

Initiatives for Strengthening Connectivity and Boosting Trade in the BBIN Sub-region – An Overview



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An Overview

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AN OVERVIEW: FIELD DIARIES

Just as trade matters in development, connectivity matters in trade. But neither trade nor connectivity will matter if people's lives do not take a turn for the better. For, ultimately, it is the people who matter.

Countries in the South Asian region like Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal share not only a common and rich heritage but also numerous socio-economic endowments and other complementarities that can cater to the common benefit of the people of this region. Yet intra-regional trade has been frustrated over the years, and the trade potential of the region remains grossly underutilised. In fact, the intra-regional trade among countries in the BBIN region accounts for just about five per cent of their total trade.

Although countries in the South Asian region have significant exports and imports with countries outside the BBIN region, they do not find it sufficiently profitable to carry on trade among them. Under the circumstances, it is felt that robust regional integration and connectivity among the BBIN countries can alone bail out the region from the stupor into which it has sunk and set it on the path of flourishing so far as intra-regional trade is concerned.

Flourish in regional trade will also enable these countries to address several socio-economic inadequacies that threaten the development parameters of these countries. Improved trade will pave the way to shared prosperity and equip the countries of the BBIN region to address diverse issues ranging from livelihood concerns of the people, living standards of the poor and the marginalised, empowerment of women to environmental degradation, depletion of natural resources, and issues of political instability and law and order.

In recent times, the term 'connectivity' has become a buzzword in the discourse on development. But it will be myopic to consider connectivity merely in terms of physical infrastructure. Rather, connectivity is understood as a combination of the physical infrastructure of essential roads and ports, the soft infrastructure of rules, regulations, institutions, and skills that help numerous players participate in trade, and the digital infrastructure that can connect people to the global marketplace lower costs.

Despite the existence of various treaties, agreements, and instruments among the BBIN countries – like SAFTA, SAARC, SAQG, BIMSTEC – the current status of the BBIN countries on the logistic performance index reveals there is a lot of room for improvement in respect of several domains: infrastructure, international shipment, logistics competence, tracking and tracing.

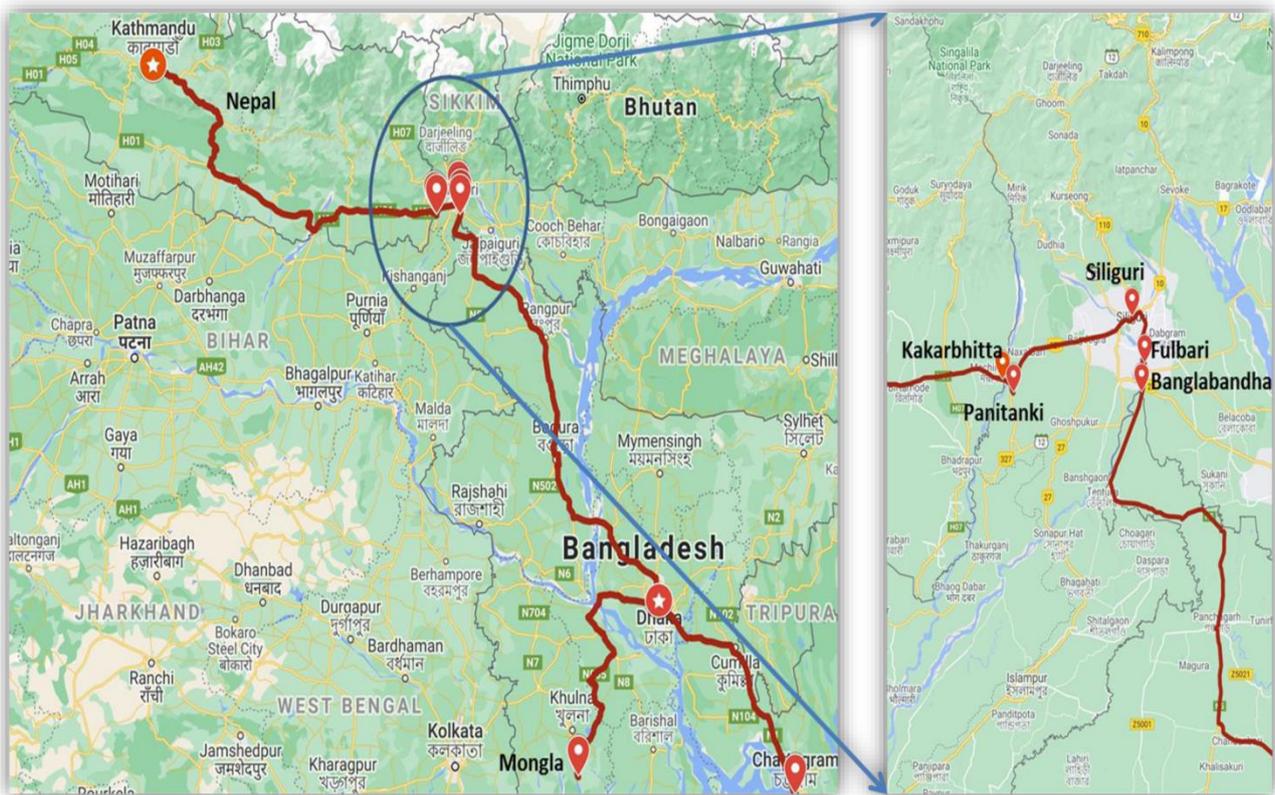
Reforms are also necessary for respect of procedures and harmonisation of data among countries. An integrated and well-coordinated network across countries in this region will act as a catalyst to the development of cross-border value chains.

Trade and transit initiatives will give a much-needed boost to the 'land-linked' countries like Bhutan and Nepal. All this clearly indicates the need to strengthen connectivity and integration among the countries in the BBIN region.

Under the project titled '[Enabling a political economy discourse for multimodal connectivity in the BBIN sub-region \(M-Connect\)](#),' CUTS International, together with its project partners in the relevant countries – Unnayan Shamannay in Bangladesh, Nepal Economic Forum (NEF) in Nepal and Bhutan Media and Communications Institute (BMIC) in Bhutan - has carried out field visits to several trade corridors across the BBIN region in an attempt to capture granular details of the problems and prospects of connectivity in this region.

The purpose was to assess and investigate the infrastructure, trade logistics, and consultations with stakeholders to explore ways and means to encourage and promote multimodal connectivity among BBIN countries. Major observations and experiences from these field trips are summarised below.

Corridor 1



1. Siliguri Corridor

Commonly referred to as the 'Chicken's neck', the Siliguri corridor¹ is a 22 Km wide corridor in the Indian state of West Bengal which connects mainland India with Northeast India.

The Inland Container Depot (ICD) in Siliguri was expected to be fully functional by the end of 2020. Several lacunae were revealed in the course of consultation with stakeholders, including representatives of the Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, North Bengal (FOCIN), Siliguri Road Transporters Association, various Block Chamber of Commerce, Siliguri Industrial Estate Development Authority (SIEDA), residents and journalists:

- (i) Information gaps and inadequate connectivity are resulting in outward migration.
- (ii) The representation of women in trade and allied services is rather low. This is a fallout of insufficient technical know-how coupled with poor financing facilities.
- (iii) Promotion of local products and specialties, including regional cuisine and local delicacies, could offer a much-needed boost to cottage industries of the region and the local economy. For this purpose, people need to be trained and incentivised to market local products.
- (iv) Roads in Siliguri are often narrow, and congestion is a regular hazard. Given the unavailability of land in the Siliguri-Jalpaiguri area, which constrains widening of roads, perhaps an alternative corridor through Tetulia Upazila of Bangladesh like the Teenbigha corridor could be an answer to the problem
- (v) Critical infrastructure gaps at borders stand in the way of improved connectivity. The Land Customs Station (LCS) on the Indian side lacks basic equipment like security cameras and scanners, weighbridges, restrooms, adequate parking spaces, plant and animal quarantine centres and quality testing labs, etc.
- (vi) Voices from the ground are not audible in decision-making corridors. The overall development of the region seems to be in neglect as borne out by the local complaint about the dearth of drinking water facilities in the Panitanki area. Common and regular platforms that allow people at the grassroots to articulate their development concerns and needs are the need of the hour.

However, there are encouraging developments.

- (a) Paperless trade and cross-border cargo movement are not absent; the sight of trucks from Bhutan, Nepal, and Bangladesh plying through Indian territory offered a sense of sub-regional integration that can be intensified and strengthened in the days to come.
- (b) The Siliguri-Jalpaiguri Development Authority (SJDA), in collaboration with the State Food Processing Industries and Horticulture Department, is developing a Centre for Perishable Cargo on its land beside Bagdogra airport. This facility is likely to give an impetus to regional trade in perishable goods, such as fruits and vegetables.

2. Banglabandha: A Dynamic Connectivity Hub in the BBIN Sub-region

The metamorphosis of Panchagarh from a poverty-ridden area to a bustling district town with a flurry of economic activities can be attributed to the Banglabandha Land Portⁱⁱ that was inaugurated about two decades ago and is situated about 60 km to its north. But if Banglabandha is to shape up as a dynamic connectivity hub in the BBIN sub-region, a number of considerations are to be borne in mind:

- (i) The workforce, from ordinary labour to high-level officials, animates the Banglabandha Port ply from Panchagarh through a 57km long road, two-laned, reasonably straight, and in good condition. It crosses multiple small bridges over rivers and canals. Though not congested, one remains apprehensive about its ability to handle increasing traffic in the days to come. In recognition of this, the Local Roads and Highways Department is set to widen the roads from Panchagarh town to Banglabandha.
- (ii) The said arterial road is flanked on both sides by vast expanses of farmlands where rice, corn, potatoes, tomatoes, and other vegetables, all of which constitute potential export items, are grown. This is also the only area in Bangladesh where tea is produced. Companies in the area own large tea gardens, and they often need to import heavy machinery through Banglabandha Port. However, the port is not equipped to handle such heavy cargo.

- (iii) The bulk of the cross-border trade through Banglabandha consists of boulders and stone chips imported from India and Bhutan. The stone mining and crushing business in this area, especially around Bhojonpur in Tetulia Upazila, was banned some years ago due to environmental reasons.

But with more than 100 traders and 200 companies actively engaged and increasing numbers of businessmen entering this industry, the industry today is the primary source of employment, taking an edge over the port itself. It reverses migration and encourages migrant workers like Dinajpur, Rangpur, and Thakurgaon. Despite being a health hazard, the industry holds immense economic significance, and so one needs to consider its relocation at a zone distant from human settlements.

- (iv) There are also infrastructural inadequacies plaguing the Banglabandha Port. Truck drivers complain that parking spaces are inadequate and congestion is a perennial problem.

There are no separate lanes or priority-based systems to manage perishable cargo movement. The port complex is ill-maintained and unkempt, with inadequate banking facilities, unclean washrooms, and gender-friendly infrastructure. No wonder that women are conspicuous by their absence in the workforce. Truck drivers from other countries also find facilities for boarding and lodging near the port to be inadequate.

The positive impact of the Banglabandha port on the socio-economic status of this region is little disputed. Still, lack of communication and transparency are generating mistrust among stakeholders and militating against the smooth and efficient functioning of the port. Otherwise, the port can make an immense contribution to the trade and commerce of the BBIN region as a dynamic and burgeoning hub.

3. Mongla Sea Port: A Potential Maritime Access Point for Bhutan and Nepal

Khulna is the third-largest city of Bangladesh, and it retains its importance as the commercial hub of the southwest region of Bangladesh. The Mongla Seaportⁱⁱⁱ was established to cater to its hinterland in the Khulna district. One of the crucial elements involved in flourishing any port or station is its connectivity to surrounding commercial areas. In exploring the connectivity of the south-western section of Bangladesh with the rest of the country, one needs to take note of the Dhaka-Mawa-Bhanga Expressway. The Expressway, divided into two sections, has set a new benchmark for road networks across the country.

While Mongla has attracted several LPG factories, as many as 41, it seems to be nestling on the edge of a precipice. Although all these factories deal with highly flammable petroleum substances, there is only one Fire Service and Civil Defence Station in Mongla, which is ill-equipped to deal with a calamity like a fire-outbreak. Moreover, these factories are situated in close proximity to each other, instilling fear among the locals about the possibility of a catastrophe.

In considering the prospects of Mongla as a potential maritime access point in regional trade, one has to think through several issues:

- (i) One has to be sensitive to the demands of the ecological balance of the Sundarban region, which cradles this part of Bangladesh.
- (ii) The equipment available at the Mongla port is mostly outmoded. This needs to be addressed together with other infrastructural inadequacies like the poor condition of the approach road to the Mongla Port.
- (iii) There is insufficient visibility of the Mongla Port in the national media, which is a deterrent to realising its full potential. Consequently, Mongla has failed to allure and harbour a cosmopolitan society usually characteristic of port areas due to inadequate civic amenities and sustainable planning.
- (iv) The port's geographical location necessitates regular dredging, which seems to have been neglected.
- (v) Delay in cargo clearance is caused by the delay in RO-RO Ferry service to cross the mighty Padma.

Therefore, it is felt that further development of the Mongla Sea Port hinges on the construction of the Padma Bridge. This will attract both big business and regional development initiatives and act as a catalyst to the flourish of south-western Bangladesh.

4. Chattogram Port: Transition from National to Regional Transportation Hub

With nearly 90 per cent of Bangladesh's trade taking place through the Chattogram Port^{iv}, it can be considered the maritime gateway of Bangladesh. Chattogram thus occupies a nodal position in any multimodal connectivity initiative in the BBIN sub-region. National Highway 1 connects the capital of Bangladesh, Dhaka, to the port city of Chattogram. The 4-lane highway, also part of Asian Highway 41, is Bangladesh's single most crucial highway. However, the highway continues to be plagued by congestion.

A journey to Chattogram readily reveals the light and shade of trade and connectivity of the place. As workers of the Export Processing Zones situated in Chattogram travel to their workplace in droves, one understands that Bangladesh's most significant competitive edge in export trade is the young and abundant labour force. At the same time, its biggest drawback lies in the wanting transport infrastructure connecting various parts of Bangladesh.

The **remediable difficulties** that are discernible at the Chattogram Port include:

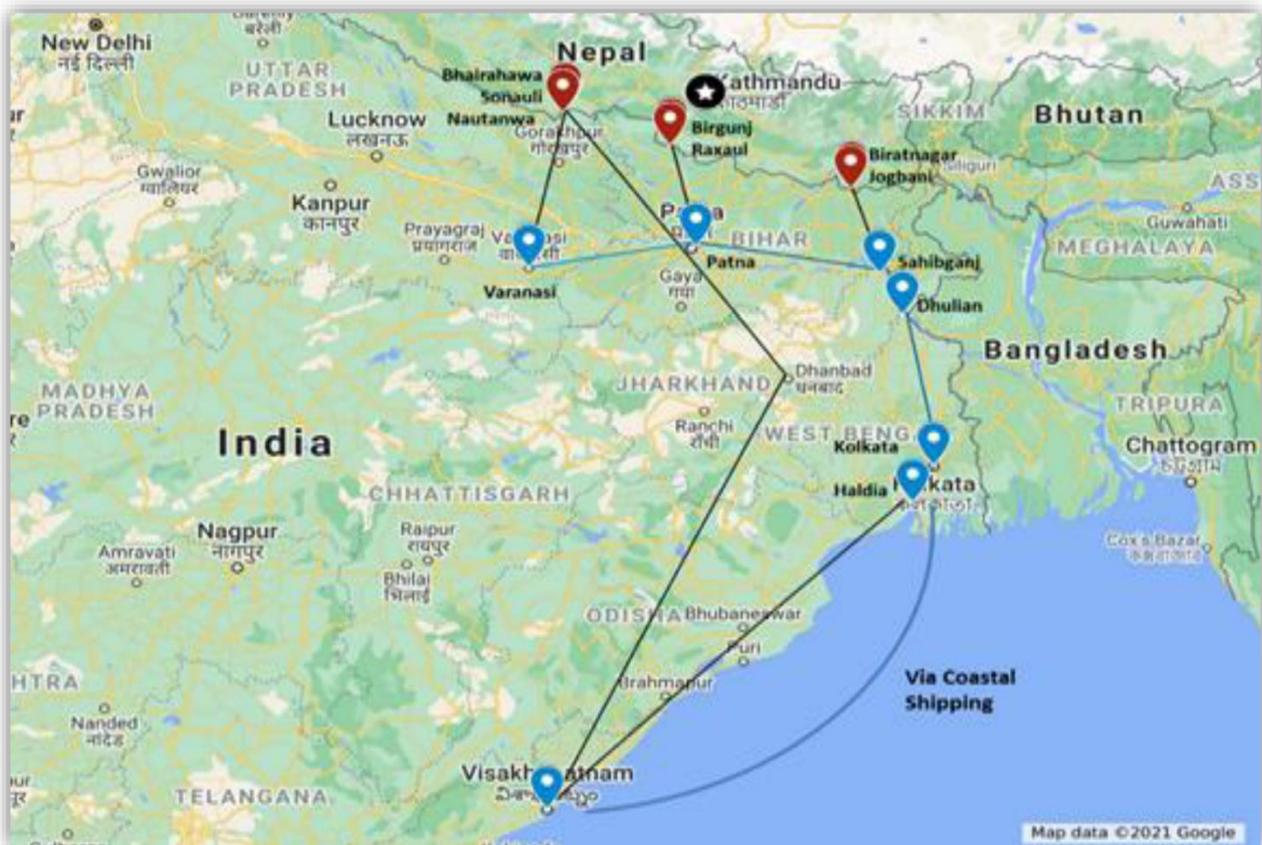
- (i) There is minimal scope for increasing the cargo handling capacity of Chattogram Port. Chattogram is an overburdened port; the only way out is to divert a portion of this burden to the Matarbari Deep Sea Port.
- (ii) It is felt that the most significant ongoing project to assuage the communication bottleneck at Chattogram Port is the Chattogram Elevated Expressway. The under-construction project, expected to be operational from 2022, will connect Lalkhan Bazar and Shah Amanat International Airport, and it will feature in the fast-track project list of the Government of Bangladesh.

However, strides in the direction of multimodal transportation are not altogether absent. In July 2020, a four-container consignment was shipped from Kolkata port to Agartala via Chittagong port. This consignment did not need to go through any customs formalities.

From Chittagong port, four containers carrying lentils, rods, and pulses were transported by trailers to Akhaura land port. The goods were then loaded into Indian trailers, which carried them further inland. But in intensifying the process of multimodal connectivity, one would require to consider other measures as well:

- (iii) It is learnt that Customs Clearance for imports can consume several hours. Therefore, structural reforms are needed to ensure an integrated paperless trade regime before implementing any such plan. Otherwise, it would fail to be a commercially viable option.
- (iv) Bangladesh Railway officials informed about the low usage of the railways for transporting cargo from Chattogram Seaport to Dhaka. They feel that railways lose the edge to roadways regarding last-mile connectivity. Bangladesh Railways is therefore taking the initiative to turn its biggest station, Kamalapur Railway Station, into a multimodal transport hub.
- (v) Consultation with the Department of Environment (DoE) Officials revealed that pollution from the ongoing construction of the Chattogram Elevated Expressway is the greatest environmental hazard facing Chattogram. A site has also been designated for a Bay Terminal in Patenga, Chattogram. Still, this site is the fishing area enabling as many as 1200 fishermen to earn their living. Therefore, policymakers will need to strike the right equilibrium between development initiatives, ecological balance, and livelihood concerns.

Corridor 2



5. Birgunj ICD: Nepal's Largest Dry Port

A visit to Birgunj was carried out to enable a ground-level assessment of the current port infrastructure, trade logistics, and the surrounding infrastructure that might play a pivotal role in the multimodal connectivity of Nepal and the BBIN sub-region.

The city of Birgunj is located about 140 km south of Kathmandu and takes approximately four and a half hours to reach via the *Kulekhani-Hetauda* route. However, large vehicles like buses and trucks can only travel the Kathmandu-Birgunj route via the Prithvi Highway, which is about 300 km and takes approximately 8-10 hours. Therefore, a 15-minute direct flight from the Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu to Simara Airport is the fastest option to travel to Birgunj.

The Birgunj ICD^v at Sirsiya is the only dry port in Nepal connected to Indian seaports in Kolkata and Vishakhapatnam by railways via Raxaul, India. Likewise, the ICP is connected to the Indian border by road and facilitates the integration of efficient customs clearance processes and cargo clearance.

Certain shortcomings were noticed in respect of the infrastructure at the ICD and ICP:

- (i) The ICD was poorly equipped with only 10 mobile cranes, seven reach stackers, and only four usable forklifts in terms of port handling equipment.
- (ii) As for the capacity of the dry port, the existing infrastructure was inadequate for handling the ever-increasing volumes of trade-related activities. However, upgrading the ICD to increase storage and bulk cargo handling facilities is underway.
- (iii) Similar problems of insufficient capacity are discernible at the Birgunj ICP. Such insufficiency is attributed to the rapid increase of trade volume within three years since its operations.
- (iii) The roads around the ICD and ICP areas are damaged, affecting industrialists, traders, transport entrepreneurs, and the general public.

Despite these shortcomings, Birgunj has evolved into a key commercial and industrial centre over the years by its strategic location. It has become a major trade, transit, and a crucial industrial hub for the nation, with countless

industries. This has generated lucrative opportunities for Nepali citizens from various parts of the country and even attracted workers across the border.

However, on the seamy side, people are also involved in informal trade. Activities, such as contraband smuggling, are rampant in the border region.

However, there remain **hindrances to multimodal connectivity**:

1. Lack of clear understanding regarding the scope of work hinders coordination between concerned bodies such as the municipalities, trade associations, agent associations, and the chamber of commerce and ultimately adversely affects the overall trade efficiency.
2. The poor digital infrastructure at customs results in physical paperwork for the clearance of goods.
3. Damage is inflicted on consignments due to mismanagement and the unprofessional attitude of agents. Authorities in the customs offices often turn a blind eye towards problems of the traders
4. Unilateral decisions are taken by Indian customs that prohibit goods exported from Nepal. This has caused severe losses to businesses dealing with perishable products.
5. Sanitary and Phyto-sanitary Standards (SPS) measures are one of the biggest bottlenecks for exporting Nepali products. Therefore, exporters and importers recommend the establishment of internationally-accredited labs on both sides of the customs to avoid delay in the certification process.
6. Delay in customs clearance at the Kolkata ports, which increases demurrage cost and ultimately increases trade cost.
7. Truckers' associations raised concerns about 72 hours permits for Indian trucks, which have affected their business. Similar facilities were not provided to Nepali trucks and passenger vehicles, which had to deposit at the Indian Embassy to ply on Indian roads.
8. Requirements of safety and security: Nepali trucks did not feel safe to transport in India due to local transporters creating problems on the highways. Moreover, they complained that due to the high taxes levied by the Government of Nepal on vehicles and spare parts, Nepali truckers were not able to compete with Indian trucks.

It is evident that substantial upgrading is required regarding the available infrastructure and its management if Nepal aspires to reap the benefits of multimodal connectivity in the BBIN sub-region.

6. Sahibganj Corridor: Emerging Inland Waterway to Link India-Bangladesh

Sahibganj is located close to the Siliguri Corridor^{vi} and can be transformed into a transit hub for commodities and people travelling to and from mainland India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal.

The Sahibganj corridor is home to a Multimodal Terminal constructed at a strategic location under the ambitious Jal Marg Vikas Project. This corridor comprising Rajmahal, Barharwa, Farakka, Pakur, Dhulian, Maia, and Jangipur harbours the potential for substantial trade between India and Bangladesh in the future.

While Dhuliyān-Rajshahi has been added to the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol Route, Dhuliyān and Maia have been incorporated as the Port of Call in the Second Addendum on Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT) between India and Bangladesh, 2020.

It is imperative to understand its onward connectivity to Pakur, Farakka, Barharwa, Rajmahal, Maia and Jangipu to gain an insight into the opportunities of Sahibganj and the Dhulian-Rajshahi route.

A visit to the Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) offices at Sahibganj and Farakka brought to the fore how the terminal and other infrastructure could decongest the district's busy roads. Apart from stone chips, fly ash and coal, china sand and silica sand can be transported through waterways. Transportation of maize, mango, banana, pulses and fox nuts (makhana) through waterways could also be promoted.

Certain challenges to multimodal connectivity need consideration

1. Some sceptics think waterways transportation may yield benefits that are disproportionate to costs involved; some, however, feel that it would reduce trade costs by almost half.

2. Although exporters wished to use rail connectivity, the availability of rakes provided by the government makes it difficult for the exports to rely on railways.
3. In the case of transportation by trucks, it is observed that the rent-seeking behaviour of officials is relatively high. There is also persistent detention cost of vehicles that increases the total transaction cost involved in roadways. Despite such difficulties, exporters do not seem inclined to favour a switch from roadways to waterways/railways to transport their commodities.

However, some exporters believe that **using waterways is economically more viable if proper infrastructure and navigability are in place**. Indeed, transportation by waterways can be advantageous on several counts:

- (i) Waterways constitute a time and cost effective mode of transportation. The Inland Waterways of India is underutilised and can act as 'Natural Highways' by reducing the distance and time between origin and destination of goods.
- (ii) Opening up new infrastructure and routes may well pave the way to increased job opportunities in the region. This is particularly significant because the representation of women in trade in this belt is meagre.
- (iii) People are not sufficiently aware of transportation prospects through waterways. Discussions with fishermen revealed a lack of knowledge and awareness among them regarding trade through waterways.
- (iv) Transportation via roadways adds to this pollution. If the transportation diverges from roadways to waterways, the pollution levels would decrease and benefit the local people. Also, the congested roads cause high chances of accidents in the town roads, which might reduce due to less traffic.

However, any move towards multimodal connectivity ought to think through several issues:

1. For inclusive development, not just economic growth, people on the ground should benefit from various facilities that may be put in place.
2. Huge investments solely for the purpose of infrastructural development will not suffice. Awareness generation and capacity-building are

concomitant pre-requisites for the successful utilisation of infrastructure that has been created.

3. Although several stakeholders may be willing to accommodate a shift to transportation by waterways, such developments could to adversely impact the livelihood of truck drivers and landowners.

7. Bihar to Facilitate Connectivity in the BBIN Sub-region

Bihar^{vii} holds strategic importance for trade between India and Nepal and the larger issue of connectivity in the BBIN region. A visit to Gaighat and Kalu Ghat sought to gather an insight into the functioning of waterways at these points and the problems they face.

Though well developed in pre-independent India, waterways transport in the post-independence period has been neglected in comparison to road and rail transport. However, the government is trying to revive the waterways routes. Such revival is not limited to just developing the infrastructure, jetties, cranes, dredging, and port of calls but seeks to facilitate the multimodal and inter-modal terminals, ferry services, navigation aids and Roll on-Roll off (Ro-Ro) facilities.

IWAI has identified Kalu Ghat for the development of the intermodal terminal. This, however, may give rise to the local disturbance, for the sand mafia is apprehensive that the terminal may hamper illegal mining and trade in sand. Making River Gandak navigable can probably lead to a modal shift about transportation in India-Nepal trade, but the issue is yet to be explored.

Road transport is still the primary mode of transportation for trade with Nepal. The **ICP at Raxaul** handles more than 50 per cent of India-Nepal Trade. Road and rail connectivity is from Kolkata to Raxaul, and the railway line from the Indian side goes up to Birgunj ICP. It is alleged that groups with vested interests hampered the link road construction at the railway yard (5 km away from ICP) so that the trucks could not pass through this route to the ICP.

It is understood that there is a lack of inter-agency coordination between LPAI and other agencies. This illustrates how stakeholders' conflict of interests can be detrimental to connectivity, transport and trade.

Regarding the connectivity of the Raxaul ICP, it is noticed that the road from Motihari to Raxaul ICP (68 km in length on NH-28A) is in poor condition, making the movement of trucks extremely difficult and time-consuming. Construction work under the NHAI is intended to improve connectivity by the end of 2021.

Located at a distance of 310 km from Patna and over 340 km from Raxaul ICP, the **Jogbani ICP** receives the maximum volume of Nepal-bound cargo from the northeast and Kolkata. Jogbani ICP has the required infrastructure to work as an integrated check post.

However, plant and animal quarantine, warehousing facilities are of limited use as the trucks can directly pass after custom clearance from Jogbani to Biratnagar ICP, and also because exports from India to Nepal consist mostly of non-perishable goods.

The rail link between Jogbani and Biratnagar needs to be activated to promote multimodal or intermodal connectivity. Secondly, land customs stations need to be set up at railway stations on both sides of the border for seamless connectivity and transportation. In a nutshell, though ICPs have been constructed with a long-term vision to promote seamless trade and connectivity, infrastructural challenges remain.

The more pressing issue is the need to harmonise and strengthen inter-agency and stakeholders' coordination and remove fixation with old ways. Workshops for awareness generation and inter-agency coordination may also help.

8. Uttar Pradesh: Emerging as a Hub for Multimodal Connectivity in the BBIN Sub-region

Uttar Pradesh^{viii} harbours several nodal spots that are significant about ongoing national and regional multimodal transport connectivity initiatives.

1. **Varanasi:** Located on the banks of the river Ganges in Uttar Pradesh and 320 km south-east of the state capital, Lucknow, Varanasi has ghats that have also emerged as tourist destinations and become a source of livelihood for hundreds of boatmen who earn their living by ferrying tourists. The boatmen are aware of government initiatives to make the river navigable and connect it to Patna in Bihar and further to Haldia in West Bengal.

The IWAI office, located in the heart of the city at Varanasi Trade Centre, looks after the smooth operation and movement of vessels and performs hydrographical services to measure the water depth for all active waterways every fortnight. The IWAI is also closely working with the state government of Uttar Pradesh to promote the movement of people and transport vehicles through the Ro-Ro vessels.

The government's seriousness to give an impetus to multimodal transport, including waterways, comes out from such cases as the MMT project, which is being implemented under the Jal Marg Vikas Project and is expected to be complete by 2023.

Under the Arth Ganga project, small jetties carrying small products will ply through NW-1. This project is based on a port-to-port and port-to-door approach.

2. **The Ramnagar** MMT can provide a considerable boost to the transport network in the state as it seeks to facilitate transport connectivity through road, rail and waterways. It is connected with NH-7 and also to NH-2.

There is a proposal for extending the rail tracks from Jeonathpur Railway Station to the MMT. Through this railway station, goods can reach Mughalsarai and beyond through railways. Once this terminal becomes operational, Varanasi can well emerge as a marketing hub of India.

Although this terminal is an inspiring instance of a Public-Private Partnership, the full-fledged operation of the terminal faces a few hurdles in its developmental process. One such hurdle is the lack of timely payment of compensation for the land acquired for the freight village.

Such issues are vexatious as people may not willingly participate in the land acquisition process of the government for the extension of a rail line to the MMT.

3. **Allahabad:** Connected to Varanasi through NH-19, Allahabad is home to a Railway Station poised to play a nodal role in the dedicated freight movement for which the laying down of the track is under process.

At the Subedarganj railway station (4.9 km away), the Train Management System (TMS) for dedicated freight movement has been installed to oversee and monitor the movement of freight trains between Khurja and Kanpur. This

is believed to be Asia's biggest and the first control room monitoring centre for dedicated freight movement.

The Kanpur (Bhaupur)-Mughalsarai route is expected to be functional soon. By 2022, the entire eastern corridor from Punjab to West Bengal is also expected to be functional. Currently, 60 per cent of the track-laying work is done.

4. **Triveni Sangam:** The Sangam, treated as one of the holiest places in India, is a confluence of three rivers, namely, Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati. The water is almost 50-60 feet deep and has scope for navigation, but there is work to make the river navigable for big vessels. Through this waterway, which is part of NW-1, vessels can reach Varanasi.
5. **Deen Dayal Upadhyay Railway Station:** Popularly known as Mughal Sarai, this constitutes a large Railway Marshaling Yard in Asia. At present, for freight movement, there is no dedicated track. However, being part of EDFC, laying down dedicated rail tracks is underway, expected to facilitate smooth movement of goods trains.

The required electrical and earthing work has been done for the stretch from Kanpur to the Deen Dayal Upadhyay Railway Junction. Currently, 120 goods trains run through this station. The goods transported include iron ore, coal, cement, onion, and food grains.

6. **Sunauli Land Customs Station:** A proposal has been mooted to construct an ICP at Sunauli. For this purpose, land acquisition is underway. The construction of the ICP is expected to commence once the land compensation issue between the state government and farmers gets sorted.

The relationship between Nepal and India in this area appears harmonious, and there is no restriction on the movement of cargo vehicles and people. This border also facilitates the third-country movement of goods from China to Nepal through Vishakhapatnam and Kolkata ports.

Crossing over to Bhairahawa, Nepal, on the other side of the border, it is felt that ICPs need to be constructed on both sides of the border for the current infrastructure is not sufficient to support increasing trade between the two countries.

Even while remaining concerned with trade and connectivity, relevant and related concerns need to be addressed. While some, like fishermen and boatmen, earn their livelihood using the waterways mode, others include people whose land has been acquired by the government for transport connectivity purposes and who need to be adequately compensated. Voices of these segments need to be heard.

For example, the boatmen of Varanasi expressed their grievance that they do not have any representation in any governmental forum even though they have some genuine concerns and ideas to share with regard to their livelihood concerns, tourism, cleanliness of waterways, and disaster management.

9. Kolkata-Haldia-Kolaghat Triangle

In respect of the Kolkata-Haldia-Kolaghat Triangle,^{ix} while there is scope for developing inland waterways, there are also practical difficulties in integrating them with other modes of transport. Suppose basic requirements such as desired width and depth in navigational channels, safe navigational aids for day and night, terminals for berthing of vessels, facilities for loading/unloading of cargo, and providing an interface with road and rail are put in place about the potential inland water terminals.

What will be achieved through the integration of the inland waterways in the logistics network of the sub-region will amount to nothing short of a revolution. This will also help in decarbonisation and reduction of logistics costs.

1. **The Kolkata Port** is operating paperless for almost 90 percent of the activities. There are clear instances of modernisation at the Kolkata Port: refrigerated containers are used to transport perishable cargo. The port is expected to be fully mechanised by 2024.

However, the condition of the approach road is poor. Rapid growth in container handling over the past few years has increased the area's road traffic and resulted in occasional traffic jams. The port has both road and rail connectivity. But the lock-gates of Netaji Subhas and Kidderpore Docks are outdated and need upgrading.

2. The **Kolaghat Port** on River Rupnarayan is not operational yet, and the land for developing infrastructure has been identified. The Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) has given 14.45 crores to the Government of West Bengal to develop an approach road (3-3.5km) from Kolaghat terminal to National Highway, which is expected to be ready soon.

Once the Kolaghat jetty becomes operational, fly ash generated in the Kolaghat thermal power station will be exported to Bangladesh through this port. Apart from fly ash, gypsum, cement, and steel could be channelised.

3. The **Haldia Dock** complex, situated on the banks of the Hoogly River, is linked with the rest of the country through multiple modes: national waterways, roadways, and railways. Major commodities handled by the port include dry bulk cargo (limestone, coal, etc.) and liquid cargo (oil), which are also handled in containers. The port does not handle perishable commodities.

The opening of the lock-gate depends on the tide timings, and this adds to the congestion at the port of Haldia, requiring vessels to wait at Sagar or Sandheads, at times, for 30 days to get the call from the port. Also, being a riverine port, the draft is low: 7.8-8 metres. Given this draft, a full load vessel cannot enter the Haldia dock and only vessels with cargo loads between 32000 to 39000 tonnes can enter the dock.

A third multimodal terminal is on the anvil: IWAI has acquired land near the Haldia Dock, measuring 61 acres in Haldia, to construct a multimodal terminal, especially for inland vessels. Construction work is underway and is expected completion by early 2021. This is the third multimodal terminal in the National Waterway 1, after Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh and Sahibganj in Jharkhand.

The Haldia multimodal terminal could play a crucial role in the growth of National Waterways 1 and 2 as it can connect the two major waterways and act as the gateway for the protocol route of Bangladesh.

10. Visakhapatnam: A Catalyst for Multimodal Connectivity and Port-led Industrialisation

Wedged between the Eastern Ghats and the coast of the Bay of Bengal, **Visakhapatnam**^x is the second-largest city on the eastern coast of India. Visakhapatnam port was declared the second gateway port in India for Nepal-bound cargo by the Government of India in 2016. This all-weather, 24*7 operating port has a draft of 16.5 meters along the berth, one of the deepest in the entire country.

The port is located only 12 km away from the Golden Quadrilateral. It has direct rail linkages to inland container depots (ICDs) in Hyderabad and New Delhi and major industrial regions, such as Raipur in Chhattisgarh, Nagpur in Maharashtra, and Jharsuguda and Kalinganagar in Odisha. Cargo from Visakhapatnam moves to Nepal and Bangladesh.

Due to capacity constraints in Kolkata, there is considerable delay in loading containers into cargo trains. Importers are satisfied with the current service from Visakhapatnam port. The Multimodal Logistics Park of CONCOR in Visakhapatnam plays a major role by taking responsibility for the Nepal-bound consignment till it reaches Birgunj. The port has three harbours -- the outer, inner and fishing. The outer harbour has six berths, including the two for the container terminal (VCTPL).

These berths can handle vessels with a draft up to 17 metres. The harbours are protected from cyclones by the Dolphin's Nose hill to the north of the entrance channel. The main commodities handled at Visakhapatnam are iron ore, manganese ore, steel products, general cargo, coal, edible oil, liquid cargo, engineering items, chemicals, fertilisers, marine products, and crude oil.

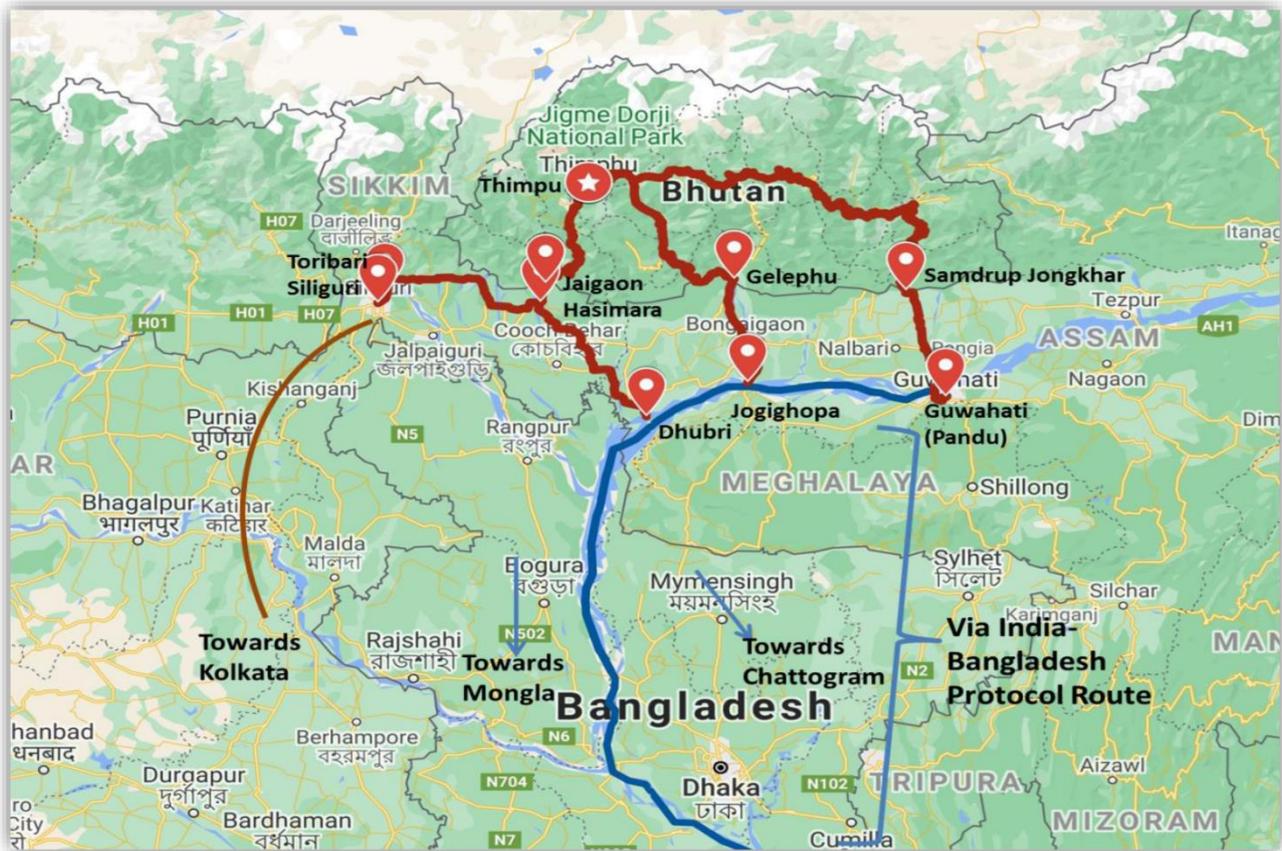
Regarding the Multimodal connectivity status of Visakhapatnam Port, it is relevant to point out that Visakhapatnam has the largest rail network amongst Indian Ports with over 200 km rail length, over 30 Sidings 60 per cent rail coefficient. For facilitating quick transportation of EXIM cargo, the port has enabled a close interface with East Coast Railway's Waltair Division.

The upcoming East Coast Dedicated Freight Corridor between Vijayawada and Kharagpur in West Bengal via Visakhapatnam will be an added advantage. The Visakhapatnam Airport is the nearest within 8 kms from the port. The port is located only 12 km away from the Golden Quadrilateral and connected to NH16. The total road network within the port limits is about 85 km. The CONCOR multimodal logistics park is located within an 8 km distance from the port.

Gangavaram Port, the deepest port in the country, lies in the northern part of Andhra Pradesh. It has a depth of 21 metres that can handle fully loaded super cape size vessels of up to 200,000 DWT. Gangavaram port, spread over 1,800 acres, has nine berths. The turnaround time inside the port for a super cape size vessel, including the loading/unloading time, is 4.5 days, which is competitive compared to most other ports in India. The port does not currently handle containerised and liquid cargo.

Visakhapatnam's is a strong case for Port-led industrialisation in India: From a small fishermen hamlet, Visakhapatnam has metamorphosed into a throbbing metropolis as a result of the development of the Visakhapatnam port and Hindustan Shipyard Limited. This fast-growing city is the major industrial hub in Andhra Pradesh, ranked at number one among states in India for the ease of doing business rankings 2020.

Corridor 3



11. Phuentsholing: Largest Commercial Hub in Bhutan

The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected trade and commerce in several parts, including the South Asian region. Phuentsholing^{xi} bears an instance of this grim reality. It is the largest commercial hub in Bhutan and more than 90 per cent of the goods and commodities are imported through Phuentsholing.

Phuentsholing has a Mini Drt Port, which is relatively new. Before the pandemic, wage workers from across the border worked as loaders at the MDP. All of them returned to their respective homes when the border gates were sealed, owing to the pandemic in March 2020, leaving a yawning gap in the workforce.

But even apart from the issue of the pandemic, so far as import-export facilities are considered, there is enormous room for improvement. Exporters feel that there is immense scope for improving and upgrading trade-related infrastructure and procedures at the border areas of Burimari-Changrabandha and Fulbari-Banglabandha.

Phuentsholing has close connectivity with the Indian town of Jaigaon, which is a free trading town. Both Phuentsholing and Jaigaon suffer from congestion. The construction of a Land Customs Station (LCS) at Ahalay in Pasakha is an important development.

A bypass road from Bibarey (Jaigaon) connects the LCS. Industrial trucks do not have to enter Jaigaon anymore, and hundreds of them hail daily from Ahalay head directly to the Pasakha industrial estate. This has diluted the congestion in both Jaigaon and Phuentsholing. A temporary MDP has also been set up at Ahalay, with generous support from the Government of India. By 2024, Pasakha will also have the largest dry port known as the Mega Dry Port, spread over 15.6 acres of land.

Although Bhutan has gone a long way in enhancing trade, much needs to be done to consolidate the growing market. While Phuentsholing continues to scale up infrastructure and trade-related procedures to match the increasing trade and transport requirements, it is equally important to capacitate other entry points to decongest Phuentsholing and cater to the growing trade and transport needs of Bhutan and the entire BBIN sub-region.

12. Dhubri-Jogighopa-Guwahati Landscape

Dhubri, Jogighopa and **Guwahati**^{xiii} are integral to the National Waterway-2 (Brahmaputra River). They are strategic in terms of the multimodal connectivity initiatives being pursued by India and other countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) sub-region.

1. **Dhubri** is a small town situated on the banks of Brahmaputra. There are no big industries in Dhubri and it is primarily dependent on agricultural and handicraft products. Dhubri is clogged with narrow roads and is witness to high traffic congestion.

Officials from the Customs office at Dhubri visit different regions, including the Dhubri Port and Jogighopa. The office of the Inland Waterways Authority of India wears a deserted look with empty warehouses and piles of stone chips and boulders strewn in the open yard. *Mahajan's* aggregate goods from wholesalers and run their distribution network through boats with 20-30 tonnes carrying capacity.

More than a thousand small mechanised boats ferry passengers and cargo from Dhubri to South Salmara and Hatsingmari.

2. **Jogighopa** is a small town located on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra River in the Bongaigaon district of Assam. A major rail-cum-road bridge, Naranarayan Setu, links Jogighopa to the southern bank of the Brahmaputra.

India's first Multimodal Logistics Park is under construction at Jogighopa, which is strategically located by its proximity to states of Northeast India, as well as to Bhutan and Bangladesh. Once complete and operationalised, the MMLP can resolve connectivity and logistics issues and provide a platform for regional integration through enhanced trade.

3. **Guwahati** is the hub of India's northeast. The office of Inland Water Transport highlighted several issues about the use of north-eastern waterways from this location: the shortage of barges, the cost advantage of Bangladeshi barges, empty vessels from northeast India.

The Government of Assam has taken up a project titled "Assam Inland Water Transport Project" to transform the quality of inland water transport services and integrate high-quality passenger and vehicle ferry services for which purpose the Assam Inland Water Transport Society has been set up.

Another scheme, "*Jibon Dinga*" is also coming up, under which the State government is making modern boat engines available at a 70 percent subsidised rate.

The field visit is a lack of consultation and deliberations among various stakeholders about utilising and integrating waterways and connectivity in India's northeast.

Governmental initiatives for revamping infrastructure ought to be preceded by interactions with stakeholders; it appears that there is a lack of coordination between the Centre, state and private stakeholders in this regard.

Furthermore, to encourage inclusive development, the participation of women in trade and supply chains should be buttressed. There is also a need for awareness generation and vocational training regarding all these domains.

Corridor 4



13. Glimpses of National and Cross-border Connectivity Linkages from New Delhi

Being home to the country's leading development organisations, civil societies, and non-profits, New Delhi^{xiii} has a stellar potential in guiding multi-modal connectivity initiatives in the sub-region.

A visit to different locations in and around the national capital - Noida Special Economic Zone (SEZ), Dadri and Tuglakabad Inland Container Depot, Container Corporation (CONCOR) corporate office, and Asian Institute of Transport Development was undertaken to capture from the field granular aspects of cross-border connectivity issues and linkages from New Delhi.

Greater Noida is shaping up as one of India's most innovative cities in addition to the National Capital Region's (NCR's) modern urban development centre. Additionally, the town is emerging as a model of far-sighted urban planning with a focus on connectivity as a driver of economic activity.

Dadri, in particular, is a city located in the Gautam Budh Nagar sub-urban district. The city is an intersection point between Western and Eastern Dedicated Freight Corridors, and it is also the gateway to the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC).

The Dadri-Noida and Ghaziabad belt comprises some of the largest companies in India. These companies are extensively involved in manufacturing auto parts engineering products, consumers, food processing & beverages (sugar & alcohol), textile, chemicals, steel, fabricated metal products, sports goods, and electronics.

The belt will serve as a central IT hub of India with a significant number of software exports. It is estimated that the belt will reduce commuting challenges for the workforce and the potential emergence of industrial zones and affordable workers housing near the industrial zones and enhance access to mass transit corridors.

The **Inland Container Depot (ICD), Tughlakabad**, is situated in the southeast of Delhi. It is an important terminal of the CONCOR and is pivotal in freight containerisation in the country. Tughlakabad ICD is the country's most extensive

Electronic Data Exchange (EDI) enabled dry port. The ICD runs daily train services to several gateway ports. It is also conveniently located, approaching major roads in Delhi connecting all National Highways, including NH-2 and NH-48, leading out of the state.

The establishment has adequate equipment and facilities for almost all tiers of its workforce and the facility of e-filing of documents and the Electronic Clearing System (ECS) for payment of dues or refund, and an SMS facility for tracking the containers.

Points to consider:

- (i)** Current policies seem to focus more on improving trans-shipment at the border when the need of the hour is seamless connectivity that will reduce dependence on trans-shipment practices for long-term trade and welfare gains.
- (ii)** It is also essential to ensure livelihood generation and community development at border points through the adoption of twin town models, as being followed in Maesot (at Myanmar-Thailand border) and the Myanmar-China border (Muse-Ruili). Such twin cities foster cross-border value chains and promote sustainable development across shared borders by addressing common cross-border challenges through active socio-economic cooperation and integration.
- (iii)** Similar implementation of twin SEZs on both sides of the border will promote synergic growth through fluid employment and further enhance regional connectivity, particularly for the BBIN countries.

14. Petrapole-Gede-Durgapur Triangle

The Petrapole-Gede-Durgapur Triangle^{xiv} is particularly relevant to trade and connectivity between India and Bangladesh and, therefore, to the larger trade issue in the BBIN region. A visit to Petrapole ICP, Ranaghat LCS, Gede LCS, and Durgapur ICD was carried out to assess and investigate the India-Bangladesh trade logistics, infrastructure, policy frameworks, and further research exploring opportunities for encouraging and promoting multi-modal connectivity between these two countries and eventually in the entire BBIN sub-region.

1. **Petrapole ICP** (Integrated Check Post). Located 150kms away from the main Kolkata city, the approach road to the ICP is in poor condition and burdened with traffic. As such detention is a major problem.

Due to inadequate warehouses on the Bangladeshi side, importers from Bangladesh use Indian trucks as warehouses for 15-20 days. Additionally, these drivers are not provided with any facilities, such as restrooms, medical assistance, water, washroom and food. The drivers seemed unhappy with the prevailing scenario.

About the ICP, digitisation was evident. There were several high-functioning cranes inside the premises. However, the scenario was not entirely paperless and there is scope for intervention to enhance digitalisation. Women's participation is conspicuous by its absence.

A visit to the premises of the Land Port Authority of India (LPAI) revealed that it is well-equipped with adequate infrastructure catering to most needs of the workers there and for completing relevant procedures. However, multi-modal connectivity in BBIN is challenged by language differences between the countries. For instance, migrant workers from Bihar, India, working as truck drivers face difficulties because they cannot speak *Bangla*.

2. **Ranaghat** is the site of another LCS. Ranaghat is a congested area, and one has to navigate through crowded thoroughfares to reach the LCS. A striking feature of Ranaghat LCS is the presence of women employees. But the office infrastructure is poor and crammed.

3. **The LCS at Gede** is three hours from Ranaghat. The office at Gede LCS was not much different from the Ranaghat Customs office and lacked necessities. Infrastructure for loading/unloading is also inadequate, and working conditions for employers are poor.
4. **The Durgapur ICD** offers a welcome contrast to the offices at Ranaghat and Gede. The premises are well-equipped with adequate washrooms, water facilities, and proper office spaces.

The infrastructure and workforce seemed sufficient for the facilities that customers desired. There were designated spaces for various functions and operations. There are separate washrooms for men and women, thereby indicating the presence of women workers.

Logistics such as customs clearance, warehousing, shipping plot operations, container weighing, freight forwarding, and transportation are available under a single roof. This ensures swift turnaround time and reduced transaction costs.

15. Benapole: Transformation from Bangladesh-India Trade Artery to a Major BBIN Gateway

A visit to Benapole^{xv} in the Sharsha Upazila, was organised to facilitate some understanding of its potential for multi-modal connectivity. Benapole-Kamalapur is the only regular intercity rail connection to Benapole. The condition of the train, inaugurated in July 2019, is satisfactory with clean coaches, functional amenities and organised on-board services.

While the distance from Dhaka to Benapole is around 200 km, the current route of this train traverses 400 km. The reason behind this is the missing link over Padma River. Though the approach road to Benapole is in good condition, there is massive congestion because of inadequate parking space.

Most of the economic activities in the area are incidental to cross-border trade. Almost 2000 active labourers are engaged at the port directly. Women play a minimal role in port-related activities, so female employment in this area is also low.

The **Benapole Land Port** is the busiest in the country, and its proximity to Kolkata renders it the most important trade hub in the region. Benapole Land Customs House is one of the largest and significant in the country. The custom-house - and quarantine wings have separate buildings within walking distance of the port. Two separate roads- for passengers and cargo- lead towards the border.

A railway line also runs through the port. Labour and equipment at the port are handled by a private company, Great Bengal Limited, under a five-year contract commencing from 2021.

The most intriguing aspect of port activities is the **absence of safety and security nets for the workforce**. The labourers get no safety equipment - gloves, boots, helmets, etc., nor are they provided with any safety training. The labourers often face severe, fatal injuries from handling hazardous products, especially heavy items, chemicals, and acid.

The **infrastructure at the port is also far from adequate**, and the port does not offer cold storage and other special facilities. With various port-related and external delays, cross-border trade through the land is becoming increasingly complex and costly. **Is this an opportune moment to explore other modes of transport?**

An experimental container shipment system through railways was experimented with during the pandemic, and this seems to be attracting a growing number of traders. Therefore, the railway authority is adopting development projects to facilitate this traffic by increasing railway tracks and building a container depot.

The **Noapara River Port**, situated 64 km east of Benapole and connected through NH 706 and then NH 7, promises multi-modal connectivity in the region. However, the area is conspicuous by the **absence of any environmental or infrastructural planning**. The goods usually get trans-loaded from ships onto trucks with manual labour using privately-owned jetties operating under issuance from Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA).

Usually, coal, cement, ash, stone, maize, wheat, rice, and fertiliser are handled at the port. The strategic location of Noapara affords connectivity between the seaport of Mongla and the Benapole land port.

It also connects other river ports and the region's most prominent seaport - Chattogram. The ships can also go to Kolkata directly using the Chunkuri river from Chalna Launch Ghat. Major infrastructural initiatives must upgrade the port facilities to handle increasing trade volumes.

There are recurrent complaints from the traders and C&F agents about mismanagement, infrastructural inadequacy, corruption and extortions. **Several issues come to the surface that merit consideration:**

- (i) **The problem of extortions** at various levels is alarming. The three most noteworthy levels are the syndicate in Bongaon on the Indian side, labourers union and custom officials. Such extortions raise the costs involved in trans-border trade beyond measure.
- (ii) **Lack of awareness** about the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement (BBIN MVA) and other seamless connectivity initiatives is another area for intervention.
- (iii) There is an apparent **lack of female participation** at all levels of the trade process.
- (iv) **The condition of roadways**, generally across Bangladesh, needs to be urgently addressed. Roadways seem to be in a perpetual state of repair and damage control which increases travelling time and escalates costs involved in trade.

16. Ashuganj: A Strategic Location in Bangladesh for Trade and Transit

Ashuganj^{xvi} is a small city with immense possibilities. This river port, situated in the Meghna river delta, functions as the central hub for transshipment activities. The river port in Ashuganj harbors 250-300 vessels per day on average. The port's connectivity stretches from Haldia-Kolkata through Bangladesh and extends to the north-eastern states of India. This river and its port provide livelihood opportunities to the local people: fishermen, boatmen, vessel operators, pilots and day labourers.

The construction of an inland container terminal has been proposed at Mohrompara in Ashuganj. It is being developed under the second Indian Line of Credit (LoC). The land acquisition is almost over, but construction work is yet to commence. Other important infrastructures in the proximity of the Inland

Container Terminal (ICT) are the Gas Transmission Company Limited (GTCL), Ashuganj Fertiliser & Chemical Company Limited (AFCCL) and Ashuganj power station.

Despite several development projects in the pipeline, the **issue of inclusive development has come to the fore.**

- (i) Truck drivers who deliver the cargo from Ashuganj river port to Akhaura land port make a meagre earning of 1500-2000 BDT per trip. They are unable to make more than one trip in a day due to excessive traffic congestion. It is seen that residents often choose to migrate as they perceive that they can earn nearly three times in foreign countries.
- (ii) Another concern of the local people is that in the construction of the ICT, the road connecting their area with the fertiliser factory will be blocked. As a result, anyone working in the factory will have great difficulty commuting daily.
- (iii) The residents also express concern about the poor drainage system in their area.
- (iv) Some locals claimed that land and factory owners got adequate compensation during the land acquisition. Still, those who worked in the factories or lived in rented accommodations were not compensated. The land allotted for food silos was also taken away during the acquisition.
- (v) The need for a common and regular platform for interest articulation is felt: people at the grassroots ought to be able to communicate their developmental concerns and needs to policymakers.

Without proper awareness and involvement, people at the grassroots will always remain neglected. As a result, they will not benefit from the development of the BBIN sub-region. **A more inclusive and collaborative approach to policymaking** in respect of overhauling trade and connectivity is desired.

17. Akhaura Land Port: A Major Opportunity for Bangladesh and Northeast India

Akhaura^{xvii} is an Upazilla of Brahmanbaria district under the Chittagong division in the east of Dhaka and is adjacent to the North Eastern Indian State Tripura. Trade and passenger transit occur through the Akhaura-Agartala check post.

Akhaura is only 128 km away from Dhaka with regular bus and train services to and from Dhaka and Akhaura. Akhaura is a vital land port and is also in proximity of Chittagong (211 km). The Agartala-Akhaura-Chittagong is the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) highway corridor.

Though declared a functional land port in 2010, the Akhaura ICP lacks the necessary infrastructure. The land port is used mainly for exporting various goods, such as stone, coal, plastic household furniture, frozen fish, cement, cotton, edible oil, and foodstuff. Exports have decreased in recent times via this land port. But passengers use this route in transit to go to India. However, there are **several infrastructural inadequacies at Akhaura:**

- (i) One-Stop Service is missing; passengers suffer a lot as they need to go to various spots to complete the procedures.
- (ii) Infrastructure is also not gender-inclusive. The truck drivers and labourers do not have any resting facilities and toilets.
- (iii) There are electricity and internet connectivity-related issues that render operations difficult.
- (iv) There is only one small warehouse but no cold storage for perishable goods like fish.
- (v) The land port is spread over a vast area, but the space is not deftly used. There is a need for better CCTV surveillance systems for security and safety within the premises.
- (vi) It is vital to have a fire station near the port in emergencies.
- (vii) A container yard and equipment gears must be built in the port area.
- (viii) An automation system must be enabled here to make the procedures easier and paperless.

- (ix) There is a need for a bank, as there is none in the port area.
- (x) The representation of women in trade and allied services is negligible. Necessary capacity building and awareness generation activities complemented by cheaper financing facilities will bring more women to the sector.

If goods can be imported through this land port, it will enhance livelihood opportunities, particularly for the labour force. It will also help in reducing the pressure on the Benapole land port.

Akhaura: Akhaura is well connected with the rest of the country via railways and roadways. But the development of waterways needs more initiative. A 4-lane road construction is underway to connect Akhaura with Ashuganj. It is divided into Ashuganj to Sultanpur, Sultanpur to Dharkhar and Dharkhar to Agartala.

The first two parts will be completed soon, but in respect of the third part, the South Union and Mugra are demanding a change in the route. Land acquisitions are still on and the project is expected to be complete by 2023.

The much-awaited Akhaura-Agartala rail line project, which will connect Agartala's Nischintapur with Akhaura's Gangasagar, is also progressing well. 6 km of the new route falls in Bangladesh and the other 4 km falls in India.

The land around Akhaura is fertile and natural calamities like floods, drought, etc., are not frequent. The land that was earlier not used for agricultural production is now being cultivated in right earnest. The local government is extending necessary support to the locals for agro-business through relevant information, fertilisers and good quality seeds. This will ensure the development of the region as a whole.

Ultimately, there should be regular platforms to enable people at the grassroots to interact with the private and public sector stakeholders and articulate their needs and concerns. The local people remain unaware of the benefits of multi-modal connectivity in the BBIN sub-region.

18. Tripura: An Emerging Gateway for Multi-modal Connectivity

Tripura^{xviii}, along with other states in India's north eastern region (NER), has remained neglected for several years. This region 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. Tripura is strategically located, about 130 km to Dhaka, within 60km from Ashuganj and with Chittagong and Sylhet within a radius of 200 km from Agartala – the state capital of Tripura.

1. 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 on the Indian side. However, the other side of the ICP-Akhaura lacks an integrated complex.

One major constraint noted at the Agartala ICP was the unavailability of product-specific cargo handling stations or warehouses. The same space is utilised for fresh fish and coal products during loading/unloading.

2. The third Largest International Land Port on the India-Bangladesh border, the **Srimantapur ICP**, is still developing. The LPAI officials assumed responsibility for the infrastructure at Srimantapur in December 2020. The infrastructure is sufficient and various agencies are commencing operations from the premises.

This **illustrates roadways-inland waterways infrastructure integration** in the BBIN sub-region: the Srimantapur ICP 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.

However, within the premises, the **condition of the workforce** - loaders/unloaders, labour contractors and car/truck owners is **appalling**. There is no provision for food or even drinking water inside the premises. They usually rely on light refreshments available at a makeshift shop adjacent to the establishment.

Furthermore, the nature of the work conducted by the labour in such establishments is prone to injuries and accidents. The integrated development complexes **lack appropriate first aid or medical services** for the labour force.

- 3. Sabroom, South Tripura:** Located on the Banks of the Feni River, Sabroom could be an answer to the connectivity desired by India's landlocked North-eastern states to the Bay of Bengal through Chattogram Port in Bangladesh. The port is approximately 72 km from Sabroom.

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 close to Indian's railway's freight handling yard.

However, there are **issues to address**:

- (i) The ICPs are yet to be declared 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).
- (ii) Various departments under these ICPs have different software. For instance, LPAI uses Cargo Management Systems (CMS), the weightment 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.
- (iii) **The information and communications infrastructure 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.
- (iv) Infrastructural development in a region is expected to have positive implications on the inhabitants of the area. But the **needs of the communities residing in remote border regions remain neglected.** Border Haats sought to address this problem to an extent, but local

inhabitants have been badly hit by the closure of the Haat due to the pandemic.

In the absence of alternative sources of income, local communities have been resorting to small and informal duties to earn their living. Reopening the Border Haats is an urgent necessity with appropriate maintaining health and hygiene protocols.

19. Gumti-Daudkandi River Port: Connectivity with Northeastern India

Gumti,^{xix} a tributary of the river Meghna, passes right by the city of **Daudkandi**. Although Daudkandi is an Upazila under the district of Cumilla, it is quite far from the city of Cumilla.

The two sides of the river almost look like a black and white chessboard. One side is black because of the imported coal and the rest is white because of the imported sand. The coal comes from countries such as South Africa and Indonesia. Then they are distributed to the brickfields scattered across the country. The sand is local, coming from Sylhet via water and then transported to Chandpur, Feni, Noakhali and Cumilla.

People previously used this river port for transportation via barges. But after the establishment of the Meghna-Gumti Bridge in 1991, the river port is now used for cargo transportation. Land formed by sediments of mud (also known as 'char' locally) can frequently be seen across the river.

Major Findings

1. **The river route remains underutilised** when it comes to trade and connectivity with the neighbouring country. But an encouraging development is creating a new river port near Bibir Bazar. An Indian vessel was brought in for a successful trial run. But **navigability continues to be an inherent problem** with the route and a lot needs to be done to make this route fully functional.
2. **Availability of electricity** in the area is becoming a concern due to various construction work in nearby areas.
3. **Infrastructure also needs to be beefed up.** The customs station has a quarantine facility but no digital weight scale platform.

4. **Illegal occupation** - The Gumti River is losing its area over time due to several structures being constructed illegally along the river bank. Sand is being stored on the river bank as a precursor to illegal occupation. As a result, the river is losing its natural flow and could dry up soon.
5. **Lack of coordination** among stakeholders and local authorities creates informational gaps and mismanagement concerning the region's development.
6. Despite its inadequacies, the river port area witnesses several migrant workers due to the **availability of work** throughout the year. Industrialisation can open doors to job opportunities in the region.
7. **Women's participation** in trade and allied services in the region is limited to the grassroots levels. Lack of security, information and financial facilities hold women from actively participating in cross-border trade. Gender-inclusive infrastructure and financing facilities could encourage more women to participate in trade.
8. **Inclusive development:** Dockworkers in the port do not get any protective equipment or gear while working in a potentially hazardous environment. Medical facilities are also not available to the workers who often fall ill while working for long hours amidst coal dumps under a scorching sun.
9. **Problem of extortion:** the local transgender community extorts money from these vessels, which is a significant concern in the area.

A common and regular platform is needed to enable the people at the grassroots to interact with the respective authorities regarding their needs and concerns about developmental initiatives. Change in this direction by grassroots level consultation, engagement and awareness generation can enable the local workforce to reap the full benefits of development in the BBIN sub-region.

20. Narayanganj River Port: Prospects as a Multi-Modal Hub

A field study was conducted at Narayanganj River Port^{xx} situated on the river Shitalakshya in the Dhaka division in June 2021 to analyse and investigate the policy and protocols associated with the Inland Water Transport (IWT) utilising the river Shitalakshya and assessing the potential opportunities of this route in the multi-modal connectivity initiatives of the sub-region.

Narayanganj is accessible by both roadways and railways. The jute industry of Bangladesh was previously centered in Narayanganj. But as the export of jute declined, the jute industry has gradually given way to the readymade garments industry.

It is known that the water of the Shitalakshya river is alkaline which plays a vital role in the manufacturing process of the 'jamdani saree', a renowned textile product of Bangladesh. The livelihood of numerous people is associated with the garment industry in this ancient historical city.

The river port in Narayanganj faces considerable challenges in its quest to become a regional connectivity hub:

1. **Infrastructure** is underdeveloped and obsolete.
2. There are some **communication and coordination problems** among different policymaking and implementation authorities. However, the concerned authorities are well-aware of the potential opportunities and sustainable development initiatives appropriate for the area.
3. Some of the major issues in the area, such as **liquid waste disposal in the river** and the removal of illegal infrastructures from the riverbank, are being addressed.
4. A **common platform is required for the grassroots people to voice their concerns** and needs associated with the new development projects. BIWTA pilots claimed they do not have enough navigation facilities in adverse stormy weather conditions.
5. **Piracy in the river waters is also a problem.** But this has reduced to a certain extent due to the joint efforts of the Bangladesh Coast Guard and the Naval Police.

6. **Media coverage** regarding development initiatives is not satisfactory. Therefore, most people are unaware of the nature and consequences of these development and connectivity-related projects. Most public-private stakeholder meetings are conducted at higher levels without any representation of the locals in those meetings.

Without the inclusion and cooperation of the locals, future development initiatives may face many difficulties in implementation. A more inclusive and collaborative approach to policy-framing and decision-making is indicated.

21. Muktarpur Port: First Private Inland Container Terminal in Bangladesh

The **Muktarpur River Port^{xxi}** is a private river port that is an extended port of call between Bangladesh and India. The Summit Alliance Port Limited (SAPL) is a Bangladeshi company that provides off-dock services. In addition to its facilities in the Chattogram Port, it also has a river terminal situated on the bank of Dhaleshwari River in Muktarpur in Munshiganj.

Muktarpur can be reached from Dhaka through the Narayanganj-Munshiganj Highway. The port is situated at the starting point of Muktarpur Bridge.

Facilities available: The port area is spread over 15.19 acres. The terminal's principal activities are Inland Container Depot (ICD), with facilities for empty container storage and container freight station provisions for handling import and export cargo.

The port has its own trained labourers, crane operators and drivers. Well facilitated cars, speed boats, container yard/storage space, wide approach road, export warehouse, import warehouses together with parking space and trailers – all this adds up to a robust infrastructure at the port.

Moreover, International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS), armed security, CCTV coverage and 24/7 monitoring and generators with full facility power back-up including crane operation, etc. are also available. The terminal is committed to environmental and social regulations.

However, the trade imbalance at the port is significant. The stark difference between imports and exports is the biggest hindrance. As the export volume depends totally on the buyers, they need to be encouraged and incentivised to use the Muktarpur port frequently. Even half of the port's existing capacity has not been utilised till date. The industry's voice also echoes in favour of the Muktarpur port to maximise usage of the new Daudkandi-Sonamura route.

22. Matarbari Sea Port: Along the Asian Highway Corridor connecting East Asian Countries with South Asian Sub-region

The **Matarbari Deep Sea Port**^{xxiii} nestling in the Chattogram subdivision of Bangladesh may well evolve into **a commercial hub in the future** with improved hinterland connectivity with the rest of the country via road, rail and river. The development Matarbari seaport will be a major stepping stone towards connectivity between the East Asian countries and the BBIN sub-region in South Asia. The benefits of the Matarbari seaport can be shared by the North Eastern States of India, especially Mizoram, Tripura, Assam and Meghalaya along with Nepal and Bhutan.

However, there is no direct bus service from Dhaka to Matarbari, nor any direct rail service. But **Matarbari is now home to several development projects** that promise the growth of Matarbari in the future. coal-powered electricity generation plant is being constructed by Coal Power Generation Company Bangladesh Limited (CPGCBL) with the financial and technical support of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). A channel from the Bay of Bengal to Matarbari Power Plant has already been dug for transporting the required equipment for the Power Plant Project.

The **livelihood concerns** of locals in and around Matarbari can hardly be ignored:

1. Matarbari was known for its vast land for salt production. Salt and dried fish (Shutki) are the major products produced in the region. The government has recently acquired a lot of land for coal power plants, earlier used as salt pans and shrimp farms. As a result, people associated with salt and shrimp farming have become unemployed.
2. Due to the specialisation of skills required in coal power projects and deep seaport construction, most of the people of the area could not be employed in these projects. The locals are also worried about whether they will join in

the future. A lot of work in the project is automated, so there will be no need for more workers.

3. There were various allegations about land price misappropriation during the land acquisition for the power plant. Local government representatives expressed their discontent over the difference in land compensation rates depending on the land type.
4. The local people seem unaware of the damage to the environment coal power plants will cause.

To address these concerns several development initiatives in and around the region are in the pipeline:

1. There are **plans for infrastructure projects, including roads and railways in Cox's Bazar** district: four economic zones, LNG terminal, three power projects, construction of Sabrang project and eco-tourism on Sonadia Island and rail connectivity project. All this is expected to boost tourism and trade in the region. National Highway-1 (N-1) will be connected to Asian Highway, connected with China via Myanmar through this region.
2. The road from **Cox's Bazar to Chattogram is not wide**, and it passes through several Upazila Centres, which causes traffic congestion and increased travel time. Widening the road will significantly reduce the time and cost of transportation.
3. From Cox's Bazar, one has to reach Chattogram via Ramu Chakoria, Dohazari, Patia. A tunnel is currently being constructed in the Karnafuli River in Chattogram. If this tunnel is constructed, a modern communication system will be established between Dhaka, Chattogram, Cox's Bazar, and a connection formed with the Asian Highway. This 4-lane road tunnel will connect Chattogram Urban center to Anwara Upazila.

Significance of the Matarbari Deep Sea Port: Importers and Exporters feel that Chattogram Port has reached its capacity limit. New ports need to be constructed to keep pace with the way country's economic development. Matarbari Deep Sea Port and Patenga Bay Terminal are being built as part of that plan.

23. Tamabil Land Port: A Gateway to Northeastern India

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

Sylhet to Tamabil road (Kachpur to Tamabil via Sylhet) up-gradation project is underway. It seeks to 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 enhance r tourism and improve the socio-economic condition of the people.

Sylhet is reputed for its scenic beauty and its tea gardens. However, one of the major issues here is that Jaflong is dusty due to stone-crushing activities. The stone crusher mills need to be shifted to another specific zone to render Jaflong an environment-friendly tourism destination. The local stone crusher mill owners have agreed to go to a specific zone if necessary facilities are provided. Tourism in Jaflong needs both expansion and planning.

Critical Issues to address

The livelihoods of the locals are dependent on quarry and tourism. There are 500-600 stone crusher mills in the Dawki-Tamabil area, employing about 15-20 labourers, both men and women, in each crusher mill. Yet, **the area is an Ecologically Critical Area (ECA)**, covering about 14.93 sq km.

Now the locals want the government to start the quarry again outside of the ECA because the quarry sustains several categories - labourers, truck drivers, crusher mills and local businesses. 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.

Tamabil-Dawki check post is not well-integrated on the Bangladesh side. Tamabil was declared a functional land port in 2017, but there is a lack of necessary facilities and infrastructure.

Improvement is desired in several domains:

- (i) General passengers do not have to sit or wait for room facilities in the land port.
- (ii) One-stop service is missing; passengers run from pillar to post to complete procedures.
- (iii) 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.
- (iv) There are electricity and network issues that make the operations difficult. There is only one warehouse and no cold storage for perishable goods.
- (v) The land port area is huge, which should be efficiently used. There is a need for more CCTV cameras for safety and a fire station nearby.
- (vi) An automated system needs to be developed to make the procedures less cumbersome and paperless. ATM booths are needed as there are none in the port area.

Recommendations

- 1. Creation of job opportunities:** There are unemployment problems in the region and fewer labour opportunities as imports have decreased. Unemployment and drug-related problems will be reduced to a great extent if quarries are resumed.
- 2. Addressing environmental concerns:** The stone-crushing mills may need relocation to contain the dust problem and create a tourist-friendly environment.
- 3. Addressing outmigration:** 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, sending remittances.
- 4. Capacity building:** There should be education and skill development facilities for the locality youth. Educational institutions and technical training centres are required. There is a plan to build an economic zone in the region.
- 5. Connectivity and communication:** Connectivity and communication of Tamabil with the rest of the country is average and needs more development initiatives. Railway connectivity is needed.

Therefore, it becomes imperative that planning and decision-making for the future be based on inputs from local inhabitants.

24. To the heights of Shillong and Dawki

The Asian Highway (AH) road network- from Jorabat to Shillong - AH 1 and AH 2 pass through Shillong and Dawki^{xxiv} before entering Bangladesh through Tamabil. Both Shillong and Dawki are important nodes for trade in this region.

A railway line project from Tetelia in Assam to Byrnihat in Meghalaya came in 2017. The 22km stretch from Tetelia in Assam to Byrnihat in Meghalaya could not be carried through because although the 20km stretch in Assam was completed, the 2.3km stretch in Meghalaya could not be constructed due to the local protests. Therefore, one must reach Shillong through the steep and curvy roads that snake their way along the Khasi hills.

Shillong has always been a tourist haven. The emporiums at the marketplace of Shillong 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.

Dawki (LCS): The Land Customs Station (LCS) at Dawki is equipped with insufficient infrastructure facilities. Limestone and stone boulders are the major trade items here.

The only available functioning facilities at Dawki LCS are two weighbridges and a power generator to manage electricity supply disruptions. Basic facilities, such as warehouse, parking space, restrooms, washrooms, staff quarters, Plant and Animal Quarantine facilities, currency exchange facilities, nationalised banks and scanners are conspicuous by their absence. One is able to list several shortcomings:

- (i) The inadequate infrastructure facilities on the Indian side are a deterrent to trade.
- (ii) Corruption is also rampant.
- (iii) The absence of parking space is responsible for massive congestion on the road. Drivers complained about the narrow roads and frequent accidents.
- (iv) The absence of basic facilities, such as internet, electricity, and banking facilities in many parts of the Northeast, are obstacles to the Government's drive for paperless trade.

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 hilly and roads are steep. Indeed the potential of Meghalaya remains grossly unutilised and there is **scope for improvement in several domains:**

1. Exporters and importers opine that the Central and state governments do not **upgrade infrastructural facilities** to facilitate seamless movement of goods.
2. Issues such as **poor internet and transport connectivity** among various parts of Meghalaya are also not addressed urgently.
3. There is an inordinate delay in establishing the **ICP at Dawki**.
4. There is difficulty getting phytosanitary certificates and other relevant documents from various offices in Kolkata and Varanasi. The stakeholders insist on **establishing testing facilities in either Shillong or Guwahati** to benefit local traders.

25. Karimganj: A Strategic Location for India-Bangladesh Trade

Karimganj^{xxv} is an integral part of the Barak valley and has a nodal importance for India-Bangladesh trade by virtue of its strategic location. It is situated at a distance of 80 kms from Silchar, but though the road connecting Silchar and Karimganj is a national highway, the maintenance of the road is abysmal.

The ICP is located in **Sutarkandi**, 48kms from Karimganj. Two national highways run through Sutarkandi, NH-151 and NH-7, connecting Sutarkandi with Karimganj and Sylhet. The road towards the ICP is an ill-maintained national highway and poses perpetual challenges to vehicles plying along this route. Since this ICP functioned as a land port for quite some time, several facilities, such as CCTV cameras, scanners, and parking facilities, are still in the process of upgrading.

Connectivity of Karimganj

The **Mahisashan Railway station** is an old abandoned station with a broad-gauge railway track connecting Karimganj on the Indian side with Shahabajpur in the Sylhet district of Bangladesh. This track joined India to Myanmar through

Moreh-Tamu, about 400 km away from Karimganj, in the pre-independence years.

There is scope to revive and reinvigorate the railway connectivity of Karimganj. Mahisashan can also be connected to Akhuara on the Bangladesh side. Goods reaching Karimganj from Guwahati and Agartala are unloaded 15 minutes away from Karimganj, known as Bhanga.

There is an **Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI)** Terminal through which only a small quantity of fresh fruits and ginger is exported to Bangladesh. Coal and Limestones are also sent to Bangladesh through the riverine route. However, the movement of goods has remained suspended since the invasion of the Covid pandemic.

Issues to address

1. Water transport needs to be explored and buttressed because it involves a comparatively lower cost than roadways. The journey across the district is not smooth, as there are allegations of extortion of money from truck drivers by vested interests at entry and exit points in all districts.
2. There are very few women involved in cross-border in this district.
3. It seems that the North-eastern states are among the most ignored states by the Central Government. The Government of India could provide some additional benefits to the exporters and incentivise schemes that will be attractive to traders in the region.

Conclusion

What was highlighted at the outset needs to be reiterated in the conclusion. That connectivity, which is a necessary ingredient for boosting and bolstering trade, is not just about revamping infrastructure or widening roadways, or exploring the possibility of utilising waterways for a modal shift in transportation of goods. It is also about addressing mindsets, reorienting embedded ideas and imagining new possibilities.

Connectivity initiatives must also address issues that have remained neglected for long: like the participation of women, installation of gender-friendly infrastructure and livelihoods of people who stand to lose due to trade-facilitating infrastructure.

The field visits through several trade corridors across India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan have thus thrown up various **take-home messages** which will be relevant for policy makers to consider as they grapple with the means to boost trade and development in the South Asian region. Some of these include:

(i) Information gaps at various levels: Inadequate connectivity and lack of job opportunities result in outward migration. Awareness generation and responsibility of the media about making some ports or access points visible to the public and stakeholders is an urgent necessity.

Lack of clear understanding among officials regarding the scope of work also hinders coordination between concerned bodies such as the municipalities, trade associations, agent associations and chambers of commerce and ultimately adversely affects the efficiency of overall trade.

(ii) Media coverage regarding development initiatives is not satisfactory. Therefore, most people are unaware of the nature and consequences of these development and connectivity-related projects.

(iii) The representation of women in trade and allied services is rather low. This is fallout of insufficient technical knowhow coupled with poor financing facilities. Necessary capacity building and awareness generation activities complemented by financing facilities will bring more women to the sector.

- (iv) **Promotion of local products and specialities**, including regional cuisine and local delicacies, local handicrafts could offer a much-needed boost to cottage industries of the region and the local economy. For this purpose, people need to be trained and incentivised to market local products.
- (v) **Roads in several places are often narrow and congestion is a regular hazard.** They need to be widened at several points and their condition revamped to accommodate heavy load-bearing traffic.
- (vi) **Critical infrastructure gaps and inadequacies** at borders stand in the way of improved connectivity. Often the equipment is outmoded or obsolete, if not altogether absent. Structural reforms are also needed to ensure an integrated paperless trade regime before implementing any such plan for connectivity. Establishing internationally-accredited labs on both sides of the customs to avoid delay in the certification process is required at several border points.
- (vii) **Voices from the ground are not audible in the corridors of decision-making.** What has transpired from various field visits is a lack of consultations and deliberations among various stakeholders regarding utilisation and integration of connectivity. For example, in India's north-east, governmental initiatives for revamping infrastructure ought to be preceded by interactions with stakeholders.

The region's overall development seems to be in neglect as borne out by the local complaint about dearth of drinking water facilities in the Panitanki area (Siliguri). Common and regular platforms that allow people at the grassroots to articulate their development concerns and needs are the need of the hour.

- (viii) One has to be **futuristic in assessing roadways or railways.** An existing roadway may not face congestion at present, but one must consider its ability to handle increasing traffic in the days to come. The Chittagong Port in Bangladesh has reached the limit of its capacity, and one has to think of ways to unburden its load, perhaps by promoting another Sea Port-like Matarbari.
- (ix) One of the crucial elements involved in the flourish of any port or station is its **connectivity to surrounding commercial areas and the development of surrounding areas.** Several illustrations can be offered in this regard. Akhaura in Bangladesh is a case in point. The land around Akhaura is fertile and natural calamities like floods, drought, etc., are not frequent.

In trying to encourage agriculture on these lands, the local government is extending necessary support to the locals for agro-business through relevant information, fertilisers, and good quality seeds. This will ensure the development of the region as a whole.

Again there are **plans for infrastructure projects, including roads and railways in Cox's Bazar** district: four economic zones, LNG terminal, three power projects, construction of Sabrang project and eco-tourism on Sonadia Island and rail connectivity project. All this is expected to boost tourism and trade in the region.

- (x) One has to be sensitive to the demands of **ecological balance and concerns of environmental degeneration** of the region in which a port or an industrial unit or even a motorway may be located. For instance, ports around the Sundarban region cradle several parts of Bangladesh.

A site has been designated for a Bay Terminal in Patenga, Chattogram, but this site is the fishing area enabling as many as 1200 fishermen to earn their living. Therefore, policymakers will need to strike the right equilibrium between development initiatives, ecological balance and livelihood concerns.

Again, the stone-crushing mills in the Tamabil-Dawki area in Bangladesh may need relocation to contain the dust problem and create a tourist-friendly environment.

- (xi) There are some **communication and coordination problems** among different policymaking and implementation authorities. Though ICPs have been constructed at several places with a long-term vision to promote seamless trade and connectivity, infrastructural challenges remain.

The more pressing issue is **the need to harmonise and strengthen inter-agency and stakeholders' coordination and remove fixation with old ways**. Workshops for awareness generation and inter-agency coordination may help in this regard.

- (xii) **Connectivity is not just about trade but also about promoting livelihood opportunities and addressing the livelihood concerns of people**. Varanasi has ghats that have also emerged as tourist destinations and become a source of livelihood for hundreds of boatmen who earn their living by ferrying tourists. The boatmen are aware of government initiatives to make the river navigable and connect it to Patna in Bihar and Haldia in West Bengal.

(xiii) Land acquisition is often a necessary part of the process of laying down the required infrastructure for facilitating connectivity. However, in several areas, the compensation for the landowners is delayed. At Ashuganj in Bangladesh, some locals claimed that land and factory owners got adequate compensation during the land acquisition.

Still, those who worked in the factories or lived in rented accommodations were not compensated. The land allotted for food silos was also taken away during the acquisition.

(xiv) It is seen that at times development of ports can trigger industrial growth and development. Visakhapatnam's is a strong case for Port-led industrialisation in India: From a small fishermen hamlet, Visakhapatnam has metamorphosed into a throbbing metropolis due to the development of the Visakhapatnam port and Hindustan Shipyard Limited. This fast-growing city is the major industrial hub in Andhra Pradesh, ranked at number one among states in India for the ease of doing business rankings 2020.

(xv) Unhealthy practices like extortions need to be diffused. For example, at Benapole, the three most noteworthy levels are the syndicate in Bongaon on the Indian side, labourers union and custom officials. Such extortions raise the costs involved in trans-border trade beyond measure. Again members of the transgender community extort money from vessels at the Gumti-Daudkandi River Port in Cumilla, Bangladesh.

(xvi) The issue of inclusive development has come to the fore. Without proper awareness and involvement, people at the grassroots will always remain neglected. As a result, they will not benefit from developing the BBIN sub-region.

A more inclusive and collaborative approach to policymaking in respect of overhauling trade and connectivity is desired. The residents around Matarbari Sea Port in Bangladesh are an apt illustration. Matarbari was known for its vast land for salt production. Salt and dried fish (Shutki) are the major products produced in the region.

The government has recently acquired a lot of land for coal power plants, earlier used as salt pans and shrimp farms. As a result, people associated with salt and shrimp farming have become unemployed.

(xvii) It is noticed at several places like Srimantapur in Tripura, India, that the **condition of the workforce** - loaders/unloaders, labour contractors and car/truck owners **are appalling**. There is no provision for food or even drinking water inside the premises, and they usually rely on light refreshments available at a makeshift shop adjacent to the establishment.

Furthermore, the nature of the work conducted by the labour in such establishments is prone to injuries and accidents. The integrated development complexes **lack appropriate first aid or medical services** for the labour force.

However, initiatives for strengthening connectivity and boosting trade cannot be pronounced as a once-for-all affair. Given the continuous inflow of ceaseless social, political, and economic variables, all such measures will have to be viewed, reviewed, adjusted, and readjusted in light of the emerging reality.

Endnotes

- i <https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/field-diary-siliguri-corridor.pdf>
- ii <https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/field-diary-banglabandha.pdf>
- iii <https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/field-diary-mongla.pdf>
- iv <https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/field-diary-chattogram.pdf>
- v <https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/field-diary-birgunj.pdf>
- vi <https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/field-diary-sahibganj-corridor-emerging-inland-waterway-to-link-india-bangladesh.pdf>
- vii <https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/field-diary-bihar-to-facilitate-connectivity-in-the-bbin-sub-region.pdf>
- viii <https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/field-diary-up-emerging-as-a-hub-for-m-connect.pdf>
- ix <https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/field-diary-kolkata-haldia-kolaghat-triangle.pdf>
- x <https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/field-diary-visakhapatnam-a-catalyst-m-connect.pdf>
- xi <https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/field-diary-phuentsholing.pdf>
- xii <https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/field-diary-dhubri-jogighopa-guwahati-landscape.pdf>
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- xx <https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/field-diary-narayanganj-river-port.pdf>
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- xxiii <https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/field-diary-tamabil.pdf>
- xxiv <https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/field-diary-to-the-heights-of-shillong-and-dawki.pdf>
- xxv <https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/field-diary-karimganj-a-strategic-location-for-india-bangladesh-trade.pdf>

About the Project

It is a frequently reiterated statement that South Asia is one of the least integrated and connected regions of the world. However, of late, there has been both movement and investment of political capital behind regional integration, particularly among the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) group of countries. It is increasingly felt that a more integrated BBIN sub-region is critical for regional and global economic growth, balance and also political stability for shared prosperity with security.

The political push behind sub-regional and regional blocs like BBIN and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) also aptly indicates the increasing buzz and consensus around regional cooperation and integration.

That will help positioning advocacy messages towards addressing implementation challenges of the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) in Bangladesh, India and Nepal and, through multi-stakeholder discourse mapping by particularly involving those at the grassroots, will set the stage for multi-modal connectivity initiatives in this sub-region, combining roadways with inland waterways, coastal shipping and railways.

For details, please visit:

<https://cuts-citee.org/enabling-a-political-economy-discourse-for-multi-modal-connectivity-in-the-bbin-bangladesh-bhutan-india-nepal-sub-region/>

CUTS International

Established in 1983, CUTS International (Consumer Unity & Trust Society) is a non-governmental organisation, engaged in consumer sovereignty in the framework of social justice and economic equality and environmental balance, within and across borders. More information about the organisation and its centres can be accessed here: <http://www.cuts-international.org>.



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