

Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue on Promoting Cross-border Trade through Trans-boundary Waterways between Bangladesh, Bhutan and India

Wednesday, September 29th, 2021 • 09:30 to 14:30 (IST) • The Lily Hotel, Guwahati, India
(Also virtually on Zoom)

Report

Organised by: CUTS International

Date: September 29, 2021

Welcome Remarks: **Bipul Chatterjee**, Executive Director, CUTS International; **Biswajit Chakraborty**, Director, North-East Advisory Council, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry; **Shah Mohammad Tanvir Monsur**, Bangladesh Assistant High Commissioner.

Key Speakers

- **Subimal Bhattacharjee**, Director, Jookto;
- **Samudra Gupta Kashyap**, State Information Commissioner, Government of Assam;
- **Mohammad Rafiqul Islam**, Director, Marine Safety and Traffic, Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority;
- **Archana Chatterjee**, Programme Manager, International Union for Conservation of Nature;
- **Abhijit Ghosh**, Assistant Professor, Mahatma Gandhi College, West Bengal;
- **Ashutosh Gautam**, Member (Technical, Traffic & Logistics), Inland Waterways Authority of India, Guwahati;
- **Kamesh Salam**, Founder and CEO, South Asia Bamboo Foundation
- **Captain Rakesh Singh**, Secretary, Indian Coastal Ship Owner's Association;
- **Mayuri Phukan**, Youth Basin Ambassador, Oxfam;
- **Avli Verma**, Researcher, Manthan Adhyayan Kendra;
- **Atowar Rahman**, President, Dhubri Waterways International Traders Association;
- **Trinity Saioo**, Assistant General Secretary, Hills Curcumin & Spice Producer Society;
- **Dipak Gyawali**, former Minister of Water Resources of Nepal, and Chair, Nepal Water Conservation Foundation (Virtually);
- **Shanta Soheli Moyna**, Natural Resource Specialist, Climate Justice and Natural Resource Rights, Oxfam, Bangladesh (Virtually)

Presentation by **Surendra Singh**, Director, Inland Waterways Authority of India, Guwahati.

Closing Remarks: **Shobhit Chepe**, Consultant – Advocacy Coordinator, Oxfam; **Saurabh Kumar**, Fellow, CUTS International

1. Background and Objectives

- 1.1 India and Bangladesh share 54 common transboundary rivers and waterways. These rivers and inland waterways can generate opportunities, such as cross-border trade, tourism, and connectivity, for the local communities in the sub-region through economic, political and socio-cultural interactions between the two countries.
- 1.2 Although various government and other initiatives have been taken to promote the trade of locally produced agricultural commodities, cultural artefacts, cuisine, and historical artwork, limited attention has been given to the use of transboundary waterways.
- 1.3 The adopted initiatives should be cost-effective to create a win-win situation for all the stakeholders involved. Thus, to achieve balanced development, private participation and community engagement are necessary.
- 1.4 A critical review of policies, regulations, and other issues such as infrastructure, marketing, visa and customs is required, parallely, with the awareness generation programme amongst relevant stakeholders.
- 1.5 The dialogue was organised to build consensus among stakeholders in Bangladesh, Bhutan, and India to promote inclusive cross-border trade and tourism via transboundary waterways.
- 1.6 The discussion aimed to enhance buy-in for small haul cross-border navigation between Bangladesh, Bhutan, and India, mainly for women, youth, indigenous communities, local traders, fishermen, boatmen and local marginalised communities through the trade of locally produced goods.

2. Key Takeaways

2.1 Session 1: Reviving Transboundary Waterways for Cross Border Trade

- 2.1.1 Historically, rivers are the thread of connectivity and promote economic growth and development of countries. They are the backbone of development and trade. The cost of transportation by the rivers, including transshipment and unforeseen costs, is approximately 60 per cent lower than any other means of transportation. However, certainty, efficiency and predictability are required for river transport that the involvement of the private sector can only achieve.
- 2.1.2 North-East India is a gateway to Bangladesh, Bhutan and other East Asian countries for trade-related activities. The India-Bangladesh relationship is critical in improving infrastructure, capacity building, trade, and dealing with issues at the local and national levels.

- 2.1.3 Public thinking and media involvement is necessary to create awareness of cross-border trade and ease of doing business through inland waterways in India, Bangladesh and Bhutan.
- 2.1.4 The number of trade routes that were functional before independence needs to be revived for transportation purposes. IWAI is concentrating on the Brahmaputra and Barak rivers to make them navigable for transportation.
- 2.1.5 The Indo-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT) routes are integrated with the other routes of both countries. During 2020-21, the number of inter-country goods cargo and vessels movement was approximately 700. Bangladesh and Bhutan have signed an MoU and SoP in 2017 and 2019 to export stone chips and boulders in the inland waterways.
- 2.1.6 The benefit-sharing approach creates opportunities for managing various water demands and needs. It can work well for biodiversity and environmental conservation management when focusing on river-related issues or cross-border trade through inland waterways.
- 2.1.7 The inland waterways have significant importance in trade in South Asia. It creates jobs opportunities and propels socio-economic development. Furthermore, it is a cheaper option for trade and is environment-friendly.
- 2.1.8 NW-2 provides alternate access to Bhutan via Jogighopa and NW-16 can provide alternative routes to access Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and the Southern part of Assam via the IBP route.
- 2.1.9 North-East has around 53 per cent of India's bamboo resources which are traded illegally through rivers. Therefore, measures should be taken to legalise the bamboo trade to benefit rural communities engaged in it.

2.2 Session 2: Engaging the Private Sector, Community-based and Youth Organisations for Inclusive Trade

- 2.2.1 European countries have taken river-based transportation as a major priority, while India has been considered the last priority. Although it has gained momentum over the past few years, it is still very low compared to China's cargo transportation through inland waterways.
- 2.2.2 China started using its water routes in late 1986 as its roadways were getting congested. Today China has overtaken the US in the number of goods it transports by waterways.
- 2.2.3 People in the sub-region must generate knowledge related to the partnership of the private sector, local people and spiritual people. If India has to compete with

China, it has to develop the inland waterways and utilise them to the fullest. India has benefits as compared to China, especially in the Ganges and Brahmaputra River, using its multimodal transport system. This will be a game-changer for India, not only in South Asia but also across the globe.

2.2.4 For effective transboundary water governance, it is essential to consider the perspectives of stakeholders.

2.2.5 There is a need for the concentration of alternative storage methods and sustainable harvesting of riverbed aggregates. Furthermore, India should also revive its traditional transport water systems like Bangladesh.

3. Conclusion and the Way Forward

3.1 Need for Involvement/participation of private sector in all the sections of water transport.

3.2 Exploring other items, except traditional items, for trade through waterways between North-east India and Bangladesh. The tourism sector also needs to be explored.

3.3 Modernisation of port facilities along with the availability of infrastructures and quick implementation of ICTs.

3.4 Establishment of Bangladesh-India Chamber of Commerce for the Northeast for resolving everyday matters quickly and easily.

3.5 Clear understanding of goods that can be exported and imported between India, especially North-east India and Bangladesh and proper dissemination of information even at the ground level.

3.6 Industries in Bangladesh, Bhutan and North-east India should take advantage of the waterways connectivity for trade. Furthermore, to reduce the disadvantage of empty return cargo, traders/producers can explore opportunities of importing items like Spices, bamboo, fruits and horticulture.

3.7 Conducting more awareness and capacity-building programmes for officials and people at the local level.

3.8 Youth and communities should be made a part of the decision-making process. The inclusion of riparian communities is highly necessary as these communities live by the rivers and are affected most by their changes.

3.9 Tracking technologies and others used in the big barges need to be designed so that similar technologies are also provided to the smaller vessels.

Agenda

09:00 - 09:30	Registration and Welcome Tea
09:30 - 10:30	<p><i>Opening Session</i></p> <p>Welcome Remarks</p> <p>Bipul Chatterjee, Executive Director, CUTS International</p> <p>Biswajit Chakraborty, Director, North-East Advisory Council, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry</p> <p><i>Special Address</i></p> <p>Shah Mohammad Tanvir Monsur, Bangladesh Assistant High Commissioner, Guwahati, Assam</p>
10:30 - 10:45	Tea/Coffee Break
10:45 - 12:15	<p><i>Session - I - Panel Discussion</i></p> <p><u>Theme:</u> Reviving Transboundary Waterways for Cross Border Trade</p> <p><i>This session aims to build consensus among the government authorities of Bangladesh, Bhutan and India and international institutions to have an inclusive approach for cross-border trade via trans-boundary waterways, thereby contributing to sub-regional cooperation.</i></p> <p>Chair</p> <p>Subimal Bhattacharjee, Director, Jookto</p> <p>Panelists</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Samudra Gupta Kashyap, State Information Commissioner, Government of Assam • Mohammad Rafiqul Islam, Director, Marine Safety and Traffic, Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority • Archana Chatterjee, Programme Manager, International Union for Conservation of Nature • Abhijit Ghosh, Assistant Professor, Mahatma Gandhi College, West Bengal • Surendra Singh, Director, Inland Waterways Authority of India, Guwahati • Ashutosh Gautam, Member (Technical, Traffic & Logistics), Inland Waterways Authority of India
12:15 - 13:45	<p><i>Session – II - Panel Discussion</i></p> <p><u>Theme:</u> Engaging the Private Sector, Community-based and Youth Organisations for Inclusive Trade</p> <p><i>This session aims to enhance buy-in for the private sector and local communities in Bangladesh, Bhutan, and India to use waterways as an alternate mode of transportation.</i></p>

	<p>Chair Captain Rakesh Singh, Secretary, Indian Coastal Ship Owner’s Association</p> <p>Panelists</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayuri Phukan, Youth Basin Ambassador, Oxfam • Avli Verma, Researcher, Manthan Adhyayan Kendra • Atowar Rahman, President, Dhubri Waterways International Traders Association • Trinity Saioo, Assistant General Secretary, Hills Curcumin & Spice Producer Society • Dipak Gyawali, former Minister of Water Resources of Nepal, and Chair, Nepal Water Conservation Foundation (Virtually) • Shanta Soheli Moyna, Natural Resource Specialist, Climate Justice and Natural Resource Rights, Oxfam, Bangladesh (Virtually)
13:45 - 14:00	<p>Concluding Session</p> <p>Wrap-up Shobhit Chepe, Consultant – Advocacy Coordinator, Oxfam</p> <p>Vote of Thanks Saurabh Kumar, Fellow, CUTS International</p>
14:00– 14:30	Networking Lunch