take a train, not only from West Bengal to Meghalaya, Assam and Tripura via Bangladesh, but from Kolkata to Yangon, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore via Dhaka? This could open the way for millions of tourists, pilgrims, workers and businessmen to travel in both directions. Apart from the direct economic benefits that would flow to it, Bangladesh could earn considerable transit revenues.

It is against this background that Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's path-out promise to India in January 2010 holds out promise of a paradigm shift, not only in India-Bangladesh relations but in regional and sub-regional cooperation too. Some important decisions taken during the visit are the agreement on improving rail and road connectivity between Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan; use of

well networked with key players in India. Bangladesh can leverage its geographical location to build links with the Asean countries and develop new markets for its products.

Bangladesh may like to consider adopting a step-by-step strategy for Asian economic integration. The first step has to be economic integration with its immediate neighbours. It would seem to be in Bangladesh's interest to come on board India's 'Look East' train. One of the most useful existing frameworks that could facilitate this is the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (Bimstec) that brings together the South Asian nations of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka with Asean members Myanmar and Thailand. Bangladesh and India's northeast region lie in the middle of the Bimstec region. Unlike Saarc, Bimstec is a geographically coherent and logical grouping. It is also well balanced, since the dependence of India's northeast

Matching slogans with actions

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NAJMUN NOOR

CONGRATULATIONS to Biman for its image-building efforts. Given the right conditions and resources, its potential could soon be reached. The new look is a welcome development and an acknowledgement that the airline business is entrenched and heavily tilted in elements that are predominantly marketing more than anything else. Indeed, the air travel industry in general and airline industry in particular are beset in this reality.

It is nevertheless advisable to tread carefully on unstable ground. It is easy to get carried away with concepts such as branding that are more useful in robust markets with ideal playing conditions, rather than slippery turf that may expose the service or product deficiencies. Changes in livery alone falls far short of full-scale brand identification.

While the new look of Biman catches one's eye, its changes are miniscule in comparison to what it could do to encourage brand loyalty. And that could very well be the catchword loyalty. The slogan "home in the air" is excellent yet it does not reflect Biman's current capabilities, which is a problem. Instead of calling itself a "home in the air," they could say, "we strive for your loyalty" as it seems more appropriate.

There need not be misgivings here. Taglines or slogans, inevitably synonymous with brand packaging, can always be changed. But brand identities, or taglines associated with it, should never "over promise" or "under deliver" on the message conveyed. Either Biman delivers what it promises or it does not. That will be the measure of its performance.

Clearly, the resources that are available to

Biman are either grossly under-utilised or limitations are so severe that it greatly hinders performance. The paucity of aircrafts has been



Change must be drastic and quick.

the cause of irregularity in schedules, inability to offer increased flights to money spinning markets and such. Maintenance costs incurred abroad make it impossible to register profits even on long haul ethnic markets.

Perhaps the most severe limitation is Biman's inability to utilise its resources. Currently Biman are a band of sound, professionally capable and experienced executives whose services can be best utilised by heeding to their suggestions and ideas. Each of them, having served abroad as Station Heads, are fully abreast of competitive strategies, capable

of reinstalling sales, pricing and marketing strategies in both ethnic and non ethnic markets. These employees are far more experienced and capable than one would find in businesses around in the country today.

Yet, each of these experienced employees are on the verge of retirement and the inability to utilise their acumen and expertise stems from the fact that Biman's functionality is not structured on private enterprise. Therefore, developing mission statements, marketing strategies and action plans targeting specific markets are conspicuously absent in this process of re-branding.

The major limiting factor is that while major airlines like Saudia, Singapore Airlines, Emirates or British Airways are blessed with vibrant and reputed hubs, Biman is not. All successful airlines are able to co-brand with their pulsating hubs at home and remote markets and that is the hallmark of their performance. Biman is deprived of this indispensable co-branding that makes airlines successful.

There is nothing demeaning or condescending in accepting that Biman is still a small airline. Small is and can be beautiful. It is prudent to remain within modest taglines reflecting hospitality, warmth and friendliness associated with our culture. These are concepts that Biman can build on until adequate aircraft is inducted and the airline is truly capable of flying on time and reaching out to non-ethnic markets. Take the current crisis that Toyota is facing at this moment. The car manufacturer is unabashedly pulling back its taglines of "safety," "dependability" and "reliability." There's more harm than utility in pretending, worse still, publicising, what one is not.

After the launch of the new look of Biman, it is hoped that the next step will be to develop the product or service commensurate with the mission statement. This will allow a synchronisation of marketing strategies in target markets vis-à-vis advertising strategies and brand packaging. When tag lines resonate with the product or service delivery, true brand loyalty and a robust customer base is sure to follow.

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The laptop revolution

The lady with the laptop computer has already covered eight villages in Nekmorod Union and established eight rural information centre societies, where about 200-300 women get their problems solved on a daily basis using this software. The alternatives, such as visits to health centres or agricultural extension officials, would cost as much as Tk.100.

ABDUL BAYES

CHONDON Chohot, an area under the Rani Shonkoil upazila of Thakurgaon district, is a typical village located near the border which lacks both access to electricity and good roads. Most of the villagers are tenants but the people there are well off in terms of having proper meals. This is because of the growth of HYV and hybrid rice, maize, and wheat cultivation with substantial yield gains over traditional varieties.

Of late, this village (and a few other villages around) has been witnessing the presence of laptop computers in the front yards of their houses. The technology has been taken there to help villagers keep up with the information revolution.

Given the situation where most of the villagers in Bangladesh hardly know about the existence of the computer era itself, the arrival of the laptop in a village seemingly surpasses all their astonishment. And this is how a "rural revolution" of that kind has taken place.

Bangladesh NGO Foundation (BNF) has been providing local NGOs with financial support in the pursuit of their social development programs. It has as many as 1,000 or so partners all over the country. Eco-Social Development Organisation (ESDO) of Thakurgaon is one of their partners who receive a modest amount for the establishment of a rural information centre.

In fact, this amount is 40 percent of the total estimated cost. A priori reasoning would tell us that the money would be spent in establishing local shops to provide access to telephone, computer, and fax facilities. But in reality, the ingenuity of the officials of ESDO seemingly rang a tone of revolution.

Laila Anjuman (25) was trained for using the software called Jeon that contains a package of information related to crops, poultry/livestock, plantations, fishery, health, human rights, etc.

Laila has formed a group of women in the village who get together in the uthan of a house every week. Females come there with complaints and questions, which are addressed by using the laptop.

Basically, the laptop displays the diseases that, say, poultry birds could be plagued with and instantly provides the solutions. Likewise, it displays various problems that might afflict paddy production or livestock population and the ways to cure them.

When we reached the Chondon Chohot villages, 15-20 females had already started airing their problems to Laila -- the lady with the lamp. An octogenarian woman was having some problems with her eyes and she was prescribed medicine. Another woman complained that some of her vegetables were being attacked by pests. Laila turned to the laptop to find solutions for her as well.

If solutions in the software fail to address any of the problems, Laila takes a note of that and after consulting appropriate experts on that she conveys the message the very next day or uses mobile phone for instant replies to the concerned woman. But we were told that most of the answers are available through the software under the aegis of the laptop.

The lady with the laptop computer has already covered eight villages in Nekmorod Union and established eight rural information centre societies, where about 200-300 women get their problems solved on a daily basis using this software. The alternatives, such as visits to health centres or agricultural extension officials, would cost as much as Tk.100.

Besides, the women could save a lot of time and devote themselves to other work. There is also a spillover effect that needs to be mentioned. For example, their husbands, children and relatives from far-flung areas also benefit from the knowledge these women have gained.

As we drove out of the village, a simple calculation struck my mind. If Tk.37 crore could be allocated as capital cost, then all villages could be covered with this technology (one laptop per ten villages).

In addition, 6,800 women could be employed at a yearly cost of Tk.40 crore (at Tk.5000 per month). By and large, an allocation of Tk.80 crore could change the shape of rural livelihoods within a very short period of time. This could go a long way towards fulfilling the dream of establishing a digital Bangladesh.

I understand that the sum of money required to spread this technology might scare many of us. It is obvious since we have limited resources but unlimited demands, and resources have their opportunity costs.

Why not then put forth a modest beginning by covering a few more villages across the country? Or can we not perhaps provide such facilities to our health or agricultural extension officials so that they are updated with recent solutions to the emerging problems of the rural residents?

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