

Bhutan in SAARC and BIMSTEC

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Abstract

Bhutan has had its own share of history in consonance to the development of its foreign policy over the decades. From abandoning its self-isolation policy to developing relations with India and other countries, to supporting the formation of SAARC and further accepting the membership of BIMSTEC, all the events have steadily contributed to the growth of Bhutan's foreign policy. SAARC was formed in 1985 for regional growth and development, and Bhutan was one of the founding members of SAARC. And since its formation, Bhutan has been actively participating in the activities and programmes of SAARC. BIMSTEC as a sub-regional organization was established in 1997 with the objective of attaining rapid socio-economic development of the Bay of Bengal region through technical and economic cooperation in various areas among the members. It came into prominence due to the failure of SAARC and also due to the fact that it would serve as a bridge between South Asia and South East Asia. Bhutan became its member in the 2004. Thus, the paper will look into the changing dynamics of Bhutan's foreign policy from self isolation to a country which opened up for diversification. Further, the paper will also examine Bhutan's changing dynamics of foreign policy with the formation and Bhutan's engagement with SAARC and BIMSTEC. The areas and potentialities these two organizations have provided for Bhutan will be highlighted upon.

Introduction

With huge natural resources at its disposal, Bhutan as a small landlocked country in South Asia has always stood the test of time maintaining peace within and outside the Shagrila.

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Bordered by Tibet and the Indian states of Sikkim, West Bengal, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, Bhutan have constantly been encountered by challenges with regard to its landlocked and strategic location, in consonance to its neighbors. Nevertheless, Bhutan over the last few decades has sustainably undergone the process of modernization and democratization.

In 2008, Bhutan became world's youngest democracy and the transition of the governmental system was marked with peace and consensus, which was worth an applaud. Though initially self isolation was its primary policy Bhutan has never hesitated to the changing situation in the world scenario, this can be very well explained through the changing dynamics of its foreign policy, its active participation and cooperation in issues pertaining to South Asia in particular and the world order in general.

Every country has a set of national policies which deals with their respective national affairs. The protection of national interest is the primary goal of any country's national policy. The preservation of a country's national interest is dependent not only on the domestic developments, but it is also determined by a country's relationship with the other states. Each country tries to determine their foreign policies, taking into consideration, their strengths, weaknesses and their changing social, economic, political and strategic requirements.

Therefore, international politics operates through the foreign policies of the entire gamut of nations in the world order. The way a country conducts its relations with the other countries for various reasons is foreign policy. The ambit of conducting foreign relations range from politics, military, culture, economy to technology, etc.

In the age of liberalization, privatization, globalization, and a digital world, no nation can avoid getting oneself engaged in international politics. Today it is not feasible for a country to

stay isolated from the world order. No country can be self-reliable and self-sufficient in the world of interdependence. Therefore, the importance of conducting foreign relations for development is broadly accepted by all the countries today. Every country formulates their foreign policy in a way which seeks to promote its own national and international interest, along with their territorial integrity and sovereignty protection. This is especially true in context of smaller countries.

The existence of foreign policy is a common factor among all the nations, but the principles, ideas and the structure of foreign policy of every nation is different from each other. There are many factors that determine the foreign policy of a country. Geography is the most important factor that will determine the pattern of a country's foreign policy. Geography is one of the parameter to determine a nation's self-sufficiency. Geography includes the climate, fertility, land, soil, location water bodies, landlocked position, etc.

The influence of history, traditions and culture also conditions a nation's foreign policy. Bagged by a history of colonial subjugation, post 1947, India directed its foreign policy towards its support for the freedom movement all over the world, from Indonesia, to Vietnam and many more. Similarly, other significant determinants of foreign policy are public opinion, the scenario of the internal environment, and the ideologies of the particular country, to mention a few.

The determinants which help to mould the foreign policy of every nation exist in plethora, depending upon the country, which makes the existence of foreign policy an inevitable part of a country's politics. Each nation has its own trajectory regarding the evolution and development of foreign policies. In a similar manner Bhutan's foreign policy which has remained so dynamic over the decades has had its own journey, walked and traversed with its unique traditions and principles.

Research Methodology

The methodology that has been used in the manuscript is based on qualitative study which frequently interconnects theory and analysis. An examination and analysis of the primary and secondary data has been made. However, a vast amount of literature of the manuscript has been garnered from the secondary domain. Secondary sources such as, relevant books and articles from Journals, monographs and unpublished theses have been used to generate information. Relevant reports published by several research institutes like IDSA and the Centre for Bhutan Studies have also been used. The adopted methods have suited the objectives of the manuscript as the content of the paper is descriptive, analytical and explanatory in nature with full dependency upon on words and theory.

Changing Dynamics of Bhutan's Foreign Policy

Prior to coming out of self isolation which Bhutan had embarked upon itself, barring a few minimal contacts with the British India and Tibet, Bhutan had chosen not to develop contacts with the other countries for a very long period of time. It was only in the 1960's that Bhutan decided to end its isolation policy and since then Bhutan has peacefully and steadily been expanding and internationalizing itself with its neighboring countries and countries all over the globe.

Infused with the principles of Buddhism, since the ancient period, Bhutan has always given great importance to its traditional, cultural and spiritual values. Avoidance of any kind of foreign adulteration upon its unique identity and traditions was one of the key reasons for Bhutan to isolate itself. Bhutan has always looked at development through a holistic perspective, wherein development needs to focus not just on economic prosperity, but it should also cater to the preservation of the timeless culture, tradition, spiritual happiness and wellbeing of the people at large.

Bhutan's ideas on growth and development have been constitutionally authenticated through its policy of gross

national happiness. This is symbolic to the duality of Bhutan getting traversed to the journey of expanding its foreign affairs and moving along the requirements of liberalization and globalization, but according to its own needs and priorities which adheres primarily to the concept of preservation. This makes the tiny Himalayan nation unique on its own.

Many factors contributed to Bhutan's dynamism in its foreign policy. The needs of the changing time in the modern world, its strategic location between two Asian giants, the Tibet occupation by Chinese, to the episode of reinstatement of Sikkim with India, coupled up with its own insecurities and the need for socio-economic development in the globalised world, compelled Bhutan to give up its isolation policy for the better. The dual combination of aspirations and anxiety earmarked Bhutan regional and international initiatives.

Post 1950's Bhutan stepped onto the path of modernization and development. And it turned towards India as the primary partner, making India the first partner of Bhutan's externalization journey. Thus, the development of friendly relationship between Bhutan and India began, which holds prominence till today. The diplomatic relations between Bhutan and India officially began in the year 1968. However, the relations between Bhutan and India have been molded over the decades, owing to their shared heritage, culture and religion, which made both the countries affiliated with each other in a more enhanced manner.

Over the years the bilateral relationship between the two countries has been pretty well sustained through various initiatives taken from governments at both the ends. Today Indian assistance to Bhutan has diversified in innumerable areas, health, military, education, human resource, roads and infrastructure, hydropower, agriculture etc. Bhutan's first five-year plan which began from 1961 was fully funded by India.

India's budgetary assistance to Bhutan, vis-à-vis. the proportion of loans over grants has been gradually rising and

most of these loans are for the hydropower projects. The foundation of hydropower development cooperation between India and Bhutan was laid on 23 March 1974, when the two governments signed an agreement on the Chukha Hydropower Project in Western Bhutan¹.

From the early period to today, Bhutan and India have shared cordial relations marked with minimal level of conflict and contradictions and its due credit goes to Bhutan's Buddhist imbibed principle of peaceful way of living within and outside the country.

Nevertheless, Bhutan being a small landlocked country was well aware of the negative implication of being fully dependent upon one country only, especially given the fact that situations between nations keep changing in international politics, hence Bhutan wanted to expand and secure its international position while maintaining good relations with India also.

Therefore, to counter its foreign policy insecurities, Bhutan chooses to seek new initiatives in the region and outside. It chooses the path of diversifying its foreign relations. And fortunately to some extent India has been pretty cooperative in supporting Bhutan's international initiatives, considering Bhutan's strategic importance, India felt the best policy was to keep Bhutan appeased.

With the support from India, Bhutan secured an admission to the Colombo plan in the early 1960s. In the year 1969 Bhutan became a member of the International Postal Union. Bhutan's breakthrough moment in the league of international organizations membership, came when Bhutan got an admission to the United Nations in the year 1971, which was followed by the opening up of the United Nations Development Office in Bhutan in 1979. The United Nations membership

¹ Saklani, Udisha & Tortajada, Cecilia.(2019), India's Development Cooperation In Bhutan's Hydropower Sector: Concerns And Public Perception, *Water Alternatives*,12(2).

exposed Bhutan to the intricacies of multilateral diplomacy, and it provided a lens for Bhutan to look through the worldwide gamut of international politics and the techniques of strategizing.

Over the decades Bhutan has successfully developed diplomatic relations with many western countries, like Norway, Austria, Sweden, Switzerland, and Denmark. In addition, Bhutan has also diversified its bilateral relationship within Asia and more specifically in South Asia, leveraging Bhutan's experience in international politics.

In the year 1983, Bhutan established its nonresident relations with Nepal and since then the two countries have been determined in their mutual cooperation. The other regional initiative in diversifying its foreign policy was taken in February 1984 in relation to Bangladesh when King Jigme Singye Wangchuck visited Bangladesh. During this visit, a Protocol on expansion and regulation of trade and an Agreement on Economic and Cultural Cooperation were concluded between the two countries. A Treaty of Trade and Transit concluded in September 1980 became operative with the signing of the protocol.²

Aware of Chinese aggression in its neighborhood, Bhutan also initiated for border talks with China in 1984. The opening of border talks indeed marked the first direct formal contacts between Bhutan and China. Though much has not been achieved till date, yet it showed Bhutan's enthusiasm to maintain cordial relations with all the countries.

Along with the strive for an independent role in conducting its external relations, Bhutan has also diversified its commercial, economic relations with the other countries, looking for partners beyond India. Bhutan established her diplomatic relations with Japan in the year 1986. Since then, the relations between the two nations have developed gradually. In the

² Muni, S.D.(1984), Bhutan Steps Out, *The World Today*, 40(12).

recently concluded Doklam standoff between Bhutan, India and China, Japan became the first major country to convey its unequivocal support for Bhutan and India through diplomatic channels. Japan stated that all the parties involved in the conflict should not resort to unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force, further amplifying Japan's overtly critical position on the Chinese attempt to change the status quo.³

Japanese assistance to Bhutan dates back to before the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between the two countries. In 1964, a Japanese agricultural expert, Keiji Nishioka, was sent to Bhutan to help Bhutan improve its agricultural sector. Japanese official development assistance (ODA) has contributed significantly to improving agricultural productivity and human resource development in Bhutan. The first ODA loan to Bhutan was extended by Japan in 2007 and since then it has been consistently providing aid to Bhutan.⁴

The major areas of Japanese support to Bhutan include agriculture and rural development, economic infrastructure development (which includes road network development and improvement of rural electrification), improvement of social services (which includes human resource development, employment generation, improvement of education service and healthcare service) and good governance (consisting of decentralization and improvement of information equity).⁵ Japan's interest in Bhutan is likely to grow even further.

There is a realistic perception, that small landlocked countries, who are more vulnerable to intrusions and external influences due to their not so strong military, economic and political capacities, do not have a major role to play in chalking out their

³ Indian Express, Doklam Standoff: Japan Backs India, Says No One Must Use Unilateral Force in Bid to Change Status Quo, 28th August, 2017.

⁴ Borah, Rupakjyoti (2018), Japanese Foreign Minister's Bhutan Visit: Enhancing the Bilateral Relationship, *Institute of South Asian Studies*, National University of Singapore.

⁵ Ibid.

foreign policy affairs vis-à-vis their neighbors and others, especially when the neighbors are huge and gigantic in many possible ways. In simple terms a small country's foreign policy does not have much significance in consonance to the bigger countries.

The case is true regarding Bhutan too, sandwiched between two Asian giants, Bhutan has always been very cautious in its foreign policy with regard to India and China. And the most general perception with regard to Bhutan's foreign policy was one which was mostly attached to India or China's foreign policy and an independent status was hardly accorded to it.

Nevertheless, nothing exists as it does in the field of international politics. Today in the region, Bhutan has strategically become very important for India's foreign policy. China's encirclement of India, India's weakening neighborhood relationships, barring Bhutan all the other South Asian countries have become signatories to the China's belt road project, all this makes Bhutan and its foreign policy actions very important for India's security concerns as China is in a constant ploy to woo away Bhutan from India.

Similarly, for China too, Bhutan occupies a predominant position due to Bhutan's closeness to the India's chicken neck corridor and the Chumbi valley which China has been eyeing. So, both ways the tiny Himalayan country's foreign policy dynamics, in the current scenario, has assumed great importance with regard to China and more specifically for India.

Therefore, India now needs to adopt various authenticated means to keep Bhutan at its side. Bhutan is a landlocked and a small country, but in the current situation existent in the region, Bhutan's foreign policy decision and actions have the capability to bring some meaningful impact in the region and change the status quo.

Bhutan's foreign policy status has undergone considerable changes since 1949 to the present times. With a rather simple and mostly non-conflictual foreign policy coupled up with keeping its indigenous mode of development intact, Bhutan has always maintained a cooperative attitude in the regional initiatives.

Bhutan's participation in the formation and working of SAARC to the formation and working of BIMSTEC are implicit examples of Bhutan enthusiasm in developing a friendly environment in the region and beyond coupled up with the objective of further diversifying its foreign policy initiatives for further growth and development, keeping intact its certain objectives of national security, territorial integrity, economic development, sovereignty, cultural and traditional preservation.

BHUTAN and SAARC

SAARC: The Formation

SAARC was officially formed in 1985. The Idea of SAARC came into existence in 1980 at the initiation of former Bangladesh President Zia-Ur-Rahman, highlighted to cater to many problems that was facing the South Asian countries.⁶ To discuss about the formation of SAARC Zia-Ur-Rahman made a number of visits to India, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Pakistan between the periods 1977 to 1980s.

Zia envisioned for a regional organization in South Asia on line with the ASEAN. In the year 1981, foreign secretaries meeting took place in Sri Lanka which was further followed up by a foreign ministers meeting of the South Asian countries in 1983 in India. In this meeting the countries gave their consensus on the formation of SAARC. Though India and Pakistan were initially reluctant to join the organisation, due to various

⁶ Muzaffar Muhhamad, Jathol Iqra & Yaseen Zahid. (2107), SAARC: An Evaluation of its achievements, failures and compulsion for cooperation, *Global Political Review*, II (I).

reason, but in the later period they ultimately became signatories of the organization.

The first SAARC summit was held in December 1985, with the participation from all the member nations. The SAARC charter was adopted in the summit. The SAARC charter contains ten articles and a preamble. The preamble to the charter embraced general principles of sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, national independence, non-use of force and non-interference in the internal affairs of the other states and peaceful settlement of all the disputes. After the eighteenth SAARC summit, there has not been any summit held. The 2018 summit was to be held in Pakistan but due to the Uri attack in 2016 the summit was cancelled.

Areas of Activities under SAARC

Ever since the formation of SAARC, the organisation has been engaged in plethora of activities to promote regional cooperation and growth. Along with making an effort through various initiatives to increase people to people contact, SAARC has taken many initiatives to connect South Asian countries through various platforms like the SAARC audio visual exchange (SAVE), the SAARC documentation centre, visa exemption schemes, various provisions for scholarship, schemes to promote interstate tourism etc, to foster communications between the countries and their people.

The member countries have to an extent cooperated in matter of peace and security in the region. Constant effort has been made towards the removal drive of human trafficking, threats of terrorism, and drug trafficking. The SAARC convention on suppression of terrorism was organized in 1987.

Social issues have always been considered imperative for discussion and action in SAARC. Issues concerning poverty, deplorable condition of women, child issues, drinking water, food, nutrition, education are some of the activities in the social agenda of SAARC. To validate the social issues, the SAARC Social Charter was signed in 2004.

To become more inclusive and to expand its ambit further, SAARC has increased its membership and its observer status members. The SAARC members designated Afghanistan a SAARC membership in the year 2005. And SAARC also offered its observer status to many countries, the first being Japan and China. SAARC has also involved itself with many inter-governmental organizations, through which it has signed numerable memorandum of understanding with various intergovernmental organizations like, WHO, UNCTAD, UNDP, UNESCO, World Bank, etc.

Formed with high regional and inter regional aspirations for growth and development, SAARC has come a long way since 1985. The organization has been able to show its capabilities at many instances, but unfortunately it could not achieve as much as the founding members had envisioned for SAARC.

Abundant with the advantages of geographical proximity, ties of history and culture with each other, SAARC as regional organizations have been grasped with more problems than expected, which have severely impacted the efficient working of the organization. The numerous social, political and economic problems had already been hovering on the functioning of SAARC, wherein further the lack of cooperation amongst the member countries, has led to damaging procrastinations in the works and activities of SAARC.

Adding to this the redundant SAARC summits which cater to primarily theoretical achievements than practical achievements have further added to the already existent damage. In fact, post 2014 summit, another SAARC summit has not yet been held till date, which speaks volume of the SAARC edifice. The strained bilateral relationships especially between India and Pakistan and the lack of robust conflicting solving mechanism in the region have further deteriorated the success of SAARC. The issue of terrorism over the years further adds to the sluggish growth of SAARC. Due to a plethora of reasons therefore SAARC today is considered as a failure

organization due to various complicated problems which seems to not be solved in the region.

Though SAARC has not been very successful in its outputs, yet when the organization was formed, the smaller nations of South Asia, Bhutan and Nepal, had hopes from it. And to a certain extent SAARC has been helpful towards the smaller nations to fulfill their designs. SAARC has been a stepping stone to the smaller countries to help them to decentralize through engagements in various bilateral, regional, inter regional and multilateral cooperation and collaboration among themselves and with the outer countries which has leveraged their growth even if on a minimal aspect.

Bhutan in SAARC

Bhutan was amongst one of the first country to support the formation of SAARC, therefore Bhutan was one of the core founding members of SAARC and since then Bhutan has actively participated in the regional organization. Bhutan was pretty enthusiastic about the regional grouping as Bhutan held a vision to further project itself as sovereign independent nation to the world and Bhutan also aspired for a platform through SAARC to leverage its economic growth and foreign policy expansion with its South Asian counterparts.

As mentioned earlier Bhutan had initiated its foreign policy, with the avoidance of full dependence on India only, therefore the formation of SAARC provided Bhutan an opportunity to further implement its goals. Through SAARC Bhutan got opportunities to develop contacts with the other South Asian countries.

Bhutan was convinced that joining SAARC would counteract external threats while expanding its relations with the neighboring South Asian countries as Bhutan saw an immense prospect in expansion of its trade within the region and

economic cooperation with the neighboring countries through SAARC and its various programmes and actions.⁷

The timely formation of SAARC was an additional thrust to Bhutan's gradual diversification of foreign policies and quest to consolidate its status as a sovereign nation. SAARC with its principles to advocate non-interference in both internal and international affairs of the member nations enabled Bhutan to maintain multilateral diplomacy in the region.⁸

SAARC provided Bhutan the platform for fulfilling its objectives of foreign policy dynamism to the fullest. Ever since the formation of SAARC, Bhutan has always been an active member of it, participating in most of the programme and meeting of SAARC. Bhutan had the objective of using SAARC as a platform to secure and strengthen its independence and sovereignty against any kind of crisis that would emerge in its neighborhood. SAARC made it possible for Bhutan to project its independent personality on the basis of political equality. It provided Bhutan leverage in dealing independently in its foreign affairs.⁹

After joining SAARC Bhutan developed its relationship with Sri Lanka, Maldives, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. It helped Bhutan to integrate within the region. The relationship got further deepened with the various SAARC ministerial meetings, SAARC summits, and other kinds of joint activities help within SAARC.

In 1980, Bhutan and Bangladesh set up diplomatic missions in their respective countries. Further the two countries also signed a trade and transit agreement, and as per the agreement

⁷ Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS) and Institute of Developing Economies/Japan External Trade Organization (IDE/JETRO) (2004), *Economic and political Relations between Bhutan and Neighboring Countries*, Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Naidu, A. G. (1986), *Bhutan Looks Outwards: It's Search for Identity*, *Indian Political Science Association*, 47(4).

Bhutan and Bangladesh reached on a consensus to provide most favored nation status to each other, this was a leveraging factor for Bhutan. From 1987 onwards Bhutan's exports to Bangladesh began to pick up and by 1989 trade surplus rose to Nu.126.2 million.¹⁰ In the late 1980s Bhutan started weekly air services to Dhaka. Dhaka granted the Royal Bhutan Airlines, Druk Air, Fifth Freedom Rights and fifty percent concession on handling charges.¹¹

Bhutan's total value of exports to Bangladesh in 2001 stood at Nu. 222.4 million, out of which orange exports alone accounted for Nu. 137.5 million (About 62 percent of total exports).¹² Bangladesh provided an alternative market for Bhutan along with it being a source and outlet for Bhutanese goods through its major sea ports. Over the years, Bhutan's relation with Bangladesh has reduced its exclusive dependence on India and helped Bhutan to diversify its trade and external relationship.¹³

Trade and economic relations between Bhutan and Nepal have not been substantive but following the formation of SAARC Bhutan made some efforts to build up trade links with Nepal. Imports and exports between them began post the SAARC formation. In 1997 Bhutan's major exports to Nepal were gypsum and coal. Nepal stated to import consumer goods from Bhutan like, soaps, beer, noodles, etc.¹⁴

¹⁰ Labh, Kapileshwar. (1994), "Bangladesh Partnership in Peace and Economic Development Commonalities and Constraints", in Sr Chakawarty (eds) *Foreign Policy of Bangladesh*, Delhi.

¹¹ Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS) and Institute of Developing Economies/Japan External Trade Organization (IDE/JETRO) (2004), *Economic and political Relations between Bhutan and Neighboring Countries*, Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS) and Institute of Developing Economies/Japan External Trade Organization (IDE/JETRO) (2004), *Economic and political Relations between Bhutan and Neighboring Countries*, Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH.

¹⁴ Ibid.

On 7th August 1990, Bhutan and Nepal signed an air service agreement operating the flight services between the two countries. Since the formation of SAARC many Bhutanese people have availed the fellowship offered by Nepal in the field of animal husbandry, as well as many trainings and workshops under the United Nations, SAARC and other regional and international organizations.¹⁵

While there not much of a high degree of bilateral cooperation between Bhutan and Pakistan, but through the various platforms of SAARC, Bhutanese delegates and public have attended various trainings, programmes and courses in Pakistan. Due to the funding programmes of the SAARC and Pakistan government, various funding schemes like the UNDP, UNICEF, UNESCO, World Bank, etc. have made it possible for Bhutan to avail around sixty-five trainings, seminars and workshops in Pakistan over the years. Many official visits have also been made between the two countries after the formation of SAARC.¹⁶

New sources of trade and market outlets came up for Bhutan's economic activities. And many of the SAARC countries like Pakistan and Sri Lanka also made some potential market for the products from Bhutan. Bhutan exports oranges and apples to Bangladesh. Bangladesh has also been a central market for Bhutan's processed and packed products such as pickles, juice, jams and others. Bhutan exports apples, oranges, processed fruits and wood products to Sri Lanka.

Along with regional integration, Bhutan's international integration process which had already been taken up by Bhutan prior to the formation of SAARC got furthered with the formation of SAARC, which is indeed one of the primary advantages of becoming a member of any regional organization.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS) and Institute of Developing Economies/Japan External Trade Organization (IDE/JETRO) (2004), *Economic and political Relations between Bhutan and Neighboring Countries*, Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH.

Therefore, Bhutan developed trade relations with countries like Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Belgium, Thailand, Netherlands, United States, and United Kingdom.

The process of economic integration of Bhutan was further heightened with the creations of SAPTA and SAFTA. Through these two forums Bhutan got a better and precise opportunity to integrate its economy within the region. It got the benefits of tariff cuts; free trade etc. which also contributed towards helping Bhutan to export its products at a much cheaper price with profit derivations for Bhutan. From 1995 exports of Bhutan have considerably increased. Though India is still a major market for imports for Bhutan today Bhutan has some alternative markets, like Bangladesh and Nepal.

In the meeting of the SAARC Energy Ministers held at New Delhi in 2014 a SAARC Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation was signed. The agreement proposed to establish SAARC Market of Electricity (SAME) where electricity would be traded among the members by establishing power grid across the region. This provided Bhutan opportunity to diversify its markets for electricity revenue.

Tourism industry is an important sector for Bhutan contributing to the revenues of Royal Government along with generating employment opportunities. The Human Resource Development and Tourism as an area of cooperation under SAARC were established mainly for the promotion of tourism in the SAARC region. A SAARC Action Plan on Promotion of Tourism was adopted in the second meeting of Tourism Minister.¹⁷ At present citizens from Bangladesh, India and Maldives do not require visa in Bhutan.

Thus, it can be said that SAARC provided the best platform for Bhutan to further expand and grow along with keeping intact

¹⁷ Available at http://saarc-sec.org/areas_of_cooperation/area_detail/human-resource-development-and-tourism/click-for-details_3, accessed on 29th Sept, 2018.

its territorial integrity, sovereignty, culture and heritage. Along with the advantages Bhutan could accrue through the platform of SAARC, Bhutan has also been constant giving its full cooperation, in the growth and development of SAARC.

Bhutan's concept of gross national happiness (GNH) is one kind of a revolutionary policy, never adopted by any big country prior to Bhutan adopting it. Bhutan's gross national happiness made Bhutan stand out extraordinarily within South Asia and outside the region. Western countries like France, America and Brazil have also taken inspiration from Bhutan.

The concept of GNH was formulated by Bhutan's king Jigme Singye Wangchuck in the late 1980s. The central focus of GNH is the holistic happiness of the people to measure the development of the country, contrary to GDP focus on finances and money to measure the development of any country.

Inspired from the principles of Buddhism the concept of gross national happiness, has four pillars as its base, sustainable development, environmental conservation, preservation and promotion of culture, and good governance.

Other South Asian nations can follow the model of Bhutan in working for environment, good governance, sustainable development, which are the major concerns of South Asian countries in comparison to Bhutan. A small landlocked country of SAARC has laid down the blueprint for holistic development in the region, which can be taken as an example by other countries.

In a modern nation state, which is based on the principles of democracy, the theoretical and the implementation of the concept of good governance is a vital component in the institutions and structures of the state. The system of governance as it exists in every state determines the overall status of any country. As a concept good governance was first introduced by the World Bank in the year 1989, in consonance to the accountability factor in most of the developing states

then. Some of the main features of good governance are a) Public involvement (b) Conformity to law (c) Transparency (d) Receptiveness (e) Harmony among diverse and conflicting interests (f) Impartiality to all individuals (g) Effective and responsible public institutions and the statecraft.¹⁸

When the issues of good governance in context to south Asia comes up, various kinds of existential problems, put governance at the fence. But within South Asia, Bhutan has provided an example before its counterparts, with the inclusion of the concept of good governance as one of the pillars of gross national happiness. Amidst the many measurements scale on the parameter of governance, the corruption perception index (CPI) ranked Bhutan as the first in South Asia in terms of terms of low levels of corruption in the region for the year 2012 and 2013. And Bhutan also acquired the eight positions all over Asia.¹⁹

Primarily being a pretty closed country, Bhutan introduced media and communication in the 1990s, at a time when all the SAARC member nations had the facility of media in their respective countries. Yet Bhutan deserves the credit of clean usage of the technology, within SAARC. And Bhutan was also the host to the first SAARC conference on media and democracy.

Bhutanese media puts more concentration on the serving and empowering the people in the right manner rather than full-fledged commercialism, which is something the other SAARC member countries can learn from Bhutan.

With the help from the government the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy has facilitated many short-term courses for journalists and media literacy courses for young people and teachers. The fourth king of Bhutan Jigme Singye Wangchuck

¹⁸ Mazhar, Saleem, Muhammad. (2015), Issues of Good Governance in South Asia”, *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 30(2): 127.

¹⁹ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs (2014), Bhutan’s Drive for Improved Governance, *Asian Development Bank*.

empowered the Bhutanese media by making them an active participant in the process of transition of the country from monarchy to democracy. It was on this premise that the Bhutanese media became a player in governance of the country after the introduction of democracy in Bhutan. Under the rule of King Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck, there was the commencement of a vocal and private media and a tremendous growth of media.²⁰

Along with the concerns of poverty, conflicts of various kinds, overburdened problem of populations, South Asia is very vulnerable to the disastrous implications of climate change and environmental degradation. Within South Asia, Bhutan being a landlocked country and a mountainous is equally exposed to the adversaries of environmental degradation, though not as much as the other South Asian countries.

Taking note of the problems associated with it, Bhutan has been adopting various measures for further degradation within Bhutan and in collaboration with the members for South Asia in general. It was a due to Bhutan's stance that SAARC agreed to climate change as the theme for its 16th summit 2010, held in Bhutan. In the summit all the members with the initiative of Bhutan at large strived to work positively towards the problem. Vision Statement with a strategy known as "Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness" was laid down by Bhutan. The emphasis of the strategy was on maintaining forest region, to develop environmentally friendly power generating sources and to balance economic development with its environmental conservation.

The environmental policies Bhutan generates tries to find a development path which will meet up the food, health care, employment, and education requirements of Bhutan without having to sacrifice the quality of the natural environment or

²⁰ Lamsang, Tenzing. (2015), The Role of Bhutanese Media in Bhutan's Democratic Evolution and Governance, *The Bhutanese Leading the Way*, Bhutan, 2015.

depleting the natural resources. Further Bhutan has always been positively cooperating in fostering peace and security in the region.

In 2003 with the help from India, Bhutan launched operations to clear its land off the ULFA militants, which was a source internal threat to India and its neighbors. The stalled talks between India and Pakistan due to the 2008 Mumbai terror attack was resumed in the friendly environment Bhutan in the 2010 summit. Bhutan ha also in the past took the steps for talks between the Sri Lanka government and the LTTTE leaders in its land. Bhutan hosted the Fourth Meeting of the SAARC Home Ministers, to address terrorism issues in South Asia.

Further Bhutan has always been willingly participating as the host and the guest to various programmes, seminars, meetings of the SAARC, for the regions betterment. In 1987 Bhutan had organized the first SAARC seminar on forest. Similarly, to propagate handicraft in the region, Bhutan hosted and organized the seminar o wooden handicraft in 1995. Bhutan agreed to be part of the South Asian growth quadrangle in 1997, alongside Bangladesh, India and Nepal, for the fast economic development of the region. And recently Bhutan has also become a member of another organization known as the BIMSTEC, within which Bhutan has been working and participating with a positive energy like it has always done within SAARC.

BHUTAN and BIMSTEC

BIMSTEC: The Formation

Bhutan observed the 20th anniversary of the Bay of Bengal Initiatives for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) by offering butter lamps in the Simtokha Dzong.²¹ BIMSTEC as a regional organization was established on 6th June, 1997 with the objective to attain rapid

²¹ Press Release- BIMSTEC Day, (6th June, 2017), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan, accessed on 21st August, 2017).

socio-economic development of the sub-region through economic and technical cooperation in various areas among the members. It has a total of seven members namely, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

In two decades of its formation the regional organisation has got great prominence and emphasis mainly because of the failure of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and also by the fact that it would become a bridge between South Asia and South East Asia region. In addition, the cancellation of the 19th SAARC summit 2016 that was to be held in Islamabad (Pakistan) because of India's decision to boycott the summit on the grounds of Uri terror attack and the BIMSTEC summit held in the sidelines of the BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach summit meeting in Goa, India, on October 2016, may have also hypothetically further leveraged the importance of BIMSTEC for its members and India specifically.

In 2004 Bhutan became a full member of the BIMSTEC and has taken the responsibility to be a lead country in the priority area of Cultural Cooperation. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to delve into Bhutan's engagement with BIMSTEC particularly in the area of cultural cooperation. Further, this paper will examine the opportunities available for Bhutan through BIMSTEC.

BIMSTEC was created on 6th June, 1997 on the initiative of Thailand and initially it was known as BIST-EC, the acronym represented the names of the first four founding member countries, i.e. Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand. In December 1997 Myanmar was given full membership and its name was included in the organization's title. The organisation came to be known as BIMST-EC. In 2004, Bhutan and Nepal was also given full membership but no changes were made in the name of the organization. The acronym no longer

represented the full membership of the organization.²² Therefore, during its first Summit 2004 held in Bangkok it was decided that the letters of the nomenclature should stand for Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation rather than for initials of the names of member countries.²³

At present BIMSTEC has total of seven members out of which five members namely Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka are from South Asia and two members, i.e. Myanmar and Thailand from South East Asia. It brings together 1.5 billion people about 21 per cent of the world population and a combined GDP of US \$ 2.5 trillion.²⁴

Until the First Summit in 2004, since its establishment BIMSTEC started off with a low profile and for seven years it was only engaged in ministerial-level meetings and deliberations. The First Foreign Ministerial meeting was held at Bangkok on 6th June 1997 and a declaration was issued that delineated the principles, aims and purposes, scope and institutional mechanism of the organization.

After seven years of deliberations and meetings at the foreign ministerial level the First Summit of BIMSTEC was held at Thailand on 31 July, 2004. This summit was held in accordance with the agreement reached in the 5th BIMSTEC ministerial meeting on Dec. 2002 in Colombo.

In the summit the organization was renamed to BIMSTEC from BIMST-EC. The summit agreed to explore the expansion of BIMSTEC cooperation into the areas of culture, education, public health, protection of biodiversity and traditional knowledge, rural community development, small and medium-

²² Shrivastava, Smita (2005), BIMSTEC: Political Implications for India”, *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 66(4): 973-988.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See Brief on BIMSTEC: https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/BIMSTEC_Brief,February,2014.pdf. accessed on 21st August, 2017.

scale enterprise, construction, environment, information and communications technology, biotechnology, weather and climate research, and natural disaster mitigation and management.²⁵

The Second Summit of BIMSTEC was scheduled to be held on 8th February, 2007 in New Delhi, India but it was postponed because of the political instability situation in Bangladesh and Nepal, therefore the summit was held on 13th November, 2008 in New Delhi. In the summit the heads of the state and the government encouraged the need for concrete cooperation among the members so as to meet the challenges faced by the world due to economic, social and environmental complexities and also to grab the opportunity given by globalization.

The Third BIMSTEC Summit took place on 4th March, 2014 at Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, and the heads of the government decided to go ahead in finalizing the draft Agreement on Trade in Goods, in signing of Agreement on Dispute Settlement and Agreement on Cooperation and Mutual Assistance in Customs Matters within the Framework Agreement of BIMSTEC Free Trade Area.

Areas of Cooperation in BIMSTEC

BIMSTEC having being established with an objective of attaining rapid socio-economic development of the sub-region through economic and technological cooperation in different areas, initially in the Second Ministers' meeting six areas of cooperation were identified, namely trade and investment, technology, transportation and communication, energy, tourism and fisheries.

In the Eight Foreign Ministers' meet the seven new areas were incorporated for further development of the sub-region thereby the total number of areas for cooperation reached thirteen. The new areas were agriculture, public health, poverty alleviation,

²⁵ Document of "BIMSTEC Summit Declaration, *Bangkok*, 31 July 2004", *South Asia Economic Journal*, (2005), 6 (1), p. 162.

counter-terrorism and transnational crime, environment and natural disaster management, culture and people to people contact. Further, in the Twelfth Foreign Ministers' meeting Climate Change was added as the new and 14th area of cooperation among the members.

Economic cooperation since the founding days has been the main objective of the BIMSTEC organization and to achieve it the organization laid emphasis on trade and investment as the organization sees it not only the main driver for regional integration but also the most important means for the overall development of the region. Keeping this in mind in 2004 the members signed a framework agreement for BIMSTEC Free Trade Area, although it is yet to be implemented as negotiations on trade in goods are still in the process.

Similarly, emphasis is laid on early completion of trade in services, investments, customs cooperation and dispute settlement mechanism so that the final agreement is signed at the earliest and then implemented. Despite delay in the implementation of the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area, the intra-regional trade has increased manifolds since its establishments. In 2016 the intra-regional trade stood at \$72.76 billion, thereby showing great potential for further and higher trade in the region.

Transport and Communication being the cornerstone to regional connectivity and prosperity of the sub-region, members since the beginning has emphasized on creating air, land and sea linkages including digital connectivity. Therefore, development of roads under the 1360 km Trilateral Highway project between India-Myanmar-Thailand has been the main project. Further, talks are being held on extending this project to include Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan as well as synchronizing with other planned projects that will facilitate connectivity in the region.

Railway connectivity has been increasingly focused particularly and projects of connecting North East States of

India under broad gauge railway track and then connecting it with Myanmar-Thailand rail network is in the process. Railway connectivity will provide an added advantage particularly in transporting bulk goods. Similarly, sea connectivity being a major means of connectivity in the region mainly because the maximum trade within the region has been through sea transportation. Therefore, projects are undertaken to modernize the existing ports in member countries to handle the large volumes of cargos and in handling large vessels as well as to connect ports with railway system for smoother and faster transportation.

The region having being endowed with vast untapped energy resources, efforts have been made by the members for the development, distribution and sustainable use of the resources. Therefore, important projects have been undertaken for the development of regional hydrocarbon and hydropower energy infrastructures, energy trading network between members, natural gas grids and emphasizing renewable energy technologies and conservation of energy. Joint Research and Development activities have been undertaken for developing cost effective technologies.

Tourism is another area of cooperation and the steps have been taken by the members to jointly promote the tourism in the region such as through exchange of visits, joint promotion of tourism packages and others. In addition, steps have been taken to ease the visas and improve connectivity in the region for the growth of the tourism. Proposal to establish BIMSTEC Tourist Circuit and Temple Tourist Circuit in the region can boost the sector.

The Bay of Bengal is a region that is home to 30 per cent of the total fish population of the world and has rich marine resources but it is still untapped. The marine resources has also been an important source of livelihood for the people of the region, therefore, steps have been taken to develop and promote the sector but emphasis is laid on sustainable and efficient use of the resources.

Agriculture is one of the most important areas of cooperation mainly because all the members are primarily agrarian economies and in most, agriculture is the main contributor to their national economy. Therefore, emphasis is given to cooperate among members so that there is an increase in productivity and yields in the region.

Cultural cooperation as an important area is recognized for not only strengthening relation among the members on the basis of cultural and historical linkage but it is also recognized to play an important role in development and promotion of cultural industries so that it plays a vital role in poverty reduction and overall economic development. Therefore, emphasis is given on developing cultural industries among the members.

Poverty has been another important problem of the region and for its reduction BIMSTEC encourages the members that all the measures taken must focus on the poor like cutting expenses, increasing incomes and creating working opportunities. Further, emphasis is laid on educating the poor people, access to credit, rural development and others. Also, members are encouraged to share their experiences to find the best ways for poverty alleviation.

Recognizing terrorism as the single most significant threat to peace and stability of the region, the member states agreed to ratify the BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking and agreed to sign the BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual legal Assistance in Criminal Matters.²⁶

Environment and Disaster Management is another important area as the BIMSTEC region is mostly vulnerable to environment and natural disaster leading to loss of lives, property and loss of revenue to the affected country; therefore, members are encouraged to intensify cooperation in disaster

²⁶ Ibid.

management. Further members have agreed to establish Expert Group on Disaster Management.

Bhutan in BIMSTEC

Bhutan became the member of BIMSTEC in 2004 and also the country to lead the cultural cooperation sector of the organization. Bhutan proposed culture to be one of the areas of BIMSTEC cooperation during the Thailand summit in 2004. Then it was decided that Bhutan would be the BIMSTEC's lead country in the area of cultural cooperation.²⁷

The geographical proximity, rich historical linkages and cultural heritage that existed were seen as the most important factors that would forge relationship among the members and for this BIMSTEC recognized the potential of the cultural cooperation. However, along with strengthening ties cultural cooperation was emphasized as a priority area mainly because it would contribute on development and promotion of cultural industries that would in-turn help in poverty reduction, community vitalization and economic development.

The First BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting on Culture was held from 23-25th May 2006 in Paro, Bhutan. Bhutan introduced the Concept Paper for cooperation in culture and in the meeting the ministers adopted it and referred it as the Paro Initiative. It was the roadmap for socio- economic progress driven by cultural industries in the BIMSTEC region. BIMSTEC culture industries would cover not only arts and crafts and traditional culture, but also a wide range of other significant areas such as fashion, architecture, filmmaking, publications, graphics, and multi-media productions which includes creative activities in the service sectors like advertising, television, radio, films and other aspects of entertainment²⁸.

²⁷ Ondrey, Sangey (May 24, 2006), BIMSTEC Culture Minister Meet In Bhutan, Bhutan News Service. Retrieved from <http://apfanews.com/stories/bimstec-culture-minister-meet-in-bhutan.html>.

²⁸ Ibid.

The Paro Initiative called for the establishment of BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Commission (BCIC) and BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Observatory (BCIO) to be located in Bhutan. And in the Third Summit 2014 held in Myanmar Memorandum of Understanding on the Establishment of the BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Commission (BCIC) and BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Observatory (BCIO) was signed by all the members.

Besides being a lead country of the cultural cooperation area Bhutan has also equally been an active participant in the activities of BIMSTEC in spite of being a small member nation Bhutan has extended its support and cooperation in all levels of activities undertaken in BIMSTEC.

Opportunities for Bhutan in BIMSTEC

Bhutan is one of the smallest countries in the world and it is landlocked as well as least developed country. Its economy is mainly driven by agriculture, hydroelectricity, and tourism. Bhutan mostly exports electricity, agriculture products, spices and handicraft items.

BIMSTEC is said to act as a bridge between South Asia and South East Asia. As a result, this will help South Asian nations to form strong relationship with South East Asian nations via Myanmar and Thailand. For Bhutan also through BIMSTEC it will be able to establish ties not only with Myanmar and Thailand but with other South East Asian Nations also and the ties will help Bhutan to find new markets for its finished products mainly agricultural products and handicrafts.

Implementation of BIMSTEC Free Trade Area (FTA) on goods and services will lead to increase in exports of products for Bhutan and at the same time this will generate employment opportunities as well as investments in Bhutan. This in turn will help Bhutan to develop its infrastructures, rural areas and will lead an overall development of the country.

Increasing emphasis is laid on developing transportation and connectivity under BIMSTEC particularly India's plan to

connect mainland India via North East to Myanmar and Thailand as well as to other South East Asia will certainly be a boost to landlocked country like Bhutan. The development of roads and railways in North East India will provide a shorter transit route for Bhutan to connect to South East Asian nations. Further, short transit route means importing and exporting goods will be cheaper and this in turn will help to earn extra revenue.

The strong emphasis to develop the untapped energy resources, setting up electric grid network will help Bhutan by attracting investment in developing hydropower to produce extra electricity. Since hydroelectricity has been a main driving force to Bhutan's economy, thus by generating and exporting electricity to member countries it can further contribute to the country's economy as well as this will help Bhutan in electrifying the rural areas.

Tourism sector is another important sector that contributes to economy and it is the only sector that generates hard cash in the country. Under BIMSTEC tourism is an important sector and for its development increasing efforts have been put to improve, land, air and sea connectivity, measures are been take to make visa easily available among the members. Improved connectivity and easy visa availability will boost the tourism industry in Bhutan as it is not only beautiful Himalayan country but also because of Buddhism, therefore, Bhutan will be able to attract tourist from member countries and South East Asian nations and the tourism sector can flourish.

Under BIMSTEC cultural cooperation the main objective is not only to improve relationship among the members based on cultural and historical linkage but also to develop cultural industries that would help in poverty reduction generate employment, develop rural areas and overall socioeconomic development of the members and the region as a whole. Similarly, under this area the cultural industries of Bhutan particularly handicrafts can be developed and promoted.

Through BIMSTEC Bhutan will get access to new market for its products and this in turn will lead to rural development in Bhutan and will generate employment and income and at the same time it will help to sustain the cultural industry of Bhutan.

Besides the above mentioned prospects for Bhutan through BIMSTEC areas like climate change, poverty alleviation and public health will also provide great opportunities to Bhutan's overall development. The information and assistance in climate change will also help Bhutan to deal with the adverse effects of climate change on country's agriculture sector which is the largest contributor to the national economy.

Further, exchange of information on public health and poverty alleviation will also help Bhutan in improving the health of the public, ways to reduce poverty and at the same time increase employment. Other areas of cooperation under BIMSTEC like technology, environment and natural disaster management, people to people contact and counter-terrorism will also provide opportunities and contribute to the overall development of Bhutan.

BIMSTEC as an organization was established in 1997 and since then it rose to prominence mainly because of the failure of SAARC to establish itself as a successful sub-regional organization. In addition, BIMSTEC would act as a bridge that would connect South Asia with the South East Asia. Under BIMSTEC 14 priority areas of cooperation encompassing a wide range of economic, social and technical issues has been laid down so that successful cooperation in these areas would lead to overall socio-economic development of the region.

However, BIMSTEC as an organization has achieved little success and it is still striving to become successful. All the members of BIMSTEC are a member of a larger regional organization, because of which the member nations of BIMSTEC has not been able to give its full attention and priority making it achieve little. Delays in implementing the

works and initiatives have also proved disadvantageous. Sluggish economic progress and lack of proper infrastructure and connectivity, political instabilities and bilateral tensions and differing ideas and opinions in the areas of cooperation adds to the inefficiency.

However, the prospects for cooperation and growth of BIMSTEC do lie, which will solely depend upon the willingness and the expertise of efficiency of the member nations. For BIMSTEC, successfully implementing Free Trade Area is the most important task and once it is accomplished then the BMSTEC will automatically get success in others areas of cooperation.

For Bhutan BIMSTEC offers great opportunities for its overall development. Importantly, Bhutan will be able to establish relations with countries from South East Asia. It will open up new markets for Bhutan to export electricity, agriculture goods, handicrafts and gems. The success of BIMSTEC will lead to increase in investment in Bhutan. It will help Bhutan to expand its tourism sector and exporting sectors that in turn will generate employment and revenue. Besides, rural areas will also be developed mainly by promoting cultural industries. Thus, to conclude it can be said that as BIMSTEC becomes successful Bhutan will also get better and greater opportunities to develop which in turn will lead to overall development in Bhutan.

Conclusion

Being a small landlocked country, the foreign policy of Bhutan has passed through various phases, as and when the circumstances demanded so. From adopting self isolation, to coming out of self isolation, to diversifying its external relations, to enthusiastically joining SAARC and BIMSTEC, Bhutan has been playing its role, in a way which calls for the betterment of its own country and also for the other countries, associated with Bhutan in a way or the other. And in the present regional environment in context to South Asia, Bhutan foreign policy dynamics have garnered much importance,

leaving the space for Bhutan to determine its goals, which Bhutan has been fulfilling in a sorted and non-conflictual manner.

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