**Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura: Local trade between India and Bangladesh in the Meghna Basin**


With the declaration of river Barak as National Waterway-16 (NW-16) by the Inland Waterways Authority of India, the navigational prospects of the Meghna river system have come to limelight. The Meghna basin, fed by a number of rivers originating in the hills of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, supports the lives of local riverine communities with its extensive systems of wetlands, flood plains and fisheries. Inland navigation in these rivers would not only improve hinterland connectivity of this isolated landscape but would also integrate it with mainland India through the Bangladesh-India Inland Waterways Protocol Routes. Karimganj in the state of Assam in India and Zakiganj, in Sylhet Division of Bangladesh, both located on the banks on Kushiyara River, are the entry and exit points of trans-boundary cargo through Protocol Route 3 (Kolkata-Karimganj). Improving navigability up to Karimganj and linking it with NW-16 from Bhanga to Lakhipur (121 kilometres) will provide better transit connectivity between Kolkata and the hinterlands of lower Assam, Tripura, Nagaland Manipur and Mizoram.

It can facilitate cargo movement to and from Bangladesh for key commodities such as fly ash and food grains. The dredging operation between Bhanga and Silchar has already been completed. India and Bangladesh have initiated joint dredging from Ashuganj to Karimganj to improve the navigability of protocol routes. Given these developments, as part of an on-going Oxfam programme on Transboundary Rivers of South Asia (TROSA), CUTS International has conducted a study in the rivers of Kushiyara, Haora and Gumti to explore the prospects of cross-border trade through inland waterways and its possible impact on riverine communities. At present, bank to bank cargo movement using row boats takes place from Karimganj to Zakiganj across the international border of the Kushiyara River. Zakiganj on the Bangladeshi side is hardly 300 metres away from the Indian side. Mostly fruits and horticulture commodities such as apples, citrus fruits, grapes, oranges, kinnows, pomegranate, betel nuts, and ginger are exported from India to Bangladesh after their customs clearance. Interestingly, except for oranges, citrus fruits, betel nuts and ginger which are locally produced in Meghalaya and Manipur, other fruits come from North Indian states of Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Maharashtra which are hundreds of kilometres distant. This trade mostly caters to the local demand across the border in Sylhet, Bangladesh. The total value of export for the year 2018 from Karimganj steamer station was INR 154 million (USD 2.2mn).

This arrangement sustains a local support system by engaging people for loading, unloading and transportation of traded commodities from nearby warehouses, thereby providing livelihoods to 400-500 people in each country. All 12 registered boats plying across the border are Bangladeshi...
boats and the cargo movement is from India to Bangladesh. There are about 40-50 small trucks/pick-up vans engaged in this trade as well. There is also a high demand for Bangladeshi rice and tomato varieties in the border districts of India, but an absence of proper linkages with traders on the Indian side has limited their trade to the informal sector. However, traders in Karimganj are hopeful that if the river is made navigable until the town of Ashuganj in Bangladesh, goods from Assam, Meghalaya and Manipur can reach Sylhet’s market, which is a major trading hub in Bangladesh. On the other hand and unlike Assam, inland navigation is not popular in Tripura, India. Haora and Gumti rivers originate from the hills of Tripura and are primarily used as a source of irrigation and drinking water. Extraction of huge amounts of water from the Gumti River for irrigation purpose has considerably reduced its discharge and velocity and increased sedimentation downstream, thereby impacting navigation.

Unlike the trans-boundary trade happening though the land customs stations in Assam and West Bengal, custom stations in Tripura were mostly busy with imports from Bangladesh. Cement is the single most important imported product, accounting for more than 84% of the value of trade on average through the Srimantapur custom station over the last five years. Interestingly, in 2018, more than USD 350,000 worth of coal was imported from Bangladesh, which has no coal deposits of its own, and imports coal itself. Following the ban on coal mining in the Indian state of Meghalaya, Tripura’s requirement for its brick kilns and tea factories has been met through these imports, which originally come from Indonesia, South Africa and Australia through Bangladesh’s Payra and Chittagong ports. It is then transported to Daudkandi by medium sized vessels/barges. From Daudkandi, it is transported by tucks to Bibir Bazar custom station in Comilla, which is adjacent to Sonamura, India.

Our study has found that the Gumti River is navigable between Daudkandi to Comilla during the whole year. Considering the low lying bridges over the river between Comilla and Daudkandi, small boats of 20-25-tonne capacity make a good case for trans-boundary movements of local goods. For this to come about a few shallow locations close to the border need to be cleared by dredging and Daudkandi-Sonamura stretch should be considered as part of Bangladesh-India Inland Waterways Protocol Routes. Though coal is a commodity of immediate interest to Indian traders, local farmers can also benefit by trading vegetables and other agricultural products provided non-tariff measures related to their standards and port restrictions are addressed. Small-haul trans-boundary trade between Sonamura and Daudkandi through the Gumti River is a promising as it can be done by using 20-25 tonnes vessel capacities. Traders can avail facilities at the land custom stations of Srimanatapur and Bibir Bazar in India and Bangladesh, respectively.

This is not the case for the Haora river, though. The proximity to well-developed infrastructure at the Integrated Check Post in Agartala, Tripura and the railway connectivity being developed between the two countries through Akhaura makes land and rail based trade easier. Additionally the Haora River is not only very lean but also does not have navigable depth. In short, the
wetlands in the Meghna basin on the Bangladeshi side are rich in fisheries resources and these are of high demand in India. Similarly, vegetables grown in Tripura, India can fetch a good market in Comilla, Bangladesh. Such localised trade can provide better support to the lives of riverine communities, provided necessary regulatory infrastructure for trade facilitation is created. Trade-related infrastructure development such as cargo terminals, warehouses and support services will provide further employment opportunities to the local population. With 29 trans-boundary rivers between India and Bangladesh in the Meghna basin, riverine livelihoods in border areas are vulnerable. Such locations are generally characterised by inadequate infrastructure, which result in widespread, multi-dimensional poverty. With little or no industrialisation, these border areas are prone to illegal activities including human trafficking and smuggling. Trade-induced improvements in physical and regulatory infrastructure will eventually improve the quality of life of these communities as there will be more employment opportunities leading to decent education and healthcare, among other benefits.

Mizoram: Landslides, floods plague Mizoram


Incessant rainfall in past 48 hours has triggered landslides and floods in various parts of Mizoram. The northeastern state has seen floods every year in past five years and this year seems to be no different. The land is now unstable around the hilly areas cuts across National Highway 54. It is the area located near Hunthar, Aizawl and its the road to the airport too. Even areas just outside the Aizawl city located near the Tlawng river had been badly affected. Flooding has affected the lives of the people and even houses have collapsed. A two storey house collapsed due to the landslide, leaving eight family members injured. Four have been rushed to Aizawl civil hospital for proper treatment while the rest have been given first aid. Disaster management & rehabilitation (DM&R) team and local NGOs like Young Mizo Association (YMA) run by the youth in the state are currently cleaning up the rubble and helping the affected people but the landslides are far from stopping in the days to come.

Mizoram: Is Imported Fish to Northeast India causing Cancer?


The state of Mizoram is dubbed as the ‘Cancer Capital of India’ and it is a worrisome trend if the state is given such a status and the same applies for the rest of the Northeast where cancer is supposed to be one of the biggest reasons for death. Many have termed use of Tobacco, Kwai or even eating smoked meat as one of the main reasons why there is cancer in the region. But recent studies show that Fish imported to northeastern states contain formalin which leads to cancer. Health is wealth but as per research findings through the Population Based Cancer Registries
report, over 700 people have died by cancer each year from 2012-14. The reports also revealed that new cases of cancer have been reported between 2012 and 2014 with numbers going to 4656 with number of males going ahead at 2567 and female at 2089. The latest shocker is that imported fish in the region contains formalin when injected causes cancer and the reason is to preserve the freshness of the fish when it reaches the state and market. Formalin as defined in Wikipedia is a naturally-occurring organic compound and an important precursor to many other materials and chemical compounds. It is mainly used in the production of industrial resins, e.g., for particle board and coatings. In 2011, the US National Toxicology Program described formaldehyde as “known to be a human carcinogen”!!

Then does it point that the number of cases is due to addition of compound on food which has the potential to harm human lives. Food adulteration in many parts of the state and the country as a whole is not a new thing. None better example would be Maggi and the surrounding controversies around it. The Mizoram government’s health and family welfare department has come in defence and to clear the air on the usage of formalin saying that it does not contain any traces of the substance. The director of the state cancer institute, Dr Thangchungnunra, recently wrote an article in which he made this observation. The article was published in ‘Hriselna’, a journal of the health department. ‘Over 1,300 people have died of AIDS in Mizoram out of the 13,040 HIV positive cases identified since October 1990’ The state government has to even relook at this too and whatever is the findings or reports it is imperative that officials need to look at these issues at a more higher level.