

## Webinar Report

### India-Bangladesh Border Haats

*Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*

**Organised and supported by:** CUTS International and Unnayan Shamannay organised the Webinar with the support of Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Organisation of 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”.

**Date:** October 29, 2020, 15:00–16:30 hrs. (IST), 15:30–17:00 hrs. (BST)

**Opening remarks:** Arnab Ganguly, Policy Analyst, CUTS International

**Moderator:** Indranil Bose, Associate Professor of Political Science, St. Xavier’s College, Kolkata.

#### Speakers

- Ms. Shirin Akhter, Member of Parliament, Bangladesh;
- Dr. A K Enamul Haque, Professor of Economics, East-West University, Dhaka;
- Dr. Joyeeta Bhattacharjee, Senior Fellow, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi;
- Ms. Bijaya Roy, Senior Research Associate, CUTS International.

Concluding Remarks: Bipul Chatterjee, Executive Director, CUTS International

#### Introduction

CUTS International, with the support of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, UK and in partnership with Unnayan Shamannay, Bangladesh, is implementing a project entitled ‘Border Haats between India and Bangladesh as a tool to reduce informal cross-border trade’. Three briefing papers were published under this project discussing the role of border haats in border management; the prospect of border haats in promoting people-to-people connectivity; and the need to resume border haats in the post-COVID era in a bio-secured manner.

Dr. Joyeeta Bhattacharjee, Senior Fellow, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi authored the briefing paper titled “Role of Border Haat in Management of India-Bangladesh Border” (<https://bit.ly/3p9P5EV>). Dr. A. K. Enamul Haque, Professor of Economics, East-West University, Dhaka, Bangladesh authored the briefing paper titled “Can Border Haats Become Centres for Cultural Exchange, Tourism and People-to-People Connectivity?” (<https://bit.ly/2Ip2acd>). Mr. Indranil Bose, Associate Professor of Political Science, St. Xavier’s College, Kolkata, and Ms. Bijaya Roy, Senior Research Associate authored the briefing paper “India-Bangladesh Border Haats in the post-COVID Era”(<https://bit.ly/2UblBbh>).

## **Background and Context**

Traditionally, border management was perceived, from the prism of security. Therefore, India undertook a policy of restraining development in the areas adjacent to the international boundary. But, border haats have been transformational in the management of the India and Bangladesh border.

The border haats bolstered development in the border region by generating livelihood opportunities and controlling cross-border illegal activities. Moreover, they also served as a forum for cross-border people-to-people communication. But, the outbreak of the COVID-19 led to the suspension of the border haats for an indefinite period, diluting the benefits accrued to the local communities.

Therefore, this webinar was an endeavour to discuss the importance of border Haats in effectively managing the borders; strengthening people-to-people connectivity at the grassroots level; and put forth recommendations to facilitate re-opening of the India-Bangladesh border haats and promote them as centres for tourism, cultural exchange and people-to-people connectivity.

## **Highlights of the Panel Discussion**

### ***Border Haats and its role in facilitating better border management and strengthening People-to-People connectivity at the local level***

India and Bangladesh share 4,096 km of an international border. Yet when one delves into the history of this piece of political engineering, one realises that the border was a rather artificial construct which ran through people's houses, hearts, and lives. Border haat however, provided the opportunity to reunite people and families who were divided by international borders. These opening remarks were made by Indranil Bose, Associate Professor of Political Science, St. Xavier's College, Kolkata, in his opening remarks.

Border Haats are a rough-and-ready market, at the zero points, that allows local communities from both India and Bangladesh 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. They were established by the Government of India and Bangladesh to boost livelihood opportunities for the local communities, usually poor and marginalised.

According to Dr. A. K. Enamul Haque, Professor of Economics, East-West University, Dhaka, Bangladesh, the policies of the governments are very crucial in determining whether border areas will be conflict zones or friendship zones. After the establishment of the hard border between India and Bangladesh in 1965, the mistrust and conflicts in border regions started to grow.

In 2011 when the first border haat was established it proved to be a turning point in Indo-Bangla relations since it created an opportunity for communities residing in the border regions to strengthen trust among each other by understanding each other's culture and language. Apart from playing the role of a market, Border Haats also acted as re-union spots for friends and families separated by the barbed wires.

To promote people-to-people connectivity between border residents, he recommended issuing family reunion pass which may be availed by the border residents to visit family members across borders for a limited period; promoting border tourism and, developing special economic zones in the border areas which will also generate jobs among border residents.

Dr. Joyeeta Bhattacharjee, Senior Fellow, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi, said that India's approach to managing the border was security-centric and hence militaristic. It did not improve the socio-economic condition of the border residents. On the contrary, informal trade and illegal activities flourished in the border areas owing to the availability of limited livelihood opportunities.

The opening of border haat has marked a paradigm shift in the basic approach towards border management from militaristic to people-centric. This paradigm change yielded several positive impacts among local communities residing on either side of the borders. Dr. Bhattacharjee further added that the border haats have proved to be a successful model for better border management where the border areas act as zones of peace driven by economics. In this regard, she emphasised the need for opening more border haats along the India-Bangladesh border.

Border haats have been instrumental in reducing informal trade and creating employment opportunities for grassroots stakeholders, including women. The haats have opened new opportunities for women to participate in income-generating activities and also to re-connect to their relatives through border haats. They have also played a significant role in strengthening diplomatic ties and people-to-people connectivity between India and Bangladesh said Ms. Shirin Akhter, Member of Parliament, Bangladesh.

She suggested organizing cultural events within the haats premises on special days such as independence day, International Mother Language, Day, etc. to promote cultural exchanges to enhance people-to-people connectivity among border communities.

She also mentioned that few traders are not happy with border haats as they are losing market for their indigenous products due to the import of Indian goods through border haats.

In this regard, Bipul Chatterjee, Executive Director, CUTS International, underlined that every initiative has got gainers and losers. While the establishment of border haats has expanded choice for consumers at the grassroots level, they have also impacted the sale of a few local indigenous products. There is a need to explore how to strike a balance between the two so that local communities residing on both sides of the border can enjoy more gains from this initiative.

### ***Need for re-opening Border Haats***

The suspension of the haat operations for an indefinite period due to COVID-19 is likely to cause the economic impoverishment of the local communities. Also, shrinking employment opportunities might force the local communities to re-engage in informal cross-border trade. Therefore, it is imperative to re-open border haats but without compromising the health and hygiene safety of the participants.

In this regard, Bijaya Roy, Senior Research Associate, CUTS International, recommended a list of operational guidelines that the Haat Management Committees might follow. It includes limiting the number of vendees per haat, ensuring proper sanitization facilities in the haat premises, increasing the number of haat days to compensate for a reduction in income due to reduced footfall, promoting the sale of essential products in the haat.

### **Key Issues Emerged during Open Discussion**

Presently, there are four operational border haats along the India-Bangladesh border in Meghalaya and Tripura states. Six more are about to become operational. Many other locations are also proposed for the establishment of border haats. But, there is a lack of awareness about border haats among people, even among officials and diplomats in both countries.

Therefore, it is important to create awareness about border haats among people by sharing the success stories of border haats in the form of the video documentary, awareness generation meetings, snippets, etc.

54 trans-boundary rivers between India and Bangladesh could be used for creating “Border Ghats”. These would be floating markets where residents from both sides of the border could assemble to buy/sell products like border haats.

Arnab Ganguly, Policy Analyst, CUTS International mentioned that participation of women in border haats depends on the social construct of that place where the border haats are presently operational. As Meghalaya has a matrilineal society, the participation of women in the haat both as vendor and vendee is significant, compared to locations in Tripura and/or Bangladesh side of the haats where the societies are patriarchal and orthodox. Thus while establishing border haats are important, it is also essential to develop strategies to enhance the participation of the women folks in the border haats.

He also underlined that the long-term sustainability of border haats would typically hinge on whether the border haats can create value chain connectivity among the local communities. As an example, he cited the case of the Kalaichar-Baliamari border haat that facilitated the formation of cross-border value in areca nut. This has created many ancillary income opportunities in the nearby border villages.

Monoj Roy, a former Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Commerce, Bangladesh, suggested conducting a study to identify the new commodities for which demand is created

in the border areas due to an increase in their income and then assist border residents in getting required capacity building training. This will enable them to produce those products and sell them in the border haats.

## **Conclusion**

Border haats are playing a positive role in ensuring peace, security, stability, and prosperity in the border areas between India and Bangladesh. Border haats have exacerbated the income opportunities in the border areas and due to this out-migration from the border areas has reduced significantly in the locations where the border haats have been established. The products that were earlier traded informally are now being traded through the border haats.

The border haats also serve as a forum for cultural exchange and instill trust among border residents. They could also act as vital links in the formation of the cross-border value chain and facilitate women empowerment in remote areas. Given these positive impacts of the border haats on the lives and livelihood of the local communities, there is an urgent need to re-open the border haats, but with necessary on-the-ground measures for the health and hygiene safety of the participants.

**Youtube link:** <https://bit.ly/3korIUw>

**Press Release links:** <https://bit.ly/2lkL148> <https://bit.ly/3eInyFL>