

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



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Field Diary

Mongla Sea Port: A Potential Maritime Access Point for Bhutan and Nepal

Ayan Soofi

Research Officer, Unnayan Shamannay, Bangladesh

About the Field Visit

Unnayan Shamannay in association with CUTS International is conducting a study entitled 'Enabling a Political-Economy Discourse for Multimodal Connectivity in the BBIN Sub-region'. As part of the study, Unnayan Shamannay Research Officer Ayan Soofi visited Bagerhat and Khulna in March 2021 to enquire and understand the potential and challenges of incorporating Mongla Seaport as a major hub in the connectivity map of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) sub-region.

Field visit at Mongla Seaport was aimed with a view of providing valuable insights into the unique perspectives of the stakeholders and the ground reality of the multimodal connectivity initiatives undertaken in and around the area and how these initiatives align themselves with the BBIN sub-region's multimodal connectivity requirements.

On the Highway of Development to Khulna

The journey through one of the most sensational roads of Bangladesh starts at the unlikely places of Dhaka, Gulistan Bus Terminal. A shabby little bus terminal owned by Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC) and operated by private bus service companies will surely arouse some scepticism in one's mind about the state of the connectivity of the southwestern section of Bangladesh with the rest of the country.

All doubts will be cleared when the bus departs from the terminal and heads towards the Jatrabari Flyover and Dhaka-Mawa-Bhanga Expressway. It is the first Expressway of Bangladesh and has ushered in a new era of connectivity in Bangladesh.

The Expressway, divided into two sections, has set a new benchmark for the road network in Bangladesh. It will be connected by Padma Bridge when completed.



Dhaka-Mawa-Bhanga Expressway

Khulna: Gateway of the Southwest

Khulna is the third-largest city of Bangladesh and the third-largest economy as well, according to Nominal Gross State Product (NGSP). Mongla Seaport was established to cater to its hinterland in the Khulna district. Since ancient times, Khulna City Corporation was the regional commercial hub of the land and boasted vibrant economic and political history.

It still retains its place as the commercial hub of the southwest region of Bangladesh, with nearly all the prominent businesses, administrators and policymakers of the division stationed at Khulna due to its prominence as divisional capital.

The Road to Mongla

There are two modes of transportations available for passengers to commute from Khulna to Mongla – Bus and Reserved Motorcycle – with the latter being much faster. One has to cross the Rupsha river to reach Mongla from Khulna; the 1.6 km long Khan Jahan Ali Bridge over Rupsha river provides direct road linkage from Khulna to Mongla.

The approach road of the port in its final 20 km stretch provides a grounded experience and perspective about the infrastructural development or the lack of it, which in turn, is hindering trade and connectivity in the region.



Rupsha River Landing Station

Mongla: Mangrove Yet Marine

Despite the plethora of industrial units recently set up on the shore of Pasur river in Mongla, one is constantly reminded of Mongla being the domain of the Sundarbans just after entering Mongla Port. The distinct change in the surrounding atmosphere forces one to think about the importance of the delicate ecological balance of the Sundarbans.

The development agendas surrounding the Sundarbans should be organised keeping a focus on their consequences upon the environment. There are many scopes for regional cooperation to ensure that only environmentally sustainable development initiatives are considered for this location.

41 LPG Factories and 1 Fire Station

Mongla has attracted a lot of LPG factories in recent times, 41 to be exact. Although all these factories deal with highly flammable petroleum substances, there is only one Fire Service and Civil Defence Station in Mongla, which is ill-equipped to deal with any fire outbreak in those factories. Moreover, to make matters graver, all these factories are situated adjacent to each other, instilling fear of a looming catastrophe among the locals.



Omera LPG Factory in Mongla

Port Infrastructure and Stakeholder Consultation

Mongla Seaport is well equipped with physical infrastructure with transit sheds, stuffing and unstuffing shed, warehouses, container yard, reefer plug points, car parking yard and open dumps. The operational efficiency of the Mongla Seaport depends on the cargo and container handling equipment to a great extent.

According to port officials, new machines will be requisitioned soon, as the equipment in question is quite old. Currently, Mongla Port has Mobile Harbour Crane, Straddle Crane, Forklift Various Capacity, Reach Stacker, Mobile Crane, Jetty Deck Crane and Terminal Tractor.

In the Mongla Seaport, consultation sessions were held with Mongla Port Authority and Mongla Customs House officials, Vessel pilots, Port Labourer Association, Mongla Municipality Mayor and Clearing and Forwarding agents. Stakeholders felt that the representation of Mongla Seaport in the national media had quite a negative impact in fully realising its potential.

Due to the nature of the geographical position of the port, it is imperative to understand that dredging should be considered an operational activity of the Mongla Seaport.

The consultations showcased that nearly half of the port employees live in Khulna and commute daily to Mongla for working. It was an eye-opening revelation, which portrayed the extent to which Mongla has failed to lure in and create a sustainable cosmopolitan society characteristic of port areas due to a lack of proper civil amenities and sustainable planning.

Apart from the aspect of speed money, port users complained of a 100 per cent assessment of the cargo in the port, which according to them, eats away precious time that could be better utilised to counter the delay in RO-RO Ferry service to cross the mighty Padma.

Concern regarding the Picnic Spot in Mongla

Some 500 yards from the Mongla Port's jetty, there is a picnic as well as a boat hiring spot. Though public enthusiasm about visiting the port is understandable, it is not sensible for the authorities to allow such an arrangement which can potentially lead to incursions into the port which is a highly sensitive security zone.

During the consultations, locals raised this security concern and felt that a designated tourist spot, controlled and maintained by Mongla Port Authority should be constructed to avoid a potential security threat.

Back to Khulna

After witnessing the visible infrastructural opportunities and building a perspective on the proceedings of the port from Mongla, the quest for knowledge of what the policymakers and influential port users were thinking takes one back to Khulna.



Khulna City Corporation

Interview sessions were held with exporters, importers, chamber of commerce leaders, Khulna City Corporation officials, local activists, Roads and Highways Department officials, Bangladesh Railway officials and ship owners.

Following stakeholders' consultations in Khulna, it was evident that a feeling of renewed optimism has grown among all the stakeholders regarding the development potential of Mongla Seaport and Southwestern Bangladesh as a whole. This renewed optimism can be attributed to the construction of Padma Bridge, which will be a game changer in the region. The people here feel that construction of Padma bridge is a token of a robust political for the development of the region.

Policymakers and government officials opined that the development initiatives undertaken in the region reflect the demand of the people. They are focussing on large-scale development projects in the area. Meanwhile, businesspeople are waiting for the opening of the Padma bridge as it would provide a competitive advantage to Mongla over Chattogram Port.

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