**Mobilityscapes in Public Boats: A Case Study of Commuting in Mashuk Bazar Area, Sylhet**

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**Abstract**

This study explores the unique dynamics of commuting via public boats, focusing on the experiences of commuters and boatmen. We used  qualitative approach with case study, semi-structured, unstructured interviews and observations in this research. Our aim of the study is to show how spatial and social forces are affecting commuter’s daily lives.

**Introduction**

Commuting is a significant form of spatial mobility (Mondal, 2015). For most people, a commuter is someone who lives in the periphery, travels to work in the urban core, and travels back home at the end of the working day. Research on commuting in Canada’s major cities indicates that although commuting remains common, the picture is becoming more complex with increasing periphery-to-periphery flows (Heisz and LaRochelle-Côté, 2005). Various studies have focused on rural commuting, (Schindegger et al., 1997), but, outside major agglomerations, the understanding of the multidirectional nature of commuting patterns is more limited (Harris et al., 2002). Although some think commuting as an urban phenomenon, rural-to-rural commuting is more complex and multidimensional (Harris et al., 2008). Rural-to-urban commuting is one of the key components of rural-urban integration. Population of rural areas may grow without the growth of local job centres, and thus a broad regional economy is developed. Some rural areas are located far from the urban shadow. With increasing distance from urban centres, the rate of rural-to-urban commuting lowers down (Vaidyanathan, 1986). As opposed to the peri-urban villages, inter-rural commuting is more prominent there (Mondal, 2015).

The development of transportation and improvements in the various modes have impacted not only economic and socio-cultural activities, but also played a major role in spatial organization, spatial ordering and spatial process. Inland Waterways Transport (IWT) in UK is the movement of people and goods along waterways (Felinda, 2006; Obeta, 2014). Inland waterway transportation plays an essential role in the socio-economic development of any nation (Aiyegbajeje & Deinne, 2023).

Boat commuting is a way to travel to work by boat or ferry, and it can be a comfortable, affordable, and environmentally friendly way to get around. Boats provide a vital means of transportation for people and goods, especially in areas where roads are not feasible. They are essential for trade, connecting islands and coastal communities. Bangladesh is a riverine country. Ferry boats are the major means of communication in the rural area (Kabir et al., 2016). Boat is an important transportation system in Bangladesh. Ferrying services developed at suitable points along both sides of the big rivers for transporting vehicle, goods and people are also called ghats. Aricha, Nagarbari, Daulatdia, Mawa and Bahadurabad ghats of Bangladesh are the best examples of this type (*Ghat - Banglapedia*, n.d.). To maximize the use of boat multiple 'ghats' are created. Every ghats has its own identity and purpose. Sylhet, Bangladesh has several major rivers, including surma, Kushiyara and Dhanu-Boulai-Ghor (*Boat Transportation in Sylhet Pdf - Google Search*, n.d.). For this reason, in some areas of Sylhet division, boats are one of the modes of transport for transportation and transportation of goods. As a result, local peoples are using boats for mobility though they have some alternative way to commute (Inspireli, n.d.). In this research, we aim to examine “commuting” as a particular event to analyze how social life is shaped by commuting.

**Problem statement:**

There are many studies related to commuting but there’s not any specific work in context of Mashukbazar, Sylhet. And some of the literatures have worked on this topic many years ago. But there's not any sufficient recent studies that worked on commuting by boat in rural area.

**Study questions:**

A study's questions are generally directed toward how and why considerations, and their articulation and definition is the first task of the researcher. We selected two study questions for our research.

* Why are the people of Mashuk Bazar still using boats as their daily commuting?
* How are the people experiencing the boat commuting?

**Objective**

***Broad Objective :***

This research explores how ferry commuting is shaped by spatial and social forces and affects commuters’ daily lives.

***Specific Objectives:***

1. To illustrate what social and spatial forces shape commuters’ means of transportation for their mobility.

2. To explore the challenges faced by residents while commuting from and to their homes.

**Theoretical Framework**

Sharon R. Roseman, in his article "Precarious Mobility and Spectacle Dwelling on a Ferry Commute" examines the experiences of commuters using ferry services, particularly in the context of public transportation challenges. It highlights how the prolonged waiting times for ferries have become a significant aspect of the commuting experience, transforming line-ups into a form of "mobile dwelling." The study draws on Guy Debord's concept of the "society of the spectacle" to analyze how these waiting experiences reflect broader systemic issues, such as aging infrastructure and bureaucratic inefficiencies. Mobility theory, as discussed by Cresswell (2006) and Bissell (2007), emphasizes the relational aspects of movement and the socio-political implications of commuting practices. This framework posits that mobility is not merely a physical act but is imbued with social meanings and power dynamics that shape individual and collective experiences. Furthermore, the notion of the spectacle, derived from Debord's work, provides a critical lens through which to analyze how commuting experiences are mediated by visual culture and societal narratives. The interplay between the mundane aspects of ferry commuting and the spectacle of public protests illustrates how everyday mobilities are influenced by broader socio-political contexts. This theoretical framework allows for an exploration of how commuters navigate their identities and social relations within the precarious conditions of ferry travel, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of the complexities of mobility in contemporary society. In our studies, we intend to focus on how ferry commuting is shaped by spatial and social forces affects commuter’s daily lives in essence of this theoretical framework. And we will also relate how the residents face challenges during transporting along with their individual and collective experiences.

**Methods of the Study**

***Research Design***

In this study, we followed a qualitative research approach to explore how the local residents experience commuting events. In particular, we followed the event based case study method ((B. L. Berg, 2001). For data collection techniques from the cases, we used semistructured Interview, unstructured interview, and observation. For secondary source of information existing literature has been reviewed. The method we used for this study is a descriptive case study. For conducting the case study, we have to go through some processes, and for the process, we are following Bruce L. Berg’s book.

***Study Area***

Our selected field was primarily the Tukerbazar Ghat and Mashukbazar Ghat. Tukerbazar Ghat is located near Tukerbazar, next to the main road. On the other side of the river is Mashukbazar Ghat, which is next to Mashukbazar. It is part of Union No. 8 and Ward No. 8. To understand the commuting system, we conducted a study in the areas of Purba Darsha and Poshchim Darsha, which are adjacent to Mashukbazar. These areas have a madrasa and a primary school.

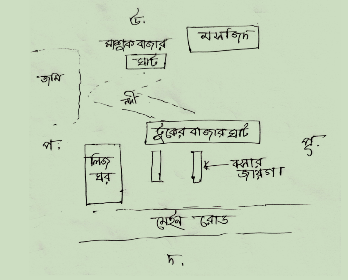
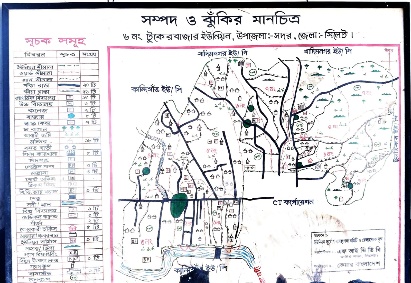
 

Figure 2: Tukerbazar Union

Source: https://tukerbazarup.sylhet.gov.bd

Figure Ghat Area

***Period of the Study***

The study duration was 4 days from 29th November to 2nd December.

***Study Participants and Sampling***

For better understanding the commuting of the Masukganj residents, we interviewed boatmen, passengers( farmers, teachers, housewife and small businessmen) and the ghatmalik who owns the ghat. We selected four boatmen, eleven passengers (two farmers, two teachers, four housewives, two businessmen and one mat trader) and the ghatmalik (one). These passengers use boats as transportation which is based on their needs but mostly they select boat as mode of transportation so they could go to Tuker Bazar. Each participant shared their experiences of traveling by boat. The boatmens explained how the number of passengers and boats at the ghat has declined over time. Other participants also explained why boats are still an essential part of their daily lives, despite the development in transportation in the area.

***Unstructured interview***

Unstructured interview is a method where the interviewer and participants openly engage in a conversation, allowing the participant to express themselves freely at their own pace (Bernard, 2002).

On the first day of our field visit, we went to Tukerbazar Ghat. As soon as we arrived, the ghat owner asked if we would be crossing by boat, as there is a fee for the ride. After reaching the ghat, we observed the surroundings and sat in the waiting shed to prepare ourselves for talking to the passengers. We spoke with the local people to learn about the boat services and the area on the other side. After a while, a passenger arrived who was about to cross the river by boat. We asked him if his house was on the other side of the river. He told us that his house was there, and he had come this way for some work. Now, he was going back by boat.

On the second day of the field visit, we spoke with a woman who lived on the other side of the river in Purba Darsha. She was waiting for a boat with her child. We asked her about the purpose of her river crossing.

On the third day of the field visit, we conducted an interview with a farmer using the unstructured method.

***Semi-structured interview***

Semi-structured interview is a qualitative method where the interviewer follows a written guide with predefined questions and topics but maintains flexibility to explore new ideas and follow leads during the conversation. This approach ensures that key areas are covered while allowing participants to express their perspectives in depth and at their own pace (Bernard, 2002).

On the second day of the field visit, we introduced ourselves and explained our purpose before conducting interviews using the semi-structured method. We spoke with the ghat owner, following the semi-structured method. Later, we interviewed two teachers from a primary school in Pashchim Darsha, on the opposite side of the river, using the same method. We also interviewed two boatman and one farmer that day.

On the third day of the field visit, we conducted interviews with three passengers at the ghat (two women and one man) and a local resident from Tukerbazar.

***Observation***

To go to our field we started our journey from the university gate and reached Tuker Bazar Ghat. The first thing we noticed was a small tin room where the Ghat malik collects a 3-taka fee from passengers, ensuring no one crosses without paying. He spends most of his time sitting or lying on a bed inside. The ghat was quiet, with a few boats tied up. The boatmen, mostly middle-aged, waited for passengers, often passing the time by chatting and relaxing under umbrellas. They didn’t start the boat until it was full with 10 people, cooperating with each other to make the wait more comfortable.

As passengers arrived, the boat was filled with a mix of people, including women, fishermen, and vegetable sellers. Interaction between the boatman and passengers was minimal. On the boat, people sat based on comfort, with mothers carefully holding their children to prevent them from falling. During the crossing, passengers remained silent, but they often spoke before boarding, discussing topics like the bridge, local activities, and schools. The women, based on their attire, appeared very religious.

At the ghat, women generally sat separately from men, but on the boat, they chose seats where they felt comfortable. Some passengers paid extra to speed up the journey if they had urgent work. Most people used the boat to reach the market, while children enjoyed the ride. The river, however, was polluted with garbage, making the water murky.

We also noticed that many of the boatmen were over 65 years old, continuing their work due to age, as they lacked the physical strength for other labor. The passengers, mostly farmers, boarded and unloaded their goods in an orderly manner, and the boatmen seemed familiar with them. The boatmen and passengers shared a close relationship, with farmers sometimes paying the fare after selling their goods. During idle times, the boatmen relaxed in the sun and engaged in conversations with local elderly people. The boatmen followed an informal system where the first boat to arrive would board passengers first to avoid disputes. Passengers maintained balance on the boat by sitting along the sides and in the middle, ensuring the weight was evenly distributed.

***Ethical Consideration***

This research is informed by the ethical code of conduct of the American Anthropology Association. The participation in this research was voluntary. We also safeguard the participant privacy by keeping their information confidential and also using their names as pseudonyms.

**Cases**

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| **Case- 01: Boatmen, livelihood, and vulnerability**  Name: Jalal Mia(pseudonym)  Age:50  Occupation: Boatman    He is a boatman by profession. He has been involved in this profession for about 15/16 years. Before that he was working as a shopkeeper. Currently, he starts driving the boat around 4 am in the morning. Because at that time, the farmers sent their vegetables to Tuker Bazar by boat. In this way, he delivered vegetables to the Tuker Bazar till 7 am. Then he took ordinary passengers to cross the river. According to him, before the bridge was built in the area, people usually used to travel by boat. But with the bridge, the use of boats has decreased due to the improvement in the communication system because the residents of that area prefer to travel by CNG. For this reason, the income of the boat has reduced. Earlier, there were 60 to 70 boats at the ghat. Now there are only about 10 to 12 boats because many residents of the Masuk bazar use CNG as their vehicle to reach their destination. During the monsoon season, the boatmen earn very little because the heavy rainfall cause the river’s water level to rise and also the ghat turn slippery which create fear among the passengers to cross the river. According to him, if they earn 200 Taka, they have to pay 100 Taka to the ghat owner. When their earnings are low, they discuss among themselves and decide to pay 50 Taka less to the owner because with this income they cannot support their family. During the monsoon, the owner charges 200 Taka per day. The amount they pay changes with the season. They want to continue working as boatman because it is a permanent source of income, while other jobs such as day labourer is temporary because sometimes they cannot find work and because of their age they are not willing to switch their profession. |

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| Case-02: Social realities of boatmen  Name: Siraj(pseudonyms)  Age: 70+  Profession: Boatman  Siraj works as a boatman at the Toker Bazar Ghat on the Surma River. He has been in this profession for 8–10 years. He mentions that the winter season is their busiest time, as farmers from the Masukganj area produce a large number of vegetables during this period. These farmers transport their produce to Toker Bazar by boat.  Siraj says that during this season, he arrives at the ghat at 4 a.m. to help transport the farmers' vegetables to the market. For this service, he charges each farmer 10 takas. According to him, if he transports five farmers, he earns 50 takas.  In a day, he can cross the river approximately 15 times.  Daily Income and Expenses:  • Income: 15 x 50 = 750 takas  • Expenses:  o Boat owner's fee: 200 takas  o Fuel cost (2 liters): 230 takas  o Daily personal expenses: 200 takas  At the end of the day, Siraj is left with 200 takas to support his family. He says managing his household expenses with this amount is very challenging.  Siraj had considered changing his profession to driving a battery-powered auto-rickshaw, but he couldn’t afford to buy one due to its high cost.  Most of the time, he struggles to pay the boat owner on time and often has to take loans from various NGOs to settle his debts.  Despite these challenges, he has continued in this profession because, due to his age, he cannot  take up physically demanding jobs. |

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| Case -3  Name: Kamal Hossain(pseudonyms)  Age:40  Occupation: Farmer  He works as a farmer. He has a small plot of land which he uses to grow vegetables. He mentioned that he primarily transports the product of the land from Masukbazar to the Tuker Bazar. He works at 3 am. For transformation, he uses both CNG and boats, but he mainly relies on the boat because they can carry more vegetables than CNG. In the boat they also can separately keep their product so they can carry 2 or 3 kinds of vegetables which reduce the chance of damage of the vegetable. During the winter time they start their work early to ensure that the vegetables reach the Tuker Bazar market on time. |

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| Case -4  Name: Mahmud Hasan(pseudonyms)  Age:46  Occupation: Small Businessman  He is a small businessman and also works as a contractor for Bishwanath Municipality. He has lived in the Masuk Bazar area since he was a child and knows the area well. He shared that most people in this area prefer boats over CNGs because traveling by CNG requires changing vehicles twice, which can be both inconvenient and time-consuming. On the other hand, crossing the river by boat is quicker and cheaper. He explained that taking a boat costs only 5 Taka on the other hand traveling by CNG would cost 15 Taka twice for the same journey. In earlier times, people only paid 1 Taka to cross the river. Sometimes if passengers offer 10 Taka than the boatmen agree to start their boats with just four or five people without waiting for the boat to fill up with passengers. Small business owners in the area often depend on boats to cross the river especially when they have work in Tuker Bazar. This historic bazar, established during the British period, remains a vital hub for trade. While the use of boats varies depending on individual needs, it is estimated that around 100 people use boats to cross the river every day especially at the. According to him because of travelling by boat he can reach the destination earlier and also make the journey short. |

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| Case-5  Name: Rahima Begum  Age: 35  Occupation: Housewife  She is a housewife. She lives in the Poschim Dorsha area of Tuker Bazar. She always crosses the river by boat. She explained that in the morning she finishes the work at home and takes her son at the Madrasah daily. In the morning, when she brings her child to the ghat for the boat crossing, she has to pay an extra fare due to the low number of passengers on the boat. She chooses the boat because it saves time and reach the destination earlier. She also mentioned that she has to wait for the CNG and also due to traffic jam they reach their destination late. |

**Findings**

***Commuting in and out***

In the context of commuting by boat, the infrastructure on both sides of the river plays a crucial role. At the ferry terminal under study, one side has a shaded shelter for passengers, where they can wait, especially during scorching heat or rain. However, the opposite side lacks any such infrastructure. The boat begins its journey only after a certain number of passengers have boarded. Both men and women travel as passengers, but the number of women is significantly lower.

Among the people crossing, farmers and general villagers constitute the majority, while the number of salaried employees and regular students is relatively low.

Male passengers can board the boat with ease, but female passengers often face difficulties, as boarding sometimes requires jumping onto the boat. There are no designated seats on the boat; passengers sit on the boat's structure itself.

Most passengers use the boat primarily for visiting markets or for buying and selling agricultural products. Around 100 people commute through this ferry terminal daily.

***Gender Dimension***

Both men and women use boats for transportation. However, the number of female passengers is significantly lower. This is because women face various challenges. According to an individual, getting on the boat often requires a big leap, which increases the risk of women slipping and falling at the dock. Additionally, there is no designated seating area for women on the boat. These factors contribute to the lower number of female passengers.

Another observation is that women are often afraid to board boats due to their inability to swim and the fear of potential accidents.

The lack of designated seating on boats often forces women to stand, even when they are accompanied by children. These issues collectively contribute to the lower number of female passengers.

In contrast, these problems are not commonly observed in the case of men. As a result, the number of male passengers is higher compared to female passengers.

***Sufferings***

Some commuters said that commuting by boat wastes their time because passengers have to wait until there are at least ten people on the boat. The boatman does not start rowing unless there are ten passengers. If there are not ten passengers, the remaining passengers have to compensate for the shortfall. We observed that during the noon, there were very few passengers on the boat. At that time, about four passengers had been sitting on the boat for quite a while, but no more passengers were coming. Then, one of the passengers signaled to the boatman, suggesting that he should start the boat with them and not wait for more passengers. This means they have to pay more than the usual fare of five taka.

Moreover, one individual said that when it rains slightly while crossing the river, mud accumulates along the riverbank, making it very difficult for passengers to move around.

***Seasonal Advantage***

 A boatman says that during winter, the highest number of passengers travel by boat. This is because, in this season, the farmers from the Masuk Bazar area produce a large quantity of crops and vegetables. The farmers bring these crops to the market for sale by boat, and passengers feel safer boarding the boats at this time since the water level in the river is at its lowest during this season. As a result, passengers believe that the likelihood of accidents is significantly reduced during this period. During the rainy season, the river has a lot of water and strong currents, and during this time, there are very few passengers. In other seasons, even though the water level is lower, people use boats only for regular commutes, not for transporting goods. As a result, the number of passengers is lower in other seasons compared to winter.

***Economic Benefits for Farmers***

A farmer said that farmers benefit the most from using boats in the Mashukbazar area. This is because they can transport their agricultural products to Tuker Bazaar, located on the other side of the river,Tuker Bazaar is a place where a lot of agricultural products are bought and sold. Many people visit this market throughout the day for their daily activities. in a very short time and at minimal cost. As a result, farmers become economically profitable.

***Why Age as a Determinant of Retaining in Boatman Profession doesn’t Change Professions***

Despite the limited income from boat driving, the boatmen have continued in this profession without making any changes. The main reason is that most of the fishermen at the local markets are elderly. At this age, it is physically impossible for them to do heavy work as they no longer have the strength. Since the boats are engine-powered, even though the boatmen are elderly, they do not face much difficulty in operating the boats. This is the reason why they have been able to sustain this profession until now.

***Recreational Travel***

The boatman says that some people take the boat for leisure and cross the river. Some bring their children along for a ride. And many university students come to ride the boat. The boatmen always welcome these visitors. For recreational travelers, both the boatmen and the ferry terminal contractors benefit economically, as the number of passengers increases during such times.

***Riverbank lease Auction***

Every year, this river ghat is auctioned, and through the auction, one person is given the responsibility of collecting money from this ghat. During the auction, the person has to deposit a specific amount of money into the government treasury. He stays at the ghat continuously and collects a fixed amount of money from passengers crossing the river.

***Myth***

3–4 years ago, an incident occurred where a boat capsized due to a strong current, causing all the passengers to drown. Everyone survived except for one person, whose body was never found.

Later, another person reported that near the same spot, a boy drowned while swimming, with claims that he was pulled underwater. These events have led many to believe that the area of the river is cursed, creating fear and anxiety among the local people.

**Discussion**

This study dives into the lives of boatmen and passengers in Mashuk Bazar, examining the social, cultural, and economic factors that shape their experiences, particularly following the construction of a nearby bridge. The study also examines how myths, gender norms, and seasonal fluctuations influence their daily activities and relationships. Perceptions are heavily influenced by local beliefs about a “cursed” river. Roseman (2019), in Precarious Mobility and Spectacle Dwelling on a Ferry Commute, highlights how cultural narratives influence perceptions of mobility. In her work on ferry commutes, she demonstrates that perceptions of transport spaces are shaped not just by practical concerns but by cultural and emotional contexts. Stories concerning fatal events, such as a boat capsize in which one body was never recovered, and the drowning of a youngster who was allegedly carried below, instill terror among locals. These stories add to a sense of collective fear, impacting how people see and use the river.

Gendered behaviors reflect cultural customs. Mashuk Bazar, a conservative community, finds a strong demarcation between seating configurations. While men and women can peacefully share boats, they sit separately in the waiting area (ghat), demonstrating a continued commitment to conventional gender norms even in public settings. Hidayati (2023) explains in his work, in Jabodetabek, women’s commuting decisions are influenced by cultural expectations, especially concerning safety. Women often prefer routes with visible security or women-only transport options for comfort and security.

Passengers confront various obstacles when using boats for transportation. The requirement to assemble at least ten passengers causes departure delays, which frequently lead to unhappiness. Roseman (2019) explains in her work where passengers face uncertainty and discomfort. In the study on ferry commutes, this situation is similar—commuters deal with delays and overcrowding, making the commute a shared, stressful experience. If the minimum number of passengers is not met, the cost for those present rises, adding to their financial burden. Furthermore, rain exacerbates problems, making muddy riverbanks practically inaccessible, generating trouble and aggravation. Similarly we see where, Bowles (2016) explains the slow, unpredictable nature of “boat time” on London’s liveaboard boaters, where environmental factors like weather and external delays shape the temporal experience of commuting. However, seasonal changes provide some benefits. During the winter, the river is most active as farmers move harvests to market. Passengers feel safer at this time because the likelihood of an accident is reduced. This seasonal demand underlines the importance of boats in promoting regional agricultural commerce. Farmers benefit financially from the river transportation system. It enables them to carry their produce to adjacent markets swiftly and at a low cost. This not only saves time but also increases profit margins, demonstrating the economic importance of boat services in the agricultural community.

Most boatmen continue to work despite their low pay. One important reason for this is age; many boatmen are elderly and unable to do physically demanding work. The usage of engine-powered boats decreases their workload, allowing them to maintain their vocation and support their families. Aside from its use, the river is a popular recreational destination. Some people, especially families and university students, use the boats for recreational purposes. These exchanges give social liveliness to the industry, as boatmen eagerly greet such visitors, bringing excitement to their often mundane tasks. Clarke (2020) explores in his work, the transformative role of transport in shaping social relationships and community dynamics. The boatmen’s interactions with visitors create social connections, adding value to their work beyond its functional aspects. The riverside lease system formalized the ghat’s functioning framework. An individual is chosen in an annual auction to collect fees from river crossing passengers. This individual contributes a set amount to the government, ensuring an ordered and regulated system.

This study illustrates a complicated interaction between ancient traditions, economic need, and changing social dynamics. While the bridge reduces reliance on boats, the social, cultural, and economic importance of river transit remains firmly embedded in the community’s lives. Understanding these factors is critical for ensuring boatmen’s long-term livelihoods and improving passenger well-being.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations in carrying out this research paper. Due to lack of time, sufficient data was not collected in this study. Furthermore,many times women are subjected to teasing or harassment on the boat (Hidayati, 2023). But in our study, the informants did not want to provide any information related to this. So, we could not get any detailed information regarding this matter.

**Conclusion**

This study highlights that boats continue to play a crucial role in Mashuk Bazar even though there is a bridge situated in that area. The locals prefer boats more as their transport because they are affordable for transporting both people and goods. Seasons also influence boat travel and earning of the boatman. Though people face challenges such as delays that are frustrating even though boats remain vital. The boats are a permanent source of income for older boatmen who rely on engine-powered boats to keep working. Boat is not just used as a means of transportation, it also brings people joy such as families and students using them for fun. Boats aren’t just a means of travel it is a part of the community’s spirit and way of life.

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