

Role of the Media in Popularising Border Haats

Asjadul Kibria*

To provide a better understanding of border haats, the dissemination of relevant information through media is vital. Both in Bangladesh and India, misunderstanding abounds both in respect of border Haats, in particular, and Indo-Bangladesh trade, in general. The challenges and opportunities for enhancing border haats are also largely unknown to people in both countries. Even the media is not aware of the real situation in many cases.

The comprehensive research project undertaken by CUTS International holds the promise of facilitating understanding about border haats and their long-term potentials. This Briefing Paper argues that media in both countries can enhance its knowledge and understanding about Border Haats from such research and develop stories and disseminate awareness about Border Haats among the people at large.

The media could also reinforce the findings of on-going research through field visits and discussions with different stakeholders. The possibility of collaboration between media in both countries may also be explored in this regard.

Introduction

Bangladesh-India bilateral trade is always a matter of interest to media in both countries, though there are significant divergences in their perspectives. For instance, there was a time when most of the press in Bangladesh focused on the big trade deficit with India.

Generally, it was perceived by Bangladeshi media that tariff and non-tariff barriers imposed by India were

the main reasons for the deficit suffered by Bangladesh. Indian media, however, presented it as a lack of capacity on part of Bangladeshi manufacturers and exporters to meet the demand in India and also an inability on their part to comply with Indian standards.

With the growth in bilateral trade over the years, the economic relationship between the two countries has also intensified. It is not merely the trade but measures to advance the process of economic

* Planning Editor, *The Financial Express*, Dhaka, Bangladesh

In 2011 that the governments of Bangladesh and India formally opened the first Border Haat at Kalaichar in the Indian state of Meghalaya and Baliamari of Kurigram district in Bangladesh

integration that is getting more coverage in the media in both countries.

Nonetheless, differences in perspective are discernible. Bangladeshi media is seen to assume a more critical consideration of the different steps involved in bilateral and sub-regional integration. It is more eager to identify the long-term benefits and losses of Bangladesh from deals like transshipment, transit, or inland water trade. The view that India is deriving unilateral advantage at the expense of Bangladesh is also reflected there.

Indian media, on the other hand, find that these deals and steps are mutually beneficial to both countries and, in fact, in some cases, it is Bangladesh that reaps the greater benefit. Indian media, at times, is seen to push for a different agenda, arguing that economic connectivity and integration are the need of the hour.

Against the backdrop, Border Haat has also triggered an interest in the media. It was in 2011 that the governments of Bangladesh and India formally opened the first Border Haat at Kalaichar in the Indian state of Meghalaya and Baliamari of Kurigram district in Bangladesh.

Later, three more Border Haats were opened between 2012 and 2015. These are (i) Balat (Meghalaya, India)-Sunamganj (Sylhet, Bangladesh); (ii) Srinagar (Tripura, India)-Chhagalnaiya (Feni, Bangladesh); and (iii) Kamalagar (Tripura, India)-Kasba (Comilla, Bangladesh).

Encouraged by the initial response, the two governments have already agreed to open two more Border Haats along the Sylhet-Meghalaya border. Moreover, India will also open four new Border Haats with Myanmar in the state of Mizoram. Different media outlets have already published several news and articles on Indo-Bangla Border Haat.

Some lacunae regarding the information on Border Haats and their operations are, however, noticed. In some cases, articles and analyses were based on information unveiled in different reports. Again, some of the stories and articles were based on secondary sources and no effort was made to verify details with the help of field visits.

Under the circumstances, the comprehensive report on Border Haats prepared and published by CUTS International may be looked at as a reliable document to consult for gaining an insight into the conceptualisation and operations of Border Haats between India and Bangladesh.

Review of CUTS Report on Border Haats

Bangladesh and India share a common border stretching some 4100 km. Bangladesh-India Border Haats or Bazaars are established on the zero-line of the international border.

To understand the status of existing Border Haats and explore the potential for new Haats, CUTS International initiated a study, together with its project partner Unnayan Shamannay, Dhaka-based research, and development organisation under support from the World Bank.

The findings of the study have been presented in a research report entitled 'Bordering on Happiness: An Assessment of Socio-Economic Impacts of Bangladesh-India Border Haats.' Released in 2019, it is the first comprehensive report on Indo-Bangla Border Haats.

Based on a review of existing literature, the report shows that border markets in Asia and Africa are slowly growing and thus cross-border trade, albeit small-scale, is flourishing across the world.

The study focuses on broader aspects as well as long-term direct and indirect benefits of Border Haats. While focusing on the livelihood issue, it highlights that Border Haats have directly impacted income generation for all the participating stakeholders (especially vendors).

That is why the writing on the wall seems loud and clear: there should be more Border Haats to improve the lives and living standards of the poor and the marginalised inhabiting the remote locations along the border between the two countries.

A significant argument in favour of introducing Border Haats is the reduction that it facilitates in respect of informal trade alongside illegal trade, including smuggling.

CUTS study points out that Border Haats have not only lowered the extent of informal trade but has also contained, to a substantial extent, the flow of unwelcome commodities like drugs and explosives in the adjoining areas.

An interesting finding of the CUTS study is in respect of the gender issue. It is not unusual that male vendors dominate the Border Haats. Other stakeholders like officials, transporters, and labourers are almost entirely male, especially on the Bangladesh side.

The paper, however, suggests: "Border Haats can be treated as a platform to enhance participation of women, in various capabilities. Although there is limited scope for increasing vendors given persisting regulations, specific vendor quotas for women can boost women engagement."

Border Haats can thus serve as instruments of women empowerment in societies that have long succumbed to conservative norms of patriarchy. While focusing on regulations, the study discerns the problem of information asymmetry. Vendors do not always have the latest information on officially approved items for trade at Border Haats.

Details of amendments to rules and regulations often do not reach the concerned officials on time. Officials



are also found to apply rules and regulations indiscriminately.

Again, "Customs officials and local policemen are not present regularly and it largely falls on the BSF/BGB personnel to monitor Haat proceedings on a day-to-day basis." There is also the problem of inadequate infrastructure in Border Haats, to which the report draws attention.

Overall, the report highlights some positive outcomes of the four Border Haats. One drawback of the study is the absence of a combined estimate of annual transactions and trade volumes of the four Border Haats. Though transactions in individual Haats are presented separately, a combined assessment could add clarity to the overall picture.

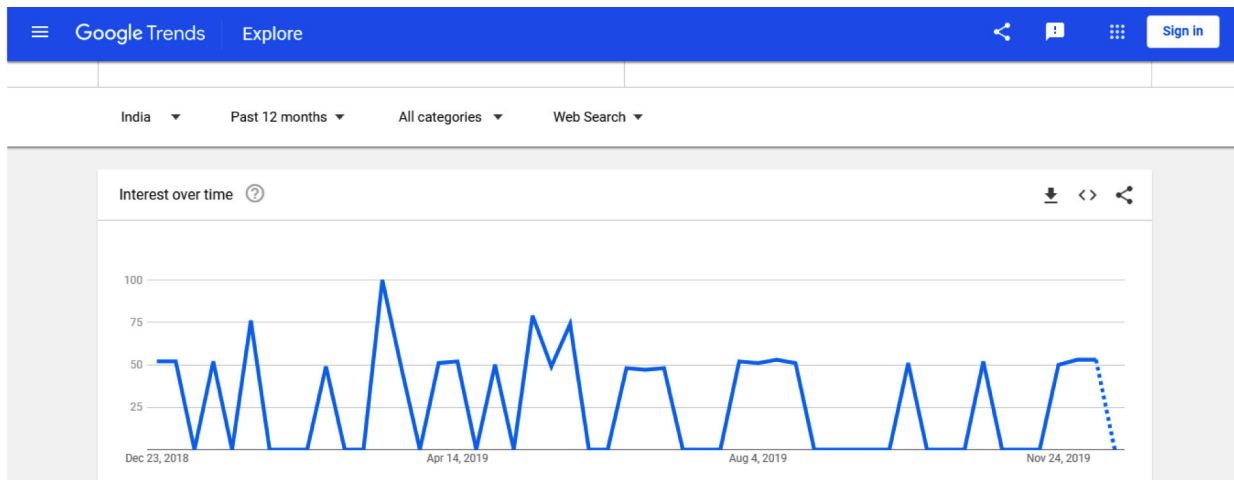
Role of Media

The CUTS report provides a comprehensive picture of the four functioning Border Haats and the benefits highlighted may well serve as a source of encouragement for both governments to institute more such Haats. The report may also serve to promote awareness and understanding of the economics of Border Haats.

The extent to which the border Haat arouses interest in both the countries may be gauged from the trend of web and news searches indulged in through Google in the two countries. Google Trends (explored on December 23, 2019, in Dhaka) reveal that, in 2019, there was at least some interest in India, New Delhi to be specific, regarding 'Border Haat.'

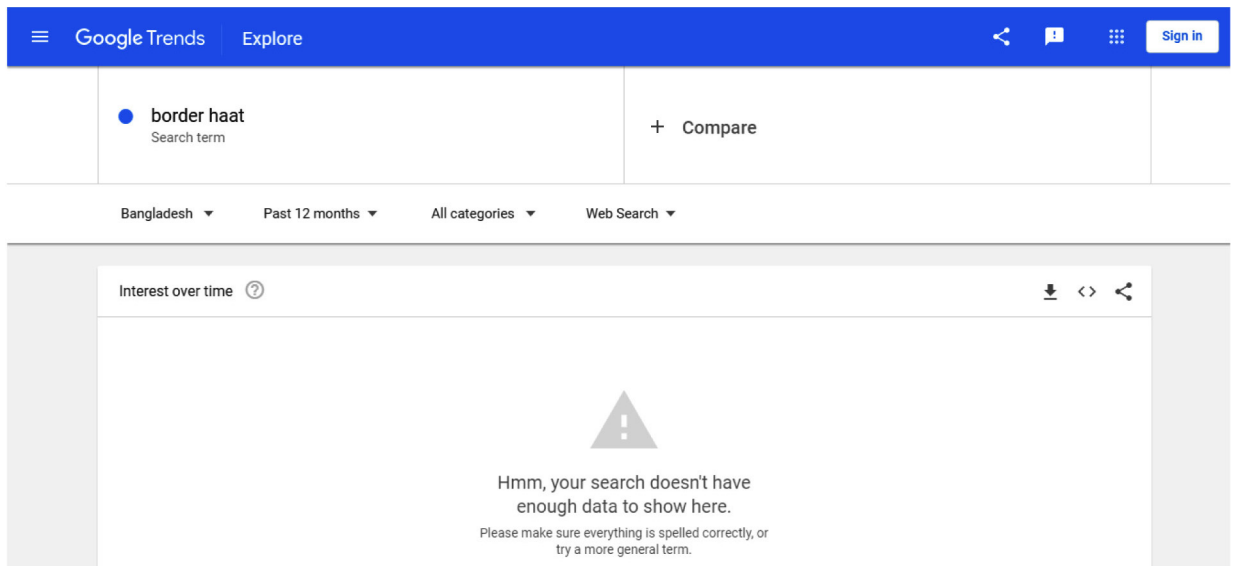
This, however, may not necessarily bear reference to the Bangladesh-India Border Haat. At the same time, there was 'zero' interest in Bangladesh or the search might have been too negligible for Google to consider.

Web Search on Border Haat in India in 2019



Source: <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?geo=IN&q=border%20haat>

Web Search on Border Haat in Bangladesh in 2019



Source: <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?geo=BD&q=border%20haat>

Nevertheless, there is little scope to arrive at any firm conclusion about the interest in Border Haats from the above search trend.

Given that the CUTS report provides a comprehensive picture of four Border Haats, it may well serve as a guideline for both governments to make the Haats more efficient and beneficial, even as they contemplate the establishment of more such Haats along the Indo-Bangladesh border.

Media in both countries has a wide scope to investigate the functioning of Border Haats and

provide vital inputs for further development thereof. The extent of coverage in the media will also be a measure of interest of people in Border Haats.

In fact, despite the increasing focus on bilateral trade and economic activities, the national media in both countries is yet to capture the grassroots level stories sufficiently. The coverage in media is largely based on the government briefings, discussions held by trade bodies, comments, and observations on part of business leaders, and analyses of economists and experts.

Border Haats can be treated as a platform to enhance participation of women, in various capabilities

Field visits are rare. Even when the local correspondents at local business hubs and ports in the proximity of the border areas dispatch some news, it is not always given the kind of importance or publicity that it deserves by the central desks of the news agencies. Several journalists, however, usually talk to industry associations and local traders to get insights into Border Haats.

Enhancing Media Engagement

Instead of relying on secondary sources like government documents and relevant literature, media in both countries needs to carry out extensive and regular visits to Border Haats. The efforts of local correspondents of dailies need to be supplemented by the electronic media to ensure comprehensive coverage of the Haats.

Senior staff members of these media also need to visit the Haats along with local correspondents and interact with different stakeholders. Media may also seek collaboration with trade bodies or chambers in this regard.

It is only through a multi-pronged strategy that the media can provide a better picture of the Haats and disseminate adequate information to all.

As outlets of local media have also grown over the years, there is scope to sensitise them to look into the Border Haat and related aspects of border trade intensely. Several journalists working in local media have a better and deeper understanding of the dynamics of border areas. They have better access to local authorities and businessmen and also local inhabitants.

The experiences of senior journalists may be helpful to those who are currently working and focusing on Indo-Bangla trade and economic relations.

Thus, the collaboration between local and national media may be an excellent option to widely cover border trade in all its dimensions. Such collaboration appears all the more pragmatic since national newspapers and television channels usually prefer their local correspondents to do the work.

Another collaborative approach may involve journalists on both sides of the border. Both Bangladeshi and Indian journalists may join hands to explore border trade activities. Not only is such collaborative journalism not unprecedented, it also makes ample sense if one considers that the residents on both sides of the border have a shared history, alongside several cultural and social affinities.



Media in both countries has a wide scope to investigate the functioning of Border Haats and provide vital inputs for further development

Transforming personal interactions and collaborations to the level of an institutional arrangement is likely to foster better outcomes. Media of the two countries may also explore the scope for cross-border cooperation at local levels.

COVID-19 has posed a severe threat to the media industry. Several newspapers and web portals have already shutdown. There have been unprecedented cases of layoffs and furloughs in media across Bangladesh and India.

The pandemic, however, has also thrown up opportunities. To survive, almost all media outlets are trying to strengthen their digital platforms to enhance their virtual presence.

In this process, the demand for diversified and grassroots stories is on the rise. Both national-local and cross-border media collaboration can provide such reports as border Haat or border trade.

Not only trade, interesting life stories of border residents, tales of friendship across the border, sagas

of women entrepreneurship and facets of life as lived by peripheral border dwellers are not likely to fall flat on people who have lived lives differently.

Conclusion

Border Haats are about people living on the border areas between the two countries. These people are mostly poor and marginalized. Their voices usually do not get reflected in government documents and non-government researches.

It is the media that can accommodate and echo their voices and sensitise people about the larger reality of their lives.

The media can go a long way in disseminating information regarding Border Haats and how they have benefitted the poor inhabitants of remote border regions. This is a social responsibility that the media cannot and must not shirk from.

References

Bordering on Happiness: An Assessment of Socio-Economic Impacts of Bangladesh-India Border Haats - CUTS International, Jaipur, India. 2019.

Firsthand assessment of makeshift Indo-Bangla border haats- The Financial Express, December 02, 2019. <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/reviews/firsthand-assessment-of-makeshift-indo-bangla-border-haats-1575216899>

Indo-Bangla border haats exemplary: WB- The Daily Star, September 26, 2018. <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/news/india-bangladesh-border-haats-exemplary-world-bank-1638919>

Six border haats to come up soon-Times of India, August 21, 2019. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/shillong/six-border-haats-to-come-up-soon/articleshow/70767318.cms>

This Briefing Paper has been published as a part of CUTS project entitled, 'Border Haats between India and Bangladesh as a tool to reduce informal cross-border trade' undertaken with the support of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, UK and in partnership with Unnayan Shamannay, Bangladesh.

