

Linking India's Inland Waterways to Bay of Bengal: Assessing the Potential of Sub-regional Cooperation

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Introduction

In an interview to The Hindu, newspaper (24 May 2017), the Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal said,

Namami Brahmaputra was mainly organised to connect Assam with the rest of the world through the Brahmaputra river. This was the most viable waterway during the British regime, Brahmaputra to Padma (river Padma in Bangladesh) and the Bay of Bengal. Our finished products could find a global market. For 70 years, this has been stopped. We want to re-open that route for speedy growth.¹

The seriousness behind wanting to re-open the waterway is evident from the fact that 'Namami Brahmaputra', a five day event, was organized from 31 March–4 April 2017, along the entire stretch of the river Brahmaputra across 21 districts of Assam from Sadiya to Dhubri. Inaugurating this river festival, President Pranab Mukherjee said,

The development of this national waterway can give Assam access to international ports like Chittagong in Bangladesh. This will give Assam an exposure to international trade and commerce. With the Act East Policy taking forefront, Assam is perfectly positioned to become the corridor of the country to the ASEAN nations.²

Just over a year ago, in March 2016, the Indian Parliament enacted the National Waterways Act 2016 wherein certain inland waterways, numbering a total of 111, were declared as national waterways. The Act also provided for the regulation and development of these waterways for the purposes of shipping and navigation.³ In April 2016, 'Sagarmala' —the national program aimed at accelerating economic

development in the country by harnessing the potential of India's coastline and rivers network—was announced by the government.⁴ The Asian Confluence River Festival was held on 15-16 July 2016 in Shillong, Meghalaya. Apart from government officials, business persons and the common people, dignitaries from neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar also participated. They were all of the opinion that the river transport system—inland navigation which was prominent during pre-Independence era—should be revived; and that the rivers which are common to the neighbouring countries need to be given more emphasis for the development of the region.⁵ At the bilateral level too, Indian Prime Minister Modi's visit to Bangladesh in June 2015 and Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India in April 2017 have laid the foundation for cooperation on waterways, the coast guard, port development, and coastal shipping.

Thus, a new narrative of socio-economic development centred on rivers as drivers of growth has emerged. It recognizes that opportunities offered by rivers—which are trans-boundary in nature—can be tapped only through sub-regional cooperation. This issue brief examines the manner in which rivers were used for navigation during the pre-Independence period; and secondly, the way in which India's National Waterways Act 2016 is being looked upon as a game changer for sub regional-cooperation.

Historical Perspective

Historical studies show that, since ancient times, rulers of the Indian sub-continent used rivers for the navigation of people and trade very extensively. In many places, rivers connected seaports to the interior places in the kingdom.⁶

Under the East India Company, steam boats arrived in the Indian sub-continent in the 1830s and revolutionized inland river transport. Regular steamer services plied through the Ganges from Kolkata to Allahabad and beyond, aiding not only the movement of goods but also troops and civilians to the towns on the banks of the river Ganga. With the growth of the tea industry in Assam, the services of the steam boat extended to Assam too.⁷ The East India Company undertook river canal projects with the aim of serving both navigation and irrigation purposes. Pioneering work in this field was done by Sir Arthur Cotton who had a complete mastery over the river systems, and suggested various waterways linking the subcontinent.⁸ During British colonial rule, the Brahmaputra and Barak-Surma rivers were used extensively for transport and trade between Northeast India and the port of Kolkata. That is to say,

the boats would traverse through what is now Bangladesh into the Bay of Bengal. It is estimated that, in 1877, as many as 180,000 country cargo boats were registered in Kolkata—124,000 at Hooghly and 62,000 at Patna.⁹

With the introduction of the railways in India in the year 1853 as well as the focus on road projects, the colonial government's priority gradually shifted away from waterways. The exception was Northeast of India, where ninety eight per cent of trade was carried on by waterways despite the railway line. The Partition of India in 1947 disrupted these uninterrupted waterways because riverine trade had to pass through East Pakistan. The deterioration of political environment in 1962, and later in 1965, between India and Pakistan completely halted the use of these waterways for navigation and shipping. With the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, a Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade was signed by Bangladesh and India in 1972. This is limited to providing transportation for inter-country trade cargo and transit cargo on specified routes.

Thus, political factors have resulted in the vibrant waterways of the pre-Independence period becoming unused. Significantly, the recent debates on rivers as waterways for navigation seek to reverse this.

India's Waterways and Sub-regional Cooperation

The National Waterways Act 2016 of the Government of India seeks to develop 111 inland waterways. These have been declared as national waterways for purposes of shipping and navigation. All these national waterways would be developed in phases following detailed project reports. In phase I, eight waterways are being considered for development.¹⁰ Some states that these national waterways would cover include Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Goa, West Bengal and Assam. With the exception of Goa, all the other states share borders with Nepal, Bhutan, or Bangladesh. Thus, India's focus on inland waterways has given rise to hopes of sub-regional cooperation wherein Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and India's northeast would especially see a development arc driven by rivers.

One of the most important waterways being developed by the government is National Waterway 1 (NW1) under the Jal Marg Vikas Project. This is a 1,620km long Ganga-Bhagirathi-Hoogly river system from Allahabad to Haldia. The World Bank is providing financial and technical support to this project, which is expected to lead to extensive economic and social development of the hinterland along the banks of the

river Ganga. The project would enable the commercial navigation of vessels with the capacity of 1500-2000 tons.¹¹

The Jal Marg Vikas Project includes the development of a fairway with three metres depth; multi-modal terminals at Varanasi, Haldia, and Sahibganj; the strengthening of the river navigation system; conservancy works; modern River Information System (RIS); Digital Global Positioning System (DGPS); night navigation facilities, modern methods of channel marking; and the construction of a new state of the art navigational lock at Farakka.

The successful completion of the Jal Marg Vikas Project will benefit Nepal too which is a landlocked country. The Kalghat Terminal would enable transportation of cargo from Kolkata to Nepal through this Waterway.¹² Further, the Gazipur terminal—which is dedicated to LNG (liquefied natural gas) trade—would facilitate the transportation of LNG to Nepal via Gazipur.¹³

The Jal Marg Vikas Project will also procure 25 LNG fuelled vessels or barges to promote the use of the waterway. A total of 60–65 vessels will be procured under the project. Measures have also been undertaken to ensure that dredging results in a 3m assured draft between Farakka and Kahalgaon in Bihar. A beginning has already been made, and goods are being transported through inland waterways.¹⁴ The cargo movement for the landlocked Nepal and Bhutan is partly taking place through the riverine route till Sahebgunj also, from where trucks move goods to Nepal and Bhutan. It is estimated that it has reduced transport costs by 30 per cent.¹⁵

These developments have given rise to a positive response from academicians, business, and political leaders in the Sub-continent. They are of the opinion that India's National Waterways Act is a landmark game changer that has resulted in a positive shift in the discourse on inland waterway connectivity in the Sub-region. In September 2016, after attending the Asian Confluence NADI 2016 July Festival held in Shillong, Dipak Gyawali, the former Minister of Water Resources of Nepal, wrote

the primary agenda ended up becoming the pressing need to revive riverine transport. It seems during the British rule, goods from abroad came up from the Bay of Bengal along the Brahmaputra, all the way up to Tejpur and Dibrugarh.¹⁶

All the participants at this event, including those from Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar, were of the opinion that inland navigation—which was prominent during India’s pre-Independence era—should be revived. As some of the river systems of Nepal meet the river Ganges in NW1, the possibility of Nepal directly accessing the Bay of Bengal through this waterway needs to be explored.

The Namami Brahmaputra River festival organized by the Assam state government also conveys the need to revive waterway connectivity of the pre-Independence period. NW2 (the Sadiya-Dhubri stretch of Brahmaputra River) and NW 16 (the Barak River) are being promoted by the Assam government. If one looks at the bigger picture, it is argued that Assam and its waterways can play a central role in connecting India with the ASEAN countries. This is to be seen in the context of India’s Act East Policy wherein the focus is on expanding political, economic, and socio-cultural linkages with Southeast Asia. All these further re-iterate the need for sub regional cooperation.¹⁷

Bangladesh has an important role to play if the pre-Independence riverine waterways have to be revived. In this context, Bangladesh looks upon itself as being strategically located wherein it can provide sea connectivity to the nations around it. Thus, it is also keen on sub-regional cooperation. Significantly, 24,000 km of its waterways find their way into the Bay of Bengal. Thus, it has a critical role to play in regional waterway connectivity. It has two maritime ports: the Chittagong Port and the Mongla Port. The third maritime port of Pyra is currently under construction, but initial operation has already started. These maritime ports have hinterland connectivity by river. In June 2016, the World Bank approved US\$ 360 million to help Bangladesh improve the navigability and year round safe transport for passengers and cargo along Bangladesh’s busiest waterways. This is called the Regional Waterway Transport Project for Bangladesh which is expected to enhance waterway connectivity within the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) sub region also.¹⁸

Being a lower riparian country, all the rivers in Bangladesh are trans-boundary—that is, originating beyond its borders. Thus, rivers connect India and Bangladesh, and the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade signed by Bangladesh and India in 1972 provides for transportation of inter-country trade cargo as well as transit cargo. However, vessels have to follow definite routes, and take voyage approvals from competent authorities in both countries for each and every voyage. The existing routes provide inland waterway connectivity between West Bengal and the North-east only. Waterways connecting North India and the North-

east and North India and Bangladesh are yet to be developed. There are suggestions from Bangladesh that, apart from the simplification of customs formalities, the Ganges river should be included in the protocol routes so that goods can move from Allahabad to any destination in the northeast or in Bangladesh. Further, there are also suggestions that the scope of the Protocol be extended by taking Nepal and Bhutan on board so that they can have a direct access to the Bay of Bengal through the maritime ports of Bangladesh. Also, that sub-regional cooperation can be truly implemented by combining the Motor Vehicles Agreement of BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) and the bilateral Protocol on Inland Water Transport between Bangladesh and India to create a new framework of multi-modal transport among the BBIN countries.¹⁹

Coastal shipping has already commenced between India and Bangladesh in March 2016, following the decisions taken during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Bangladesh in June 2015. Sheikh Hasina's visit to India in April 2017 consolidated this bilateral trust, and went further to examine the possibilities of regular movement of river and coastal passenger and cruise vessels between India and Bangladesh on coastal routes and inland waterways. The Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) between the coast guards of India and Bangladesh were also concluded to contribute to maritime security in the Bay of Bengal. Port construction and shipping are also among the many areas of cooperation between India and Bangladesh.²⁰

India's Sagarmala program brings out the need for multi-modal connectivity wherein inland waterways have an important place. India has 14,500 kms of navigable and potentially navigable waterways, and 7,500 km of coastline covering 13 states. However, transport through waterways accounts for only 6 per cent of total freight movement in India in tonne km terms. The Sagarmala project calls for multimodal connectivity whereby a combination of waterways, railways, and roads will be utilized to have efficient logistics, all of which are important for goods to remain competitive. Given the projections for economic growth in the Sub-continent, there is great potential for increased cargo movement on waterways as freight traffic is likely to increase.

Conclusion

India's Waterways Act 2016 of declaring 111 waterways as national waterways for navigation and shipping has initiated a constructive discourse not only in India but in the BBIN sub region too. India's Sagarmala program has also contributed to this discourse. The debates and discussions which have followed have highlighted the need

to move from bilateral approaches towards more regional ones for utilizing trans-boundary rivers as waterways. The central government's efforts in India are being also complemented by those of state governments, as is seen in the organization of the Namami Brahmaputra festival by the Assam Government and the Asian Confluence River Festival in Meghalaya. They are also emphasizing the need for a regional approach and the revival of pre-Independence waterways for the movement of cargo and passengers. Significantly, inland waterways and the need to have a regional approach have been prioritized by India's eastern neighbours too. Water discourse also seeks to explore multimodal connectivity at the sub-regional level involving both the waterways and the motor vehicle agreement among the BBIN countries.

The Bay of Bengal will soon become a hub of maritime trade if the sub-regional projects involving trans-boundary rivers for navigation and shipping are successfully implemented. It will change the very narrative of sub-regional cooperation in which the unhindered movement of not only goods but also of people will take place through the trans-national waterways. With its strategic location as the lower riparian state (wherein all its rivers flow into the Bay of Bengal), Bangladesh has a key role to play in this new paradigm of cooperation. However, consistent political will and convergence among all the countries concerned is an important pre-requisite for commencing and implementing these regional projects. Only then will it facilitate the participation of financial institutions and private entrepreneurs with investments so very necessary for the success of these projects.

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