

External Affairs Minister's address at International Conference on “India and Indian Ocean: Renewing the Maritime Trade and Civilizational Linkages” in Bhubaneswar

March 20, 2015

Hon’ble Chief Minister of Odisha, Shri Naveen Patnaik,
Hon’ble Union Minister of State for Petroleum, Shri Dharmendra Pradhan,
Shri Sumith Nakandala, Secretary General, BIMSTEC,
Shri Tilak De, Chief Post Master,
Shri Arindam Mukherjee, Secretary, ISCS,
Prof. Sachin Chaturvedi, Director General, RIS,
Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I address you all today at this International Conference, "India and Indian Ocean: Renewing the Maritime Trade and Civilizational Linkages" jointly organized by Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) and Institute of Social and Cultural Studies, Kolkata. I would like to place on record my appreciation for RIS and the Institute of Social and Cultural Studies for their hard work in organizing this Conference.

The city of Bhubaneswar has a unique distinction of having rich history which goes back to many millennia and at the same time being among modern India's first planned cities. The city is home to a large number of ancient temples which stand testimony to millennia old uninterrupted flow of its culture and a number of institutes, or I may say, temples of higher learning. The World Bank has ranked Bhubaneswar as the best place to do business in India. So, it presents an apt location for engaging in deliberations like the one you all are starting today.

The Indian Ocean has been our common maritime home since time immemorial. India was home to some of the earliest seaports in the world and has had a long maritime tradition. The seas around us have facilitate links of commerce, culture, and religion with our extended neighbourhood across several millenniums. This is evident from our cultural footprints which stretch across Asia and Africa.

Importance of the Indian Ocean region from the stand point of historical and cultural linkages is no less than other.

Ladies and Gentlemen, when it comes to the role of Diaspora we focus on issues where national economic development comes at the centre-stage. When I took over as Minister for External Affairs, I'd an opportunity of participating at the Regional Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas in London, when, along with others, I also rejoiced the success of the Indian Diaspora and invited them to actively participate in India’s growth story.

Thanks to our strong community linkages of the Indian Ocean, our respective cultural practices, values and societal ethos are well defined in our folk songs and writings.

Boitha Bandana that is the worshipping of the ships is a practice that has been there since Kalinga days. The ships used to embark on long voyages to Sri Lanka, Bali, Java, Sumatra, Borneo, Malaya, Vietnam and also to China.

While here, if any of you find time please do visit the Sun Temple of Konarak, where you can see a boat containing a giraffe, which shows linkages with Africa.

The festival of Baliyatra on Karthik Purnima in November is a continuation of this tradition. With commendable efforts of the State government here, this has emerged as a major connect with our ancient maritime legacy.

Small Krathongs or boats on several streets of Bangkok, sometime in November, remind us of Boitha. Similar cultural practices are evident in Indonesia when Mesakapan Ke Tukad is celebrated all across the different islands.

Our writers have captured the movement of people across the Indian Ocean with vivid details. In contemporary times, Amitav Ghosh's 2008 Booker nominated novel *Sea of Poppies* captures how a voyage of the East India Company ship *Ibis* travelling from India to Mauritius has characters from diverse social milieu who recognise themselves as jahaj bhais. It is a saga of building of nations and role of migration. It tells us what happens when languages interact. Do we really need a common language to communicate? It is the power of humanity prevailing when Bhojpuri interacts with French to create Creole for building bridges of communication.

Another similar instance comes from another famous writer Shri Giriraj Kishore with his 'Pahla Girmitiya' where he has also explained how individuals responded to the situations they were pushed in. This novel gives a detailed description of how Gandhiji developed his non-violent principles through protest methods like Satyagraha. This year as we celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the return of Mahatma Gandhi to India from South Africa, we salute the courage and conviction with which the 'girmitiya' withstood the atrocities and difficult times.

This is indication of one fact only that we need to reconnect and re-explore these linkages. In his famous poem "The Time Has Come", Lewis Carrol (1872) has a message for us and I recall the few lines by him:

'The sun was shining on the sea,

Shining with all his might:

He did his very best to make

The billows smooth and bright—

‘And this was odd, because it was

The middle of the night.

The moon was shining sulkily,

Because she thought the sun

Had got no business to be there

‘After the day was done—

"It's very rude of him," she said,

"To come and spoil the fun!"

"The time has come," the Walrus said,

The time has come!!’

There is a growing body of evidence to show for example that East Africa had flourishing trade ties with India long before Vasco da Gama discovered the sea route to India via the Cape of Good Hope. Communication between the two regions was facilitated by the monsoon trade winds. India’s trade, including spices, cotton and cotton-made fabrics, was reaching countries in far areas of Africa and South East Asia as well as Europe. India’s ancient trade linkages including in the cotton trade with the countries of the Indian Ocean Region and beyond could well be a subject of a standalone in-depth study.

Today, the Indian Ocean carries one half of world’s container shipments, one-third of the bulk cargo traffic and two-thirds of the oil shipments, though three-fourths of this traffic goes to other regions of the world. 90% of our trade by volume and 90 % of our oil imports take place through sea. We have a long coastline of 7500 km, 1200 islands and a 2.4 million square kilometres of Exclusive Economic Zone.

The vast Indian Ocean region hosts over 40 states and nearly 40 % of world population. It is vast and diverse, home to great cultures and holds immense opportunities for the future.

Therefore, this region which extends from African coast to West Asia, South Asia and South East Asia and touches Australia has been a focus of our foreign policy. This is evident from the several visits undertaken by Prime Minister to this region including most recently to Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka. I myself have also visited most of the countries in this region.

We call this Indian Ocean outreach as 'SAGAR'. As Prime Minister said in Mauritius last week, we seek a future for Indian Ocean that lives up to the name of SAGAR- Security and Growth for All in the Region.

Our vision for the Indian Ocean Region is therefore built on fostering increasing cooperation in our region, use of our capabilities for the benefit of all in our common maritime home and assisting our maritime neighbours and island states in building their maritime security capabilities.

We believe that we will prosper when the seas are safe, secure and free for all. We therefore have advocated collective action and cooperation in the region. We strongly believe that those who live in this region have the primary responsibility for peace, stability and prosperity in the Indian Ocean. At the same time we recognize that there are other nations, who may have strong interests or presence in the region.

The Indian Ocean has acquired new salience with the shift of the global economic engines to Asia. There has been sustained economic growth in the countries on the littoral of the Indian Ocean. We see growing global stakes and presence in the region. At the same time the region is witnessing non-traditional threats such as natural disasters, piracy, terrorism, illegal fishing, oil spills and effects of climate change.

Maritime Security is an important dimension of India's bilateral relations with all Indian Ocean Littoral states and through various formal and informal structures currently in place.

We look forward to building closer cooperation in the maritime domain, regularize bilateral maritime exercises and strengthen the dialogues between the navies and the Coast Guards with all littoral countries in the Indian Ocean Region. India is part of various multilateral institutions, which are actively debating maritime security issues in the Asia Pacific region.

The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, which India founded in 2008, has 35 countries participating in its various activities. The effort has gathered momentum and deepened mutual understanding on maritime challenges and has strengthened our collective ability to address them.

We value our trilateral maritime security cooperation with Sri Lanka and Maldives. We are exploring possibilities of expanding it to include others in the Indian Ocean Region in particular Seychelles and Mauritius.

The Indian Navy has been playing an important role in this through increased bilateral/multilateral maritime exercises including MILAN which saw participation from 17 regional navies off the Andaman Coast in February 2014.

As a founder member of the Contact Group on Piracy, India has been sensitive to the maritime security situation in the Gulf of Aden for the shipping lanes in this part of the Indian Ocean. Consequently, to protect Indian ships and Indian citizens employed in sea-faring duties, the Indian Navy commenced anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden and the sea routes of the Indian Ocean in 2008.

We have been working with like-minded countries to preserve the integrity, inviolability and security of maritime domain which is a global commons. We are committed to maritime security, freedom of navigation, unimpeded lawful commerce and peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law.

We are seeking a more cooperative and integrated future for the region through overall development of the ocean or blue economy. This would promote increased cooperation in trade, tourism and investment, infrastructure development, marine science and technology, sustainable fisheries and protection of marine environment.

Through greater collaboration we look forward to increasing our understanding of marine ecology and resources and improving our abilities to harness new possibilities offered by the Indian Ocean in a sustainable and balanced manner and through a collaborative effort of the countries located in the Indian Ocean region.

In this connection the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IORARC), which is now known as Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) formed in 1997, by Australia, India, Mauritius, Oman, Singapore and South Africa provides an ideal platform. The Association was established with the primary focus on economic cooperation, to promote sustained growth and balanced development of the region and of its Member States, and create common ground for regional economic cooperation.

However, unfortunately, the launching of IORA coincided with the 'Asian Crisis' in 1997, when economically vibrant economies within the region, particularly countries in the East and South-East, were subject to severe economic turmoil, and failed to provide adequate support to the new regional initiative. The entire region witnessed series of external shocks intermittently during the

subsequent years. This led to modest progress registered by the Association in its initial phase of little more than a decade. However, significant economic and financial challenges including those flowing from the global economic and financial crisis of 2007 notwithstanding, the members of IORA remained steadfast in their efforts aimed at further consolidating the Association.

At the 11th meeting of the IORA Council of Ministers that took place under India's Chairmanship in Bengaluru in November 2011, the members were unanimous in their approach to identify six priority areas for cooperation in coming years and those are: (i) Maritime Safety and Security; (ii) Trade and Investment Facilitation; (iii) Fisheries Management; (iv) Disaster Risk Reduction; (v) Academic and S&T Cooperation; and (vi) Tourism Promotion and Cultural Exchanges.

The visibility of the grouping has increased in recent years with the initiation of several new activities in different cooperation mechanisms under IORA. Member countries have shown renewed interest in participating and also in launching number of programmes to coordinate between regional economies in diverse range of areas including capacity building, scholarships programmes, among others.

On the economic front, IORA exhibited significant dynamism in the past few years. The region experienced steady growth in global and intra-regional trade since 2003. Global trade expanded by 3.5 times from USD 1,224 billion in 2003 to USD 4,232 billion in 2012 whereas intra-regional trade increased by more than four times from USD 302 billion to USD 1,230 billion over the same period. Intra-regional trade ratio that measures the degree of trade integration in the region has also registered significant increase over the years. This growth in intra-regional trade without any formal trade arrangement among the member states reflects the potential existing in the region for deepening regional economic integration.

Besides goods, the region witnessed a significant rise in services trade. The region as a whole was found competitive in services sectors such as telecommunications, computer and information services; transport and travel whereas individual member countries are competitive in a number of other services sectors also.

However, full potential of intra-regional trade remains untapped because of poor communication and transport links, lack of information about the supply capabilities, among other barriers. The ports in most part of the region need to be modernized and equipped with multi-modal transport facilities besides efficiency improvements. The customs and clearance procedures at borders need to be streamlined to reduce delays and costs of transit.

Similarly the intra-regional investment is still negligible despite tremendous potential. Deepening of regional economic integration may help in exploiting this hidden potential of intra-regional cooperation for mutual benefit.

The existing trade potential can be further tapped through sectoral cooperation initiatives. The emerging sectors that present immense potential for trade expansion and regional integration include food processing, fisheries, tourism, environmentally sensitive goods, information technology, SMEs, regional value chain, and so on. Time has come that the countries in the region consider evolving a common regional standard to promote intra-regional trade. Some mechanisms need to be evolved to address the challenges and hindrances in the way of trade growth to ensure that intra-regional trade becomes significant to make the overall economic performance of IORA vibrant.

We see IORA is as a regional body that can respond effectively to the needs and enhance individual and collective capacities of Member-States to tackle contemporary challenges of sustainable and balanced economic growth, development and common maritime domain. The IORA provides an effective multilateral platform that facilitates realization of untapped opportunities for prosperity, peace and development of the region. The growing number of membership and the number of Dialogue Partners is a testimony of growing salience of the Indian Ocean and IORA as the apex body in the Region.

It gives me satisfaction to note that IORA members are taking a number of initiatives to address the challenges in the way of further deepening of trade and economic ties amongst themselves.

I am sure this Conference would facilitate exchange of ideas, concerns and experiences of IORA Member States and would help evolve a common understanding to address the emerging challenges in the region. I look forward to substantive and fruitful discussions ahead.

Once again I thank RIS and the Institute of Social and Cultural Studies for their timely initiative to organize this Conference and inviting me to share my vision with the galaxy of scholars and experts present here.

Thank you.