

Re-opening of India-Bangladesh Border Haats

Standard Operating Procedures during the Covid-19

1. Background

1.1 India-Bangladesh border haats play an important part in the lives and livelihood of the border communities. Not only do they provide additional income support to the local communities but also facilitate their access to essential commodities at cheaper prices, and thereby contribute to livelihood security of the local communities.

1.2 Moreover, the haats have been successful in reducing cross-border informal trade at the local level. The decline in informal trade post establishment of the border haats was primarily due to the creation of local employment opportunities and the permission granted for trade in commodities through border haats that was earlier done through informal and often risky informal channels.

1.3 If the haats remain closed for an indefinite period of time, it will not only lead to economic impoverishment of the people who are directly dependent on the haats, but would also force some of the border residents to re-engage in cross-border themselves in informal trade.

1.4 The haats operate once a week for a specified period of time. On a haat day, on an average, at least 25 vendors from each of the two countries participate at the haats and each vendor is accompanied by two to three helpers. In addition nearly, 1,000-1,500 vendees visit the haats for buying products.

1.5 While it is essential to combat the spread of the Covid-19, it is also necessary to gradually consider re-opening of the border haats. At the same time, the concerned authorities should ensure the adoption of essential and precautionary health measures like social distancing, use of face masks, hand sanitizers, etc.

1.6 Therefore, this document outlines a set of specific measures, which are to be adopted at the border haats in order to guard against the spread of the Covid-19. In that manner and along with another set of proposed measures, lives as well as livelihoods will be saved and that will create a more enabling environment for Peace, Security, Stability and Prosperity in India-Bangladesh border areas.

2. Specific Measures

- Persons above 65 years of age, pregnant women and children below the age of 10 years should not be allowed to visit the haats. In addition, persons with common cold and cough, fever should not be allowed to enter the haat premises.
- Along with the Customs Officials, Border Security Force of India, Bangladesh Border Guard, Banking staff, Local police, there should be a designated staff from the State/Upazila health department inside the border haat for monitoring all health related issues of the participants and visitors.
- Vendors, BSF, BGB, Banking Staff, Customs officials, local police, etc. must wear hand gloves and face masks during all operations.
- Washing hands with soap and water and/or use of hand sanitizers should be mandatory for all participants, prior to their entry to the haat premises. In addition, the body temperature of persons entering the haat should be checked with the aid of thermal scanners. The Border Haat Management Committee (henceforth, the Committee) ought to make the hand sanitizers and thermal scanners available with the BSF/BGB personnel for ensuring compliance with these steps. This Committee should also consider the setting-up of 'Disinfectant Tunnels' at the entry gate of the border haats.
- Cleaning and regular disinfection (using 1% sodium hypochlorite) of frequently touched surfaces should be made mandatory at the border haats.
- Use of face covers/masks should be made mandatory. No person without face mask should be allowed to enter the haat premises.
- Proper crowd management outside the haats, viz. managing the queue with due concern for social distancing norms, should be ensured by BSF/BGB personnel.
- Required precautions while handling supplies, inventories and goods in the haats should be ensured. Designated personnel must also be on vigil inside the haat premises to ensure that there is no crowding in front of stalls, and all vendees should observe social distancing and sanitation norms.
- Each and every vendee will have to carry an umbrella while entering the border haat, so that when it rains, crowding under one shade is avoided.

- There should be a temporary ceiling on the number of vendees within the haat premises. The Committee may consider admitting 200 vendees at a time and allow the next batch of 100 vendees to enter the haats after a specified period, say 45 to 60 minutes, once the previous batch of 100 vendees have left the haat premises and basic sanitisation activities like the cleaning of washrooms have been performed.
- Physical distancing of at least six feet is to be followed within the haat premises.
- Respiratory etiquette is to be strictly followed inside the haat premises. This include the practice of covering one's mouth and nose while coughing/sneezing with tissue/handkerchief/flexed elbow/back of the hand and disposing off used tissues in covered bins made available for the purpose.
- Spitting at the haat premises should be strictly prohibited. There should be penalties imposed on participants violating such norms.
- Washrooms are to be frequently cleaned and running water to be made available in the haat premises. The Committee may also consider the option of installing temporary toilets outside the haat premises, in case it is time-consuming to repair the existing washrooms within the haat premises.
- Posters/standees/audio-visual mediums on preventive measures about the Covid-19 should be displayed prominently and/or announced regularly during haat hours to promote awareness among the participants about the preventive measures to the Covid-19. In this regard, displaying large posters in local languages at the entry point of the haats conveying the following messages should be made mandatory:

General Practices to be followed inside the Haat

- ✓ Frequent hand-washing
- ✓ Wearing masks inside the haat premises
- ✓ Maintaining social distances and avoiding physical contacts
- ✓ Prohibiting the participants from spitting inside the haat premises
- ✓ To complete purchases within 45 minutes so that others can also participate at the haats

General symptoms of COVID-19 and what should be the immediate steps

- ✓ Running high temperature, undergoing the Covid-19 test, self-quarantine, etc.

- Specific markings should be made with necessary distance to manage the queue and ensure social distancing at the entrance as well as inside the haat premises.
- No food stall should be allowed inside the border haats.

3. Other Proposed Measures

- Increase in the number of haat days: There are 25 stalls for vendors from each of the two countries – that is, 50 in total. In order avoid over-crowding, it may be useful to increase the number of haat days from once-a-week to twice-a-week and limit the number of participating vendors to 15 instead of 25 on a particular haat day.
- Remove the five kilometre radius restriction: The Border Haat Management Committee should remove the five kilometre radius restriction, which will increase the footfall of vendees on each haat day. This will partly compensate the losses incurred by the vendors during its closure due to the Covid-19 and owing to the proposed new limit on the number of participants at the haats. Also, this will enable a greater number of vendees, whose incomes are also negatively affected by the Covid-19, access essential commodities at cheaper prices at the haats.
- Promote the sale of essential commodities: The vendors should be encouraged to sell essential food and agricultural commodities as against FMCG (fast moving consumer goods) products to take care of food and livelihood security of local communities.
- Allow the trading of protective equipment: The border haats should be used for the trading of health and hygiene products such as face masks, personal protective equipment, soap, hand sanitisers, which are either not available in border villages or are costly. Bangladesh, which has a comparative advantage in the readymade garments sector, can produce face masks and personal protective equipment at a much lower cost as compared to India. Similarly, there is a dearth of supply of soap and hand sanitisers on the Bangladeshi side, which India can plug. Such mutually beneficial and complementary trade needs to be encouraged.