

River and Coastal Connectivity: Indo Bangladesh Perspectives

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India and Bangladesh have much in common, but the common 54 rivers have been a rather emotive bilateral issue between the neighbours. The riverine borders of 1116 kilometres form a substantial portion of the 4,095 kilometres of international borders shared by these two neighbours. The common rivers assume special significance given the two agro-based economies where the rivers not only provide for a large number dependent on agriculture but also on fisheries, tourism and some inland water commerce too. India being the upper riparian state, has often been accused of not allowing adequate water flows into Bangladesh especially during the few months of the dry season. The issue of regular flooding during monsoon, resulting in huge losses has also been an environmental concern. Water sharing has thus been a perennial preoccupation between these two South Asian neighbours. Sharing of accurate data, mitigation measures have been part

of the bilateral dialogue for seeking resolutions to this issue.

The water-sharing narrative turned a corner with the Indo-Bangladeshi framework of cooperation signed in 2010. The Sheikh Hasina led Awami League government and Manmohan Singh Led United PA government consciously decided to change the paradigm of common water sharing. While Bangladesh argues for a water-sharing agreement covering all the trans-boundary rivers, there was a mutual realisation that river basin management of the Ganga/Padma, Brahmaputra/Jamuna, Barak/ Meghna would provide for an effective bilateral mechanism. The River Basin Management Bill (2018) is pending before the Indian parliament; however, the neighbours have made distinct progress over effectively using the rivers for trade and tourism. As, discussions about sharing waters from Teesta and other common rivers continue, increasing cross border

connectivity became a cornerstone of the bilateral cooperation and river, and coastal connectivity assumed salience.

New River Connectivity Routes

Arguably in recent years, there has been significant bilateral progress over river connectivity projects undertaken by both

Coastal Agreement which allowed goods to move by sea from Kolkata in West Bengal to Chittagong Port in Bangladesh. The under-construction MaitreeSetu over Feni river will provide Tripura with a shorter route to Chittagong port.

The three agreements essentially



the governments. Much of it is premised on the India-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Trade and Transit (PIWTT), has existed since 1972 and periodically renewed ever since, but for long remained a very underutilised form of transport. Even though Bangladesh has effectively used its waterways for providing an affordable and viable mode of local transport. India and Bangladesh have four routes under the PIWTT with five Ports of Call identified in each country. Annually, about 1.5 million metric tonnes of traffic was transported via the protocol routes but would now stand to grow with the new momentum that has been added to this sector.

It was on 25 October 2018, that these two neighbours signed three bilateral memoranda of understandings to strengthen the existing inland water transportation system. Earlier in June 2015, India and Bangladesh signed the

provided India quicker access to its Northeast region facilitating viable commerce opportunities. It provided for India to use Chittagong and Mongla ports for goods movement and secondly the proposal to develop of Jogighopa as a hub/ transshipment terminal would enable movement of cargo to Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Bhutan and thirdly, notifying Munshiganj river terminal by Bangladesh customs for routing third-party exim cargo through Kolkata port would also facilitate Indian access to its Northeast states through this route. The latest agreement ensured India to access the two seaports through its Northeastern states of Tripura, Meghalaya and Assam. The access to Mongla port has led to the Indian company Ashok Leyland, one of the leading vehicle suppliers to Bangladesh open a truck assembly plant in Dhamrai, Savar.

The 2018 coastal agreement led to the first trial cargo movement on the container ship, which started from Kolkata on 16 July 2020 and reached Chittagong Port (Bangladesh) before travelling via road on Bangladeshi trucks to Agartala. This first transshipment cargo between India and Bangladesh consignment of the trial movement included two container ships carrying TMT steel bars destined for West Tripura district and two containers carrying pulses destined for Karimganj, Assam was received at the Agartala (Tripura) Integrated Check on 23 July 2020 morning.

Enabling Access to Northeastern Region

The new route will reduce time and logistics cost for cargo movement connecting from India to its Northeast states through Bangladeshi ports. This coastal transshipment will complement the recent inland water protocol agreement signed between India Bangladesh on 20 May 2020 that was followed up by Tripura opening up its first-ever inland waterway route from the lower segment on the Gomati River between Sonamura (Siphajila, Tripura,) and Daudkandi (Comilla, Bangladesh) district of Bangladesh within another few months. This route between Ashuganj river port in eastern Bangladesh and Sonamura in Siphajila district of Tripura through rivers Gomati and Meghna will facilitate cargo movement between Tripura and Bangladesh through a short distance of 60 kilometres, skirting the long route via Siliguri. Small boats and ferries capable of carrying 50-ton goods are expected to run through this route. And in the first week of September 2020, the first vessel with a consignment of around 50 tons of cement for Sonamura

in India travelled from Munshiganj. Bangladesh through Meghna river.

Furthermore, Badarpur on river Barak (NW-16) is being developed as an Extended Port of Call of Karimganj in Assam and Ghorasal of Ashuganj in Bangladesh on a reciprocal basis. The Indian side proposed for the extension of the protocol routes from Kolkata up to Silchar in Assam. The PIWTT being linked to the number of maritime ports has lent the routes with robustness which it previously lacked. In addition, the inclusion of the Rupnarayan river (National Waterway-86) from Geonkhali to Kolaghat in West Bengal in the protocol route and adding Kolaghat in West Bengal and Chilmari in Bangladesh as the new Ports of Call. For long India Bangladesh coastal trade existed through West Bengal and Bangladeshi ports of Narayanganj and Khulna, this has now been expanded to create an effective transportation network in the region including West Bengal.

The above, along with the road and railway network will enable a cost-effective cargo movement amongst the BBIN (Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Bhutan) subregional group but also in the extended neighbourhood. India has invested heavily in the cross border transport sector in Bangladesh, and it stands to benefit from the services they offer too. Indeed, as Bangladesh emerges as 'transport hub for the BBIN, opportunities for commerce in this subregion is growing. Clearly, Bangladesh is strategically poised to leverage its locational advantage.

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