

An Analysis of Viable Alternatives to Transport and Communication System of Tripura's Cross Border Trade with Bangladesh

Rakesh Deb Roy, Research Scholar, Dept. of Commerce, Tripura University, Suryamaninagar, Tripura (West), India, rakesh4963@gmail.com

Dr. P.K. Haldar, Retd. Professor & Former Head, Dept. of Commerce, Tripura University, Suryamaninagar, Tripura (West), India, pkhaldar@rediffmail.com

Abstract: The present paper is an attempt to focus upon the alternative transport and communication system that indeed is regarded as one of the prerequisite for the overall development of the cross border trade between Tripura and Bangladesh, as, the trade between these two neighboring region is still suffering a lot with least upgraded surface transport which is the only existing mode of cross border movement of goods between these two region, especially, on both the sides of the border.

Keywords: Tripura, Bangladesh, Cross Border, Transport, Communication.

I. INTRODUCTION

Tripura's development has always been challenged by its geographical isolation. This isolation has been felt again due to atrocious condition of National Highway – 44 which connects Tripura with the mainland India. During rainy season, the condition becomes much worst and thus, leads to unavailability of various essential products and this situation is continuing for many years. The transport and communication has always been affected due to non-maintenance of the highway and as stated earlier, supply of essential commodities into Tripura has always been affected by poor road condition. So, it is quite understandable that when such uncertainty exists in supply of essential commodities into the state and how much it would be difficult to think about the prospects of trade between Tripura and its neighbouring states and Bangladesh. However, Tripura have achieved considerable success in opening the values of cross border trade but a lot is yet to be achieved. In this context, the viability of proposed transition highway may be considered or reviewed. The reason for developing transition highway route is that Tripura does not have any access in which it could smoothly transport goods. The NH-44 is not properly maintained and the part of NH-44 in Assam has been deteriorated beyond imagination [11]. Despite government's initiative to improve the road condition, Assam government's approach has always been reluctant. However, it is a fact that the portion of NH-44 which is outside Tripura's geographical border is moving through hilly regions of north-east, particularly in Meghalaya. In this context, transition highway's north-east corridor may be a viable option for development of transport and communication and very particularly a viable option for cross border trade. Besides this, the air and water

communication may also be given due importance which as of now are still non-functional and may prove to be a much viable option in connection to trade between Tripura and Bangladesh.

II. TRIPURA'S CROSS BORDER TRADE

The cross border trade between Tripura and Bangladesh has been going on from the primeval times but the formal trade between the two have started since 1995-96 [12]. The quantum of trade between the Tripura and Bangladesh has risen significantly over the years. In the trade between the two, Bangladesh was and still the dominant one whose attempt has always been to curb down the overall deficit trade balance, it has with India by capturing the entire NER of India in general and Tripura in particular. As Tripura is surrounded by Bangladesh on all the sides (856 Km), the latter sees it as a huge hunting business ground that it needs to pocket for its economic growth. Das [1] observed in his study¹ that Tripura's total trade with Bangladesh during 1998-99 was ` 1240.83 lakhs and during 2009-10 the total volume of trade raised to ` 13695.02 lakhs that means there is a considerable growth in cross border trade between Tripura and Bangladesh. However, Bangladesh trade balance with India has always been negative, whereas the trade balance between Tripura and Bangladesh has gradually become positive. During 2010-11, the value of export from Tripura to Bangladesh was nearly 0.1% of the total exports of goods from India. Tripura's import from Bangladesh during the same financial year has been 12.56% of the total imports by India. It is because of the matter of

¹ Cross-Border Cooperation for the Development of Peripheral Regions: The Case of India's North East and Bangladesh., (pp. 211-220). Bangkok, Thailand.

the fact that the manufacturing base in Tripura is low due to less number industries which are operating and that is why it hardly could take any dominance in cross border trade. Low growth in manufacturing sector has been caused mainly by bottleneck in communication as well as due to its geographically landlocked position. Tripura is the only state which is surrounded by Bangladesh on three sides and this

geographical position itself created its limitations. The long 856 km border is yet to be fenced to curb the menace of informal trade, which in fact is desirable with no significant changes in the formal trade. However, fencing was possible over land but it was not possible to extend over water as many rivers downstream are situated in Bangladesh.

Table 1: Border Fencing Status of Indo-Bangladesh Border (Tripura)

(Length in km)

Name of State (with length of border)	PHASE-I		PHASE-II		TOTAL (PH-I + PH-II)	
	Fencing Sanctioned	Fencing Completed	Fencing Sanctioned	Fencing Completed	Fencing Sanctioned	Fencing Completed
Tripura (856 Km)	545.37	480.51	639.64	516.77	1182.37	997.28

Source: Annual Report, 2014-15; Ministry of Home Affairs

III. OBJECTIVE

The objective of this paper has been to identify new viable options of Tripura's trade by alternative transport and communication system.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for this paper is explorative in nature. Various secondary sources like websites, journals, reports, etc. have been systematically utilized and referred for enquiry and also for the construction of conceptual

base of the present study and it has been done keeping the objective of the study in mind.

V. TRANSITION HIGHWAY NETWORK

The idea of transition highway was coined in 1959 to promote development of international road transport. Apart from the main aim, objectives were also formulated for best utilization of existing highways and to avoid cost burden of construction of new highways. The necessity of development of North-Eastern corridor of transition highway has been justified in subsequent analysis of data.

Table 2: Distance between capitals of North Eastern States and Kolkata via Chicken's Neck

Sl. No.	Distance and Travel Time					
	From	To	Road		Rail	
			Distance	Travel Time	Distance	Travel Time
1	Agartala	Kolkata	1680 km	170 hrs	1565 km	120 hrs
2	Silchar	Kolkata	1407 km	146 hrs	1368 km	96 hrs
3	Guwahati	Kolkata	1081 km	75 hrs	972 km	48 hrs
4	Shillong	Kolkata	1181 km	80 hrs	No Rail Connectivity	
5	Imphal	Kolkata	1742 km	155 hrs	No Rail Connectivity	
6	Aizwal	Kolkata	1657 km	152 hrs	No Rail Connectivity	

Source: G. Das (2013); Cross-Border Cooperation for the Development of Peripheral Regions: The Case of India's North East and Bangladesh

Table 3: Distance between capitals of North Eastern States and Kolkata via Bangladesh

Sl. No.	Distance and Travel Time					
	From	To	Road		Rail	
			Distance	Travel Time	Distance	Travel Time
1	Agartala	Kolkata	450 km	35 hrs	No Rail Connectivity	
2	Silchar	Kolkata	600 km	35 hrs	Rail Connectivity is non-functional	
3	Guwahati	Kolkata	820 km	50 hrs	No Rail Connectivity	
4	Shillong	Kolkata	720 km	46 hrs	No Rail Connectivity	
5	Imphal	Kolkata	900 km	55 hrs	No Rail Connectivity	
6	Aizwal	Kolkata	800 km	42 hrs	No Rail Connectivity	

Source: G. Das (2013); Cross-Border Cooperation for the Development of Peripheral Regions: The Case of India's North East and Bangladesh

Table 2 reveals that distance between Agartala and Kolkata through North-East (Road Transport) is 1680 km and it takes to reach Kolkata a time of 170 hrs, while distance between Agartala and Kolkata via Bangladesh is just 450 km and travelling time is 35 hrs as shown in Table 3 and there is a gap of 135 hrs. This reality indicates the

necessity of an alternative option of transport and communication, which indeed will prove to be very cost effective for importing of different goods by Tripura from Kolkata via Dhaka, as this will not only substantially decrease the time and distance for bringing various logistics but also will decrease the transportation cost by

fourfold. Such scenario may further lead to boost the existing small and medium size industries of Tripura.

However, presently bus service between Agartala and Kolkata is operating but there are a lot to accomplish extensive movement of vehicles. The proposed transition highway's North-East corridor in one way will solve communication problem between North-East and mainland India and very importantly new corridor will open up venues for trade with other South-East Asian countries through Bay of Bengal. However, [9] conceptualized the idea by visualizing Tripura as "Gateway of North-East" in his article "New Equation in Cross Border Trade". He also stated that the viability of Tripura's gateway is connected with certain realities and these are (i) Cultural proximity, and (ii) Geographical proximity.

Transition Highway as has been proposed to enter into Bangladesh through two different routes, one route is Asian Highway-1 and another one is Asian Highway-2. Asian Highway-2 is entering into Bangladesh through Banglabandha and Asian Highway-1 is entering into Benapole or Petrapole [7]. Both these two Asian Highways are splitting near Katchpur of Bangladesh, and then Asian Highway-1 has been proposed to move towards Sylhet and then Tamabil of Meghalaya in India. Another highway route which is an extension of Asian Highway-1 is moving towards Chittagong and Cox Bazaar which is much more near of Tripura's south-east sub-division Sabroom. Meanwhile, extension of railways from Agartala to Sabroom is going on and broad gauge railway line which was scheduled to be completed by 2017 is still under the process of construction. In addition to this, construction of new two more national highways are already in progress [8] viz. 108A and 208 which is aimed to increase better mobility of goods and services to the other states of NER, the benefits of which will be acquired both by Tripura in particular and Bangladesh in general following the cross border trade relation between the two. In such situation, transport and communication is likely to be smooth.

VI. WATER TRANSPORT

Tripura shares a riverine border of 83 Km out of its total 856 Km border sharing area with Bangladesh [13]. Water transport may be hypothetically viewed as an alternative option for development of communication between Tripura and Bangladesh and then with South-East Asia. The importance of water transport has been felt recently in a renewed trade when turbines of Tripura's thermal electric power station were to be transported to Tripura. Arrangement was made through bilateral talk between New Delhi and Dhaka and subsequently turbines were transported to Tripura [6]. However, diplomatic twists in the context of cross-border trade has been felt when the transshipment of turbines successfully completed by assurance to Dhaka administration of supply of 250 MW electricity to Bangladesh. Various studies and researches are in procession to restore the old traditional water routes that once existed for trade between Tripura and Bangladesh. An analysis of the transport arrangement through inland water transport (refer table 4) as represented by Chaudhury [2], reveals that water transport will prove to be much more cost effective in comparison to any other mode of transport between Tripura and Bangladesh. Tripura can possibly reap the benefits through

development of river ports² (Gumti and Howrah River) and development of a mechanism of inland water transportation (refer to image-1).

Table 4: Efficiency of IWT Mode of Transport

Fuel Efficiency	Road	Rail	IWT
One Horse Power moves	150 Kg	500 Kg	4000 Kg
One liter of fuel moves	24 Km	85 Km	105 Km
Operating cost at International Level (Cents per Km)	5.2	2.5	1.0

Source: Inland Waterways Authority of India, 'Inland Water Transport in Northeast, Shillong, 19 June 2012

VII. AIRWAY COMMUNICATION

There was a time when Tripura had four air bases and with the advent of time three of them diminished and at present only one is functional in the state capital Agartala handling only passenger services. Besides Agartala, the other three air bases were located in Khowai (Khowai District), Kamalpur (Dhalai District) and Kailashahar (Unakoti District) all of which became defunct during the earlier period of 1990s and not to the surprise, all the three mentioned places share trading land routes with Bangladesh. The Airports Authority of India (AII) has already sanctioned a radical amount to upgrade the Agartala Airport to an international one wherein appeals from the state government were made to the Bangladesh government for air connectivity to Dhaka and Chittagong³. Confronting to this, if the rest of the three air bases are given due importance and brought under the gamut of trade, it will invariably add to the development of the state and give an overall thrust to the ongoing trade pattern between Tripura and Bangladesh.

VIII. RAILWAY COMMUNICATION

Railway is meant to be a cheaper transport communication system in comparison to any other transport system and is very much responsible for the growth and development of an economy. There had been railway links in Tripura since the princely era [10], but the same shattered with the demarcation of the land boundaries after the independence of India. In the post independence period, Tripura was connected with meter gauge track with its mainland to Dharmanagar which extended to Kumarghat and finally to the state capital Agartala. Now, the conversion of meter gauge to broad gauge has brought much speed in movement of peoples and consignments of the landlocked state. The railway network in the state is already extended to Udaipur city in Gomati District which is further likely to be extended to Sabroom in the South District. Tripura is very keen to extend its railway network with Bangladesh

² <https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/IndiaBangladesh.pdf>

³ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/good-governance/tripura/Upgradation-of-Agartala-airport-to-start-in-Feb-2016-Minister/articleshow/49151993.cms>

through three routes and works on the same is been carried out with prime importance. The Agartala railway is proposed to be connected to Akhaura (15 Km route), Sabroom with Chittagong (74 Km) and Sonamura with Comilla (12 Km)⁴. Such communication with Bangladesh may thus prove to be another viable option for Tripura which will add to its improved transport and communication system enhancing the cross border trade relation between the two. Besides this, Tripura is keen to get itself connected with the Trans-Asian Railway Network (TARN) where approach has already been made to the Indian ministry to extend the existing rail route from Jawaharnagar in Dhalai district to Darlwan in Mizoram, which further extended will connect Kalay in Myanmar. If Tripura gets such connectivity with Kalay in Myanmar, the rest of the entire NER India will get connected to Cambodia and Singapore, only if the gap of 95 Km gets filled between Dawei in Myanmar and Namtok in Thailand. In a nutshell, if such connectivity comes to existence, Tripura will get an exposure in cross border trade with other Asian countries as well, which Bangladesh can channelize too for their benefit through Tripura.

IX. CONCLUSION

The growth and development of an economy depends largely on the type of transport and communication facilities it has with the other states or nations. Subject to the geographical location, Tripura suffered a lot or can say still suffering to get smoothly connected by developing its transport and communication systems. But the advent of time is reflecting drastic changes in the overall scenario for the improvement of communication systems in the state. The roads being upgraded along with the formation of new highways are indicators that in the coming recent years, Tripura will be a definite entry corridor for Bangladesh, or can say, will act as a gateway to it for the entire NER of India. Similarly, railway connectivity are also been given due importance to bridge the missing links once Tripura had with Bangladesh, for a more stable cross border connectivity. Additionally, Tripura will gain more if it gets connected to the TRAN, which will connect it with other South Asian countries. But the inclusion of water and air transport along with the surface transport is more desired which will undoubtedly unleash much more congenial and effective trade relation between Tripura and Bangladesh.

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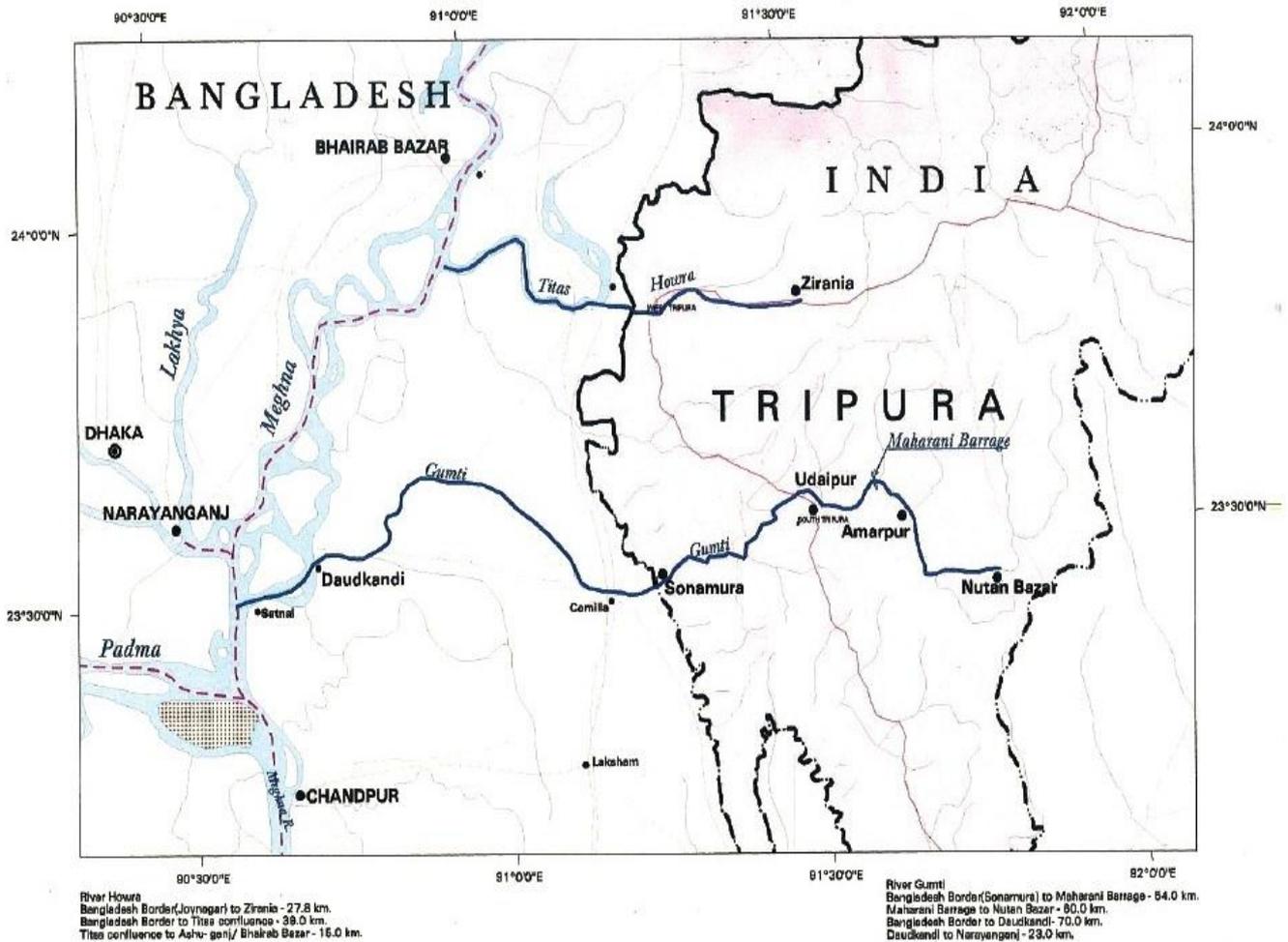
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Image-1: Showing Different waterways between Tripura and Bangladesh



Source: Director, Inland Water Ways Authority of India