

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



Joining Dots • Connecting People • Shared Prosperity

Field Diary

Matarbari Sea Port: Along the Asian Highway Corridor connecting East Asian Countries with South Asian Sub-region

Shuvro Guda

*Senior Research Associate and Md. Masudul Hasan,
Research Associate, Unnayan Shamannay*

About the Field Visit

Unnayan Shamannay, in collaboration with CUTS International is conducting a study named 'Enabling a Political Economy Discourse for Multimodal Connectivity in the BBIN Sub-region (M-Connect)'. A team from Unnayan Shamannay, Bangladesh, comprising Robert Shuvro Guda and Md. Masudul Hasan visited the Matarbari, Dhalghata, Moheshkhali, Cox's Bazar, and Chattogram areas under Chattogram Division in February 2021.

The main objectives of the field visit were to assess the current status of the development of the Matarbari port areas and its surrounding hinterland connectivity situation in the context of multi-modal connectivity initiatives. In addition, a local-level stakeholder consultation was conducted focusing on the development of Matarbari port. Its future potentials for connectivity in the regional landscape were also assessed.



Location Visited

The team visited the Matarbari Deep Sea Port areas to understand that the improved hinterland connectivity with the rest of the country via road, rail and river will make the location a commercial hub for the future. The under development Matarbari seaport will be a major stepping stone for developing connectivity between East Asian countries and the BBIN sub-region in South Asia. The benefits of the Matarbari seaport can be shared with the North Eastern States, especially Mizoram, Tripura, Assam and Meghalaya. Besides that, Nepal and Bhutan can also have the potential opportunities from the coming port.

Moving from Dhaka to Chittagong to Moheshkhali

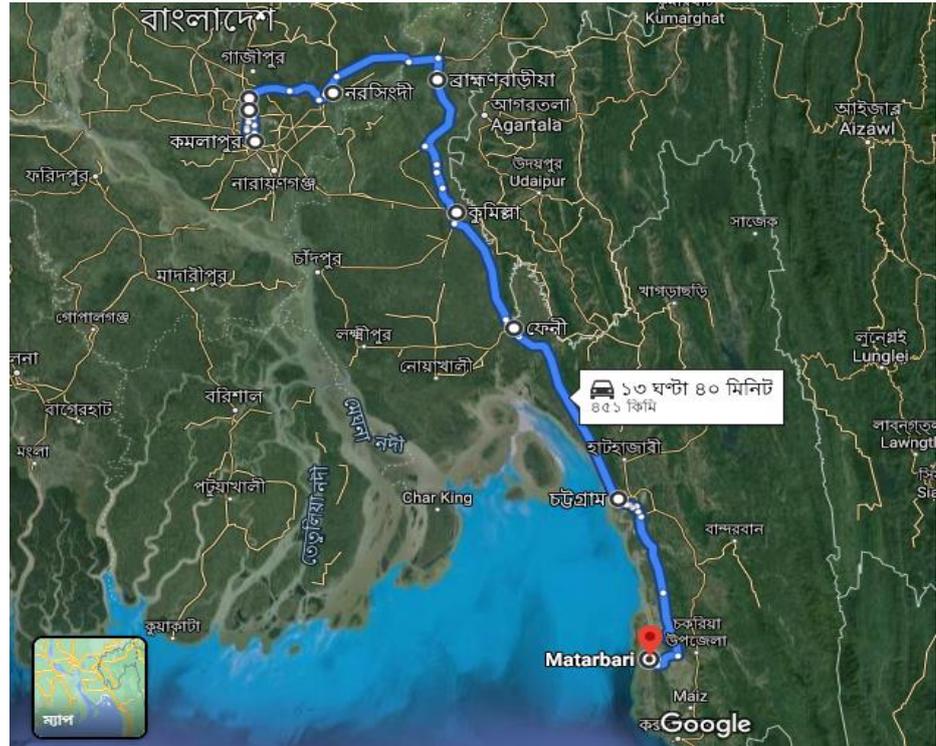
The team started their journey from Dhaka by Railway to observe the railway connectivity situation. It took about 6 hours to reach Chattogram city by trains. The distance between the two points is about 321 km, while the distance is much short when one uses roadways from Dhaka to Chattogram. However, both railway and roadway take almost the same hours to reach Chattogram port city.

Upon reaching Chattogram, the team started towards Bodorkhali Upazila, about 3 hours far from Chattogram city. From Bodorkhali, it took about an hour and a half to reach the Matarbari union. Matarbari is a Union in the northwestern part of Maheshkhali Upazila in Cox's Bazar district in the Chattogram Division. Maheshkhali-Badarkhali Matarbari Road is the most crucial route in this region. Mainly, CNG, battery-powered auto-rickshaws ply on this route. The Matarbari port is about 8 km away from the centre of the Matarbari union.

Current Inland Connectivity Options towards Matarbari

There is no direct bus service from Dhaka to Matarbari. The most convenient way to reach Matarbari is by boarding a bus destined for Cox's Bazaar, getting off at Chakoria and then taking a CNG from Chakoria to reach Matarbari.

There is also no direct rail service to Matarbari from Dhaka as of now, and one has

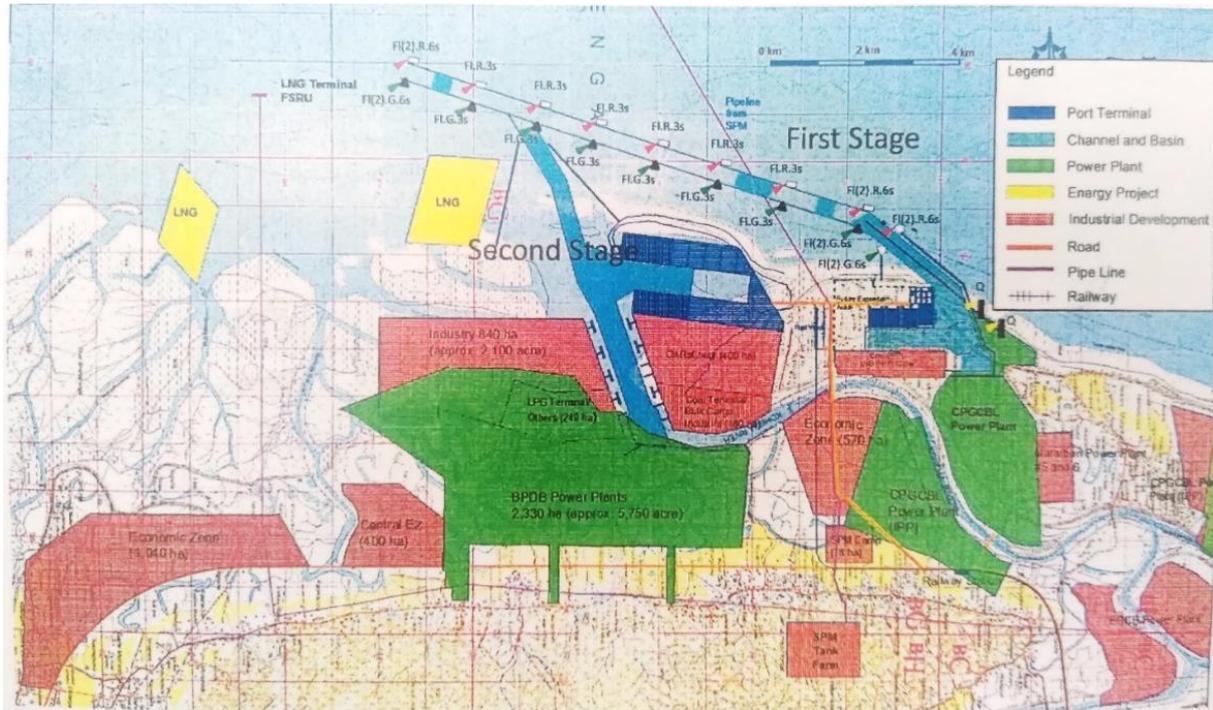


to board on the train from Kamalapur Railway Station, Dhaka and get off at Amanat Shah New Bridge Station. From there, one has to take a CNG autorickshaw or hop on a local bus to Badarkhali. From Badarkhali, it takes another CNG autorickshaw to reach Matarbari.

Ongoing Development Works in the Matarbari Area

When the team reached to Matarbari areas, it feels like the busiest place. Lots of development works around the Matarbari areas were ongoing. An electricity generation hub is planned and 'Matarbari 2*600 MW Ultra Super Critical Coal-Fired Power Project is one. The coal-powered electricity generation plant is being constructed by Coal Power Generation Company Bangladesh Limited (CPGCBL) with the financial and technical support of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Bangladesh office. The team learned from the local representative that the other two power plant projects are ongoing nearby the Matarbari areas.

Besides that, a channel from the Bay of Bengal to Matarbari Power Plant has already been dug. The required equipment for the Power Plant Project has already been carrying through the channel to Matarbari Power Plant. However, the construction of the port structure was not started when the team visited the place. The first vessels carrying the equipment came to the Matarbari power plant in December 2020.



Draft Design of Matarbari Deep Sea Port

The power plant falls under two unions, namely Matarbari and Dholghata Union. CPGCBL officials informed that the project would feature Ultra-super Critical Technology. Two steam turbines capable of producing 600 MW electricity each will be installed in Matarbari. Matarbari Power Plant will use coal as the raw material to produce electricity; thus, a channel was dug in the sea to facilitate the movement of coal-laden ships into the power plant port.



Matarbari Port Channel (Left) and Port Areas (Right)

Initially, it was planned that the port would only be used to transport coal used in the power plant, but later it was transformed into a dual-purpose one with the unique feature of being a deep seaport.

Livelihoods of the Matarbari Port Surrounding Areas

Matarbari was known for its vast land for salt production. Matarbari Union covers an area of 24.43 square km with a population of nearly sixty thousand people. They are primarily involved in salt farming, aquaculture and fishing from the sea. Salt and dried fish (Shutki) are the major products produced in the region. The government has recently acquired a lot of land for coal power plants, earlier used as salt pans and shrimp farms. As a result, a lot of people associated with salt and shrimp farming have become unemployed.

Impact on Local Livelihoods

Due to the specialisation of skills required in coal power projects and deep seaport construction, most of the people of the area could not be employed in these projects. Though the government provided training during their rehabilitation process, it did not help them in practice as the training could not equip them to change the fortunes of the people.

During the project's construction, 14 switch-gates (gates through which seawater was allowed in salt panes) have been closed so that water cannot enter the other salt pans of the union. As a result, salt farming in the entire union is expected to be halted in the near future.

Ordinary people informed that the government had suggested turning uncultivated lands into arable ones.

During the season (in November, December, January and February month), those lands were used for salt farming and for the rest of the year, they used to farm Kailcha (Black Shrimp). Vast portions of land have been acquired for this project. Some even expressed concern about what would happen if more land was acquired in the future.

Moreover, there were various allegations about land price misappropriation during the land acquisition for the power plant. Local government representatives expressed their discontentment over the difference in land compensation rates depending on the land type.

The local people seemed unaware of the damage to the environment coal power plant will cause.

They are not being provided any opportunity in the construction works since they have no experience in it. They are also worried about whether they would be able to join in the future. A lot of work in the project is set to be automated, so there will be no need for more workers.

CPCGBL is paying for the rehabilitation of people. The Land Administration office is paying for the land acquisition. Local people had to go to Cox's Bazaar district to process and collect those payments and that too multiple times. Those whose land was acquired for the project have received compensation, but the promise of jobs has not been implemented. They said the project land was once used for salt and fish farming. Hence, the income that used to be earned at different times of the year has now been completely halted.



Matarbari Coal Power Plant Jetty

Moving towards Cox's Bazar District Centre

The team left Matarbari for Cox's Bazar to seek the opinion of the district administration and road and highways department officials. The team went from Matarbari to Gorakghata Municipality by CNG autorickshaw. They met an official of road and highways at the Gorakghata Municipality.

Maheshkhali has always been a tourist attraction. Coastal Parabon, Sonadia Sea Beach, Adinath Temple are all well established as tourist spots. From Gorakghat, the team took the speedboat and reach Cox's Bazar Municipality areas where the world's longest sea beach is situated.

The team tried to better understand various development projects at Matarbari from District Administration officials, Road and Highways Department officials, Cox's Bazaar Chamber of Commerce representatives and journalists.

Project stakeholders informed that the locals were promised jobs or training to prosper. Many participated in training but have not been able to put that into practice. The land official said that the local people were offered resettlement but preferred cash compensation over land resettlement. Hence the money was handed to them as per their requirements. Moreover, Bangladesh's most significant special economic zone (SEZ) has been planned at Moheshkhali. Bangladesh Economic Zone Authority (BEZA) has already selected the land on which the SEZ is to be constructed.



Gorakghata Jetty

Development Initiatives in the Moheshkhali and Cox's Bazar Areas

Plans are being made to construct various infrastructure projects, including roads and railways in Cox's Bazar district. The construction of various projects has already started, including four economic zones, LNG terminal, three power projects, construction of Sabrang project and eco-tourism on Sonadia Island and rail connectivity project. This will boost tourism and trade in the future. National Highway-1 (N-1) will be connected to Asian Highway, which will be connected with China via Myanmar through this region. The Press Club President spoke about the demand to upgrade the road from Cox's Bazar to Chattogram.

The road from Cox's Bazar to Chattogram is not wide. It passes through several Upazila Centres, which invariably leads to traffic congestion and increased time of travel. Widening the road will significantly reduce the time and cost of transportation.

From Cox's Bazar, one has to reach Chattogram via Ramu Chakoria, Dohazari, Patia. A tunnel is currently being constructed in the Karnafuli River in Chattogram. If this tunnel is constructed, a modern communication system will be established between Dhaka, Chattogram, Cox's Bazar, and a connection formed with the Asian Highway. This 4-lane road tunnel will connect Chattogram Urban center to Anwara Upazila.

Moving towards Chattogram through Asian Highways-41 and Back to Dhaka

The Chairman of S Alam Group, a large industrial conglomerate based in Chattogram, is of the view to place their opinion to policymakers during the formulation of the plan. Various logistics companies usually use Chattogram Port and Deep-Sea Port. He anticipated that government agencies would develop better service to maintain the expected quality.

Port users (Importers and Exporter) feel that Chattogram Port has reached its limit. New ports need to be constructed to keep pace with the way country's economy is developing. Matarbari Deep Sea Port and Patenga Bay Terminal are being built as part of that plan. The Project Director said that there is no opportunity to increase the capacity of Chattogram Port.

Therefore, Matarbari Deep Seaport will play an essential role in maintaining quality service delivery and in solving traffic congestion in the Chittagong port. They also thought that the port would be a gateway for NE India to connect with the rest of the world.

With the support of



Asian Development Bank