

Multimodal Connectivity in the BBIN Subregion

**Political Economy Challenges to
Multimodal Connectivity**

Why Connectivity?

- Connectivity initiatives like the BBIN-MVA are premised on the desire to boost trade in the South Asian region, given that the intra-regional trade here is amongst the lowest in the world.
- **But all changes recommended at the infrastructural and procedural levels to boost trade will throw up winners as well as losers**
- **Therefore the real challenge lies in propping up opportunities for the winners to consolidate their gains, while at the same time addressing the concerns of possible losers and extending to them viable alternatives and support systems.**

The rationale of multi-modal connectivity

- 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 intra-regional trade.
- 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.*

The wider implications of 'Connectivity'

- 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.
- 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.**
- **An integrated and well-coordinated network across countries in this region will act as a catalyst to the development of cross-border value chains.**

Glimpses of Political-economy challenges thrown up during field trips across select corridors in the BBIN region

National and Cross-border Connectivity Linkages from New Delhi

- While current policies have focussed on improving transshipment at the border , a large chunk of the locally residing communities depends on their livelihood practices.
- To make multimodal connectivity efficient, understanding the usefulness and effectiveness of different modes of transport is vital
- Need to build confidence measures through civil societies' and people-to-people contact. Such linkages can be established through meetings, dialogues and training sessions that address the apprehensions of the concerned stakeholders.

Field Diary – Dhubri-Jogighopa-Guwahati Landscape

- Need to better understand the bottlenecks in trade and for decongesting trade from the roadways and divert same to waterways.
- There is a lack of consultations with stakeholders
- There is lack of coordination between the Centre, state and private stakeholders as a necessary prelude to infrastructure initiatives.

Field Diary: Bihar to Facilitate Connectivity in the BBIN Sub-region

- Though ICPs have been constructed with a long-term vision to promote seamless trade and connectivity, infrastructural challenges remain.
- The need to strengthen inter-agency and stakeholders' coordination and remove inertia regarding old ways.
- There is need to create more awareness and conduct inter-agency coordination workshops.

Field Diary: Kolkata-Haldia-Kolaghat Triangle

Kolaghat on the banks of the Rupnarayan River, is declared as a port of call in the second addendum to India-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT).

- **The residents of the area are eagerly waiting for the port to become operational for more employment opportunities.**

- **They are not part of any meetings organised to discuss the development plan of Kolaghat**
- **Field Diary Karimganj: A Strategic Location for India-Bangladesh Trade**
- **Water transport is the best transportation mode as it involves 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 every entry and exit point in all districts.**
- **The team was informed that there are very few women involved in cross-border from this district.**

Field Diary – Petrapole-Gede-Durgapur Triangle

Both at Gede and Ranaghat, the LCS lacked proper infrastructure for loading/unloading and had poor working conditions for employers.

Field Diary -Sahibganj Corridor: Emerging Inland Waterway to Link India-Bangladesh

- **For inclusive development, not just for economic growth, people at the ground level should benefit from infrastructural facilities.**
- **Representation of women in trade in this belt is meagre. Hence, appropriate measures should be adopted to enhance their participation.**
- **Discussions with fishermen revealed a lack of awareness among fishermen regarding trade through waterways. They would be willing to shift to trade and related practices if their incomes increase.**
- **The environment implications of the practices in the stone belt corridor are severe. Breating problems and tuberculosis are rampant. Transportation via roadways adds to this pollution.**

Field Diary - Siliguri Corridor

- **People from various sectors are aware of some of the recent major trade and connectivity developments in the region, even though informational gaps exist.**
- **Many people are moving from this region in search of jobs to other places. If the full potential of the region in trade and connectivity is tapped, then the outward migration can be prevented, and even lead to reverse migration.**
- **The representation of women in trade and allied services is low. Various reasons, such as the absence of information and the technical knowhow with poor financing facilities are contributing among many other reasons to the low presence of women in the sector.**
- **Necessary capacity building and awareness generation complemented by cheaper financing facilities will bring more women to the sector.**
- **People in Panitanki were promised solution to their drinking water crisis during the time of land acquisition for the construction of Asian Highways (AH) through Panitanki. But after the construction of the road, nothing happened.**
- **There is a toll plaza on the road towards Siliguri from Panitanki, where the local people have to pay during their upward and downward journey. It is increasing the cost of living for the people in this area as they depend on Siliguri for almost all their needs.**

Field Diary: To the heights of Shillong and Dawki

- **There were complaints about rampant corruption practices at the Dawki LCS.**
- **The officials informed the absence of basic facilities, such as internet, electricity, and banking facilities in many parts of the Northeast, which is affecting the implementation of the government's paperless trade initiatives.**
- **The constant transfer of officials is also delaying the implementation of promising initiatives.**

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

- **Local communities depend extensively on Agartala for their consumption and livelihood needs.**
- **Despite tremendous improvements in hard infrastructure in the state, the Government of Tripura has not understood, still less provided for the needs of the communities residing in remote border regions.**
- **Condition of people working as loaders/unloaders, labour contractors and car/truck owners is appalling.**
- **There had been adverse impacts due to the closure of the Kamalasagar Border Haat. The local communities have no alternative income source and have been resorting to small and informal duties to earn a living.**

The Way Forward

- **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.**

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

- **Boatmen of Varanasi expressed their grievance that the boatmen community does not have any power. Their voices are not heard and they do not have any representation in any governmental forum even though they have some genuine concerns and ideas to share with regard to cleanliness and disaster management.**

Inputs for policy makers with regard to multimodal connectivity

(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.

(ii) 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 ought to be put in place.

(iii) 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.

(iv) 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.

(v) 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.

(vi) 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

(vii) 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.

(viii) 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.

(ix) 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.

(x) 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.**

(xi) **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.

(xii) 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.

(xiii) 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.

(xiv) 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.

(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.*

(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.

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Conclusion

- **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.**

Thank You