

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



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## Field Diary Tripura: An Emerging Gateway for Multi- modal Connectivity

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### About the Field Visit

Under the project entitled '[Enabling a political economy discourse for multi-modal connectivity in the BBIN sub-region \(M-Connect\)](#),' a team from [CUTS International](#) comprising Prashant Sharma and Srijata Deb visited Tripura from January 18-23, 2021. The purpose of the visit was to examine the extent of India-Bangladesh trade logistics infrastructure, policy frameworks, and stakeholders' participation while looking at the scope for improving livelihood generation and private sector engagement opportunities to promote multi-modal connectivity in the sub-region.

The locations visited are existing and upcoming inter-modal trade and transport connectivity corridors between India and Bangladesh, including Agartala Integrated Check Post (ICP), Srimantapur ICP, Feni Bridge (Sabroom) and Kamalasagar Border Haat.



*Locations Visited*

## Tripura at a Glance

Tripura, along with other states in the northeastern region (NER) of India, has remained neglected for several years. This region of India has no trade and connectivity linkages with the mainland except through the Siliguri Corridor. However, the momentum created by the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT) and India-Bangladesh Coastal Shipping Agreement has created an opportunity for Tripura to serve as a gateway to the Bay of Bengal for the entire North-East region of India.

Geographically, the state is surrounded by Bangladesh on three sides and usually dependent on exports from our friendly neighbour for local consumption. Tripura is at a strategic location about 130 km to Dhaka, within 60km from Ashuganj and with Chittagong and Sylhet laying within 200 km from Agartala – the state capital of Tripura.

## Existing and Upcoming Trade Infrastructures in Tripura

Several Central and state government initiatives have led to establishing several trade logistics infrastructure of significance in Tripura, particularly ICPs. In addition to this, efforts to develop South Tripura have gained severe traction in the past couple of months.

### **Agartala ICP: An Important Trade Route between India-Bangladesh**



*Trade Gate at Agartala ICP*

The Agartala ICP appears well-equipped with the necessary infrastructure required to facilitate the seamless movement of goods and passengers across borders. This includes Plant Quarantine, Customs, banks, Land Port Authority of India (LPAI) and Immigration at the Indian side. However, it was reported the other side of the ICP-Akhaura lacks an integrated complex.



*Different agencies at Agartala ICP*



*Facilities Available at Agartala ICP*

One major constraint noted at the Agartala ICP was the unavailability of product-specific cargo handling stations or warehouses. While observing the labour at work, it was witnessed that for products like fresh fish and coal, the same space was being utilised for loading/unloading.



*Transshipment of Fresh Fish on Coal Ground, Agartala ICP*

## Srimantapur ICP: Third Largest International Land Port on the India-Bangladesh border



***Srimantapur ICP Main Complex***

The Srimantapur ICP is still developing. The team was informed about an ongoing internal process for the infrastructure to be handed over to the LPAI as its custodian. The LPAI officials have reported having assumed their role in December 2020. The infrastructure is sufficient and various agencies are in the process of starting their operations from the premises.

On January 21, 2021, the team witnessed one such inauguration, Plant Quarantine (PQ) office at the Srimantapur ICP. Currently, the agencies/departments operating from the premises are LPAI, Immigration, Customs, BSF and PQ.

As one of the unique examples of roadways-inland waterways infrastructure integration in the BBIN sub-region, the premises are attached with a temporary jetty over river Gomti. This was notified in May 2020 as a port of call for the Sonamura-Daudkandi Indo-Bangla Protocol (IBP) route under India-Bangladesh PIWTT.



***Temporary Jetty Installed by IWAI at Srimantapur ICP***



***IWAI Notice at Srimantapur ICP***

On requesting to the BSF personnel, the team got an opportunity to move around the riverine border on a patrolling boat. The team noticed that the river's depth was insufficient for small boats to ply, let alone cargo vessels. The LPAI officials said that moving goods through water from this route would be a challenge. The river is seasonal, and vessels with a load capacity of 12 to 50 tonnes can only move on the route for a few months.

In addition to this, there are 23 bridges on the Bangladeshi side that have not been built according to international standards and would hinder cargos' seamless movement. For year-round operations, authorities will be required to ensure regular dredging.



***Inauguration of Plant Quarantine at Srimantapur ICP***

### **Sabroom, South Tripura: Located on the Banks of the Feni River**

In South Tripura, the team visited Sabroom to explore India's landlocked Northeastern states' connectivity prospects to the Bay of Bengal through Chattogram Port in Bangladesh. The port is approximately 72 km from Sabroom.



***Feni Bridge Connecting Tripura and Bangladesh***

As a whole, the northeast region and Tripura, in particular, have gained traction post the announcement of a bridge over the Feni River, connecting Sabroom, Tripura and Ramgarh in Bangladesh via road. An ICP is also developed to ensure the seamless movement of goods and passengers through this route. Upon completion in the next two-three years, the compound of the ICP is expected to be very near Indian's railway's freight handling yard.

The team wondered why the railway freight handling station is not yet conceptually integrated with the proposed ICP. The port connectivity through Feni Bridge along with the rail link to the Indian Railways network can tremendously enable and epitomise the city's potential for the transformation of not just Tripura but also the other Northeastern states of India.



***En-route Sabroom***

Having envisioned a potential trade and transit hub in the region, the state government has also laid the foundation stone for a multi-sector Special Economic Zone (SEZ) at Paschim Jalefa, Sabroom.



**Foundation Stone at Sabroom SEZ**

Deliberations over a logistics hub in the region are also being conducted. The Department of Industries & Commerce of the state anticipates a logistic hub, an ICP, and an SEZ within 10 km in Sabroom.

## Functional Integration of the Infrastructural Facilities

The ICPs are yet to be declared as Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) ports. They thus lack the necessary digital infrastructure to implement a single-window compliance interface through Indian Customs Electronic Gateway (ICEGATE).

It is also learnt that various departments under these ICPs have different software. For instance, LPAI uses Cargo Management Systems (CMS), the weighment is computed using the Truck Management System (TMS), etc. Equipping these ports with EDI will raise the potential to catalyse and optimise operational integration among border agencies with Customs as a nodal agency.



**Manual Entry of Trucks Entering at Srimantapur ICP**



**Piles of Papers in Customs, Agartala ICP**

The information and communications infrastructural provisions in the ICPs are suboptimal. Especially in Srimantapur ICP, there is no network. This leaves the officials and the trade community with no choice but to conduct their transactions manually.



***Sabroom Railway Freight Handling Station***

The initiatives and subsequent implementations are impressive. During the meetings, it was highlighted that local communities in the region depend extensively on Agartala for their consumption and livelihood needs. Thus, the initiatives mentioned above will help raise nearby dwellers' well-being, eventually increasing trade and commerce in the region.

However, stakeholders raised few concerns over the scope of such developments. Authorities felt that the initiatives are being taken without analysing the feasibility of each of these requirements.

## **Livelihood Concerns**

Any infrastructural development in a region is expected to have positive implications on the inhabitants of the area. However, some stakeholders opined that, despite tremendous improvements in hard infrastructure in the state, the Government of Tripura has not understood and provided for the needs of the communities residing in remote border regions.

The team had interactions with the labours employed in the ICPs and conducted a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in Srimantapur ICP. The participants included shop owners of the ICP, the loaders/un-loaders, the labour contractors and the Indian car/truck owners.



***Labour at Work in Agartala ICP***



***Labour at Srimantapur ICP***

Within the premises, the conditions of people working as loaders/unloaders, labour contractors and car/truck owners are appalling. There is no provision for food or even drinking water inside the premises. They usually rely on tea and light snacks sold at a makeshift shop adjacent to the establishment.

Stakeholders with whom the team discussed highlighted that they are sometimes even forbidden to use the regular washrooms inside the ICP. In addition to this, they expressed grave concerns over the lack of a designated resting area for themselves. Their movements usually are limited to the goods yard for the entire day.



***FGD with Labourers at Srimantapur ICP***

Furthermore, the nature of the work conducted by the labour in such establishments is prone to injuries and accidents. The integrated development complexes lack the availability of appropriate first aid or medical services for the labour force. *"The woes of us- informal labours- fall on even god's deaf ears,"* the labour contractor expressed in resignation while expressing these concerns.



*In conversation with the Kamlasagar Panchayat Pradhan*

On the same day, the team visited the Kamlasagar border haat.<sup>1</sup> The area has been closed since March 2020 due to the lockdown restrictions of COVID-19. The team had a conversation with the head of the *Panchayat* to understand the formal cross-border trade's livelihood impacts via the Border Haat. The team was informed that there had been adverse impacts due to the closure of the Haat. The local communities have no alternative income source and have been resorting to small and informal duties to earn a livelihood. He urged to re-operationalise the border-haat while ensuring the health-related protocol of COVID-19.

## Wrap Up

The team left the state of Tripura with a strong determination to further empower a discourse aimed at streamlining the infrastructural and connectivity developments for the betterment of the local stakeholders. Thus, the project will be a catalytic force to enable regional cooperation, harmonise trade and connectivity, and further address the socio-economic challenges in the BBIN sub-region.

1. <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=155324>