

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



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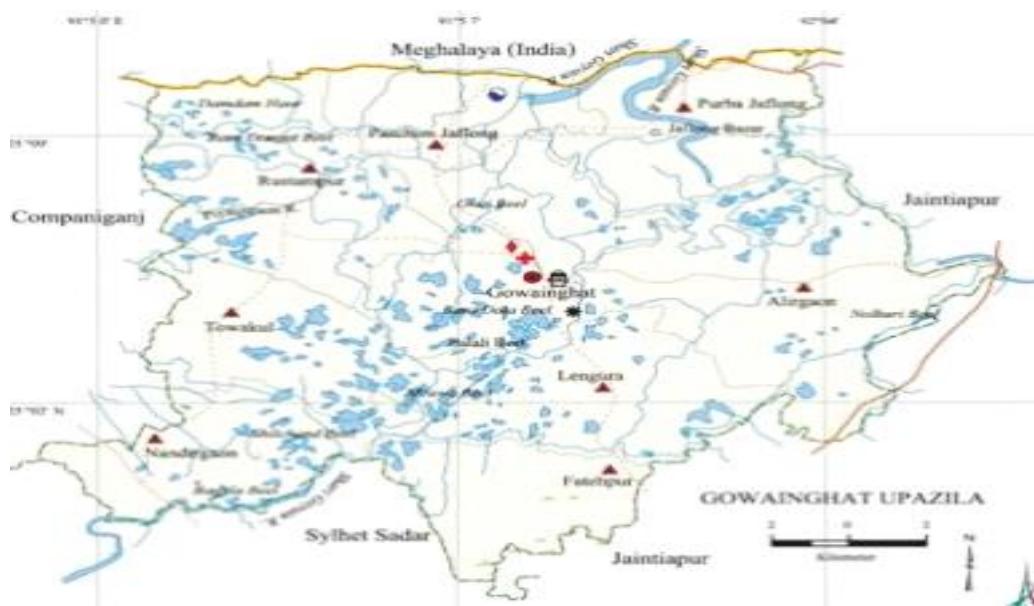
## Field Diary Tamabil Land Port *A Gateway to Northeastern India*

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### About the Field Visit

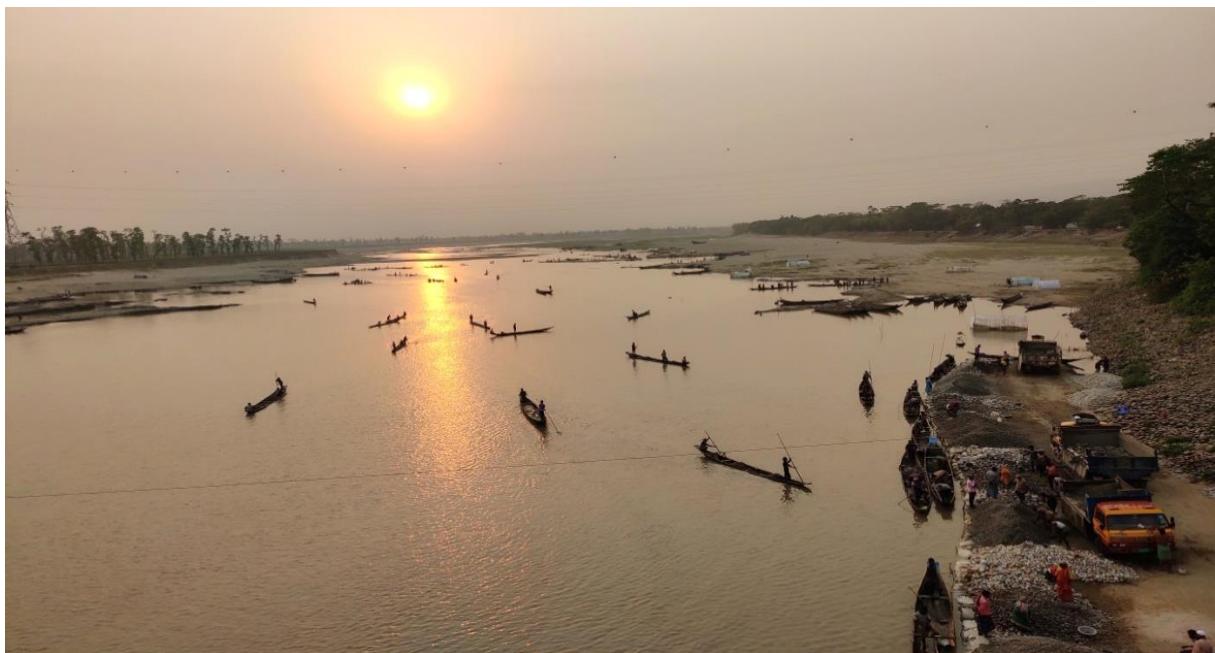
CUTS International, in association with Unnayan Shamannay, is conducting a study entitled, 'Enabling a Political Economy Discourse for Multi-modal Connectivity in the BBIN Sub-region'. As part of the study, Touseef Adnan, Research Officer, Unnayan Shamannay, visited Tamabil and port on the India-Bangladesh border. The purpose of the visit was to assess and investigate the infrastructure, trade logistics, and stakeholder consultations to explore ways and means to encourage and promote multi-modal connectivity among BBIN countries.



Tamabil is a rural hilly area in Gowainghat Upazila in the Sylhet Division. It is located on the border between Bangladesh and the Indian state of Meghalaya. It stands on the Sylhet-Shillong road. Tamabil was turned into a full-functioning land port in 2017. Even though import and export both occur through this port, the import of stone and coal is the dominant activity. Major goods imported through this land port are limestone, bolder stone and coal, although coal import has decreased significantly.

## Sylhet to Tamabil via Jaflong

As the team started the journey from Dhaka to Tamabil, they had to reach Sylhet first as there are no direct ways to reach Tamabil from Dhaka by bus or train. To go to Tamabil from Dhaka, one has to go to Sylhet town by bus or train. Afterward, there is a need to take a local bus or CNG towards Jaflong of Gowainghatupazila to go to Tamabil. Tamabil is 60 km from Sylhet town and 5 km away from Jaflong.



*Surma River, Sylhet*

Sylhet to Tamabil road (Kachpur to Tamabil via Sylhet) up-gradation project has been approved. The highway will be upgraded with slow-moving vehicular traffic (SMVT) lanes as well. The highway project will be implemented by June 2025 at the cost of Tk. 3,586.05 crore.

Once this project is completed, it will establish sub-regional connectivity through the Dhaka-Sylhet-Tamabil route and develop enhanced communication with Tamabil land port, economic and export processing zones. It will also create scopes for tourism development and improve the socio-economic status of the people. Land acquisition for the 4-lane road has been completed.

## Jaflong's Scenic Beauty and Tourism

Located about 55 km north of Sylhet city, Jaflong is famous for the border crossing into India located at Tamabil and stone bed river that flows between the two countries at Jaflong zero point. There are Dawki and Piyain rivers in Jaflong. The crystal-clear water is beautiful and boat rides are available. It is a famous tourist spot in Sylhet where people from all over Bangladesh come to visit the scenic beauty.



Sylhet is naturally very famous for tea gardens. There are tea gardens in Jaflong as well. One of the major issues here is that Jaflong is very dusty due to stone crusher activities. The stone crusher mills need to be shifted to another specific zone to create an environment-friendly tourist spot in Jaflong. The local stone crusher mill owners have agreed to go to a specific zone if necessary facilities are provided. Tourism in Jaflong needs to be well-planned and expanded.



**Dawki River**

People are mainly occupied with tourism business and quarry. Many male and female vendors in the tourist area try to sell certain things to the tourists at various spots in Jaflong.

## Local Businesses depend on Quarry

The livelihoods of the locals are highly depended on quarry and tourism. There are 500-600 stone crusher mills in the Dawki-Tamabil area. About 15-20 labourers work in each crusher mill. Men and women are both seen working as labourers in these mills. Labourers have one work, i.e., loading on to and offloading limestone, stones and coal from trucks in the port area and the private dumping yards.

In recent times, coal imports have decreased a lot. When coal import was frequent, labourers had more work reportedly. The labourers are highly dependent on the stone imports via the Tamabil land port. A lot of migrant workers are there in the area, including female labourers.



**Trucks carry stones**

The work in quarries has been paused now due to the harm it is causing to the environment. But, all the labourers, truck drivers, crusher mills and local businesses somehow depend on the quarries for their livelihood. This has resulted in a bit of distress among locals, as all the quarry activities are stopped. People took loans to buy trucks and crusher machines and, therefore, they are in debt now due to the pause in quarrying.

The area is an Ecologically Critical Area (ECA). The critical area is about 14.93 sq km long, starting from the source of the Dawki River. The Piyain River is outside of the ECA. Now the locals want the government to do proper planning and give permission to start the quarry again outside of the ECA. The locals believe that tourism will not be affected if the quarry is started outside of the ECA from the Piyain River. The air in the areas visited by the tourists will not be polluted as well.



*Trucks carry stones*

## Tamabil Integrated Check Post Facilities

Tamabil-Dawki check post is not well-integrated on the Bangladesh side. Tamabil was declared as a functional land port in 2017. But, there is a lack of necessary facilities and infrastructures in Tamabil. The land port is used mainly for importing various goods like stone and coal.



*Tamabil check post*

Export via this land port is not frequent. Before COVID-19, about 150-200 passengers on average used this route for entering India. A good amount of tourist tax was earned from this check post. Now tourism visa is not active via this check post. But, other visas like student and business visas, etc., were activated in November 2020.

General passengers do not have any place to sit or waiting room facilities in the land port. However, there is a VIP restroom used only by VIPs. There is also a plan of building waiting rooms for the passengers once the Customs office shifts to the new building.

Among various issues, one issue is that one-stop service is missing; passengers suffer a lot as they need to go to various spots to complete the procedures.

Other than that, the infrastructure is not gender-inclusive. There are no restroom/washroom facilities for women. The truck drivers and labourers do not have any resting facilities/toilets as well.

There are electricity and network issues that make the operations harder. There is only one warehouse and no cold storage for perishable goods. The land port area is huge, which should be efficiently used. The buildings and infrastructures need to be developed. There need to be more CCTV cameras for safety and a fire station nearby. A container yard and equipment gears need to be built in the port area. An automated system needs to be developed to make the procedures easier and paperless. ATM booths are needed as there are none in the port area.

## **Stakeholders Consultations**

Consultation meetings were held with various stakeholders, including land port officials, customs officials, exporters and importers association, clearing & forwarding (C&F) agents, truckers association, truck and auto drivers, PurgaJaflong Union Parishad Chairman, Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), labourers association and residents and journalists from that region. It was found that coordination exists between Customs and other important offices.

But, local people are less aware of the region's major trade and connectivity developments, as an information gap exists. All the stakeholders agreed that steps like shifting the crusher mills to a different zone for saving the environment and tourism are necessary. It will contribute significantly to improving the tourism opportunities and the environment of Jaflong.



***Stones are imported***

There is a severe network problem in the area and it is hardly available on some selected sim cards, such as Airtel and Grameen Phone. Tourists face a lot of trouble due to this reason. Trade and a lot of official works are hampered and delayed due to this acute network issue. Necessary capacity building and awareness generation activities complemented by cheaper financing facilities will bring more women to the sector.



*In conversation with the locals*

## For Inclusive Development

There was dissatisfaction among the locals that there are unemployment problems in the region and fewer labour opportunities as imports decreased. Unemployment and drug-related problems will be reduced to a great extent if quarries are resumed. The dust problem should be taken care of.

Lands are hilly and natural calamities like floods, droughts, etc., are frequent here. The lower lands should be used for agricultural production. Many people from this region go to work abroad, mainly in the middle-east, from where they send remittances.

There should be education and skill development facilities for the youths of the locality. Planning of building educational institutions and technical training centres to develop skills for migration is underway. There is a plan to build an economic zone in the region.

Connectivity and communication of Tamabil with the rest of the country is average and needs more development initiatives. Railway connectivity is needed. The local government gives all

kinds of support to the locals who want to do business by providing them with helpful information and support.

There are no major political conflicts or issues in the area, thus making it easier for the locals to start a business. There are some occurrences of truck accidents at night which is a safety issue and needs to be looked at. Not many livelihood opportunities are available, other than stone quarrying and crushing, along with a few tourism-related jobs.

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 needs and concerns. The local people are not aware of the benefits they can get by developing the BBIN sub-region.

The field visit ended with an optimistic note that the M-Connect project will create a political economy discourse for the region's economic development.

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