

Role of Border Haat in Management of India-Bangladesh Border

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The border haats have been transformational in the management of India and Bangladesh border. Traditionally, border management was perceived, from the prism of security, therefore, restrictions were imposed on the people in the bordering areas, thus hampering development.

Given the security-centric approach to the border, India undertook a policy of restraining development in the areas adjacent to the international boundary. Unfortunately, such a policy backfired and instead of securing the border, increased vulnerabilities and the border region became a hub of illegal activities. The haats were established to bolster development in the border region by generating livelihood opportunities and controlling cross-border illegal activities.

This Briefing Paper studies the role and impact of the border haats in the management of the India-Bangladesh border.

Understanding Border Management

Border management has two major objectives – *firstly*, to facilitate the movement of legitimate goods and people across the border between two sovereign countries; and *secondly*, to ensure the security of the country by restricting entry of illegal goods and those individuals across the border who might disturb the peace.¹ Given the objectives, border management requires the involvement of multiple agencies like — border guarding forces, customs, immigration and local police. Border management approaches vary from one country to another — the border can be open or closed.

The border management policies are determined by the nature of bilateral relationship a country enjoys with the other country across the border. Despite divergent approaches, security is a key component of border management across the globe. For example, India shares around 15,000 kilometres of land borders with six countries, however, its policies are not uniform. The country follows different policies based on the nature of the relationship with a specific country. India has open borders with Nepal and Bhutan, where the movement of people is easier while its borders with Pakistan and Bangladesh are restrictive.

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Notably, when it comes to borders, open or close, security is at the core of border policies, that encourages securitisation of the border, which in turn increases the propensity for militaristic measures in dealing with challenges. It is a preference for the militaristic solution that inspires nations to deploy security forces in the border. India has five border guarding forces deployed to secure its international land boundary.

Lately, a change is visible in the understanding of 'borders', one that regards the border as not necessarily divisive, but rather as a meeting point among the countries.² Such a transformation in thinking is influencing the framing of border management policies globally. Though border remains an innately descriptive element of a state, nevertheless, countries are more willing to explore new border management options that are not exclusively militaristic.

Presently, border management policies are desired to create opportunities for interaction among the communities across the border without hampering the security. India has been more forthright in testing

this new approach and its experimentation is visible, especially, in the border with Bangladesh.

Establishment of border haats along the Bangladesh border is a reflection of its new approach to border management.

India's Approach in Managing Bangladesh Border

India shares around 4,096 kilometres of border with Bangladesh covering five states including West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura. The border lacks any natural division and runs through diverse topography amidst congested towns, villages, paddy fields, hills and rivers. The partition of India in 1947, of which Bangladesh was a part, is responsible for the complexity of the border.

The partition, besides, creating an artificial boundary disrupted socio-economic conditions of the two countries and the border regions in particular. It did not only divide the nations but also separated families, villages broke down connectivity linkages and hampered economies.

Prior to 1947, many of the regions that constitute the border today were in fact, centres of major economic activities, which unfortunately lost their importance post-partition. The areas close to the border turned remote and lacked development. The vulnerabilities visible in the border region have their roots in the partition. The border became a major ground for the proliferation of cross-border crimes. Major crimes across the Bangladesh border include — cattle smuggling, smuggling of arms and narcotics, trafficking of women and children.³ The border is prone to informal trade also.

Initially, India emphasised guarding and regulating for purpose of securing the border. India adopted several measures including — deployment of Border Security Force (BSF) between entry and exit points for guarding the international border, establishing Border-Out Post, erecting barbed wire fences within the 150 metres inside its territory, floodlighting and increasing surveillance along the border.⁴

For regulating the border, India established land custom stations and immigration check posts at designated entry and exit points along the border with Bangladesh to check entry of foreigners.

India recognised the need for developing the bordering areas and Border Area Development Programme (BADP) started in 1987. The BADP aims to meet the special developmental needs of the people living in remote and inaccessible areas near the international border by building critical infrastructure, providing economic opportunities and promoting a sense of security among the border population.⁵


India realised the necessity for the cooperation of the neighbouring countries for enhancing the efficiency of managing the border. India and Bangladesh had set up a three-tier institutional mechanism in 1994 to discuss and resolve security and border management issues. The three tiers include:

- i) Talks between Director General (DG) of BSF and DG, Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB),
- ii) Joint Working Group (JWG) at the level of Joint Secretaries of both the countries
- iii) Meeting between Home Secretaries of the two countries.

Again, home and foreign ministers of the two countries have been meeting regularly to discuss issues concerning border management. These interactions have helped voice concerns and develop an understanding between the two countries. The sustained interaction between the two countries has helped to deepen cooperation between them. BSF's deployment of non-lethal weapons at the border with Bangladesh in an attempt to reduce the death of Bangladeshi nationals at the border — a concern raised by the Bangladeshi border guarding force — is an outcome of these dialogues.⁶

Introduction of non-lethal weapons has indeed reduced the number of the deaths of the Bangladeshi nationals. In 2009, the number of deaths at the border was 67 while 24 people died in 2017.⁷

India and Bangladesh at present share close ties and cooperation with respect to border management. A landmark episode of this cooperation has been the resolution of the boundary dispute. India and Bangladesh through sustained dialogue resolved issues like delimitation of the land boundary, enclaves and land in adverse possession; which was a source of irritation between the two countries for a long period. Closure of the land boundary dispute contributed to better management of the border.



Expansion of the border haats will help larger numbers of people to enjoy its benefits that in turn will contribute to the development of the region and deepen bonds between people. It will help in sustaining the border cooperation between the two countries

For a long time, the enclaves were an important corridor for transnational crimes between the two countries and made border management difficult. The peaceful resolution of the land boundary dispute further helped to boost confidence between the two countries.

In 2011, India and Bangladesh signed a Coordinated Border Management Plan (CBMP). The aim of signing the CBMP was to synergise efforts of the border guarding forces and to control cross-border illegal activities and crimes more effectively and maintain peace and harmony along the border. As per the plan, the two countries resolved to fight trans-border crimes like — human trafficking, drug smuggling, arms/ammunition/ explosive trafficking, dealing with fake currencies, trespassing (arm/unarmed) of the border, smuggling, theft, terrorism, straying of animals, cattle smuggling and illegal migration.

Under this plan, the two countries pledged to carry out coordinated patrolling, exchange intelligence, hold dialogues and meetings between the forces to resolve issues mutually and respond with joint action in case of a serious incident. Today, India and Bangladesh carry out joint patrolling to curb criminal activities across the border.

The step has been the outcome of the cooperative approach adopted by the two countries. The border guards are also conducting joint exercises to strengthen cooperation. On February 27-28, 2019, BSF and BGB conducted a two-day long Mainamati

Maitri-Exercise-2019 in the Tripura sector to enhance operational efficiency between the two countries in combating the vulnerabilities together.⁸

Despite the progress achieved in the border management cooperation between India and Bangladesh, controlling illegal activities across the border remained a challenge and demanded a fresh outlook to the problem.⁹

Involvement of the border communities in cross-border crimes, which is largely an outcome of a dearth of livelihood opportunities in the border areas, is recognised as an obstacle to a peaceful border between the two countries. Thus, a necessity for a holistic solution was felt, one that would address both issues of livelihood and curb illegal activities, primarily smuggling, in the bordering areas simultaneously.

It is worthwhile to mention that prominent products smuggled between India and Bangladesh include dry fish, fruits and vegetables, kerosene and garments. The exchange of these products across the border does not qualify as criminal activity as such, and hence, could be dubbed as informal trade.

However, since the trade does not take place under the legal framework it falls under the category of smuggling. A prominent reason for the thriving of such illegal trade across the border is procedural difficulties involved in legal trade, which communities find hard to fulfil or lacks the necessary skill to handle.¹⁰





Continuation of such illegal trade is problematic because of following reasons — a) causes loss of revenue; and b) the trade because of its informal nature is not monitored like in the case of legal trade, hence creates opportunities for the criminal groups to take advantage of its loopholes to carry out various criminal activities under its cover. Some of the risks are – cross-border money laundering since payment of such trade cannot take place via formal channels. Additionally, the fear of fake currency racket runs high. Given the risks involved, formalising the informal trade became a necessity.

Impact on Grassroot Stakeholders

Border haats along the India and Bangladesh border are established to provide a livelihood to the border communities. Further, it aimed at formalising the informal trade across the border. India and Bangladesh established the first border haat in 2011. Currently, four border haats are functioning in the states of Tripura and Meghalaya bordering Bangladesh. Initially, goods produced in areas close to the border were traded in these haats but the number of products has been increased over time.

Following are the four operational border haats:

- Balat (Meghalaya)-Sunamganj (Sylhet)
- Kalaichar (Meghalaya)-Kurigram (Rangpur)
- Srinagar (Tripura)-Chagalnaiya (Chittagong)
- Kamalasar (Tripura)-Kasba (Chittagong)

Roughly, goods worth Rs 4 crore are traded annually in each of these haats.¹¹ Given the volume of bilateral trade between India and Bangladesh, via formal channels, is around US\$10bn, the percentage of trade happening through the border haats is minimal. Nevertheless, the impact of these haats on the lives of the communities has been phenomenal.

The haats have been a boon for the communities living closest to the border. The traders are benefiting by selling their products in the haats, the buyers are also saving money as they do not have to travel far for buying the products. Again, the haats are providing new avenues of livelihood for local communities since they are also involved in providing services like transport, running tea and food stalls on the haat days.

Additionally, these haats are contributing to the empowerment of women in these areas as they are participating in the economic activities that have emerged due to the establishment of the haats. Earlier, women of the bordering areas where the haats are located had limited opportunities to participate in economic activities because they could not travel out of the locality, unlike the male members in their community.

Again, the border haats promoted ties among communities across the border. The people across the border have familial, social and linguistic linkages

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but these ties were disturbed due to the division of the country. The haats provided the communities to re-energise these bonds by providing a meeting platform for families having their relatives in the neighbouring country; as for many (especially women), visa and immigration process particularly travelling to a foreign country is cumbersome and unaffordable. The haats have become meeting points for the communities and help to develop and promote mutual understanding, which contributes to the peace and stability in the border region in no uncertain terms.

Besides, the haats have reduced informal trade substantially as items earlier traded through informal channels are presently traded through border haats. A rise in formal trade helped in subverting the risks involved in informal trade, which in turn, threatens national security.

Conclusion

The border haats add a new dimension to the India and Bangladesh border cooperation and is a clear departure from more conservative measures for addressing border security challenges.

The border haats highlight the close relationship between trade, security and border communities, an aspect often overlooked while framing policies. The border haats highlight the importance of border communities in effectively managing and securing the border. Expansion of the border haats will help larger numbers of people to enjoy its benefits that in turn will contribute to the development of the region and deepen bonds between people. It will help in sustaining the border cooperation between the two countries.

Endnotes

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