

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



Joining Dots • Connecting People • Shared Prosperity

Field Diary – Dhubri-Jogighopa-Guwahati Landscape

Kajal Sharda

Research Associate, CUTS International

About the Field Visit

Under the project titled '[Enabling a Political Economy Discourse for Multi-modal Connectivity in the BBIN Sub-region \(M-Connect\)](#)', a team from [CUTS International](#) comprising Arnab Ganguly, Sayandeep Chattopadhyay and Kajal Sharda visited Dhubri, Jogighopa, and Guwahati in Assam in November 2020.

The purpose of the visit was to understand the ground realities and challenges faced in multi-modal transportation and logistics in the region.



Map of the locations

Strategic Inland Waterways locations in lower Assam

CUTS team landed at Bagdogra airport and stayed for a night in Cooch Behar- a city in the foothills of the Eastern Himalayas. After the night halt, the team left for identified locations in Assam.

The team visited Dhubri, Jogighopa and Guwahati for a week and interviewed a diverse group of individuals. These locations are integral to the National Waterway-2 (Brahmaputra River) and are strategic in terms of the multimodal connectivity initiatives being pursued by India and other countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) sub-region.

The team was excited to visit the locations as a Multi-modal Logistics Park (MMLP) is being constructed at Jogighopa. It is also included as a Port of Call in the Second Addendum under Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT) between India and Bangladesh. Dhubri and Pandu are also Ports of Call between India and Bangladesh under PIWTT.

The underutilised trade via Dhubri

Dhubri is a small town situated on the banks of Brahmaputra. There are no big industries in Dhubri and it is primarily dependent on agricultural and handicraft products. Dhubri is clogged with narrow roads and high traffic congestion. Elevated road connecting highways for approaching the Dhubri terminal to bypass the town could act as a big relief to reduce the traffic congestion on the roads of Dhubri.

Beginning with the field survey, the team went to the Customs office in Dhubri. Officials from this office visit different places in the region for inspection including the Dhubri Port and Jogighopa.

There were stacks of files and the use of modern-day technology was very limited because of the lack of 24/7 electricity and internet.

The team visited the Inland Waterways Authority of India office. We could notice the empty warehouses and only see stone chips and boulders around in the open yard. The loading and unloading was done through JCB or were done manually. Consignments from Bhutan, destined for Bangladesh are loaded in the vessels in Dhubri. There were many small mechanised boats carrying passengers and cargo.



Customs Division, Dhubri

The team noticed the infrastructure in the Dhubri Customs office as well as the river port was not gender-inclusive. Infact, both the buildings did not even have separate functional washrooms for women. Additionally, there were no female officials present in these locations.



**Discussion with a river pilot
in IWAI office, Dhubri**

We understood management and operational aspects such as the unavailability of least available depth (2.8m till B border in the survey conducted during 09.11.2020 to 13.11.2020) through the NW-2 route.

The team also met a river pilot who was able to state the depth of the river by its color. He briefed us about signaling, night navigation along the unpredictable and mighty river Brahmaputra as well as the time taken to load un-load, crew, markings, etc. The team also got a chance to do a boat ride.

The next day, the team got an opportunity to meet an exporter whose firm is registered in his wife's name. He opined that the business, in the beginning, gives losses and then gradually starts generating profit. He was, however, not happy with the officials involved. "The time taken for the goods to reach their destination is very unpredictable due to challenges of depth, detention, etc.," he said.



Discussion with wholesalers

Before leaving Dhubri, the team met wholesalers and boatmen of the region. *Mahajans* aggregate goods from wholesalers and run their distribution network through boats of about 20-30 tonne capacity. More than a thousand small mechanised boats ferry passengers and cargo from Dhubri and onwards to South Salmara and Hatsingmari. A lot of people are dependent on this chain.



Discussion with boatmen

The team realised the need to accommodate these people with more livelihood opportunities as the plying of big vessels and barges through this river may strip them from their current livelihood. The people have lack of job opportunities available and therefore they migrate to other cities in search of jobs. Dhubri, with its strategic location has the potential to provide a lot of job opportunities and encourage reverse migration.

India's first Multi-modal Logistics Park under construction

From Dhubri, the team headed towards Guwahati, with a plan of visiting Jogighopa on the way. Jogighopa is a small town located on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra River in the Bongaigaon district of Assam. A major rail-cum-road bridge, Naranarayan Setu links Jogighopa to the southern bank of the Brahmaputra.

The team visited the site of the MMLP at Jogighopa which is a very strategic location due to proximity to states of Northeast India, as well as with Bhutan and Bangladesh. Once completed and operationalised, it has the potential to resolve connectivity and logistics issues and would provide a platform for regional integration through enhanced trade.



Site of Multimodal Logistics Park

A vast beautiful site will now be converted into a logistics park and the construction work has started. It is expected to generate employment opportunities for a large number of people in the region. The park is envisioned to provide direct air, road, rail and waterways connectivity to the people.

The team reached Guwahati at night and from experience, it was felt that there is a serious need of decongesting the roadways in Assam!

Guwahati – the Northeast Hub

On reaching Guwahati, the team visited the Inland Water Transport office and had very informative discussions with officials. It was pointed out that the major issue faced while using waterways from this location is a shortage of barges, the cost advantage of Bangladeshi barges, empty vessels from northeast India, etc.

The Government of Assam has taken up a project titled “Assam Inland Water Transport Project” to transform the quality of inland water transport services and integrate high-quality passenger and vehicle ferry services for which Assam Inland Water Transport Society has been set up.

The team was also informed about the upcoming scheme “Jibon Dinga”, under which the State government is providing modern boat engines at a 70 percent subsidised rate.



Assam Inland Water Transport Development Society



Amingaon Inland Container Depot

The next visit was to the Pandu Port and Amingaon Inland Container Depot (ICD). The Pandu port has opened a new route for transporting goods in Assam and Northeast India with sufficient infrastructure.

In the Amingaon ICD, mainly tea is transported through rail by Concor. The team understood the scope of expansion and possibilities through which various products can be aggregated and exported through this ICD.

The team also met representatives from the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry, Assam Development Council, and Media.

These discussions helped the team to better understand the bottlenecks in increasing the trade through waterways for decongesting trade from the roadways. Though the interest is the same, there is a lack of consultations and deliberations. From interactions with stakeholders, it appears that there is a lack of coordination between the Centre, state and private stakeholders before coming up with infrastructure initiatives. Furthermore, to encourage inclusive development, the participation of women in trade and supply chains should be increased. There is a need for awareness and vocational training.

Overall, it was a great experience and learning on connectivity issues at the ground level. The team hopes that the various initiatives by the government and the M-Connect project bring a positive change in the lives of the people of the region and eventually the BBIN sub-region.

With the support of



Asian Development Bank