

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



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## Field Diary Sahibganj Corridor: Emerging Inland Waterway to Link India-Bangladesh

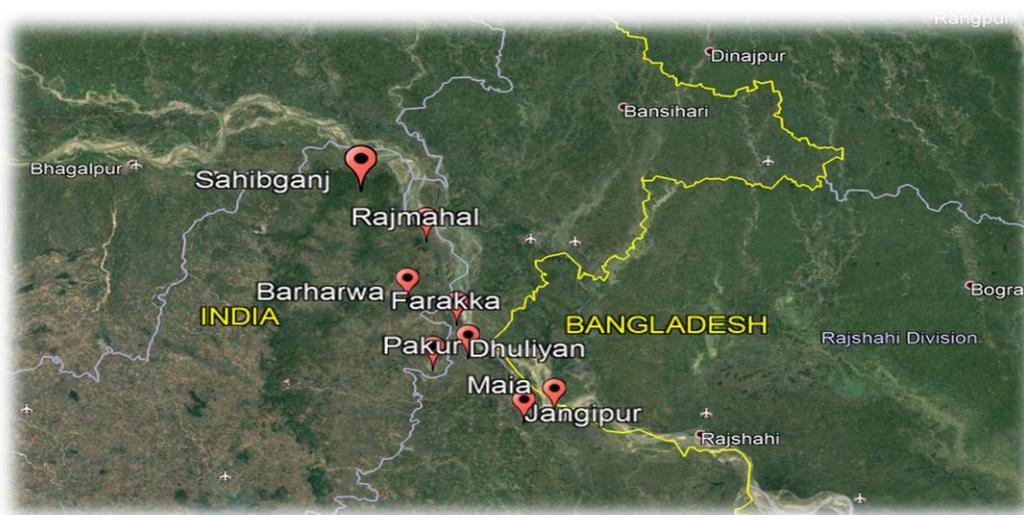
**Kajal Sharda**

*Research Associate, CUTS International*

### 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 from [CUTS International](#), Jaipur, comprising Arnab Ganguly, Sayandeep Chattopadhyay and Kajal Sharda visited Sahibganj, Rajmahal, Barharwa, Pakur in Jharkhand and Farakka, Maia, Dhuliyian and Jangipur in West Bengal in December 2020.

The purpose of the visit was to assess and investigate the trade logistics, infrastructure, transport challenges, and opportunities and conduct stakeholder consultations to explore means and ways to encourage and promote multimodal connectivity among the BBIN countries.



**Locations Visited**

The team visited the Sahibganj corridor with great enthusiasm and eagerness as a Multimodal Terminal has been constructed at a very strategic location under the ambitious Jal Marg Vikas Project. This corridor comprising Rajmahal, Barharwa, Farakka, Pakur, Dhulian, Maia and Jangipur will have immense potential for trade between India and Bangladesh in the future.

The Dhuliyani Rajshahi has been added in the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol Route, whereas Dhuliyani and Maia have been incorporated as the Port of Call in the Second Addendum on Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT) between India and Bangladesh, 2020. To gain insight on the opportunities of Sahibganj and the Dhulian-Rajshahi route, it is also vital to understand its onward connectivity to Pakur, Farakka, Barharwa, Rajmahal, Maia and Jangipur.

## **Towards the Sahibganj Corridor**

The team landed at Kolkata airport, which is more than 280 km from Pakur. Due to the COVID-19 scenario, the team decided to stay at one place throughout the visit. We chose a hotel in Pakur, and visited all the locations by road and returned to Pakur post the daily visits and consultations.



***Model of Sahibganj Multimodal Terminal, IWAI Office, Sahibganj***

The team visited the Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) offices in Sahibganj and Farakka. While interacting with officials, the team understood how the terminal and other infrastructure could decongest the district's busy roads.

Other than stone chips, fly ash and coal, china sand and silica sand have the potential to be transported through waterways. Transportation of maize, mango, banana, pulses and fox nuts (makhana) through waterways could be promoted.



**Congested roads of the region**

The consultations involved discussions with many exporters along the region. The insights from various exports were intriguing. While some exporters expressed *'the little premium in waterways as movement is not worth the hassles,'* others believed *'it is a game-changer and would reduce the trade cost by half.'*

The team was informed that the exporters wished to use the rail connectivity. However, the availability of rakes provided by the government makes it difficult for the exports to utilise railways.

In comparison, in the case of transportation through trucks, it is observed that the rent-seeking behaviour of officials is relatively high. Apart from this, there is a persistent detention cost of vehicles that increases the total transaction cost in roadways. Besides, there is an additional cost to exports through roadways in a considerable detention cost.

Despite such challenges, little to no exporters find incentives to switch from roadways to waterways/railways for transportation. However, some exporters believe that using waterways is economically more viable for their goods given the proper infrastructure and navigability.

## **Infrastructure Facilities, Problems and Prospects**

The team visited the Multimodal terminal in Sahibganj. It has a jetty of 270 m length x 25 m width with berthing and mooring facilities.



***Facilities at Sahibganj Multimodal terminal for loading-unloading***

A Freight village is also being constructed near the terminal and Roll-on/roll-off (Ro-Ro)<sup>1</sup> services starting soon in Samdaghat.

There is enough infrastructure and facilities provided in Sahibganj MMT. The low-hanging fruit is exporters need to be made aware of the facilities available to them and the usage of these facilities should be promoted.

For inclusive development, not just economic growth, people at the ground level should benefit from these facilities. Making massive investments solely for the purpose of infrastructural development will not suffice. Awareness generation and capacity building is pre-requisite for the successful utilisation of infrastructure that has been created.

To understand the same, the team had discussions with several people of the region, including BSF, truck drivers, local businessmen and fishermen. The team's interaction and observations reveal that the representation of women in trade in this belt is meagre. Hence, appropriate measures should be adopted to enhance their participation. Additionally, border security also needs to be increased at this route.



***Dysfunctional Jangipur Lock***

The team also visited the Jangipur lock, which is now dysfunctional (justifies its name!) but needs to be developed to connect Sahibganj with Jogighopa and the Dhulian-Rajshahi route.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.marineinsight.com/types-of-ships/what-are-ro-ro-ships/>

## Reducing Distance and Cost



*Discussion with truck drivers using RO-RO services of Rajmahal-Manikchak*

Waterways is a time and cost effective modes of transportation. The Inland Waterways of India is underutilised and can act as 'Natural Highways' by reducing the distance and time between origin and destination of goods.

One such example is the Rajmahal-Manikchak Ro-Ro services. There are four barges, which ply between Rajmahal and Manikchak between 6 am to 6 pm. One barge has a capacity of loading seven to eight trucks of 50 tonnes each capacity and takes three to four hours for a round trip.

For example, a truck from Teenpahar to reach Gazole will have to cover 105 km if the road route is taken. The distance reduces significantly if the truck comes Rajmahal through the road and uses the RO-RO facility to reach Manichak and takes the road route to Gazole after that. Similarly, there is a RO-RO facility, which connects Sahibganj and Manihari Ghat, West Bengal.

## Increasing Job Opportunities

Opening up new infrastructure and routes are anticipated to the way for increased job opportunities in the region. For the same purpose, Maia has been added as a Port of call in the India Bangladesh protocol route. Maia is majorly dependent on fish cultivation. Successful transit hubs often grow from fishing villages to port towns.



*Discussion with Chairman, Lalgola Padma Fishermen Community*

Fishermen collect fish worth around Rs 400-1,000 and sell in the wholesale market near Lalgola, Gabtola, which goes to Kolkata, Behrampore and Howrah. These fishermen are generally sole earners in the family of around five people and have an average per month income of Rs 8,000-9,000.

The discussion with fishermen revealed that there exists a lack of knowledge and awareness among fishermen regarding trade through waterways. They expressed that they would be willing to shift to trade and related practices if there are increased income benefits for them. The employment in the region would increase significantly as the people are looking at the project with high hopes.

## Reduces Pollution Emission



*Mines and crusher unit in outskirts of Sahibganj*

The environment implications of the practices in the stone belt corridor are severe. The people face problems of breathing and many suffer from tuberculosis. Transportation via roadways adds to this pollution. If the transportation diverges from roadways to waterways, the pollution level would decrease and benefit the local people. Also, the congested roads cause high chances of accidents in the town roads, which might reduce due to lesser traffic.

The field visits finally came to a close after a week and the team hit the road from Pakur to Kolkata. Inland waterways in the region has a scope of utilisation for the whole region as it has several advantages. Such developments are, however, likely to adversely affect the livelihood of truck drivers and landowners.

Numerous measures have been initiated and a few are being processed in Sahibganj for the regional integration in the BBIN countries. Sahibganj is located close to the Siliguri corridor and has the potential to be transformed into a transit hub for commodities and people to and from mainland India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. Sahibganj is also included in "The Transformation of Aspirational District Programme" of NITI Aayog. The team hopes that these initiatives and the M-Connect project contribute significantly to the lives of the region's people and the BBIN sub-region thereafter.

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