

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



Joining Dots • Connecting People • Shared Prosperity

Field Diary

Benapole: Transformation from Bangladesh-India Trade Artery to a Major BBIN Gateway

Naimul Alam Alvi

Research Officer, Unnayan Shamannay, Bangladesh

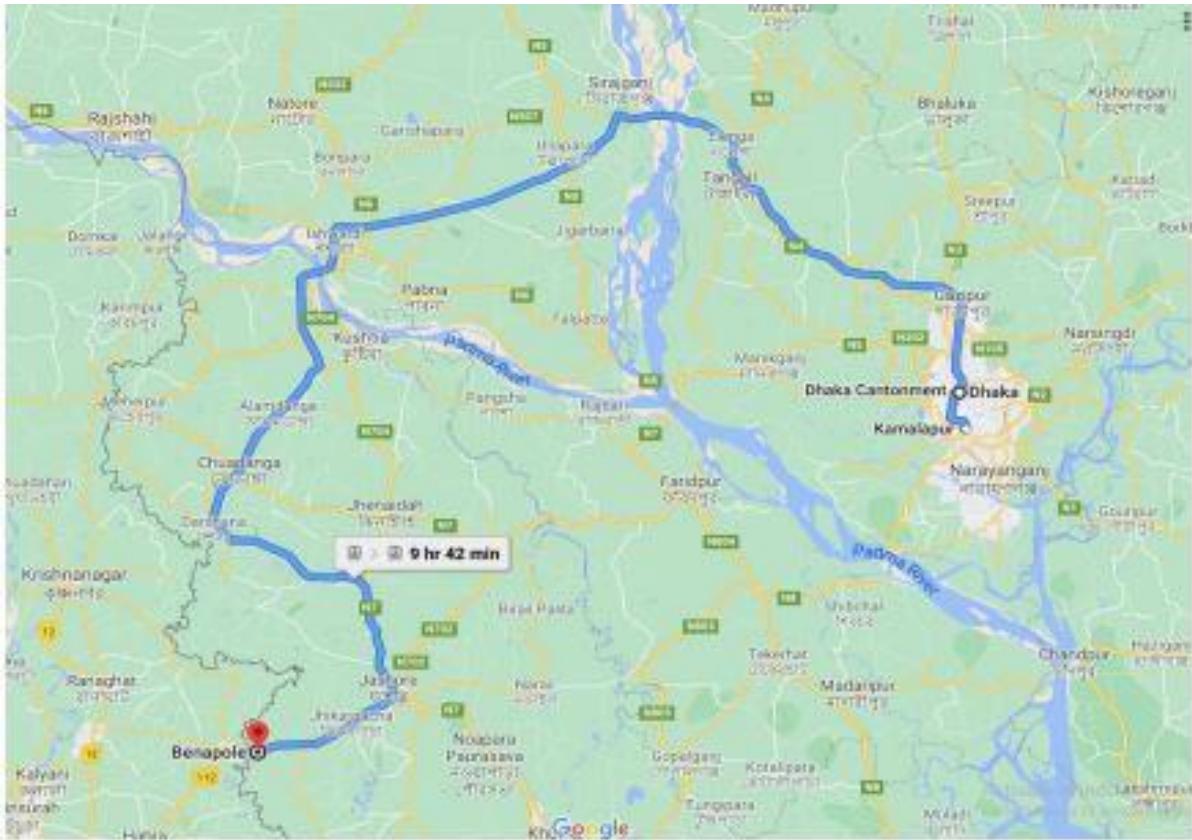
About the Field Visit

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)'. Benapole Land Port acts as a major trade point between Bangladesh and India. A team from Unnayan Shamannay conducted a field visit at Benapole, Sharsha Upazila, to get a comprehensive understanding of the potential for multi-modal connectivity in the region.

The field visit was conducted to assess and investigate the infrastructure, trade logistics and conducting stakeholder consultations for exploring ways and means to encourage and promote multi-modal connectivity between BBIN countries.

Train to Benapole

Benapole-Kamalapur is the only regular intercity rail connection to Benapole. The condition of the train, inaugurated in July 2019, is satisfactory with clean coaches, functional amenities and organised on-board services.



A railway route from Dhaka to Benapole

A straight line from Dhaka to Benapole is around 200 km, but the current route of this train is over 400 km. The reason behind this is the missing link over Padma River. The train has to go through Gazipur, Kaliakoir, Tangail and cross Bangabandhu Bridge over Jamuna river, and then to Sirajganj, Ullapara, Ishwardi from Pakshi, crosses the Lalon Shah Bridge to go over Padma River (North-West End of Padma River within Bangladesh). Then it goes to Darshana through Alamdanga, from where it continues to Jessore after a halt. In Jessore, it changes the engine and direction to reach Benapole finally. The whole journey takes about 10 hours.

However, the successful completion of the Padma multi-purpose Bridge will contribute extensively to reducing the travel time from Dhaka to Benapole. This bridge will be connecting Louhajong, Munshiganj to Shariatpur and Madaripur.

The Chaotic and Busy Trade Town

Benapole Railway Station is somewhat small but has many of the necessary facilities of a regional functional station. The representative was positively surprised to see a breastfeeding section in the station. This is a welcome step towards ensuring enhanced women's participation at the station, which is often ignored. There is also a small waiting room for the passengers.



Cargo rail wagons at Benapole Railway Station

Benapole unignorablely contrasts from the general scenario of the typical southern Bengal delta, which has lush-dense vegetation, vast agricultural fields and ponds with fishes. Benapole welcomes with unruly concrete, chaotic traffic and dust. The station is within walking distance of the port.

The road in front of the port is compact with Indian and Bangladeshi trucks waiting to enter the adjacent parking yard, electric auto rickshaws calling for passengers, port labourers with their disheveled red uniforms, cross-border passengers boarding and getting off passenger buses and local vendors with their customers.



Indian trucks standing on road

The road in front, two-laned with a divider, is not awe-inspiring but is in good condition. However, the line of standstill trucks and private cars parked on the road narrows the functional road down to a congestion magnet. There are concrete junk and small sand dunes alongside the road and on the footpath. The closer the road gets to the port, this scenario becomes more and more prominent. The locals claim that this situation is a reduced version of the typical stuffed streets because of the ongoing pandemic

Most of the economic activities and social structures have grown around cross-border trade. Almost 2000 active labourers are working in the port directly. Besides that, truck drivers, truck owners, businessmen, C&F agents, workers in different port-related offices, etc. directly rely on the port, and auto drivers, restaurant runners, vendors, shop owners, journalists, etc., indirectly source part of their income from the port.

Other economic activities are scarce in the area. Women play a minimal role in port-related activities, so female employment in this area is also very low. The only women working, noticed by the representative, are some cooks working for nearby restaurants and some of the officers in the Custom Houses - which is also a surprisingly unusual occupation for women in this country.

Other social infrastructures, such as hospitals, fire stations, educational institutions, entertainment facilities, etc., are inadequate or absent. A recurrent concern expressed by members of various walks of society, especially, is lack of education. Low-income class - labourers, auto drivers, small vendor owners, etc. do not feel the need or have access to education; and high-income class - especially the children of businessmen do not feel the need for higher education as they are expected to inherit the family business. Those who can afford higher education leave the place to live in adjacent cities like Jessore or Khulna.

There are also security concerns. There were accusations of theft and hijacking from the traders and C&F agents, especially when they carry a considerable amount of money to deposit in the bank. The investigator was repeatedly warned about going out at night and hotels lock their main doors after 10 or 11 at night. However, the team did not face any security threats during their stay in the area.

Benapole Land Port

Benapole Land Port is the busiest land port in the country. Its proximity with Kolkata, around 90 km through the historic Jessore Road, has made it the most important trade hub in the region. The land port spans over 90 acres of land with multiple open yards, shades, warehouses, truck terminals, a chassis yard, an export terminal, an international passenger terminal and an international bus terminal.

Benapole Land Customs House is one of the largest and significant in the country. The custom-house - and quarantine wings have separate buildings within walking distance of the port. Two separate roads- for passengers and cargo leads towards the border. A railway line also runs through the port parameter.



Passenger entrance through Benapole Border

This is one of the major land ports in Bangladesh, where the principal trade is not boulders or stone chips. The port handles arrays of various goods - from vehicles, chassis, heavy machinery to consumer products, spices, garlic, onions; from cotton, iron,

steel plate, plastic to chemicals, medicine, baby food, fish. Approximately two-thirds of the cargo is handled with manual labour and the rest with machines.

Labour and equipment are handled by a private company, Great Bengal Limited, under a five-year contract starting from 2021. The company is continuing the existing average reputation of cargo management with some complaints of shortage of and broken equipment; and mismanagement of labourers. However, the most alarming disregard from them - as it was from previous labour-management organisations and overlooked by the port authority - is a complete disregard for labourers' safety measurements.

The labourers get no safety equipment - gloves, boots, helmets, etc., nor are they provided with any safety training. The labourers regularly get into severe and fatal injuries from handling hazardous products, especially heavy items, chemicals and acid.



Labourers loading chemical in a truck



Cargo waiting to be unloaded

The sector where the port stumbles the most is in its perishable goods handling capacity. The port does not offer cold storage and other special facilities. With various port-related and external delays, cross-border trade through the land is becoming increasingly complex and costly.

An experimental container shipment system through the railway because of the pandemic is attracting growing numbers of traders. The railway authority is now adopting development projects to facilitate this traffic by increasing railway tracks and building a container depot.

Towards Noapara River Port

Noapara River Port is approximately 64 km east of Benapole through NH 706 and then NH 7. The area contains traces of organically grown trade areas - without any environmental or infrastructural planning. Like Benapole, the area is more dusty and chaotic - with rows of privately operated jetties, warehouses with openly



Noapara Jetty Road

stored burning coals, stone chips, etc., than other adjacent areas. However, the authority has recently made a tiled road along the banks with seating arrangements and vendors' spots, which has become a community space for the locals.



Loading a Truck in Noapara

The goods usually get trans-loaded between the ships and the trucks with manual labour using privately-owned jetties working under issuance from Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA). Usually, coal, cement, ash, stone, maize, wheat, rice, fertiliser etc., are the goods of trade in the port.

The ships follow the concerning river Bhairab to go to Mongla - a vital seaport - and then to Ghoshaikhali, Sannasi, Charkhali, Kaukhali and Chandpur - a key riverway route in the country. From there, the ships follow rivers connecting all over the country.

The riverport can be a significant multi-modal connectivity hub as it connects a seaport – Mongla, with a major land port. It also practically connects other river ports and the region's most prominent seaport - Chattogram. The ships can also go to Kolkata directly if they use the Chunkuri river from Chalna Launch Ghat. Major infrastructural initiatives to upgrade the port is needed to accommodate possible heavy trade traffic.

Stakeholder Consultation

The stakeholders interviewed - notable officials and spokespersons from the port authority, the custom-house, traders' association, C&F agents' association, labourers association, transport owners' association, truck drivers, labourers, local government, etc. - are well versed in trading activities. They are aware of every nook and cranny of the process compared to those of the other land ports of this country the team visited. There are regular participatory meetings between multiple stakeholders in connection to different port-related objectives.

However, there are still complaints from the traders and C&F agents about mismanagement, infrastructural inadequacy, corruption and extortions. Besides the concern mentioned above over perishable items, the traders argue that they are slowed by the lack of adequate infrastructural capacity to handle the massive amount of cargo efficiently.

They complained about various levels of extortions – the three most noteworthy being a syndicate in Bongaon on the Indian side, labourers union and custom officials. The process of extortion – forceful paid parking, slowed paper works, ceasing to handle goods without extra charge - is a prominent factor that affects transborder trade by increasing the cost significantly.



Interviewing Local Union Chairman

Information about the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement (BBIN MVA) and other seamless connectivity initiatives is yet to sufficiently get concerned stakeholders' attention. There are some generalised information floating around, but specific up-to-date knowledge and plans are not in the immediate availability of any participants met in this field survey.

There is an apparent lack of female participation in all levels of trade. There are no female workers in the cargo management force, no female truck drivers, no female traders or C&F agents. The port authority and customs office have occasional female employees in the administration, but they are overshadowed by the odd proportionate number of male employees.

Although there are no proactive initiatives to include the female workforce, the team believes that the globally praised rising involvement of women in the economy throughout the country will gradually reach here. The existing workers claim that manual labour is too physically demanding for female workers. However, initiatives such as skill training for women to handle equipment will help bring female labourers into this sector.

Road to Dhaka

We headed back to Dhaka using the National Highway 706 (N706) until Jessore, then N702 until Magura and N7 to reach Daulatdia to cross the Daulatdia Paturia Ferry route to cross the Padma Bridge, and then followed N5 to reach Dhaka.

This is one of two usual major route options, currently connecting Benapole and other southwestern Bangladeshi areas – such as Khulna and Jessore, the other being N706 to Jessore, then Z7503 to Bhatiapara, N805 to Bhangra, and then using the N8 expressway to Dhaka, crossing Mawa Ferry Ghat to cross the Padma river. The second route will be the principal route once the Padma Multipurpose Bridge is completed.



Roads under construction



Road to Daulatdia-Paturia Ferry Ghat

The road towards the ferry separates passenger vehicles and cargo vehicles. The cargo line is long and, more often than not, remains standstill while the passenger line is clear. A few vendors were selling seasonal fruits, snacks and water bottles inside the ferry. The ride sometimes gets interrupted

because of dense fog in the winter season. Still, the representative, crossing this in springtime, did not experience this problem and crossed the river in minimal possible time.

The road throughout the whole journey is marked by construction sites of roads and bridges, an ongoing phenomenon in the rapidly developing country. Due to these temporary hurdles, it takes around ten hours to reach Dhaka from Benapole.

The team ended the field trip with high hopes of more excellent connectivity and integration in the BBIN sub-region

With the support of



Asian Development Bank