

Navigating the Blue Horizon in the Bay of Bengal: India-Bangladesh Cooperation in Blue Economy



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Introduction and Background

The Bay of Bengal, one of the largest marine ecosystems in the world, encompasses the territorial waters and exclusive economic zones of Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, along with significant portions of India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. Additionally, it includes large areas beyond national jurisdiction, covering a total of 6.2 million square kilometres¹. The coastal Bay of Bengal region boasts rich biotopes, including mangroves, estuaries, lagoons, seagrass habitats, and coral reefs. These coastal biotopes support diverse marine biodiversity, with endemic species sustaining the region's fisheries. Over 450 million people living along the Bay of Bengal's coastlines rely directly on marine bioresources for their livelihood².

Ocean usage was limited to coastal fishing, commercial voyages, and naval battles for centuries, with maritime affairs primarily concerning a few seafaring nations. Consequently, the law of the sea was shaped by the interests of these naval powers. However, this has changed with the emergence of the "blue economy" concept, signalling a shift in ocean utilisation. The blue economy, or the ocean economy, refers to the economic activities related to the oceans and seas. According to the World Bank, the blue economy involves the sustainable use of ocean resources to enhance economies, livelihoods, and the health of the ocean ecosystems.³ The maritime domain of the Bay of Bengal is anticipated to contribute to the prosperity of its coastal states through the blue economy. Sustainable use and management of the Bay's living and non-living marine resources will enhance job creation, socio-economic development, and top-tier food security.

India, being a peninsular country, is extremely reliant on the sea for transportation, trade, electricity, and tourism. Moreover, being topographically abundant in freshwater resources like rivers, lakes, dams, reservoirs, tanks, and ponds, collectively plays a crucial role in fulfilling the country's blue economy needs. India is also the world's third-largest fish producer and the second-largest aquaculture fish producer. Consequently, blue industries

¹ BOBLME Strategic Action Programme, 2015, 71 pg(s)
<http://www.boblme.org/documentRepository/BOBLME%20SAP-Final.pdf>

² Vivekanandan, Elayaperumal, et al. "Climate Change Effects in the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem." *Environmental Development*, vol. 17, no. 1, Jan. 2016, pg. 47.
www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2211464515300129

³ Darian McBain, "What is the blue economy?," *Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment*, May 16, 2023,
<https://www.lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/explainers/what-is-the-blue-economy/#:~:text=The%20blue%20economy%2C%20r%20the,livelihoods%20and%20ocean%20ecosystem%20health%E2%80%9D>

can employ a substantial workforce, which they have done for decades in areas such as fishing, aquaculture, fish processing, maritime tourism, shipping, and port operations.⁴ Apart from earlier initiatives like the Sagarmala project and the Blue Economy Policy, India has recently launched the 'Maritime India Vision 2030'. It focuses on the Blue Economy, recognising it as a crucial component of economic growth.⁵ For a maritime nation like Bangladesh, the blue economy concept has provided the impetus to pursue new avenues of economic development. The Blue Economy discussions in Bangladesh gained momentum following the resolution of maritime boundary disputes with Myanmar and India. On March 14, 2012, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) ruled in favour of Bangladesh, granting it sovereign rights over resources within a 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and beyond. A similar verdict with India on July 7, 2014, extended Bangladesh's rights up to 354 nautical miles. These legal victories established Bangladesh's maritime boundaries, setting the stage for Blue Economy initiatives.⁶

In Bangladesh, approximately 30 million people rely on marine resources and ocean-related activities for their livelihood.⁷ The country has significant potential in the blue economy sectors. Bangladesh aims to achieve developed country status by 2041, which can be realised if ocean resources are utilised effectively.⁸

A World Bank report states that the ocean economy contributed a gross value added of \$6,192.98 million to Bangladesh's economy in 2014-15, accounting for approximately 3.33 percent of the nation's GDP. Bangladesh's current ocean economy primarily consists of tourism and recreation (25 percent), marine capture fisheries and aquaculture (22 percent),

⁴ Roshan Khanijo and Samridhi Roy, "India and the Blue Economy: Challenges and Way Forward," 2022, 8 Pg <https://www.usiofindia.org/pdf/20240112145305.pdf>

⁵ News Hound, "Maritime India Vision 2030 key priorities," *The International Institute of Marine Surveying (IIMS)*, February 28, 2024, <https://www.iims.org.uk/maritime-india-vision-2030-key-priorities/#:~:text=The%20Maritime%20India%20Vision%202030%20aims%20to%20implement%20actionable%20initiatives.pivotal%20element%20of%20economic%20progression.>

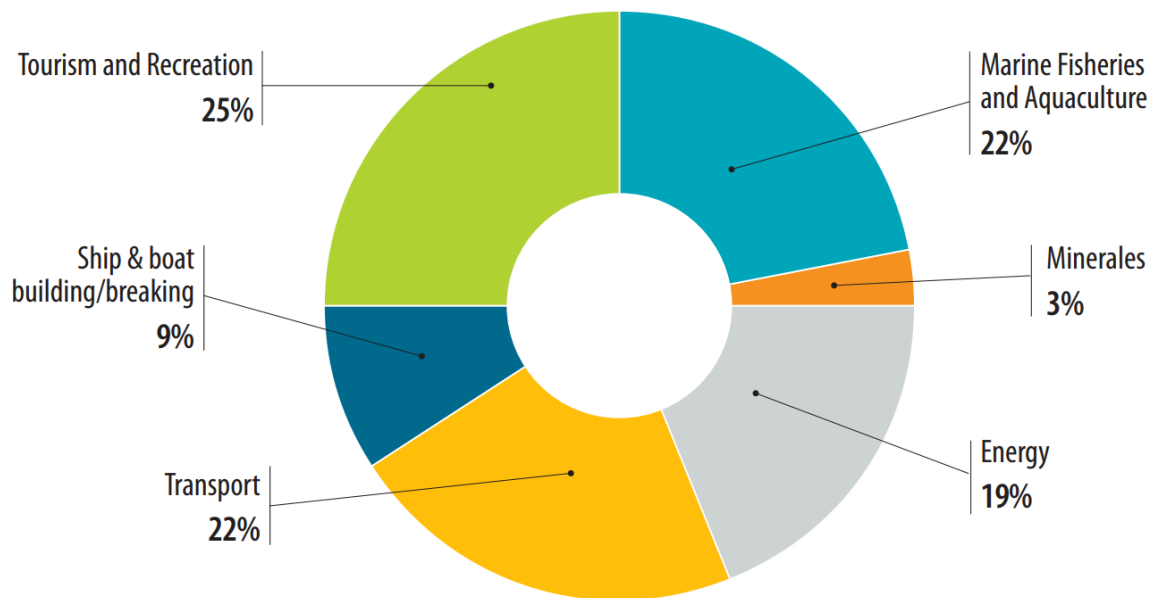
⁶ Sarah Watson, "The Bangladesh/Myanmar maritime dispute: lessons for peaceful resolution," *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, October 19, 2015, <https://amti.csis.org/the-bangladeshmyanmar-maritime-dispute-lessons-for-peaceful-resolution/>

⁷ Md Minarul Hoque, "Potential of Marine Resources for Sustainable Development of Bangladesh," *ResearchGate*, January 2023, Pg - 1, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367327879_Potential_of_Marine_Resources_for_Sustainable_Development_of_Bangladesh

⁸ Ministry of Finance, Bangladesh, *Country Statement*, Pg - 2 https://unesco.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/Bangladesh_Minister%20of%20Finance_2a_Country%20Statement_HFM_Final%20ERD.pdf

transport (22 percent), offshore gas and oil extraction (19 percent), ship and boat building/breaking (9 percent), and minerals (3 percent).⁹

Figure 1: Pie chart of Ocean Economy in Bangladesh, Percent of Gross Value Added (2014-15)



Source: World Bank Report "Towards a Blue Economy: A Pathway for Sustainable Growth in Bangladesh." 2018

With its "Neighbourhood First" policy, India considers Bangladesh a key partner. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was the first leader to visit India after the new Modi government began its tenure. India needs to support the enhancement of Bangladesh's blue economy.

Existing Initiatives between India and Bangladesh in Blue Economy

As the blue economy is a concept both nations emphasise, there are several recent initiatives taken by both countries to address the issues related to blue economy and marine

⁹ P.G. Patil, J. Virdin, C.S. Colgan, M.G. Hussain, P. Failler, and T. Vegh, "Toward a Blue Economy: A Pathway for Sustainable Growth in Bangladesh," World Bank, 2018, Pg - 45-46
<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/857451527590649905/pdf/126654-REPL-PUBLIC-WBG-Blue-Economy-Report-Bangladesh-Nov2018.pdf>

ecology. The Indian government has initiated several recent projects to support the growth of the blue economy, like the 'Amrit Kaal Vision 2047', the long-term blueprint for India's maritime blue economy. This plan outlines strategic initiatives to enhance port facilities, promote sustainable practices, and facilitate international collaboration.¹⁰ The new initiative of Maritime India Vision 2030 is also centred around the blue economy. Vision 2041 aims to transform Bangladesh into a high-income nation by 2041, focusing on utilising the marine and coastal resources of the Bay of Bengal for economic growth, employment, and development. This vision aims to enhance the contribution of the ocean economy to national GDP and support coastal communities.¹¹

Under the recent negotiations between India and Bangladesh for a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), the blue economy finds its space. The pacts, signed during discussions between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, aim to enhance cooperation in various areas, including the digital domain and green initiatives. This collaboration is intended to improve trade efficiency, maritime security, and sustainable ocean resource management, benefiting both nations by promoting economic growth and stronger bilateral relations¹².

India and Bangladesh are also part of the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem (BOBLME) Project, which aims to promote the management and sustainable use of Bay of Bengal marine resources through regional collaboration among the neighbouring countries. The BOBLME Phase 1 laid the foundation for sustainable management of the Bay of Bengal's large marine ecosystem by promoting regional cooperation and building institutional capacity, which ended in 2015. The second phase of the project started on June 30, 2022, and aims to tackle the significant challenges that include the overexploitation of marine resources, degradation, loss of critical habitats, water pollution, etc. It emphasises sustainable fishery management, habitat conservation, and livelihood enhancement. It adopts an ecosystem approach to fishery management (EAFM) within Marine Managed Areas (MMAs) to rebuild fish stocks, sustain local livelihoods, and achieve positive

¹⁰ PIB Delhi, "PM inaugurates Global Maritime India Summit 2023," October 17, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1968331#:~:text=During%20the%20programme%2C%20the%20Prime,practices%2C%20and%20facilitating%20international%20collaboration.>

¹¹ General Economics Division (GED), "Making Vision 2041 a Reality: Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2021-2041" (Bangladesh Planning Commission, Ministry of Planning, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2020), Pg - 209 <https://oldweb.lged.gov.bd/uploadeddocument/unitpublication/1/1049/vision%202021-2041.pdf>

¹² Anirban Bhaumik, "India, Bangladesh Ink Pact to Boost Ties in Maritime Sphere, Blue Economy," Deccan Herald, June 22, 2024, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/india-bangladesh-ink-pact-to-boost-ties-in-maritime-sphere-blue-economy-3076799>

biodiversity outcomes. Additionally, it also focuses on marine pollution reduction activities and decreasing the use of plastics in fishing activities.¹³

On July 7, 2022, CSIR-National Institute of Oceanography (Goa) and BSMRMU (Dhaka) signed a five-year MoU to promote scientific cooperation in ocean sciences. Signed by Prof. Sunil Kumar Singh and Rear Admiral Mohammed Musa, the agreement aims to establish a collaborative framework for research and development in ocean sciences, supporting the blue economy mission in both countries.¹⁴

The Protocol of Inland Water Transit and Trade, first signed in 1972 and later, along with its second addendum on 20 May, 2020, significantly boosts blue economy and marine ecology cooperation between India and Bangladesh. By enhancing inland waterway connectivity, these agreements facilitate sustainable use of water resources, streamline trade processes, and promote regional economic integration. The addition of new Indo-Bangladesh Protocol (IBP) routes and ports of call, such as the Sonamura-Daudkandi and Rajshahi-Dhulian-Rajshahi stretches, supports infrastructure development, alleviates congestion, and fosters environmental sustainability and economic growth in the region.¹⁵

Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2018 on Passenger and Cruise Services between India and Bangladesh also emphasise the blue economy. It aims to enhance bilateral maritime connectivity and tourism, promoting sustainable economic growth through efficient and safe maritime travel. By establishing guidelines for passenger and cruise services, the SOP ensures effective management of marine resources and supports the development of the tourism sector, aligning with blue economy principles of sustainable use and development of ocean resources.

The MoU between India and Bangladesh regarding the use of Chittagong and Mongla Ports signed in 2015 is also related to the blue economy. Although the primary focus is on enhancing trade and economic cooperation, the use of these ports can also contribute indirectly to aspects of the blue economy, such as improving maritime logistics efficiency, reducing transportation costs and carbon emissions by using shorter sea routes instead of

¹³ *Ocean Decade, "Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem Project II (BOBLME II)," Ocean Decade, March 23, 2023, <https://oceandecade.org/actions/bay-of-bengal-large-marine-ecosystem-project-ii-boblme-ii/>*

¹⁴ *PIB Mumbai Government of India, "MoU for Scientific Cooperation between CSIR-National Institute of Oceanography, Goa and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Maritime University, Dhaka," PIB, July 7, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1937966>*

¹⁵ *PIB Delhi Government of India, "Second Addendum on Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade between India and Bangladesh, 2020," PIB, May 22, 2020, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetailm.aspx?PRID=1625342>*

longer land routes, and promoting sustainable regional development through enhanced connectivity. While the MoU primarily addresses trade facilitation and economic benefits, its implementation could potentially support broader blue economy goals indirectly through improved maritime infrastructure and logistics management.¹⁶

Challenges faced by Bangladesh in the Blue Economy Sector

Bangladesh encounters several challenges in advancing its blue economy initiatives, Bangladesh lacks comprehensive national regulations aligned with international conventions like UNCLOS and MARPOL. Existing policies, enacted years ago, are insufficient to address current socio-economic and environmental changes, necessitating updated legislation. Despite possessing competent security forces such as the Navy and Coast Guard, Bangladesh faces challenges in securing its maritime zones effectively. Coastal patrolling predominates, leaving vast areas under-surveilled and vulnerable to piracy, IUU fishing, and other threats.¹⁷

Even though Bangladesh is a signatory to MARPOL 73/78, it has not enacted domestic legislation to enforce it in its waters, affecting the Coast Guard Act 1994. Shipbreaking activities, managed by local businessmen and politicians, contribute significantly to pollution due to inadequate debris disposal and steel recycling for construction. Political reluctance to enact pollution control laws exacerbates this issue. Enforcement mechanisms as a port state are weak and disjointed, with past failures to prosecute foreign ships for major oil pollution incidents. Limited authority of Port State Control inspectors hampers effective oversight of foreign-flagged vessels for anti-pollution compliance at sea. Bangladesh lacks institutional capacity in government agencies to combat vessel-source marine pollution, necessitating substantial investment in facilities and equipment. The Bangladesh Coast Guard faces severe shortages of patrol boats and detection equipment, with no sea port reception facilities. Overcoming budget constraints is crucial to enhancing institutional capacity and enforcing anti-pollution measures effectively.¹⁸

¹⁶ Rezaul H. Laskar, "Bangladesh Okays India's Use of 2 Ports to Transport Goods to the Northeast," *Hindustan Times*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/bangladesh-clears-use-of-chattogram-and-mongla-ports-by-india-for-transit-and-trans-shipment-of-cargo-cutting-time-and-cost-of-transport-to-northeastern-states-101682509293677.html>

¹⁷ M. Golam Sharwar, M. Ziauddin Alamgir, and Arif Mahmud, "Emerging Blue Economy for Bangladesh: Challenges and Way Forward," *BMJ*, Vol 7, Issue 1, Pg - 44-46 <https://bsmrmu.edu.bd/public/files/econtents/63e209dc456f53-Emerging%20Blue%20Economy%20for%20Bangladesh%20Opportunities%20.pdf>

¹⁸ (*Ibid*, 46)

Additionally, blue economy regulations in Bangladesh are not as robust as those governing agriculture and other industries. The environment of the Bay of Bengal has been severely damaged due to extensive cultivation. To feed a growing population, agriculture has had to expand, jeopardising the environment's long-term viability. Moreover, like the Maldives and Sri Lanka, Bangladesh also has significant geographical advantages over their neighbours, but they have not fully utilised their blue economy potential.¹⁹

The Coastal and Maritime Tourism (CMT) sector in Bangladesh faces several challenges. Despite various legal and institutional frameworks from different ministries addressing coastal and marine tourism directly or indirectly, there is still no integrated and dedicated CMT policy, act, or plan focusing specifically on this form of tourism.²⁰ There is a significant deficiency in tourism infrastructure such as luxury hotels, resorts, and restaurants necessary to cater to high-end international tourists. Apart from Cox's Bazar, there are no 5-star hotels available in other coastal tourist destinations. Although BPC operates a few motels, they are insufficient to meet the demands of tourists. There is also a shortage of skilled manpower in the hospitality sector, including well-trained hotel management, tour operators, and trainers for marine-based recreational activities, which impedes the development of Bangladesh's marine tourism sector.²¹

The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between India and Bangladesh, as described, could potentially impact blue economy initiatives between the two countries in several ways. If the CEPA results in a trade imbalance favouring India, it could affect Bangladesh's ability to invest in and prioritise sustainable development initiatives, including those related to the blue economy. A significant trade deficit and potential loss of tariff revenue could strain Bangladesh's finances, potentially reducing funds available for environmental conservation and sustainable marine resource management. With the introduction of CEPA, the private sector in Bangladesh may need time and assistance to adjust to the new competitive environment it brings. This adjustment period could delay investments in sustainable practices and technologies related to the blue economy as businesses focus on maintaining competitiveness and adjusting to new trade dynamics.

¹⁹ Roshan Khanijo and Samriddhi Roy, "India and the Blue Economy: Challenges and Way Forward," 2022, Pg - 6, <https://www.usiofindia.org/pdf/20240112145305.pdf>

²⁰ M. W. Islam and T. Sarker, "Sustainable Coastal and Maritime Tourism: A Potential Blue Economy Avenue for Bangladesh," ADBI Working Paper 1293 (Tokyo: Asian Development Bank Institute, 2021), December, 2021, Pg - 9, <https://www.adb.org/publications/sustainable-coastal-maritime-tourism-potential-blue-economy-avenue-bangladesh>

²¹ Hassan Siddique, Kaniz Fatima, Faisal Azim, and Md. Mostofa Sadik, "Challenges of Marine Tourism in Bangladesh," BMJ 6, no. 1, Pg - 200-201, https://bsmrmu.edu.bd/public/files/econtents/621c736e82b8b10-Challenges%20of%20Marine%20Tourism%20in%20Bangladesh_compressed.pdf

Way Forward and Potential for India

It is important for India to help Bangladesh in addressing some of the issues related to the blue economy. In order to enhance the legal and policy framework in Bangladesh, both India and Bangladesh can work together to update and harmonise Bangladesh's national regulations with international conventions like UNCLOS and MARPOL. Developing a joint maritime surveillance system to monitor the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) effectively would be beneficial. This can involve the use of satellite technology and joint patrols by the navies and coast guards of both countries to address issues like illegal fishing and other maritime threats. Apart from that, it is important to develop maritime awareness programmes. This initiative should start from the bottom level and could involve incorporating ocean literacy into school and college curricula, raising awareness among the general population, especially the coastal community about maritime issues and security threats.

India can assist Bangladesh comprehensively in addressing maritime pollution challenges through several strategic initiatives. Enhancing the capacity of Port State Control (PSC) mechanisms by training inspectors, granting them additional enforcement authority, and improving their capabilities to detect and penalise violations of marine pollution laws are few. Both countries can also monitor and enforce MARPOL regulations in shared maritime areas through joint patrols, information sharing on vessel movements, and coordinated responses to pollution incidents. India can also provide crucial infrastructure and equipment support to Bangladesh, such as patrol boats, detection technology, and seaport reception facilities for effective waste management from ships. Additionally, India can offer advisory support to Bangladesh in developing and strengthening policy and legal frameworks related to maritime pollution control, ensuring alignment with international standards prescribed by MARPOL.

India can share its expertise and best practices in policy formulation and implementation related to coastal and marine tourism. This could involve technical assistance and advisory support to help Bangladesh draft and enact comprehensive legislation and policy frameworks tailored to CMT. Encouraging Bangladesh to increase private sector participation in infrastructure development and tourism services through Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) in coastal areas is necessary. This could involve facilitating partnerships between Indian and Bangladeshi companies for investment in resorts, hotels, and tourism facilities along Bangladesh's coastal areas and islands. India can also assist Bangladesh in developing specialised academic and training centres to build a skilled workforce for the tourism sector. This could involve collaborating with educational institutions in Bangladesh to

expand the scope of courses related to tourism and hospitality management. Also, providing support in curriculum development, faculty training, and exchange programmes to enhance educational offerings in tourism could be beneficial.

Finally, looking into the recently negotiated Free Trade Agreement, it is crucial to conduct a comprehensive impact assessment of CEPA across sectors, particularly those linked to the blue economy. This assessment should encompass potential environmental and social implications, as well as the economic effects on industries engaged in sustainable practices.

Conclusion

The enhancement of the Blue Economy in Bangladesh needs robust cooperation between India and Bangladesh, with India being the immediate neighbour and long-term partner. Both countries have made significant steps in initiating projects and agreements to address Blue Economy challenges, yet much more remains to be done. By successfully collaborating to address challenges in policy implementation related to blue economy aspects, marine pollution, and coastal and marine tourism will not only foster the blue economy but also contribute to regional stability and prosperity, reinforcing the bonds between India and Bangladesh.

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