

**Inaugural Address by H.E. Indra Mani Pandey, Secretary General of BIMSTEC,
at Regional Conference on BIMSTEC Synergies in Agricultural Trade:
Promoting Regional Growth Inaugural Session,
(25 June 2024 | India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, India)**

- Excellency Shri Jaideep Mazumdar, Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India
- Professor Sachin Chaturvedi, Director General, Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS)
- Dr. Ramesh Chand, Member, NITI Aayog
- Dr. Shahidur Rashid, Director, South Asia Office, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)
- Distinguished Speakers and Participants; Ladies and Gentlemen,

Namaskar, A very good morning to you all!

I am delighted to participate at the “Regional Conference on BIMSTEC Synergies in Agricultural Trade: Promoting Regional Growth” and I am grateful for inviting me. I regret that I am unable to join in person because the 4th Meeting of the BIMSTEC Eminent Persons’ Group is scheduled to be held in Dhaka during 25-27 June 2024. I am, therefore, constrained to share my message through this video.

I commend RIS, IFPRI, Ministry of External Affairs and NITI Aayog for organizing this Conference, which is a very timely initiative on a topic which is of immense importance for the BIMSTEC member States. Taking this opportunity, I would like to place on record our appreciation for the invaluable contributions of RIS to BIMSTEC. As a member of BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks (BNPTT), RIS has consistently demonstrated its commitment to advancing BIMSTEC’s objectives.

BIMSTEC is being seen as a potent regional organisation for forging cooperation and collaboration in Bay of Bengal region. Our member States— Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand – are bound by historical, cultural and economic ties that provide a solid foundation for working together to realise their shared aspirations for a secured and prosperous Bay of Bengal region.

Given that agriculture plays a pivotal role in economies of all the BIMSTEC member States, providing livelihoods for a substantial part of their populations, BIMSTEC has always given regional cooperation in agriculture sector a high priority. As you are aware, Agriculture and Food Security is one of the 7 Sectors of cooperation within BIMSTEC and regional cooperation in Agriculture, has been pursued to realise the goals of enhancing growth in agriculture sector and improving food security.

Over the years, significant progress has been made in forging cooperation in the field of Agriculture and Food Security. In November 2022, BIMSTEC Agriculture Ministers adopted a Plan of Action on Strengthening BIMSTEC Agricultural Cooperation, which charts out the areas of cooperation. The Plan of Action has identified 17 actions in 5 areas of cooperation with the broader objectives of ensuring food security, food safety and better nutrition, reducing rural poverty as well as increasing resilience to climate change. One of the areas in the Plan of Action is “Enhancing Agricultural Trade and Investment”.

In this context, I am glad that the Conference will be deliberating on the need to leverage the synergies in our agricultural sectors to create robust regional trade networks. The importance of regional trade in Agri-commodities cannot be overstated. More trade will encourage more production and lead to higher income for our farmers; it will also contribute to our endeavours to ensure food security.

In order to enhance intra-regional trade, improving the infrastructure is essential. Efficient transport networks, storage facilities and other logistics are critical for increasing trade. Investment in rural infrastructure, particularly in remote and underserved areas, is vital for connecting farmers to the local and regional markets.

Further, reducing trade barriers is crucial for fostering a conducive environment for regional trade. Harmonizing standards, simplifying customs procedures and promoting transparent regulatory frameworks will enable smoother cross-border trade and reduce transaction costs. We must work together to create an enabling policy environment that encourages regional trade and investment in agriculture sector.

Moreover, improving market access for our farmers and agribusinesses is essential. We must also focus on building resilient and sustainable food systems that provide fair returns to farmers and ensure food security for all.

Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The synergy in our agricultural sectors holds the promise of transforming the BIMSTEC region into an agriculturally self-sufficient region, ensuring our food security. Let us work together to enhance regional trade in agriculture, as a driver of regional growth, sustainable development and prosperity.

I am confident that this Conference will deliberate on various ways for meaningful collaboration amongst the BIMSTEC member States in the field of agriculture and food security, including intra-regional trade in agriculture. Before I conclude, I once again thank RIS and other organisations like, IFPRI, MEA and NITI Aayog, for organizing this Conference. I extend my best wishes for the success of the Conference. I thank you for your kind attention. Have a good day!