

# Up-scaling India-Bangladesh Border Haats

## What, Why and How

**Organised and supported by:** CUTS International and Unnayan Shamannay organised this webinar with the support of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Organisation of the United Kingdom (formerly known as DFID) under the project titled “Border Haats between India and Bangladesh as a Tool to Reduce Informal Cross Border Trade.”

**Opening Remarks:** **Bipul Chatterjee**, Executive Director, CUTS International

**Moderator:** **Bipul Chatterjee**, Executive Director, CUTS International

### Speakers:

- **Sabyasachi Dutta**, Executive Director, Asian Confluence
- **Mahbuba Nasrin**, Professor & Director, Institute of Disaster Management & Vulnerability Studies, Bangladesh
- **Asjadul Kibria**, Planning Editor, The Financial Express, Bangladesh
- **Nisha Taneja**, Professor, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, New Delhi
- **Tania Haque**, Professor, Department of Women & Gender Studies, Dhaka University
- **Ratul Baruah**, Senior Journalist, formerly associated with Meghalaya Guardian as News Editor & In Charge

**Concluding Remarks:** **Bipul Chatterjee**, Executive Director, CUTS International

### Introduction

With the support of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, UK, and in partnership with Unnayan Shamannay, Bangladesh, CUTS International is implementing a project entitled ‘Border Haats Between India and Bangladesh as a Tool to Reduce Informal Cross Border Trade’. Three Briefing Papers titled ‘Reimagining Border Haats as Broder Co-Prosperity Zones’, ‘Border Haats and Women Empowerment’ and ‘Role of The Media in Popularising Border Haats’ were published recently under this project.

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The authors of these papers are Sabyasachi Dutta, Executive Director, Asian Confluence, Mahbuba Nasrin, Professor and Director, Institute of Disaster Management & Vulnerability Studies, Dhaka and Asjadul Kibria, Planning Editor of The Financial Express of Bangladesh, respectively.

Along with the Paper Authors, other Speakers on the Panel were Nisha Taneja, Professor, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relation, New Delhi; Tania Haque, Professor, Department of Women & Gender Studies, Dhaka University; and Ratul Baruah, Senior Journalist, Formerly associated with Meghalaya Guardian as News Editor & In Charge.

## Background and Context

Bangladesh and India share a common border stretching some 4100 km. Bangladesh-India Border Haats or Bazaars have been 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 this study jointly with its project partner Unnayan Shamannay.

It has been observed that border markets in Asia and Africa are slowly growing and thus, cross-border trade, albeit small-scale, is flourishing across the world. Border Haat has been a moderately new concept in the India-Bangladesh border and quite successful. However, certain challenges need to be overcome while up-scaling this concept to a higher level, ensuring more direct and indirect benefits regarding restricting the volume of informal trade and promoting women empowerment in and around the existing sanctioned and proposed Border Haat locations. The new dimensions that require acknowledgment are women empowerment, media role, and building a holistic border co-prosperity zone.

The comprehensive research project undertaken by CUTS International holds the promise of facilitating understanding about border haats and their long-term potentials.

This webinar was an endeavour to discuss the future of Border Haats through upscaling of the same.

## Highlights of the Panel Discussion

**“The spotlight should be on development at the border and not through the border” - Sabyasachi Dutta.**

Dutta, Executive Director, Asian Confluence, and one of the authors of the briefing papers mentioned above, emphasised on perceiving the Border Haats as part of ‘Border

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Co-prosperity Zone' promoting inclusive growth. The envisaged generational shift can be achieved by trade, transit, and tourism to build better trust among the communities across the border. Organising curated programmes, conferences, cultural events at the border haats will play a crucial role in creating better media stories.

The paradigm shifts of borders from being thick dividers demarcating national boundaries to becoming corridors and connectors should be seen as a positive development towards regional cooperation and increasing regional security and prosperity. However, setting up a 'Border Co-prosperity Zone' needs adequate political will, financial inputs, careful planning, and convergence of several agencies on both sides of the border.

**“Border haats have facilitated the participation of women in border areas in economic activities. They instilled confidence in them that they are capable to run a business”** - Mahbuba Nasrin, Professor and Director, Institute of Disaster Management & Vulnerability Studies, Dhaka.

Men are outnumbering women as vendors in the existing Border Haats. In the gendered culture, selling commodities in an open market or vending at the Haat is considered too strenuous, unsuitable, and unsafe for women. Most of the Border Haats are located in remote areas where transport is inadequate and connectivity poor.

Nasrin mentioned that women's cultural identity and the social construct of the locality and women-friendly infrastructure could play a significant role in driving them to enhance their participation in the Border Haats. Several measures should be initiated to increase women's interests and involvement as vendors and vendee. These include making provisions for a flexible and safe working environment, extending financial support and incentives, exploring and exploiting local resources and skills to get more women interested and involved in trading, raising awareness of community and household members through gender-sensitive initiatives to help women overcome entrenched patriarchal customs, attitudes, and practices that retard women empowerment.

**“There is a problem of perspective”** - Asjadul Kibria, Planning Editor of The Financial Express of Bangladesh

To understand better border haats, disseminating relevant information through media is vital. Both in Bangladesh and India, the challenges and opportunities for enhancing border haats are largely unknown to people. Even the media is not aware of the actual situation in many cases. Despite the increasing focus on bilateral trade and economic activities, the national media in both countries is yet to capture the grassroots level

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stories sufficiently. The media coverage is based mainly on government briefings, discussions held by trade bodies, comments, observations on business leaders, and economists and experts' analyses.

Kibria emphasised on the role of media in presenting case studies on the border haats to generate knowledge and understand their effectiveness among the common people. The Foreign Ministry should play a critical role in channelising the media to do investigative stories on on-the-ground models like the border haats and publish such vital information as a means of confidence-building across the border. The efforts of local correspondents of dailies need to be supplemented by the electronic media to ensure comprehensive coverage of the Haats. Both Bangladeshi and Indian journalists, in an unprecedented move, may join hands to explore border trade activities.

Taneja re-emphasised on the advantages that the Border Haats bring to the table, like enabling cross-border exchange of goods with the least procedural compliance. The border haats have been a significant driver of employment in the border region, boosting cross-border economic activities. However, it remains to be seen if reservations for women traders can become a reality. Taneja also mentioned that existing border haats could be scaled up by increasing the number of vendors, the list of commodities traded, the frequency of the haats and providing additional services, such as healthcare facilities.

Haque highlighted that the focus between these two countries has always been on significant issues. But, there is a need to prioritise the local issues affecting the daily lives of the people living in border areas. It is no doubt that COVID 19 has created turmoil in every sphere of our life, individual or collective, but it has also offered some opportunities as well. Socio-economic development has taken different routes with new ideas and diversity. She mentioned that in the absence of equal rights for men and women, the latter have to become the active agents for an equal share of opportunities.

Baruah suggested that while making policies regarding the border haats, the demands of border communities should be considered, and that is where the role of the media comes into play.

It is important to note that to escalate the benefits of the border haats, a demand assessment study should be conducted across the border. Accordingly, border communities should be capacitated to easily sell the products traded in Border Haats.

## Other Important Points of Discussion

The mechanism of Border Haats was introduced as an experiment to reintroduce pre-partition synergies between Bangladesh and India as an instrument primarily for generating livelihood for people in the border areas of the two countries that are marred with limited access to development through the trade of locally grown produce and products. The four operational Border Haats between India and Bangladesh have achieved this objective to a large extent. Border Haat's concept has stood its test of time as a Bottom-Up approach to withstand the ups and downs of regime changes and bilateral relations at government levels.

However, there exist scopes for further enhancement of the capacity of such structures and their benefits. For example, it was reinstated by the panellists that to up-scale the India-Bangladesh border haats initiative, there is a need to work much more closely with the security agencies across the border, in state and national capitals. Also, there is a need to include clauses to the existing protocols for their functioning on the ground during and post COVID times.

Border Haats highlights the intimate relationship between trade, security, and border communities, which is often overlooked while framing policies. Border Haats underline the importance of border communities in effectively managing and securing the border. Therefore, expansion of the border haats will percolate down the benefits across all the local community strata and yield better regional cooperation contributing towards peace, prosperity, security, and stability.

## Conclusion

Delivering his concluding remarks, Chatterjee underlined the need to further engage with the border communities to identify specific issues and make policy recommendations at the local, state, and national levels. In this regard, the emphasis should be placed on further empowerment of the Border Haats Management Committees. They are in a better position to resolve most of the specific issues.

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**Press Release link:** <https://bit.ly/38lgyXm>

**Video link:** <https://bit.ly/3lnquuQ>