Field Diary
Bihar to Facilitate Connectivity in the BBIN Sub-region

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About the Field Visit

Under the project titled '[Enabling a Political Economy Discourse for Multimodal Connectivity in the BBIN Sub-region (M-Connect)](), a team from [CUTS International](), Jaipur, comprising Suresh Singh and Apoorva Lalwani visited two locations – Gai Ghat and Kalu Ghat Intermodal Terminal of National Waterways-1 (NW-1). The team also visited two other locations, namely Raxaul and Jogbani Integrated Check Posts (ICPs) in Bihar from January 07-14, 2021.

The purpose of the visit was to understand and gather information relating to connectivity, trade logistics, infrastructure and transport challenges and opportunities through stakeholder consultations to explore ways and means to promote multimodal connectivity within India, between India and Nepal and in the BBIN sub-region as a whole.

Locations Visited

Table 1: Project Sites and Destinations Details			
Destination	*Location*	*Approx. distance from the state capital (Patna)*	*Stakeholder*
1. Gai Ghat (located at the southern bank of river Ganges)	Patna	11 km	Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI)
2. Kalu Ghat (Site for intermodal terminal)	Near Parmanandpur (Saran District)	15 km	IWAI
3. Integrated Check Post	Raxaul (East Champaran District)	214 km	Land Port Authority of India (LPAI)
4. Integrated Check Post	Jogbani (Araria District)	310 km	LPAI

Gai Ghat and Kalu Ghat[1]

The team visited Gaighat and Kalu Ghat on reaching Patna. Gai Ghat is around 40 minutes away from the city centre. The team visited the Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) and interacted with officials of IWAI. They provided us a detailed insight into the functioning of waterways at Gai Ghat jetty and Kalu Ghat and the rest of National Waterways (NW) and the problems they face.

Inland Waterways Authority of India, RO: Gai Ghat, Patna

[1] Kalu Ghat is an area in Parmanandpur in Saran District of Bihar and has been proposed for development of Intermodal Terminal by IWAI.

According to IWAI's officials, waterways transport was well developed in pre-independent India. Bridges built in the British era were well planned. However, post-independence waterways transport has been neglected. In comparison, road and rail transport have been given more priority. Given this, the potential of the waterways transport sector has deteriorated over the period. It was mentioned that in the 1950s, 11,000 vessels moved on NW-1 but today, the number has come down to just 27.

However, the government is trying to revive the waterways routes. The current waterways revival initiatives, such as the Jal Marg Vikas Project (JMVP), led by the IWAI and financially supported by the World Bank, will be completed by 2023 for the revival of NW-1.

These initiatives are not limited to just developing the infrastructure, jetties, cranes, dredging, and port of calls but seek to facilitate the multimodal and inter-modal terminals, ferry services, navigation aids and Roll on-Roll off (Ro-Ro) facilities.

Gai Ghat has water up to an average of 2-3 meters depth. It has limited traction because of a lack of economic viability. Often, vessels are used for transporting goods from one side return empty from the other side, which increases the cost of transportation. Other challenges are preserving perishable commodities during transportation, no last-mile connectivity, lack of ease, and mind-set inertia.

It is mentioned that the IWAI has identified Kalu Ghat for the development of the intermodal terminal. It has water more than 3 meters in January. Operationalisation of this IMT would help cargoes from Kalu Ghat (Bihar) to go up to Gidhe (West Bengal) to meet Ganga in the main NW-1. At present, Kalu Ghat is mainly used for illegal trade in sand.

The team was informed that the Kalu Ghat area was a little disturbed because of the coming up of the intermodal terminal. The sand mafia expects this terminal to hamper their illegal mining and trade in sand. The sand from Kalu Ghat is traded at various locations interstate with Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, West Bengal and cross-border with Nepal and Bangladesh.

The team observed that road transport is the primary mode of transportation to conduct trade with Nepal. However, it is expected that making River Gandak navigable can probably lead to a shift in mode of transport from India to Nepal to some extent, but so far, it remains unexplored. This Gandak river, known as Narayani in Nepal, originates at the Nhubine Himal glacier in Nepal and enters India near the Valmiki Tiger Reserve in Bihar. It flows down another 300 km to meet the Ganga near Patna. Making this river navigable could help in promoting multimodal connectivity between India and Nepal.

Site for Intermodal Terminal, Kalu Ghat, Parmanandpur (located about 35 km away from Patna)

Raxaul: The Second Integrated Check Post in Bihar

The ICP Raxaul handles more than 50 per cent of India-Nepal Trade. The officials at ICP Raxaul were very cordial and supportive. They showcased ICP's presentation, which was quite informative about the LPAI's present scenario and future plans. There is both road and rail connectivity from Kolkata to Raxaul, and also that railway line from the Indian side goes up to Birgunj ICP. However, there is only road connectivity between Birganj to Kathmandu on the Nepal side, though a rail link has also been proposed.

Trucks waiting for their turn to enter ICP Raxaul

The LPAI officials facilitated the team to a visit around the ICP premises. The operation of this ICP and its cross-border reciprocity at Birganj is one of the best developments to witness at India's border points. Both sides work in complete harmony and have coordination on a day-to-day basis. Though the ICP opens for trade at 8 am, there is no specific closing time.

Officials mentioned that trucks are allowed to cross the border even at odd hours, usually not witnessed at any other border crossing points with other countries. Such actions by both sides help in the decongestion of spaces at the ICP on both sides. This ICP continued to function even during the COVID-19 pandemic, though at a very slow pace.

This Raxaul ICP has all the necessary infrastructures, including warehousing, quarantine, weighing machine and Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) facilities. Full-body truck scanners are under construction.

With regard to documentation for clearance of goods, the team was informed that most of the work has become paperless, though for some verifications, physical documents are also required.

With regard to the warehouse facility at the ICP, it is noticed that the warehousing facility has had minimal use because the trucks, after customs clearance, directly pass through Raxaul to Birgunj ICP without any parking requirement. Also, cold storage is not used to its total capacity because of lack of requirement and exports from India are majorly non-perishable goods. Another significant issue is that though this ICP has plant quarantine-related infrastructure, no personnel has been appointed until now to restrict the trade of certain commodities. Further, there is no FSSAI personnel at the ICP, which hampers testing of packaged products and trade.

Interactions with some stakeholders revealed that some vested interest groups allegedly hampered the link road construction at the railway yard (5 km away from ICP) so that the trucks cannot pass from this route to ICP. It is understood that there is a lack of inter-agency coordination between LPAI and other agencies. Such kind stakeholders' conflict of interest can be detrimental for connectivity, transport and trade. Efforts are being made to integrate land customs and rail yards with ICP and make the system harmonious.

Regarding the connectivity of the Raxaul ICP, it is noticed that the road from Motihari to Raxaul ICP (68 km in length on NH-28A) is very bad, making the movement of trucks extremely difficult and time-consuming. Construction work by NHAI is undergoing on this stretch to improve the connectivity. It is expected that the work would be completed before the end of this year, 2021.

Arial view of ICP Raxaul

On average, about 550 trucks pass through this ICP per day, out of which 85 per cent are exported from India to Nepal and 15 per cent are imported to India from Nepal. This imbalance in export and import-bound cargo has created a problematic situation at the ICP. The import parking is used for export vehicles and the capacity created for export and import parking is the same.

The export vehicles take 8 hours for clearance from Raxaul ICP to Birgunj ICP. Primarily grains and petroleum products are traded. The annual collection of fees of the ICP is over Rs 6 crore.

Jogbani: India-Nepal to Benefit from this Cost-effective ICP

The team visited Jogbani ICP, located at a distance of 310 km from Patna and over 340 km from Raxaul ICP. It was a pleasant surprise for the team to witness the improved quality of roads, except for some exceptions at few places.

With regard to the movement of goods, the team was informed that this ICP receives a maximum number of Nepal-bound cargos from the north-east and Kolkata. While petroleum products, agri-products, motor vehicles, iron (clinker) and edible oil are major exports to Nepal from India, major import items from Nepal include palm oil, rum pum (Maggie), plastic material, masalas. All goods are now routed through the ICP since its inception. A total of 350 trucks are used for export and 50 are import trucks.

Entry Gate from ICP Raxaul (India) to ICP Birganj (Nepal)

Jogbani ICP has all the required infrastructure to work as an integrated check post. These, among others, include an RFID scanner and 24*7 BSNL lease line. However, at the moment, infrastructures like full-body scanners and other infrastructure are yet to be constructed and operationalised. It is observed that infrastructures like plant and animal quarantine, warehousing facilities are of limited use as the trucks can directly pass after custom clearance from Jogbani to Biratnagar ICP, and because exports from India to Nepal are majorly non-perishable goods.

Further, it is learnt that India-borne export trucks are allowed to enter Biratnagar ICP in Nepal and beyond. They are required to be back on the Indian side within 72 hours from their exit time. In case of delay, a nominal payment is charged from truck drivers.

Though this ICP is connected by rail lines as well on the Indian side, the rail link between Jogbani and Biratnagar is not yet operational. Further, from Biratnagar to Kathmandu, there is only road connectivity, and rail links are proposed.

Jogbani: Promoting Multimodal Connectivity

The team visited the Jogbani Land Custom Station office which is located in an old building outside the ICP at Jogbani. The officials were exceptionally friendly and helpful. Most of the work, however, happens from ICP customs and is made paperless. They also shared that India-Nepal relations are quite friendly and there are regular meetings to coordinate on operational matters.

On being asked about how multimodal or intermodal connectivity can be promoted, they stated that at first rail link between Jogbani and Biratnagar needs to commence its operations. Secondly, there would be a need to set up land customs stations at railway stations on both sides of the border for seamless connectivity and transportation.

Goods at Jogbani Railway Station waiting to be transported to Nepal through ICP Jogbani

The team also interacted with the truck drivers. They told us that some basic facilities like drinking water are not available and the washrooms are also not clean and adequate.

To summarise, though ICPs have been constructed with a long-term vision to promote seamless trade and connectivity, some infrastructural challenges remain. The more pressing issue is the need to strengthen inter-agency and stakeholders' coordination and remove mindset inertia towards the old ways. For reaping more significant benefits, there is a need to create more awareness and conduct inter-agency coordination workshops.

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