

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



Joining Dots • Connecting People • Shared Prosperity

Field Diary - Siliguri Corridor

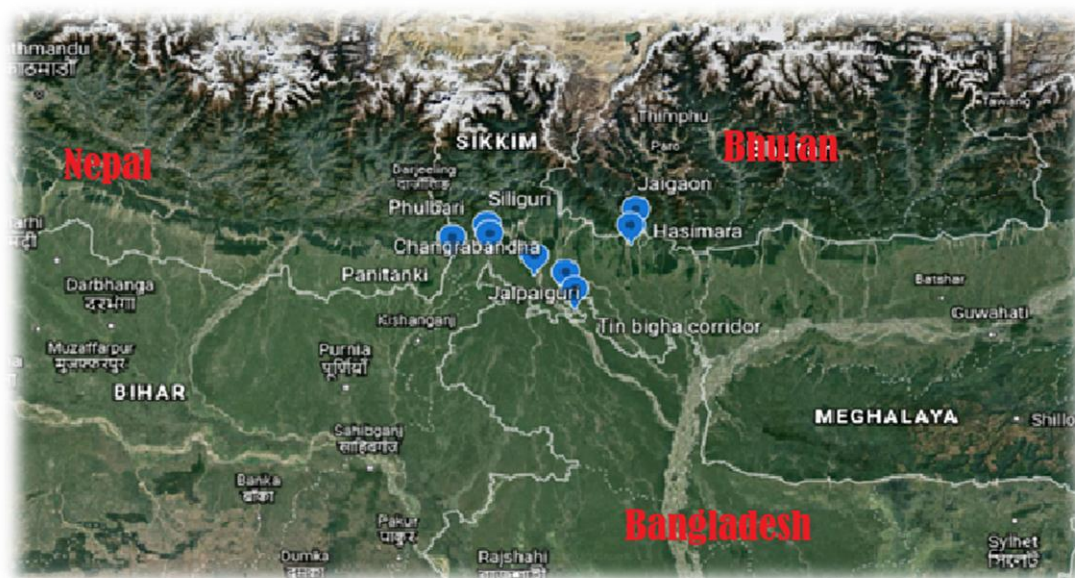
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About the Field Visit

Under the project titled '[Enabling a political economy discourse for multimodal connectivity in the BBIN sub region \(M-Connect\)](#)', a team from [CUTS International](#) comprising Jithin Sabu, Sumanta Biswas and Shaswata Mukherjee visited Siliguri, Jalpaiguri, Panitanki, Jaigaon, Hasimara, Changrabandha, Phulbari and Tin Bigha in West Bengal, in November 2020.

The purpose was to assess and investigate the infrastructure, trade logistics along with doing stakeholder consultations for exploring ways and means to encourage and promote multimodal connectivity among BBIN countries. Major observations and experiences of the CUTS team during the visit are summarised below.



Map of the locations

Towards the Chicken's Neck Corridor

The team visited Siliguri with great enthusiasm and eagerness, as it is situated at a very strategic location, sharing boundaries with Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and China. The Siliguri corridor is a 22 Km wide corridor in the Indian state of West Bengal which connects the mainland India with Northeast India.

The team landed at Bagdogra airport, which is 10 km from Siliguri. The mind refreshing tea gardens, which are very common in the region, welcomed us to the Asian Highway 2 which passes through the airport.



A Tea Garden in North Bengal

Inland Container Depot in Siliguri

The Inland Container Depot (ICD) in Siliguri, developed by the consortium of Pristine Logistics and Hindustan Dockyard on the land given by Siliguri-Jalpaiguri Development Authority (SJDA), was the first destination after landing in Siliguri.



Entry of the ICD in Siliguri

The ICD which is spread around 29 acres of land has rail and road linkages and is expected to be fully functional by the end of 2020. Even though the letter of award was given in 2015, the ICD is not fully operational till now. Disputes between SJDA and the Railways Department regarding the land given for the construction of ICD delayed the process.¹

Stakeholder Consultations

After the ICD visit, consultation meetings were held with various stakeholders, such as the Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, North Bengal (FOCIN), Siliguri



In discussion with the Siliguri Road Transport Association

Road Transporters Association, various Block Chamber of Commerce, Siliguri Industrial Estate Development Authority (SIEDA), residents and journalists from the region.

People from various sectors are aware of some of the recent major trade and connectivity developments in the region, even

though informational gaps exist. There was uniformity in the opinion that the full potential of the region is not utilised yet. Many people are moving from this region in search of jobs to various other places.

If the full potential of the region in trade and connectivity is tapped, then the outward migration can be prevented which can lead to reverse migration.

The representation of women in trade and allied services is very low. Various reasons, such as the absence of information and the technical knowhow with poor financing facilities are contributing among many other reasons to the low presence of women in the sector. Necessary capacity building and awareness generation complemented by cheaper financing facilities will bring more women to the sector.



In conversation with a local trader's association

¹ <https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/railway-terminates-sjda-lease/cid/1524489>

The marvellous taste of sweets received during the stakeholder consultations made us think about the possibilities of exporting these regional cuisines. If the people of the region are given training in marketing of their local products, it will bring revolutionary changes in the cottage industries sector of this region.



Sweets of North Bengal

Congestion on Roads

Roads in Siliguri are very narrow at many places and congestion on the road is very common. During the meeting with SJDA, it was understood that the unavailability of



Traffic jam in a congested road in Siliguri

land is the one major issue that blocks the widening of roads and construction of parallel ones. But SJDA has some plans to reduce the traffic congestion in the Siliguri-Jalpaiguri area which includes making a Mass Rapid Transport System.

The team, after knowing about the land availability constraints in the Siliguri corridor, was wondering why India cannot make an alternative corridor through Tetulia Upazila of Bangladesh like the Teenbigha corridor. After all, this demand has been there for a long time.

SJDA is developing a Centre for Perishable Cargo on its land beside the Bagdogra airport by joining hands with State Food Processing Industries and Horticulture Department. This is an important facility that will boost the trade of the region in perishable goods, such as fruits and vegetables.

Towards the Borders

After the consultations in the Siliguri Jalpaiguri area, the team travelled to various corners of North Bengal where India shares its boundaries with Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh. Developing an idea about the movement of goods and the particular infrastructure connectivity in these border points was the main objective.

The team organised stakeholder consultations at these borders, which included Customs officials, Border Security Forces and local level associations. We visited Panitanki (border with Nepal), Jaigaon, Hasimara and Kokhla Basti (border with Bhutan) and Changrabandha and Phulbari (border with Bangladesh).



Panitanki, India-Nepal Border. View of the Asian Highway 2

The Asian Highways, AH 2 connecting Bangladesh, India and Nepal and AH 48 connecting Bhutan, India and Bangladesh, made journeys comfortable and easy.

It is making the trade and connectivity integration of the BBIN subregion easy. Paperless trade and cross

border cargo movement are improving even though it is not complete.

Critical infrastructure gaps were identified in all these borders and the associated Land Customs Station (LCS) on the Indian side. Gender-inclusive infrastructure planning was missing at almost all locations.

Most of the LCSs are missing the basic requirements such as security cameras and scanners,

weighbridges, restrooms, plant and animal quarantine centres, quality testing labs, etc. Some of them, announced as ICPs long before, are not yet upgraded as ICPs on the ground. Trucks parked on roads due to insufficient parking space was a common picture at all borders.



Trucks parked on road in Changrabandha



A goods train in Hasimara Railway Station

The absence of quality testing labs in the entire North Bengal region is making the exporters and importers dependent on Kolkata. Domination of roadways in cargo movement was visible in the entire region. The border connecting rail lines are single line- non-electrified which prevents the cross border movement of refrigerated cargo through railways.

The rivers in the region were dry as it was the winter season. But these silent dry rivers are very disastrous during the rainy season according to the locals. At the time of the visit *Chhath Puja* rituals were happening on the banks of Mechi river, where recently a new double lane bridge was constructed, with funding from the Asian Development Bank (ADB). However, the Teesta river was flowing in its full beauty in green.



Waterless Mechi river and people performing Chaath Puja rituals in the river bank. The new two-lane bridge above the river can be seen in the picture

The sight of trucks from Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh moving through Indian territory gave a sense of closer sub-regional integration. It also recalled days of the past when all these territories were under a single power.



Teesta River, A view from the Coronation Bridge

For an Inclusive Development

There were voices on the ground that they are not gaining anything and their living expenses are going up because of the developments in their region. One such example was the case of people in Panitanki area. People in Panitanki were promised solution to their drinking water crisis during the time of land acquisition for the construction of Asian Highways (AH) through Panitanki. But after the construction of the road, nothing happened for the development of drinking water facilities according to the local people. Apart from that, there is a toll plaza in the road towards Siliguri from Panitanki, where the local people have to give tolls for all their upward and downward journey. It is increasing the cost of living for the people in this area who depends on Siliguri for almost all their needs. The community playground in Panitanki was also taken away during the construction of Mechi Bridge and AH.

There should be some common and regular platforms that enable the people at the grassroots to interact with the private and public sector stakeholders about their development concerns and needs. The absence of information and proper awareness will lead to resistance. According to the inputs from the field, the way



Discussion with the local people in Changrabandha

discussions go currently, are majorly at higher levels, without much representation of the local people. The people at grassroots should also be consulted and made aware of the benefits which they can get by the development of the BBIN sub-region.

We are leaving this place with a strong belief that this M-Connect project will help to address the issues at ground level and to bring an inclusive development in the subregion.

