

# Regional Connectivity through Banglabandha Port: Opportunities and Challenges for Bangladesh

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Bangladesh should focus on trade-related activities for its sustainable economic development rather than remittance earnings. All kinds of connectivity play a significant role in establishing bilateral relations, improving trade, and creating economic opportunities. This paper discusses the benefits of land connectivity among Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Bhutan through the Banglabandha port.

**Methodology:** The study sample size was 46, among which 15 were exporters, 15 were importers, 15 were clearing and forwarding agents, and one from the port authority. Separate questionnaires collected primary data, and researchers interviewed the respondents to get the actual scenario of the Banglabandha port. Secondary sources are used to understand the opportunities and challenges that lie in border connectivity with its vicinity regions.

**Findings:** Banglabandha port is one of the strategic ports of Bangladesh, which connects India, Nepal, and Bhutan in a very short distance. Since the emergence of the port in 2014, trade has been increased among the countries through the Banglabandha port. All neighboring countries can gain from the development of the intra-network by using the port, and it will contribute to the improvement of the living standard for all. Bangladesh can benefit from transit facilities and increased business scope.

**Limitations:** This paper includes a small number of respondents which should not be the case. However, somebody can extend future research with respondents from each country (India, Nepal, and Bhutan).

**Practical Implications:** This paper might help the countries' authority to understand the value of the Banglabandha port for all.

**Originality:** There are available research publications on overall connectivity among Bangladesh's neighboring countries but not on Banglabandha Port. This paper might motivate governments to investigate the opportunities that Banglabandha has to offer.

## 1. Introduction

Land connectivity is considered as a door for the promotion of trade and commerce in International Trade. The regional position is considered a crucial factor that contributes to the exploration of international trade. Banglabandha port is popularly known as the Northern Gateway of Bangladesh situated in Panchagarh district with a border of West Bengal of India. This place's importance increased since it is very close to Nepal and Bhutan (Emelyanov, 2019). The exploration of the regional market is fundamental for international trade development as proximity reduces transportation costs. Banglabandha port might turn as the hub for international trade in the region by connecting them (Sargsyan & Matevosyan, 2018).

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Considering the inter-regional trade issues, the analysis of the opportunities and challenges for the Banglabandha land port can help develop the policy and understand the business, influencing countries' trade and social and cultural development. To ensure the effective use of natural resources and other capital, the analysis of the offers counties and challenges Banglabandha port offers can create a new dimension for international trade. It can influence the socio-economic functions in the countries. So, the place might turn highly significant for changing the north region of Bangladesh's economic conditions and the other countries' border areas.

International trade has increased the utility of products and services. It ensures the supply of the demand across the world where the supply is not available, and thus the system has increased the understanding and interrelationship among the countries (Koch & Martinez, 2019). For the development and smooth operations of international trade, it is necessary to have different transportation modes. Those facilities made it possible to conduct global trade with other countries; thus, international business became flourished over time.

Balanced growth throughout the country is crucial for sustainable economic development. International trade ensures balanced growth (Popova, Sizova, & Filatova, 2020). Banglabandha land port will increase the global trade volume with the neighboring countries. The neighboring country's communication facility will be expanded by the Banglabandha port, contributing to promoting trade and commerce among the border regions (Kumar, 2019).

The port is situated in Panchagarh. It connects India, Nepal, and Bhutan. This port would become one of the most convenient ways for trade and tourism gateway among the countries as immigration service seekers get done all the formalities within a minimum amount of time. The service is hassle-free at the Banglabandha port (Kumar & Jain, 2011). People will be able to travel its vicinity regions with less time through Banglabandha port. So, It will attract more tourists. In the bigger picture, this land port might turn into the hub for international trade among India, Nepal, Bhutan, China, and Russia. This port can reduce the rate of trade deficit among the nations. Using the Banglabandha land port, people can travel to New Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Chennai, and Kolkata (Sazzad & Shaon, 2018). Due to the physical closeness, the port will benefit all countries' tourism and trade, developing a strong market structure. It will reduce unemployment in the North Bengal of Bangladesh (Jantoń-Drozdowska & Majewska, 2016).

Improvement in international trade depends on diverse factors where the location, relation with neighbor countries, and diplomatic ties play significant roles. This paper explores the trade opportunities that arise among the Bangladesh-India-Nepal-Bhutan through Banglabandha port. This article aims to determine the opportunities and challenges of land connectivity with India, Nepal, and Bhutan through Banglabandha Port. Connectivity among Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Bhutan through Banglabandha port will be a win-win situation for all, but this paper will only highlight Bangladesh's benefits. The port will be the door for the economic development of the north region of Bangladesh. It will solve the financial gap between the north area of Bangladesh and other areas. Making this port a transport hub will benefit all concerned parties. From a strategic point of view, Banglabandha port is vital to enhance regional trade.

## **2. Banglabandha Port: A Strategic Centre for International Trade**

International trade is one of the fundamental requirements for ensuring balanced growth and development in a country. Among four modes of transportation such as air, land, sea, and railways, International trade transportation cost is lower in inland and ocean transportation than in Airways transportation (Popova, Sizova, & Filatova, 2020). The Banglabandha land port in Panchagarh could become a convenient trade and tourism gateway for India, Nepal, and Bhutan. Around a hundred Bangladeshis per day are currently using Banglabandha land port to go to India. Most of the people are adjacent people who are from north-western districts. The purpose of their visit is medical treatment in most cases. From the Indian side, around thirty people per day are using this port, and most of the people come to visit their relatives who are living in the vicinity regions of Bangladesh. However, local people think that this port could attract more tourism and trade than other borders such as the Benapole-Petrapole border (Sazzad & Shaon, 2018). Benapole-Petrapole border point is the essential land port for the overland trade between India -Bangladesh. Around 70% to 80% of bilateral trade passes through Benapole-Petrapole border (Banglabandha Port, 2011).

The mechanism for the import and export process of goods at Banglabandha port started in 1997, and full trade services began in January 2011. The immigration service is new, and service seekers get formalities done in a minimum amount of time, but many are uninformed about these hassle-free immigration services. Service seekers said that dollar endorsement and money exchange services are not available and from the borderline, passengers must carry their luggage for two hundred yards. Aside from the capital Dhaka, no bus goes directly to the borderline (Kumar & Jain, 2011). From Tetulia, passengers must take a bus to the Banglabandha bus stand, and then a battery-run auto-rickshaw to the check post. On the way back, they must take a three-kilometer ride, by auto rickshaw, to the Banglabandha bus stand. From the check post area to the bus stand, one needs a mask as local stone crushers, on both sides of the road, create dust (Oh, 2010). Several trucks carrying stones also keep the road busy or sometimes blocked. Few mobile phone operators have a strong network available at the borderline.

The recent initiatives on an integrated trade development program in South East Asia by the South Asia Sub-regional Economic Cooperation's (SASEC) add the speed for promoting the inter-regional trade. The program's objectives are to enhance the nations' multilateral reciprocal relations to increase trade and commerce. The program will support the development of the infrastructure and favorable environment for the industrialization and trade policy development in the regime. Through the program, Bangladesh has received around \$150 million for infrastructural development to ensure the communication sector's sustainable development, supporting improving the countries' inter-relations. The communication facility will further contribute to promoting trade and commerce, ultimately contributing to the border region's economic growth (Kumar, 2019). According to the experts, it will take around \$5 billion to complete the South Asia project, which will set the premises for industrialization, ultimately contributing to the more comprehensive cross-border trade with India, Nepal, and Bhutan. The development of the inter-regional trade facilities will improve the trust and social relations with neighboring countries as the current trade is not a matter of border; instead, it is a matter of outlook of the country. The government of Bangladesh is working on upgrading the Dhaka to Rangpur highway to reduce the congestions in Banglabandha and Burimari. Currently, around 300 hundred trucks are being handled by the authority daily, from India, Nepal, and Bhutan. According to the ADB financial analysis, the internal rate of return on economic activities can be possible with the improved road networks by as high as 18.4%. According to the statement, annual traffic growth on the road will be 6.9% for goods transportation and 6.4% for the passenger's movement (Azad, 2019).

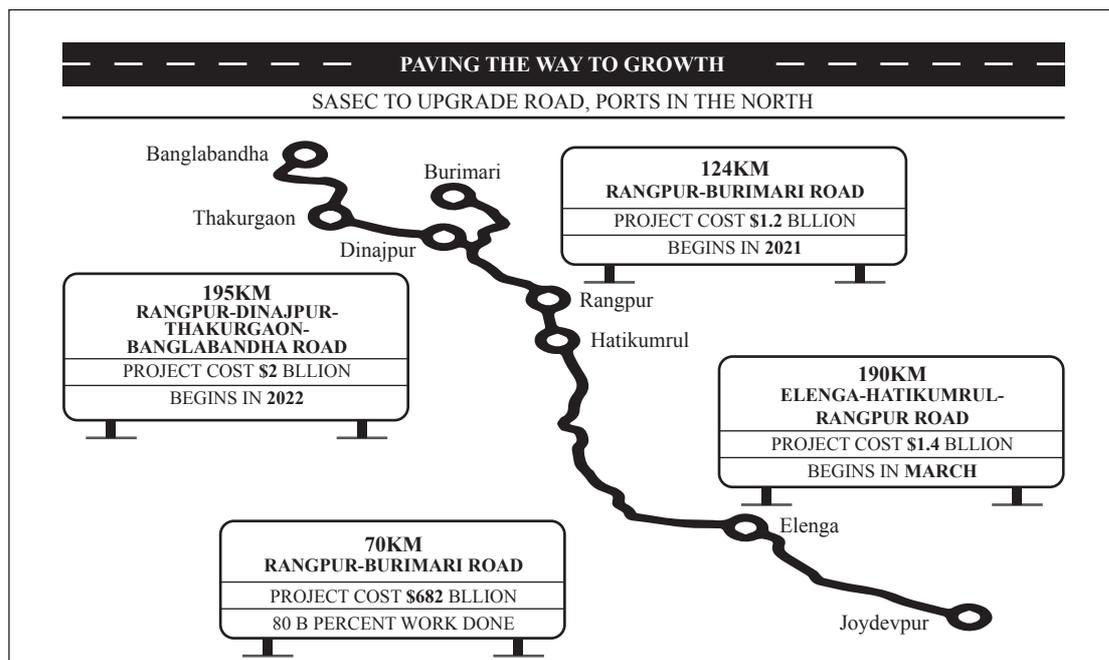


Figure 1. SASEC project for upgrading the port. Source: (Azad, 2019).

## 2.1 Strategic Location

Banglabandha is the Northan Gateway of Bangladesh, and the area is connected with the province of West Bengal of India. The region might turn into the hub of international trade among India, Nepal, Bhutan, China and Russia. This land port connection among the countries can reduce the trade deficit rate among the countries. The port is situated at the tip of north-western Bangladesh. The coordinate is 26°37'46"N 88°24'45"E. This port is 57 km away to the north of the Panchagarh town and 7 km away from Siliguri and Jalpaiguri. Darjeeling city is 58 km away to the north from Panchagarh. Kakarbhitta (India and Nepal border point used for the third parties) is 61 km away, and the India-Bhutan border is 68 km away from the Indo-Bangladesh boundary near which Banglabandha stands (Sazzad & Shaon, 2018).



**Figure 2.** Strategic location of Banglabandha port. Source: Asia Map [Banglabandha port marked by Authors].

The border crossing was meant to reduce the amount of time it took to travel from Rangpur and Dinajpur to Jalpaiguri, Cooch Bihar, Darjeeling, and districts of northern West Bengal as well as Sikkim and Assam. Banglabandha port is near Siliguri, and it can be considered the Gateway to the North East of India, Nepal, and Bhutan. From Banglabandha, India's Siliguri is only eight kilometers away, Jalpaiguri 10km, Darjeeling 58km, Nepal's Kakarbhitta 58km, Bhutan's border 130km, and China's Nathula is 200km away. Banglabandha as a gateway to those countries was meant to lower the tour costs, but that is not happening. Still, this land port is failing to attract tourists. Tourists who want to travel to Kolkata, Chennai, New Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore, can also use the Banglabandha land port. Connections to Siliguri's airport are also developed and equipped with modern facilities. Bagdogra Airport in Darjeeling district which is nine kilometers west of Siliguri is also a gateway to Kurseong and Kalimpong's hill stations and other portions of the North Bengal region of Sikkim. Every year thousands of tourists use the airport. It has flights to Delhi, Kolkata, Guwahati, Bengaluru, Chennai, Mumbai, Ranchi, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Bangkok, Paro, and Imphal. It has helicopter flights to Sikkim's capital Gangtok. The people of this area said, "Brokers are everywhere there. We needed to give bribes both to the Bangladesh and India sides and took half a day to complete formalities. This immigration post takes only one or two hours," (Sazzad & Shaon, 2018).

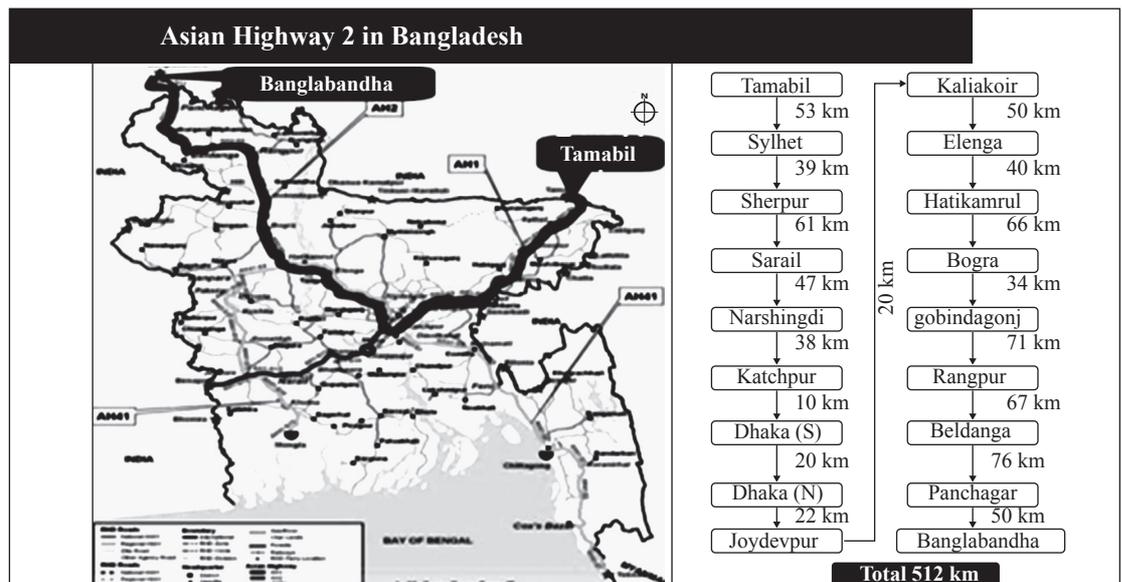


Figure 3. Asian Highway project in the North region of Bangladesh. Source: <https://bit.ly/3nVOiWF>

Bangladesh signed the agreement on implating the Giant project on building and increasing the bilateral trade about Asian Highway among the member countries in the area. The government is implementing the project where the north region of the country falls on Asian Highway 2 projects (Harada & Watanave, 2010). The road will connect the West Bengal area and Kakarbari of Nepal through the road 2 area. The road’s development considers the future needs of 4 lane facilities. The route will connect the other place as the whole country connected through Asian high way 1 and Asian high way 41 supporting building an integrated network through the entire country and the other countries.

There is a domestic airport in Thakurgoan in the Rangpur division, the nearest airbase from the Banglabandha port. But the operations of the airport are not active, so the people and trade with other countries are made using the Syedpur airport, an operational airport for the north region of the country (Portel, 2019). There are much more opportunities for the business community and people to trade domestically and internationally. The domestic area to the international sector, Banglabandha port, might turn as the hub for international business as seven sisters in India can transfer the goods. This airport can be used for international trade with Nepal, Bhutan, China, Russia, and European countries, mostly trading agricultural goods. From the area, Bangladesh’s authority has started to upgrade the facilities by improving the runway by 1800 meters to 3600 meters long to conduct business activities with India and Nepal (Septiant, 2020). The authority has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with those countries, and this airport will connect the Bhadrapur and Biratnagar with Saidpur airport. From Saidpur, it will take 20 minutes to move to those two border cities. The distance from Saidpur to Banglabandha is 144 km, and this is the major inland port in the northern region. Those three countries are separated by 52 km of Indian Territory known as the Siliguri Corridor. The products and services can be transported from Saidpur to other areas by increasing the vertical and horizontal links.

### 2.2 Economic Opportunities and Challenges

However, export-import through the Banglabandha land port has gone well since its inauguration. Importers can bring in most importable goods; except potato and thread from Nepal and Bhutan as well as stone, timber, and fruit from India (Witze, 2011). Bangladesh can export all exportable goods to those countries. According to the Bangladesh Land Port Authority, in the 2016-2017 fiscal year, Banglabandha port earned TK 19.37 crore revenue. In that year, 600,656 metric tons of goods were imported through the port while 7,051 metric tons were exported (Dey, 2014). The less efficient mechanism and corruption in the process have made the port less efficient. The countries did not become successful in taking advantage of the area instead of having a very short distance (Philippon, 2015). The international trade policy with the neighboring countries should improve locational

advantages as they are not far from each other. The development of the infrastructure facility and export-import process will enhance the trade relations with those countries. For the locational advantages, the port can benefit tourism and trade, which eventually will contribute to the development of the market structure and lifestyle. Since the culture, attitude, and social network are similar to those in neighboring countries; it can also impact the reduction of the unemployment rate in the region, especially in the North Bengal of Bangladesh (Jantón-Drozdowska & Majewska, 2016).

The Banglabandha land port serves as a gateway to Bangladesh's northern part. Its function is to facilitate trade and tourism between Bangladesh and its three neighboring countries: Bhutan, India, and Nepal (Dey, 2014). Currently, this port is used for dealing with Nepal and India. Major import items through this port are stone boulders, rice, wheat, maize, apple, grapes, and ginger from India; and lentils, wheat bran, chirata, hajmola tablet, and ritha from Nepal. Bangladeshi products are exported to Nepal mainly through this port. Major export items are fresh potato, battery, cotton knitted fabrics, jute waste cotton, food products, plastic and melamine goods, medicine, soft drinks, tissue paper, fabrics, and raw jute (Thakur, Paudel, Gauchan, & Shrestha, 2014). The export of the varieties product can also capture the market, which will further contribute to the development of the agriculture and industrial sector. Banglabandha port can be the door to the economic development of the North region of Bangladesh. As we know, this region is lag behind in effect compared to the other area, Banglabandha port can be the best solution for solving this economic gap (Rakhmangulov & Muravev, 2016). Some of the opportunities that might arise for Bangladesh from Banglabandha port are:

- i. Bangladesh has a large trade deficit with India. This port can help Bangladesh reduce the trade deficit by providing transit facilities and taking the benefits of becoming a transport hub. It will be a win-win situation for all (Rahmatullah, 2009).
- ii. Bangladesh can import raw materials and export finished products, which would be cheaper due to India, Bhutan, and Nepal's physical closeness.
- iii. In Nepal and Bhutan, Bangladesh will increase its market share for food items, electronic products, and RMG products.
- iv. More trade will occur in fresh potato, battery, cotton knitted fabrics, Jute waste cotton, food products, plastic and melamine goods, medicine, soft drinks, tissue paper, textiles, and raw jute.
- v. Import raw materials and export finished products at a cheaper cost due to the physical proximity;
- vi. It could generate more employment opportunities for Bangladeshi people.
- vii. The development of this port could lead to the development of the transport sector in Bangladesh (Selim, 2012).
- viii. Recently, Bangladesh-India has taken initiatives to introduce railroad through Banglabandha port. The railroad should be the prime transportation mode with India and other countries. Rail connectivity is cheaper, and it will be the most beneficial for Bangladesh. The Bangladesh railway can have a sizeable profitable market which will help this moribund organization revive again (Murshid, 2011).

There are 26 distinct steps involved in the import process from arrival to release of the good and exit from the Banglabandha Land Port. Export processing involves 21 different steps involved from loading to unloading the products at Land Port to its final release and subsequent export and border crossing (Dey, 2014). Currently, import formalities take 6 hours 34 minutes, and export formalities take 1 hour 45 minutes on the Bangladesh side.

Banglabandha LCS is not yet connected to the ASYCUDA system and all the customs clearance procedures are managed here manually. The risk management system's presence is not so strong in the port. The post-clearing audit mechanism network is also not useful for conducting business activities. All bills of entries and bills of exports are subjected to check with a full documentary by the customs and border authority. They may disclose secret information, and sometimes they do it. So, the business process is losing the competition. The risk-based management approach is hampering the regular trade at the border since the authority is taking too much to delay

the imports and exports. Except for BGB and Police, no other border agency officials wear a uniform. It creates difficulty in identifying among border management personnel, the general public, C&F agents, and Traders (Dey, 2014). Lack of coordination between Customs and other border agencies in conducting inspections of import consignments sometimes lengthen the release procedures. The practical solutions for those problems and strategies for different steps of the process can increase trade volume (Youssef, Ayres, & Sweller, 2012).

Bangladesh's revenue board has opened three more LC stations using Indian Territory for trading with Nepal and Bhutan on December 1, 2019. The LCs stations will support increasing the trading facilities by the area where the Banglabandha port is the critical point for exporting and importing the goods. According to the SRO, the business organizations are permitted to import all kinds of goods except potato and yarn produced and processed in Bhutan and Nepal through the LCs stations from Nepal and Bhutan. Bangladesh can export all types of products from Bangladesh. Currently, Bangladesh operates 184 LCs stations for international trade with neighboring countries, and it has 24 land port that supports transferring the goods. Some of the challenges of Banglabandha port are:

- i. People working at the port are less efficient.
- ii. There is a lack of standardization of documents and implementation of modern customs procedures at the port, which creates some delays with the preparation of customs documents and inspections.
- iii. The use of a manual operational system also creates a delay in completing the formalities.
- iv. Customs formalities take more time, and more charges imposed at the port.
- v. Banglabandha port doesn't connect ASYCUDA facilities, delaying preparing customs documents and inspections.
- vi. Indian port authority has created some unofficial trade barriers.
- vii. Non-cooperation between the authorities of the countries though trade is win-win for all.
- viii. The transport network between India and Bangladesh is still fragmented for historical, political, and economic reasons. As a result, both countries failed to get the maximum benefits of this port. Both parties know how many economic benefits could arise from this port. However, an absence of integration and continued non-cooperation in transport are still creating barriers for reaping the port results (Rahmatullah, 2010).
- ix. National security concerns among the countries must address to increase the port's activities. Many Bangladeshi people think that more liberal port activities will hamper Bangladesh's national security. Some national security analysts show concern that more port activities engagement could spur arms and drug trafficking through Bangladesh territory (Selim, 2012).
- x. Without improving the road infrastructure, trade promotion might not be workable. Bangladesh should work on its road infrastructure before taking initiatives for increasing trade-related activities; otherwise, the internal road system might collapse (Gupta, 2013).

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 Data Collection and Sample**

This research is qualitative. The research sample includes four stakeholders of the Banglabandha port: (1) Port Authority, (2) Exporters, (3) Importers, and (4) Clearing and Forwarding (C & F) Agents. The authors applied a non-probability sampling method for collecting data and considered the respondents' age and experience. Researchers contacted the respondents at their office premises to collect survey responses and attend a direct interview with them. The total sample size was 46 (forty-six) among which 15 (fifteen) were exporters, 15 (fifteen) were importers, 15 (fifteen) were clearing and forwarding agents, and 1 (one) from the port authority. The secondary sources used for getting more detailed recent updated information on Banglabandha Port.

### 3.2 Measures

The study questionnaire was translated into the native language of Bangladesh-Bangla. To avoid confusion and understanding of the questionnaire and get the maximum level of information, researchers have contacted the respondents twice. In the first meet-up, researchers have discussed the questionnaire and interview questions with the respondents. In the second and final meet-up, researchers have collected questionnaire data and conducted an interview session to get the port's actual scenario.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

There are available research publications on overall connectivity among Bangladesh's neighboring countries but not on Banglabandha Port. The nature of this research is exploratory. There was not much quantitative information available on Banglabandha port; instead, most of the data was based on the respondents' subjective evaluation of the situations. Researchers have used descriptive statistics in some quantitative information wherever possible. There was not enough data on Banglabandha port as it has yet to explore the countries' opportunities. The secondary information was collected from newspapers, journals, magazines, and other publications.

## 4. Survey and Interview Outcomes

### 4.1 Findings from Banglabandha Port Authority

The door of the north Bengal of Bangladesh is Banglabandha port as the port's location has connected 3 (three) neighboring countries. Conducting trade and service activities via Banglabandha port with these three countries will be more cost-effective and will take less time (Debnath, 2016). This port has the highest chances of accomplishing trade with those countries, and it can be the hub for increasing trade and services with India, China, Bhutan, and Nepal, and the European countries. The authority of government has inaugurated the commercial operation through the port by the Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) basis by the time. The time for the contract is 25 years.

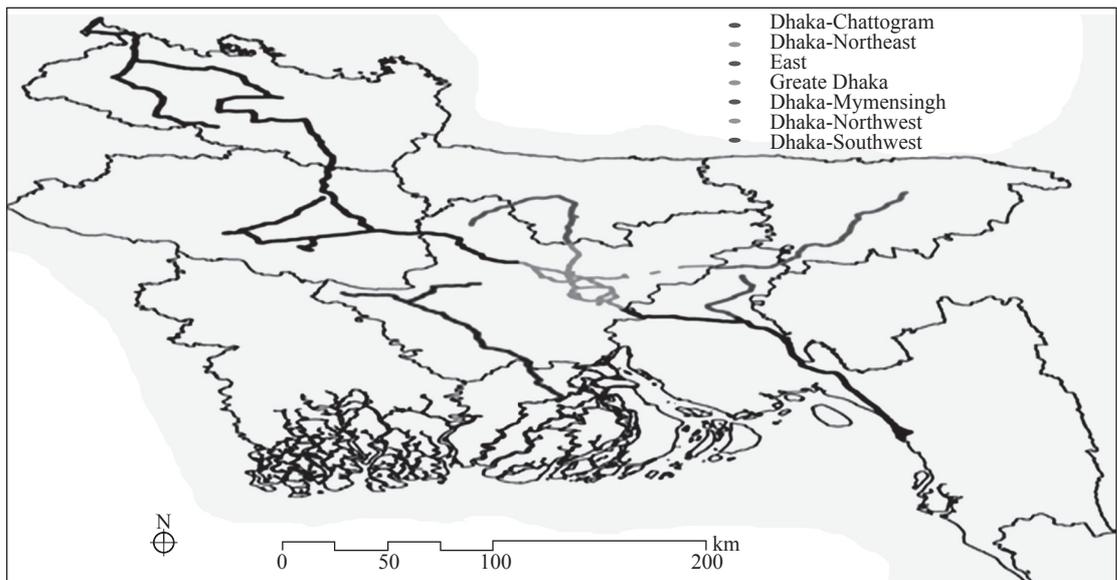
Bangladesh side: Tetulia, Panchagarh. Indian side: Fulbari, Jalpaiguri, West Bengal, India, the port operated as the Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) named Banglabandha Land Port Ltd. The port gets government recognition by 12/01/2002, and it signed off with the operator on October 9, 2005. The partial commercial operation start date is January 22, 2011, and the full commercial operations start on January 01, 2014 (<http://www.bsbk.gov.bd/>).



Figure 4. The strategic location of the port. Source: world map [Banglabandha port marked by Authors].

The government receives the operator's royalty: the fixed rate is 5 lakh from the 1st anniversary of COD and a variable rate on the gross revenue income by 31.26%. The port's storage capacity is 500MT and the total land area is 10.4822 acres. The port has different infrastructural facilities including Warehouse-2, Open stack yard-1, truck terminal-1, weighbridge scale-2, standby power generator, lighting, administrative building, dormitory building, Barrack house, security post, boundary wall, and the transshipment shed-1 which is under construction. In the port, the port's handling capacity is 0.5 mln MT (manual-yearly) principal import and the items of imported goods are lentil, wheat, onion, and fruits, etc. The export items are jute, glass sheet, medicine, food products, etc. In recent times, two countries signed the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP). The loaded trucks of countries can unload the goods by crossing the zero line. The port is operated by human resources controlling the port's whole mechanism (<http://www.bsbk.gov.bd/>).

Although the land port connects with the remote area, it is associated with the GPS on truck movements. The World Bank analysis shows that the internal and external linking processes are combined with different neighboring countries. GPS tracking facilities support easy transport. The Banglabandha port is connected with two seaports via a GPS mechanism (Uhlemann, 2016). This opportunity can establish communication among Bangladesh's seaports, including Mongla seaport and Chattogram seaport for contributing to the trade facilities. The below picture shows that the Asian High way 2 connects the national roads all over Bangladesh. Trade facilitation possible through the network while developing the trading mechanism from the north region of Bangladesh (E-Elahi, 2015).



**Figure 5.** The road of Bangladesh connected by the GPS facilities in Bangladesh. Source: (Rahmatullah, 2009).

Although the existing network is enough to conduct the business activities in the area, but not enough for the business's development according to the expectations, the logistic cost in Bangladesh is comparatively high in the maximum sector ranging from 4.5 percent of sales (for leather footwear) to 47.9 percent of sales (horticulture). Business organizations need to spend a high logistic cost in the inventory transportation carrying in a different transportation mode. The road transportation rate in Bangladesh ranges from \$0.06 for a 16-ton truck to \$0.12 for a trailer. They are higher than many other developing and developed countries (Rahmatullah, 2009). According to the current condition, the transportation system in whole countries is considered as congested, unreliable, and unsophisticated, and it charges a high cost for the transportations of goods. The distribution channel also not useful to ensure the growth of the sector. The country is experiencing challenges including poor management of logistic facilities, higher freight cost, inadequate public, and private logistics support, poor management of transportation infrastructure, and local and international barriers to the logistic services (Ducret, 2014). These challenges are demotivating the importers and exporters to involve in trade.

'One Belt, One Road (OBOR) is an initiative for connecting the Euroasian economy, and its economic integration from the perspective of proposed BCIM-EC (Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar Economic Corridor). This

project shall try to connect the land-locked area of china with eastern India and the Bay of Bengal through Myanmar and Bangladesh. In May 2013, BCIM-EC was yoked to another connectivity initiative CPEC (China Pakistan Economic Corridor). The two encompassed president Xi Jinping's grand vision for a new overland and maritime Silk Road (Uberoi, 2016). Among those three initiatives, India has endorsed the BCIM-EC and rejected the CPEC, and maintained silence on the OBOR initiative.

From the above initiatives by the neighboring countries, Bangladesh can access the facilities from China, India, Pakistan, and European countries through the road transportations mode using Banglabandha port. This port's strategic location can provide Bangladesh with the opportunity to work as a third party in the CPEC and BCIM-EC (Asif, Rehman, Zheng, & Shah, 2019). The below picture shows that Banglabandha port can work as a hub for ensuring the supply chain of products among neighboring countries like India and China. According to the plan, the marine route directly connects to conduct business activities.



Figure 6. Proposed one belt, one road initiative. Source: (Fuad, 2017)

The organization operated as a private port operator named Banglabandha Land Port Limited from commercial operation date (COD). The port handled the private authority concession agreement, and the contract was made for 25 years on a BOT basis. The government authority is getting the commission by 31.25% of total income by the private and public partnership process. Although the port started the operation by the initial period of the 21st century, the port started its operation by 01.01.2014. The trade with the neighboring countries began with India on 22/0/1/2011, with Bhutan on 01/01/17, and Nepal on 01/09/97.

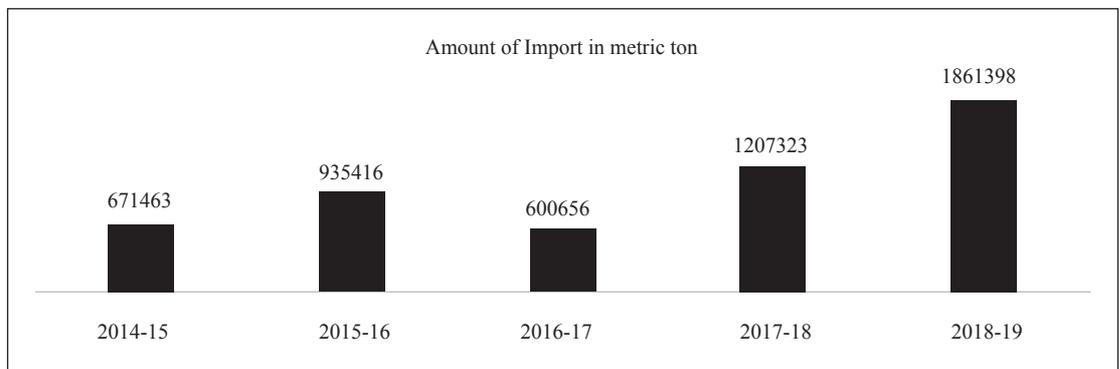


Figure 7. The goods imported by the business organization in the year 2014-19. Source: Survey data.

After finishing the commercial operations date, the authority started to promote the trading facility—the port used for importing the goods from India, Nepal, and Bhutan. The importers import 95% stones and block from India, and they also import fruits and rice. The graph indicates that the quantity of imported goods is increasing day by day. The trend is moving upward. The data shows that the number of imported goods increased further due to the lower transportation cost and a more straightforward process. Both the government have understood that the trade through Banglabandha port is beneficial for all.

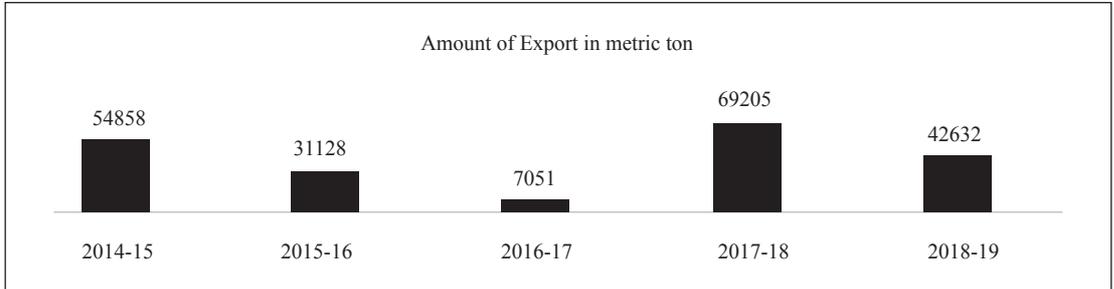


Figure 8. The amount of exported goods through the port from 2014- 2019. Source: Survey data.

The port is located in the northern region of Bangladesh and the area is rich with agricultural goods and the small and cottage industry. The recent trend about exporting industrial goods has increased. The import and export ratio is very high, although the current trend shows that exporting goods through the port is expanding, it is fluctuating. Although it has extensive facilities and is very close to transferring the goods to the neighboring country, the outcome is still unsatisfactory. The main problem behind the slow growth of export is the miss management of trade relationships. Indian port authority has created some unofficial trade barriers resulting in lower export volume. Bangladesh's side is keeping its promises to the other countries.

On the other hand, India is showing non-cooperation. Hence, the trade deficit is not shrinking. Political co-operation between the countries at the Banglabandha port will reduce the trade deficit.

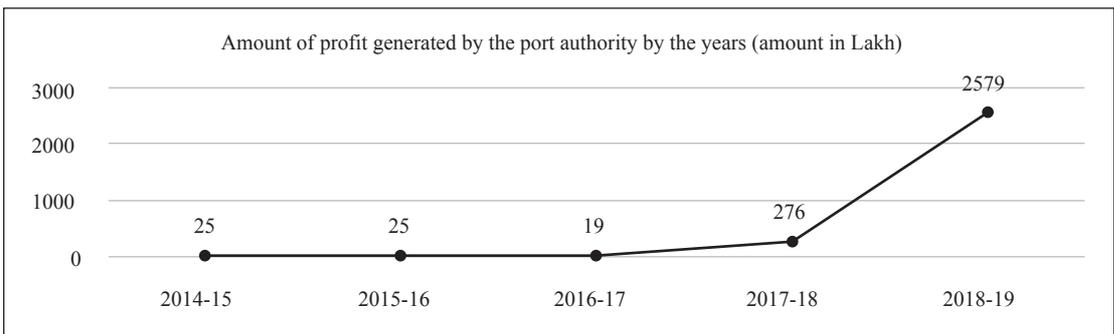
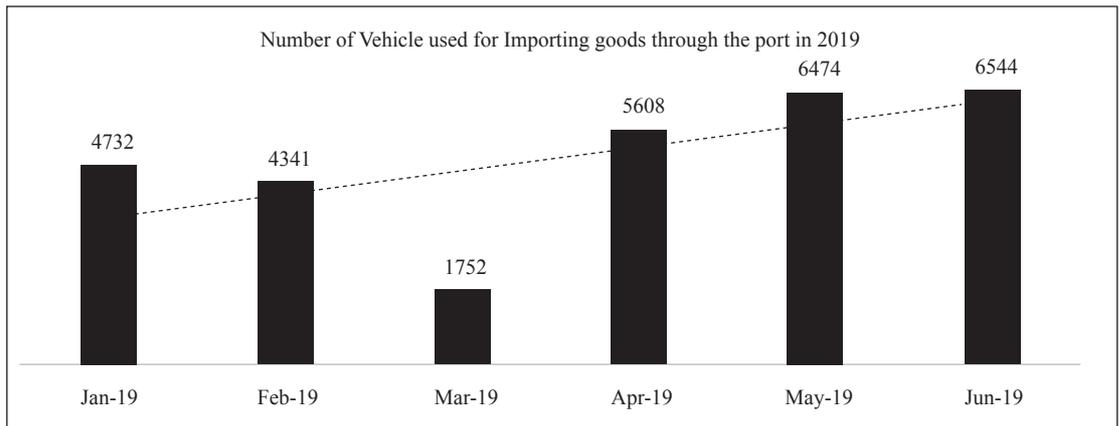
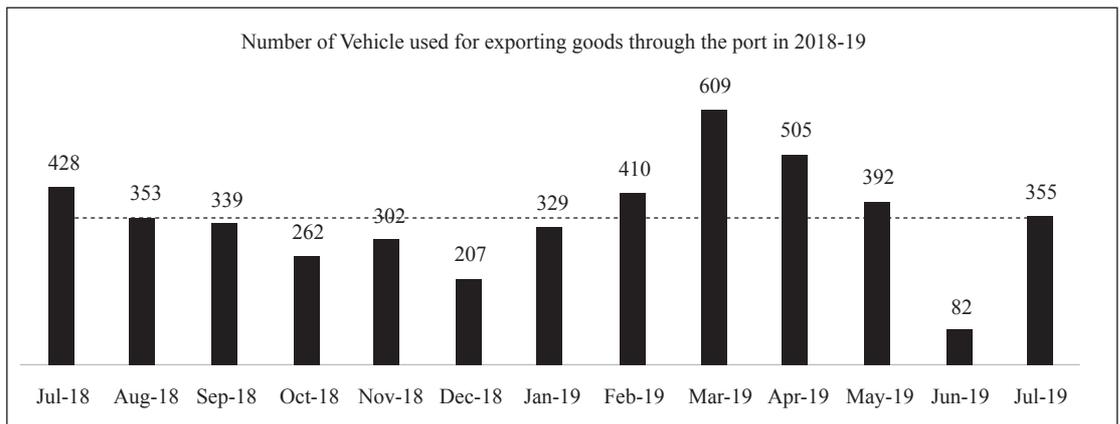


Figure 9: Profit ratio from the year 2014-2019. Source: Survey data.

The port earned Tk. 2576 lakh in 2018-2019 where the profit for the initial year 2014-2015 was only Tk. 25 lakh. In 2014-2015, the profit earning was insufficient due to some internal problems and systematic complexity in the port. After developing the digital communication system and solving labor issues, the payoff increased from two digits to four digits. The port workforce is less efficient, and the port management runs by manual operating systems. The introduction of the software-based recording system and training and development to staff will increase the port's profitability.



**Figure 10.** The number of vehicles used for transporting imported goods by the port. Source: Survey data.



**Figure 11.** The vehicle used for exporting the goods through the port in 2018-19. Source: Survey data

The trading volume through Banglabandha port increases daily as the facilities increase to promote trade among the countries. The number of the vehicle using for export is not rising. On the other hand, the number of vehicles used for import increases. The exporting vehicle is not growing; instead, the trend is continuously going around the same number. The port authority needs to increase the collaboration and port facilities to accelerate export growth.

The port authority stated that Banglabandha port has a vast opportunity to promote trade among the countries and the communication system is very strong. It needs some incentives for further acceleration. In the initial period, the port failed to solve the internal issues and the infrastructural problem where the current situation is different said the authority. The main issues they are facing now are environmental issues and the assistance of the Indian administration. The Indian administration is not cooperating to accomplish the work on time; instead, they create complexity for demotivating the trade with them and other countries (Lozano, Fobbe, Carpenter, & Sammalisto, 2018). Indian authority sometimes charges more cost for discouraging trade. The administration suggests that the port income may rise to the highest position if the government takes more bold diplomatic actions with India by considering the win-win situations.

#### 4.2 Findings from Exporters who are using Banglabandha Port

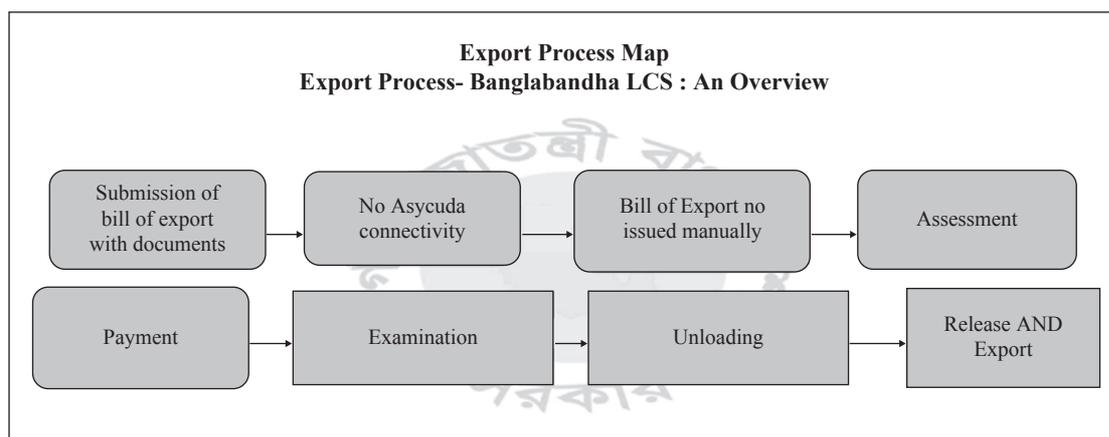
From 1986-1987, Bangladesh's export earning is more than a billion-dollar, and it achieved two-digit billion dollar export earnings in 2005-2006, and the growth is continuing.

Major Import Items	Major Export Items	Financial Year	Import Revenue (in Million Taka)	Export Value (in Million US Dollar)
Dabur Chyawanprash	Fresh Potato	2010-11	39.3	21.8
Hajmola	Jhoot Waste Cotton	2011-12	76.7	18.2
Chirata	Soft drinks	2012-13	138.2	29.4
RedWhole Lentils	Battery	2013-14	233.5	21.2
Wheat Bran		2014-15	367.6	26.8
Retha				

**Figure 12.** Total Revenue earned through the port. Source: Bangladesh Customs (<http://customs.gov.bd/index.jsf>)

After the 1980s, Bangladesh has started to gain momentum in export earnings. After independence, the main export item was Jute and jute-related products but after the 1980s, many non-traditional items were added to the export basket. Readymade garment export has started to contribute more rapidly, and jute products fall back. Over time, RMG becomes the number one export earning sector with more than 84% contribution in export revenue.

The export rate is increasing with the support of the port authority—the individual and the organization focus on incrementing the trade volume with the countries. The exporters are mainly exporting readymade garments, industrial goods, food items, medicines, jute corn in Bhutan and Nepal (An & Oh, 2018). The cost of transportation facilities is lower, but the exporters found some issues that create barriers to developing the export volume. Exporters think that the demand for Bangladeshi products is high in those countries and can be the future's long-term market.



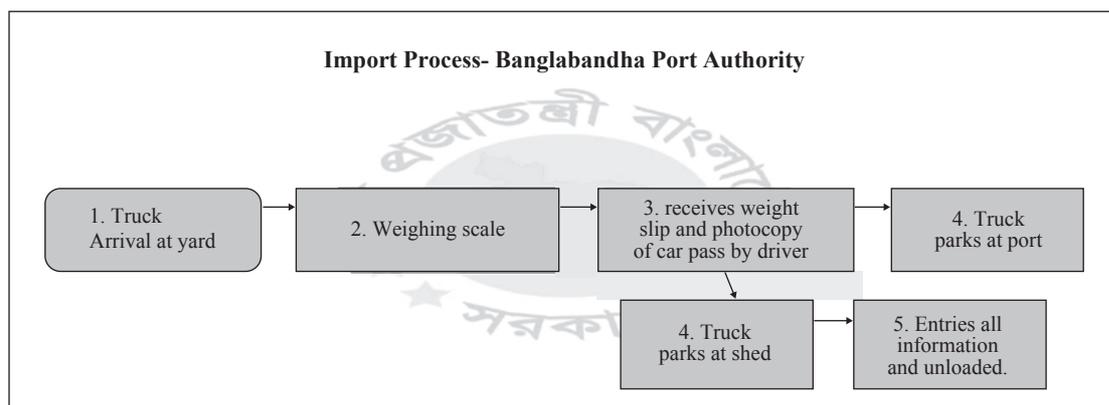
**Figure 13.** The export process through the port. Source: Bangladesh Customs (<http://customs.gov.bd/index.jsf>)

The respondents say that the exporter faces challenges in dealing with the different importers of neighboring countries as the trade relationship is not so strong, and the communicating system is not robust. However, the market structure is beneficial for the products of our country. According to 100% of the respondents, the process faces some issues with the quality of the products, less assistance from the Indian authority with higher tariff charges, environmental problems, and the increasing transportation cost over time. The mentioned problems create barriers in exporting Bangladeshi products to those markets.

Considering India's current relations with Bangladesh, the tension between the countries is increasing due to the imbalance of trade facilities and other policy-related barriers. India introduced some disputed laws and regulations about citizenship. The red tap process of trade with Indian business organizations also demotivates Bangladeshi organizations to exports goods in India. The area's authority creates those barriers due to security issues, socio-culture, and economic complexity. Those factors are the main challenges in conducting business activities with India.

#### 4.3 Findings from Importers who are using Banglabandha port

Banglabandha port is mostly used to import goods and services from the neighboring countries as the demand for the product from those countries is high in Bangladesh. According to the 85% of respondents, they import stone mostly from Bhutan, India, and Nepal. Besides the stone, imported goods are sometimes lentil, fruits, and rice. The balance of trade deficit with India through Banglabandha port is high, and the gap is increasing gradually.



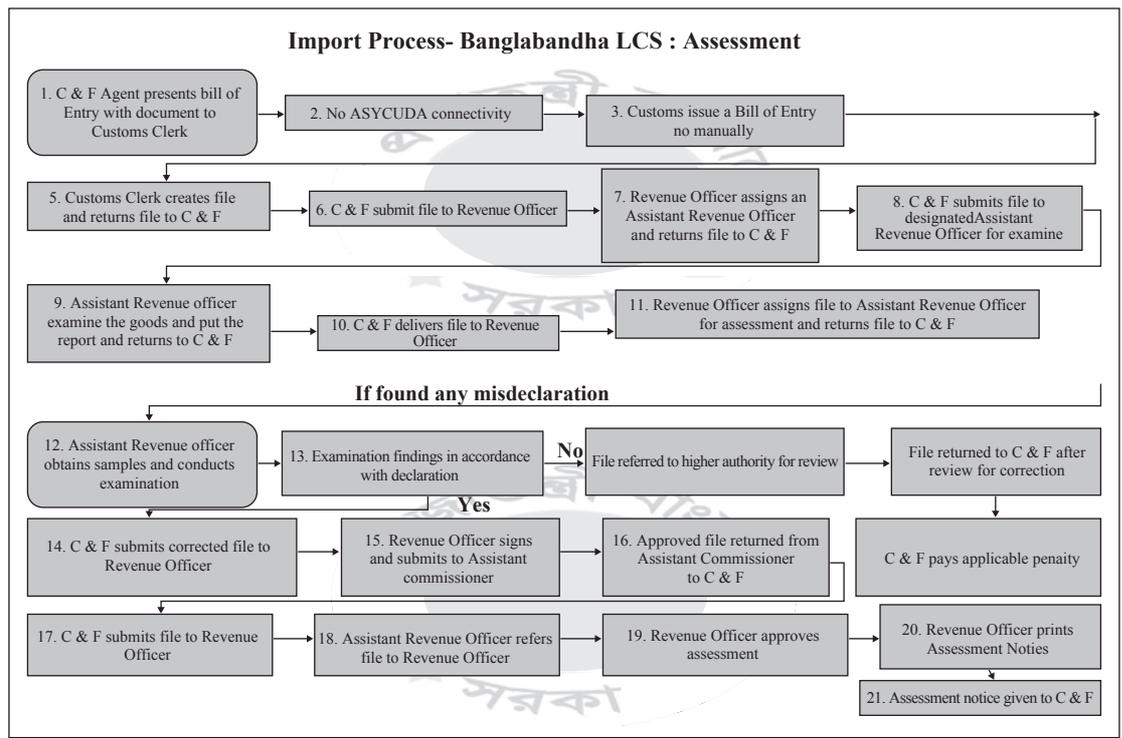
**Figure 15.** Import process through Banglabandha Port. Source: Bangladesh Customs  
[http://www.bangladeshcustoms.gov.bd/procedures/p\\_import/123](http://www.bangladeshcustoms.gov.bd/procedures/p_import/123)

The importers import stone from India and Bhutan via Banglabandha port and sometimes they also bought lentils or rice from India and Bhutan. Total import exceeds export through this port though India's overall balance with Bangladesh is not different. The overall trade balance with India is negative (trade deficit). Bangladesh imports from India by \$7647 million in 2018 -2019. In 2017-2018, Bangladesh import \$8621 million (Bhardwaj, 2016). The trade relation with Bangladesh is a deficit since the initial period of independence.

Some of the challenges importers face at Banglabandha port are (i) lack of integrity by the Indian port authority; (b) the embargo or strike by the labor union in the port area; (c) abrupt decision about the import of the goods; (d) less co-operation from the port authority; (e) lack of trading facilities; (f) lack of modern technology to the port authority; and (g) less diversified trading mechanism and policies (Rahmatullah, 2009).

#### 4.4 Findings from Clearing and Forwarding (C&F) Agent who are using Banglabandha port

As import and export procedures are not easy, it is essential to appoint the Clearing and Forwarding agent to manage the documentation process. The business needs to appoint experts who are knowledgeable and well-versed in customs and shipment procedures. According to 97% of respondents, they performed both C&F activities and said their collaboration increased. The international trade process through the port needs to revise, and it needs to improve the condition for providing the services correctly. C&F agents face a different kinds of problems. Some of the notable problems respondents mentioned are (i) lack of available expert labor; (ii) lack of cooperation from the Indian port authority; (iii) lack of availability of digital technology for measuring quality; (iv) mismanagement about the payment; (v) internal management problems; (vi) increasing cost to handle the process; and (vii) the varying and sometimes conflicting jurisdictional and international regulations create problematic issues for freight forwarders and their respective clients.



**Figure 17.** The functions performed by the C&F agents in trade and commerce. Source: Bangladesh Custom [http://www.bangladeshcustoms.gov.bd/procedures/p\\_import/123](http://www.bangladeshcustoms.gov.bd/procedures/p_import/123)

The government of Bangladesh and India's recent communication steps through the railway also created a new business opportunity. The development and design of both country's working conditions can access the resources for accelerating the trade. The government of Bangladesh has planned and working to establish the railway network with India through Banglabandha port, which will connect the Indian railway network via Haldibari and Darjeeling (Burroughs, 2020). The inauguration of the network has already started to trade through the Chilahati station to India. Through the Banglabandha port, the network may connect Nepal and Bhutan, and China. This network will work as the horizontal network for the Asian Highway.

### 5. Conclusion

Bangladesh and its neighboring countries (India, Bhutan, and Nepal) will benefit from the Banglabandha port if every country takes the initiative to transform it into a transport hub. How much gain each county will get is a matter of in-depth analysis, but no one doubts that this decision will be a positive-sum game for all. This port might turn into the hub for international trade among the neighboring countries as the strategic location is a blessing for Bangladesh, rare on the other side of the country. Since the area is rich with agricultural, mineral, and other natural resources, every country can use the port for increasing the trade among themselves. The port is connected with roads, airways, railways, and these geographical advantages can ensure the business with low cost, thus reducing poverty throughout the area. With the support of the diplomatic process and development of the required services, the trade ratio might eventually ensure the countries' economic growth. All neighboring countries can benefit from developing the intra-network by using the port where the countries' possible opportunities can improve the living standard. Bangladesh can benefit by providing transit facilities and increasing business scope. India can access the mineral resources by ensuring communication via Banglabandha port to the international market. The area's economic condition can develop when it can access the facilities to reduce the market gap.

Banglabandha port will increase the global trade volume with neighboring countries, eventually reducing Bangladesh's trade deficit with India. This port can help Bangladesh reduce the trade deficit by providing transit

facilities and taking the benefits of becoming a transport hub. Tourists of the countries will be able to move among the countries with a lower cost as the port will substantially reduce travel time. Expanding the opportunities through the Banglabandha port will reduce the pressure on other busy ports. In the long run, this port will help Bangladesh enhance regional connectivity among India, Nepal, Bhutan, China, and Russia. It will help develop a strong market structure resulting in reduced unemployment in Bangladesh's North Bengal. The North Bengal region of Bangladesh lagged in economic development than other areas of the country. This port will work as a catalyst to reduce the financial gap. The authority of the governments should come together to get the benefits of the port.

The analysis presented above gives a clear indication that Bangladesh and its close neighboring countries India, Nepal, and Bhutan would gain substantially if Banglabandha port becomes a transport hub for the regions by all modes and the port will be a win-win situation for all. There are some problems such as infrastructure development, inefficient workers, lack of standard customs procedures, lack of cooperation from the authorities, etc. which need to solve to accelerate the benefits of the Banglabandha port. Political commitment must be sought for establishing the port as a transport hub. Political leaders need to understand that North East India and Bangladesh's economies are complementary. This port will help to develop regional transport connectivity. The research presented in this paper would be useful to the researchers of regional transport development.

## **6. Recommendations**

Improvement in 'Terms of trade' is essential for international trade growth. When export exceeds import, the country's 'terms of trade' situation improves. The proper management of the port influences international trade among nations. Locational benefits bring more international trade opportunities, which can be materialized through Banglabandha port. The Banglabandha port is one of the strategic places in the north Bengal of Bangladesh, and it might turn into a hub for international trade among the neighboring countries. Based on the interview with the four stakeholders (Port authority, Exporters, Importers, and C&F agents), addressing the following issues will help Bangladesh to get the maximum benefits from Banglabandha port:

### **6.1 Political Commitment among the Nations**

Political support is a must for smoothing port operations and robust regional connectivity. The government should strengthen its diplomatic relations with the neighboring countries for using Banglabandha port. Indian customs authority currently creates unofficial trade barriers that demotivate both countries' importer and exporter.

### **6.2 The Problem Should Look from Bigger Picture**

The bilateral relations don't work for a single issue; instead, it works for all the problems together. The problems identified in this study should not deal in isolation. In the port activity, which is a part of regional connectivity, the country should look for other outstanding water disputes, border disputes, etc. with India. Otherwise, it won't be possible to bring trust among all the stakeholders. A country can't solve regional transport connectivity problems in isolation. All the unresolved problems among the countries should be solved together, and without strong political commitment, these diversified problems can't be solved.

### **6.3 Creating Awareness among all the Countries**

The government should create awareness that this port is mutually beneficial, and non-cooperation is costly for all parties. A process of awareness must create through multilateral dialogue. All the concerned parties must understand the cost of non-cooperation. Again, political leadership must persuade all the stakeholders about the port's mutual benefits.

### **6.4 Improvement in Operations of the Port**

Ensuring the prompt installation of ASYCUDA and other digital infrastructural development might help the port authority reduce the time required to complete customs procedures. All countries need to establish online customs IT connectivity. Countries should minimize the cost associated with the export and import process. Automation

process in border activities, simplification of trade documentation procedures, expediting border clearance procedures will improve the port's efficiency.

### **6.5 Training and Development for the All Stakeholders Associated with Banglabandha Port**

There should have more training opportunities for all stakeholders. Port authority needs to train up the front-line officials to manage the overall risk management system. Skilled people are required to operate the port and C&F activities.

### **6.6 Creating Awareness and Engaging Local People of the Port Area**

The government should take initiatives to develop the local area's economic situation. Then, local people will feel motivated to be involved in international trade in agricultural goods. Governments need to engage local people of the countries to realize this port will be a positive-sum game for all. The government and private sectors should work together to create employment opportunities for the local people.

### **6.7 Improvement in the Policy Direction**

Signing a memorandum of understanding to increase trade with the neighboring countries might increase trade and tourism. The countries' government needs to improve trade facilitation measures at the land port. A policy improvement in every aspect of port management is required to make the Banglabandha port efficient. The new policy must address the problem of inefficient customs operations, lack of bilateral transport agreement, lack of transparency in inspection procedure, etc. to facilitate smooth movement across the border through Banglabandha land port. The new policy should have a future direction for seamless regional connectivity among the nations.

### **6.8 Improvement in the Transportation Systems**

Considering the limitations of the Bangladesh roads, transport communication systems need to improve. Otherwise, the whole local transport system might collapse. Countries should take transportation integration initiatives, given the physical and cultural proximity. Bangladesh government needs to develop a system-wide strategy for increasing transportation systems efficiency. Without improving Bangladesh's internal road transport system, sub-regional framework BBIN-MVA (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal-Motor Vehicle Agreement) might not work. Transport integration among the countries is essential to benefit from Banglabandha port. Given shared history and physical and cultural proximity, transport integration will look natural among the neighboring countries around Bangladesh.

### **6.9 Setting Storage Facilities at the Port**

Given physical proximity, trade on perishable goods is obvious. Improve storage facilities for export and import products will increase trade in agricultural goods.

### **6.10 Establishing Industry around the Port Area**

Currently, Bangladesh exports RMG products to Nepal and Bhutan via Banglabandha port. Establishing readymade garments industrial area near Banglabandha port will reduce transportation costs, which will give the firm a competitive advantage in exporting RMG products. The demand for Bangladesh's readymade garments is increasing in Nepal and Bhutan

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