

Sustainable River Cruise Tourism between India and Bangladesh

With adequate investments, infrastructure and regulations, river cruise tourism will provide a win-win situation for the public and private sectors and the communities ensuring the sustainability of the economy and environment in the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna basins.



Background

The Transboundary Rivers of South Asia (TROSA) is a five-year (2016-2021) regional programme supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and managed by Oxfam. The ultimate goal of the project is to reduce the poverty of marginalised and vulnerable river basin communities through increased access to and control over water resources.

This project attempts to understand and address challenges related to transboundary rivers and work together to create conditions to eradicate the poverty

of communities living in the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) and the Salween river basins.

CUTS International's intervention under TROSA is to promote cross-border trade and tourism through transboundary waterways in the Brahmaputra and Meghna basins. As part of year-4 activities (2020-21), CUTS International organised two public-private dialogues (one virtual and one physical dialogue) with government officials, cruise operators and community representatives for inclusive and sustainable business practices in river tourism.

These dialogues aimed to understand the business practices followed by cruise operators and how they can be more inclusive and sustainable.

The [Maritime India Vision \(2030\)](#) states that the Government of India and the Government of Bangladesh will promote cruise tourism through the various transboundary rivers between both countries. River cruise tourism on the India-Bangladesh Protocol (IBP) route is thus being promoted to connect the tourist places along river Ganga, Brahmaputra, and other transboundary rivers.¹

However, certain challenges need to be addressed, such as security issues, immigration checks for passengers and crew, custom clearance, and health clearance for all foreign tourists arriving through a river cruise.

There are several [cruise operators](#) plying vessels within the national borders of India and Bangladesh and across borders. The current itinerary of the river cruise between Dhaka and Guwahati includes staying at different villages along the banks of Brahmaputra river. This provides ample opportunity for the tourists to interact with the local communities and acquaint with their lifestyle.

This document captures the key messages and suggestions from the virtual and physical dialogues on sustainable cruise tourism held during the project period.

Recommendations

1. Day pass for tourists and tour operators:

Day-pass for tourists from India-Bangladesh: Day-pass for tourists from India-Bangladesh would play an important role in promoting river tourism. This would encourage short haul tourism in transboundary rivers (for instance Umngot-Piyain Rivers) by attracting domestic tourists from India and Bangladesh.

2. Cross-border stakeholder consultations and collaborations:

Innovative thinking and digitalisation are necessary to connect the tour operators and other stakeholders through borders. Also, tour operators from both sides of borders should meet and share their innovative ideas to promote effective and efficient tourism. The competent authorities (in this case Inland Waterways Authority of India and Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority) should facilitate such consultations with tour operators from both countries.

Establishing partnerships with media and new age travel writers who would be willing to write on various aspects of the protocol route while exploring the niche and unexplored routes can also help promote river tourism.

3. Engaging local communities:

Dialogues on river cruise tourism need to include the grass-root as well as indigenous communities, artisans, youth and women so as to render their services and protect their rights. Tourism provides a platform to showcase the local culture and crafts.

There is immense scope for both skilled and unskilled labour which in turn will boost the local economy.

Financial aid and expert counselling on tourism should be imparted to the communities so that they derive the benefits that tourism brings in. This will have a cascading effect on the overall development of the region.

- 4. Simplified travel regulations:** Travel restrictions and regulations particularly in the context of COVID-19 are the primary concerns of the stakeholders of India and Bangladesh.

While adhering to the COVID protocols, there is also a need for making rules and procedures simplified such as on arrival visas, e-visas, on-board immigration & customs clearance to facilitate cross-border tourism. It was suggested to consider Hemnagar, West Bengal as an immigration point. Integrated check posts should be established at immigration points.

- 5. Increased Public-Private Collaboration:** The Public and private sector collaborations should be encouraged to develop sustainable infrastructure for river tourism.

Technically advanced ships, silencers, oil separators and pollution-free shores are essential to promote sustainable river cruise tourism.

Vessels of smaller size, cabins on boats are some initiatives that require low capital investment and provide budget friendly options for domestic tourists from both the countries. The private sector should be engaged in developing port facilities and provided with incentives for building/repairing vessels for the further development of the tourism sector.

- 6. Technical Studies and Market**

Analysis: Ensuring year-round navigability is vital to sustain river tourism and to prevent unforeseen circumstances during voyage. Feasibility studies in shorter stretches of marginal unexplored rivers are to be conducted and tourism prospects need to be explored for larger benefits.

The governments of India and Bangladesh should work jointly on developing river routes and engage the private sector and civil society organisations to undertake market analysis.





Be it the life of people living in boats or Hilsa fishing during the monsoon, river tourism has exciting things to offer."

Commodore Golam Sadeq

Chairperson, Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority



"It is important to capitalise tourism sector of Assam and explore waterways that offer river tourism as it will enhance livelihood opportunities of the local communities."

Biswajit Chakraborty

Director, North-East Advisory rCouncil, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry



"River cruise tourism has great potential to generate employment to the local communities of India and Bangladesh in the form of cruise crew, jetty operators, language translators, local tourist guides, local cultural artists, small boat operators, local food joints by women etc."

Amita Prasad

Former Chairperson, Inland Waterways Authority of India



"Tourism through river generates economic opportunities for MSMEs and local people that aid in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Therefore, travel restrictions and regulation procedures should be simplified to enhance the tourism sector."

Mohammad Saiful Hassan

Deputy Director (Research & Planning), (Deputy Secretary), Bangladesh Tourism Board, Bangladesh

- 1 In 1972, the India-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT) was first signed to restore trade and transit through the river. In April 2015, the two countries decided to renew the Protocol automatically after five years. In October 2018, the [SoP and MoU on Passenger and Cruise Services on Coastal and Protocol routes](#) were signed. Its purpose is to enhance the bilateral movement of passengers, tourists and cruise; improve creditability, accuracy, efficiency and transparency; and minimises hindrances in service and operation.

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