An alternative path to South Asian cooperation: Fisheries diplomacy

By Srimal Fernando

Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu, at the southern tip of mainland India, is where the waters of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal come together. Sri Lanka, situated 22 miles off the southern coast of India and the Maldives, 311 miles southwest of Sri Lanka and India, have some of the world's richest fishing grounds. The three neighbours possess vast sea spaces under the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the world's third largest ocean.

Over 16 million people are directly or indirectly dependent on marine fisheries, inland fisheries and in fishing farming as an economic activity in India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, making the seas of South Indian Ocean of particular importance for them.

It is important to recall what the iconic Nelson Mandela said during his visit to India in 1995. “The natural urge of the facts of history and geography should broaden the concept of an Indian Ocean Rim for socio-economic cooperation and other peaceful endeavours,” Mandela had said.

Two years later, in March 1997, the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation (IORA), comprising 20 states, was set up to promote sustainable growth and balanced development among member nations.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the Indian Ocean accounted for about 15 per cent of global annual fisheries output (FAO State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2016). A substantial amount of this output is from these three South Asian neighbours. A major international study shows nearly one in 10 people depend on fisheries and aquaculture for their livelihoods. This led 170 FAO member countries to launch the Blue Growth Initiative (BGI) in 2013, aimed at integrating economic growth with enhanced livelihoods and social equity for millions of people engaged in the fisheries sector.

Therefore, fisheries diplomacy and ocean law should be one of the most essential foreign policy priorities to strengthen good neighborly cooperation and relations amongst the three nations.

There has been a steady increase in fish production in India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives over the years. Statistics for 2017 reveal that India is the world's second largest fish-producing nation, with an annual production of about 11.41 million tonnes.

The states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and the islands of Lakshadweep, Andaman and Nicobar are in the forefront of fisheries development among India's 14 coastal states. More than 3,400 fishing villages depend on selling fish, fish products and fisheries-related economic activity.

The Southern Indian Ocean Fisheries Agreement (SIOFA), which was signed in mid-2006 and came into force in 2012, is one of India's most significant fishing agreements. The latest figures show India exported US$ 5.78 billion worth of seafood in 2016 - 2017. The European Union is the third largest export market for Indian marine products, accounting for nearly 18 per cent of exports. The EU's new Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) is thus important for the two-way fisheries trade between India and the EU. The CFP is designed to address economic, social, and environmental sustainability.

Opening a new Indian Ocean foreign policy chapter, the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) agreement in the mid-70s, demarcating waters marked a significant milestone in relations between India and Sri Lanka. Most conditions of this agreement relate to marine fisheries activities in Sri Lanka, where over 500,000 fishermen, living in 15 coastal districts, are dependent on the fisheries sector (National Aquatic Resources Research and Development Agency 2016). It is estimated that nearly 50,000 boats and trawlers operate out of the 25 fishing harbours in the coastal areas and contribute significantly to the national economy. The annual fish catch is estimated at 530,920 metric tonnes.

The fish trade in Sri Lanka is in the hands of wholesale dealers and retail vendors. Latest figures show that the country’s fisheries sector economy has grown in importance. Seafood exports to the EU, after the ban on exports was lifted, have grown 45 percent. In the case of small island states like the Maldives, the trend in the fisheries sector is similar to Sri Lanka.

The fisheries sector is a major driver of the Maldivian economy, and represents seven percent of the nation's GDP. Total fish production increased to 48,399 metric tonnes in 2016.

Sri Lanka and the Maldives enjoy cordial relations with India and must develop a common position on regional piscine issues. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is an important anchor for strengthening cooperation and consolidating maritime policy for the region. India's 'neighborhood first' policy and broader economic diplomacy efforts from Sri Lanka and the Maldives has been a key catalyst that helps to strengthen the longstanding historical friendship between the three nations, especially in the area of fisheries diplomacy.
Prem Sharma sells gutka (a combination of betel nuts, tobacco and mouth freshener) and cigarettes near the Vijay Nagar square in Indore, the commercial capital of the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. However, the most visible part of his tiny business is the dustbin that he does not dare to lose. The case is similar with pretty...