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 Chittangong 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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