

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



Joining Dots • Connecting People • Shared Prosperity

Field Diary Gumti-Daudkandi River Port Connectivity with Northeastern India

Muhammad Saadman Zahur

Research Officer, Unnayan Shamannay, Bangladesh

About the Field Visit

Under the project entitled 'Enabling a Political Economy Discourse for Multi-modal Connectivity in the BBIN Sub-region,' Daudkandi (Cumilla District of Chittagong division) and its surrounding areas were visited by Muhammad Saadman Zahur, Research Officer, Unnayan Shamannay. Interviews with key stakeholders were conducted in March 2021.



Daudkandi river port and its surrounding areas

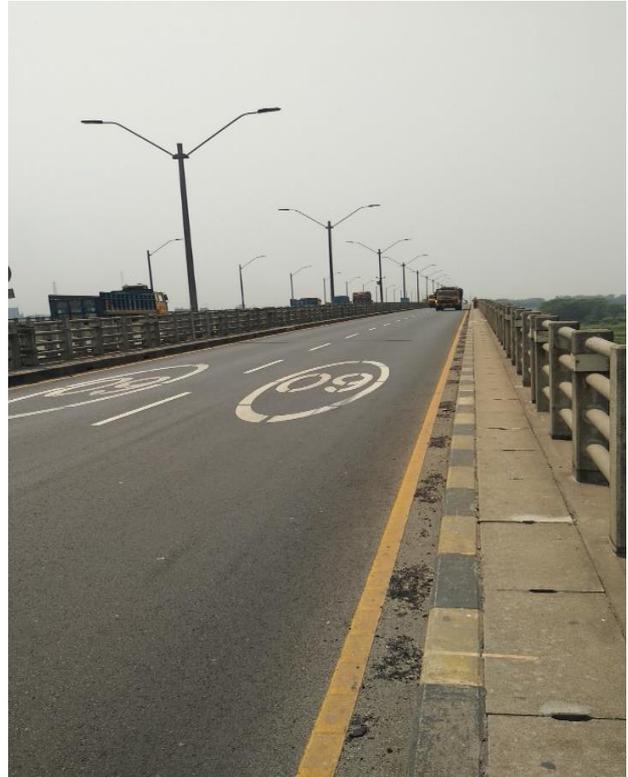
The purpose was to investigate and analyse the policy and protocols associated with the Inland Water Transport (IWT) through the Mongla-Daudkandi and Chittagong-Daudkandi route along with any other probable route for trade and transport. The objective of the visit was also to analyse infrastructure and trade logistics along with conducting stakeholder consultations for finding out ways to encourage and facilitate multi-modal connectivity between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN).

A journey towards Daudkandi

Gumti, a tributary of the river Meghna, passes right by the city of Daudkandi. Although Daudkandi is an Upazila under the district of Cumilla, it is quite far from the city of Cumilla. The distance between Dhaka-Daudkandi and Daudkandi-Cumilla is almost the same by road.

Upon reaching the area by bus in one and a half hours, it was found that Daudkandi is a small but busy area. Infrastructurally, it is not as developed as some of the other Upazilas. But all in all, it has most of the facilities a city can offer.

Road connection to this part is perfect, thanks to the Meghna-Gumti bridge connecting Dhaka-Chittagong passing through Cumilla.



Meghna-Gumti Bridge

A visit to the Gumti river port

The two sides of the river almost look like a black and white chessboard. One side is black because of the imported coal and the others are white because of the imported sand. The coal comes from countries such as South Africa and Indonesia. Then they are distributed to the brickfields scattered across the country.

The sand is purely local, coming from Sylhet via water and then transported by truck to Chandpur, Feni, Noakhali and Cumilla. It is scorching and suffocating in the river port area due to the nature of goods stored there.



Smoke coming out of coal dump

People previously used this river port for transportation via barges. But after the establishment of the Meghna-Gumti Bridge in 1991, the river port is now used for cargo transportation. Land formed by sediments of mud (also known as 'char' locally) can be seen across the river frequently.



Bibir Bazar Land Customs Station

Following the river to the borders

The team proceeded towards Comilla from Daudkandi to look at the river connectivity with the neighbouring country India. The road to Comilla through N1 seemed very well constructed and convenient to travel.

Upon reaching the city of Comilla, the team visited the Land Customs Station (LCS) in the place called Bibir Bazar, which is near the Indian border. Upon reaching the border, it was evident that trade commenced majorly through the road.

The river route remains underutilised when it comes down to trade and connectivity with the neighbouring country. But the good thing is, a new river port was recently inaugurated near Bibir Bazar. An Indian vessel was brought in for a successful trial run. But the inherent problem with the route is the navigability crisis; hence a lot of work needs to be done to make this route fully functional.

The major export through this route is cement. Import through this route is currently limited. Customs officials remain hopeful that trade through this route will significantly increase once the river port becomes functional.



Bangladeshi trucks in Sonamura (India)

It was also mentioned that the problem with electricity in the area is becoming a concern due to various construction works in nearby areas. The customs station has a quarantine facility but no digital weight scale platform. With all these observations, the team moved back to the previous station of Daudkandi.

Illegal Occupation of the Gumti river

After taking another visit to the Gumti river port in Daudkandi, it was observed and verified by the locals that the river is losing its area over time due to several structures being constructed illegally adjoining the river bank. Nowadays, sand is being stored on the banks of the river for illegal occupation. As a reason, the river is losing its natural flow and has a chance of getting dried up soon.



Part of the dried Gumti River occupied with sand mound

Stakeholder consultations

After the visit to the river port and the LCS, consultation meetings were held with various stakeholders, such as the Upazilla Chairman, the Mayor, vessel operators, importers, residents, and journalists. People from various sectors are aware of some of the region's recent major trade and connectivity development. However, the lack of coordination between different stakeholder authorities creates many informational gaps and mismanagement concerning the region's development. The full potential of the region is not being utilised yet.

Despite this, the river port area sees many migrant workers due to the availability of work throughout the whole season. Industrialisation can open doors to job opportunities in the region and adjoining areas.

Women's participation in trade and allied services in the region are mostly limited to the grassroots levels. Lack of security, information and financial facilities holds back women from actively participating in cross-border trade. The building of a gender-inclusive infrastructure and cheap financing facilities should encourage more women to participate in trade.



Consultation with the Upazila Chairman

For an Inclusive Development

Stakeholders at the grassroots were often deprived of the benefits of the development in their region. Dockworkers in the port do not get any protective equipment or gear while working in a potentially hazardous environment. There were several reports of workers getting sick while working long hours in the middle of the coal dumps under the roasting heat of sun.

There is an absence of sufficient medical facilities in the port and required medical attention was not given to the workers who fall sick. Each day, the workers work under such harsh conditions to exchange an inadequate compensation of only BDT 400-500 per day.

There are unheard demands from the vessel employees too. Many of them claimed not to get enough compensation for cargo transportation from one place to another. Moreover, the local transgender community extorts money from these vessels, which is a significant concern in the area.

The inclusion of transgender people in new development initiatives can kill two birds with one stone. A common and regular platform is needed to enable the people at the grassroots to interact with the respective authorities regarding their developmental needs and concerns associated with any developmental initiatives.



Discussion with the locals in the area

It was observed that most consultations are held at the policymaker level without much representation from the people of the local community. Change in this direction by grassroots level consultation, engagement and awareness generation can allow these local working-class people to reap the full benefits of development in the BBIN sub-region.

It is hoped that the M-connect project will help bring these findings from the periphery to the central level, making the development initiatives centering on the Daudkandi and its suburb more inclusive.

With the support of



Asian Development Bank