**REPORT ON NATIONAL SEMINAR**

**CONTIGUITY, CONNECTIVITY AND ACCESS**

**THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BAY OF BENGAL REGION IN INDIA’S FOREIGN POLICY**

**ORGANISED BY
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**Inaugural Session: Chair Professor Om Prakash Mishra**

The program began with **Professor Om Prakash Mishra**, head of Department of International Relations Jadavpur University, addressing the audience present and welcoming them to the event jointly organised by Netaji Institute for Asian Studies, Asia in Global Affairs in association with Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University, sponsored by Indian Council for World Affairs. He invited Dr Anita Sengupta, Director of Asia in Global Affairs, Professor Suranjan Das, Vice Chancellor, Jadavpur University and Honorary Director Netaji Institute for Asian Studies, Mr Soumen Bagchi, Deputy Director General, Indian Council for World Affairs and Prof Sanjay Chaturvedi, Chairperson and Professor Department of International Relations & Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences, South Asian University and Advisor Asia in Global Affairs to the stage.

Professor Mishra welcomed the dignitaries on behalf of the Department of International Relations and invited **Dr Anita Sengupta**, Director, Asia in Global Affairs to deliver the welcome address. Dr Sengupta began her address by thanking at length the speakers, audience and especially the students whose presence she noted was fundamental to the ambience and success of any academic program. She introduced Asia in Global Affairs which was a comparatively new research organization, being founded in 2017 and highlighted the research partnerships, publications and upcoming meets that are in the pipeline as also a vibrant internship program to sensitize students on matters concerning India and her Asian neighbourhood. Moving on to the theme of the Seminar, Dr Sengupta talked about how the Bay of Bengal conceptualized as Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a zone of strategic significance in the Asian and global theatre and how convening the Seminar in Kolkata at this juncture seemed to be culturally and geo-politically significant.

Prof. Mishra then invited **Professor Suranjan Das**, Hon. Vice Chancellor, Jadavpur University and Hon. Director, Netaji Institute For Asian Studies, Kolkata thanking him for his efforts in bringing the institutions participating in the Seminar together thereby creating an academic synergy. In his speech, Prof. Das principally underscored the significance of the academic ties that has been forged between Asia in Global Affairs, Netaji Institute for Asian Studies and Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University, specifically thanking the International Council of World Affairs, New Delhi for the financial sponsorship without which as he pointed out, the Seminar would not have been possible. Speaking on the exceptional nature of this collaboration Prof. Das explained how this collaborative exercise has created a breakthrough by bringing together a leading university of the country, an important think tank of the city, an important research institute of the city and the International Council of World Affairs. Prof. Das highlighted that this was the first time ICWA was supporting any venture in Jadavpur University and hoped that this Seminar would be the entry point for further collaborative exercises. Institutes in Delhi, as he argued, are much more favourably disposed in getting grants from central government bodies from which Jadavpur University or other State Universities are generally deprived. He hoped that the involvement of ICWA in this venture would change that and usher in similar other collaborations with Jadavpur in the near future. While he refused to speak on the particular theme of the Seminar arguing that in the course of the next two days it would be much debated and discussed, he did touch upon the notion of Connectivity in the emerging discourses of International Relations. He noted that traditionally connectivity has been seen as part of geo-political and geo-strategic exercises. But now is an opportune time to view connectivity within a broader canvas, from a historical perspective and from a perspective beyond the state actors. He highlighted that this Seminar has made a breakthrough by having a historical panel on Bay of Bengal and how through the historical perspective, it would be possible to enter into other realms of significance vis-à-vis connectivity. Expounding further, Prof. Das noted that there is need to discuss the functionalities of connectivity; i.e. connectivity for what, whom or which and emphasized that time has come when regional connectivity should not only replicate the broad trading and economic patterns of the international level. Instead as he argued regional connectivities should strive to develop an alternative paradigm of trading relations and governance—different from that which has already been established at the international level. Referring to a new book on BRICS that he was reading, Prof. Suranjan Das referred to the author’s contention that over time BRICS has emerged as a new area of sub-imperialism. He emphasized that as far as regional cooperation goes, the notion of connectivity should not be confined to development of relation between states but it should also make possible relations between non-state actors, or people to people relationships so that social issues like refugee issues, human rights issues, and climate change can also be intercepted and understood through connectivity. Therefore, as the Vice Chancellor expressly noted the time has come to view Connectivity within a new paradigm and he was confident that the Seminar would make an important contribution in that context. He further drew attention to a new discourse in International Relations which views regional connectivity as an impediment to the globalization process and stressed that that is also a problematic that needs to be addressed. According to Professor Das, regional connectivity is not hindered by globalisation and should not replicate global economic patterns but must come up with alternative paradigms of systems of governance suited to its own needs. He further reiterated the need for people to people ties to enhance connectivity. Prof. Das stressed that that regional solidarity can only bolster and not impede global understanding as regional connectivity need not be confined only to state-actors but it should go beyond state-actors and address social, economic and cultural issues. He wished the conference luck and expressed hope for further collaboration and a continued process of exchange of ideas.

**Mr Soumen Bagchi**, Deputy Director, ICWA in his speech acknowledged how it was a great honour to be present in Jadavpur University—a hallowed institution he had much heard about from his younger days but hadn’t attended before since he was born and brought up outside Bengal, and to speak about a subject with which he has been associated for a while in ICWA. He stressed that ICWA is also very happy to lend the hand of support and noted how there is a dedicated outreach now to sign MOUs with institutions of the country apart from the international ones and they are being successful as there is a palpable hunger among an increasing number of universities and think tanks to learn about international relations and foreign policies and their relevance to our lives. This, he noted was a significant shift as for many years international relations and policy matters were looked upon as domains removed from regular life. This has changed as today India is much more connected people wise, economically to other nations and so what happens internationally affects us. So there is an emerging shared international connect that affects India equally as the other nations. Mr Bagchi also noted that current Indian economy is not in a great shape which needs to be redressed to maintain her international standing as also among the ASEAN nations and to improve the economy the nation cannot only depend on domestic consumption. Instead it has to increase the export trade growth to maintain a competitive edge and raise a standard of living and provide employment to millions of Indians. He argued that as an increasing number of Indians are getting educated and unskilled that is creating a demand in response to which the economy must develop and foreign policies must be shaped. Contextually he harped on the importance of the image of India in the international arena. He referred to a saying of Pundit Nehru where he had apparently noted that foreign policy essentially is about the development of a country, to drive home his argument that foreign policy and domestic policies and development are intrinsically linked and the former flows out of the needs and requirements at home. So to become an export-oriented growth economy, certain structures need to be in place. Here he specially mentioned North east India which is comparatively weaker in development and infrastructure than the rest of the country. Concentrating on the theme of the Seminar, he noted that North East is the only part of India that is physically linked to ASEAN, to South-East Asia and since it lacks the requisite development and infrastructure as also the density of connectivity to the South Asian countries over land which would have bolstered the ties, the level of economic activities is far less than desired. If the north-east had the infrastructure then it could have well emerged, as he argued, as the trading hub in the interface with South-East Asia. Mr Bagchi felt optimistic that such a positive shift would happen. He further expressed his thoughts on how the northeast became isolated from the Bay and referring to Radcliffe Line, he noted the Eastern and South-eastern part of today’s Bangladesh--Chittagong Hill tracts and Rangamati etc. were not Muslim majority and should logically have been part of independent India and wistfully noted that it would have been terrific if Tripura and Mizoram had a corridor running down to the Bay and were connected by water. Then ‘chicken’s neck’ issue would have been solved to a great extent if rail and road link were available to that region. But this could not happen since during Partition, he notes, Calcutta was given to India and Eastern Bengal thus didn’t have any other natural harbour. Mr Bagchi in this context observed that traditionally India has been much more land-centric than sea-centric in her connectivity and it was connections with China, Pakistan, West Asia etc. that earlier dominated India’s strategy. In the 1990s, as he noted, it was perceived for the first time that other nations have raced far ahead of India in terms of standard of living. Consequently the Look East Policy was introduced. Referring to the Bay of Bengal, the Deputy Director General argued that that body of water brought with it a host of challenges as well as opportunities. His suggestion was that coastal states like West Bengal, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu can derive much more from the Bay and make trade investments than what is being done presently. South-east Asia being one of the most prominent economic hubs of the world in present times, he felt it is a very important area for India. The challenge is to keep this connect safe and secure and to ensure that no power dominates the Bay of Bengal or what is known as the Indo-Pacific so that this space remains open and free for navigation and trade, open skies and there are certain rules which all follow there. He submitted that while there are many discourses on the Indo-Pacific as it is an evolving concept, India’s stand is she is aware that she is part of this Indo-Pacific community that stretches from the Eastern Coast of Africa to the East Pacific and this space is for the entire human species and not for domination of any one nation which contains marine resources, resources for sustainable development etc. To ensure this there has to be, he emphasized a collaborative security architecture that ensures peace and stability in this space as no development can take place without ensuring the latter. The idea here, as Mr Bagchi noted, should be to economically develop our coastal areas for which currently there are through government programs that encourage such endeavour. This would not be new as historically, he reminds the audience there were linkages between the eastern coast of India and South-East Asia which were lost in time. Here he referred to how a Delhi bureaucrat mentioned that the concept of Asia Pacific is actually a colonial construct and contextually reminded that India lost its traditional linkages with that part of the world. Mr Bagchi concluded with the hope that the Seminar would focus on these issues as also talked about the challenges posed to the region and cited the example of Andaman and Nicobar island which being situated right next to Indonesia is of supreme strategic importance and needs to be guarded. Thus collaborative defence exercise with partners is the need of the hour for India as India could not afford to neglect the region. He concluded his address on an optimistic note of further collaboration and events both in Kolkata and Delhi by ICWA, NIAS, Asia in Global Affairs and Jadavpur University not only in Kolkata but also in Delhi where ICWA is based.

The Keynote Address for this seminar was delivered by **Professor Sanjay Chaturvedi** who serves as the Chairperson and Professor at Dept of International Relations & Dean of Faculty of Social Sciences at South Asian University. He conveyed his warm regards to the panellists and the audience present. His presentation was titled “Relocating the Bay of Bengal in Anthropocene: Entangled Imperatives, Colliding Cartographies and Indian Response.” He began by commenting on the theme of the seminar and reflected on how it captures the rich, diverse aspects of the dynamic region of Bay of Bengal. He went on to his own visualisation of the Bay of Bengal region as a ‘critical social science laboratory’ which challenges conventional disciplined understanding and holds immense scope for theorising and contribute to the global understanding of IR. He then placed Bay of Bengal in the larger context of Anthropocene, which he admitted was a difficult task for a scholar of International relations who would need to disentangle the “cobweb” of multiple logic and perspectives. According to him, for a region like the Bay of Bengal, this would lead to more questions rather than answers.

Prof Chaturvedi’s presentation drew on theoretical concepts espoused in Philip E. Steinberg’s Social Construction of Oceans. As the book talks about the social and historical nature of past and present conceptualisation of sea’s, he applies it to the Indian Ocean as shows how it has been used by various actors differently as each actor may favour a different social policy which would in turn strengthen their own security interest. The result of such multiple perspectives is that there are multiple narratives surrounding the region. He then delved into the core of his presentation which focused on critical geopolitics. He began with a brief introduction on what is critical geopolitics with a quote from Simon Dalby and the geopolitics behind strategy. He explored what he called the “political knowledge in Bay of Bengal” and pointed out the problem of mismatch between current theoretical terms and what shapes daily economy of the region which according to him contributed to difficulty in building a maritime narrative. According to him, the Indian Ocean region is a region of sub-regions and represents a fluid geography. He then looked at oceanic regions through multiple lenses. Reflecting on the legal aspects, he began with the disclaimer that legal geographies are also embedded in ecological geographies. By legal geographies he meant the existing legal framework in the seas. He contextualised the South China Sea as an enclosed or semi-enclosed sea and drew upon Article’s 122, 123 of the UNCLOS, which talks about cooperation among the littorals, to explain how legal framework is inevitably dictated by geopolitics. To explain the geostrategic aspect, Mr. Chaturvedi drew upon Professor Sugata Bose’s core idea of an inter-regional economy which existed in the Indian Ocean region, and made a case for the need to learn from history. He argued for the need to apply human agency to think about alternatives and ask ourselves- Why can’t history repeat itself in the Bay of Bengal? Although in view of the changed circumstances and narratives, the Bay of Bengal will look different but argued that this did not mean that there should not be continuity.

Along these lines, he argued how cartographic anxiety about the closing of the world has led to revisiting classical concepts. He drew upon concepts enshrined in the works of not only the famous theorist Mahan, who spoke about the influence of sea power, but also Mackinder and Karl Haushofer. He pointed out that the term Indo-Pacific was first used by Haushofer as “"Indopazifischen Raum.” He quoted Mackinder’s idea of China constituting a “yellow peril to the world freedom” if they were organised by the Japanese to overthrow the Russian empire and conquer its territory. While drawing on these ideas he pointed out that neither granted eastern agency a progressive role in the making of world politics. In 1945 It was K.M. Panikkar who advocated that Indian Navy should have the primary responsibility for guarding this ‘Steel Ring’ as a post-independence strategy. With the end of Cold War, there was an expansion of strategic interests and subsequent shift towards the littoral states of Malacca and hence the shift eastwards.

Commenting on the post-cold war order, he highlighted that it was a ‘spinning globe’ which has the potential to cause ‘geopolitical vertigo.’ This has led to the emergence of strategic conundrums, shifting alliances, entangled logics and debatable geography. In the context of the multiple narratives, all narratives be it historical, strategic or geopolitical needs to be considered. According to him the role of BIMSTEC becomes important, as it is an initiative of building regime and bringing states together, removing overlap. He mentioned how symbolically the dots have been laid and how it depends on how to connect them. He concluded with the statement he began with- there are more questions rather than answers.

Following the keynote address, Professor Om Prakash Mishra built on the ideas presented and summed it up by noting on how geography is opportunity and the rest is rearrangement through political management. He then individually thanked the members of the panel and the audience dispersed for tea.

**Session 1**
***Imagining a Bay of Bengal Community: History, Literature and Diaspora***

**Chair: Mr Soumen BagchiSpeakers: Suchandra Ghosh, Sarvani Datta Gooptu, Susmita Mukherjee**

**Prof Suchandra Ghosh’s** paper was titled “Convergence across the Bay: Early interactions and exchanges between regions of eastern sea boards of India and regions of South East Asia”

The presentation explored the metanarrative of connectivity in the Bay of Bengal region, in the period between 7th century CE to 13th century CE, through micro stories. She began her presentation by identifying important ports in the bay of Bengal ‘world’ which included India, Srilanka, lower Myanmar and peninsular Thailand. Her central contention was that in these regions around the Bay of Bengal there were constant interactions which facilitated civilizational dialogue. She argued that it was not social distance but nearness which was the defining feature of this region. She pointed out the similarity in process of state formation and in architectural styles and showed pictorial evidence of the same to argue for the existence of a ‘Bay of Bengal community’ Her argument was that that the premise of convergence was the connected history of ports. She also pointed out that existence of connectivity is reflected in ancient shloks. Through pictures she showed how the Arkanese prototype was borrowed for Harikela coins, again indicating connectivity. She pointed towards textual evidence in the form of travel stories of Ibn Batuta which spoke of connectivity. Buddhism was another connectivity factor, as evidenced from the images of *Avalokiteśvara* in Thailand Jhiuri Bidhisattva in India showing similarity in seating posture and base. The evidences of shipwreck as portrayed in the art served as evidence for high movement between Sumatra and Java. Cirebon, which is in Java, Indonesia showed ritual elements of Indian culture and she showed pictures to prove the same. Professor Ghosh traced the Trans-Isthmian route through which interactions took place and portrayed the ‘Isthmus of Krah’ as a transnational place connected by powers and serves as a crossroad for civilizations. She concluded her presentation with the remark that the Bay of Bengal community emerged through an adaptation of shared culture and in argued that a loosely connected Bay of Bengal community thrived in ancient times.

**Professor Sarvani Datta Gooptu** was the second speaker whose paper was titled “Forging New Friendships through Oceanic Travels: Cosmopolitan and Nationalistic ideas in Bengali Journals (late 19th and 20th centuries)”

An interesting mixture of cosmopolitan and nationalistic ideas pervades the Indian sensibility from the mid 19th century, as thoughts and writings of many intellectuals reveal. Despite inevitable concentration time and again in anti-colonial and nationalistic movements in the twentieth century, the study of the popular literary journals of Bengal show that there was no apparent contradiction with a desire to look beyond the nation. It is this desire to ‘know’ the ‘unknown’ and rekindle connections where they existed or forge new friendship ties that seem to be a key element in the articles exploring ‘Asia’. The countries that were ‘explored’ physically as well as imaginatively by them may belong to the various denominations of South-East, East, South or West Asia in today’s parlance but were then referred to by their names which were popular, though a strong sense of being a part of Asia underlay the explorations. Also unlike today when any discussion on Asia and connections brings in political or commercial means of forging look east or act east linkages, in the period that I refer to, a more people to people connection which was culturally oriented that was aimed at by intellectuals. What is more also significant in using these journalistic writings is that the writers were not always prominent individuals yet they had in their hands the pulse of people- it is for the general public that they are opening up a world not easily accessible then. For this paper I have referred to travels to Burma and Sri Lanka from Bengal by some individuals at various times who share their thoughts and experiences in these journals to show how non-statist attempts were continually made to stress human values and ties as important elements in forging links in a Bay of Bengal community.

Professor Datta Gooptu revealed how people to people interaction erases nationalist sentiments. She studied 36 journals and noted that the writers were not prominent leaders which according to her opened up a whole new social world which could be explored. She argued that the journals reflected people to people connections and reflected the cultural orientations of the local people. She cited the tales of writers who were the main non state actors driving the links across cultures. The writings revealed the narratives of a “Greater India” as a cultural sphere, which was inspired not only by nationalism but also cosmopolitanism, According to her study this “Greater India” was conceptualised to provide leadership to a troubled Asia. It reflected the consciousness of being part of a larger Asia. She explained how the mosaic of composite culture reached out to a large section of the population through various art mediums.
She points out that the travel writings discussed political and socio-cultural developments and reflected a holistic picture. Taking the example of Tagore, who travelled East and West and learnt about different cultures, came back and incorporated them in the curriculum of his school in Shantiniketan, she brought this out. Shared experience of colonialism in a sense brought people closer together. In her presentation, she traced the changes in Indo-Burmese relations as reflected in the text. She noted how economic hardship on either side caused deterioration in relations as was reflected in the text. Her presentation spoke of texts which reiterated the spirit of universalism and criticised narrow nationalist ideas. Overall she argued that the message depicted in the journals was one of the powers of Art in forging connections, where every journal she studied had some form of representations of art. Tagore’s writings reflected the unique plan of cultural assimilation which came out through her study of the journals.

**Professor Susmita Mukherjee** was the final speaker in this panel and her presentation was titled “Locating the Bengali Revolutionaries in Burma (1923-33): As reflected in the History and literature of the wider migratory culture of Bay of Bengal”

Her presentation brought out the pre-colonial connections between Bengal and Burma through the people to people ties between the Bengali’s and the Burmese.
Her micro study was contextualised within the large scale movement between Burma and Bengal taking place during this period. She pointed out that Indians dominated in the spheres of health, education etc in British Burma. From Bengal people travelled to Burma and served as clerks, traders, merchants and some of them even made a fortune for themselves. The core of her paper studied how in the 1920’s they got involved in radical political activity, which she argued was not restricted to just the working class Bengalis but also those working in prominent positions in the colonial administration. She traced their entry point to the port city of Rangoon, form where they expanded, much to the resentment of the British who were not able to take much action owing to the secrecy of the revolutionary activities. The main source of income for these revolutionaries were illegal activities like theft, smuggling, creating counterfeit notes and coins etc. She showed how the Jugantar Party, a revolutionary party in Bengal had connections in Burma and the former provided financial help to Bengali revolutionaries in Burma. She cited the instance of how Surja Sen, the famed revolutionary visited Burma to seek asylum but had to leave fast once sources revealed to the British his movement. She then explained how due to the political situation and constitutional developments in 1920’s an animosity began to develop between the Indian and the Burmese. Her paper showed that the British now actively involved in fostering anti-Bengali sentiment, to that end pass a legislation to deal with Bengali revolutionaries in Burma. The paper concluded by showing how the anti-Indian feeling generated from within the Burmese nation and fomented by the British Government contributed to a large extent to the disintegration of the revolutionary movement that was being organized in

This was followed by a Question and Answer session where the discussion was around the significance of these historical links in a proper understanding of any attempts at creating a Bay of Bengal community through economic and strategic linkages but also people to people contacts.

**Session 2
 The contemporary factors shaping the emergence of the Bay of Bengal region as a critical strategic theatre in Indian foreign policy**

**Chair: Professor Sarvani Datta Gooptu**

**Speakers: Anindya Jyoti Majumdar, Shantanu Chakraborty, Subhadeep Bhattacharya, Pratnashree Basu**

**Professor Anindya Jyoti Majumdar** presented a paper titled “The Bay as a Strategic Theatre: Evolving Trends.”

Professor Majumdar began his presentation by identifying the Bay of Bengal as a region where India is now attempting to project its naval superiority. In view of the multiple actors in the region he spoke of the benefits of interdependence. He identified the major trend to be that of militarization in the region but felt that equal focus is necessary for non- traditional threats.
He explained how at a fundamental level, no area could be strategic unless it is perceived as such by at least one actor and subsequently utilised to actualise the interest of the actor. With this background, he identified how the Bay of Bengal is an important strategic theatre. He argued that India is an important actor in the region and hence must construct a naval geopolitical narrative that suits its interests. He cited KM Panikkar who had pointed out the strategic character of the India and traced how independent India gradually grew up and awoke to the possibilities that oceans hold. According to him, the Act East policy serves as the geopolitical narrative for India which is still developing. In such a narrative, the Bay inevitable plays an important role and is an indivisible part of the Eastern Indian Ocean and has no independent identity. He identified the opportunities presented by the region as commercial growth, trade, all round development and well-being and soft power diplomacy while some challenges were illegal fishing, piracy etc. Since the Bay becomes a region where the Act East and Neighbourhood policy converge, the littoral in the region come to acquire significance.

With the rise of China in the region and the changing geopolitical equations, he argued that there is now a scramble for connectivity- especially between China, India and Japan. Amidst the tendency of competing regionalism, he proposed that India should engage with China bilaterally and multilaterally, aim at revitalising sub-regional organisations while unilaterally it could secure the region with naval supremacy. According to him, India should protect coastal SLOC’s, resources and prevent infiltration and while navigating its rise as a naval power, it should ensure the littorals view it favourably, also protect its own security and economic interests.

**Professor Shantanu Chakraborty’s** presentation was titled Projection of the “Bay of Bengal initiative’ as a strategic endeavour- a critical survey.”

He began by tracing how the region is being constructed in dominant narratives, especially in view of the growing fascination around the region. He then presented an alternative reconstruction, in lieu of ‘China-centric’ narratives and suggested a reconstruction which would bring back old linkages which would foster military, economic, structural cooperation. Quoting Gurpreet Khurana, he cited his apprehensions about China’s current operational capability to dominate in the region, hence an exclusive focus on China, would be counterproductive. Alternatively he suggested, going back to history, which provides an indigenous model and shifts the focus from existing strategic models. He pointed out how most writings on connectivity focus on the strategic dimension, even the shift from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific was a reflection of American strategic interests. He made a case for building a non-western model- a ‘civilisational state’ model which would be holistic. He pointed out how China always uses its own idioms, phrases and words over western language and this is something we can learn and build our own phrases and narratives for the Indo-Pacific which does not centre around China.

**Mr Subhadeep Bhattacharya** presented a paper titled “India’s Bay of Bengal Strategy: Programme and Predicaments”.

He structured his paper around the following aspects: the basic problems of the Bay of Bengal region, how India is facing these challenges and the future options for India. He identified how despite potential, the region is less integrated and does not perform well in terms of trade, as is the case in South Asia. He noted that India has taken the lead in addressing connectivity issues in the region through its Sagarmala initiative. He substantiated this by reviewing some of India’s attempts at connectivity including the signing of 3 MOU’s for port connectivity with Thailand, development of Nepal’s inland waterways and India-Myanmar-Thailand bridge. Yet, he argued this was not enough, particularly in light of the decrease in budget allocation to the navy which was much less than expected. He cited that the Indian navy needs 200 ships by 2027 to be a naval power. He argued that India has to make its moves very carefully in the region and must particularly in economic terms given that the current trade is nowhere near it’s potential. He made a case for promoting BIMSTEC over BCIM, given that the latter includes China. For such a policy, he suggested enhancing military ties, since economically India is not in a position to face China economically. He concluded his presentation by stating that the victory of China has been economic integration in the region and reiterated the need for an independent policy in the Bay of Bengal.

**Ms Pratnashree Basu** was the final speaker on the panel and spoke on “The Bay of Bengal and Politics of Strategic Geographies.”

She began her presentation by tracing how the Bay of Bengal region was earlier a backwater in the larger Indian Ocean region whose salience has increasingly been recognised. The littoral states which are engaged in the region are being termed “Bay of Bengal tigers” along the narrative of the Asian tigers due to their growing importance. She then traced the changing power dynamics and the inescapable rise of Beijing’s footprints in the region and the expansive One Belt One Road Initiative. She identified Chinese functioning of commerce as a key driver of Chinese initiatives in the region which not only changed regional and power dynamics but also was influenced by them. The region has witnessed the increasing footprint of Japan as well as other powers. The lack of infrastructure integration in the region lead to what she termed a ‘scramble for connectivity’ predicated upon a premise of linkages. In the Indian case, she then traced how there has been a consolidation of strategic linkages across boundaries, which have taken cognizance of China’s role. She concluded by stating that India’s future course of action should focus on strengthening institutions and mediating concerns of the smaller actors in the region.

This was followed by a Question and Answer session.

**Session 3
The importance of oceans to Strategy**

**Chair: Dr Sanjay Pulipaka
Speakers: Abhishek Mishra, Anasua Basu Roy Chaudhary**

**Abhishek Mishra’s** presentation was titled “Piracy and armed robbery in Indian Ocean Region: Assessment, Challenges and the Way Forward”

He explored the various dimensions of maritime security and provided a holistic assessment of India’s role in the same and elucidated upon the various initiatives undertaken. He began with a definition of maritime security as concerns of protection of states’ land and maritime territories. With this broad definition, he clarified that it is a broad term and there is no definite meaning and can be discussed in a variety of contexts. He identified the threats to maritime security as illegal activities, arms, drugs, human trafficking, IUU fishing, and pollution at sea. However such threats only receive media coverage when pirates are involved. Commenting on the paramount importance of safety of oceans and safe order at seas, he argued that in dept understanding of complexities of maritime domain is necessary.

He explored in depth the threat of Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea, and identified it as the most significant challenge to effective maritime governance across sub-Saharan Africa and around the Indian subcontinent. He explained the legal difference provisions available to deal with this threat as stated in the UNCLOS (Article 101) which deals with Piracy outside the jurisdiction of territorial waters of the state, which Resolution A.1025 (26) by International Maritime Organisation was committed to piracy in territorial waters. He went on to explain the difference between the two as- piracy takes place in international waters, high seas, EEZ and contiguous zones while armed robbery takes place within a state’s internal, territorial and archipelagic waters. Commenting on why it is a significant threat to maritime security, he commented that global trade would be impossible without more than a million seafarers on the merchant ships transporting world’s cargo between ports. Given the volume of traffic over such vast, unmonitored spaces attracts illicit actors to target such vessels, steal cargo, and kidnap crew for ransom. As a result, it incurs threat to commerce, endangers seafarers, financial losses and enables transnational criminal networks. Apart from this he commented on the human cost of piracy also as an important consideration.

He identified three models of piracy and its drivers: Kidnap for ransom, Hijacking for cargo theft and armer robbery and the drivers as high population growth with low possibilities of employment, weak judicial system, corruption, local conflicts, political instability etc. These encourage blatant foreign Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated fishing and cited the case of Somalia as an example. Assessing the trends in piracy, he identified an increase from 2017 figures only in West and Central Africa. However kidnapping incidents increased form 4 in 2017 to 6 in 2018 worldwide. In the West Indian Ocean in 20118 there were no reported incidents of hijacking. He then presented an assessment of India’s role in the region in terms of Governance, Economic Resilience and Security at Sea. In terms of governance, he argued that India has played an above average role given its participation in several initiatives to improve maritime efficacy and efficiency. India has also partnered with Maritime Anti-Corruption Network (MACN) and also worked to improve port integrity and efficiency. Significantly, India also took a hard stance against corruption. Overall, he argued that India has played a positive role in establishing Int cooperation, rule of law and maritime enforcement. However, he pointed out that it has a weak coastal welfare and was ranked lowly at 63 out of 70 countries. In the Indian case, unsustainable resource gathering and excessive sand mining has contributed to an erosion of physical and economic security and will require government attention. India due to its massive coastline has created difficulties to control maritime border. The maritime routes were exploited by terrorists in the famous Mumbai attacks in 2008, following which India has increased its surveillance capabilities. Mr. Mishra then provided an assessment of India’s role in anti-piracy. He pointed out that no Indian escorted ship has been hijacked since 2017 and that mission based deployment (since August 2017) has significantly helped in ensuring this. He pointed out that independent anti-piracy patrols commenced as early as October 23, 2008

The final presentation of the day was presented by **Anasua Basu Roy Chaudhary** which was titled “Exploring BIMSTEC’s potential as India’s stepping stone in to the wider Indo-Pacific.”

The objective of her presentation was to analyze the importance of BIMSTEC in India’s maritime connectivity outreach and to evaluate India’s role in strengthening maritime linkages in the Bay of Bengal region. She also looked at how and to what extent India’s engagements with the extended Bay littorals will be conducive in strengthening its position in the wider Indo-Pacific. Her presentation drew on work which had been conducted by the Observer Research Group titled Exploring India’s Maritime Connectivity in the extended Bay of Bengal. She identified the various projects under the BIMSTEC framework which deal with the issues of development of Deeper Water Ports and Container Handling in the Bay of Bengal. Commenting on BIMSTEC strategy, she focused exclusively on how it seeks to promote the development of new ports and encourages investment in the port sector. As a geopolitical space, she identified that the region combines South and South-East Asia and traced the major ports in use around the coastal area of Bay of Bengal. She then traced the port connectivity between the ports on India’s East Coast and ports in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. She shared with the audience her personal experience of travelling across these areas and how her team noticed that coastal shipping agreements are actively emerging and prospects for reviving port connectivity is good. She provided EXIM trade data from major ports on India’s east coast (Kolkata Port, Haldia Dock, Paradip Port, Vishakhapatnam Port, Chennai port) to South-East Asia and the data revealed considerable sea trade. Nevertheless she reiterated the need for India to invest in infrastructural development to create demand. She also reflected upon linkages through inland waterways between India and Bangladesh. She showed that while both countries agreed to extend water transit, trade protocols some problems persist such as high navigation problems and the dominance of Bangladeshi vessels. She presented data collected by the ORF team from their field visit and provided a status of Inland container terminals (govt and private owned) out of which only one was complete. She reiterated the need for a cohesive BIMSTEC coastal shipping arrangement and saw the first ever BIMSTEC Conclave of ports in 2019 as a positive development. She argued that the trends towards the reformulation of BIMSTEC were indicative of India’s efforts to advance its Indo-Pacific vision. In conclusion, she suggested certain concrete steps such as Maritime domain awareness, operational outreach of the Indian navy, strategic coherence, joint exercise for better interoperability, capacity building, and maritime infrastructure.

This was followed by a Question and Answer session.

**5th February**

**Session 4
Re-engaging with disconnected spaces: Regional Organizations and India’s role within the broader region
Chair: Professor Anindya Jyoti Majumdar**

**Speakers: Sanjay Pulipaka, Binoda Kumar Mishra, Avipshu Haldar, Vivek Mishra**

**Dr Sanjay Pulipaka’s** presentation was titled “Bay of Bengal: Multiple Constructs and Initiatives for Economic Cooperation”

The presentation discussed the economic engagements that have surface in the Bay of Bengal region. The speaker began by enlisting the various important economic entities that are at work in the region which included several regional organizations as well as nations that have claimed stake in the region. The presentation began with SAARC, which according to the speaker has not made much progress in terms of economic integration in the region and as a whole. One of the primary reasons for that has been the essentially Indo-centric nature of the organization, which has created a significant disparity among the member states. India has been the single most important state in the region and the smaller countries have often operated with anxiety vis-à-vis India, and the Indo-Pak tensions have been widely responsible for the deadlock of SAARC. It was further noted that SAARC did not put much emphasis on the maritime space, as a through reading of the several declarations and the MoUs have shown that the summit declarations have no maritime dimension. The BBIN has also figured as a key multi-national arrangement in the region. There have been deliberations on ports in the MoUs and discussions about railways have also figured among key observations in BBIN, although the speaker concluded that it may not have had significant impact on the overall progress of the organization. The speaker further observed that BBIN has essentially become a three nation run organization due to Bhutan’s concerns about pollution among several other reasons, although Bangladesh has shown proactive engagement with BBIN. It can perhaps be argued that BIMSTEC is one of the foremost organizations in the region which has been active in the region. The speaker highlighted the role of Thailand in shaping this arrangement. However he also asserted that Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Nepal have not made much progress in BIMSTEC due to their internal political situation, however, India has largely seen BIMSTEC as an opportunity to keep Pakistan out of its regional framework. Bangladesh and Myanmar have also shown interest in BIMSTEC as a favoured regional organization. The speaker emphasized on the need to make a shift from BBIN MVA to BIMSTEC MVA. He also pointed out that the GDP of BIMSTEC is better than the collective GDP of SAARC, promising better economic prospects. HE spoke further about the enhanced role of Japan in the region, mainly highlighting Japan’s understanding with India, name the JICA ODA and the India Japan Act East Forum in North-eastern India, institutionalizing Indo-Japan relations. He emphasized on joint collaborations between India and Japan like the Colombo Port takeover which is aimed at containing Hambantota, and the Trincomallee Deep Sea Water Port which is a strategic endeavour where India will have full control over the port. He emphasized that Japan has clearly flagged off its prioritization of coordination over collaboration. With regards to China, the speaker mentioned that Bangladesh seemed to have been successful in navigating the debt problem that is associated with China, and is careful of not taking loans. He ended by talking about a potential of some sort of regional strategy for Bay of Bengal. The speaker was of the opinion that India is not merely reacting to China. India should undertake connectivity projects alongside growth centres and not in a scattered manner, strategically use official aids and include third countries in growth centres and have an increasing density and transparency in the projects. This presentation also highlighted that the Bay of Bengal as an enclave will have significant geopolitical impacts.

**Dr Binoda Kumar Mishra’s** presentation was titled “Towards a Pragmatic Look East Policy: Promoting BIMSTEC”

The presentation began with a sobering assessment of the Government of India’s plans about BIMSTEC. It started with an anecdote about how the Government still finds itself clueless about BIMSTEC as an institution which will leverage India’s strongholds in the region. BIMSTEC is yet to have a separate and dedicated division. This paper is essentially designed to project BIMSTEC as a stepping stone for India’s larger vision of the ‘Look East Policy’. It was emphasized that the origin of the adoption of Look East policy was to be revisited in order to make a comprehensive assessment of the present scheme of things. Northeast India was not a part of the Look east policy initially as Myanmar was not a part of ASEAN and hence did not facilitate connectivity projects in that region. It was also important to revisit our ancient ties with Southeast Asia in order to understand how they were established and sustained. The speaker emphasized the historical role of the South and East Indian states in shaping the ties between India and Southeast Asia. These states took the lead in establishing trade and connectivity. However, now Delhi is seen to be the epicenter for connectivity and other economic decisions. According to the speaker, an exclusive economic approach is preventing the Look East Policy to develop fully. The trade specific approach that is in place is not materializing fully. One of the primary reasons is because there are no trade complementarities among the nations in this region. All the countries in this region are engaged in producing the same products hence there are not enough takers. It was emphasized that creation of value chains was essential. It was proposed that engagement on lines of culture, tourism and connectivity was essential in revitalizing India’s Look East Policy. It is also important to be sympathetic to our smaller neighbouring countries and have a strategic approach in making BIMSTEC operational. Examples of Myanmar’s pulse production for the Indian market were cited.

**Dr Avipshu Haldar** spoke on “Globalization, Regionalism and BIMSTEC: An International Political economy perspective”.

He began with a brief introduction on the theoretical concepts of globalisation and regionalism and focussed mainly on the latter for his presentation. He showed how regionalism was mainly a western concept but needed to be contextualised in context of south and south-east Asia. He then briefly traced the economic history and transformation the member states underwent. His paper studied how financial crisis reshaped the politics of the region and also looked the role of financial institutions in the economic development of the region. He used Wallerstein’s theoretical framework to point out the potentialities of South-South cooperation.

He addressed the question- Are regionalism and globalisation contradictory or complementary and the argued in favour of later. Dr Haldar argued that as national economies are getting integrated with world economies, the concept of borderlessness should be revisited. He also used the theoretical framework of interdependence and inter and intra firm diplomacy in his paper. He argued that region states serve as nodal points in this framework and come to play a key role in horizontal integration and political climate in the state plays a crucial role in such integration. Taking the example of Indonesia, Thailand and Myanmar he showed the similarity in the political climate in these countries during their formative stage and how this lead to the countries adopting an Import-Substitution strategy which was followed. However significant changes were visible post 1990 when the countries took major steps towards liberalisation, and focused upon Exclusive economic zones, Special Economic Zones etc. The govt adopted a new attitude and introduced new banking regulations.
In discussing the role of International trading structures, he argued that Bretton Woods and International Monetary Fund were not suited to meet the socio-economic diversity of the region and identified Asian Development Bank as an alternative to the existing international structure. The Bank received its especially prominent role after the ASEAN financial crisis which left a huge impact on the economies of these countries. He assessed the failure of economic agreements in context of the SAARC countries to be political fallouts among members.

According to him, BIMSTEC holds immense potential for South-South cooperation and used Wallerstein’s logic to argue that economic progress would take place from semi-periphery to periphery and hence BIMSTEC economies would come to play a leading role. He identified South and South-East Asia to themselves be Western conceptualisations and proposed BIMSTEC as a Pan-Asian concept, identify behavioural similarities are build on it. He concluded his paper with the assertion that BIMSTEC had to be understood from the perspective of International Political Economy to understand the greater impact it will have on the economy of the region and countries involved.

The final speaker in the panel was **Dr Vivek Mishra** whose presentation was titled “The Strategic Significance of Andaman and Nicobar Island: Assessing Anti-Access Area Denial Potential in the Bay of Bengal.”

The presentation assessed the significance of the Islands not only in terms of its importance in countering China, but also to boost domestic potential and overall the potential of the Bay of Bengal.
In terms of geography the region is home to over 500 islands out of which very few are inhabited by humans, is 140kms away from the shipping lines of Malacca and Indira Point is 90 nautical miles from Indonesia and is also close to Sundar straits. He also highlighted the rich biodiversity of the region and is home to many endangered species which lends to the region’s significance.
In terms of its strategic significance, he pointed out how it could serve as the ‘springboard’ for India’s Act East policy. He pointed out how the increase in Chinese presence in the region is a concern for India. The Coco Islands which is north of Andaman was identified as strategically important to both Myanmar and India and he spoke of the increasing Chinese presence in the region and how it directly threatens India. Other threats include sea piracy and sea traffic which although less, nevertheless persist.

He explored the possible role of Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Indo-Pacific discourse. He made a case for the strategic use of the Andaman and Nicobar islands and pointed out that it could be used for India’s third fleet and could developed as a potential transhipment hub.
He briefly explored the Mahanian concept of sea control and denial, which relates to are denial in context of the presentation, as the capacity to destroy enemy ability to be commercially viable and its ability to carry commerce across counties and allies in the region. At the multilateral level initiatives such as Combined Maritime Forces, ensures shipments go without being obstructed, which makes it easier for a state to ensure sea denial. Dr Mishra then briefly commented on the US-China dynamics in the region since it is directly linked to India’s dynamics in the region. He argued that China understood American presence in the region stemmed from its ability of sea control and expansion of fleet and has attempted the same. Broadly he argued that a country’s sea control/denial ability is assured by 3 factors- nature of assets, positioning of the assets which if done strategically could boost asset capability and domestic ability to acquire assets. In this context, sea based deterrence becomes critical and India’s acquisition of nuclear triad while projects its deterrence capability was assessed to be relatively new for assessment. In domains like cyber, maritime domain awareness, India was identified to have made significant advances, particularly the establishment of a fusion centre in Gurgaon. He argued for the need to build solid surveillance near Andaman and monitor the Strait of Malacca and wider South China Sea. He identified that India has shed much of its traditional reluctance as visible from its increased patrolling with the US, defence ties with Vietnam, Mission Based Deployments but singularly the development of Andaman was not given sufficient importance. He identified submarine development as being crucial to denial and control and compared China’s capability with India and pointed out that while the former has 4 SLBMS, 5 nuclear powered, 47 diesel and electric, India has 1SLBMS, 1 nuclear, 14 conventional. By highlighting this gap, he reiterated the need for India to develop submarines to develop the region. He drew upon the theoretical concepts of compellence and deterrence in furthering the discussion on maritime security and concluded that the development of Andamans ultimately rests on theoretical arguments.

This was followed by a Question and Answer session.

**Session 5
The twenty first century maritime Silk Road and Indian Alternatives**

**Chair: Professor Ishani Naskar
 Speakers: Urbi Das, Sayantani Sen Mazumdar**

The first speaker **Ms Urbi Das’s** presentation was titled “Power projection in the Bay of Bengal: Comparing India and China’s naval strategy”

She began her presentation by providing an insight into critical geopolitics which uses geography to its advantage, since it is given and cannot be bypassed. She then commented on how maritime security is intrinsically geopolitical in nature. She identified the general aims of nations to be to securing freedom of seas and the sea lanes of communication. Drawing back to classical geopolitical ideas, she identified the importance of both Mahan and Mackinder in formulation of naval strategies by states. She provided a comprehensive assessment of Chinese initiatives in the Indian Ocean Region in context of military modernisation and compared it with Indian strategies. She pointed out that given the different political systems in both countries and following the Kautilyan dictum that your neighbour is your natural enemy, India and China cannot be friends but had to be rivals. She further pointed out tensions areas in their relationship as China’s strategic partnership with Pakistan, diplomatic advance in Bangladesh, military initiatives in Indo-Pacific, Belt and Road Initiative and the ongoing border dispute and the subsequent standoff at Dokhlam together with regional problems. At the multilateral level China has opposed India’s bid to the NSG, its permanent membership at the UNSC among other tensions. Following this she pointed out the fundamental tensions in their respective worldviews since a Sino-centric Asian system does not work well for Indian interests and an India dominated Asian system also does not bode well for China.
She then provided a detailed comparison of Chinese and Indian presence in the Bay of Bengal in particular and the Indian Ocean in general and highlighted how the region is economically important to china which is developing economic zones in the region. She pointed out that India is unable to compete with development assistance being given by China, has been unable to complete projects. Meanwhile she reported through pictorial evidence how China stepped up its underwater forays in the region while the PLA Navy tripled its presence, and has been identified by the US to have patrolled around the region. In this context, she assessed that Indian initiatives are significantly lagging behind.

She concluded her presentative by providing future prescriptions for what India can do and argued for increased defence expenditure by the India. She argued for the need to modernise bases, increase naval surveillance facility, conduct capacity building programs, dispatch instructors, and provide financial assistance to friendly countries. She pointed out how China is also engaging with the littoral countries and more intensely, she stated that China has sent out 10 submarines to these littorals. She argued that given the current dynamics in the region, there remains possibility of standoffs between the actors who may collide over control of strategic waters. The involvement of big powers and regional grouping may create what she described as a ‘cold war like rival groups’ situation and in this context commented on the renewed significance of smaller states who can and are playing India and China off one another. Amidst these narratives, she argued for India’s need to show that it is a credible power. Multilaterally, she suggested, India should abide by Sun Tzu’s dictum- ‘subdue the enemy without fighting.’ She also pointed out that despite tensions escalation will not go beyond a level given that China will not be able to face India due to its own geographical constrains and domestic challenges.

The final presentation of the conference was by **Dr Sayantani Sen Mazumdar** titled “India’s littoral strategy: Partnership and Beyond”

Dr Sen Mazumdar provided an analysis of the significance of sea in a country’s diplomatic and strategic equations with its neighbours. She identified the three primary reasons for the importance of seas: transport and communication, projection of military prowess and resources. Contextualising this in Asia, she commented on how both China and India started focusing on the importance of sea power, the protection of Sea Lines of Communication which has in turn become a matter of deep concern at the strategic level. According to her it is the intensification and widening of the maritime and strategic interest which propelled India to look beyond their traditional ocean spaces. The result was an escalation of rivalry between the two Asian giants. And given the expanding naval profile pf each country into the other’s domain, both countries viewed each other with suspicion and distrust. She identified a wider acceptability of the notion of “Indo-Pacific” in contemporary discourse as a single geopolitical theatre in the political and intellectual community. She highlighted how Indo-Pacific is intrinsically different from Asia-Pacific and how the of a free and open Indo-Pacific is the dominant rhetoric by Japan and USA. She also spoke about how with the abundance of seaborne trade passing through the Strait of Malacca, the Straits of Singapore and the Gulf of Hormuz, the Indo-Pacific region has evolved as a realm of contesting assertions, challenges and power politics of significant players. In this context she elaborated how the US pivot to Asia has raised Beijing’s suspicion about the safety of its sea-based trade. She also pointed out how it is being apprehended through the employment of comprehensive means of economic inducements and bribes and through manipulative penetrations and interferences in the domestic politics of the countries, China is at an upward swing to mark its imprint on the region.

Amidst such a narrative, she placed India’s role in the region and argued that given India’s power aptitudes and competitive potentials as well as past inferences of good neighbourhood policies India is being regarded as a trusted, dependable ally steered to play a pivotal role in the Indo-Pacific affairs. India is also inclined to prevent the use of the sea as a medium for the use of inimical technologies to act as a strategic deterrent or the projection or applicability of military forces by any country to achieve ulterior ends. After chalking out the major actors, she assessed the partnerships in the region and argued that networking has been rendered precedence than the process of alliance-building in the Indo-Pacific region and the initiatives like the trilateral India-Japan-Australia exercises, India-US-Japan dialogues, the Malabar Exercises, the Quadruple Alliances do exemplify the networking spree of the countries. Speaking about India’s strategy in the region, she pointed out that India has always emphasized on the geographical contiguity from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas and has also pondered of eulogizing equal access to the region under international law, exploration and use of common areas on the sea and air, freedom of navigation and peaceful settlement of disputes. India’s Indo-Pacific vision connects Asia and the Pacific and focuses on ASEAN centrality, a primary facet of its Act East Policy.

She concluded her presentation by stating that The increasing Chinese influence on the region might have adverse implications on India, which can only be countered through extended defence and security cooperation with the countries like Japan, Australia, Vietnam and the US, through deepening of security ties with the ASEAN and through intensifying engagements with the islands in the Indian and Pacific Oceans as well. Through the vision of “SAGAR” or Security and Growth for All in the Region, India is venturing to expand the maritime logistics in Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles and its littoral neighbours, to promote the Blue Economy, develop infrastructure to bolster onward connectivity from India. For the Indo-Pacific to restrain the hegemonic ambitions of both the US and China, the initiatives should be taken up by India as a balancing factor.

The event concluded with a vote of thanks.

#### Prepared by Somdatta Chakraborty, Sayantan Haldar, Shromona Jana and Priyanka Ghosh