Field Diary

Akhaura Land Port: A Major Opportunity for Bangladesh and Northeast India

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About the Field Visit

Unnayan Shamannay, in collaboration with CUTS International, is conducting a study entitled ‘Enabling a Political Economy Discourse for Multimodal Connectivity in the BBIN Sub-region (M-Connect)’. Under the project, a team from Unnayan Shamannay visited Akhaura to access and investigate the infrastructure and trade logistics and

[Map image: Akhaura Upazila, Brahmanbaria]
conduct stakeholder consultation to explore ways and means to encourage and promote multi-modal connectivity in the BBIN sub-region.

Akhaura is an Upazilla of Brahmanbaria district under the Chittagong division in the east of Dhaka and it is the adjoining area to the North Eastern Indian State Tripura. Trade and passenger transit occurs through the Akhaura-Agartala check post.

**Reaching to Akhaura**

Akhaura is only 128 km away from Dhaka. There exist bus and train services between Dhaka and Akhaura. The team reached Akhaura by train and the significant stations the team crossed to reach Akhaura are Tongi (Gazipur), Narsingdi, Bhairab, Ashuganj and Brahmanbaria. The team reached Akhaura junction around 10 pm. The Upazilla Parishad is not much far from the junction.

Akhaura Upazilla is a semi-urban area and the town is filled with some small groceries, hardware, pharmacy and clothing stores, among others. The roads are generally good but narrow. The internal roads connecting other villages have greenery and paddy fields on both sides. It is an agriculture-based area where paddy, jute, potatoes and vegetables are grown. “Boro” Rice is dominantly produced in this region.

Akhaura holds significance with a land port, and it is very close to Dhaka and Chittagong (211 km). Agartala-Akhaura-Chittagong is known as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) highway corridor. Akhaura to Chittagong is on the National Highway 1 (NH1).
Integrated Check Post Facilities

Akhaura-Agartala check post is not well integrated in Bangladesh’s side. Akhaura was declared as a functional land port in 2010. But still, it lacks a lot of necessary facilities and infrastructure.

The land port is used mainly for exporting various goods, such as stone, coal, plastic household furniture, frozen fish, cement, cotton, edible oil, foodstuff, etc. Exports have decreased a lot in recent times via this land port. But the passengers use this route for transit to go to India a lot. Before COVID-19, about 1200 people used this Akhaura-Agartala check post for entering India.

Among various issues, one issue is that One-Stop Service is missing; passengers suffer a lot as they need to go to various spots to complete the procedures. For example, after clearing the Customs, Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) check post is half an hour later, passengers need to walk more to reach the immigration office. Bags are checked several times at different spots, which is not feasible. There is no principal digital scanners.
Other than that, it is not gender-inclusive. The truck drivers and labourers do not have any resting facilities and toilets. There are electricity and internet connectivity-related issues that make the operations harder. There is only one small warehouse but no cold storage for perishable goods like fish. The land port area is vast, which should be efficiently used.

An adequate infrastructure facility is to be developed. There need to be more CCTV surveillance systems for safety. It is vital to building a fire station nearby to the port in case of emergencies. A container yard and equipment gears need to be built in the port area. An automation system needs to be enabled here to make the procedures easier and paperless. There is a need for a bank, as there are none in the port area.

Labour opportunities at the land port need to be increased. If goods can be imported through this land port, it will enhance labour opportunities. It will also help in reducing the pressure on the Benapole land port.

**Border Haat**

There takes place a Border Haat known as Kamalasagar Border Haat at Kasba, which is on the south part of Akhaura once a week, although now the haat activities are paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The border haat aimed to establish a traditional system of local marketing products like local handmade products through the local market and facilitate a reunion spot for families living on both sides.

The currencies of both countries can be used for buying and selling. But the team was informed about a problem that instead of local and handmade products, Indian branded products are dominantly sold. Thus, Akhaura locals buy those branded products paying a considerable amount and sell them in Bangladesh, which damages the scope of importing those goods with proper customs tax.
Stakeholder Consultations

Consultation meetings were held with various stakeholders, including Land Port and Customs officials, Exporters and Importers Association, Clearing & Forwarding (C&F) agents, Truck Association, Truck and Auto Drivers, Roads and Highways Department, Brahmanbaria Chamber of Commerce, Upazilla Chairman, Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), Labours Association, Engineers, Residents and Journalists from the region.

It was found that coordination exists among Customs Office, other related departments and essential offices. Local people are aware of the region's foremost trade and connectivity developments, as many of them are fish exporters. Still, some informational gap exists.
All stakeholders agreed that permission to import goods via this land port would change the game in Akhaura land port. It will contribute significantly to improve the livelihood opportunities in Akhaura.

Exporters hand over all the related papers to the C&F agents, who work as Customs associates in the exporting procedure. C&F agents assess all the necessary documents for exports and forward them to the Customs Office for commission. Customs officers examine and cross-verify the furnished details.

It was found that C&F agents do not have any scope to know if there is any legal problem with the exports like under-invoicing or over-invoicing as these are customs responsibilities. The team found an absence of regular discussion meetings among various stakeholders to iron out the raising concerns and issues connected with the land port.

The representation of women in trade and allied services is almost zero. Necessary capacity building and awareness generation activities complemented by cheaper financing facilities will bring more women to the sector.

**Progress of Akhaura-Ashuganj 4 Lane Road**

The 4-lane road construction is divided into three parts: Ashuganj to Sultanpur, Sultanpur to Dharkhar and Dharkhar to Agartala. The first two parts will be completed very soon as there are no complications. But in the third part, there are some complications as the South Union and Mugra are demanding to change the route. The authority for appropriate solutions is assessing these demands.
Land acquisitions are still ongoing. 30 per cent of the project is completed so far. There will also be service lanes for the rickshaws and non-motorised vehicles on both sides of the road. The project is expected to be concluded in 2023.

**Progress of Akhaura-Agartala Rail line**

The much-awaited Akhaura-Agartala rail line project, which will connect Agartala’s Nischintapur with Akhaura’s Gangasagar, is progressing well. 6 km of the new route falls in Bangladesh and the other 4 km falls in India. The land acquisition process is complete and was handed over to IRCON International Ltd., the Indian executing agency of the rail line construction project. The project is expected to be completed soon.

**For an Inclusive Development**

There was dissatisfaction among the locals with unemployment problems in the region and fewer labour opportunities as no imports occur through the port. Permission to import all the products through the port will change the scenario, according to them.

Toxic black water flows from Agartala to Akhaura through the canal, which causes a lot of waterborne disease for the locals, a burning issue in that area.
The land is very fertile and natural calamities like floods, drought, etc., are not frequent. The land that was not early used for agricultural production is now being used due to the increasing demand.

Many people from this region go to work abroad, mainly in the middle-east from where they send remittances that support the local economy. Planning of building educational institutes and technical training centre for skills development is in progress. There is a plan to build an economic zone in the region; feasibilities are being tested here to build that economic zone.

The connectivity of Akhaura with the rest of the country is excellent via railway and roadway. But waterways need more development initiatives. The local government gives all kinds of support to the locals who want to do agro-business by providing them with helpful information, fertilisers and good quality seeds.
There are no major political conflicts or issues here, making it easier for the locals to start a business. There are some occurrences of truck hijacking at Sultanpur, a place between Akhaura and Brahmanbaria Sadar at night, which is a safety issue to look out for.

There should be some common and regular platforms that enable the people at the grassroots to interact with the private and public sector stakeholders about their needs and concerns. The local people are not much informed and aware of the benefits of developing multi-modal connectivity in the BBIN sub-region.

The team ended the field trip with high hopes of greater connectivity and integration of the BBIN sub-region.