

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



Joining Dots • Connecting People • Shared Prosperity

Field Diary To the heights of Shillong and Dawki

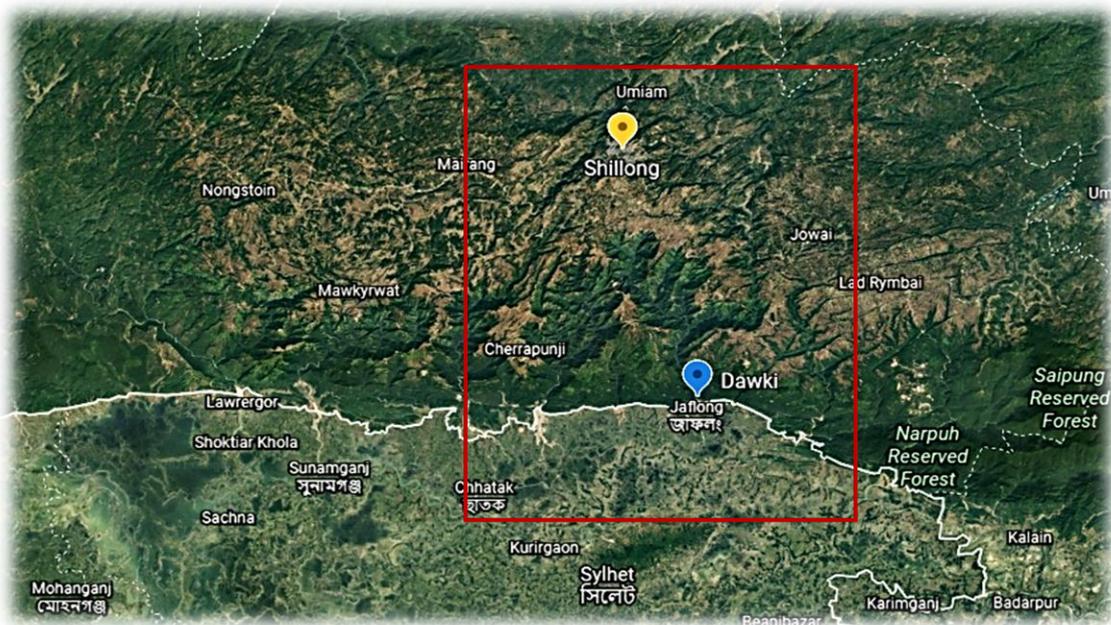
Jithin Sabu

Research Associate, CUTS International

About the Field Visit

Under the project entitled '[Enabling a political economy discourse for multimodal connectivity in the BBIN sub-region \(M-Connect\)](#)', a team from [CUTS International](#) comprising Jithin Sabu and Deepmala Ghosh visited Shillong and Dawki in Meghalaya in January, 2021.

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 multimodal connectivity among BBIN countries.

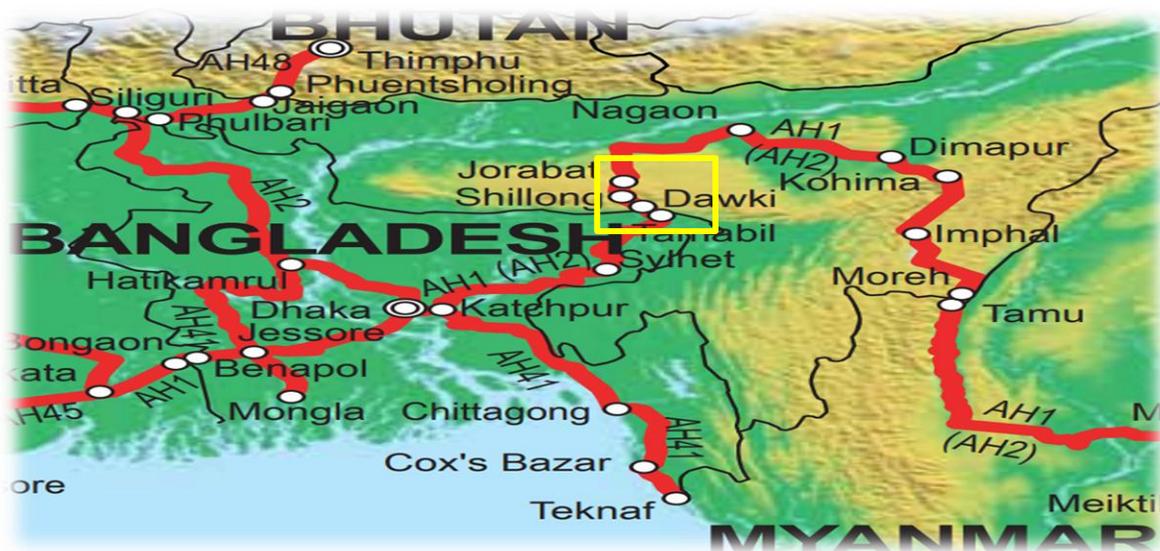


Map of visited locations

Towards the Khasi Hills

The team landed at the Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International airport, Guwahati. While travelling from Guwahati to Shillong through the road, the driver narrated the pandemic's hardships to the tourism sector. He showed the relatively empty roads to the Shillong town, which in the pre-pandemic times were constantly facing traffic jams due to the high number of tourists visiting Meghalaya.

The team was travelling through the Asian Highway (AH) road network from Jorabat to Shillong. AH 1 and AH 2 pass through Shillong and Dawki before entering Bangladesh through Tamabil.



Asian Highway stretch marked in yellow box

On the way, "Landslide Zone, Drive Cautiously" boards were standard and as indicated, the team saw various sites on the road where minor landslides happened. Since the road is passing through hills, it is vital to building concrete belts and walls on roadsides to prevent casualties.



The team was informed about a railway line project from Tetelia in Assam to Byrnihat in Meghalaya, halted in 2017. The 22km stretch from Tetelia in Assam to Byrnihat in Meghalaya was started, where the 20km stretch in Assam was completed. In comparison, the 2.3km stretch in Meghalaya could not be constructed due to the local protests. The rail connectivity to Shillong has been planned from Byrnihat as an extension to the Tetelia-Byrnihat rail line. However, not much progress has been made in this regard to date. The team reached

Shillong through the Khasi hills' steep and curvy roads, passing the Umiam lake, which provides a good view.

The team reached Shillong, where roads were filled with hawkers and people who came for purchases and leisure time activities. The team met a Shillong-based journalist and discussed the scope for cottage and tourism-based industries in Meghalaya.



The Shillong town markets' emporiums sell handicrafts made from natural materials, such as wood, textiles, and bamboo. Women were involved in making these handicrafts. These handicrafts are showcased during exhibitions outside the Northeast for broader marketing. However, the involvement of women in international trade is minimal. Rice is the staple food for the people of Meghalaya. The town was frigid during the time of visit.

Border Town Dawki: A Trade Hub



The team travelled to Dawki on the second day. The roads were very foggy, which made the driver drive very slowly. The sight of the rising sun peeping through the misty mountains was very rejuvenating. It was also an unexpected sight to see women sitting on roadsides early morning in winters to sell fruits and vegetables.

The roads were becoming narrow while moving far from the Shillong town. The curvy, narrow roads through the top of steep hills without proper side railings make it dangerous for vehicles' movement,



especially the heavy ones used for the



cargo movement. The team experienced a traffic jam on the road due to the tyre puncture of a loaded vehicle. Due to the road's narrowness, other vehicles' movement through the alternate side of the road was difficult and time-consuming, thus causing the jam.

Before entering Dawki town, there is a very narrow old suspension bridge on the Umngot river, causing traffic jams. The bridge is also not able to hold heavily loaded trucks. Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is funding the widening of these narrow roads from Shillong to Dawki. Land acquisition for the same is completed. The widening also includes the construction of a new bridge on the Umngot river.

After reaching Dawki, the team visited the existing Land Customs Station (LCS) with very insufficient infrastructure facilities. Limestone and stone boulders are the major trade items here. The only available functioning facilities at Dawki LCS were two weighbridges and a power generator to manage the electricity supply disruptions. Basic facilities, such as warehouse, parking space, restrooms, washrooms, staff quarters, Plant and Animal Quarantine facilities, currency exchange facilities, nationalised banks, scanners, etc., are missing at Dawki LCS.



Most importantly, the difficulty of accessing the internet at this LCS is making it skip all the paperless cargo movement initiatives of customs and government. The team saw piles of paper in the LCS office. The road towards the LCS was also congested by trucks parked on the roadsides.

After visiting the LCS in Dawki, the team headed to the location where the proposed ICP is being constructed. The site is near the India Bangladesh Friendship Gate at Tamabil.



India-Bangladesh Friendship Gate

The foundation stone for the ICP was laid in 2017, but the construction has reached nowhere till now. The team was informed that the delay in the construction of the ICP is due to a change in a contractor. The Manager of the ICP and the current contractor company expressed hope that the construction work which has already started will be completed in a time-bound manner. Bangladesh has already constructed an ICP on the other side of the border.



Construction site of ICP on the Indian side. Bangladesh side is pointed with a red arrow

The team spoke to various stakeholders such as exporters, importers and drivers in Dawki. The inadequate infrastructure facilities on the Indian side are affecting the trade. One significant thing heard about Dawki LCS from the exporters and importers is the low clearance time. There were complaints about rampant corruption practices. The absence of parking space is causing massive congestion on the road. Drivers complained about the narrow roads and said that accidents are common.



The team was informed about the vast volume of illegal cross-border trade commodities, such as dry peas, rice and cattle. It was shocking to hear that the Border Security Forces seized 7 tonnes of dry peas and 511 cattle in a single month during the lockdown.

Poor Internet Connectivity, a Major Issue

After reaching back in Shillong from Dawki, the team spent the following two days in Shillong to meet various stakeholders. The Customs Commissionerate in Shillong was the first destination. There are currently 35 LCS in the Northeastern region, all of which are coming under this office's jurisdiction. 27 of them facilitate trade with Bangladesh, whereas three facilitate Indo-Myanmar trade and four facilitate Indo-Bhutan trade.

The officials informed the absence of basic facilities, such as internet, electricity, and banking facilities in many parts of the Northeast, is affecting the implementation of the government's paperless trade initiatives.

The constant transfer of officials is also delaying the implementation of promising initiatives. The officials also opined that the central software should be accommodating all types of exporters, commodities and all regions. The absence of good options in the software is leading to customs officials doing the manual paperwork.

Exploring the Scope of Ropeways in Cargo Movement

Following the discussion with officials in Customs Commissionerate, the team spoke to various other relevant Central and state government officials. The officials from the Forest Department and Pollution Control Board of the Meghalaya government said that even though there are no significant steps taken to reduce carbon emissions, permission for new businesses and infrastructural projects is given after ensuring adherence to standard procedures.

As Meghalaya lacks railways and potential rivers for transporting cargo, roadways are the primary option for transporters. The scope of use of electric vehicles looks difficult as the region is having a large number of hills and steeper roads. The chairman of the State Pollution Control Board suggested exploring the potential of using ropeways in trade.

The North Eastern Council officials informed the team that North Eastern Handicrafts and Handloom Development Corporation Limited, Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, is playing a vital role in developing and promoting handicrafts and handloom in the region.

They provide marketing support through procuring directly from the artisans, weavers and Self-Help Groups. These are then sold at various emporiums in Shillong, Guwahati and other parts of the country.



A Region of Under Utilised Potential

Post the discussions with various government officials, the team met other stakeholders such as journalists, residents, exporters, importers and representatives of big MNCs involved in cross-border trade in this region. All of them believed that the geographic location advantage of the Meghalaya state is under-utilised. Some major issues highlighted by them include:

- Exporters and importers opined that Central and state governments do not do much to uplift the infrastructural facilities to facilitate seamless movement of goods.
- Issues such as poor internet and transport connectivity among various areas of Meghalaya are also not addressed with the importance it deserves.

- The delay in establishing the long back declared ICP is negligence on the part of the governments.
- There is severe difficulty getting phytosanitary certificates and other relevant documents from various offices in Kolkata and Varanasi.
- The stakeholders raised the demand to establish testing facilities in either Shillong or Guwahati to benefit local traders.

Good Bye till Next Visit

The sight of dense forests, natural freshwater bodies, beautiful mountains and lush greenery complemented by the fresh air devoid of pollution make Meghalaya a special place to anyone who visits the hilly state. There is an unlimited scope of international tourism in the state.

While leaving this beautiful state through the hills, the team was hopeful about the state's developmental aspirations getting strong wings soon to take it to the potential heights.



Like every other Meghalaya visitor, the team got a mesmerising goodbye from the beautiful Umiam lake encircled by the lush green East Khasi hills.

With the support of



Asian Development Bank