

The Bay of Bengal- the civilizational bond between ancient cultures

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This commentary looks at how the Bay of Bengal played a role as a mediator between cultures, from Chinese to Indonesian and Vietnam, taking a long view of the civilizational bonds fostered in its region.

Located at the intersection of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the Bay of Bengal has served primarily as a maritime bridge connecting South Asia with Southeast Asia for over two millennia. Today, however, it is rapidly evolving into one of the world's most consequential geopolitical spaces. As the Indo-Pacific emerges as the principal theatre of global geopolitics, the Bay of Bengal is increasingly viewed not as a peripheral water body but as a strategic frontier shaping the future balance of power in Asia.^[1]

The strategic significance of the Bay of Bengal lies in its location. Bordered by India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia, it connects the Indian Ocean to the Strait of Malacca, one of the world's busiest maritime chokepoints. A substantial portion of global trade and energy shipment passes through these waters, making the region critical for both economic prosperity and strategic stability.

The Bay occupies a central place in India's maritime strategy. India's eastern coastline, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and its Act East Policy collectively position the country as a natural stakeholder in the region's stability. The Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, situated close to the Strait of Malacca, provides India with a strategic vantage point to monitor maritime activity and safeguard critical sea lanes.^[2] For centuries, the major economies of India's east coast—namely Bengal (Banga), Odisha (Kalinga), and the Tamils—used the Bay of Bengal as an international trade corridor.

Historically, Tamralipti/Tamralipta was an important port of ancient Bengal used for international trade through the Bay. Sailing vessels laden with indigo, silk and copper went out from this port in large numbers to distant countries. As archaeological remains prove, from 200 BCE to 700 CE, the port had trade contacts with several domestic and foreign entities such as Southeast Asia, China and Rome.

Ancient texts and accounts of foreign travellers, pilgrims and geographers also referred to Tamralipti as a bustling port city and a religious centre on the eastern coast of India. Second-century CE Roman philosopher and voyager Pliny talks about Taluctae (Tamralipti) as a thriving port in his book Natural History. Renowned Chinese pilgrims like Fa Hien, Hiuen Tsang and I-tsing who visited Tamralipti left vivid accounts of the flourishing port city. Tamralipti was not only a trading port but also a Buddhist center of learning.^[3]

The Jataka Tales of Buddhist literature (1 CE-4CE) make frequent references to the voyages from Tamralipti to Suvarnabhumi (Myanmar/Thailand) for trade and Buddhist missionary activities. King Asoka sent his son Mahendra and daughter Sanghamitra to transport the Bodhi Tree to Sri Lanka and introduce Buddhism to Sri Lanka through the Tamralipti port. Mahavamsa, the epic history of Sri Lanka, written in the 2nd century BCE, records the journey of the Bodhi tree: "It was a fourteen-day journey to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) from

Tamralipti, out of which seven days of the journey were spent from Pataliputra to Tamralipta on road.”^[4]

Tamralipti's fame was sustained in different periods – Maurya, Gupta and the Post-Gupta era of Bengal. During the third century BCE, the area of Tamralipti was included within the boundary of the Mauryan Empire. It became indispensable and prominent as a port of the Mauryan Empire in its maritime trade with overseas destinations. Similarly, Tamralipti was the principal part of Bengal at the mouth of the Ganges which the Ashokan Empire developed.^[5]

During the reign of Chandragupta Vikramaditya, one of the most eminent Chinese-Buddhist pilgrims, Fa-hien came to India during his travels in 399-412 CE, in search of original Sanskrit texts which formed part of the Buddhist canon, and visited Tamralipti. Fa-hien came to India in 399 C.E. by the Inner Asian land route and returned by sea in 412 via Ceylon. He left India about 409 from Tamralipti, and after a two-year stay in Sri Lanka, he left for China. However, a violent storm drove his ship onto an island, which is probably Java. After five months there, he took another ship for southern China, returned to the mainland in 412, and settled in what is now Nanjing. He wrote a book on his travels around the year 414.

Unlike Fa-Hien and Hiuen Tsang, who entered India via land routes, the Chinese Buddhist monk I-tsing (Yijing) arrived in India via a sea route around 673 CE. He stayed at Tamralipti for a period of three years to study Sanskrit and Buddhist texts before traveling further inland. He returned from India to China in 695 CE via a maritime sea route. Departing from the port of Tamralipti, he sailed across the Bay of Bengal to the powerful maritime kingdom of Srivijaya (comprising modern-day Palembang, Sumatra, and Indonesia), where he stayed to translate scriptural texts before sailing onward to Guangzhou, China.

Every year on Kartika Purnima, around the end of October and November, people of Odisha gather near banks of the Mahanadi and Brahmani rivers, along with other river banks, ponds, water tanks, and sea shores, to float miniature toy boats, made of colored paper, dried banana tree barks, and cork, as a symbolic gesture of their ancestors' voyages. The festival, Bali Yatra, is held in the city of Cuttack at Gadagadia Ghata of the Mahanadi river to mark the day when ancient Sadhabas (Odia mariners) would set sail to distant lands of Bali, as well as Java (at the time known as "Yawadvipa"), Sumatra, Borneo (all in Indonesia), and Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) for trade and cultural expansion.

As early as the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, ports flourished in this area. There was regular interaction via sea routes between the ports of Orissa and Ceylon, Java, Sumatra, Borneo, and Bali. By the beginning of the Christian era, the merchants from Orissa established cultural and trade ties with countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Cambodia. Bali, Java, and Sumatra were the ports most frequented by the merchants from Orissa. The maritime history of Kalinga sailors lies littered in these Indonesian islands.^[6]

South India had established strong connections with Vietnam and Cambodia via marine routes. One of the oldest pieces of epigraphy found in Southeast Asia is the Vo Cahn inscription found in the village of Vo Cahn in central Vietnam, dated to the 7th century CE. This is a Sanskrit inscription written in the Pallava-Grantha script used at the time of the Pallava dynasty from 6th to 9th centuries CE in South India. The region of Champa, situated in central Vietnam, came under Indian influence sometime in the 4th century CE. Historians

believe that the ties between the Pallava kingdom and Champa were close. They point to the fact that the Kings of Champa used 'Varman' from the time of King Bhadravarman I (380 to 418 CE) onward in their names, much like the Pallavas in India.^[7]

During the Chola period, the Bay of Bengal was called Chola Samudram because, from 9th to 12th centuries CE, the Chola dynasty, ruled by Rajaraja Chola I and Rajendra Chola I invaded and controlled the Bay of Bengal using the Chola Navy. The Bay of Bengal was also known as the Chola Sea or Chola Lake. The Medieval Chola emperor Rajendra Chola I led a Chola Expedition of the Ganges between 1019 and 1021. The expedition traversed the states of Vengi, Kalinga, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Bengal, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh, culminating in their arrival at the Ganges River. The Chola victory over the Pala king Mahipala I is considered to be the climax of the expedition. Significantly, though the word 'Bangla' was first used in written records in the 14th century after the Sultanate of Bengal was established, Asiatic Society historian Ramkrishna Chatterjee pointed out that in 11th-century South Indian records the term Bangaladesa has been used.^[8]

In 1778 CE, a young courageous Chinese tea trader named Tong Achew landed on the shores of the Bay of Bengal, near Budge Budge (outskirts of Calcutta) with the hope of conducting trade with the English East India Company. It took him years of struggle to establish a trading relationship with the Company. During the late 1770s, after being successful in persuading Warren Hastings, the then Governor-General of British India, Tong Achew was permitted to start the first Chinese-owned sugar mill of the country. This opened doors to the influx of hordes of Chinese workers from the Hakka and Cantonese communities, who settled in the villages in and around the sugar mill.^[9] Thus, the first Chinese settlement in India was established on the bank of the river Hooghly in 1778.

The Bay of Bengal has functioned as a civilizational arc since long before the emergence of modern nation-states or the vocabulary of geopolitics. For India, rediscovering the Bay of Bengal as a civilizational bridge may be the key to reinvigorating its Act East policy.^[10] The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), comprising the countries of the Bay of Bengal region, is a suitable platform to promote the civilizational bond between South and Southeast Asia. India should take a lead in reviving this thirty-year-old initiative.

^[1] David Brewster. 2014. *India's Ocean: The Story of India's Bid for Regional Leadership*. Routledge.

² <https://diplomatist.com/bay-of-bengal-the-indo-pacifics-emerging-strategic-core/>

^[3] <https://www.livehistoryindia.com/story/lost-cities/tamralipti-the-ancient-copper-port>

^[4] <https://www.livehistoryindia.com/story/lost-cities/tamralipti-the-ancient-copper-port>

^[5] Sharmin Akhtar and Hanizah Idris. 2022. Ancient trade corridor Tamralipti and Bengal's glory (200 BCE–700 CE). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362712850_Ancient_Trade_Corridor_Tamralipti_and_Bengal's_Glory_200_BCE-700_CE

^[6] <https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/16729/1/Unit-23.pdf>

^[7] <https://www.livehistoryindia.com/story/people/the-pallava-king-from-vietnam>

^[8] <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/historians-trace-banga-metamorphosis-through-the-ages/articleshow/53515755.cms>

^[9] <https://getbengal.com/where-have-all-the-chinese-of-achipur-gone/>

^[10] https://basispointinsight.com/Story/Home/the-bay-of-bengal-and-the-return-of-civilisational-connectivity_134cff332e00.html