

## India's Connectivity with Bangladesh with reference to Tripura : Prospects and Challenges

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### Abstract

*The North-East Region (NER) of India has borders with Myanmar in the East, Tibet and Bhutan in the North and Bangladesh in South-West. The NER has more proximity with other countries than with the rest of the India. But the region is still isolated and lack development though it is rich in natural resources with large and small river systems and treasure house of flora and fauna. Problem of connectivity hinder the growth potential of the region both nationally and internationally. Thus improving all forms of connectivity such as road, rail, air, water including inland water, telecom etc. is paramount for this region. The present paper focuses on India's connectivity with Bangladesh with special reference to Tripura. The present analyzes the achievements in connectivity during the recent times, prospects and challenges of connectivity with the emphasis on areas where Tripura can March ahead if better connectivity is established in NER particularly through Bangladesh. This paper focuses the connectivity of NER with Bangladesh for deriving tangible dividends to Tripura regarding movement of essential commodities and transportation of heavy goods. Tripura is destined to be a hub of trade and commerce in NER given the proper implementation of existing projects and policies of NER and agreements between India and Bangladesh governments.*

**Key words:** Road connectivity, Water connectivity, Transportation cost, Border trade

### Introduction

The North-East Region (NER) of India has borders all along Myanmar in the East, Tibet and Bhutan in the North and Bangladesh in the South-West. North East India has more proximity with other countries than with the rest of the India. This frontier region has a mere 27 km link with the rest of the country through the

chicken corridor of Siliguri, but it is having a 5300 km length of border with other countries of the subcontinent i.e. Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and China. The region is rich in natural resources, covered with dense forests, has the highest rainfall in the country, with large and small river systems nesting the land and is a treasure house of flora and

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fauna. The partition of India in 1947 not only took the region backwards, but also placed hurdles on future economic progress. It isolated the region, sealed both land and sea routes for commerce and trade, and severed access to traditional markets and the gateway to the East and South-East Asia – the Chittagong port in East Bengal (now Bangladesh). Poor infrastructure and governance is combined with low productivity and market access. There is overwhelming dependence for resources on the Central Government, public investment in the region has sub-optimal productivity due to weakness of forward and backward linkages (MoDONER, 2008). Most of the commercial products used in the NER are manufactured outside the region and supplying these products to this region is another problem due to poor roads and infrastructure. While developing current roads and infrastructure should be a priority for India, alternative sea route via Myanmar, Bangladesh must be developed by exploring mutual benefits and areas of cooperation with these countries. Having only a small enclave connection with north east India can be very risky if by chance India goes on a state of war with China, while securing it should be another priority (Shrivastava, 2013). Thus, poor connectivity hinders the development potential of NER.

The award of road projects for Rs. 1 lakh crore in NER in the next five years and declaration of 18 national waterways are some of the highlights bearing the testimony of focus that NER carries. The

Kaladan Multimodal project, Trilateral Highway, Trans Asian Railway and the Asian Highway Network could be game changing projects for the development of NER redefining the strategic and business dynamics of the region. Chief Ministers of various NER states emphasize on improving road, railway, air connectivity and improvement of inland water transport within the region for bringing about all round development. Improved connectivity will not only bring about all round development of the NER but also bring the region closer to the mainstream. It may be mentioned that FICCI stressed on reviving the preparation trade and multi-modal connectivity including surface, air, rail and most important river in the region that includes not only north east India but also Bangladesh and Myanmar too. The Act East Policy, installation of democratic government in Myanmar, cordial relation with Bangladesh and the growth of South Asian Economic engine are all set to give an additional mileage to the NER during the next few years if adequate infrastructure particularly connectivity is created. Thus improving all forms of connectivity such as road, rail, air, water including inland water, telecom etc is paramount for this region. The present paper focuses on India's connectivity with Bangladesh with special reference to Tripura. Connectivity comprises land (road and rail networks) and water (sea, port and inland water ways). Further, the study intends to explore collaboration in the field of energy (natural gas, electricity), coordination in

border management to facilitate movement of people across the Border States. The present paper analyzes the connectivity achievements during the recent times, prospects and potential areas where Tripura can march ahead if better connectivity is established in NER particularly through Bangladesh. The paper is based on secondary data namely reports, articles, newspapers, websites of governments, and other available publications.

### **Recent Developments of Connectivity**

Tripura is a tiny state in North East India with a population of 36 lakh as per 2011 census. The state is also rich in natural, mineral and human resources having a significant strategic location. It is surrounded on three sides by Bangladesh with 856 Km long international border. Geographical isolation, industrial backwardness, soaring unemployment, lackluster infrastructure, poor communication and low capital formation are some of the pitfalls of the state. Tripura's location and socio-economic linkages with Bangladesh makes the state a potential hub for trade with and through Bangladesh for the entire northeastern region of India and other adjoining countries – Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and China. Act East policy of Government of India is not only a stimulus to the NER but it has also given a significant boost to the prospects of development in Trade and industry in the state. The connectivity of state through Bangladesh during recent times has given

a fillip to the whole economy, which inter alias, include the following:

- Road connectivity saw a sea change over the few years. In 1990 India and Bangladesh opened bus service between Kolkata and Dhaka and in 2001 between Dhaka and Agartala but the introduction road connectivity between Agartala and Kolkata via Bangladesh was a long standing demand. On June 2015, the first trial run of bus service between Agartala to Kolkata via Dhaka commenced. Agreement provides for operation of passenger buses directly between Agartala and Kolkata with one stoppage at Dhaka reducing the distance by 560 Km from Kolkata to Agartala. The proposed construction of a bridge over Feni River in Sabroom will connect the Chittagong port of Bangladesh closer and facilitate the transshipment of goods at ease for the state as well as whole NER. With better road and infrastructure, the transportation cost is likely to be lower.

In September 2016, petroleum products reached Tripura via Bangladesh to mitigate the crisis of petrol and diesel due to deplorable condition of National Highway 44. Ten vehicles including seven diesel, two kerosene tankers and one LPG vehicle reached Tripura's bordering town Kailasahar through Chatlapur check post in Bangladesh. According to drivers, they entered through Meghalaya's Dauki border and then

- after crossing Sylhet, Moulavibazar, Shamshernagar, entered Kailasahar through Chatlapur check post of Bangladesh. The journey took about five hours for a distance of 138 km and the road is stated to be much better than Tripura and they could save both time and fuel.
- Nearly seven decades after Partition, trains are set to run from Kolkata to Agartala through Bangladesh. India is building Rs 1,000 crore, 15 km railway line connecting Agartala with Akhaura in Bangladesh which is expected to reduce the distance between Agartala and Kolkata to 499 km from the existing 1,590 km route via Badarpur, Lumding, Guwahati and New Jalpaiguri. The project was recently inaugurated by Indian Railway Minister with his Bangladesh counterpart in Agartala on July 31, 2016.
  - Agartala became India's third internet gateway after Mumbai and Chennai when the Prime Minister of India and the Bangladeshi Premier inaugurated an Internet connectivity project between the two South Asian countries in March 2016. The leasing of the Internet bandwidth from Akhaura in Bangladesh to Agartala, will not only help the people of Tripura to access reliable Internet connectivity, but it will also improve internet speed in the entire northeastern region. Thus Tripura becomes a gateway to development in NER with other states like Manipur, Mizoram and Siliguri etc.
  - Water connectivity is also impacting the economy of Tripura. Agreement on Coastal Shipping between India and Bangladesh was signed during the visit of Prime Minister on 6 June 2015. The move by the two governments was aimed at reducing the cost of EXIM cargo and bringing advantages for cargo slated to reach India's Northeast through inland waterways from the Chittagong port (Chatterjee et al., 2016). The present arrangement has facilitated enormous benefit to the whole NER and now smaller vessels may be connected through sea ports of India and Bangladesh and regular plying of vessels became feasible reducing time approximately to 10 days as well as cost. Tripura has reaped huge benefits from the coastal agreement which facilitated easy transportation of heavy equipment for OTPC Palatana Power Project in Tripura. Tripura now transports heavy goods and essential commodities via Ashugunj Port, Bangladesh, proving both time and cost effective. It may be mentioned that efforts towards strengthening bilateral economic co-operation between India and Bangladesh became resplendent when a cargo vessel from Calcutta, carrying a consignment for Tripura, reached Ashuganj port on the Meghna River in Comilla district. The ship anchored and 1,000 tonnes

of iron and steel sheets were unloaded and put into Bangladeshi trucks. From Ashuganj port, around 100km from Dhaka, the Bangladeshi trucks set out for Tripura, taking the route along the Agartala-Akhaura border. The biggest advantage of the two countries agreeing to allow the transit facility is that the cost of transportation will come down drastically. It is a fact that the cost of transportation to the Northeast is at least two-and-a-half times more than to other parts of India (Purohit, 2016). For example, a truck has to travel around 1,600 km to reach Agartala from Calcutta, taking a circuitous route through Siliguri and Meghalaya. With the introduction of the transit facility through Bangladesh, the distance comes down to 500 km. The travel time gets decreased to 10 days from one month.

- Further, the facilitation of transportation of rice stocks from Vishakhapatnam port to Tripura via Ashuganj Port, Bangladesh is also favourable for Tripura. First consignment of Food grains for Tripura has reached in Aug 2016 via Ashuganj river port of Bangladesh from Vizag of India. The Food Corporation of India took the initiative to ship 10,000 MT of rice to Tripura from its Vishakhapatnam silo via the Ashuganj port in Bangladesh. India has begun using a new trade route via a Bangladeshi

port as well as land terrain to ship food grains to the North-east after foreign minister Sushma Swaraj's recent successful visit to Dhaka. Thus another non-conventional route through Bangladesh from Andhra Pradesh is explored easing the movement of goods at reduced cost.

- With a view to boosting the people to people contact, border haats are opened in Tripura. Tripura will have six more border *haats* (markets) along its 856 km long border with Bangladesh to boost trade and commerce between the two countries. It may be mentioned that two border *haats*, one in Srinagar under Sabroom sub-division of South Tripura and another in Kamala Sagar under Bishalgarh sub-division of Sipahijala district, have been functioning. Located at the zero line, the haats allow commodities to be exchanged in local currency or on barter basis. Each person is allowed to purchase commodities to the extent reasonable for personal or family consumption and its value should not be more than \$100. No local tax is imposed on the trading and both Indian as well as Bangladeshi currencies are accepted. The items permitted for trade include local agricultural and horticultural products, spices, minor forest produce (excluding timber), fresh and dry fish, dairy and poultry products, cottage industry items, wooden furniture, handloom and

handicraft items. There has been an increasing demand for certain items by people on both sides. This includes demand for hilsa fish from Tripura while baby food, sugar, printed sarees, jackfruit, pineapple, dry fish, biscuits, utensils, and cosmetics are the most popular items from Bangladeshi side.

### **Prospects**

The trade between India and ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) is mostly manufacturing products and is restrictive towards agricultural products. Therefore the NER states do not have the comparative advantage in India's export to ASEAN. In order to take the advantages of the growing trade alliances, effort should be on improving inter-state connectivity and market integration (Saikia, 2011). The NER needs to participate in the growing trade with ASEAN countries, particularly in locally produced items like bamboo and other wood products, ores, rubber products, horticulture and food products, refined petroleum products, silk products, other non-metallic mineral products, chemicals and chemical products, pharmaceutical products and preparations, etc (De and Majumder, 2014). Connectivity will improve the border trade immensely and this has been referred to many experts on Indo Bangladesh relations. According to the experts the ongoing border trade between Tripura and Bangladesh had enhanced towards sustainable livelihood of Tripura farmers.

Tripura including the North-Eastern States would be able to move the goods at a cost much lower than that being incurred presently. This would not only help consumers' interest but also attract investment in the North-Eastern region. Direct transit route through Bangladesh's territory would remove one of the major bottlenecks for the progress and prosperity of the North-Eastern region and link this region more closely with the mainstream of the Indian economy. Massive investment on road, rail air and water connectivity in Tripura is destined and it will facilitate the speedy movement of goods from one place to another within a reasonable period of time.

Tripura's Cane and Bamboo handicrafts are considered to be among the best in the country for the exquisite designs, wide range of products and artistic appeal. This industry has a great export potential as well. The exquisite bamboo products have been referred to by Union Railway Minister at the inauguration ceremony of broad-gauge railway from Agartala on 31<sup>st</sup> July 2016 as bamboo is ideologically and ecologically supportive. Preferring bamboo products would be ideological as bamboo is a grass product and not a timber product. Railways will facilitate easy export of bamboo and bamboo products from the state at much lower cost and bamboo has an immense scope.

The setting up of food processing units always possesses good prospects in Tripura. Major Fruit Crops of Tripura are pineapple, jackfruit, orange, cashew,

coconut and the agro-climatic conditions are favourable for growing various fruits and horticultural crops that are well known for delicious quality as green/ ripen form or processed form. There is ample scope for the expansion of cultivation under organic spices cultivation in Tripura. Major spices include ginger, turmeric, chilli, black pepper, cinnamon, and tezpatta. But except for NERAMAC, a Government of India Undertaking, no private investor has seriously come forward to promote and add value with the agri-produces of Tripura. Lack of proper marketing and value added policies have marred the prospects of growers immensely. So is the fate for the agriculturists opting vegetable cultivations in the state. It is expected that better connectivity either through rail, road etc would widen marketing avenues as transport cost is likely to come down significantly.

There is enormous potential for setting up rubber –based industries in the state. Natural rubber based activities has already been declared as thrust sector in Tripura because of its special significance. Till now, bulk portion of rubber are going outside the state due to inadequate rubber industries in the state. Problem of value addition is still a fundamental flaw for which the rubber growers at large are deprived of getting expected return. Better connectivity will lead to enormous scope of investment in sectors like auto parts, footwear, tread rubber, vulcanized rubber, rubber band, rubber cushion and mattress, latex thread, textile fabric, hoses etc

causing more expansion of market and consequently rubber production in the state.

Immense reserves of natural gas are present in non-associate form in Tripura. The gas is of high quality, with high methane content of up to 97%. The natural gas is available in the northeast at almost half the price compared to other parts of the country. Concessional Gas pricing and vast reserve create potential for setting up industries in this sector. Natural Gas is presently used mainly for generation of power and to some extent in domestic, industrial, commercial and transport sector. It needs no mention that Tripura has been exporting 100MW power daily to Bangladesh from gas-based combine cycle plant at Palatana in Udaipur of Gomati District. Another gas based power plant at Monarchak in West Tripura is going to be operational very soon with 100 MW capacity productions. Tripura government has expressed its willingness to sell another 100MW power to Bangladesh from the state's thermal power plant at Monarchak in West Tripura as there is no industrial demand in the state following repeated demands from Bangladesh and the government of India has agreed to the proposal.

On the other hand, connecting NER with national gas grid and regional gas grid has substantial potential for Tripura. To ensure gas supply and connect demand centers in the Northeast, the current route of the national gas grid needs to be extended beyond Barauni-Siliguri-



Bongaigon-Guwahati. The proposed route of the grid spans 800-900 km, at an expected cost of Rs 3,600-4,050 crore. As Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura will be major production centres, these states must be linked to the grid on priority. In the first phase, Agartala should be connected to Bongaigaon through Guwahati (800 km) via Silchar and Shillong along the NH-44 route (Ministry of Petroleum, 2016). In third phase Myanmar to Agartala Gas line is proposed to be constructed. To improve supply of LPG, another route for importing LPG, which is Chittagong- Sabrum-Agartala is proposed at an estimated cost of Rs 450 crore. At present, LPG is imported through the Paradip/Haldia terminal and then transported to the Northeast through Siliguri. Given the above, it may be mentioned that the connectivity of gas grid with other NE states and Myanmar and Bangladesh will bring changes in economic fortune of local people.

Besides tourism, skill development, textiles, clothing and information technology etc. would also attract investment resulting in revenue generation and employment generation in the state. According to Bibek Deb Roy, Advisor NITI Ayog, four sectors where investment can happen are not manufacturing sectors but service sectors and these include higher education, health or medical higher end, bio-technology, IT and tourism (*Business Standard*, 2016). It is also that connectivity will boost people to people contact of north east with main land as well as East Asians. With greater

economic prosperity and cultural contact, the feeling of inclusion will deepen. Connectivity of north east is also expected to pose a restraint on NE terrorists and increased flow of tourists will uplift the socio-economic conditions of people and will create additional employment generation besides revenue generation in the respective states.

### **Challenges**

It is unequivocally true that NE states could not capitalize the geo strategic advantage of sharing international borders with several key economies of the world. One of the primary reasons for such failure is the absence of adequate road, railway, air and water connectivity with other parts of the country as well as the neighbouring countries. Tripura is one of the states in NE, which, prior to its merger with Union of India, had the connectivity with erstwhile East Pakistan through rail, river and road. After partition, the state became landlocked and road connectivity with the rest of the country was restored through Assam. This was the backdrop why the state lagged behind to improve the road connectivity through hilly areas with the paltry budgetary support. The progress especially in road connectivity started rolling mainly in last two decades. 'In Tripura there are about 20,818 Km roads of which 646 km is National Highway , 509 Km is state highway , 90 km is Major District road while 1218 is other district roads and balance are village roads maintained by RD/ADC and PWD , IBP road (Tripurainfoway, 2015).



Road connectivity remains awfully poor during the rainy season and cost of essential goes up high when NH 44 remains disrupted. Air connectivity in this region is not up to the mark. Except Guwahati and Manipur, no other state capital of the NER is connected with Agartala by Air. Broad-gauge Railway connectivity is just commenced with the services to Silchar, Kolkata and New Delhi. Inland water ways is hardly available from Tripura. In a nut shell it may be mentioned that the connectivity of Tripura within the NER and outside is poor. The presence of national highway is also negligible as in most of the NER. Land acquisition is a major hindrance, mostly because of the lack of land records. Many other projects to develop roadways are still on paper and have not been implemented or have failed to operationalize. Under the NLCPR scheme during 2010-11 the central government introduced around 151 infrastructure projects. It has been reported that till now only 25 projects have been completed. Most of these infrastructure projects have failed due to the geographical condition of the region and the problem of transferring heavy construction materials from far flung area (Saikia). Inability of various ministries to spend 10% of budgetary allocation meant for NER states is also a reason for the development of connectivity in this region.

Besides problems of insurgency, periodic political instability and corruption, shortage of competent contractors, lack of adequate skilled labour have also stood in the way of

speedy completion of the projects. Absence of assured network, broadband and internet connectivity and lesser teledensity in the NER are also the factors to reckon with. Threat of internal security from terrorism, narcotics and entry of foreign goods particularly cheap Chinese goods including the arms from across the border is a point to remember. Media reports indicate that Tripura is already becoming a narcotic corridor. Tripura's narcotics business is fueled by drug-mafias, Islamic fundamentalist groups along Sonamura-Boxnagar region, Tripura-Mizoram border -smuggling tons of brown sugar, marijuana, contrabands (Tripurainfoway, 2016). Thus 'if the Guwahti – Kunming corridor is materialized for any sub – regional co-operation such as the Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM), Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and Greater Meknog Sub Region Co-operation (GMS), then drugs and small arms may sneak into the north east in huge quantities jeopardizing the peace and stability of the region' (Pattnaik, 2015). So the impact on people, culture and bio-diversity of this region should be considered critically if north east borders are opened for trade and transit under the framework of Bangladesh China India Myanmar Economic Cooperation.

Border trade including both formal and informal is not free from limitations. There exist various issues related to regulations, infrastructure and trade

services which hamper trade between the two countries. 'Gross inefficiency in the existing trade systems and infrastructure of India and Bangladesh, has encouraged and nurtured informal trade, which is estimated to be as huge as half the volume of formal trade. Because per unit trade cost (including transportation, warehousing, testing and documentation) is rather high, traders adopt the informal mode of trading. There is large portion of people who are involved in such activities, varying from small children, women to cattle (CUTS, 2014). But the ominous side of the informal trade is the dispatch of drugs, phensidile, corex, ganja, opium etc. Cost of doing trade is high between India and Bangladesh mainly due to lack of trade facilitation. Almost all border crossings lack in modern skillful infrastructure. It is a fact that most of the land custom center in Tripura except Agartala are far from capital and roads, either state highway or national highway are not so wide and developed. Other NTBs like regulatory measures and lack of trade services have also resulted in hindering the bilateral trade.

### **Conclusions**

Connectivity forms an indispensable element of the 3C of 'culture, commerce and connectivity' which will promote economic engagement and strengthen people to people, cultural and civilization contacts between two regions (Sajjahaar, 2015). There is an urgent need of developing the road connectivity in the state and between Tripura and neighbouring Bangladesh in order to bring boon to NER states. Air connectivity with

other important cities and particularly Dhaka is the need of the hour. Connecting Gomati River with Megha River would facilitate the movement of cargo at shortest time with reduced cost. Poor and unsatisfactory telecom services need immediate overhaul and for quicker ramification for telecom connectivity, latest technology and equipment need to be installed. The existing system of transit visa through pass port need to be reviewed for quicker mobility as a majority of people living in Tripura is without International Passport which retards the success of Agartala– Kolkata bus service via Dhaka. Increasing the capacity of local contractors, engineers and other stakeholders is essential as involvement of the stakeholders in the construction of highways and infrastructure would result in new employment opportunities. To reduce traffic congestion double-laning / four laning of NH-44, maintenance of NH 44 particularly in Lowairpoa area of Assam during the rainy season and immediate commencement of Sabroom to Kukital are crying need for smooth movement of goods, which will also improve the border trade through Bangladesh. People to people contact can be enhanced manifold through the frequent visits of artists in various fields, academics and skilled personnel etc.. People to people contact may be strengthened by increased sharing of the common food, culture, language, weaving motif and other practices. Exchange of faculties and students, artists and skilled personnel between educational institutes of

Tripura and Bangladesh should be facilitated. Promotion of Bengali language in higher and technical education through collaboration, folk songs of both regions, hands on training in Jamdani Saree and delicious Bangladeshi foods and cuisine, introduction of Agartala-Dhaka flight services, facilitating transit visa on Aahaar or Voter Identity card for NER people instead of international passport, increasing the competence of traders to opt for formal trade through mass awareness should also be some steps in this direction.

It may be mentioned that special efforts are being made by Government of India on connectivity to develop a coherent strategy particularly for linking ASEAN with the NER. Measures, including building transport infrastructure, encouraging airlines and waterways internet connectivity in the region, facilitating gas pipe line connectivity, contacts between academic and cultural institutions are underway. It is also a fact that mere efforts of the Government can't make the connectivity rewarding. Rather composite efforts beginning from the

involvement of people to resolving the regulatory framework, bureaucratic bottlenecks, promotion of entrepreneurs and willingness of the investors to establish industries particularly in Tripura are keys for pushing the local economy to higher economic growth aimed at mitigating the soaring unemployment as well as alleviating the standard of living of people in the state. However the security of the country should not take a backseat for which border management should be effective to block the illegal entry of drugs, foreign goods , arms etc and combat the insurgency , drug, human trafficking and cattle smuggling in this region. It is expected that latest initiatives of Government of India particularly 'Act East policy' and allocation of Rs. 1 lakh crore for the road connectivity in NER will go a long way in ushering a new era not only in improving the economic ties in neighbouring countries in NER particularly Bangladesh but also bring a significant contribution to economy of the state and that Tripura would be a hub of international trade and commerce in the near future.

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