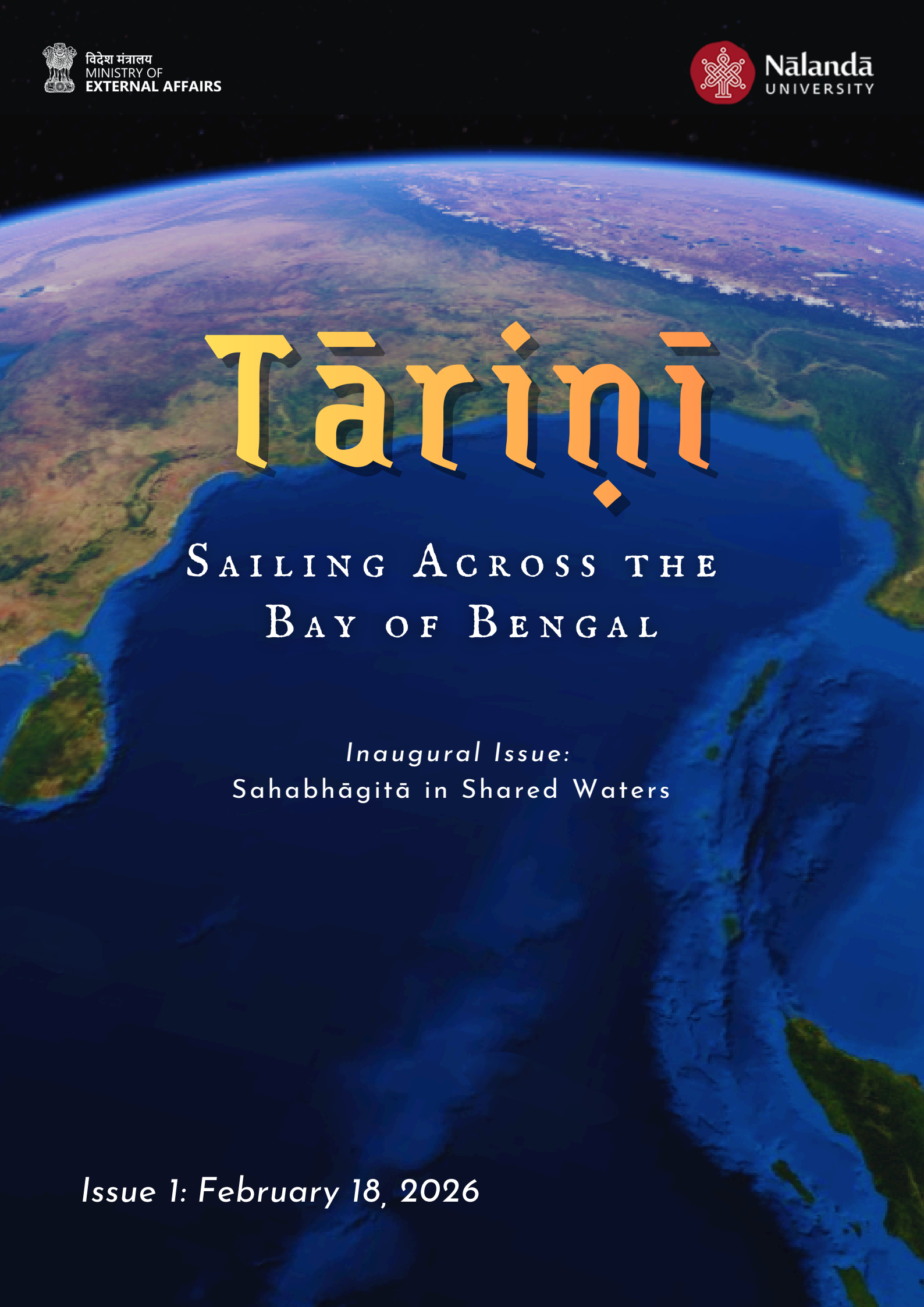
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CURRENTS OF THOUGHT

Shared Waters, Shared Futures: Sahabhāgitā and Cooperative Governance in the Bay of Bengal

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For the littoral states of the Bay of Bengal, shared water systems are not merely environmental assets; they form the foundation of economic connectivity, political trust, and human security. The Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) basin supports nearly 700 million people and underpins agriculture, fisheries, hydropower, navigation, and deltaic ecosystems. However, governance approaches remain predominantly national and sectoral, failing to reflect this deep interdependence. As climate change accelerates hydrological extremes, the costs of fragmented governance are rising sharply.

The Cost of Non-Cooperation in the GBM Basin

Swain and Karim (2022) identify nine categories of cost arising from non-cooperation across four sectors: water, energy, food, and environment. These include increased disaster losses, deteriorating water quality and health impacts, foregone hydropower and inland navigation benefits, reduced agricultural and fisheries productivity, and ecosystem degradation, particularly in the Sundarbans delta. The estimated USD 14.2 billion annual loss is deliberately conservative, intended to signal the magnitude of opportunity costs rather than provide exhaustive monetisation.

These losses are not caused solely by climate change. Instead, climate stress multiplies vulnerabilities created by limited data sharing, uncoordinated river management, and weak regional institutions. Cooperation, therefore, constitutes a powerful and cost-effective form of climate adaptation.

Climate Change and the Bay of Bengal Risk Cascade

The Bay of Bengal is increasingly characterised by compound and cascading risks. Rising sea surface temperatures, intensified monsoon rainfall, Himalayan meltwater, and sea-level rise interact to heighten cyclone intensity, flooding, and salinity intrusion. These impacts propagate from the Himalaya through the GBM plains to coastal and marine systems, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations such as smallholder farmers and fishers. Climate hazards thus translate directly into development and security challenges.

In this context, water cooperation becomes a form of climate diplomacy, linking upstream and downstream interests through shared risk management rather than zero-sum bargaining.

Sahabhāgitā: A Framework for Shared Water Governance

Nalanda University's concept of Sahabhāgitā, participation, partnership, and shared stewardship, offers a timely framework for reimagining water governance in the Bay of Bengal. Rooted in Global South traditions of collective responsibility, Sahabhāgitā moves beyond transactional cooperation toward the co-production of regional public

goods. Applied to shared waters, it reframes rivers, deltas, and seas as commons requiring joint knowledge creation, institutional trust, and long-term commitment.

India's Leadership and Emerging Regional Architecture

India has begun operationalising cooperative principles through BIMSTEC-linked institutions. The BIMSTEC Weather and Climate Centre, hosted in India, strengthens regional forecasting, climate modelling, and capacity building. BIMSTEC's evolving disaster management mechanisms, including joint exercises and proposals for a dedicated disaster management centre, signal a shift from ad hoc response to institutionalised preparedness.

Collaboration with the Asian Disaster Preparedness Center on regional flood frameworks further promotes real-time data sharing, harmonised protocols, and joint training, translating Sahabhāgitā into practice.

Dividends of Cooperation

Cooperation yields triple dividends. Economically, coordinated river and transport management lowers logistics costs and enhances energy security. Ecologically, joint action protects critical ecosystems that function as natural buffers against extreme events. From a security perspective, cooperation reduces risks of climate-induced displacement and humanitarian crises, strengthening regional stability.

From Shared Risks to Shared Futures

The Bay of Bengal faces a clear choice. Continued fragmentation will deepen climate vulnerability and economic loss. Embracing Sahabhāgitā offers an alternative pathway grounded in shared responsibility, institutional innovation, and regional solidarity. In a warming world, cooperation over shared waters is no longer optional; it is the most effective, just, and future-oriented strategy for the Bay of Bengal and the Global South.

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