

View: Fostering Indo-Bangla trade relations, connectivity is the 'mantra'

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ET CONTRIBUTORS | Last Updated: May 30, 2020, 11:32 AM IST



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Connectivity enables trade. While this is an ancient story, we sometimes tend to forget this simple logic. Our penchant for looking at the whole tree, as against the eye of a parrot, tends to push us towards debating trade issues in technical and esoteric language, at times far removed from ground realities. We have to first grasp the basics of trade and also keep in mind that talking about trade possibilities is rather different from making trade possible.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on cross-border trade between India and Bangladesh has, once again, underlined this simple fact. For a large number of basic necessities, including commodities such as onions or salt, Bangladesh is dependent on India. Nothing wrong with that as nobody can or should produce everything. However, due to legitimate health-related concerns, during this global pandemic, land borders, through which bulk of Indo-Bangla cross-border trade takes place, are firmly closed.

Does it mean that Bangladesh is not receiving Indian goods which they require as vital necessities? The answer is an emphatic 'no'. Trade exchanges are taking place via the railways and waterways. Indian goods are being sent via railway wagons along the Gede-Darshana route.

Coastal shipping is also underway, primarily linking Indian ports of [Kolkata/Haldia](#) and Vishakhapatnam with the [Bangladeshi](#) ports of Chittagong and Mongla. While these connections are decades old, the India-Bangladesh Coastal Shipping Agreement is a major enabler for reducing both time and cost.

These coastal shipping routes are also being used to send goods to India's North-eastern states, which are heavily dependent on this link, as transporting basic necessities via the 'chicken's neck', the Siliguri corridor, is not fully operational. Bangladesh is cooperating with India in facilitating such trade.

Thus, alternative means of connectivity matter most in emergency situation like this, as well as during normal times; they also help diversify logistics, which is the most critical ingredient for making trade actually take place. The recently signed 'Second Addendum on Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade between India and Bangladesh' is to be viewed in this context. That is about enabling more trade, in a better manner.

Most importantly, this instrument has provisions, which can localise trade. For example,

the inclusion of Sonamura-Daudkhundi stretches on the Gumti River bordering Tripura, as part of the India-Bangladesh Protocol Route, has been helpful. Similarly, the inclusion of Jogighopa in India and Bahadurabad in Bangladesh bordering Assam makes these new ports of call. Movement of shallow draft mechanised vessels is also allowed. Taken together all these measures will help trade in local products between India's North-eastern states and Bangladesh. There can't be better examples of 'Vocal for Local'.

The above were some of the major recommendations, which came out of the work of CUTS International and its partners in Northeast India and Bangladesh under a project titled 'Trans-boundary Rivers of South Asia', which is being managed by Oxfam with support from [the Swedish International Development Agency](#). This is a successful example of South-South as well as trilateral development cooperation.

While these are some recent positive developments in fostering better connectivity for trade between India and Bangladesh, much more work and effort is needed. With support from India under its '[Development Partnership](#)' programmes, a number of old railway links are being revived, such as the Chittagong-Dibrugarh line, while new ones such as Mongla Port-Khulna, Agartala-Akhaura are also being developed. With the construction of the Padma Bridge in Bangladesh, expected to be completed over the next two years, further connectivity opportunities can be explored.

The Padma Bridge is a dual purpose bridge, having both road and rail links. If the old railway line linking Sealdah in West Bengal and Khulna in Bangladesh via the Petrapole-Benapole border (the old Barisal Express) is revived, and extended to the Padma Bridge, then the time and cost of trade exchanges along this stretch will be reduced by more than three-quarter, compared with the present situation. Also, there will be no congestion at the Petrapole-Benapole land border as the majority of trade will shift to the rail link. At present, trucks carrying goods sometimes have to wait as much as two weeks to cross this border.

We can also view the above positive developments in a wider frame, that of stronger sub-regional cooperation that brings benefit to the other immediate, geographic neighbours. All we need to do is to recognise that these countries -- that is Nepal and Bhutan -- are both potential and actual beneficiaries of stronger, more robust rail, river and road networks that interlock and connect with them.

As economies and as population hubs, the smaller countries do not compare with Bangladesh and India, but in the context of their own economies, any additional gains in connectivity options and trade additionality translate into important direct benefits. And this breathes impetus, plus validity, into the [BBIN](#) Project, benefiting all the four, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal.

Looking beyond the four countries is the 'South Asia Sub-regional Economic Cooperation' (SASEC) Project, also a beneficiary of Asian Development Bank support, which widens the reach of sub-regional cooperation to bring in the Maldives, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. As with BBIN, we need effective ground level actions among these seven countries, each of which adjoins India with a shared land or close sea border.

In the past we elevated bilateral diplomacy to an all-embracing doctrine, which indirectly closed off benefits of wider, issue-based partnerships. We also need imaginative actions to move forward regional programmes, the more so when all these seven countries enjoy positive sentiment that supports cooperative actions.

Regional diplomacy is not a matter of binary choices, where opting for one closes the door to the other. Each group has its validity and context. Each can and does co-exist with other groupings. The bottom-line is: Does the group have an inner logic and a potential for gain for all the members? As the larger state, it behoves us to move forward with the vision of shared benefits and stronger mutual partnerships.

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