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From National Strategy to Regional Partnership: India's Blue Economy Programme and ASEAN–India Cooperation

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Abstract: The Blue Economy, broadly understood as the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, livelihoods, and ecosystem health, has become central to India's development agenda. This paper examines India's Blue Economy prospects and their implications for ASEAN-India partnerships. It highlights the absence of a standardised accounting framework, noting that preliminary estimates place the sector at nearly 4% of GDP in 2016–17, likely an underestimate. India's Blue Economy provides emerging opportunities to strengthen environmental stewardship, modernise port infrastructure, expand blue financing, build maritime skills, and advance integrated governance across more than 24 ministries. Persistent challenges include environmental degradation, infrastructure and financing gaps, skill shortages, and fragmented governance across several stakeholders. The paper identifies areas of regional cooperation with ASEAN, including sustainable fisheries, marine pollution, renewable energy, port connectivity, tourism, ocean science, and climate resilience. It calls for institutional depth, technology sharing, and sustained financing for aligning ASEAN and Indian Blue Economy policies.

Keywords: Blue Economy, India, ASEAN, Maritime Cooperation, Ocean Governance, Sustainable Development

1. Introduction

The concept of the Blue Economy has taken centre stage in contemporary economic and environmental discourse in India. It is broadly defined as the sustainable use of marine and ocean resources to support economic growth, improve livelihoods, and safeguard ecosystem health. Blue Economy is integrally multi-sectoral, making it one of the most diverse and complex economic sectors globally. Integrating environmental

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science, technology and innovation, law, economics, and strategic dimensions, its scope extends across fisheries, maritime transport, coastal tourism, marine biotechnology, renewable ocean energy, seabed resources, etc. This vast sectoral coverage makes the Blue Economy not only a scientific pursuit but also a strategic economic agenda for nations with significant maritime potential.

With more than 11,098 kilometres of coastline, 1,382 islands, and an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of approximately 2.4 million square kilometres, India holds a strategic position in the vital global shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean. India's maritime legacy ranges from maritime trade with Mesopotamia to building tidal docks at Lothal, through cultural expansion, naval power, etc. Over the years, the role of the oceans in the Indian economy has increased, with millions directly and indirectly depending on the oceans for their livelihood. For management of the marine resources, the Government of India established the Department of Ocean Development (DOD) in 1981, under the aegis of the Prime Minister's Office (GoI, 2020). In 2006, the Department was rechristened as the Ministry of Ocean Development (MOD) for promoting and coordinating ocean development activities. During the same year, the roles and responsibilities of the Ministries were restructured under the Ministry of Earth Science, which is now the nodal ministry for the Blue Economy in India.

As the Blue Economy is a cross-cutting issue, encompassing the role of more than 24 ministries and state actors in India (MoES and EY LLP, 2025a), the Government is in the process of finalising the National Policy on Blue Economy. It is proposed to establish a National Blue Economy Advisory Council, which would include Secretaries from the relevant ministries/departments and Chief Secretaries or Principal Secretaries from the coastal states and industry as members. Additionally, India foresees this sector to be an important driver of economic growth. In this regard, the country has rolled out Maritime India Vision 2030, which provides a comprehensive framework for the development of the maritime sector, including shipping, ports

and waterways, to increase logistics efficiency through modernised, technology-driven and sustainable initiatives (GoI, 2021). In the long run, the Maritime Amrit Kaal Vision 2047 aims to position India among the global maritime leaders and integrates maritime development with "Viksit Bharat" aspirations (GoI, 2023).

Apart from establishing national goals and policies, India has opened regional initiatives and cooperation with its various regional partners in the Blue Economy sector. India's multi-platform engagement through ASEAN, Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), India-Africa Forum Summit, Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative (IPOI), and BRICS offers a pathway for broader regional coordination and prosperity rooted in shared stewardship of the world's oceanic commons. Following Indonesia's launching of Oceans 20 (O20) in the G20 framework, India also advanced Blue Economy priorities in global governance discourse during its G20 Presidency (G20 India, 2023). ASEAN and India, together, through various regional forums, have been cooperating in the field of the Blue Economy.

2. Need for an Blue Economy Accounting Framework

Though it has gained considerable traction in global policy discourse over the past decade, one can witness the emergence of a Blue Voice (Mohanty, 2024); the Blue Economy globally lacks a standardised or universal definition. Several countries and regional organisations have defined the Blue Economy based on the natural endowments, national priorities, technology, and geographical limitations (Surís-Regueiro *et al.*, 2013; NOAA, 2015). India defines its Blue Economy as 'a subset of the national economy comprising the entire system of ocean resources and man-made economic infrastructure in marine, maritime, and onshore coastal zones within India's legal jurisdiction, aiding the production of goods and services, with clear linkages to economic growth, environmental sustainability and national security (GoI, 2020). Thus, India understands the Blue Economy as part of its overall economy, ensuring its integration

with macroeconomic planning at the national level. It extends beyond marine activities to encompass maritime and onshore coastal zones, including inland waterways and man-made economic infrastructure such as ports, shipbuilding, and coastal industrial zones.

As a multi-sectoral science, India's approach to the Blue Economy recognises the convergence of diverse activities, spanning from traditional sectors such as fisheries and aquaculture to emerging domains including deep-sea mining, offshore renewable energy, marine biotechnology, and ocean-based tourism. This covers all broad economic sectors, namely, agriculture, mining, manufacturing and industries, and services (Mohanty, *et al.*, 2015). However, unlike traditional industries, there are no stylised facts or standardised methodologies that capture its impact on GDP. Several countries rely on their own methodology, shaped by their natural resource endowment and technological capacity. The challenge lies in Blue Economy accounting, which has historically been underestimated. Many sectors and industries remain unrecognised or underreported, leading to an incomplete picture of their economic significance (Colgan, 2016). Identifying and categorising these industries is therefore critical to understanding their true potential.

India's Blue Economy, based on preliminary estimation, accounts for nearly 4 per cent of GDP in 2016–17, highlighting its high economic relevance. Between 2011-12 and 2016-17, the Blue Economy in India witnessed robust growth, outpacing the overall economy. This trajectory demonstrates its potential as a driver of inclusive development, offering opportunities for employment, innovation, and sustainable resource management. Though not comparable in terms of methodologies and definition, India's Blue Economy estimates surpass those of advanced economies such as the European Union, the United States, Japan, and Canada. This underscores both the scale of India's maritime resources and the dynamism of its coastal industries. It has been noted that Blue Economy accounting remains an underestimate of true scale, owing largely to the non-identification of emerging sectors and sub-sectors

(GoI, 2020) and the application of appropriate weights for the partial Blue Economy sector. A benchmark survey of the sector would act as a necessary step to further the Blue Economy Accounting framework in the country. Hence, estimating the contribution of the Blue Economy is complex, but equally essential.

3. Blue Economy Sectors

3.1 Fisheries and Aquaculture

The fisheries and aquaculture sector occupies a pivotal position in the Indian economy, both in terms of scale and socio-economic impact. The fisheries sector accounts for 7.4 per cent of the agricultural gross value added of India and provides livelihood to nearly 16 million people at the primary level (Rajeev and Bhandarkar, 2022). India is the second largest fish producer globally, contributing 8 per cent of the world's share. The fisheries sector is an essential source of food and nutritional security, along with export earnings. However, the sector faces challenges related to high operational costs, environmental sustainability, technology and infrastructure gaps, among others (Patel *et al.,* 2025; Krishnan *et al.*, 2026). Recent budgetary allocations mark a strong governmental commitment to addressing these constraints. Moreover, policy frameworks like the National Policy on Marine Fisheries (2017), Fisheries and Aquaculture Development Fund (2018), and the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (2020) have provided institutional support for modernisation, infrastructure development, and ecosystem-based management of the sector.

3.2 Maritime Transport and Infrastructure

Maritime transport is the backbone of India's external trade, with ports handling most of the trade by volume and value, underscoring the strategic importance of port infrastructure for sustaining economic growth. India currently has 12 major ports and over 200 non-major ports under the centre and state jurisdiction, respectively. The country has been heavily investing in port modernisation through its Sagarmala programme

since 2015 to reduce logistics costs, improve turnaround times, and create economic clusters around ports. The programme encompasses more than 800 projects for port modernisation, coastal community development, industrial clusters and inland waterways. (GoI, 2025) The adoption of green port practices and the digital transformation of port infrastructure would help India align with international standards. India is actively diversifying its maritime transport modalities. Inland Water Transport (IWT) has gained prominence as an energy-efficient alternative, with the government declaring 111 National Inland Waterways, spanning 14,500 km of navigable routes. Coastal shipping is being promoted through the development of multi-modal corridors for cost-effective cargo movement and regional connectivity.

India also possesses the 13th largest merchant fleet by tonnage globally. The Shipping Corporation of India (SCI) operates a mixed fleet of bulk carriers, tankers, and container vessels. Shipbuilding also has a huge potential in India. Currently, India's share in the world market is nearly 1 per cent. However, with the massive programmes and policies initiated in the sector under Maritime India Vision 2030, India aims to become one of the top 10 shipbuilding nations in the world (GoI, 2021). There are several challenges that the country faces, including stiff competition from global leaders, overcrowded ports, shallow draft, etc., in maritime transport. Yet with revised and effective policies and new initiatives, like Sagarmala, Shipbuilding Financial Assistance Policy, Atal Innovation Mission, Indian Ports Act, 2025 and Merchant Shipping Act, 2025, India is focusing on becoming a global maritime hub by 2047.

3.3 Marine Offshore Energy

Marine offshore energy, including hydrocarbons and renewable sources, represents one of the most strategically vital pillars of India's blue economy. Some of the primary offshore hydrocarbon-producing areas in India are the Bombay High field off Maharashtra, the Cauvery basin and Andaman offshore basin in the south and the Krishna-Godavari basin off the east coast. The nation has also introduced the Hydrocarbon

Exploration and Licensing Policy (HELP) in 2016 to introduce uniform licensing for the exploration and production of hydrocarbons (GoI, 2016). Though India is an import-dependent country, the offshore oil and gas sector meaningfully contributes to the domestic energy production. However, marine renewable energy provides a frontier for India's energy transition. India has a huge potential in offshore wind energy on the west and south coast, and the government is targeting 30 gigawatts of offshore wind energy capacity by 2030 (GoI, 2023). The country has been endowed with the prerequisites for tidal and wave energy along specific coastal stretches, and pilot projects have been initiated. India has also developed a first-of-its-kind Ocean Thermal Energy Conversion (OTEC)-powered desalination plant with indigenous technology, providing freshwater and generating electricity, particularly useful for the islands. India's Blue Economy strategy increasingly recognises offshore and marine energy, yet to reach its full potential, as a cornerstone for the nation's long-term energy security.

3.4 Marine and Coastal Tourism

India's vast maritime landscape, comprising pristine beaches, coral reefs, mangrove forests, estuaries, and marine national parks, presents significant opportunities for developing a vibrant marine and coastal tourism economy. Coastal states and the union territories in India have emerged as premier coastal tourism destinations (MoES and EY LLP, 2025b). From beaches in Goa to backwaters in Kerala, through marine biodiversity in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the country provides enormous potential for sports tourism, ecotourism, lighthouse tourism and cruise tourism. The multiplier effect of investment in coastal and marine tourism is enormous, with employment opportunities, infrastructure expansion, local community development, cultural preservation, etc. The economic potential of marine and coastal tourism in India is huge, but it is still considered underutilised relative to global benchmarks. Schemes such as the Swadesh Darshan 2.0 initiative, PRASHAD (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual, Heritage Augmentation Drive) Scheme, and the Sagarmala Programme have specifically earmarked funds for

the development of coastal circuits, pilgrimage destinations, port-linked tourism infrastructure, and waterfront regeneration projects.

However, the sector faces formidable challenges, like plastic pollution, unregulated coastal construction, coral bleaching, beach erosion, safety protocols for adventure tourism, etc., that must be addressed to realise its full potential. India has been focusing on addressing such challenges through various schemes and initiatives. For instance, the MISHTI (Mangrove Initiative for Shoreline Habitats and Tangible Incomes) Scheme was launched by the Government of India in 2023 to conserve and restore the mangrove ecosystem, which simultaneously aims at promoting coastal sustainable livelihoods (PIB, 2023). India is developing this sector under the Blue Economy framework for creating prosperity for coastal communities with technology and environmental integration.

3.5 Placers and Deep-Sea Minerals

The deep ocean floor holds vast deposits of polymetallic nodules, containing manganese, nickel, copper and cobalt, and polymetallic sulphides, rich in zinc, gold, silver and copper, which are critical for the energy transition, including semiconductors, green technologies and rare earth elements. India has an exclusive right to explore 75,000 square kilometres in the Central Indian Ocean Basin for polymetallic nodules and has recently signed another contract with the International Seabed Authority to explore polymetallic sulphides, making the country the 'pioneer investor' and the first to hold two contracts in the world (PIB, 2025a). In the context of placer mining, states like Odisha, Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh have rich natural endowments with significant deposits along the coastline. Despite several challenges, such as technological limitations and environmental and regulatory hurdles, India has been addressing these dimensions under its Deep Ocean Mission (DOM), 2021. With an approved budget of INR 4,077 crore for 2021-26, the DOM is focusing on six pillars: deep-sea mining and manned submersible technology; ocean climate change advisory services; deep-sea

biodiversity conservation; deep-sea survey and exploration; ocean energy and freshwater generation; and advanced marine biology research. The Samudrayaan programme is the centrepiece of the Mission, advancing India's indigenous capacity for manned deep-ocean exploration to a depth of 6,000 metres (Cranworth, 2025).

4. Challenges for the Blue Economy

Despite its considerable potential, India's Blue Economy is confronted with several challenges that constrain both its growth and long-term sustainability. These challenges are multidimensional, encompassing environmental, infrastructural, socio-economic, and geopolitical concerns, and their effective resolution is central to India's maritime development agenda. Coastal and marine ecosystems in India are increasingly affected by environmental degradation arising from untreated sewage, industrial effluents, and plastic waste (CPCB, 2021). In particular, the discharge of untreated industrial wastewater poses a serious threat to marine biodiversity. Furthermore, certain conventional fishing practices, especially those involving mechanised trawlers, have contributed to unsustainable resource extraction and the overexploitation of fish stocks. Climate-related pressures, including sea-level rise, ocean acidification, and increasing sea-surface temperatures, are altering fish migration patterns and placing coastal infrastructure at heightened risk (Jyotsna *et al.,* 2024). The growing frequency and intensity of cyclonic events further exacerbate vulnerabilities among coastal communities and port infrastructure. Consequently, environmental degradation not only disrupts ecological balance but also directly affects livelihood security, thereby making sustainability a core concern within India's Blue Economy framework.

India's port and marine infrastructure continues to lag behind the international benchmarks. Several ports remain constrained by shallow drafts, congestion, and limited integration of advanced logistics systems, which contribute to higher turnaround times and transaction costs, thereby weakening India's competitiveness in global trade (Munjal &

Pohit, 2023). Inadequate investment in ocean science, technological innovation, cold-chain infrastructure, processing facilities, and modern marine vessels further limits sectoral efficiency. India faces a persistent financing gap, particularly for small and medium enterprises, artisanal fishing communities, and blue infrastructure projects in the Blue Economy sectors (Patel *et al.,* 2025). Significant gaps persist in autonomous underwater vehicles, deep-sea mineral extraction, and advanced marine monitoring. Emerging sectors like offshore energy and marine biotechnology require specialised skills that are scarce in India's workforce. India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions) visions link Blue Economy development to maritime security (Gaur and Tiwari, 2026), but operationalising these visions remains a challenge.

Being multi-sectoral in nature, one of the challenges the Blue Economy sector in India faces is the complexity in governance. The Ministry of Earth Sciences is the nodal ministry for Blue Economy activities, but more than 24 other ministries and state actors are involved in sharing the responsibility of India's Blue Economy. This leads to poor coordination, weak enforcement, duplicated efforts and a lack of an integrated framework. Addressing these issues requires a sustainable, inclusive, and technologically advanced approach. Additionally, the absence of a standardised estimation framework is hampering evidence-based policymaking in the sector, which requires a comprehensive satellite accounting (Colgan, 2016; GoI, 2020). India is pursuing the formal activation of its National Blue Economy Policy, which is still in draft form. A unified National Blue Economy Policy would help India in balancing economic growth with ecological sustainability to leverage its maritime resources to their full capacity.

5. Areas of Regional Cooperation

ASEAN is one of India's maritime neighbours, linked by ancient maritime routes that have long connected civilisations, cultures, and

trade between the two regions. Sharing resources of the Indian Ocean, ASEAN and India both have huge potential in the Blue Economy but also face common challenges that can be addressed together. The 22nd ASEAN-India Summit in 2025 declared 2026 as the ASEAN-India Year of Maritime Cooperation to leverage the strategic partnership for ocean-centred development (PIB, 2025b). The convergence of ASEAN and Indian frameworks on the Blue Economy provides a structured basis for cooperation across several key areas:

- **Sustainable Fisheries and Aquaculture:** Fisheries represent perhaps the most immediate and people-centred area of collaboration. Both sides grapple with shared threats, including Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, declining fish stocks, overfishing, and climate-driven shifts in marine ecosystems. Joint management frameworks for shared fisheries, data-sharing platforms on fish stocks and weather patterns, with harmonised certification standards for sustainable seafood trade, may benefit both sides enormously. India's experience under the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana, targeting capacity building, cold chain infrastructure, and livelihood support for small-scale fishers, offers a model that many ASEAN countries could adapt with Indian technical assistance.
- **Marine Pollution and Ocean Health:** Several river systems in ASEAN member states discharge substantial volumes of plastic waste into the global marine environment, while India's coastal zones are similarly affected by industrial effluents, urban waste, and broader forms of environmental degradation. In addition, coral reef bleaching, intensified by rising ocean temperatures, has adversely affected marine ecosystems that sustain the food security and livelihoods of millions of coastal communities across both regions. Cooperation in marine pollution governance could therefore encompass joint clean-up initiatives, coordinated monitoring of plastic waste and oil spills, collaborative research on marine debris movement, and technology transfer for coastal waste management. The ASEAN Blue Economy Framework identifies digital platforms for marine pollution data-sharing as a priority area, and India's expanding capabilities in

satellite-based maritime domain awareness could be leveraged to support ASEAN partners in real-time ocean monitoring.

- **Marine Renewable Energy:** The Indo-Pacific region is endowed with vast offshore wind potential, promising tidal and wave energy resources, and significant scope for ocean thermal energy conversion (OTEC). India has been scaling up its offshore wind ambitions, while several ASEAN nations are exploring marine-based renewable energy to meet their net-zero commitments. Joint development projects, co-investment in offshore infrastructure, and the creation of green shipping corridors between Indian ports and Southeast Asian counterparts are among the actionable possibilities. The ASEAN-India Science, Technology, and Innovation cooperation framework already identifies alternative energy and environmental management as priority areas, and a dedicated blue energy workstreams could be created under this umbrella to accelerate deployment.
- **Port Connectivity and Maritime Trade:** Maritime infrastructure is the backbone of the India-ASEAN economic relationship. Green port development, digital customs harmonisation, and logistics efficiency improvements could substantially reduce trade costs for both sides. Strengthening this infrastructure also has an advantage for diversifying regional supply chains away from single-point dependencies.
- **Maritime Tourism:** Coastal and maritime tourism offers another avenue for shared growth. India's rich coastline and ASEAN's world-renowned marine tourism destinations are natural complements. Developing integrated cruise circuits, underwater tourism packages, and heritage maritime routes that connect India with Southeast Asia could significantly boost the tourism economies of coastal communities.
- **Ocean Science, Research, and Capacity Building:** Deep-sea exploration, marine biodiversity research, and ocean science represent areas where India's growing capabilities can serve as a regional public good. India's participation in the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) also provides a multilateral framework within which India-ASEAN research collaboration on marine biodiversity, seabed mapping, and

oceanographic data can be structured. Capacity-building programmes for ASEAN fishers, marine scientists, and coastal administrators would strengthen human capital across the region (Gupta, 2025). India's network of marine research institutions could partner with ASEAN counterparts on joint expeditions, shared observational infrastructure, and training initiatives, building the institutional depth that long-term ocean governance requires.

- **Climate Resilience and Coastal Ecosystem Protection:** Rising sea levels, intensifying cyclones, and coral bleaching threaten millions of people who depend on coastal ecosystems for their livelihoods. Blue carbon ecosystems, such as mangroves, seagrass beds, and salt marshes, are among the most powerful natural carbon sinks available, and both India and ASEAN countries host significant extents of these habitats. Joint efforts to restore and protect these ecosystems, alongside the development of early-warning systems for maritime disasters, would serve both climate and humanitarian goals. India's established expertise in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief could be channelled into a structured ASEAN-India maritime disaster response framework.

6. Conclusion

The geographic proximity, shared ecosystems, and interlinked economies of India and the ASEAN nations create a natural basis for ocean cooperation. The commonalities in the definition of Blue Economy in India and ASEAN raise the need for both regions to set up a regional approach for the sector, which would be a stepping stone for developing a regional economic framework. Institutional depth, technology sharing and sustained financing, through regional blue carbon credit projects, are necessary to bring synergies between India and ASEAN Blue Economy policies. As nations increasingly turn to the oceans for sustainable development, the Blue Economy must be recognised not merely as a collection of maritime industries but as a strategic growth engine for the 21st century.

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