

Report

Multi-stakeholders and Traders' Advocacy Meeting on Cross-Border Trade, Tourism, and Navigation through Trans-boundary Inland Waterways between India and Bangladesh

March 21, 2022, Dhubri, Assam

Welcome Remarks: Saurabh Kumar, Fellow, CUTS International

Speakers:

Atowar Rahman, President, Dhubri Waterways International Traders Association;

Lalit Kumar Chopra, Chattered Accountant and Manager, Bhansali International;

Surendar Kumar Choudhury, Trader;

Surat Jamal, President, Dhubri Traders Association;

Yunus Khan, Boat Operator, Panchu Ghat

Background and Objectives

India and Bangladesh share 54 transboundary rivers. These rivers can generate opportunities for the local communities in the sub-region through economic, political, and socio-cultural interactions between the two countries. These two countries' cross-border trade and connectivity through these rivers and inland waterways hold immense socio-economic potential. However, due to political, navigational, and regulatory challenges, these have not been utilised to their fullest potential.

Several efforts to engage the local communities in the production and trade of locally produced agricultural commodities, cultural artefacts, cuisine, and historical artwork have been made. Limited attention has been paid to using these transboundary waterways to trade these products. The advocacy meeting was organised to build consensus among stakeholders to promote inclusive cross-border trade and tourism via transboundary waterways.

The meeting aimed to discuss the issues and challenges of the stakeholders involved in trade and tourism through the inland transboundary waterways and suggest measures to strengthen trade and tourism activities through the Dhubri port.

This advocacy meeting was organised under a regional project entitled "Transboundary Rivers of South Asia" (TROSA), which is supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and managed by Oxfam. The project aims to reduce the poverty of marginalised and vulnerable river basin communities through increased access to and control over water resources on their livelihoods depend. The details of the project can be accessed [here](#).

Key Points

There has been an increase in trade volume for third-country goods from the Dhubri port. Dhubri Port in Assam has the potential to be an export hub for Bangladesh, but functional challenges are stopping it from realising its total capacity. The Brahmaputra river near Dhubri forms a secondary channel, which requires dredging to make the inland waterway navigable.

Due to a lack of dredging, large vessels and ships are prohibited from entering the Dhubri port. Presently, this port sends shallow-draft vessels to Chilmari, Bangladesh.

The stakeholders also expressed their need for Indian vessels. Mostly, Bangladesh vessels are used for trade through this port, and the Bangladeshi vessels are charged higher. The Dhubri port needs infrastructure that would help promote more Indian vessels and reduce this cost. Shipbuilding and repairing infrastructure are highly demanded in this port.

The government should take the initiative to reduce the cost and increase trade volume. The focus should be given to the export of goods and on imports. Vessels returning empty are not cost-effective, and this demotivates the Indian traders.

From Guwahati to Dhubri, trucks cost INR 800 per MT. This cost can be reduced with the emergence of shallow-draft vessels at the Dhubri port

Bangladesh can export agricultural products, such as corn, ginger, etc., and locally produced goods through this port. The port has a high potential for promoting agricultural goods and locally produced goods as Dhubri has an agrarian economy. However, currently, stone chips are sent through this port.

The digitalisation of all the documents, faster implementation of the EDI system (Electronic Data Interchange), and reduction of paperwork and time-bound approvals are highly required in this region. The port also needs more facilities that would facilitate smooth and efficient trade.

In 2017, Assam's first RO-RO service was started on the Brahmaputra River from Dhubri to Hatsingmari, bordering the Meghalaya state. However, after the first trial run, the service was stopped abruptly. Reviving the Ro-Ro services in Dhubri Port will reduce costs and time.

The first consignment of the cotton-waste product took a longer time than expected. By road, consignments reach the traders in three days, whereas by waterway, it took nearly 1.5 months for the shipment to arrive at the Dhubri port from Chilmari, Bangladesh. It resulted in loss and an increase in cost and time.

A night navigation facility is necessary for vessels plying in the PIWTT route from Dhubri port. The navigation facility will also enable the exporters to run vessels at night.

Bangladesh's import duty on Indian products accounts for an eight percent tax, whereas import duty on Bhutanese products is cheaper, accounting for only two percent tax. The traders of Dhubri demanded that if import duty in Bangladesh is reduced on Indian products and at par with Bhutanese products, then local products can also be exported to Chilmari from Dhubri.

Way Forward

Continuity of dredging on the Brahmaputra river is necessary for the smooth movement of vessels to Chilmari from Dhubri.

Digitisation of all documents and paperwork is highly demanded in this port to reduce the cost and time involved. For this purpose, all the relevant stakeholders, such as traders, customs officials, bankers, etc., must undertake awareness generation workshops and capacity-building programmes.

For long-term sustainability and development in trade, Indian vessels are required to function and operate in the ports of North-east India.

Agenda

11:00 - 13:00	<p>Welcome Remarks Saurabh Kumar, Fellow, CUTS International</p> <p>Speakers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Atowar Rahman, President, Dhubri Waterways International Traders Association• Lalit Kumar Chopra, Chattered Accountant and Manager, Bhansali International• Surendar Kumar Choudhury, Trader• Surat Jamal, President, Dhubri Traders Associaton• Yunus Khan, Boat Operator, Panchu Ghat <p>Vote of Thanks and Wrap-up Saurabh Kumar, Fellow, CUTS International</p>
13:00-14:00	Lunch

Annexure

Press Release:

<https://cuts-citee.org/traders-discuss-challenges-hampering-trade-from-dhubri-port-2/>

Media Coverage:

<https://indiaseatradenews.com/traders-discuss-challenges-hampering-trade-from-dhubri-port/>

Also available at:

<https://www.eastmojo.com/assam/2022/03/22/assams-dhubri-port-could-be-export-hub-for-bangladesh/>