

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

Joining Dots • Connecting People • Shared Prosperity

Field Diary

Banglabandha: A Dynamic Connectivity Hub in the BBIN Sub-region

Naimul Alam Alvi

Research Officer, Unnayan Shamannay, Bangladesh

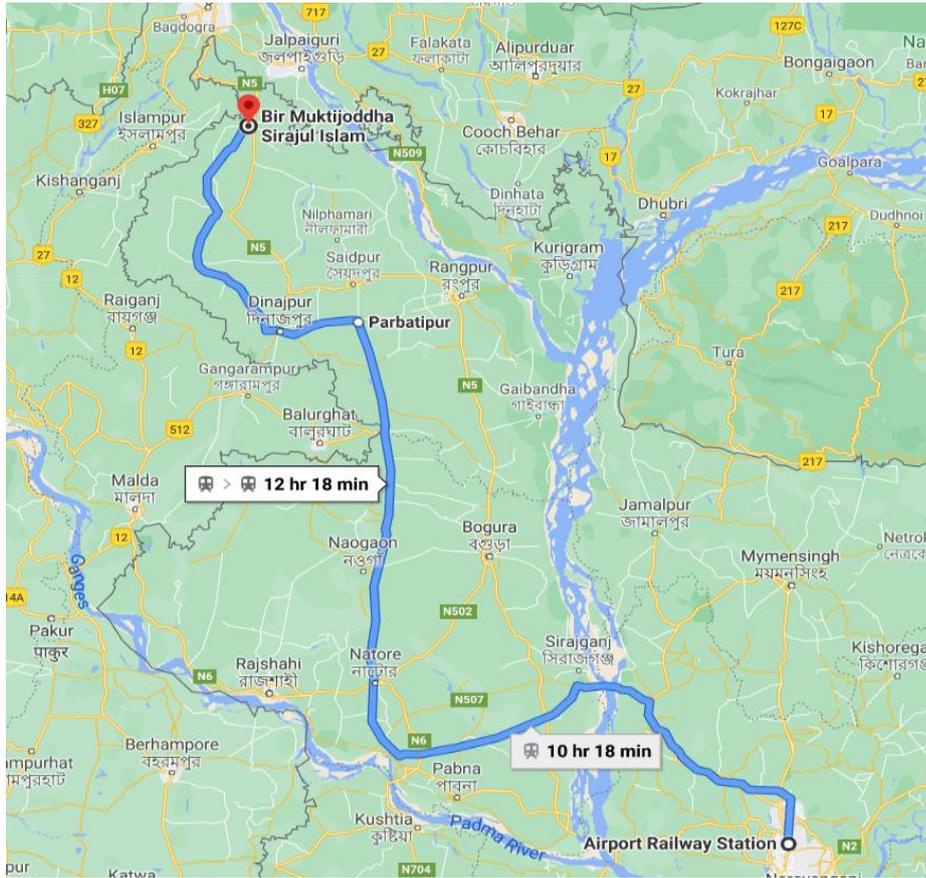
About the Field Visit

A team from Unnayan Shamannay visited Panchagarh Town, Banglabandha, and adjacent locations under the project entitled 'Enabling a Political Economy Discourse for Multi-modal Connectivity in the BBIN Sub-region (M-Connect)' in March 2021.

The purpose of the visit was to assess and investigate the infrastructure and trade logistics and do stakeholder consultations to explore ways and means to encourage and promote multi-modal connectivity in the BBIN sub-region.

Journey to Panchagarh

The team began its journey from Biman Bandar railway station in Dhaka, boarding Drutojan Express, one of the three intercity train services from Dhaka to Panchagarh, on March 06, 2021. The distance from Dhaka to Panchagarh's Bir Muktijoddha Sirajul Islam Railway Station is 693km by rail, currently the longest from the capital. Besides that, there are bus services and air-connectivity through a domestic airport about 106 km down the Asian Highway 2 (N5) in Saidpur, Nilphamari District.



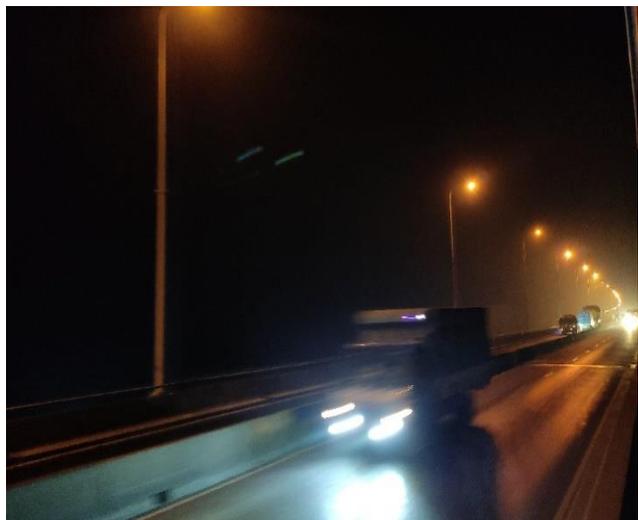
Train Route from Dhaka to Panchagarh

The train soon left the dust and crowd of the capital city and began to run through Gazipur, Tangail, Elenga. It was slowed down upon reaching Bangabandhu Bridge over Jamuna River.

The 4.8 km long bridge is now a bit risky for train commuting, and so trains usually pass the bridge at a "restricted speed" of 20 km per hour while crossing the

bridge. It took around half an hour to cross the 7 km stretch between the bridge's east and west stations.

A project to build a dedicated dual-gauge, double-track railway bridge, named Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Railway Bridge, started last year and is expected to finish by 2025. There is also a bottleneck in the path - the Tangail-Ishwardi section. This section now handles around 42 trains daily, which is almost double its comfortable capacity. So, there were occasional stops to manage the train traffic.



Vehicles passing over Bangabandhu Bridge

The project to upgrade this section, started in January 2016 by the government, is now practically at a standstill due to various policy resolutions.

After almost 10 hours of journey, the train reached Bir Muktijoddha Siraj ul Islam Station at Panchagarh. Clearer air and sky, with a bluish tint, is one of the first things that welcomed me to the northernmost district of Bangladesh.

Panchagarh – A Town Nourished by Port

Observing the present situation of Panchagarh, it is hard to believe that this town was an unremarkable, poverty-ridden area infested by Monga – a seasonal situation in Bengal’s agricultural scenario where the locals only find substantial works during planting and harvesting seasons while remaining unemployed in other times of the year.



Bir Muktijoddha Sirajul Islam Station



Road through Panchagarh Town

The residents here used to migrate to other parts of the country to find work. After over two decades of opening the port, the district has seen a dramatic rise in economic activities. With its busy town area, bustling markets, inter-state and local vehicles, hotels and restaurants, shops of renowned national and international brands, comparable to any Bengali district town.

Although being around 60km south of Banglabandha Land Port, the town is the centre for offices, residences of officials and a resting place for the traders as Tetulia Upazila and Banglabandha Union have inadequate facilities.

With the insurgence of demographic and economic traffic, many businessmen, according to the locals, most of the present traders in the town market have come from all parts of Bangladesh, a new phenomenon for the migration-prone local populace.



Seasonal fruit stalls in Panchagarh

Asian Highway 2 (NH5) runs through the town towards Banglabandha. The two lanes, dividers, class II road, already insufficient for heavy cargo traffic, suffer more inside the town with the town's local traffic and human movement. With an underdeveloped road safety design, the road is at risk of accidents. There was a fatal road accident even while the team was in the town.



Local rivers in the area

The adjacent rivers, Chauli and Karatoya, were still mostly dry in the early spring season. The seasonally exposed river basins are used as farming lands. There are still some locals who collect washed-down Himalayan stones from the rivers.

Road to Banglabandha – A Daily Commute for the Locals

The majority of the workers and port-related officials live in Panchagarh Town and its surrounding area. Usually, high-level officials use private cars for their daily commute to Banglabandha. However, others, comprising most of the populace, use public transports, such as buses and shared electric auto-rickshaws. Many workers climb on empty trucks and lorries to reach the port from the Panchagarh town.



Workers commuting to the port on empty lorries

The 57km long road from Panchagarh is two-laned, reasonably straight and is in good condition. It crosses multiple small bridges over rivers and canals. The team noticed no congestion, but it was felt that the road would gradually face difficulty in handle the

increasing traffic. However, there is a project, soon to begin by the local Roads and Highways Department, to widen the roads from Panchagarh town to Banglabandha.



Tea gardens on the road side

There are seamless farming lands with rice, corn, potatoes, tomatoes and other vegetables alongside the road – a common scenario in the Bengal Delta, and these are the potential local export items. However, this is among the only areas in Bangladesh where tea is produced in flat land. Various big companies in the area own large tea gardens.

Interestingly, many privately-owned small tea-growing fields, like any other crop, sell unprocessed tea to big companies. This growing industry which operates in the area, imports heavy machinery through Banglabandha Port. However, the port is under-equipped to handle the cargo and the tea producers face difficulty.

As the road reaches close towards Banglabandha, stone-crushing sites and their stone-dust fog appear more and more frequently. The green farming lands are now replaced with white land covered in the dust of crushed stone.



Female Workers at Lunch Break

The majority of the cross-border trade through Banglabandha is boulders and stone chips imported from India and Bhutan. The trucks unload them in the port area and they are then crushed and sold to all parts of the country.

More businessmen are entering into this industry, with more than 100 traders and 200 companies actively present. There was an existing stone mining and crushing business in this area, especially in Bhojonpur in Tetuliaupazila, but it was banned some years ago due to environmental reasons. However, this new industry has now become another unignorable environmental and health hazard. The sites are built on private lands, so the authority cannot prosecute the companies.

Moreover, the industry is the primary source of employment, even more significant than the port itself. It pushes reverse migration and encourages migrant workers from surrounding districts like Dinajpur, Rangpur, Thakurgaon, etc. So, any injunction on this industry will have negative economies. However, authorities can relocate the industry to a separate zone away from human settlements, implementing environmental regulations.

Banglabandha Land Port

Banglabandha Land Port, spanning 10.48 acres of land leased by Bangladesh Land Port Authority (BLPA) to Bangladesh Land Port Limited (BLPL), is on the side of Asian Highway 2 (N5), and about 200 yards from the Bangladesh-India zero point.

On the last mile of the road, after the clouds of stone dust, there are trucks, especially Bangladeshi trucks with export goods, waiting on the road to cross the border and unload the goods in Phulbari, the corresponding port on the Indian side. That is the farthest the trucks from Bangladesh are allowed.



Trucks parked in double lane

The road has no divider and some of the trucks are parked side by side, blocking both lanes of the road. From India, Bhutan and Nepal, the trucks coming from the Indian side face complications in crossing these chokeholds of chaotic parking. The Bangladeshi truck drivers complain that the parking space inside the port is not enough and is discriminately accessed by foreign trucks rather than Bangladeshi trucks.

On the other hand, Indian and Bhutanese drivers do not complain about parking spaces but complain about the disorderly parked Bangladeshi trucks. No initiative is seen from any of the authorities to solve this parking and congestion issue. There should be a specific parking space for the trucks waiting to go to Phulbari crossing the border, the truck lines should be regulated and a divider can help in the process.



Truck weighing on the weigh bridge inside the port

No passengers or immigrants were waiting to cross the border. The ongoing COVID-19 situation has practically halted cross-border passenger movement. There were no separate lanes or priority-based systems to manage perishable cargo movement.

The port complex seemed under-maintained, with construction materials stored at random places and un-cleaned buildings and washrooms. The BLPL and Customs

have separate office buildings. BLPL office houses a branch of Sonali Bank. The lack of other options for banking handicaps the traders to a certain extent. The BLPL building is under construction to increase the facilities.

There are three weighbridges, one is between the two office buildings and the remaining two are in the parking yard. The parking yard was mainly empty, with some trucks, primarily Indian and Bhutanese, in the area. The Bangladeshi trucks waiting to cross the border were closer to the border on the road. Indian truck drivers said that there is no categorisation of cargo-carrying vehicles on the parking design. There was a noticeable absence of any cargo-handling machinery.



A Food Stall for drivers

There were food stalls and non-concrete restaurants on both sides of the roads until the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) check post, with somewhat spacious sitting arrangements, but any customer other than Bangladeshi truck drivers was not seen.

The foreign truck drivers complain that the restaurants do not serve according to their religious regulations or taste. There is also a lack of accommodation for the drivers of both sides to rest while they wait, sometimes for multiple days. They had to find local residence options in the scarcely facilitated Banglabandha and Tetulia area.

There were no women seen inside the port area. The port office and manual labour section have no female employees. The infrastructure is not built in a gender-friendly manner – there is no separate washroom for men and women. There was no identification system such as ID cards, vests, or dresses to mark the staff and outsiders. Any person can enter and roam around unquestioned, thus causing severe security concerns.



Workers waiting outside their Union Office

Trucks parked outside the port due to limited parking space is left without any security support. All that is available is a limited number of CCTV surveillance cameras.

ATI Ltd. is the company given the lease for labour-handling at the port. As a consequence of ATI Ltd.'s inefficient labour management system, the labourers have no waiting space inside the port complex. They wait in a subpar conditioned tin-made house made by their own labourers' union outside the port area. The union supports the labourers in health or financial crises from their welfare fund. ATI Ltd. does not offer any support or training for their employees.

Stakeholder Consultation

Multiple stakeholders in the land port, local shops, BLPL office, port customs office, labour union office, regional Roads and Highways office, stone crushing site, markets, etc., were interviewed. There was unanimous agreement about the remarkable positive impact of the port on the socio-economic status of this region. But lack of communication, inclusive committees and transparency are generating mistrust and disruption. This is allowing some individuals to exploit other stakeholders and increase inefficiency.

There seemed to be two groups accusing each other, one being the traders, C&F agents and labourers, while the second category being the authorities of BLPL, and ATI Ltd. Impactful intervention is needed from the government level to increase cooperation among all the stakeholders.



Interviewing Executive Officer of BLPL

There is a clear gap of information about the developments in the BBIN sub-region multi-modal connectivity among the general populace, workers and even many officials. No public engagement and information exchange meetings are organised by the concerned authorities, especially about any BBIN-specific agenda.

Inclusion of women, albeit if asked is agreed upon, is not proactively considered to any extent. The absence of female labourers in the port operations is due to the nature of manual labour required in the port, in the absence of modern equipment. However, there is no infrastructural support planned to address this.

The stakeholders agreed about the scope of the connectivity initiatives when discussed. The locals want more efficient local trading options across the border.

Road Back to Dhaka – The Other Option

The team started its return journey on March 11, 2021, on a bus, after five days of the survey. The road from Panchagarh to Dhaka is about 411 km using AH2 (N5). Despite being around 200 km shorter than the rail route, the bus journey is more expensive and requires more time.



Construction of road under SASEC programme

The road development project is ongoing from Rangpur to Elenga to construct a four-lane road under Bangladesh: South Asia Sub-regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) Dhaka-Northwest Corridor Road Project, Phase 2 - Tranche 1.

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

