EDITORIAL

Strengthen maritime capabilities

Maritime trade is called the heart of global trade and plays a key role in globalization. In today's world, the sea route is the most effective way of transporting goods for its massive capacity. Seabourne trade is also considered the most cost-effective mode of transport compared to other modes of transportation. As India moves towards being a global powerhouse, marine trade is said to be the backbone of the country's exports. Hence, April 5 is dedicated to all the members working in India's maritime industry and contributing significantly to the nation's global trade and commerce. India has had a strong maritime tradition since ancient times. Evidence from the Indus Valley Civilization suggests that Indian traders have been using sea routes for commerce for thousands of years. Sea transport is more economical compared to other modes of transport. India is well-connected to major international markets through sea routes. National Maritime Day highlights the importance of India's maritime industry, trade, security, and environmental protection. It is a day to celebrate India's maritime legacy and inspire future growth in shipping and sustainable maritime practices. Collective efforts are essential to protect marine ecosystems, advance maritime trade, and ensure safe navigation. Strengthening India's maritime capabilities will help the country emerge as a leading global maritime power. The growth of maritime commerce led to the establishment of the Ministry of Shipping in 1962. In 1964, the government declared April 5 as National Maritime Day to honour the historic SS Loyalty. India became a member of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) in 1949 strengthening its presence in waters. India's maritime heritage extends beyond historical milestones; it plays a crucial role in our contemporary success story. Today, India stands proudly as one of the leading economies globally, and a significant part of this stature is attributed to the thriving trade sector and a robust shipping industry. As we reflect on National Maritime Day, it's imperative to recognize the indispensable contribution of the maritime sector to our nation's economic prosperity. India's inclusion into the global economy has been significantly facilitated by its expansive coastline and the strategic location of its ports. The maritime industry is a linchpin for international trade, seamlessly connecting our shores to distant lands. Importing and exporting goods via ships have become the lifeblood of our economy, fostering economic growth, creating job opportunities, and enhancing our global standing. Behind the scenes of this economic juggernaut are the unsung heroes of the seas—the dedicated crews who embark on maritime journeys that span months on end.

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Disasters know no borders

BY
SATENDRA SINGH

The devastating earthquakes that recently struck Myanmar and Thailand have once again underscored the pressing need for a coordinated and effective disaster response mechanism in South Asia

The recent catastrophic earthquakes in Myanmar and Thailand have highlighted the urgent requirement for an effective and unified disaster response system in South Asia. Even with regional bodies like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) in place, prompt and efficient aid to impacted nations continues to be problematic because of bureaucratic hold-ups, logistical hurdles and differing national strategies. The number of fatalities and damage to infrastructure could be greatly minimised if an organised and cooperative framework existed to guarantee a swift and smooth response across borders.

The BIMSTEC countries — Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand — often face natural and human-induced disasters because of their specific geological, climatic and economic conditions. This makes them well-suited to set up a Rapid Regional Disaster Response Centre (RRDRC). This centre would function as a focused platform for member states to collaborate on urgent disaster relief initiatives by exchanging information, skills and resources. This mechanism would not only improve disaster resilience but also bolster diplomatic relations and promote a sense of regional unity.

India, boasting its specialised and well-prepared National Disaster Response Force (NDRF), can take a pivotal role in this effort. The NDRF, overseen by the Ministry of Home Affairs, is an exceptionally skilled force focused on disaster response and management. It comprises several battalions skilled in search and rescue missions, medical support and engineering services. India has a strong history of helping countries affected by disasters, including Nepal, Sri Lanka, Japan, Indonesia and Turkey. Establishing a comparable coordinated initiative within BIMSTEC would guarantee prompt and efficient support in the event of a disaster. A significant challenge in regional disaster response is the swift and effective transportation of personnel, equipment, and relief supplies across borders. A Rapid Regional Disaster Response Agreement within BIMSTEC could facilitate the creation of a systematic method for collaboration. This pact must define explicit operational protocols, guaranteeing that every nation honours the sovereignty and rules of others while facilitating aid when necessary. Within this framework, the impacted nation would hold the main responsibility for coordinating disaster response on its land. Nonetheless, it would have the opportunity to seek help from other BIMSTEC countries, which would reply according to established protocols. An assigned agency within BIMSTEC, like the BIMSTEC Disaster Response Cell, might act as the primary coordinator for these initiatives.

For the RRDRC to thrive, BIMSTEC countries must dedicate themselves to several crucial obligations. They ought to collaborate to establish monitoring and early warning systems, enact measures for disaster risk reduction and set up contingency plans for emergency response. In the event of a disaster, impacted nations must promptly exchange information with other members, allowing for swift action to be taken. Every country should be prepared to provide human and material resources for regional disaster response efforts. Exchanging technical knowledge and optimal strategies will enhance overall disaster resilience. Moreover, national Governments ought to integrate essential legal and administrative actions to ensure seamless collaboration within the BIMSTEC framework.

For the RRDRC to be effective, it is crucial to create Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for every BIMSTEC member state. These processes must encompass regional standby plans for disaster assistance, the use of logistical resources, and coordination systems for disaster response. Creating collaborative strategies and backup plans would aid in minimising losses during future disasters. Strengthening capacity is another vital domain.

Countries ought to conduct routine training sessions, simulation drills, and conferences to evaluate the readiness and response effectiveness of the RRDRC. The BIMSTEC focal point, in partnership with the RRDRC, must conduct regular assessments of these procedures to improve efficiency. Every member state must guarantee that it possesses the essential resources-both human and material-ready for prompt disaster response. Effective mobilisation of response by assisting nations could be enhanced through clear communication regarding the scope and type of support required. To ensure seamless coordination, impacted countries should offer local resources and services to aid relief initiatives. The aid supplies offered by supporting nations must adhere to the quality and safety regulations of the impacted country. Staff and resources sent for support must comply with the national regulations of the country seeking help and function within the specified disaster-impacted regions. To guarantee seamless cross-border support, member States must establish legal frameworks that enable the deployment of disaster response teams and relief supplies. This encompasses providing tax relief, simplifying customs processes, and speeding up approvals for staff and equipment. A committed national focal point ought to be set up in every member nation to collaborate with the RRDRC. This will guarantee that aid initiatives are effectively coordinated, minimising red tape and postponements. The creation of regional standby arrangements will enhance readiness, facilitating the swift deployment of response teams in the event of disasters.

The increasing occurrence and severity of disasters in South Asia necessitate a swift and unified response approach. The creation of the Rapid Regional Disaster Response Centre (RRDRC) within BIMSTEC is not merely a requirement but also a moral duty. Through promoting mutual assistance and teamwork, BIMSTEC nations can guarantee that disaster response is prompt, efficient and life-saving. The suggested framework, incorporating defined operational procedures, regional agreements and resource-sharing mechanisms, will greatly improve disaster readiness in the area. The moment to take action is now. BIMSTEC leaders should unite to formalise this framework, guaranteeing that no nation faces a disaster in isolation. By remaining united, we can create a safer, more resilient South Asia for future generations.

(The writer is a retired IFS officer, a former Executive Director of the National Institute of Disaster Management and a former Director of the SAARC Disaster Management Centre. Views expressed are personal)

Disconnected Telangana govt schools in AI age

BY
VIJAY KORRA,
SANTHOSH
GUGULOTHU

For a State which aspires to lead India's AI revolution, it is disappointing that just 21.9% of government schools have net connectivity

While addressing the Legislative Council on 27 March 2025, Telangana Chief Minister Revanth Reddy expressed deep concern about the education sector in the State and stressed the pressing need for comprehensive reforms. The government spends Rs 55,000-60,000 on each student a year and more than Rs 1 lakh for residence students, which is higher than the nation's average, he said. However, despite spending an extravagant amount, the outcome remains a major concern as the schools have inadequate infrastructure facilities.

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), 2024, published by the Pratham Foundation, highlights a serious decline in foundational literacy among schoolchildren over the past decade. In 2014, 12.2% of third-grade students could read a second-grade level text, but this number dropped to just 6.8% in 2024. Similarly, the percentage of fifth-grade students who can read at a second-grade level has fallen sharply from 53.7% in 2014 to just 29.3% in 2024. Among eighth graders, literacy levels have also steadily declined, with only 50.8% able to read a second-grade text in 2024, down from 73.9% in 2014. Comparable outcomes were also found vis-à-vis arithmetic.

This decay suggests a severe learning crisis in primary and middle school education in the State. Despite various educational policies and interventions, foundational reading and mathematical skills have not improved. Instead, it has led to a sharp deceleration. Students without mastering basic literacy could have long-term consequences on their academic performance and future employability. Regarding the digitalisation of school education, the ASER report pointed out at the persistent lack of access to computers for children in educational settings in Telangana. In 2010, 90.7% of schools had no computers available for student use, and while there was a slight improvement in 2018 (89.5%) and 2022 (85.9%), the number alarmingly rose again in 2024 to 91.1%. This shows that despite technological advancements, access to computers in schools has not significantly improved. Telangana food

Also, in 2024, only 3.9% of schools reported students actively using computers on the day of the visit, showing only a marginal rise from 3.3% in 2022 and 3.1% in 2018. The proportion of schools where computers were available but unused fluctuated, peaking at 11.7% in 2022 before dropping to 5.1% in 2024.

Education in AI era

Education remains the foundation for preparing the next generation for future challenges. India is a nation with ambitious goals under the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020, and Digital India initiatives for the state-run government schools are a critical indicator of readiness.

Telangana government must focus on comprehensive digital infrastructure, including reliable internet, functional science labs, computers and digital libraries to empower students with the knowledge and skills needed in AI age

The Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+ 2023-24) report, released by the Ministry of Education, provides comprehensive details of infrastructure in India's 14.7 lakh schools, including a detailed look at Telangana. The enrolment in government schools is significant, with around 127.49 million students across India and 2.78 million students in Telangana who are mostly from low economic classes and marginalised communities like Tribes, Dalits and other backward classes. Here, the question is clear: do these schools have the infrastructure to nurture the digital literacy that students need in a tech-driven future?

Digital Infrastructure

According to the report, in the government schools in Telangana, nearly 4 out of 5 students, or 78.1%, do not have access to the internet. It is not just a statistical number but a wall between the children of marginalised communities and a future ruled by technology. On the other side, private school students, particularly in urban areas, have better access to the internet and digital equipment, which helps them become aware of different aspects of digital learning at the school level itself.

Telangana promotes itself as an AI hub, with extravagant summits and IT giants. But for marginalised communities, who are dependent on free government schools, the reality is obscure. The UDISE+ data shows inadequate digital facilities, leaving kids unprepared for jobs in India's AI market, which is estimated to be $17 billion by 2027.

Electricity is a fundamental requirement for the operation of digital equipment in schools, such as PCs, projectors and digital classrooms. Though 89.1% of government schools have functional electricity facilities, and they are closer to the nation with 89.7%, just 21.9% of the schools have internet access, as against India's 46.2%.

On the other hand, it is 84.8% and 74.3% for private and private-aided schools, respectively. This gap is stark for a State that aspires to lead India's AI revolution, as evidenced by initiatives like the Global AI Summit 2024 and partnerships with tech giants like Microsoft and NVIDIA.

The availability of computers in Telangana is 74%, higher than the nation's 50%; similarly, 41% of schools have tablets, again more than the nation's average of 22.2%. Nevertheless, the lack of internet access makes it of no use to have these digital tools. The gap challenges particularly the marginalised sections.

Digital Divide & Employability

Without adequate internet connectivity and supporting infrastructure, these students continue to endure educational disadvantages, widening the existing gap between them and their more privileged peers. Experts say tech jobs such as data analysts and coders will rule the employment market in the future. Kids studying in private schools, by and large, come from better economic backgrounds, families and communities, and master these skills at an early age and grab the opportunities.

But for Telangana's 2.78 million government students, 1.05 million in primary, 5,43,181 in secondary and 3,04,174 in higher secondary, the path is blocked.

Way Forward

Private schools, largely unaffordable for marginalised families, provide better digital access, while government schools, which enrol millions, struggle with inadequate infrastructure. For students from backward communities who depend on free education, this digital divide reinforces systemic inequality, limiting their prospects in a tech-driven world, which might perpetuate the cycle of poverty.

In contrast, States like Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Kerala and Karnataka have over 80% internet connectivity in government schools. To bridge this gap, the Telangana government must prioritise comprehensive digital infrastructure, including reliable internet, functional science labs, computers and digital libraries. Investing in these facilities would ensure equitable access to digital learning, empowering students with the knowledge and skills needed for future employment market and AI-driven challenges.

(Vijay Korra is Assistant Professor and Santhosh Gugulothu is Senior Research Fellow, at Centre for Economic and Social Studies [CESS], Hyderabad)