

# India-Bangladesh Border Haats in the post-COVID Era

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*The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted not only public health across the world but also other sectors, like trade and connectivity at all levels. The immediate response to contain the pandemic has restricted cross-border movement of people and cargo. Since the border haats facilitate cross border people-to-people contact, these were also suspended for an indefinite period of time.*

*Given that the border haats are an important source of employment and livelihood for the local communities inhabiting remote border areas, its temporary closure will have adverse socio-economic effects on the local communities. In this regard, this Briefing Paper argues in favour of reopening the border haats, while adopting necessary measures to ensure the health and hygiene of the participants.*

## Background

A worldwide trend is discernible among countries to look upon their international borders no longer exclusively in terms of military security, but rather as meeting points where two adjacent communities can meet up and interact and exchange. Not that security is unimportant or even secondary, but such meeting grounds can facilitate people-to-people connect and cultural exchange which can contribute to improved relations at the grassroots between people and communities inhabiting geographically contiguous areas. The more underdeveloped border areas are, the more are they vulnerable and prone to harbour illegal activities, which only adds to the insecurity of such remote regions.

The Department of Border Management, Ministry of Home Affairs of the Government of India has been implementing the Border Area Development Programme (BADP) through the State Governments as part of a comprehensive approach to Border Management. The programme aims to meet the special development needs of the people living in remote and inaccessible areas situated near the international border and to saturate the border areas with the essential infrastructure through convergence of Central/State/BADP/Local schemes and participatory approach.

BADP was initiated in the border areas of the western region during that Seventh Five Year Plan period for ensuring a balanced development of border areas

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## Given that the border haats provide an important source of employment and livelihood to the local communities living in the far-flung border areas, its temporary closure will have adverse socio-economic effects on the local communities

through the development of infrastructure and promotion of a sense of security among the border population. The programme now covers 394 border blocks of 111 border districts in 17 States, which includes 167 border blocks in 55 districts of 8 North East, States (including Sikkim), located along the international land border. The States covered are Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and West Bengal. Under this programme, priority is given to the areas closer to the border.<sup>1</sup>

BADP is an important intervention of the Central Government to bring about the development of border areas by supplementing the State Plan Funds to bridge the gaps in socio-economic infrastructure, on one hand, and improving the security environment in border areas on the other. It follows that the development of border areas is a top priority of the Government of India.

### Border Haat on India-Bangladesh Border

India shares with Bangladesh an international border which stretches over 4,096 Kms.<sup>2</sup> Yet when one delves into the history of this piece of political

engineering, one realizes that the border was a rather artificial construct which ran through people's houses, hearts, lives and living and split people living socially, culturally and economically integrated lives into two communities with different badges of national political identities.

The gradual realisation of this reality induced the governments of India and Bangladesh to come to a consensus about establishing meeting points where people of the two nations could engage in mutual trade of commodities produced locally, without having to navigate through cumbersome documentation processes and bureaucratic hurdles that are usually entailed by international travel.

Such fora would not only boost livelihood opportunities for the local communities, usually poor and marginalised, but also open up avenues for socialisation and cultural exchange. The result was Border Haats.

'Border Haat' is a rough-and-ready market, which allows local people from both the countries to trade in vegetables, fruits, spices, food items, agri-implements, cosmetics, toiletries, garments, melamine products, aluminum products, bamboo products, plastic products, fruit juice, processed food items, and other such indigenous products. Such haats or markets are located on the zero lines of the border between India and Bangladesh and each buyer is allowed to buy commodities worth up to US\$200.<sup>3</sup>

Currently, there are four border haats in operation, two of which are in Tripura (namely, Kamalasagar-Kasba and Srinagar-Chhagalnaiya) and the other two haats are in Meghalaya (namely, Balat-Dolora and Kalaichar-Baliamari). The first border haat has been functioning since July 23, 2011, at Kalaichar (India)-Kurigram (Bangladesh) in the West Garo Hills of Meghalaya.



The three other haats that followed are located at Balat (Meghalaya, India)-Dolora (Bangladesh) in 2012, Srinagar (Tripura, India)-Chhagalnaiya (Bangladesh) and Kamalasagar (Tripura, India)-Kasba (Bangladesh) in 2015. Additionally, six locations were also sanctioned for the establishment of border haats.<sup>4</sup>

## How Border Haats Benefit Local Communities?

In all the locations where border haats are established, agriculture is the main source of livelihood of the residents. The landless either used to work as labourers or migrated to towns and cities in search of livelihood opportunities. Border Haats have created different avenues of income for these poor and marginalised people by offering them employment as vendors, transporters, labourers, and support service providers.

Border Haats have also created earning opportunities for vendees who buy products from the haats and sell them in their local markets and thereby manage to earn some profit. These border haats have been instrumental in not only boosting trade but also in generating livelihood opportunities for residents in these remote border areas.

Border haats have therefore directly impacted income generation opportunities for all the participating stakeholders, viz vendors, transporters, labourers, support service providers and even vendees. It has not only given rise to new vocations of work in the remote interiors of the two countries but has also created new opportunities for people to engage with cross-border trade in different capacities. Many of these stakeholders associated with border haats are the sole income earners for their families and the border haat is the only source of livelihood for them.

Not only have these Border Haats created livelihood opportunities for the people inhabiting remote border areas, but also provided access to essential products at reasonable prices, to the border residents most of whom are poor and marginalised. In the Balat-Dolora border haat Indians get fresh vegetables and fish from Bangladesh at a lower



price and on the other hand, Bangladeshis get spices, fruits, and other items at affordable prices. For example, while Jeera costs around US\$5.31 in Bangladesh, the Bangladeshi vendees can buy the same Jeera at US\$3.30 at the haat.<sup>5</sup>

It needs to be reiterated that one of the professed advantages of border haats lies in respect of the reduction of informal trade. The decline in informal trade post establishment of border haat was primarily due to the creation of local employment opportunities and the permission subsequently granted for trade in commodities through border haats, which was earlier done through informal and often risky informal channels.

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## COVID-19 Pandemic and its Impact on Border Haats

The outbreak of COVID-19 has forced governments of many countries to enact stringent measures such as national lockdown, suspension of international trade, etc. Closing of border haats along the international border between India and Bangladesh, from mid of March 2020 for an indefinite period, is another measure adopted by the governments of India and Bangladesh to contain the spread of this virus.

Given the significance of the border haats and their positive impact on the local communities, prolonged closure of border haats will be detrimental to the interests of border residents of both India and Bangladesh as it may force many people below poverty levels due to a decrease in income opportunities and non-availability of essential commodities that were available at affordable prices at the border haats. Additionally, this can also result in the migration of border residents as income opportunities are limited in these border areas.

The situation will be even more critical for women as their mobility is restricted given their domestic responsibilities and security concerns - a consequence of occupational segregation due to socio-cultural norms prevalent in a patriarchal

society like Tripura on the Indian side and the villages in Bangladesh that are adjacent to the Border Haat. It is logical to be apprehensive that the pangs of unemployment and hunger might even drive a few towards informal trade which was predominant in these areas before the establishment of the haats.

Given these inevitable adverse consequences of the suspension of border haats, it is crucial to re-open these at the earliest. COVID-19 is, however, a problem that is going to stay. Going by projections of contemporary medical expertise the world over, it seems that we have to reconcile ourselves to the 'new normal' where we will be required to abide by various practices about the maintenance of hygiene, sanitisation norms, and physical distancing. To ensure safety, both personal and public, in this COVID-19 era it is equally important to ensure the practice of social distancing and adherence to other safety norms within the haat premises.

## Need to Operationalise the Border Haats

To re-open the border haats, while keeping in perspective the issues of safety of health and maintenance of hygiene, it is necessary to make the following amendments to the operational guidelines of these border haats.



- ◆ A limit needs to be imposed on the number of vendees per haat and even time slots could be allotted to vendees to prevent over-crowding and ensuring social distance among participants. For example, a batch of say 200 vendees will be allowed to stay at the haat premises for a stipulated period; once they have vacated, the next batch will be allowed to enter after an interval that will grant time for some basic cleaning up of the haat premises. This may entail deployment/recruitment of additional personnel for purposes of haat management and maintenance.
- ◆ It will also be mandatory for the participants to wear masks, and maintain adequate distance among themselves for which vigilance is also necessary. But, since this might reduce profits of vendors due to reduction in footfall, the number of haat days could be suitably increased which would compensate for the loss of business.
- ◆ As hygiene, particularly hand hygiene, is extremely important to prevent the spread of the virus it is crucial to ensure an adequate supply of running water in the washrooms and the required sanitisation of the washrooms after each haat day.
- ◆ The Border Haat itself could serve as a forum for the dissemination of awareness about the COVID-19 virus and the steps that need to be followed by the people to contain its spread. A stall at the Haat premises could be earmarked for sale of soap, sanitisers, masks and such other items that people will need to use to prevent spread and contamination by the virus.
- ◆ Owing to the national lockdown in both the countries, it is assumed that the purchasing power of the border residents has shrunk, and their purchase basket might remain limited to essential commodities for the time being. To compensate for the losses of the vendors due to a decrease in spending by buyers, vendors of non-essential products could be advised to shift their usual merchandise in favour of essential items only, and vendees beyond 5 Km should also be allowed to participate in the border haat.
- ◆ Additionally, stress should be given on trade in agricultural and essential commodities through the border haat to ensure food security on both sides.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

Impact of border haats on the income and livelihood of the local communities is immense. The operationalisation of border haats has led to the generation of alternative employment opportunities and reduce out-migration, provided additional income support; and in the process led to a significant decline in the informal trade between India and Bangladesh that was happening through these border points earlier. Further, the border haats are also important for promoting cross border value chains in agri-horticulture products and spices at the local levels.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed the scenario, leading to a suspension of the haat operations for an indefinite period. This is likely to cause economic impoverishment of the local communities. Also, shrinking employment opportunities might force the local communities to re-engage in informal cross border trade.

**Border haats have been instrumental in not only boosting trade but also in generating livelihood opportunities for residents in these remote border areas**

# Given the importance of the border haats for the lives and livelihood of the local communities, there is a need to re-open the border haats, but without compromising with the health and hygiene safety of the participants

Given the importance of the border haats for the lives and livelihood of the local communities, there is a need to re-open the border haats, but without compromising with the health and hygiene safety of the participants. In this regard, there is a need to revisit the earlier protocols and revise them, there is also a need for putting in place appropriate infrastructure. Once re-opened, the haats can serve as a market for new products like a face mask, hand sanitisers, personal protection equipment, etc. Local women folk who are engaged in tailoring can produce face masks and sell them through the border haats which will buttress income opportunities.

The smooth functioning of the Border Haats may also be complemented by other initiatives of the Government of India. One such significant initiative is the Government of India's decision to implement the Shekatkar Committee recommendations<sup>6</sup> related to creating border infrastructure.

The Government has accepted and implemented three important recommendations of the Committee of Experts (CoE) under the Chairmanship of Lt

General D B Shekatkar (Retd) relating to border infrastructure. These were related to speeding up road construction, leading to socio-economic development in the border areas.

On the matter related to creating border infrastructure, the government has implemented the recommendation of CoE to outsource road construction work beyond the optimal capacity of the Border Roads Organisation (BRO). It has been made mandatory to adopt Engineering Procurement Contract (EPC) mode for execution of all works costing more than ₹100 crores.

Such complementary initiatives may facilitate the journey of vehicles to and from the Border Haats and also prevent congestion of traffic at the approach to Border Haats.

In a nutshell, suspending the border haats for an indefinite period will dilute the benefits accruing to the local communities, and hence there is an urgent need to re-open the border haats while at the same time ensuring health safety and hygiene standards of the participants.

## Endnotes

- 1 [Badp.mha.gov.in](http://badp.mha.gov.in)
- 2 <http://maizestarch.com/connex/downloads/Border-TradeRecommendations-Sept-2011.pdf>
- 3 [https://commerce.gov.in/writereaddata/UploadedFile/MOC\\_636295985083746420\\_MOU\\_Border\\_Haats\\_across\\_Border\\_India\\_and\\_Bangladesh\\_8th\\_April\\_2017.pdf](https://commerce.gov.in/writereaddata/UploadedFile/MOC_636295985083746420_MOU_Border_Haats_across_Border_India_and_Bangladesh_8th_April_2017.pdf)
- 4 <https://cuts-crc.org/pdf/bordering-on-happiness-an-assessment-of-socio-economic-impacts-of-bangladesh-india-border-haats.pdf>
- 5 Information collected by researchers of CUTS International through primary survey under the project "Border Haats between India and Bangladesh as a tool to reduce informal cross border trade" supported by Department for International Development.
- 6 <https://www.insightsonindia.com/2020/05/19/shekatkar-committee-recommendations/>

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