

Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC)

Background

The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) is an initiative by six countries – India and five ASEAN countries, namely, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam for cooperation in tourism, culture, education, as well as transport and communications. It was launched in 2000 at Vientiane, Lao PDR. Both the Ganga and the Mekong are civilizational rivers, and the MGC initiative aims to facilitate closer contacts among the people inhabiting these two major river basins. The MGC is also indicative of the cultural and commercial linkages among the member countries of the MGC down the centuries.

2. The suggestion to set up such a grouping was made by the then Thai Foreign Minister to EAM during his visit to India in early July 2000 who had expressed the hope that India could also join it. The then EAM, Shri Jaswant Singh, had welcomed the idea and suggested that the names of the two rivers, Ganga and Mekong, should be in the title of this cooperation initiative. EAM had felt that given the commonalities of cultural traditions, including the heritage of Buddha, countries in this region could join hands in an informal manner to promote tourism, culture and educational interaction. Subsequently, on the margins of the 33rd ASEAN Post Ministerial Conferences held on 28 July 2000 in Bangkok, EAM and the Foreign Ministers of these five countries formally announced this project, then called the Ganga-Mekong Suvarnabhumi Programme (GMSP). It was agreed that this programme would be formally launched in November 2000 at Luang Prabang, the ancient capital of Lao PDR situated on the river Mekong, on the occasion of the Festival of Lights (very similar to our Diwali) – celebrated in Lao PDR and other countries of the region, when the First Ministerial Meeting of this Programme would be held in Vientiane. The name was changed to Mekong Ganga Cooperation, after reservations were expressed by Lao PDR in particular on the use of the word 'Suvarnabhumi'.

Previous MGC Ministerial Meetings

3. The 1st MGC Ministerial Meeting was held in Vientiane from 9-13 November 2000. It issued the Vientiane Declaration on MGC covering cooperation in the 4 traditional areas. The 2nd MGC Ministerial Meeting was held in Hanoi on 28 July 2001, and adopted the Hanoi Programme of Action (HPA), a detailed Work Programme for six years (July 2001 to July 2007), providing specific actions for cooperation, in the 4 traditional areas. The 3rd MGC Ministerial Meeting was held in

Phnom Penh on 20 June 2003 and provided additional political impetus to the MGC initiative. It adopted the Phnom Penh Roadmap.

4. On the margins of the ASEAN Summit in Cebu, the Philippines, in January 2007, Thailand, the then chairman of the MGC, handed over chairmanship to India on 12 January 2007. The 5th MGC Ministerial Meeting was held at Manila, Philippines on 1 August 2007, and was chaired by India. Thereafter, the MGC Ministerial Meetings remained pending for 5 years from 2007-2012.

5. To provide a fresh impetus to the MGC initiative, India hosted the 6th MGC Ministerial Meeting on 4 September 2012. Apart from the traditional areas of cooperation, some new areas were also identified for cooperation in this meeting, including the establishment of an India-CLMV Quick Impact Projects (QIP) Fund of USD 1 million annually, SME cooperation, conservation of Rice GermPlasm, setting up a Working Group on Health for sharing information and cooperation in Pandemics management and a Common Archival Resource Centre (CARC) to be established at the Nalanda University.

Sixth MGC Ministerial Meeting

6. India hosted the 6th MGC Ministerial Meeting on 4 September 2012, in New Delhi preceded by the MGC Senior Officials Meeting on 3 September 2012. The Meeting was chaired by the then EAM, Shri. S.M. Krishna, and saw active participation from all the MGC partner countries.

7. In the 6th MGC Ministerial Meeting the Ministers recalled the Vientiane Declaration, the Hanoi Programme of Action and the Phnom Penh Road Map, that define the vision, objectives and specific actions to be taken in the areas for focus under the MGC. The Ministers reviewed the decisions taken at the 5th MGC Meeting held on 1 August 2007 in Manila, the Philippines and noted the progress in the projects initiated thereof. The Ministers reiterated the significance of the MGC for their countries and recalled its strong foundation in the cultural and commercial linkages amongst the member countries over many centuries.

8. The Ministers agreed with the SOM recommendation that there is considerable potential to expand the partnership into new areas of relevance to trade, investment, sustainable development and the well-being of the people of MGC countries.

9. India announced the establishment of the India-CLMV Quick Impact Projects (QIP) Revolving Fund with an annual contribution of USD 1 million. This Fund is

for short gestation projects that could directly benefit local communities, with results that are immediate and visible. This was appreciated by all the MGC partners and was seen as a clear reiteration of India's commitment towards the MGC collaboration.

10. The Ministers appreciated the completion of construction of the MGC Traditional Asian Textiles Museum building at Siem Reap, Cambodia in December 2011. Cambodia provided the land and undertook the construction with financial contribution by India. The Ministers recognized that the 1st meeting of the Working Group on the MGC Textiles Museum project, held on 4 May 2012 in Siem Reap, Cambodia had made a number of recommendations and tasked the Senior Officials to undertake appropriate follow up. The Ministers welcomed the initiative by India for setting up an Integrated Textile Centre with focus on Textile traditions of the MGC Countries as part of the Museum. The Ministers also agreed to utilize the space in the Museum for showcasing performing arts from the MGC countries, especially since they are intrinsically linked to the textile traditions in these countries.

11. The Ministers took note of the ongoing cooperation for the preservation of the world heritage sites in MGC countries. They welcomed the offer of Thailand to work with India in this important area and tasked Senior Officials to identify new initiatives in this regard.

12. The Ministers also noted the positive developments in India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway project and other ongoing cooperation under the India-ASEAN framework to realize India-ASEAN Connectivity. Keeping in view the significance of connectivity amongst the MGC countries, and its associated benefits, the Ministers agreed to expeditiously take forward matters related to the extension of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway to Cambodia and Lao PDR, and to the new proposal for the development of an India-Myanmar-Lao PDR-Viet Nam-Cambodia highway. There is also a projection by ERIA for a Mekong-India Economic Corridor linking the corridors in peninsular India with the production networks along the Southern Economic Corridor of the Greater Mekong Sub-region through Chennai-Dawei sea link.

13. The Ministers noted the threat of drug resistant malaria, which is emerging as a major public health issue in MGC countries, impacting disproportionately on the economically weaker sections. They agreed to recommend that MGC Health authorities consider the formation of a Working Group in this important sector to share information and cooperate in pandemics management.

14. The Ministers recognized the wealth of natural resources and expertise available in the MGC sub-region, and the complementarity amongst Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) in MGC countries in terms of product, technology, human resources and market. They agreed to explore the possibility of establishing a Working Group to review and monitor cooperation in the SME sector including the participation of the private sector wherever applicable and exchange of best practices. During the 6th MGC meeting, India proposed a Working Group to review and monitor cooperation in this sector and circulated a concept paper on “Cooperation between India and the Mekong countries in the field of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises.

15. The Ministers noted the richness of biodiversity in member countries and agreed that its loss would have adverse consequences for food security, health and other life sustaining resources. In the context of ongoing collaboration in different multilateral fora, the Ministers noted the need for coordination and enhanced cooperation in biodiversity related issues. They welcomed Thailand’s announcement of the World Teak Conference in March 2013 in Bangkok and also the offer for MGC participation in Eco-tourism and Community-based Tourism training courses organized by the Thailand International Development Cooperation Agency in 2013.

16. The Ministers acknowledged that rice is the most important crop in MGC countries. Despite significant progress, rice production continues to face many challenges. The Ministers tasked the Senior Officials to explore mutually beneficial cooperation in rice production techniques and downstream processing projects. During the 6th MGC Meeting India circulated a concept paper on “Identification and Conservation of Rice Germplasm for Nutritional Quality Traits and Enhancing Profitability of Rice Production through Mechanization and Downstream Processing”, to forge mutually beneficial cooperation in rice production techniques and downstream processing projects.

17. The Ministers noted the establishment and progress of Entrepreneurship Development Centres (EDCs), Centre for English Language Training (CELTs), and Vocational Training Centres (VTCs) by India in CLMV countries. They accepted the recommendation of the SOM that this ongoing cooperation should be strengthened and expanded.

18. The Ministers appreciated India’s annual scholarships to MGC countries under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, which have been contributing consistently to capacity building and human resource development of MGC countries. They welcomed India’s offer to organize special customized capacity building programmes on WTO related issues and trade and

sustainability matters. The Ministers agreed on the need for effective and full utilization of scholarships with a view to increasing trade relations and economic cooperation amongst MGC countries.

19. The Ministers appreciated India's continued support in providing 50 scholarships through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) to students from MGC countries and the extension of the scheme to 2016.

20. The Ministers reaffirmed the important role of Nalanda University and took note of the progress made by India in re-establishing the Nalanda University as a symbol of Asian renaissance. To preserve the long history of intra-Asian interactions, the Ministers tasked the Senior Officials to explore the possibility of establishment of a Common Archival Resource Centre at Nalanda University to facilitate research on the Mekong Ganga deltaic region.

India's Sector-wise Approach in MGC

Tourism

21. India hosted a delegation of about 100 Buddhist pilgrims from Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam from 5-12 September 2007. Due to much untapped potential of tourist inflows from Mekong countries in particular, India has suggested in internal discussions last year that Ministries of Tourism and Civil Aviation explore feasibility of flight connections from a tourist spot such as Angkor in Cambodia into India. Furthermore, we offered to host participants from ASEAN countries to the International Buddhist Conclave (IBC) scheduled to be held in Varanasi in October 2016.

Capacity Building

22. 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 (Danang 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.

23. At the 8th ASEAN-India Summit in Hanoi on 30 October 2010, India had announced cooperation 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, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam) countries; (ii) Set up Information Technology Resource-cum-Study Centre for ASEAN & 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 USD 8,696,010. CDAC is the implementing agency for this project. MOUs in this regard have been finalized with Myanmar and Cambodia, while those with Lao PDR and Vietnam are being considered by their concerned authorities. It is expected that the MOUs with all the four countries would be signed in the near future.

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

25. Under the Initiatives for ASEAN Integration, India would also be setting up a Centre for English Language and IT, comprising 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 USD 276,856, which is being funded under the ASEAN-India Cooperation Fund. An MOU to this effect has been signed with the Vietnamese government during the visit of Vietnamese PM to New Delhi on 28 October 2014. The project proposal is expected to be approved by ASEAN Secretariat in the near future. 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 USD 20 million, which the Vietnamese side has requested India to provide under an LOC.

Education

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

27. In pursuance of the decisions at the 3rd Ministerial Meeting of MGC held on 20 June 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 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).

28. The Universities preferred by the MGC students are located in Bangalore, Delhi, Hyderabad, Pune, Warangal, Madras, West Bengal, 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, LL.M, BCA, BBA and M.Tech.

29. We have also 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.

30. We would soon be offering courses under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme for MGC countries to train one representative each from Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam in museology and conservation techniques. We hope 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.

Connectivity

31. 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-Myanmar-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 Lao PDR and also a new highway linking Viet Nam.

32. India has proposed a Joint Working Group on Maritime Connectivity between India, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar and Viet Nam 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 ASEAN-India connectivity related issues.

Culture

33. India 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 7 April 2014. India has provided its exhibits towards the two permanent galleries as well as the travelling exhibits. Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam have provided their exhibits.

34. Ms. Charu Smita 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 MEA, ICCR and Ministry of Textiles. The tenure of Prof. Charu Smita Gupta, Director of the Museum has been extended by another year on same terms & conditions till 31 July 2017 on the recommendations of our Ambassador in Cambodia.

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

36. 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, Lao PDR. The documentary was well received by the MGC partners. Copies of DVDs have been handed over to the MGC SOM Leaders.

Update on the New Areas of Cooperation added in the 6th MGC MM

Conservation of Rice GermPlasm

37. During the 6th MGC Meeting in New Delhi on 4 September 2013, a new area of mutually beneficial cooperation in rice production techniques and downstream processing projects was added. India circulated a revised concept paper on “Identification and Conservation of Rice Germplasm for Nutritional Quality Traits and Enhancing Profitability of Rice Production through Mechanization and Downstream Processing”. We have received comments from MGC partners.

(ii) MSMEs

38. Since there exists complementarity amongst the Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) of MGC countries and India, in terms of product, technology, human resources and market, India, during the 6th MGC meeting proposed a Working Group to review and monitor cooperation in this sector. India circulated a revised concept paper on “Cooperation between India and the Mekong countries in the field of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises”. We have received comments from MGC partners.

(iii) Quick Impact Projects (QIPs)

39. During the 6th MGC Ministerial Meeting, India had announced the establishment of an India CLMV QIP revolving fund with an annual contribution of USD 1 million. Project in areas such as connectivity, education, social infrastructure, health, agriculture, farming and animal rearing would be considered under this.

40. We have simplified the procedures for commissioning of these projects, based on the requirements of CLMV countries, and we are confident that they will take off in the coming months. So far, 6 project proposals from Cambodia, 5 from Vietnam are already under implementation. We have also received 3 project proposals from Laos and 2 from Myanmar. We hope to have the projects from Laos and Myanmar implemented soon.

(iv) Health

41. During the 6th MGC Meeting, in order to strengthen the region's capacity to respond to the menace of drug resistant malaria and other such emerging public health threats, India had suggested that Health Ministries in MGC countries consider setting up a Working Group for undertaking health research relevant to the MGC region and share information and expertise on pandemics management. The Ministers agreed to recommend that MGC Health authorities consider the formation of a Working Group on the threat of drug resistant malaria, which is emerging as a major public health issue in MGC Countries. A revised concept paper on Threat of Drug Resistance in Malaria was circulated by India. We have received comments from MGC partners.

(v) Common Archival Resource Centre (CARC) at Nalanda University

42. The Nalanda University is moving towards developing the CARC through various means. Courses pertaining to the core ideas on Asian History, inter-Asian cooperation, etc. are being taught. The University's partnership with the Nalanda Sriwijaya Centre in Singapore has moved to the next stage with a scholar coming in to teach at Nalanda University. The University is moving towards collecting material objects once its library is in place and designated places are made available for collections of material and digital resources from the Mekong Ganga deltaic region.

43. India has proposed the establishment of a Common Archival Resource Centre at Nalanda University to facilitate research and preserve the history of interactions in the Mekong Ganga deltaic region. The CARC would facilitate research by preserving archival records in various media and formats. A revised concept paper on the Common Archival Resource Centre at Nalanda University was circulated by India. We have received comments from MGC partners.

Draft Plan of Action

44. As per discussions in the 7th MGC SOM, India had taken the lead in formulating a draft Action Plan on MGC for 2016-2018 and circulated it amongst all the MGC SOM Leaders inviting their comments. We have received comments from MGC partners. We hope to take necessary steps to implement the draft Plan of Action.

July 2016