

NORTHEAST NEEDS INTERNATIONAL ROUTES

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Lifelines snapped: A road damaged in floods in Karimganj district on Friday. PTI-

Prolonged disruption of road and rail transport across a major part of Northeast India due to floods and landslips has renewed the demand for fast-tracking projects for connectivity with the rest of the country through Bangladesh.

The Barak Valley in southern Assam and the southern half of Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura are dependent on the arterial Lumding-Badarpur railway line for transporting essentials from other parts of the country. The National Highway through Meghalaya shares some of the passenger and cargo load, while another through Dima Hasao in Assam has not quite been serviceable.

The 185-km railway line connecting Lumding in Hojai district of central Assam and Badarpur in Karimganj district of southern Assam, much of it through the hill district of Dima Hasao, has been prone to landslips since the metre gauge track of 1899 vintage was realigned and converted to broad gauge in 2015. Badarpur is the junction from where the tracks branch out to Silchar (30 km away), Jiribam in Manipur, Bairabi in Mizoram and Agartala in Tripura. The two highways have a similar problem, particularly during the monsoon months of June to September.

On May 14, rain-induced landslips and flash floods damaged the railway line in Dima Hasao at 56 locations. The highways either caved in or were blocked in many places, affecting road transport for days. These cut off Barak Valley, parts of Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura for weeks. Subimal Bhattacharjee, a Delhi-based cybersecurity expert from Silchar, said the landslip-prone railway and highways made the revival of old British-era routes through present-day Bangladesh important for at least five northeastern States, including Meghalaya.

"The Maitri Bridge across the Feni river connects Sabroom in Tripura and Ramgarh in Bangladesh, while efforts are on to take the railway line beyond Sabroom. Another railway line connecting Agartala and Akhaura in Bangladesh is in the works," he said.

"These will improve Tripura's connectivity by leaps and bounds. But Mizoram, Manipur, Barak Valley, Dima Hasao and Meghalaya will be better served by the old British line through Mahisasan on the Assam-Bangladesh border with Badarpur becoming the communication hub," Mr. Bhattacharjee said.

Mahisasan in Karimganj district of the Barak Valley used to be connected to Chittagong, via Kulaura.

"I am a strong proponent of connectivity, especially between Sylhet and our long-separated cousins in the Barak Valley. The Chittagong-Badarpur-Haflong railway line is one of the oldest set-up by the British to carry goods and traffic. We need to reconnect Kulaura with Mahisasan and beyond. This would be a win-win situation for both Assam and Bangladesh," Ishfaq Ilahi, a retired Air Commodore of Bangladesh Air Force specialising in international affairs, told *The Hindu*.

"I also visualise direct train between Sylhet and Silchar, just like the one we have between Kolkata and Khulna. I proposed the other day in a meeting with Indian High Commissioner here (Dhaka) to build a friendship bridge between Karimganj and Zakiganj (Bangladesh) across the

Kushiara river, with immigration facilities on either side,” he said.

Officials at the Northeast Frontier Railway said a 2.7-km line from Mahisasan to Zero Point is expected to be commissioned by December 2023. “Taking the track beyond into Bangladesh would then be a matter of time,” a spokesperson said.

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