

# Exploring the Potential of Inclusive Cross-Border Trade through Jinjiram, Simsang and Wah Umngi Rivers in Brahmaputra and Meghna Basin

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## Abbreviations

BBIN	Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal
BIWTA	Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority
FMCGs	Fast-Moving Consumer Goods
GOI	Government of India
IWAI	Inland Waterways Authority of India
IWT	Inland Water Transport
LCS	Land Customs Station
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NEI	Northeast India
NHIDCL	National Highways & Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd.
NW	National Waterway
PIWTT	Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade
RoRo	Roll-on/Roll-off
SHGs	Self-Help Groups

## Acknowledgement

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The study seeks to identify the potential for enhancing cross-border trade between India and Bangladesh, with a specific focus on the Jinjiram, Simsang, and Wah Umngi rivers within the Brahmaputra and Meghna basins.

It highlights key issues faced by riverine communities, including infrastructure limitations, navigability challenges, and resource constraints. The report provides actionable policy insights aimed at facilitating trade and empowering women entrepreneurs in the region. Furthermore, it outlines recommendations to inform future policy planning and regional development strategies.

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## Executive Summary

This report explores the untapped potential of inclusive cross-border trade and connectivity between India and Bangladesh through three lesser-known but historically significant transboundary rivers: the Jinjiram, Simsang (Someswari), and Wah Umngi. These rivers, once thriving conduits for local commerce, transport, and cultural exchange, now remain largely underutilised due to geopolitical, infrastructural, and environmental challenges.

Historically, river routes served as the primary arteries of trade across Bengal and Assam, connecting markets on both sides of the present-day India-Bangladesh border. The Partition of 1947 and the formation of international borders disrupted these natural trade flows. While formal riverine trade has seen some revival particularly under the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT), smaller rivers and localised trade remain neglected, despite their critical role in sustaining border economies and livelihoods.

This study investigates the current state, historical usage, and future potential of these three rivers through field-based research across riverbank communities in Assam, Meghalaya, and Bangladesh. Special emphasis is placed on gender dynamics, acknowledging the significant role that women entrepreneurs and self-help groups (SHGs) play in cross-border economic activity particularly in trade involving dried fish, spices, betel nuts, textiles, and handicrafts.

### Key Findings

- Jinjiram River, a tributary of the Brahmaputra, once supported vibrant trade between Assam and northern Bangladesh. Today, siltation and weakened infrastructure have limited its navigability, yet seasonal opportunities still exist for small-scale trade, particularly near Kukradanga and Mankachar.
- Simsang River, the longest river in Meghalaya, holds potential for regulated trade in forest products and coal, especially between Baghmara (India) and Durgapur (Bangladesh). Women-led production of spices, bamboo products, and textiles offers strong trade linkage opportunities.
- Wah Umngi River, while seasonal and less navigable on the Indian side, connects to the Surma River in Bangladesh and has multimodal trade potential via road-to-river linkages. The Balat-Dolora border haat demonstrates existing demand for regulated cross-border exchange.
- All three rivers show evidence of illegal trade, underscoring the need for formalisation and regulation through the development of land customs stations (LCSs), multimodal land ports, and community-driven trade infrastructure.

## Recommendations

1. Revive navigability through targeted dredging, ecological restoration, and infrastructure development at key river points.
2. Formalise cross-border trade through the operationalisation of land ports, LCSs, and expansion of border haats.
3. Promote gender-inclusive trade policies, capacity building for women entrepreneurs, and market access for SHG products.
4. Develop multimodal transport corridors linking roads in India to river ports in Bangladesh for cost-effective, low-emission trade.
5. Foster India-Bangladesh institutional cooperation to enable joint management of river routes and regional connectivity.

## Conclusion

The Jinjiram, Simsang, and Wah Umngi rivers hold vast yet underutilised potential to contribute to economic integration, livelihood enhancement, and regional cooperation between India and Bangladesh. By combining infrastructure investments with gender-inclusive, community-driven approaches, these rivers can once again emerge as dynamic lifelines for sustainable cross-border development.

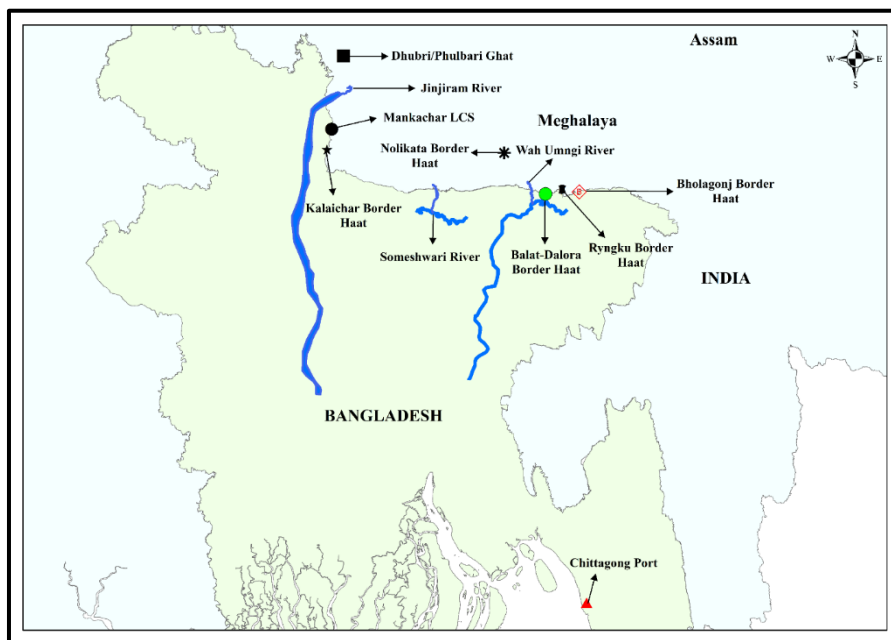


# 1

## Introduction

India and Bangladesh share a long and historically rich tradition of trade via river routes, dating back to the pre-partition era when waterways served as the primary mode of commercial transportation in the Bengal region. Before 1947, rivers like the Ganges, Brahmaputra, Meghna, and their tributaries connected markets across Assam, Bengal, and East Bengal (now Bangladesh), facilitating the movement of goods such as jute, timber, spices, textiles, coal, and agricultural produce.

Post-partition, especially after the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, formal riverine trade declined due to geopolitical tensions and infrastructural neglect. However, the signing of the PIWTT in 1972 between India and Bangladesh marked a significant step towards reviving this connectivity. Over the decades, the protocol has been renewed and expanded to include additional routes, ports of call, and cargo types, promoting mutual trade and regional development.



Overview of the Area of Study

Presently, 21 river routes are recognised under the PIWTT, with key ports such as Kolkata, Haldia, Dhubri, Narayanganj, and Ashuganj playing pivotal roles. Inland waterways are especially crucial for transporting bulk cargo at lower costs, decongesting roadways, and enhancing last-mile connectivity in rural border regions.

Riverine trade is of strategic significance for India's Northeastern states, offering an economical and mutually beneficial link to the rest of the country through waterways and infrastructure in Bangladesh. By leveraging these routes, Northeastern states can enhance market access and reduce transportation costs. Despite seasonal and logistical challenges, the

steady growth of river trade between India and Bangladesh highlights its continued importance in fostering bilateral economic cooperation and advancing regional integration.

India and Bangladesh share a network of 54 transboundary rivers, most of which belongs to the Brahmaputra and Meghna River basins. While many of these rivers and their tributaries are non-navigable or seasonally shallow, several hold significant historical relevance for facilitating trade between the two nations. In the pre-partition era, before the establishment of international boundaries, riverine routes served as the primary lifelines for transportation and trade, especially across the remote and hilly terrains of Northeast India and East Bengal (now Bangladesh). Rivers were extensively used for small-scale trade, enabling local farmers, artisans, and forest produce collectors to exchange goods across borders. These river corridors were not just channels of economic activity but also of social and cultural interaction, with many families on either side relying on them for both livelihoods and mobility.

With partition, many of these routes were disrupted, and formal river trade dwindled due to new political boundaries and lack of coordinated infrastructure. However, the historical precedence and deep-rooted local dependence highlight the untapped potential of reviving these small riverine routes, not just as economic corridors but also as tools for gender empowerment and grassroots connectivity.

This study seeks to explore the potential for cross-border trade through three lesser-known but historically significant transboundary rivers, the Jinjiram in Assam (a tributary of the Brahmaputra), the Simsang (also known as Someshwari) in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya, and the Wah Umngi in the East Khasi Hills of Meghalaya all of which connect India and Bangladesh. These rivers, despite their limited navigability today, once played a pivotal role in facilitating local trade and transport prior to the partition of India and East Bengal (now Bangladesh). The study places particular emphasis on gender engagement, recognising the historical and continuing role of women in these riverine



**A Transboundary river between India and Bangladesh**

economies, both as contributors to household income and as active participants in market exchanges, handicrafts, and processing of agri-based products.

Through qualitative, anecdotal evidence gathered from interactions with local communities including traders, fisherfolk, boat operators, women's self-help groups (SHGs), and local administrative bodies the study attempts to understand the socio-economic significance of these rivers. It investigates how the rivers were utilised in pre-partition times for trade, transport, and livelihoods, and why their usage declined post-partition. The disruption of

natural trade flows due to the establishment of new borders, lack of formal infrastructure, and reduced government focus on small-scale inland navigation have all contributed to the current state of underutilisation.

Moreover, the study highlights that local communities on both sides of the border remain deeply dependent on these rivers whether for fishing, collecting sand and stones, or small-scale trade and that revival of these routes through infrastructure development, policy support, and gender-sensitive trade mechanisms could provide significant socio-economic benefits. The research points to the need for cross-border cooperation and inclusive planning that takes into account the voices and needs of riverine communities, especially women, who have traditionally contributed to the informal economy along these water routes.

## 2

# Jinjiram River: An Overview

The Jinjiram River, one of the longest rivers in Meghalaya's Garo Hills and a tributary of the Brahmaputra, holds considerable potential for fostering cross-border trade between India and Bangladesh. Flowing through West Garo Hills and forming a natural boundary with Assam's Dhubri district, the river crosses into Bangladesh near Mankachar, where it is locally known as the Kalo or Jinjiram River. Historically, this river served as an active trade corridor, facilitating the movement of agricultural produce, forest goods, and essential commodities between communities on either side.

Today, while parts of the river have dried up or narrowed down due to shifting of the flow of Brahmaputra and sedimentation, seasonal navigability during the monsoons still allows for small boat movements carrying goods like vegetables, rice, and building materials. The Kukradanga Ghat, located near the India-Bangladesh border, was once a busy ferry point connecting Dhubri to Mankachar and beyond, but ferry and Ro-Ro services have declined in recent years due to infrastructure challenges and regulatory constraints.

Despite this, Dhubri remains a critical trade hub, with goods from Garo Hills and Assam often transported via waterways to Dhubri and then redistributed by road. The river supports informal trade and is central to the livelihoods of many local traders, farmers, boat operators, and fisherfolks. To unlock its full potential, dredging, improved customs infrastructure at Mankachar LCS, and formalisation of riverine trade routes are urgently needed. Reviving the Jinjiram as a viable trade corridor would not only ease transportation costs but also boost the local economy of border communities,

particularly in Meghalaya, Dhubri, and parts of northern Bangladesh.



The Jinjiram River

There exists a great deal of ambiguity and local folklore surrounding the Jinjiram River, particularly regarding its identity and present condition. While many residents on the Indian side, especially in parts of Assam and Meghalaya believe that the Jinjiram has dried up or

ceased to exist due to shifts in the Brahmaputra's course and excessive sedimentation, others argue that what is now known as the Kalo River, which enters Bangladesh near Barbandha village in Rawmari area and merge with Donni river in Bangladesh.

In contrast, communities in Roumari and Rajibpur regions of northern Bangladesh claim that the river earned the name 'Jinjiram' only after the entry of the Kalo into Bangladeshi territory. These differing perspectives reflect the deep historical, cultural, and geographical complexities of the river and its identity.



**Loading Activities at the Kukradanga Ghat**

This study aimed to unravel these complexities by exploring both the historical significance and the contemporary reality of the Jinjiram River. It involved extensive field visits and interviews with a diverse set of stakeholders on both sides of the border, including fisher-folks, boatmen, small traders, women's groups, local elders, and administrative officials. Through this participatory approach, the study gathered valuable anecdotal insights into how the river was once a vital trade and transport lifeline for the region and how it continues to hold symbolic and economic importance for the communities.



**Women's from Char Rajibpur area explaining their earlier engagement with dry fish work**

The report also captures the local aspirations and specific demands of these communities from reviving navigability and dredging river channels, to establishing border ghats (similar to floating market) and formal trade points, and ensuring inclusive policies that engage women and marginalised groups.

These voices emphasise the urgent need to reconsider the Jinjiram not as a mythical river, but

as a potential engine of cross-border connectivity, local trade revival, and sustainable development.

During the course of this study, extensive fieldwork was conducted in the Rowmari–Rajibpur region of northern Bangladesh, where local residents shared vivid recollections of the Jinjiram River's vibrant past. They recalled a time when the river teemed with diverse species of fish, and fishing served as a primary livelihood for the surrounding communities.

Men ventured into the river with nets and small boats to catch fish, while women engaged in processing activities such as drying the catch to make dried fish (*Shutki*), which was then sold across the border in India, especially in the bustling Manakchar market. These women would return with household essentials and food grains, making the river an integral part of the local barter and trade economy. This gendered division of labour around the river not only contributed to household income but also ensured a degree of financial autonomy for women.



**Condition of Small Stretches of the Jinjiram River in Bangladesh**

However, following the partition and subsequent tightening of cross-border movement, access to the river for trade and livelihood activities diminished sharply. Navigability decreased due to heavy siltation, unregulated embankments, and reduced water flow, which, coupled with increasing water pollution, led to the sharp decline of fish populations. Locals noted that the species diversity and fish yield of the Jinjiram have plummeted, forcing many traditional fishers to abandon their ancestral professions.

A group of elderly fishermen shared that as recently as 30-40 years ago, fishing in the Jinjiram ensured a steady income that sustained their families comfortably. Today, catching even 1–2 kg of fish per day is a challenge. Faced with declining returns, many fishers have

migrated to cities or even abroad in search of alternative employment opportunities. Meanwhile, women who once played a central role in the fish-drying trade are now engaged in low-paying jobs as domestic workers or labourers in garment factories in Dhaka.

The local people expressed strong sentiments that if the Jinjiram River could be revived with steps such as de-siltation, pollution control, and proper management of water flow it could once again become a source of sustenance and prosperity. They emphasised the need for coordinated efforts by both the governments to rehabilitate the river's ecology and restore its navigability.

Conversations with Indian traders in nearby Manakchar and Dhubri revealed similar optimism. While they acknowledged the current limitations due to poor river depth and lack of infrastructure, they highlighted the immense trade potential of the region. Dhubri already



**Fish Found in Jinjiram**

functions as a key river port with regular boat traffic and has an established trade route to Chilmari in Bangladesh through the Brahmaputra. With proper dredging and infrastructure, they believe Jinjiram could serve as a supplementary trade route, especially for local and small-scale trade.

Importantly, both environmental and economic benefits were highlighted. Riverine transport is

significantly cheaper than land-based alternatives and has a lower carbon footprint. Reopening the Jinjiram for trade would also complement the existing network of border haats small cross-border markets established along the India–Bangladesh frontier that have been praised for improving local economies and curbing informal trade. Stakeholders suggested establishing border ghats along the transboundary rivers like Jinjiram, where traders from both countries could exchange goods legally and efficiently. This could revitalise border economies, promote women's participation, and reinforce cross-border cooperation and cultural ties.

### 3

## Simsang River: An Overview

The Simsang River, known as the Someswari River in Bangladesh, is a significant transboundary waterway that originates in the West Garo Hills of Meghalaya, India. It flows eastward through the heart of the Garo Hills region, acting as a natural divider, and eventually enters Bangladesh, traversing the Netrakona district before joining the Kangsha River, part of the broader Meghna River Basin.



The Simsang River

As the longest and largest river in the Garo Hills, the Simsang holds both ecological and economic importance. It nourishes agricultural lands along its banks and supports the livelihoods of communities through fishing, farming, and local trade. Along its course, the river passes through several important settlements, including Baghmara, the administrative headquarters of the South Garo Hills district. Located near the Indo-Bangladesh border and about 113 km from Tura, Baghmara is a vibrant centre of tourism and trade.

In Bangladesh, the river is known as the Someswari and flows through Durgapur, Kalmakanda, and adjacent areas of Netrakona district. One of the distributaries of the river

flows into the Balia River, while another branch enters the low-lying haor<sup>1</sup> wetlands of Sunamganj district, eventually merging with the Surma River.

The navigability of the Simsang River varies significantly by season. During the dry months from December to May, the water level drops sharply, rendering the river non-navigable in many stretches. This is exacerbated by climate change and unregulated coal and sand mining, which have caused sedimentation and degradation of the riverbed. However, during the monsoon and post season (June to November), the river swells and becomes passable for small boats, facilitating navigation up to Durgapur in Bangladesh and Shizu in India.

Despite the challenges of low water depth and rocky upper courses, the Simsang River holds potential for small-scale navigation and cross-border trade. With proper investment in riverbed management, dredging, and environmental conservation, this route could support the transport of goods, enhance India-Bangladesh connectivity, and boost eco-tourism and cultural exchanges between the two countries.

The river's strategic location, linking agrarian communities and ecologically rich zones on both sides of the border, underscores its untapped potential for sustainable development and regional cooperation.

Historically, the Simsang River, known as the Someswari River in Bangladesh, served as a vital trade artery between the Garo Hills of Meghalaya and the Netrakona district of Bangladesh. Communities along the riverbanks engage in transport of timber, bamboo, and other forest products, utilising the river's flow to move goods downstream into Bangladesh. This trade was an integral part of the local economy, with timber and bamboo being primary commodities exchanged across the border.<sup>2</sup>

In recent times, the Simsang River has continued to be a conduit for the movement of forest products, albeit often through unauthorised means. For instance, in July 2015, the Border Security Force (BSF) intercepted nine bamboo rafts



**Locals are extracting coal from the Simsang river**

carrying coal and seven rafts laden with timber destined for Bangladesh. The seized materials included 15,000 kg of coal, 152 timber logs, and over 1,100 bamboo poles, collectively valued at approximately ₹25 lakh. Similarly, in September 2010, BSF personnel seized

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<sup>1</sup> (2021, Suvra K)A Haor is a wetland habitat in Bangladesh's north-eastern region that is geographically a shallow depression in the form of a bowl or saucer, also known as a back swamp

<sup>2</sup> [Arunachal 24+1AP Breaking News+1](#)

wooden logs, bamboos, and coal worth around ₹1.5 lakh while they were being smuggled through the Simsang River in Baghmara.<sup>3</sup>

These incidents underscore the river's enduring role in regional trade and the challenges associated with regulating cross-border commerce. Efforts to formalise and regulate this trade, such as the proposal to establish border haats (markets) and develop inland waterways, aim to harness the river's economic potential while curbing illegal activities.<sup>4</sup>

The Simsang River plays a crucial role in the livelihoods of local communities residing along its banks in Meghalaya. One of the most significant activities associated with the river is coal lifting, where locals collect coal deposits washed down from upstream coal mining areas.

This practice, although informal, provides a primary source of income for thousands of people in the region. Alongside coal, the river is also a vital source of fishing, with several communities depending on it for both subsistence and small-scale commercial purposes.

However, in recent years, illegal cross-border coal trade through the Simsang has become a growing concern. Large volumes of coal lifted from the river are transported

across the border into Bangladesh using bamboo rafts and small boats, bypassing formal customs and trade procedures.

This informal and unregulated trade not only leads to revenue loss for the state but also poses environmental threats to the river ecosystem due to overexploitation. Reviving and reopening the Simsang River as a formal cross-border trade route could serve as a transformative



**Figure 1: Coal Extraction in the Simsang River**

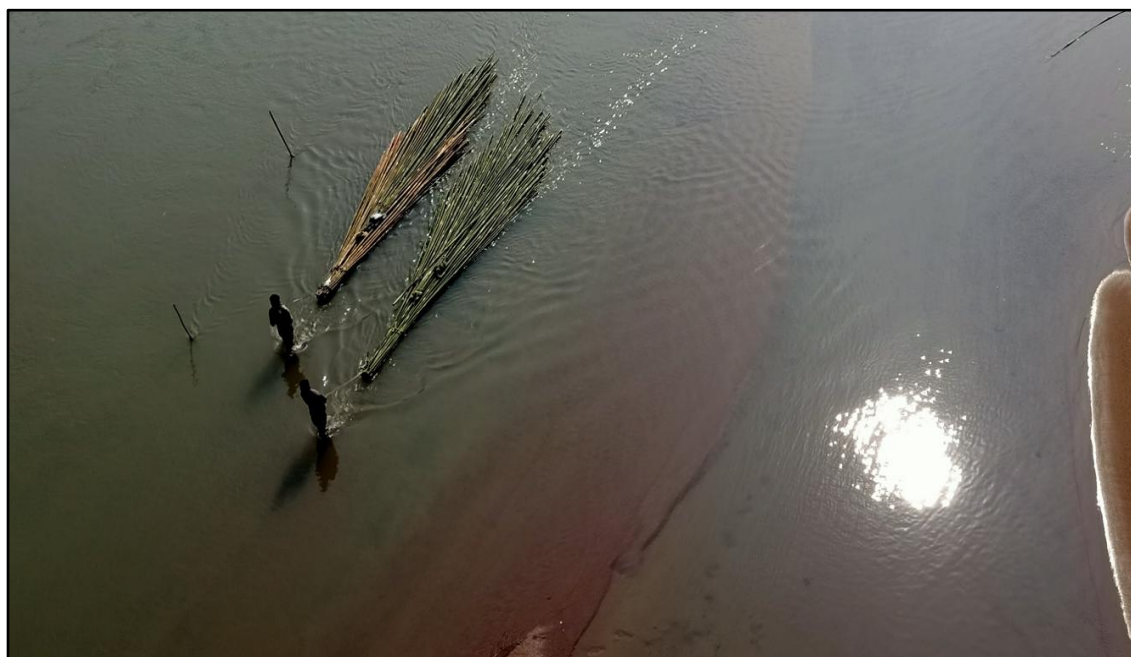
<sup>3</sup> [AP Breaking News+2The Indian Express+2The Assam Tribune+2The Assam Tribune+3The Assam Tribune+3AP Breaking News+3](#)

<sup>4</sup> [The Assam Tribune](#)

solution. By establishing a regulated riverine trade channel between India and Bangladesh, the movement of small-quantity goods like coal, bamboo, and local produce could be legalised and monitored. This would not only curb illegal trade and ensure proper taxation but also create safer and more sustainable livelihood opportunities for riverine communities. Furthermore, formalising the route could promote regional connectivity, strengthen bilateral trade, and bring much-needed infrastructure and development to the area.

In Baghmara, located in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya, a significant number of women entrepreneurs and SHGs are engaged in small-scale businesses that rely heavily on natural and handmade products. Many of these women cultivate betel nut, bay leaf, black pepper, and other spices in their own gardens, which have substantial market demand in Bangladesh. Additionally, various SHGs in the region produce handicrafts, handloom textiles, and bamboo-based products, which are not only culturally significant but also commercially viable, particularly across the border where these goods command strong interest.

On the other side, in Bangladesh, local communities are known for producing vegetables, bamboo crafts, dried fish, and traditional food products, which are equally sought after in markets across the Indian border. However, despite the presence of a Land Customs Station (LCS) in Baghmara, it remains non-functional or operational only intermittently, leading to frequent informal or illegal trade across the Simsang River. Locals on both sides have expressed strong support for reviving the historical riverine trade route, which was actively used prior to stricter border regulations and infrastructural degradation.



**Bamboo Rafts Used for Trade by Riverine Communities**

Moreover, Baghmara's status as an emerging tourist destination offers additional potential for river-based tourism. The scenic flow of the Simsang River could be leveraged to promote eco-tourism, cultural cruises, and community-led home-stay tourism, attracting both domestic and international visitors. Fishing, once a major livelihood for residents along the riverbank, has declined due to ecological degradation especially from unregulated coal extraction and

sand mining. However, with targeted river rejuvenation initiatives, including the regulation of mining activities and fishery restoration programmes, the aquatic ecosystem can be revived, supporting sustainable livelihoods once again.

Importantly, the Simsang River, as a transboundary river, flows southward into Bangladesh and merges with the Kangsha River, ultimately contributing to the Meghna basin. Reviving this river route could bring about significant socio-economic transformation for a wide region spanning both India and Bangladesh. Given the strategic potential and community demand, it is imperative that governments on both sides collaborate to initiate dredging, ecological restoration, and the formalisation of cross-border river trade, thereby unlocking sustainable development opportunities for the border population.

# 4

## Wah Umngi River: A Strategic Overview



**Present Scenario of the Wah Umngi River**

The Wah Umngi, also referred to as the Umngi River, is a transboundary river of regional importance, originating in the hilly terrains of Meghalaya, India, and flowing into Bangladesh. The river begins in the East Khasi Hills, passing through Umpung and Balat in the West Khasi Hills before reaching Lalpani near the India-Bangladesh border. Upon crossing into Bangladesh, it continues its journey towards Kalipur and eventually merges with the Surma River, a major watercourse that connects further to the Narayanganj port in Dhaka.



**The Wah Umngi River during the Summers and Winters**

Due to the hilly topography in its Indian stretch, the river is unnavigable for large portions and has limited flat terrain. Only a short segment before it crosses into Bangladesh lies on relatively level ground. Furthermore, as a seasonal river, the Wah Umngi experiences significant fluctuations in water levels, remaining shallow or nearly dry for much of the year. However, during the monsoon season, it swells dramatically, often causing floods and severe bank erosion, phenomena increasingly intensified by unsustainable human activities such as unregulated sand and boulder extraction from the riverbed.

Despite limited utility for navigation within India, the river becomes significantly more navigable upon entering Bangladesh, with its width and depth accommodating small to medium-sized vessels. Its confluence with the Surma River near Sunamganj facilitates direct riverine connectivity with key commercial hubs such as Dhaka and Narayanganj. This establishes the potential for multimodal transportation networks linking roadways in India with river routes in Bangladesh.



**Figure 2: Low Water-level of the Wah Umngi**

In India, the Wah Umngi flows past the township of Sanglan in the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya, near which lies the Balat-Dolora Border Haat (market), a cross-border trade initiative. Balat itself is an emerging commercial centre, known for cultivating high-value cash crops like betel nut, oranges, and bay leaves. Women in the region are actively engaged in producing handicrafts, weaving, and bamboo work, which they sell through the border haat.

Conversely, on the Bangladeshi side, communities contribute to the cross-border economy by supplying vegetables, fish, textiles (e.g., lungis), and bamboo-based goods. Due to Balat's relative remoteness, approximately 100 km from Shillong residents often rely more heavily on Bangladeshi goods, sometimes resorting to informal or illegal trade. Although the border haat has improved local trade dynamics, residents have long advocated for a permanent land customs station at Balat to facilitate formal trade and curb illicit transactions.

During field interactions in Bangladesh, it was revealed that Indian goods are often smuggled across the border and then transported deeper into Bangladesh via this river route. This informal activity underscores the need for a formalised, regulated multimodal trade system. Stakeholder consultations in both India and Bangladesh reveal strong consensus on the potential of the Wah Umngi river corridor as a cross-border trade route—using road infrastructure in Indian territory and inland waterways in Bangladesh.

Establishing a multimodal land port along this corridor could significantly boost bilateral trade; spur local economic development, and generate employment. It would also provide new opportunities for women-led microenterprises and reduce the prevalence of illegal cross-border activities. Given the river's linkage to major commercial ports like Dhaka and Chattogram (Chittagong), this initiative could enhance regional connectivity, benefit riparian communities, and strengthen people-to-people ties across the border.

Proactive government intervention is needed to assess the feasibility, undertake necessary river management and infrastructure development, and ensure ecological sustainability while enabling economic growth.



**Extraction activities being performed in Wah Umngi**

This study sheds light on the historical, socio-economic, and strategic significance of three lesser-known transboundary rivers: Jinjiram, Simsang (Someswari), and Wah Umngi which link the northeastern region of India with Bangladesh. These rivers, once vibrant corridors of local trade and cultural exchange, have been relegated to the margins of formal economic planning and policy discourse, despite their enduring relevance to the borderland communities.

Our research, based on rich field insights, stakeholder interactions, and a review of historical and present-day usage patterns, reveals that these rivers continue to sustain livelihoods in both countries whether through fishing, small-scale agriculture, informal trade, or the collection of natural resources such as sand, coal, and bamboo. Women, in particular, play a vital role in these river economies, often managing and marketing value-added products like dried fish, betel nut, spices, and handicrafts, with significant demand across the border.



Fishing Activities Performed in the Wah Umngi river in Bangladesh

However, the report also brings out multiple challenges that have contributed to the decline in navigability, ecological health, and formal use of these rivers for trade: siltation, unregulated extraction of natural resources, pollution, lack of cross-border infrastructure, and weak policy coordination. The absence of functional land customs stations (LCS) and underutilised border haats has further limited the potential for inclusive and regulated cross-border trade.

Yet, despite these setbacks, the study presents a compelling case for reviving these river corridors as channels for formal trade and regional development.

Notably:

- The Jinjiram River, once a bustling trade link between Assam and northern Bangladesh, retains potential if dredging and port infrastructure are developed at key nodes like Mankachar and Kaliralga.
- The Simsang River continues to support informal trade in coal, timber, and bamboo. With regulation, it can evolve into a formal trade route while promoting eco-tourism and gender-inclusive enterprise development in the Garo Hills and adjacent Bangladeshi districts.
- The Wah Umngi River, although seasonal and limited in navigability on the Indian side, connects directly to the Surma River and port networks in Bangladesh, offering a viable multimodal corridor for integrating road and riverine trade between Balat and Kalipur.

The recommendation to establish multimodal land ports in regions such as Balat-Dolora, along with revitalising existing LCSs and border haats, offers a blueprint for unlocking this potential. Additionally, the integration of gender-focused interventions, ecological restoration programmes, and community-led infrastructure development can ensure that these initiatives remain inclusive, sustainable, and locally beneficial.

In conclusion, the revitalisation of these transboundary rivers should not be viewed solely through the lens of bilateral trade, but as an opportunity for rebuilding historical linkages, empowering border communities, fostering environmental resilience, and deepening India-Bangladesh regional cooperation. With strong political will, institutional coordination, and community participation, these forgotten rivers can once again become powerful drivers of cross-border prosperity and peace.



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