

Infrastructure and — West Bengal

Positioning Bengal as
a Gateway to South and
Southeast Asia



CUTS Discussion Paper

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D-217, Bhaskar Marg, Bani Park, Jaipur 302016, India

Tel: +91.141.2282821, Fax: +91.141.2282485

Email: cuts1@cuts.org, Web site: www.cuts-international.org

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*This Discussion Paper has been written by **Aakansha Sengupta**, Research Intern of CUTS; conceptualised by **Sumanta Biswas**, Assistant Director, CUTS; and reviewed by Dr. Prabir De, Professor, Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), New Delhi; and **Bipul Chattopadhyay**, Executive Director, CUTS.*

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Executive Summary

West Bengal has positioned itself as a state that balances industrial expansion with the ambition to emerge as the gateway linking Eastern India, Northeast India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, the Bay of Bengal, and, through maritime corridors, Southeast Asia in a broader context.

This Discussion Paper presents an impactful argument that prioritises infrastructure, connectivity, trade facilitation, and investment initiatives as a converged, integrated approach rather than as isolated project strategies. The current policy architecture of the Government of West Bengal reinforces five interlinked priorities ranging from coordinating multimodal logistics, port-based industrialisation, export facilitation, developing industrial and economic corridors, and longstanding connectivity strategies concerning borders, ports, and various production centres.

This stated vision is the blueprint of this paper, where Bengal's historical background as a trade and commercial hub is assessed, the trajectory of Bengal post-partition that disrupted its integrated geographical economy, leading to port constraints and industrial stagnation, is examined, and the present initiative to reconstruct Bengal as a logistical, services, and manufacturing hub for South and Southeast Asian Markets is taken into proper account.

Core thesis

West Bengal's gateway role is strongest when infrastructure, connectivity, trade facilitation and investment initiatives are treated as a converged state-level strategy.

An Overview of Bengal's Geographical Advantages

West Bengal has emerged as a vital economic and strategic hub, situated within India's vision of a larger regional integration and its ultimate infrastructural development agenda. Owing to its unique geographical location, West Bengal is positioned as both a natural and logistical fulcrum of the Act East Policy, connecting Eastern and Northeastern India with neighbouring countries and with a maritime proximity to the Bay of Bengal, therefore acting as the Gateway to South and Southeast Asia. This briefing paper is essentially an assessment of the strategic potential exhibited by West Bengal using its geographical positioning, which can be leveraged in advancing India's foreign policy objectives across South and Southeast Asia.¹²

Possessing a rich industrial legacy, West Bengal acts as a threshold for robust industrial and infrastructural development. Key initiatives involve evolving Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, as a centre of Para diplomacy alongside the associated expansionist ventures related to the Port of Kolkata and the Haldia Dock Complex and the abandoned Tajpur project. This strategic upper hand,

¹ Observer Research Foundation. (n.d.). *As India acts East: The role of West Bengal*. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/as-india-acts-east-the-role-of-west-bengal>

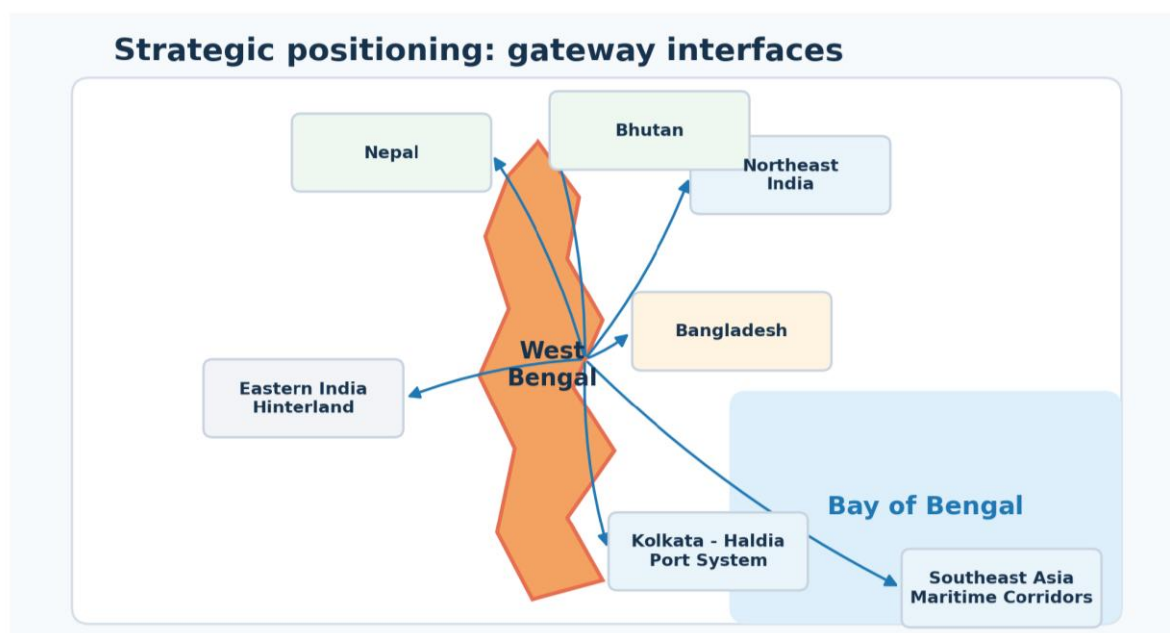
² Organiser. (2026, May 13). *How West Bengal is set to become the strategic anchor of India's Act East Policy and Indo-Pacific vision*. <https://organiser.org/2026/05/13/353164/world/how-west-bengal-is-set-to-become-the-strategic-anchor-of-indias-act-east-policy-and-indo-pacific-vision/>

complemented by a skilled human workforce and supplementary physical, natural, and social capital, renders West Bengal a pivotal edge to advocate India's east-oriented foreign policy initiatives.³⁴⁵

In this context, BIMSTEC highlights the importance of regional cooperation and the development of cross-border connectivity projects centred around the Bay of Bengal. Ultimately, the aim of this paper is to envision the operational centrality of West Bengal as a gateway for industries, connectivity, and an instrument for influencing further decisive advantages across the eastern part of the Asian continent.⁶⁷

West Bengal's Strategic Location

Figure 1: West Bengal Strategic Positioning and Gateway Interfaces



Abstract visualisation of West Bengal, not a Map.

Historically, West Bengal has cultivated a distinguished maritime position in the larger Indian subcontinent. This strategic geographical proximity to the Bay of Bengal and the Gangetic Delta has fostered Bengal as the centre for trade and commerce, infrastructure and cultural exchange dating as early as the pre-colonial era.

³ Hindustan Times. (2026). *Bengal govt scraps Tajpur deep-sea port project, identifies new site 10 km away*. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/bengal-govt-scraps-tajpur-deep-sea-port-project-identifies-new-site-10-km-away-101780581443232.html>

⁴ Government of West Bengal, Finance Department. (2026). *Budget speech 2026–2027*. https://finance.wb.gov.in/writereaddata/Budget_Speech/2026-2027_English_I.pdf

⁵ Syama Prasad Mookerjee Port, Kolkata. (n.d.). *Cargo statistics*. <https://smpportkolkata.shipping.gov.in/smpk/kol/en/cargo-statistics/>

⁶ BIMSTEC Secretariat. (2025). *Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation (AMTC)*. [https://bimstec.org/images/content_page_pdf/1745406794_Signed%20Agreement%20on%20Maritime%20Transport%20Cooperation%20\(AMTC\).pdf](https://bimstec.org/images/content_page_pdf/1745406794_Signed%20Agreement%20on%20Maritime%20Transport%20Cooperation%20(AMTC).pdf)

⁷ BIMSTEC Secretariat. (2023). *BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity*. https://bimstec.org/images/content_page_pdf/1696679586_BIMSTEC_Master%20Plan%20for%20Transport%20Connectivity.pdf

Distinguished globally for its riverine commerce, trade architecture, and port-based trade, this region has consistently reconstructed commercial ties with Southeast Asia, corroborating itself as one of Asia's most prosperous economic zones. The colonial period attested to this progress. Kolkata, then Calcutta, transcended into a major imperial port city, and the state developed an industrial nucleus around the adjacent peripheries.

Industries such as jute, tea, cotton and silk textiles, shipbuilding, railways, coal, and iron and steel industries have reflected how Bengal became a critical gateway for exercising trade across the Indian Ocean in general and Eastern India in particular. Bengal has undergone Partition twice (1905 Bengal Partition and 1947 India's Partition that resulted in the creation of former East Pakistan, present Bangladesh), which had inadvertently fractured Bengal's integrated economic topography and fragmented the traditional trade networks, which is a corollary to the eroding industrial foundation of Bengal. In the following decades, political instability, labour unrest, declining private investments, and industrial stagnation decayed the state's transnational economic prominence. In contemporary times, West Bengal has retained its strategic relevance through India's optimistic Act East Policy, the growth of BIMSTEC, and expanding Indo-Pacific connectivity initiatives.⁸

An assessment of the historical trajectory of West Bengal reveals how, across different timelines of history, Bengal has occupied a central position in trade, maritime exchange, and regional connectivity. During the pre-colonial period, Bengal occupied a predominant position at the heart of the Indian Ocean. It was characterised by both a fertile agrarian economy and riverine trade networks. Ports developed around Tamralipta, located presently at Tamluk, Saptagram (Satgaon), located near Triveni (Tribeni) during the medieval time of Chanda Sagadar, at the confluence of the Saraswati, Bhagirathi, and Jamuna rivers, later emerged as Bengal's principal medieval port. The subsequent silting of the Saraswati River shifted commercial activity to Hooghly, laying the foundation for the rise of Kolkata as Bengal's leading port, enhancing maritime commerce through regional connectivity across West Asia and other parts of Southeast Asia. This is evident in how Bengal flourished commercial relations across regions of Burma, Malacca, Sumatra, and Ceylon.⁹

During the British period, Kolkata served as a major outpost with the establishment of the Kolkata Port and the Eastern Indian Railway, which connected Bengal with Assam, Bihar, and other parts of Northeast India and opened a gateway for trade in South Asia. Driven from Calcutta, the Bengal Presidency in British India was the largest and most powerful administrative subdivision, covering a massive territory that eventually spanned from parts of Northern India to Southeast Asia till Singapore.

Following the historical trend of events, Bengal has faced both extreme paradigms of the developmental parameters, one marked by flourishing trade and willingness to conduct business across Asia and the other, where it faced chronic industrial stagnation, refugee influx, political instability, along with heightened unemployment and a decline in the industrial capacity of this once prosperous state. This indicative sharp decline is a hindrance to Bengal, adversely impacting its prominence within Indian Foreign Policy. With India's recalibrated approach through the "Act East" and the "Neighbourhood First" policies, Bengal has re-emerged as a vital corridor for connecting India with the "Tiger Cub Economies" comprising Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, and beyond.

⁸ Asian Development Bank. (n.d.). *Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement*. Asia Regional Integration Center. <https://aric.adb.org/initiative/bangladesh-bhutan-india-and-nepal-motor-vehicles-agreement>

⁹ EurAsian Times. (n.d.). India responds to China's plans to bypass Malacca Strait by militarizing Indian Ocean islands. <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/india-responds-to-chinas-plans-to-bypass-malacca-straits-by-militarizing-indian-ocean-islands/>

The Act East Policy positions Bengal as a critical node in the border transnational connectivity framework. This emphasises the development of the Kolkata and Haldia ports, and other trade links and connectivity projects undertaken, which connect India with neighbouring countries, alongside future projects to utilise the strategic proximity to the Bay of Bengal, which brings India closer to comprehending the broader Indo-Pacific. Besides this, Bengal is carefully used to connect the rest of the country with the Northeast frontier of India, thus rendering an underlying advantage to the entire Act East Policy of India. Stretching from Siliguri Corridor to Bay of Bengal, the state is ambitious in transforming Eastern India into a vital bridge and adopts an optimistic view to expand India's foreign policy goals. Thus, Bengal's role in directing India's foreign affairs in Asia can be better analysed in terms of "the 3Cs" manifested in India's foreign policy: Culture, Commerce, and Connectivity.

Government's Infrastructural Vision and Contemporary Priorities

This paper is fundamentally foregrounded in the West Bengal Government's current infrastructural, connectivity, and developmental agenda. Under the state's notified policy outlook, including the West Bengal Logistics Policy 2023, the West Bengal Export Promotion Policy 2023, and the West Bengal Industrial and Economic Corridor Policy 2023, logistical efficiency, export corridors, industrial clustering, warehousing, freight villages, port connectivity, and corridor-based investment projects have been placed at the epicentre of the state's broader developmental priorities.

Furthermore, the 2026-2027 Budget Speech emphasised constructing roads, bridges, flyovers, jetties, bypasses, and arterial corridors to ensure greater market access. This aforementioned policy outlook underscores the need to be articulated in a state-level gateway strategy. Thus, Union-level and Bilateral projects such as Sagarmala, National Waterways 1 and 2, PIWTT, BBIN subregion, and BIMSTEC extend a comprehensive regional frame but Bengal's own role lies in land side logistics, industrial estates, hinterland expansion, borderland development, workforce enhancement, and greater facilitation between the Central and the State government¹⁰. Thus, the Government's immediate priorities are based upon the following six crucial pillars:

- a) Port and maritime modernisation in and around Kolkata;¹¹
- b) Infrastructure development connecting industrial clusters, seaports, airports, and borders;¹²
- c) High-speed rail and multimodal logistical nodes concerning Kolkata-Dankuni-Haldia-Kharagpur-Siliguri Corridor;¹³
- d) Inland water transportation and coastal shipping facilities around Ganga-Bhagirathi-Hooghly and India-Bangladesh protocol routes;
- e) Air passenger and air-cargo Connectivity through Kolkata, Bagdogra, and other regional airports;
- f) An investment-based development of industrial and logistical clusters in specific priority sectors.

¹⁰ Government of West Bengal. (2023). *West Bengal Logistics Policy, 2023*.

[https://wbindustries.gov.in/policies-schemes/Notification for West Bengal Logistics Policy.pdf](https://wbindustries.gov.in/policies-schemes/Notification%20for%20West%20Bengal%20Logistics%20Policy.pdf)

¹¹ West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation. (2023). *West Bengal Industrial and Economic Corridor Policy, 2023*.

<https://wbidc.com/assets/pdf/WB%20Industrial%20Corridor%20Policy%2C%202023%20%28Gazatte%2029.pdf>

¹² Government of West Bengal. (2023). *West Bengal Export Promotion Policy, 2023*.

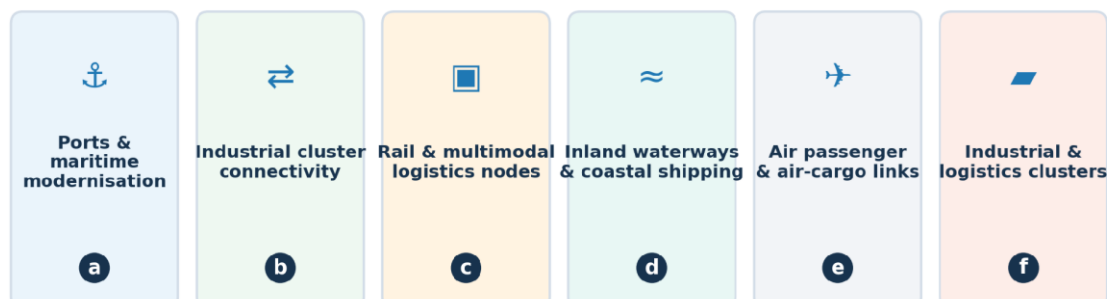
[https://wbindustries.gov.in/policies-schemes/WB Export Promotion Policy 2023.pdf](https://wbindustries.gov.in/policies-schemes/WB%20Export%20Promotion%20Policy%202023.pdf)

¹³ CUTS International. (n.d.). *Railway connectivity in the BBIN sub-region and its potential* [Briefing paper]. https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/bp-railway_connectivity_in_the_BBIN_sub-region_and_its_potential.pdf

Figure 2: Six Infrastructure Priorities in the West Bengal Gateway Agenda

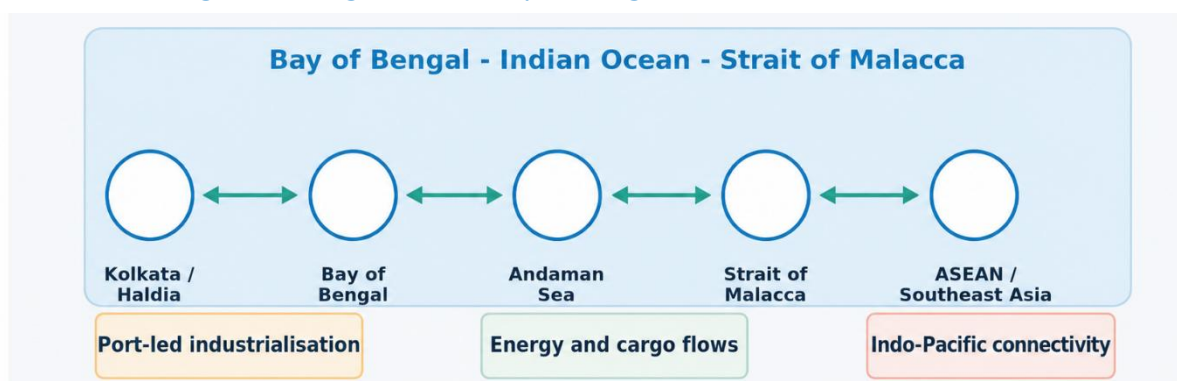
Six priority pillars for the gateway strategy

Infrastructure, trade facilitation and investment alignment should be treated as one integrated agenda.



Identifying Bengal's Maritime Vitality across Straits

Figure 3: Bengal and the Bay of Bengal-Malacca Maritime Interface



Bengal's maritime vitality is centred around its historical intersection with the "Straits World," in particular the Strait of Malacca and the adjacent critical maritime corridors which connect the Bay of Bengal region with the rest of Southeast and South Asia. This includes the South China Sea, Java Sea Network, and the broader Indian Ocean.¹⁴

Medieval Bengal has largely evolved as a vital maritime frontier where Bengal's riverine framework in general was defined by the deltaic "Bhati" region characterised by a navigable water ecosystem and affected by the monsoon-driven seaborne interaction. This characterised Bengal's active role in coordinating transnational maritime trade and commerce across the entire region.¹⁵

The Strait of Malacca is located at the crossroads of Malaysia and Singapore and connects the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea, thus playing a pivotal role in regulating the influence of both India and China in this particular continent. Historically, Bengal has been a centrifugal point integrating trade

¹⁴ Xavier, C., & Palit, A. (Eds.). (2023). *Connectivity and cooperation in the Bay of Bengal region*. Centre for Social and Economic Progress. https://csep.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/BBC_Report-F1-1.pdf

¹⁵ The Daily Star. (n.d.). *Bengal's ties to the straits of the world*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/focus/news/bengals-ties-straits-world-3897836>

and cultural exchange with the greater population. Bengali merchants, traders, diplomats, sailors, and religious mentors have extensively used the strait waterways.

During earlier times, Chittagong Port played an essential role alongside Satgaon, Pipili, and later Hugli in linking Bengal with the Malacca, Arakan, Pegu, Ayutthaya, and the wider Malay world. Despite frequent disturbances evoked by the presence of pirates followed by riverine shifts, cyclones, epidemics, and colonial intervention, Bengal has still demonstrated unshakable maritime resilience. Even after partition, Chittagong has continued to maintain commercial exchanges with the Eastern Indian Ocean.

When dissected under contemporary analysis, Bengal reveals an extraordinary linkage with the Strait, and this helps Bengal to acquire a renewed relevance under India's Act East framework and the broader Indo-Pacific discourse. The Bay of Bengal continues to be strategically associated with the Strait of Malacca, which has inadvertently emerged as one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints through which a substantial share of global trade and energy flows in transit. The Strait of Malacca is important for the import of industrial goods, pharmaceuticals, and electronic products from China and ASEAN and for the import of coal from Australia and Indonesia uses this passage for trade. The Strait of Malacca has also become geopolitically significant for both India and the United States in the broader Indo-Pacific vision to counterbalance China's growing presence in Asia through a series of multilateral cooperation and strategic partnership initiatives.¹⁶

The proposition for a maritime gateway for Bengal rests on three spatial advantages. Firstly, West Bengal offers the shortest and the most practically assessed overland interface connecting the Indian mainland with Northeast India via the Siliguri Corridor. Secondly, India inadvertently shares a vital continental and riverine interface with neighbouring Bangladesh, whose ports and inland waterways are significantly relevant for cargo movement in general. Thirdly, the Bay of Bengal coastline and the associated port infrastructures link the eastern section of India's hinterland with the maritime corridors of the Southeast Asian countries.¹⁷

Bengal as a Critical Cornerstone in India's Foreign Policy

Bengal in India-ASEAN-Indo-Pacific: India's Eastern Gateway to the Bay of Bengal

West Bengal possesses a unique location with regard to India's eastern strategic positioning. The geographical proximity at the confluence of the Bay of Bengal, South Asia, and India's northeastern region renders the state a significant opportunity to foster India's diplomatic engagements with ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific. The Bay of Bengal has been recognised as one of the most consequential sub-regions within the wider Indo-Pacific. The growing focus in this region highlights a strategic shift in India's foreign policy priorities and strengthens economic and institutional development alongside evolving ties with the Southeast Asian countries. This reaffirms the advancement of a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific.¹⁸

An analysis of West Bengal's geographic location reveals its position as located at the intersection of regional connectivity corridors. This helps the state to utilise maritime access to the Bay of Bengal,

¹⁶ Maritime India. (n.d.). *India-Bangladesh maritime trade: Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT)*. <https://maritimeindia.org/india-bangladesh-maritime-trade-protocol-on-inland-water-transit-and-trade-piwt/>

¹⁷ Press Information Bureau, Government of India. (2018). *India-Bangladesh inland waterway and coastal shipping arrangements*. <https://www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1550795&lang=2®=3>

¹⁸ Asian Confluence. (n.d.). *The Bay of Bengal: A microcosm of Indo-Pacific competition and cooperation*. <https://www.asianconfluence.org/publication-details-full/the-bay-of-bengal-a-microcosm-of-indo-pacific-competition-and-cooperation>

share extensive borders with neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, and act as a critical link between the Indian mainland and the Northeastern region. Furthermore, this linkage helps Bengal act as a neutral node for regional connectivity and even leverage its potential to facilitate cross-border trade, multimodal transport systems, and economic integration. Bengal’s strategic advantage lies in its future potential to utilise these existing capabilities and realise its role within India's Indo-Pacific strategy.¹⁹

India's engagement with the Bay of Bengal and Southeast Asia in the future will increasingly rely upon its willingness to strengthen these multiple eastern connectivity hubs. Within this evolving Indo-Pacific architecture, West Bengal has the prospect of becoming one of India's most significant gateways for regional cooperation, economic integration, and strategic engagement with ASEAN and the broader Indo-Pacific.²⁰

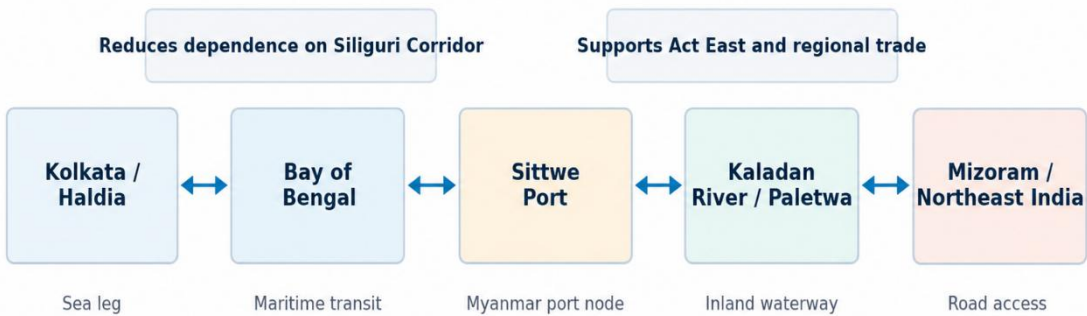
Kolkata in Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Corridor

India has established strategic ties with Western Myanmar through an international transport project that connects the Eastern Indian seaport of Kolkata with the Sittwe seaport in Rakhine state of Myanmar. The project’s first phase is currently operational at the Sittwe Port and is under Indian supervision.'

Figure 4: Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Corridor Schematic Flow

Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Corridor

A schematic showing the sea-river-road sequence connecting Kolkata to Myanmar and Northeast India.



This multi-modal transport will enable economic development, extending to Northeastern parts of India and would reduce the strategic pressure on the Siliguri Corridor or the Chicken’s Neck. The 2026 electoral mandate of Bengal, with New Delhi’s strategic emphasis on Indo-Pacific diplomacy, has focused on trade, connectivity, and maritime diplomacy linking India with ASEAN, Bangladesh, and Myanmar.

The Chilahati-Haldibari Rail Link between India and Bangladesh has revived the historic connectivity routes. These connectivity projects undertaken with Bangladesh and Myanmar are a hint at India’s future strategic outreach that shall extend up to Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Singapore, and Vietnam. This will assist in Bengal’s growth as an economic geography, which will further help the state to foster regional trade, open up economic corridors, create more logistical hubs, and ensure an optimistic industrial expansion in future. Over time, Bengal’s prominence has declined with the rise of western

¹⁹ Diplomatist. (n.d.). *Bay of Bengal: The Indo-Pacific’s emerging strategic core.* <https://diplomatist.com/bay-of-bengal-the-indo-pacifics-emerging-strategic-core/>

²⁰ Centre for Social and Economic Progress. (n.d.). *Introduction: Fostering cooperation to connect the Bay of Bengal region.* <https://csep.org/reports/introduction-fostering-cooperation-to-connect-the-bay-of-bengal-region/>

ports in Mumbai, Chennai, Visakhapatnam, and Kandla. Kolkata Port has often faced stagnation, operational backlash, and infrastructural deficiencies.

The Sagarmala project undertaken by the Government of India, is envisaged to unlock the capabilities of Indian waterways and coastline, led by the Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways. This initiative aims at modernising India's port ecosystem and ensures greater state and centre coordination.

Following the West Bengal Legislative Assembly elections of April-May 2026, the Bharatiya Janata Party formed the state government. This new administration has inherited a number of ongoing infrastructural and connectivity projects relevant to West Bengal's role in India's Act East and Indo-Pacific. Expectations have been leveraged around the development of Dadanpatrabar as the site for the development of a deep-sea port alongside the state associating itself with the Centre's Sagarmala 2.0 Programme.

By June 2026, the West Bengal government scrapped the Tajpur port project and proposed 1,700 acres of state-owned land available for development. This has several strategic implications. It will reduce pressure from the pre-existing Kolkata and Haldia Port as well as on ports located in the neighbouring states like Odisha's Paradip, and generate mass direct and indirect employment.

Bengal's maritime link in the context of BIMSTEC MCA must be added. Besides, the new ICTP project at Galathia Bay should be added. Bengal is also the maritime gateway for Northeast India, Nepal and Bhutan. This has to be underlined.

Bengal in Act East Policy

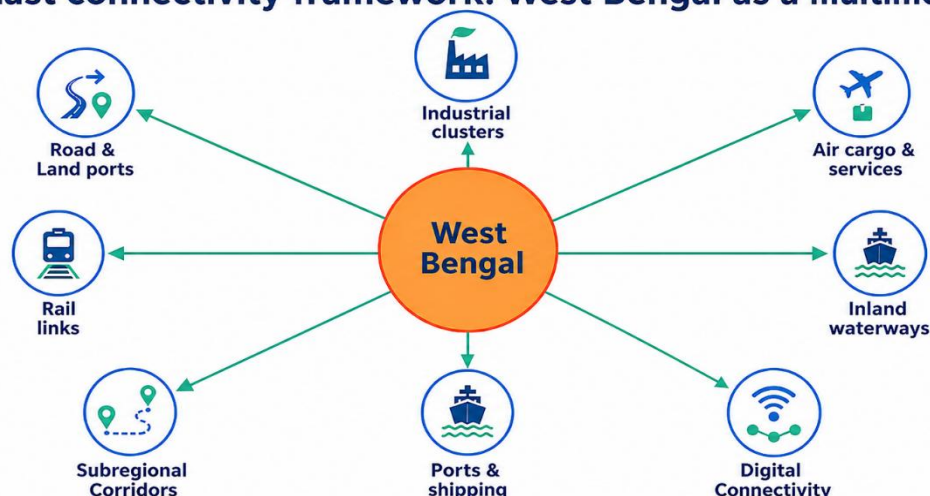
Bengal's role in the Act East Policy will boost its economy, improve the employment situation and have a positive impact on the overall revenue of the state. The Act East Policy will help Bengal manifest its commercial relationship, connectivity diplomacy, and socio-economic ties with the ASEAN and the BIMSTEC nations. Bengal has the 3rd largest road network in the country. Inland Waterways play a very crucial role in this situation.

The Jal Marg Vikas project connects Haldia with Varanasi through National Waterway 1. The Coastal Shipping Agreement between India and Bangladesh signed in 2015, furthered bilateral cooperation between both countries, indicating a revival in their partnership which was adversely impacted due to the partition. This agreement established a two-way trade route for both India and Bangladesh through their designated ports.²¹

²¹ CUTS International. (n.d.). *India–Bangladesh coastal shipping agreement* [Working note]. <https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/working-note-india-bangladesh-coastal-shipping-agreement.pdf>

Figure 5: Act East Multimodal Connectivity Framework

Act East connectivity framework: West Bengal as a multimodal hub



Mode-wise Connectivity Assessment: Road, Rail, Ports, Waterways, Air and Regional Trade Links

To assess the paper's strategic objective, connectivity needs to be evaluated across various modes with a comparative analysis between existing assets, contemporary improvements, unresolved bottlenecks and the judicious importance of these stated modes for upgrading West Bengal's gateway role.

Table 1: Mode-wise Connectivity Assessment for West Bengal

Mode	Existing assets and ongoing improvements	Recognising Gaps and actions required
Roadways	Elongated State based Road networks; National and State Highways; pre-existing approaches to Petrapole-Benapole, Hili, Changrabandha, Phulbari and other adjacent land ports; urban flyovers, bypasses and arterial corridors.	Calls for improved last-mile links to ports, ICDs, land customs stations, industrial parks and tourism circuits; reducing congestion near Kolkata, Siliguri and major border corridors; align road upgrades with BBIN freight movement.
Railways	Historic Kolkata-Dhaka, Kolkata-Khulna and NJP-Dhaka passenger rail links; freight corridors through Gede-Darshana, Petrapole-Benapole, Radhikapur-Birol, Singhabad-Rohanpur and Haldibari-Chilahati; Siliguri/NJP as a BBIN hub.	Revive the temporarily suspended passenger services when political conditions are suitable; expand freight-handling capabilities, revisiting customs facilities and multimodal terminals; prioritise connectivity projects to Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and the Northeast.

Mode	Existing assets and ongoing improvements	Recognising Gaps and actions required
Ports and Maritime Connectivity	Kolkata Dock System and Haldia Dock Complex remain the state's central maritime assets; SMPK has reported record cargo performance in FY 2025-26; proposed deep-sea capacity at Tajpur/Sagar/Kulpi-type projects can reduce draft limitations. ²²	Resolve deep-sea port location, land, rail and highway connectivity issues; modernise dredging, mechanised cargo handling, digital port operations and port-led industrial zones.
Inland waterways and coastal shipping facilities	National Waterway-1 links Haldia with the Ganga hinterland ²³ ; JMVP has developed multimodal terminals including Haldia; PIWTT and coastal shipping connect Kolkata/Haldia with Bangladesh and the Northeast. ²⁴	Manage navigability, terminal connectivity, customs processes, riverine information details and private cargo aggregation.
Airways	Kolkata is the principal international aviation gateway for Bengal; Bagdogra serves North Bengal, Sikkim and Himalayan tourism; Andal/Kazi Nazrul and other regional airports can assist in distributed growth and upgradation.	Underscores the need for a dedicated air-connectivity passage covering passenger growth, air cargo, perishables, tourism, medical travel, services exports and broader regional connectivity under UDAN/airport expansion plans. ²⁵
Regional trade connectivity	BBIN MVA, BIMSTEC transport planning, India-Bangladesh rail/water/road links ²⁶ and border haats provided the institutional platform for greater regional integration. ²⁷	Expand from route-listing to trade facilitation: modernising customs and services, check posts, digital permits, logistics standards, warehousing and predictable cross-border rules and protocols.
Border Connectivity (LCSs/ICPs)	Established network of LCSs and ICPs connecting West Bengal with neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan. These networks include cargo terminals, warehousing, integrated customs systems, and improved road and logistics connectivity to facilitate cross-border trade and movement. ²⁸	The need to address Infrastructure bottlenecks at border points, expand cargo-handling and warehousing capacity, improve multimodal connectivity, and streamline customs and transit procedures to enhance regional trade.

²² Syama Prasad Mookerjee Port, Kolkata. (n.d.). *Cargo statistics*.
<https://smportkolkata.shipping.gov.in/smpk/kol/en/cargo-statistics/>

²³ Inland Waterways Authority of India. (n.d.). *National Waterway-1 and Jal Marg Vikas Project*.
<https://iwai.nic.in/nationalwaterways/national-waterways-1-declaration>

²⁴ Press Information Bureau, Government of India. (2025, December 9). *Jal Marg Vikas Project: Update*.
<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2200919>

²⁵ Airports Authority of India. (n.d.). *Traffic news and aviation traffic statistics*.
<https://www.aai.aero/en/business-opportunities/aai-traffic-news>

²⁶ Asian Development Bank. (n.d.). *Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement*. Asia Regional Integration Center. <https://aric.adb.org/initiative/bangladesh-bhutan-india-and-nepal-motor-vehicles-agreement>

²⁷ BIMSTEC Secretariat. (2023). *BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity*.
https://bimstec.org/images/content_page_pdf/1696679586_BIMSTEC_Master%20Plan%20for%20Transport%20Connectivity.pdf

²⁸ Land Ports Authority of India. (2021). *Linking land borders: India's Integrated Check Posts*.
https://www.lpai.gov.in/sites/default/files/2021-10/WP_Linking-land-borders-ICP-1.pdf

Air connectivity requires to be given an underlying strategic significance as an economic infrastructural component and should not be merely reduced to passenger convenience. Kolkata's international airport, Bagdogra's role in North Bengal and the Himalayan region, and the potential of regional airports for tourism, perishables, pharmaceuticals, IT/ITES and high-value cargo must be given central emphasis in the investment-hub argument. The absence of this stated discussion creates a formidable major gap in the existing draft and the subsequent discussion that follows.

The 4 agreed upon Routes for the movement of the vessels include:

Table 2: Agreed Coastal Shipping Routes under the India-Bangladesh Coastal Shipping Agreement²⁹

Route	Port sequence
Route 1	Chennai-Krishnapatnam-Kakinada-Visakhapatnam-Paradip-Haldia-Kolkata-Mongla-Payra-Chittagong
Route 2	Chennai-Krishnapatnam-Kakinada-Visakhapatnam-Paradip-Haldia-Kolkata-Mongla-Khulna
Route 3	Chennai-Krishnapatnam-Kakinada-Visakhapatnam-Paradip-Haldia-Kolkata-Payra
Route 4	Chennai-Krishnapatnam-Kakinada-Visakhapatnam-Paradip-Haldia-Kolkata-Pangao-Narayangonj-Ashugonj

Bunker Supply Points and Ports of Call

Table 3: Bunker Supply Points and Ports of Call [2]

INDIA	BANGLADESH
CHENNAI	CHITTAGONG
KRISHNAPATNAM	MONGLA
VISAKHAPATNAM	KHULNA
KAKINADA	PAYRA
PARADIP	NARAYANGONJ
HALDIA	PANGAO
KOLKATA	ASHUGONJ

This agreement has reinforced Bengal's geographical significance as a regional connectivity bridge between Eastern India, Bangladesh, the Northeast, and wider Southeast Asia. It underlines the transformative character of Bengal from just existing as a peripheral region into a central logistical hub within the broader Act East Policy and the Bay of Bengal initiative (SOURCE: National Maritime

²⁹ This information is cited from the India-Bangladesh's Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) on Agreement on Coastal Shipping. This provided standardised guidelines to facilitate efficient coastal cargo movement through simplified documentation, vessel operations, and port procedures.

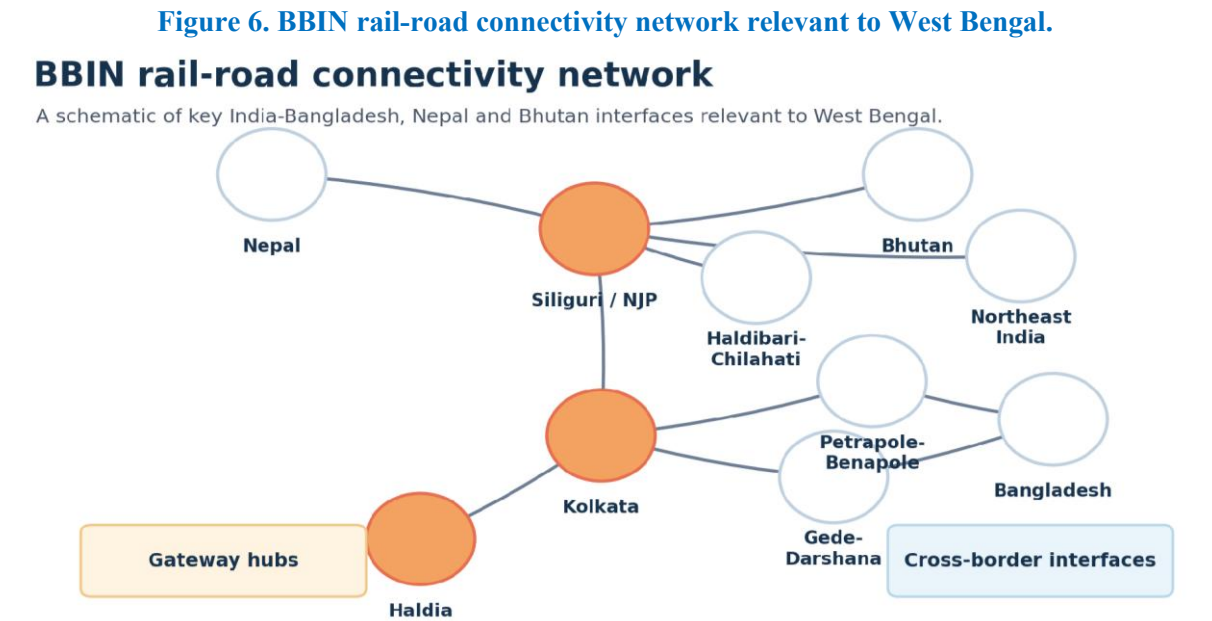
Foundation). Moreover, the India-Bangladesh Protocol Route (IBP) or the Indo- Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT) manages the inland vessels of the two countries, facilitating a smooth navigation through specific waterways.³⁰

Delhi-Varanasi-Siliguri High-Speed Rail Corridor

The Siliguri to Varanasi to Delhi High-Speed Rail Corridor has the potential to significantly enhance regional connectivity and strengthen West Bengal's position within India's emerging transportation network. Announced as part of the Union Budget 2026–27, the corridor aims to connect the National Capital Region with eastern India through high-speed rail, substantially reducing travel time between Delhi, Varanasi, and Siliguri. For West Bengal, the inclusion of Siliguri is particularly significant given its strategic location as the gateway to Northeast India and its proximity to neighbouring countries such as Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. Improved connectivity is expected to facilitate the movement of people, promote tourism and investment, and support the development of logistics and associated service sector industries in North Bengal.

In conjunction with existing road, rail, and regional connectivity initiatives, the corridor could contribute to transforming Siliguri into a major multimodal transport and economic hub, thereby enhancing West Bengal's role in regional economic integration and India's broader connectivity ambitions in eastern South Asia.³¹

Role of Rail and Road Connectivity in the BBIN Sub-region



Source: Original schematic prepared for this redesigned briefing paper.

The Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA), signed in 2015, has made significant progress towards operationalisation, with Bangladesh, India, and Nepal advancing

³⁰ Press Information Bureau, Government of India. (2018). *India–Bangladesh inland waterway and coastal shipping arrangements*. <https://www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1550795®=3&lang=2>

³¹ Press Information Bureau, Government of India. (2026). *Union Budget 2026–27: Seven new high-speed rail corridors announced*. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2222767®=48&lang=2>

implementation initiatives following the finalisation of the implementation protocol. While Bhutan has consented to the protocol, it is not presently participating in the pilot implementation process.

Once operationalised, the BBIN MVA is expected to enhance cross-border passenger and cargo movement, strengthen sub-regional economic integration, and reinforce West Bengal's strategic importance as a connectivity and logistics hub linking South Asia with Southeast Asia. This overarching framework identified around 30 key connectivity projects, with India developing economic corridors to improve trade and commerce, increase mobility, and promote development.

For India, BBIN has strategic significance because of the escalating influence of China through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's expanding infrastructure networks, port access, and economic ties with Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan increases the regional influence, underscoring the need for India to maintain mutual convergence through regional partnerships. Through cross-border transport and connectivity projects, India seeks to address gaps in the regional integration process such as inadequate infrastructure and heightened regional security concerns, while at the same time, promoting trade, people to people ties, development, and stability in South Asia.³²

India has financed around five railway links for Bangladesh wherein India’s railway finance in Bangladesh has sought to improve trading infrastructure through connectivity projects centered in and around the Mongla Port which is the second busiest port, located in Khulna, Bangladesh. These projects aim to connect Mongla Port with India via West Bengal. Furthermore, India’s proposal of a railway corridor from Banarhat (Jalpaiguri) with Samtse (industrial city in Bhutan) characterised by a large-scale investment of 577 crore is significant for India since Samtse is a major industrial and export hub in Bhutan and this project would ensure local industries better access to Indian raw materials. Furthermore, connectivity lines such as Mitali Express (Jalpaiguri-Dhaka), Maitree Express (Kolkata-Dhaka), and Bandhan Express (Kolkata-Khulna) operated via Petrapole (India) and Benapole (Bangladesh) further highlights the significance of maintaining international connectivity between two countries.

However, these lines are currently suspended due to the political unrest that unfolded in Bangladesh in 2024. Earlier, the COVID 19 Pandemic had adversely impacted all the connectivity projects. Linkages currently operational between India and Bangladesh for passenger and freight movement likely includes Petrapole-Benapole, Gede-Darshana, Singhabad-Rohanpur, Radhikapur-Birol, and Chilahati-Haldibari. Moreover, the Singhabad-Rohanpur and Radhikapur-Birol are used exclusively for freight movement.

Important Operation Routes

Table 4: Important India-Bangladesh Operation Routes [2]

INDIA	BANGLADESH
GEDE	DARSHANA
PETRAPOLE	BENAPOLE
RADHIKAPUR	BIROL
SINGHABAD	ROHANPUR
HALDIBARI	CHILAHATI

³² CUTS International. (n.d.). *Railway connectivity in the BBIN sub-region and its potential* [Briefing paper]. https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/bp-railway_connectivity_in_the_BBIN_sub-region_and_its_potential.pdf

Some routes, such as Singhabad-Rohanpur and Radhikapur-Birol are vital economic and transit corridors connecting Nepal with Bangladesh via India. The Gede–Darshana route is particularly significant in the context of the Trans-Asian Railway Network, whereas the Petrapole–Benapole is a pivotal area for conducting trade and further communication. Bangladesh Railways has earned substantial revenue from this growing freight movement, emphasising the economic importance of rail transport.

Moreover, in order to strengthen connectivity, both countries are developing new rail links such as Agartala-Akhaura, Hili–Birampur, and New Jalpaiguri/Rangapani–Banglabandha. These projects share the aspirational vision of reducing extreme congestion at land ports, lowering transportation costs, elevate the accessing facilities to Bangladesh’s ports, thereby enhancing connectivity for India’s further Northeast region.

In addition, the proposal to revive the defunct Changrabandha–Burimari rail link is simultaneously strategic because it can give a boost to trade and commerce among India, Bangladesh, and Bhutan under the broader ambition of the BBIN framework. These proposals for expanding rail connectivity are considered to be cost-effective alternatives for trade promotion, regional integration, transit cooperation, and the broader Act East and Neighbourhood Connectivity objectives.³³

India has been actively promoting railway connectivity with Nepal and Bhutan to strengthen regional integration, trade, and people-to-people ties. In Nepal, cooperation is centred on the 2004 Rail Services Agreement, under which the Raxaul–Sirsiya freight rail link and the Jayanagar–Kurtha passenger railway have become operational. India and Nepal are also pursuing the proposed Raxaul–Kathmandu railway and several cross-border links connected to Nepal’s ambitious East–West Railway Corridor, although progress has been slowed by land acquisition and terrain-related challenges. In Bhutan, which currently lacks a railway network, India has conducted feasibility studies for multiple rail links, including the proposed Kokrajhar–Gelephu line, which is expected to become Bhutan’s first rail connection. These initiatives aim to enhance connectivity, facilitate trade and cargo movement, support economic development, and improve regional integration in the eastern Himalayan region.

Siliguri (Chicken’s Neck) is emerging as the most important hub for sub-regional railway connectivity in the BBIN region (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal). Owing to its strategic location near the borders of Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan, and its strong road, rail, and air connectivity, Siliguri serves as the gateway to Northeast India.

The New Jalpaiguri (NJP) railway station already functions as an international passenger and cargo terminal, hosting services such as the Mitali Express between India and Bangladesh. Under the BIMSTEC Master Plan, several railway projects, including the New Jalpaiguri–Kakarbhitta link with Nepal and the Kokrajhar–Gelephu link with Bhutan, are being developed to provide landlocked countries with better multimodal transport access.

Bangladesh has also proposed connecting Banglabandha with the Indian rail network through NJP or Rangapani. Together, these projects position Siliguri as a key regional logistics and transit hub, facilitating seamless movement of passengers and cargo, reducing transport costs, enhancing trade and economic integration, and promoting sustainable connectivity across the BBIN sub-region.

³³ BIMSTEC Secretariat. (2023). *BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity*. https://bimstec.org/images/content_page_pdf/1696679586_BIMSTEC_Master%20Plan%20for%20Transport%20Connectivity.pdf

West Bengal as a Strategic Investment Hub in Eastern India

The opportunities surrounding West Bengal's investment picture are constructed around transforming connectivity into financially viable industrial ecosystems. Within this context, the state's optimistic gateway location is commercially significant, provided investors believe in reliable land-based logistics, increased port access, customs efficiency, a skilled labour workforce, strict regulation, industrial land, and clear central-state facilitation is thoroughly facilitated.

Priority sectors are therefore, identified in a cluster-based position: port-led logistics and warehousing around Kolkata-Haldia-Dankuni and the deep-sea port infrastructural ecosystem; petrochemicals, and downstream industries around Haldia; engineering, MSME sectors around Howrah, Durgapur-Asansol and Kharagpur; agro-processing, cold chain, fisheries, food exports; other subsequent supply chains in North and South Bengal (textiles, jute, leather and tea with export branding); pharmaceuticals and healthcare; IT/ITES, fintech, education and high-skill services in the Kolkata metropolitan areas; and tourism-linked infrastructure in North Bengal, the Sundarbans and heritage circuits are maintained and frequently supervised.³⁴

Additionally, West Bengal must prioritise emerging and future-oriented industries to strengthen its position as a dedicated investment destination in the coming decades. Key sectors include semiconductor and electronics manufacturing, supported by industrial infrastructure and a skilled workforce; green mobility and electric vehicle production, along with battery manufacturing and related supply chains; shipbuilding and ship repair industries that can capitalise on the state's maritime and inland waterway networks; renewable energy and green hydrogen-based manufacturing; and aerospace and defence production in line with India's growing emphasis on domestic industrial capabilities.

The development of maritime ancillary industries, such as marine engineering, logistics technologies, and coastal industrial services, also presents significant opportunities for growth. Establishing industrial clusters and policy support for these sunrise sectors would not only diversify West Bengal's industrial base but also strengthen its role as Eastern India's leading investment and manufacturing hub.³⁵

Implementation of a Robust Roadmap

Formulating a recommendatory robust roadmap should be recast as a properly sequenced implementary vision instead of a general set of normative suggestions.

Figure 7: Sequenced Implementation Roadmap

Sequenced implementation roadmap



³⁴ Government of West Bengal. (2023). *West Bengal Export Promotion Policy, 2023*.

https://wbindustries.gov.in/policies-schemes/WB_Export_Promotion_Policy_2023.pdf

³⁵ Department of Industry, Commerce and Enterprises, Government of West Bengal. (2023). *West Bengal New and Renewable Energy Manufacturing Promotion Policy, 2023*. <https://www.wbindustries.gov.in/>

Table 5: Implementation Roadmap: Time Horizon, Actions and Expected Results

Time horizon	Priority actions	Expected result
Short term: 0-24 months	Create an official infrastructure project dashboard; update port, road, rail, air and inland waterway data; restore/normalise rail and passenger links with Bangladesh when feasible; improve border-gate logistics; terminal efficiency and digital customs; prepare investor friendly project profiles.	Immediate credibility, enhanced evidence premises, faster trade cooperation and ensuring stronger investor confidence.
Medium term: 2-5 years	Operationalise logistics parks and freight villages; integrate ports with road, rail and inland water terminals; expand Kolkata/Haldia cargo capacity; develop air-cargo and cold-chain systems; cluster industries along Kolkata-Dankuni-Haldia-Siliguri and Durgapur-Asansol-Kharagpur corridors.	Lower logistics costs, stronger export capacity, port-led industrialisation and deeper regional supply-chain integration.
Long term: 5-10 years	Develop deep-sea port capacity with assured land, rail and highway connectivity; position Kolkata as a Bay of Bengal business, policy and maritime diplomacy hub; link BBIN and BIMSTEC corridors with industrial zones, tourism circuits and service-sector ecosystems.	West Bengal creates a durable gateway to South and Southeast Asia, converging trade, industry, services and regional diplomacy.

Way Forward

- West Bengal possesses geographical leverage, coupled by historical legacy, and strategic positioning vital to its development as India's gateway to South and Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, this ambitious vision advocates the need for a comprehensive approach that converges infrastructural development with regional advantages and diplomatic enhancement. This calls for an immediate channelling of the state's inherent capabilities and leveraging its positioning between the Bay of Bengal and the eastern Himalayan region that would strengthen India's Act East Policy, Neighbourhood First Policy, and broader Indo-Pacific strategies.

Thus, by consolidating transport networks, maritime infrastructure, and cross-border economic cooperation, West Bengal can revive its historical role as the epicentre of trade, commerce and connectivity in Asia.³⁶ The state may also consider adopting a dedicated Act East strategy for West Bengal, aligned with India's national Act East Policy, to provide a policy framework for advancing connectivity, trade facilitation, and regional economic integration.³⁷

- Highest priority should be centered around modernisation and expansion of the state's interim maritime infrastructure. Following the discontinuation of the earlier proposed Tajpur Deep Sea Port

³⁶ Government of West Bengal, Finance Department. (2026). *Budget speech 2026–2027*. https://finance.wb.gov.in/writereaddata/Budget_Speech/2026-2027_English_I.pdf

³⁷ CUTS International. (n.d.). *Railway connectivity in the BBIN sub-region and its potential* [Briefing paper]. https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/bp-railway_connectivity_in_the_BBIN_sub-region_and_its_potential.pdf

due to land and connectivity restraints, the state government has recently identified Dadanpatrabar, located approximately 10km from Tajpur as the new site for deep sea port development.

Besides, the Kolkata Port and Haldia Dock Complex call for continuous innovation through technological improvements, improved cargo management mechanisms, improved dredging frameworks, and greater logistical enhancement.³⁸ The thriving implementation of projects under the broader Sagarmala Project, alongside the development of Sagar Port and other port-led projects, would consequently increase existing cargo capacities and work on Bengal's capabilities in regional and global maritime trade.

- The reinforcement of multimodal connectivity has emerged as equally advantageous. West Bengal's strategic importance is located in its capability to merge the Indian mainland with the neighbouring Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Northeast India, and eventually Southeast Asia. Therefore, priority must be directed towards implementing pending railway, road, and inland waterway projects under the larger BBIN framework.

Reactivating suspended rail services networks with Bangladesh, expanding border infrastructure at Petrapole-Benapole and Chilahati-Haldibari, and enhancing the efficiency of inland waterways under the Jal Marg Vikas Project³⁹ can substantially reduce transportation costs and improve trade flows network. Greater integration of road, rail, riverine, and maritime transport networks will locate Bengal within the larger ambit to operate as a seamless logistical corridor that will converge India with both South and Southeast Asia.⁴⁰

- Regional connectivity initiatives under BIMSTEC and BBIN necessitates to be utilised more efficiently. West Bengal acts as a bridge connecting South Asia and Southeast Asia due to its geographical proximity to the larger Bay of Bengal region and its historically established commercial ties with the region. The state plays an important role in emphasising trade, commerce, tourism, cultural connectivity, and economic partnership among the BIMSTEC participating countries.

Kolkata particularly emerged as a centre of regional diplomacy and economic collaboration by hosting maritime summits, business conferences, policy forums, and future investment dialogues. These initiatives generate the possibility of strengthening Bengal's probability of emerging as a hub for diplomatic engagement and enhance India's influence across the broader Bay of Bengal region.⁴¹

- Besides connectivity projects, industrial development emerged as a central area for renewed focus. Improved infrastructural development yields maximum benefits when complemented by strong industrial prosperity. The state needs to work on the establishment of export-oriented manufacturing capabilities, logistics parks, petrochemical and food processing units, pharmaceutical industries, and textile clusters near major transport corridors.

Port-led modernisation can enhance direct large-scale employment chances, attract domestic and foreign investment⁴², and integrate Bengal into further diverse and global supply chains. The development of industrial corridors around Kolkata, Haldia ports can enhance the state's economic mechanisms.⁴³

³⁸ Hindustan Times. (2026). *Bengal govt scraps Tajpur deep-sea port project, identifies new site 10 km away*. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/bengal-govt-scraps-tajpur-deep-sea-port-project-identifies-new-site-10-km-away-101780581443232.html>

³⁹ Inland Waterways Authority of India. (n.d.). National Waterway-1 and Jal Marg Vikas Project. <https://iwai.nic.in/nationalwaterways/national-waterways-1-declaration>

⁴⁰ Press Information Bureau, Government of India. (2025, December 9). Jal Marg Vikas Project: Update. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2200919>

⁴¹ BIMSTEC Secretariat. (2023). BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity. https://bimstec.org/images/content_page_pdf/1696679586_BIMSTEC_Master%20Plan%20for%20Transport%20Connectivity.pdf

⁴² Government of West Bengal. (2023). West Bengal Logistics Policy, 2023. https://wbindustries.gov.in/policies-schemes/Notification_for_West_Bengal_Logistics_Policy.pdf

⁴³ West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation. (2023). West Bengal Industrial and Economic Corridor Policy, 2023.

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