

BANGLADESH-BHUTAN-INDIA-NEPAL MULTI-MODAL CONNECTIVITY IN THE SUB-REGION (M-CONNECT)



Joining Dots • Connecting People • Shared Prosperity

Field Diary Ashuganj: A Strategic Location in Bangladesh for Trade and Transit

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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.' Under the project, an officer from Unnayan Shamannay, Muhammad Saadman Zahur visited Ashuganj, Bhairab and Brahmanbaria in Dhaka and Chittagong division in March 2021.

The purpose of the visit was to analyse and investigate the policy and protocols associated with the Inland Water Transport (IWT) through the Mongla-Ashuganj and Chittagong-Ashuganj route. In addition, the available infrastructure and trade logistics were studied, along with stakeholder consultations for finding ways to encourage and facilitate multimodal connectivity among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN).

Towards the Port of Call

Ashuganj and the areas connected with the location were visited with enthusiasm and eagerness as the location was a strategic point for both local and international trade and transit. It has been declared as the port of call by concerned authorities as it is being used as a transshipment point for Indian cargo shipping from one part of India to another through Bangladesh.

Ashuganj is a small city with immense possibilities. After reaching the city's heart, the investigator found that it has several important infrastructures stationed close to each other.



Location of Ashuganj River Port

River port in Ashuganj

Upon arrival, the first destination for the investigator to visit was the nearby river port situated in the Meghna river delta, which acts as the central hub for transshipment activities. The river port in Ashuganj harbors in an average of at least 250-300 vessels per day. The connection of the port starts from Haldia-Kolkata through Bangladesh and extends towards the northeastern states of India.

This river and its port is the focal point for the livelihood opportunities of the local people. Fishermen, boatmen, vessel operators, pilots, day labourers, all these people are seen in the river port area busy making a living. The adjacent Bhairab launch jetty can be accessed from this point via boat. All in all, it seemed like the river port is always brimming with activities day and night.



A view of the river port from boat

Inland Container Terminal and Important Infrastructures

An inland container terminal is under development in an area called Mohrompara in Ashuganj. It is being developed under the second Indian Line of Credit (LoC). The land acquisition is almost completed, but no construction work has been done yet. The total area acquired for the ICT is around 25-26 acres. The locals received an amount of around BDT 2,253,000 per 100th percentile of land acquisition.

Other important infrastructures around the Inland Container Terminal (ICT) are the Gas Transmission Company Limited (GTCL), within 50 meters of the probable ICT location, Ashuganj Fertiliser & Chemical Company Limited (AFCCCL) and Ashuganj power station.



Land acquisition for the ICT



Gas Transmission Company Limited near Ashuganj Port

The pressure of the gas supplied throughout the whole country is controlled by GTCL situated in this location. The power station fulfills 25 per cent of the electricity demand of the whole country. In addition, AFCCL produces fertiliser and chemicals, which are then supplied across the country.



Ashuganj Power Plant and Station

Stakeholder Consultations

After the visit to the river port and the important infrastructures around, consultation meetings were held with various stakeholders, such as from the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) in Bhairab, Upazilla Parishad of Ashuganj, local business associations of Ashuganj, Vessel pilots, local NGO officers, local journalists and residents.

It seemed that most of the stakeholders were well aware of some of the recent major trade and connectivity development in the area, thanks to the adequate coverage by the local media. But the lack of coordination and communication between different stakeholders was quite concerning.

There were many environmental, logistical and disciplinary concerns regarding the new development projects, which were not resolved. Unfortunately, none of the stakeholders took any initiative to cooperate and coordinate to address these problems head-on.



The case of migration and reverse migration seemed ambiguous for the region. However, most of the workers working in the river port and surrounding areas seemed content with their arrangements.

One easily noticeable thing was the complete absence of women from any port-related activity, primarily due to the working atmosphere and physical expertise required to work on the port. But with the development of the ICT, it can be hoped that women's engagement in trade will increase to a substantial amount if given the proper capacity building and financing facilities.

Into the District of Brahmanbaria

After the Ashuganj, Bhairab area consultations, the investigator moved towards Brahmanbaria to consult stakeholders, such as customs officials, local business chamber representatives, roads and highways officials.

The journey to Brahmanbaria was longer than it should have been due to the amount of traffic and congestion on the road. The roads are narrow, filled with lots of heavy vehicles on the road. Thankfully, an initiative has been taken to develop this road into a 4-lane highway, which will hopefully reduce traffic congestion on the road.

Upon further consultation with stakeholders, valuable information was gathered regarding paperless trade initiative, cargo inspection and clearance and condition of export-import through the region.

During the consultation with locals, it was found that the people of this district were heavily reliant on foreign remittances. Though employment opportunities were somewhat available, the people of this district choose to migrate as they perceive that they can earn nearly thrice in foreign countries.

It is to be seen in the future whether reverse and low migration of people from this area take place after the establishment of more opportunities through the adaptation of multimodal connectivity.



Two Rail Bridges Crossing Meghna River at Ashuganj Point

Inclusive Development Initiatives

Even though significant development projects were going on in the vicinity, grassroots-level stakeholders were not benefitted from these activities. Truck drivers who deliver the cargo from Ashuganj river port to Akhaura land port make a meagre earning around 1500-2000 BDT per trip. They cannot make more than one trip in a day due to the excessive traffic congestion on the road.

Another concern surrounding the ICT development is that local people claim that due to the construction of the ICT, the road connecting their area with the fertiliser factory will be blocked. As a result, anyone working in the factory will have great difficulty in day-to-day travel. Also, the locals demanded a functional drainage system in their area.

Some of the locals claimed that land and factory owners got adequate compensation during the land acquisition, but those who worked in the factories or lived in that area by paying rent were not compensated. The land allotted for food silos was also taken away during the acquisition.



Silos near upcoming ICT

The need for a common and regular platform was apparent that allows people at the grassroots to communicate with the public and private sector stakeholders regarding their development concerns and needs.

As per the data collected from the field, some residents were involved in the discussion for developing their areas. But most of the discussions are held at higher levels, without much representation of the local people.

Without proper awareness and involvement, people at the grassroots will always remain neglected. As a result, they will not get the full benefits of the development of the BBIN sub-region. A more inclusive and collaborative approach from the higher-ups can resolve this predicament and pave the way for a sustainable development atmosphere.

The investigator left this place with a strong belief that the M-Connect project will assist in addressing the issues at the ground level and bring inclusive and sustainable development in the BBIN sub-region.

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