

Public Private Dialogue on

India-Bangladesh Cross-border Tourism and Cruise Operations

29
APRIL, 2021
Thursday
11:00 am - 01:00 pm
(IST)

Moderator

- Bipul Chatterjee (Executive Director, CUTS International)

Special Address

- Amita Prasad (Chairperson, Inland Waterways Authority of India)
- Commodore Golam Sadeq (Chairperson, Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority)

Panellists

- Taufiq Rahman (Chief Executive, Journey Plus)
- Raj Singh (Director, M/S Heritage River Cruises Pvt. Ltd)
- Samudra Gupta Kashyap (State Information Commissioner, Government of Assam)
- Biswajit Chakrabarty (Director, North East Advisory Council, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry)

Vote of Thanks

- Enamul Mazid Khan Siddique, Head of Climate Justice and Natural Resource Rights, Oxfam Bangladesh

1. Introduction

1.1 CUTS International organised a virtual Public-Private Dialogue emphasising on the importance of the cross-border trade, tourism and cruise operations between India and Bangladesh. This dialogue was organised under a regional programme titled “Trans-boundary Rivers of South Asia” (TROSA), which is supported by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) and managed by Oxfam Novib. The project aims to reduce the poverty of marginalised and vulnerable river basin communities through increased access to and control over water resources on which their livelihoods depend. The themes of the dialogue were:

- A. How can cross-border tourism and cruise operations be increased? What are gaps in current policies and standard operating procedures, and how can those gaps be filled with sustainable interventions?
- B. How sustainable and inclusive practices can be implemented with cruise operators in India and Bangladesh to improve the livelihood options of local communities so that conflicts on access to water resources can be reduced?

2. Key Points of Special Addresses

- 2.1 The river basins of Ganges and Brahmaputra constitute one of the unique deltas in the world. Thus, river cruise tourism in this region holds the potential of creating significant economic opportunities.
- 2.2 The Maritime India Vision 2030 has a special emphasis on establishing enhanced cruise shipping tourism in the country. The India Bangladesh Protocol (IBP) route is, thus, being promoted to connect the tourism places on Ganges, Brahmaputra and other important rivers in Bangladesh.
- 2.3 The standard operating procedures (SOP) and Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on passenger and cruise services on coastal and protocol routes between India and Bangladesh were signed on October 25, 2018. Further, Bangladesh is undertaking a development project to assess and recommend facilities to achieve enhanced river tourism.
- 2.4 On these IBP routes, most of the regulatory issues have been solved and the infrastructure is sound. Public and private sector collaborations can be utilised to cater to the challenges that remain unresolved. These include suboptimal jetty conditions, navigational challenges and inadequately trained and equipped staff operators, among others.

Small and medium rivers will also be covered in the cross-border river cruise services. However, it will depend on the interests of people and the private sector.

3. Key Points of Panel Discussion

- 3.1 The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted all sectors of the economy; however, the tourism sector remains the most affected. To revive tourism, particularly river-based tourism, the foremost step is to promote regional, small haul, and cross-border tourism, especially between India and Bangladesh, in a post-pandemic world. Geographically and culturally, these countries have a lot in common and thus, we should utilize the socio-economic opportunity.
- 3.2 The people of Bangladesh pursue a river-based lifestyle. The lifestyle of such communities can gain a significant audience from its neighbors and the west. For instance, interactions with local *Bede* communities and hilsa fisher communities can be special attractions with exciting things to offer. Furthermore, initiatives to expand the domestic tourism between the Northeastern states of India and to Sylhet and other neighboring regions can be contemplated.

- 3.3 Such cruise tourism is not just confined to the cruise operations alone. The tourists want to see historical places, enjoy the local artifacts, interact with the local communities, visit the local spots of attraction, historical forts and palaces, and indulge in heritage walks.
- 3.4 For example, the Kolkata to Dhaka river cruise passes through the lower Ganges in India, the Sundarbans and the Meghna river in Bangladesh. On its way, the cruise makes stops at small villages and historical monuments. This provides an excellent opportunity for tourists on the cruise by engaging in the local communities and their livelihoods.
- 3.5 Further, this kind of exposure opens up opportunities for the remote and small villages that do not usually fall on the tourism circuit because of their inaccessibility through roads. The individuals residing in these communities can be employed as cruise crew, jetty operators, language translators, local tourist guides, local cultural artists, small boat operators and local food joints owners. Such ventures can be picked up by women in these local areas as well.
- 3.6 However, to enhance this initiative and other similar to this, there is a need to ease the security arrangements, immigration procedures for passengers and crew, custom clearances and health clearances for foreign tourists. In that context, on arrival visas, on-board immigration and onboard customs on a cruise should be implemented. These measures should be an extension of the on-arrival land visa policy.
- 3.7 Additionally, it was pointed that at present, the focus is only on the Protocol Routes. There are many smaller transboundary rivers. Domestic tourists may like to go there. Thus, new routes, including short and long river cruises which involve niche riverine locations, need to be explored.

4. Suggestions

- 4.1 Sustainable and technologically advanced ships with noise-free silencers, oil separators and modern jetties are important for pollution-free shores in the region and abiding by international standards. Support is required for such kind of vessel making and its maintenance. This can be ensured with effective public-private partnerships.
- 4.2 Further, the private sector can contribute extensively in developing port facilities and providing funding in developing the tourism sector and river cruise operations.
- 4.3 Establishing partnerships with media and new age travel writers who would be willing to write on various aspects of the protocol route while exploring the niche and unexplored routes can help promote river tourism.
- 4.4 Including Hemnagar on the India-Bangladesh border in the Sundarbans as an immigration point would hasten the process.
- 4.4 Promoting water sports on the banks of small and medium rivers and establishing a maritime museum can further enhance river tourism in the region.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 The objective of such public-private dialogues was to generate knowledge about the initiatives on river tourism. Further, it is imperative to focus on small and medium transboundary rivers and big rivers such as Brahmaputra and Ganges.
- 5.2 However, it is also imperative not to stretch ourselves thin. Capitalizing the nation's natural capital for tourism can be beneficial, but the primary focus should be on straightening out the issues on the India-Bangladesh Protocol routes.
- 5.3 Engaging stakeholders of all levels, including the regulatory agencies, big and small private sector operators, media, and the local riverine communities, is significant for expanding these initiatives and further attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- 5.4 Dialogue on tourism and rivers needs to include the grass-root communities and local tribes in the discussion to provide services and protect their rights. Such collaboration is also essential for the preservation of nature, culture and heritage in both countries.
- 5.5 With adequate regulations and infrastructure, river cruise tourism will provide a win-win situation for public and private sectors along with communities. It will ensure the sustainability of the economy, ecology and society.

6. Other information

Link to the webpage of the webinar: <https://cuts-citee.org/public-private-dialogue-on-cross-border-tourism-cruise-operations-and-community-concerns-between-india-and-bangladesh/>

Annexure 1: Background Note

Themes

- *How cross-border tourism and cruise operations can be increased, what are gaps in current policies and standard operating procedures and how those gaps can be filled with sustainable interventions?*
- *How sustainable and inclusive practices can be implemented with cruise operators in India and Bangladesh with an objective of improving the livelihood options of local communities so that conflicts on access to water resources can be reduced?*

CUTS International is organising a Public Private Dialogue (virtually) emphasising on the importance of the cross-border trade, tourism and cruise operations between India and Bangladesh. This dialogue is being organised under a regional programme titled “Trans-boundary Rivers of South Asia” (TROSA), which is supported by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) and managed by Oxfam Novib. The project aims to reduce poverty of marginalised and vulnerable river basin communities through increased access to, and control over, water resources, over which their livelihoods depend. The details of the project can be accessed [here](#).

Objectives of the dialogue

1. Critical discussion and deliberations on concerns of the private sector, cruise operators, local communities and other actors with respect to the sustainable use of trans-boundary water resources;
2. Private sector should start engaging with/providing dialogue spaces to the communities on the issues of water governance (special focus on women and indigenous community);
3. Increased awareness among relevant stakeholders about potential benefits and challenges of cross-border tourism and cruise operations between India and Bangladesh;

Moderator

- Bipul Chatterjee, Executive Director, CUTS International

Special Address

- Amita Prasad, Chairperson, Inland Waterways Authority of India
- Commodore Golam Sadeq, Chairperson, Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority

Panel Discussion

- Taufiq Rahman, Chief Executive, Journey Plus
- Raj Singh, Director, M/S Heritage River Cruises Pvt. Ltd
- Samudra Gupta Kashyap, State Information Commissioner, Government of Assam
- Biswajit Chakrabarty, Director, North East Advisory Council Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry

Vote of Thanks

- Enamul Mazid Khan Siddique, Head of Climate Justice and Natural Resource Rights, Oxfam Bangladesh

Annexure 2: Press Release

Easing of security, custom, immigration and health procedures would lead to increased cross-border river cruise tourism on trans-boundary rivers of India and Bangladesh as discussed by experts at a webinar organised by CUTS International.

“Cross-border tourism and trade through trans-boundary rivers between India and Bangladesh is poised to play a significant role in the socio-economic development of local communities and environmental and cultural preservation in India and Bangladesh,” said Bipul Chatterjee, Executive Director, CUTS International.

“Sustainable cross-border river-based tourism will increase if we critically focus on three elements – infrastructure development, right and easy regulations, and public awareness”, he added.

He was moderating a public-private dialogue on India-Bangladesh cross-border tourism and cruise operations organised by CUTS International. It was organised on 29th April 2021 was attended by more than 75 stakeholders from the two countries.

It was organised as part of a regional programme titled “Trans-boundary Rivers of South Asia” (TROSAs), which is supported by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), managed by Oxfam Novib and implemented by CUTS International, among other partners.

In her special address, Amita Prasad, Chairperson, Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) said that India is being developed as a cruise shipping destination with cooperation with Bangladesh as part of Maritime India Vision 2030.

“India-Bangladesh Protocol Routes are promoted to connect the tourist places along the banks of the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and other important rivers shared between India and Bangladesh”, she said.

She added that Standard Operating Procedures for passenger and cruise services on coastal and protocol routes between India and Bangladesh have been signed on 25th October 2018. Two cruises between Dhaka and Kolkata have been completed along the Protocol Route till now.

She further highlighted that river cruise tourism would generate employment to the local communities of both the countries in the form of cruise crew, jetty operators, language translator, local tourist guide, local cultural artists, small boat operators and local food joints by women etc.

“However, to enhance this initiative there is a need to ease the security arrangements, immigration procedures for passengers and crew, custom clearances and health clearances for all the foreign tourists.”

Concurring with Dr Prasad, Commodore Golam Sadeq, Chairperson, Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) said that river tourism has a lot of economic opportunities as this is one of the unique deltas in the world.

“Regulatory issues are being resolved, now the private sector should act vigorously and start marketing once the COVID -19 crisis is under control”, he added.

“Bangladesh has a river-based lifestyle and hence can attract tourists from Western countries. Be it the life of people living in boats or Hilsa fishing during the monsoon; river tourism has exciting things to offer.”

According to Taufiq Rahman, Chief Executive, Journey Plus, Bangladesh, the Covid-19 pandemic has destroyed the tourism sector and the only solution for survival is regional, small haul, and cross-border tourism.

“One thing we should remember is that such tourism is not just confined to the cruise alone, but people also want to see historical places, local communities and want to participate in the water-related activities. For example, Kayaking and other maritime sports, visit the local bazaar, historical forts and palaces, and heritage walk. This is one thing that is still lacking. “We should also think about establishing a maritime museum”, he added including proposing Hemnagar on the India-Bangladesh border in the Sundarbans as an immigration point,

Speaking on the occasion, Raj Singh, Director, M/S Heritage River Cruises Pvt. Ltd said that river tourism has a lot to offer for local communities. It can take tourists to places that are not accessible by road, it provides opportunities for folk dancers and artisans, including women.

He also stressed the opportunities in shorter routes owing to the Covid-19 pandemic. He suggested having modern jetties, sustainable and technologically advanced ships, noise-free silencers, oil separators and pollution-free shores for sustainable river cruise tourism.

Narrating the glory of northeast India, Samudra Gupta Kashyap, State Information Commissioner, Assam said that most of the tourist and old cities in northeast India are on the banks of the river. He suggested creating a partnership with media and new age travel writers who can write on various aspects of the Brahmaputra river and explore stories to promote river tourism. Furthermore, he emphasised exploring other minor transboundary rivers for tourism purpose.

“River cruise is a niche tourism area, the question is how we can utilize the resources in this part of the world?”, said Biswajit Chakrabarty, Director, Northeast Advisory Council, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry.

He argued that while at present the focus is only on the Protocol Routes, there are many smaller trans-boundary rivers. Domestic tourists may like to go there. He also suggested that the private sector should be made part of developing port facilities, and provided more funding in the development of the tourism sector and river cruise operations.

Delivering the Vote of Thanks, Enamul Mazid Khan Siddique, Head of Climate Justice and Natural Resource Rights, Oxfam Bangladesh, emphasised the value of such multi-stakeholder partnership in strengthening cross-border tourism between India and Bangladesh through trans-boundary rivers.

He stressed that such dialogues on tourism and rivers needs to include the grass-root communities and local tribes in the discussion so that they can provide services and protect their rights. Such collaboration is also important for the preservation of nature, culture and heritage in both countries.

Concluding the webinar, Bipul Chatterjee said that the idea is to generate knowledge and focus on not just big rivers like Brahmaputra and Ganges but also several smaller trans-boundary rivers.

He further stressed that it is time to expand this kind of initiative by involving regulatory agencies, a private sector not just big vessel operators but also small vessel operators and media. This will provide a win-win situation for everybody and ensure the sustainability of the economy, ecology and society.