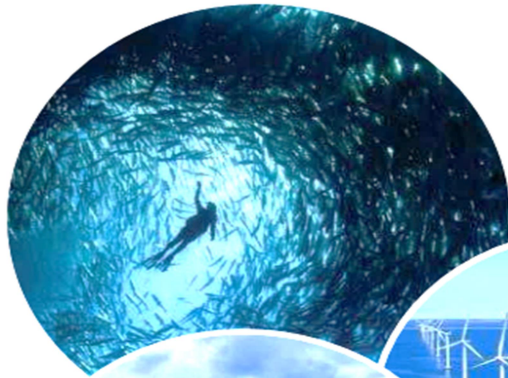


Blue Economy for Well-grounded Bangladesh

Capt A B Chowdhury, psc, BN (retd)



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Backdrops

As a littoral State at the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh has a total of 1,48,460 sq km area where 18,290 sq km area is covered by water (12 per cent). The country borders with only two neighbours i.e; India & Myanmar. Her third neighbour at the southern side is the Bay of Bengal where Bangladesh has got an area of 1,18,813 sq km after two verdicts given by the ITLOS with Myanmar in 2012 and with India in 2014. The total area includes 200 nautical miles of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) and over 354 nautical miles of resources on the seabed and the EEZ is about 1,64,000 sq km which is bigger than land area 1,48,460 sq km of the country.

Within these backdrops, Bangladesh has been graduated from the group of least-developed countries (LDCs) to the developing one recently because of her glaring advancement in some sectors like garments industry, agriculture and manpower (who are working as migrants in other countries) working outside the country. But mere depending upon only these three sectors it would be next to impossible for Bangladesh to make any remarkable breakthrough to take the position to the level of a middle-income country within the stipulated time as planned. Hence, the maritime sector seemed to be very promising and prospective for the economic advancement of the country. An attempt is made to assess the probability of harnessing this sector and tapping the resources in the sea areas and achieving the Blue Economy with relevant pros and cons.

What Actually Maritime Sector Means?

It is a fact that our life originated in the oceans and they cover more than 95 per cent of the biosphere. Oceans are continuously supporting all lives in the globe by generating oxygen, absorbing carbon dioxide, recycling nutrients and regulating global climate and temperature. A substantial portion of the global population lives with food and livelihood from the sea. Sea is the means of transportation of 80 per cent of global trade. About 32 per cent of the global supply of hydrocarbon is from the sea. The exploration and exploitation of various living and non-living resources from the sea is expanding exponentially. Bangladesh is no exception to this. A big group of Bangladeshi people are also living in the coastal areas, islands, estuaries etc and making their Livelihood using resources from the sea. All the activities either at sea or related to sea may be termed as maritime activities as mentioned below:

a. Exploration of hydrocarbons: Bangladesh discovered 26 gas fields so far in land and at sea. There may be approximate 27.12 trillion cubic feet (tcf) reserve of gas, from where 12.96 tcf gas is already expensed. Now we have only 14.16 tcf gas in our reserve. There is no real probability of finding more gas fields in the land area. Exploration of Hydrocarbons in Bangladesh's maritime border area with Myanmar and India hasn't started, though Myanmar began their exploration work at the Bangladesh border three and a half years ago.

b. Tourism: Bangladesh has not made any significant progress so far in the field of sea tourism like many other Asian countries. As there is a huge hope for sea tourism, therefore, adequate and planned care and measures need to be taken in developing sea tourism in Bangladesh. Sea tourism in Bangladesh has a very promising scope.

c. Sea trade route: Bangladesh ports play the key role of transporting major part of our foreign trade. Bangladesh desperately needs to enhance the existing handling capacities of ports and develop deep seaports with more capabilities and modern handling equipment to facilitate increased trade and commerce.

d. Ship recycling industry: It is a big sector of steel supply in the country's steel sector and many are working there. There is a huge scope to enhance this sector.

e. Sea fishing: A huge number of fishermen are involved with fishing trade. Sea is their life and death. Bangladesh is the world's largest flooded wetland (Bengal-Delta) & three main river system namely, Ganges, Brahmaputra & Meghna are there although deep sea fishing in Bangladesh is still in the infancy.

f. Deep sea minerals etc.: The probability of deep sea minerals in the Bangladesh areas not yet assessed. But it is expected that if appropriate survey and actions could be ensured a huge probability of harnessing sea minerals are there in Bangladesh aimed sea areas.

What is the Blue Economy?

The Blue Economy means the use of sea and its resources for sustainable economic development taking into special account of environmental importance. It refers to any economic activity in the maritime sector whether sustainable or not. Blue Economy is one of the fastest growing international concepts which is unequivocally entwined with the set target of Sustainable Development Goal by 2030. It is inserted in the United Nations as an outcome of 2015 Paris Agreement. It shares the same desired outcome: the importance of human well-being and social equity while significantly reducing environmental risk and ecological scarcities.

The Bangladesh government started working with diverse stakeholders at home and abroad to embark upon expansion of the Blue Economy by formulating relevant policies and places a few years back. The objective is to sustainably exploit untapped potentials of the marine environment using helpful solutions and innovations for increasing food security, alleviating poverty and improving nutrition and health, creating jobs, lifting trade and industrial profiles while protecting the ecosystem, health and biodiversity also regional security and peace.

Some apprehensions in realising the Blue Economy in the stipulated time:

Despite vast resources and prospects, development of the Blue Economy in Bangladesh faces many challenges including lack of awareness, knowledge and information in the common people, lack of concern about pollution, overfishing, illegal fishing, uncontrolled and unplanned exploitation of resources, violation of territorial waters, piracy and robbery, use of weapon and drugs trafficking, irregular migration, manmade and natural disaster, Climate Change, inadequate governance mechanism, lack of appropriate and coordinated security arrangement etc. There is a shortage of institutions for higher and dedicated studies in the maritime field. Many seminars, symposiums and discussions so far held in Bangladesh but it is now the high time go for the action.

There is only one specialised maritime university established a few years back in Dhaka namely, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Maritime University (BSMRMU) for developing expertise in the maritime sector. Of late an institution named as Bangladesh Institute of Maritime Research and Development (BIMRAD) has been formed by Bangladesh Navy as an initiative for rendering theoretical, analytical,

research and database information to enhance government initiatives for the Blue Economy. These are no doubt that initiatives have been taken at various levels by different organisations. But continuous coordination, cooperation and mutual trust and faith are indeed necessary before achieving any desired outcome in the long run.

Serious political will and commitment from all governments, realistic action plan and aggressive action are indeed necessary to achieve the anticipated outcome. Inter-ministerial cooperation, coordination is one of the single most important factors of all to ensure fruitful progress. Besides, motivation and awareness of all are also needed. A well-trained, skilled and educated human resources are the driving force for the development of an economy, who can participate in the globalisation of business and the accompanying technological revolution. Hence, dynamic and sustainable development is not possible without a skilled workforce.

Concluding Thoughts

Bangladesh as a nation is suffering from sea blindness. There have been a lot of discussions on how to manage the resources in the Bay of Bengal and lots of hopes have been generated. By tapping and harnessing maritime resources, Bangladesh can achieve its development goals. Scopes are enormous. To sustain and develop as a middle-income country, Bangladesh has no other suitable option except exploring and exploiting the maritime resources at her southern side. Bangladesh needs to have an ocean policy for handling resources in the Bay of Bengal. Otherwise, all will remain within the dream and imagination state and the desired result will be unattainable. Since time and tide waits for none, we should not miss the opportunity to jump into the maritime development bandwagon.