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Transport connectivity

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of Jamuna River. At present there is no transit facility by road or rail for Indian goods across Bangladesh. Thus the following rail route is proposed for consideration.

Rail Route 3: Kolkata-Darsana-Ishwardi-Jamuna Bridge-Dhaka-Akhaura-Shahbazpur/Mahisasan
Between India and Bangladesh, currently, three broad gauge (BG) rail corridors are active on the west side. As indicated earlier, Indian freight trains travel only up to the border stations inside Bangladesh. BR wagons also do not cross the Indian border, as the rolling stock is incompatible with the air-braked stock of Indian Railways. Present load restriction over Jamuna Bridge in Bangladesh prohibits the movement of fully loaded broad gauge wagons across the bridge, but allows fully loaded ISO containers on low platform flat cars of CONCOR to move across Jamuna Bridge, without any load restrictions.

While BG container trains can now move up to Tongi (Dhirastram-ICD), transfer facilities would be needed there to transfer containers to MG flat wagons for movement up to Shahabazpur/Mahisasan and Badarpur, until such time that the section between Tongi and Shahabazpur is converted to Dual gauge (DG). For smooth movement of trains across the border, bilateral/multilateral rail transport agreement shall have to be in developed and adopted besides introduction of simplified customs procedures and IT data transfer facilities at the border (Map-1 shows the location of the route).

Connectivity between India-Bangladesh-NE India by Road

As indicated earlier, there is no direct movement of goods by road or rail between India and Bangladesh. Transit is allowed only by Inland Water Transport (IWT), but not by road or rail. While a number of rail routes have been proposed for improvement to carry regional traffic, at least the following road link is required to carry specialised cargo (See Map-2):

Road Route Kolkata-Petropole/Benapole-Jessore-via ferry to Dhaka-NE India/Agartala

While preference needs to be given to the use of railway to carry most of the regional and bilateral traffic, road transport could be used for high value and perishable commodities. In this context, since Bangladesh roads are not yet fully geared to carry heavy axle loads, multi-axle truck-trailers shall have to be introduced to avoid damage to road infrastructure and goods should be carried by containers.

To replace the costly practice of transshipment of goods at the border, a bilateral/multilateral road transport agreement needs to be developed and adopted to allow direct movement of vehicles across the border. However, till such a time, a bilateral/multilateral agreement is fully adopted; Bangladeshi truck-trailers could immediately start ferrying Indian goods/containers between Kolkata and NE India/Agartala.

Connectivity between Bhutan Bangladesh

Since Bhutan does not have any rail system, it is entirely dependent on road transport for its regional connectivity. The following route is, therefore, proposed for improvement:

Road Route 1: Thimphu Phuentsholing Jaigon Chengrabandha Burimari Natore - Jessore Mongla Port (880 km)

This road route (See Map-2) would provide Bhutanese traffic an alternative and shorter access to port facilities in Bangladesh. To stop the costly practice of transshipment of goods at the border, a trilateral road transport agreement between Bangladesh, Bhutan and India shall have to be

developed and adopted for smooth movement of trucks across the border. In this context, to avoid damage to Bangladesh Road network, multi-axle truck-trailers shall have to be introduced to carry goods in containers.

Connectivity between India Bangladesh NE India by IWT

Since 1972, under a protocol signed between Bangladesh and India, both transit and bilateral traffic between these two countries were allowed to move by Inland Water Transport (IWT). This protocol is now being renewed at certain interval. The routes are as follows:

IWT Route - Kolkata Raimongal Mongla Narayanganj Aricha Pandu (1439 km)

IWT Route - Kolkata Raimongal Mongal Narayanganj Bhairab Bazar Sherpur Karimganj (1318 km)

Indian transit traffic across Bangladesh and Indo-Bangladesh bilateral traffic regularly travel along the above two designated Inland Water Transport (IWT) Protocol routes. Currently, these routes are highly underutilized, partly due to lack of adequate drafts, navigational aids, and partly due to limited number of ports of call and non-renewal of the Protocol for longer periods, a problem which has now been resolved.

Recognising that the IWT has high potential for carrying both transit and inter-country traffic, it is necessary to assess as to how to address the problems mentioned above and also how the above two routes could be made more efficient and competitive to other modes.

Need to improve facilitation measures at the border crossing

Considerable difficulties also exist at the land border crossings. Besides lack of bilateral agreements, other constraints include inefficient customs operations, lack of transparency in inspection procedures, informal payments and inadequate preparation of customs documentation by shippers, etc. None of the borders yet have on-line customs IT connectivity to facilitate faster clearances.

Banking, medical, communication, warehousing, security and fire fighting facilities are deficient and wayside amenities are absent in many of the land ports. Due to lack of adequate parking areas for trucks, vehicles are parked on the road creating acute congestion. At most of the border points, there is only one exit route for both passengers and goods. All these problems need to be addressed properly to facilitate smooth movement across the border.

How to move forward?

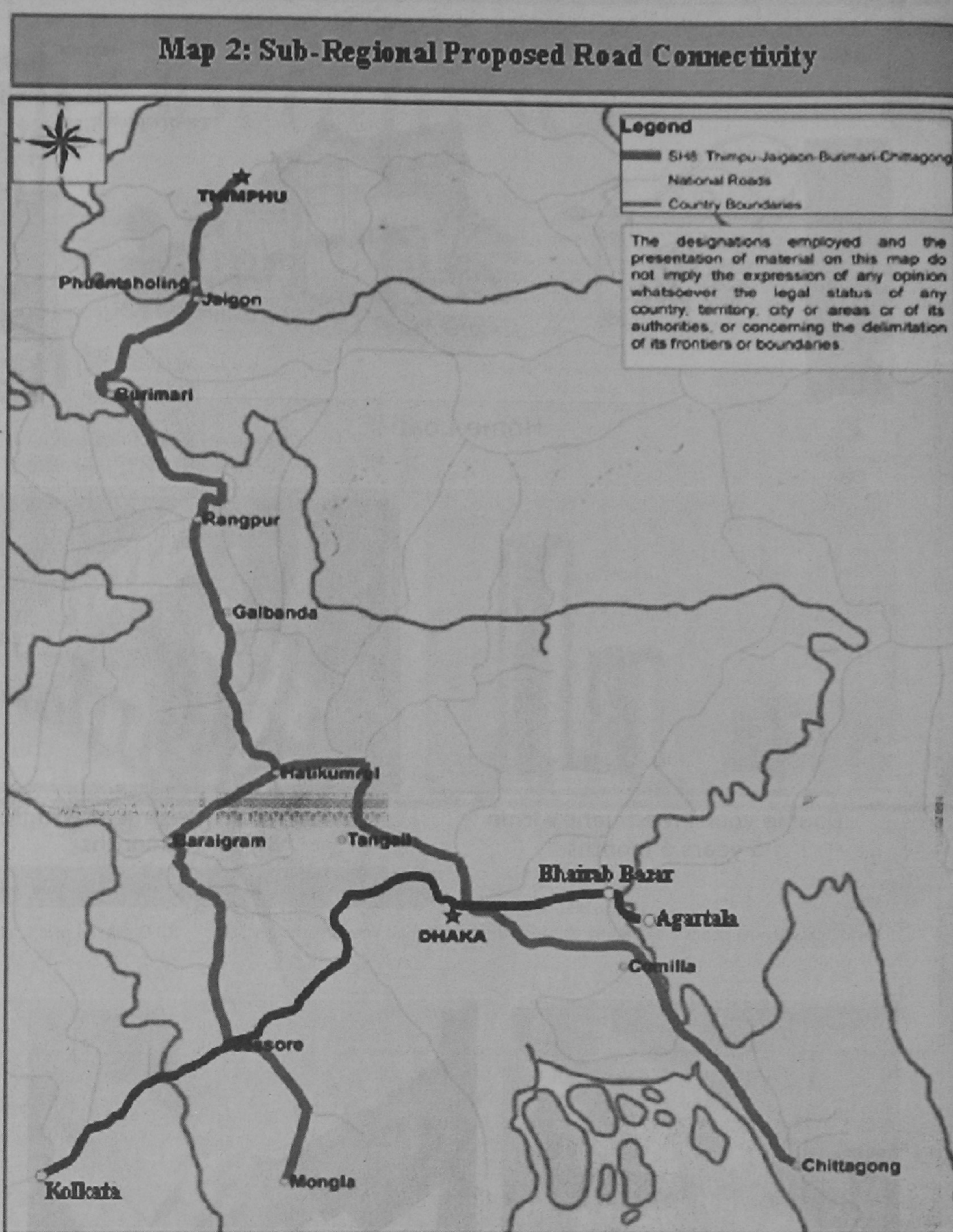
In order to establish effective regional transport connectivity among the countries of North Eastern sub-region of South Asia, the following initiatives could be pursued to make headway.

Mobilisation of political support

To establish effective regional transport connectivity, political support is a must. In order to mobilise such a support, it is essential to ascertain the real dimensions of the political constraints and types of reservations. To this end, dialogues could be organised in each of the North Eastern sub-regional countries of South Asian, involving the entire civil society to find the real scope and depth of the political reservations, so that some solutions acceptable to the politicians could be found. Representatives of the Government Intelligence Agencies need to be involved in the dialogues to ascertain if there is any security issue that needs to be addressed. Civil Society Institutions in each of the countries involved, need to take initiative to set the ball rolling.

Various issues need to be addressed together

Earlier consultations with some of the



SAARC member countries revealed that problems related to regional transport connectivity cannot be resolved in isolation. This need to be looked into together with other outstanding problems in trade, environment, water sharing, border disputes, international maritime boundary settlements, etc. Strong political commitments of the countries concerned are needed to address together, these diversified problems to find a long lasting solution.

Misunderstanding about "Transit and Security Issues" to be removed

"Transit" is a sensitive word in Bangladesh. Some people feel that if transit is given to India, it might create security problem for Bangladesh. In this context, it may be noted that Bangladesh had already given transit to India since 1972, under an Inland Water Transport (IWT) Protocol. Under that protocol, bilateral and transit traffic had been moving from North East India to Kolkata through two IWT routes across Bangladesh.

Similarly, India has also given transit to Bangladesh. While allowing Nepal's bilateral trade with Bangladesh to move by road through Phulbari/Banglabandha, India had to allow transit to this traffic across the chicken neck. So, there is no reason as to why one should be so sensitive to the word "transit"?

In the context of "security" concern

linked to "transit", it is important to spell out as to what security issue is being talked about? Did Bangladesh ever face any security problem with the IWT transit given to India? The answer is "no". Similarly, has India ever faced any security problem in the Nepal-Bangladesh transit corridor? Again, the answer is "no". If one looks at other regional groups, say European Community or to ASEAN sub-region, it is found that traffic is moving over land, across that regions/sub-regions without any security problem. Thus, Bangladesh need not be so concerned about "security" linked with "transit"?

Awareness creation needed about the cost of non-cooperation

A process of awareness creation through dialogues, about the mutual benefit of regional transport connectivity, or cost of non-cooperation, based on a study could go a long way in persuading the political leadership about the importance of transport connectivity. This study could focus on a number of selected corridors/routes. Estimate of benefit should be based on potential traffic/trade that could be generated once the selected routes are available to regional traffic movement.

Integration would need nominal resources only

The neighbouring countries around Bangladesh, given their physical and

cultural proximity and shared history and heritage, form a natural area for transport integration. Most of these countries once formed part of an integrated economy, and their transport system was fully integrated, but they probably constitute one of the less "internally connected" sub-regions in the world today. The integration of transport networks would, therefore, largely involve a reintegration of existing infrastructures, requiring minimum commitment of additional economic resources.

Need to involve people at large

In order to achieve a long lasting solution, it is essential that concerted efforts be made together by all stakeholders: the governments, the private sector and the civil society at large to bring about a change in the political mind set of the leaders, so that a long lasting solution can emerge. The Civil Society Institutions in the member countries could be urged to take the initiative to bring the above players together. Unless this challenge of integration is addressed soon with seriousness by all stakeholders, the countries of South Asia in general, and the land-locked countries/regions in particular, stand the risk of foregoing many of the economic opportunities that the process of globalisation could have provided.

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