

## **Bangladesh's Offer of Services at Chittagong Port**

### **Why in news?**

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina offered India the use of the Chittagong Port and said the port would be of benefit to India's northeastern States.

### **What is the Chittagong Port?**

- The Chittagong or Chhatogram port is one of the important seaports of Bangladesh, located in the region of Chittagong hill tracts.
- It is the main seaport of Bangladesh and is located on the bank of the Karnaphuli River.
- The port of Chittagong was known as Shetgang as early as the 4th century BC, and it received ships from the Middle East and China.
- Almost 90% of Bangladesh's exports and imports are now handled by the Chittagong Port.
- In the colonial era, the Chittagong Port was one of the largest ports of eastern India through which cargo was carried to the borders of Myanmar through railways and roadways.
- Due to the sea port's close proximity with North-Eastern Indian states, the port facility has the potential to significantly boost economic activity in the North-East Indian states.

### **What is the impact of partition on the business in the Northeast?**

- India's Northeast had easy access to the seaports, specifically Chittagong, in present-day Bangladesh via the Brahmaputra and Barak River systems before independence.
- The tea, timber, coal and oil were transported through these rivers
- The local-level border trade helped maintain undivided Assam's status as the State with the highest per capita income till the early 1950s.
- The volume of trade began dipping with the souring of ties between India and Pakistan (Bangladesh was East Pakistan then).
- Later, the 1965 war cut the Northeast off and the movement of goods through the 'chicken's neck', a narrow strip in West Bengal, became a costlier alternative.

*The northeastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram share a 1,879 km border with Bangladesh.*

### **What happened after Bangladesh was created?**

- The creation of Bangladesh with India's help in 1971 did not translate into the revival of the traditional river and land trade and communication routes for the Northeast.
- A degree of mistrust existed between the two countries because of the 'Bangladeshi' issue and camps established by myriad Northeast extremist groups in Bangladesh.
- When Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government took charge in 2009, the mistrust lessened

as the land boundary agreement was signed in 2015.

- From a bus service between Agartala and Kolkata via Dhaka to the movement of cargo on barges, trial runs and trans-shipments have been successfully conducted.

## What does the Bangladesh PM's offer mean?

- The importance of the Chittagong port made the British administrators build the Assam-Bengal Railway route to ship goods to the remotest parts of the region.
- The port would be of benefit to India's northeastern States, particularly Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya and Mizoram.
- India's 'Act East' policy that focuses on the new sense of cooperation between the two countries can help the Northeast to explore the potential of economic activities.
- With a special focus on railways and waterways, many of the pre-Partition trade routes are being revived.
- Most of these roads lead to Chittagong port, which has historically been the largest and the most convenient for trade and commerce for the region.

## What efforts were taken on the ground?

- **Multi-modal approach-** A multi-modal connectivity approach has been felt for a long time because reopening the pre-Partition trade routes would reduce the cost and time of transportation for the Northeast and generates revenue for Bangladesh.
- **MoUs-** In 2010, India and Bangladesh signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to allow for the use of Chittagong and Mongla Ports in Bangladesh for the movement of goods to and from India.
- **Bridge connection-** In 2021, the **Maitri Setu** built over the Feni River was inaugurated that would reduce the distance between Tripura and Chittagong port to just 111 km.
- Mizoram is keen on bridges across the Khawthlangtuipui river (Karnaphuli in Bangladesh) for faster access to the Chittagong port.
- **Multi-modal transit hub-** The government is working on a multi-modal transit hub at Sabroom that can help goods reach the Chittagong port in a few hours.
- **Road connectivity-** Road connectivity in Meghalaya's Dawki, southern Assam's Sutarkandi and Tripura's Akhaura linking eastern and south-eastern Bangladesh is also being improved.
- **Transit of inland vessels-** Under Indo-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transit & Trade involving the Brahmaputra, inland vessels of one country can transit through the specified routes of the other country.
- The cargo ships from Bangladesh have reached Tripura through the Gomati River and Assam's Karimganj via the Kushiara River.
- **BBIN-** The Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal Motor Vehicle Agreement (BBIN-MVA) is another key development that can enhance the trade potential of Bangladesh with India and Nepal and further to Bhutan once Bhutan formally joins the MVA.

## References

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