

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



Joining Dots • Connecting People • Shared Prosperity

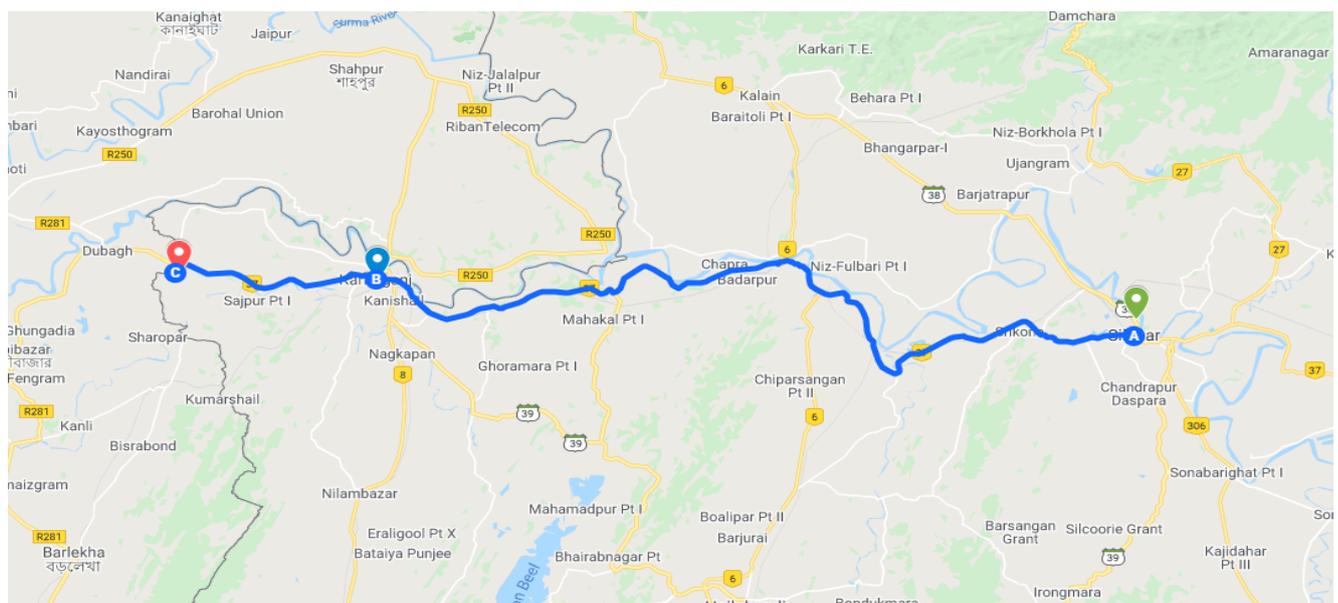
Field Diary Karimganj: A Strategic Location for India-Bangladesh Trade

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About the Field Visit

Under the project titled '[Enabling a Political Economy Discourse for Multimodal Connectivity in the BBIN Sub-region \(M-Connect\)](#)', a team of [CUTS International](#) comprising Deepmala Ghosh and Jithin Sabu from Jaipur visited Karimganj, in January 2021. The purpose was to assess and investigate cross-border trade infrastructure and trade logistics between India and Bangladesh through Karimganj. Another purpose was to conduct stakeholder consultations to explore ways and means to promote multimodal connectivity in the BBIN sub-region.



Locations Visited

Silchar Airport

The team landed at Silchar airport, which is approximately 80kms away from Karimganj. To reach Karimganj, the team travelled by road, which was extremely tiresome. Few stretches along the National Highway (NH37) had potholes and few road stretches were under construction.

The area has loose soil that makes it dusty and causes difficulty in breathing. Silchar and Karimganj are relatively warmer. Though the road connecting Silchar and Karimganj is a national highway, the maintenance of the road is abysmal. The team encountered a lot of traffic on their way. There is a flyover under construction, known as the Srikona flyover, to reduce road congestion.

Silchar has a railway connection with Agartala and Guwahati. Trains to and from Guwahati are not yet functional, but goods and passenger trains are running between Silchar and Agartala.

Location's Significance in the Context of Barak Valley

The team reached Karimganj, which is an integral part of the Barak valley. The Barak River enters the district through the north-eastern side near the Badarpur ghat to Haritkar near Bhanga. From Haritkar, the river flow gets divided into two parts, namely Kushiara (the old name of Kushiara is Bagali) and Surma. Karimganj is located on the banks of the Kushiara River. This river connects Karimganj with Kolkata via Bangladesh.

Besides Kushiara, two other rivers- namely Longai and Shingla flow through the district. Geographically, the district is bounded on the north by Bangladesh and Cachar district, south by Mizoram and Tripura; on the west by Bangladesh and Tripura; and on the east Hailakandi district. Karimganj district is shut in between two hill ranges Chhatachura range and Patharia range.

In addition, there is a third hill Duhalia range, which runs through the southern part of the district. The Chhatachura range starts from the south-east border, forming the whole length of the border with Hailakandi district. The Patharia range marks the western border of the district, forming a border with Bangladesh. The third range that crosses the district is the Duhalia range, also known as the Pratapgarh range.

The team organised stakeholder consultations with customs officials, border security forces and local level associations.



Karimganj entrance

Sutarkandi: Border Trade Centre

The team visited the Integrated Check Post (ICP) managed by Land Port Authority of India (LPAI) on the first day of their field survey. The ICP is located in Sutarkandi, 48kms from Karimganj. Two national highways run through Sutarkandi, NH-151 and NH-7, which connects Sutarkandi with Karimganj and Sylhet. The road towards the ICP is a national highway that is ill-maintained and had potholes. The movement of vehicles was challenging in this route.

The Sutarkandi ICP was a Land Customs Station (LCS) operating under the Commissionerate of Customs, North Eastern Region, Shillong. The LCS was declared as a 'Border Trade Centre' of South Assam In January 2009. In 2018, this LCS was proclaimed as an ICP.

It is noted that the LCS was used for both commodity and passenger movement. The LCS, till the time it was operational, had a separate office building for Customs and Immigration purposes. The building had a parking lot, baggage scanner, fax and computer facility, powerhouse, and trans-shipment platform, as other facilities required to facilitate movement. Since this land port is now being upgraded into an ICP, a number of facilities, such as CCTV cameras, scanners, and parting facilities, are still in the process of upgradation.



Sutarkandi LCS



Sutarkandi ICP

Mahisashan: A Border Railway Station

The Mahisashan Railway station is an old abandoned station with a broad-gauge railway track connecting Karimganj on the Indian side with Shahabajpur in the Sylhet district of Bangladesh. It can be noted that this track joined India to Myanmar through Moreh-Tamu, about 400 km away from Karimganj, in the pre-independence years.

Presently not operational, the track connected India with Bangladesh through the Mahisashan-Sahabajpur route and was used during the pre-independence period. To connect with Shahabajpur in Bangladesh, it requires just a 50-100 meters track to be converted from Meter to Broad Gauge. Mahisashan can also be connected to Akhuara on the Bangladesh side.

Presently goods reaching Karimganj from Guwahati, Agartala, is unloaded at a station 15 minutes away from Karimganj, known as Bhanga.



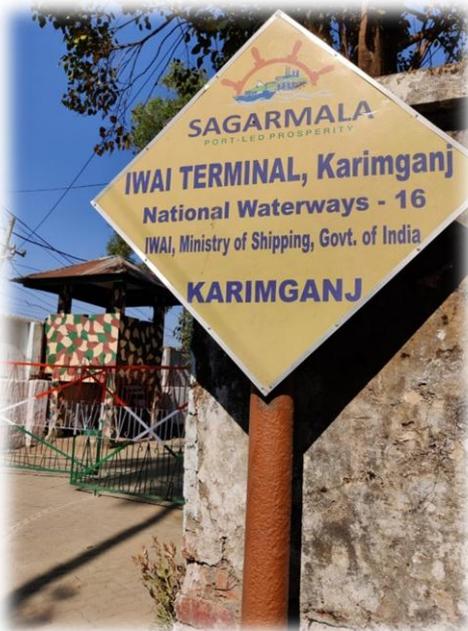
The abandoned Mahisashan Railway Station

Inland Waterways Authority of India Terminal

The team visited the IWAI terminal on the next day of their field survey. There were a closed warehouse and an IWAI vessel with a container handler facility. The steamer ghat was guarded by BSF personnel. Through this steamer, ghat has only a small quantity of fresh fruits and ginger are exported to Bangladesh. Coal and Limestones are also sent to Bangladesh through the riverine route. The team was informed that during the COVID period, no movement of goods took place through this port.



The IWAI container handler



IWAI Terminal and Warehouse

Interaction with exporter association and municipality chairman

The team met with the exporter association of Karimganj on the second day of their stay. They were informed about the goods exported and imported from Karimganj. Only OGL goods are shipped to Bangladesh. It was emphasised that by few other stakeholders that officials are encouraging more imports because of the unavailability of a sustainable ecosystem. Emphasis was given on the fact that water transport is the best transportation mode as it involves

comparatively lower cost than roadways. The journey across the district is not smooth, as there are allegations of extortion of money from truck drivers by some vested interest people at every entry and exit point in all districts.

The team was informed that there are very few women involved in cross-border from this district. Even the labourers at the ICP showed disagreement with women being involved in loading/unloading activities. They were of the opinion that women would not be able to lift heavily weighted materials and will create unwanted delays and obstacles.

We also had an interaction with one of the exporters and former chairman of Karimganj Municipality. He highlighted the fact that the Government of India must provide some additional benefits to the exporters. "At least 20-30 percent subsidy must be given to Northeast on goods transportation. The Northeastern states are the most ignored states by the government."

