



Border haats on the India-Bangladesh Border: An Opportunity and Challenges on the West Bengal Border

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Abstract: Border trade refers to trade within five kilometres of a border, often using nonstandard channels and small quantities. The markets are built on distinct local realities and enabling policies, and their size and ambition vary greatly. West Bengal, an Indian state, shares a 2217-kilometre border with Bangladesh. The region's inhabitants share language, culture, way of life, food habits, customs, traditions, and fundamental necessities. This similarity has significantly influenced bilateral ties since Bangladesh's independence. A significant portion of informal trade between India and Bangladesh comes through West Bengal border. Partition has caused misery and distress in these regions, with people dependent on the border for livelihood and involved in smuggling. Establishing border haats along the India-Bangladesh border in West Bengal could provide livelihood opportunities. It could play a significant role in women's empowerment, border management, cultural exchange, people-to-people contact, and agricultural equipment and technology exchange. This could also reduce informal trade, build mutual trust, and reduce security concerns in the region. This article examines the potential outcomes of establishing border haats along with the India-Bangladesh border in West Bengal, the anticipated difficulties that this initiative may face, and concludes with a few recommendations to deal with these challenges.

Keywords: Border haats; Borderlands; West Bengal border; Local development; Mutual Trust; Women Empowerment.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh recognise that 'Border haats' aim to promote the well-being of people living in remote areas across two countries' border by establishing the traditional practise of retailing local produce through local markets. People living in remote border areas face several problems, such as a lack of employment options, hard terrain, and distance from main towns and cities. Border haats close to the Indo-Bangladesh border are impromptu markets set up to allow inhabitants on both side of the border to sell their local produce.

Adding to this challenge was the issue of the Partition in 1947, which changed the lives of people living along the India Bangladesh border dramatically. Partition affected almost everyone in India and Pakistan, either directly or indirectly, although the effect was most strongly felt in the provinces of Bengal and Punjab, which underwent cartographic partition. However, for those whose lives, homes, and livelihoods were directly impacted by the border's construction, a new struggle began. The impact of the Participation was considerable within the new India-Bangladesh border, which has become India's longest border (4096 km) and run through five states, including West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. The inhabitants of India's and Bangladesh's border regions share a variety of similarities due to living in the same country prior to 1947. These include language, culture, food habits, gods and goddesses, customs and traditions, and fundamental necessities. The partition, in addition to creating an artificial boundary, disrupted the socioeconomic circumstances of the two countries, particularly in the border regions. What's more, partition not only divided nations but also separated families and villages, disrupted connectivity, and divided previous integrated economic spheres at the local level. Many people lost their farming land as a result of partition and became

destitute. In addition, prior to 1947, many of the regions that today constitute the border were major economic centers, which unfortunately lost their importance after partition and the newly created borderland has become isolated, remote, and underdeveloped. This underdeveloped borderland also become center for the proliferation of cross-border crimes like, cattle, weapons and drug smuggling, or the trafficking of woman and children, to name a few.

Consider the challenges associated with borderlands, the separation of former communities and integrated economic space, a local perspective to development becomes an almost primary request for analysis. Indeed, while national and regional focus policy strategies, like India's Look East and Act East are headline grappling policy formulations, their impact and relevance for different communities and space, like borderland area, need to be re-considered and with it a focus on the local when considering developments support. Thus, this article, through its focus on border haats and their impact on specific localities, tries to emphasis the local focus when considering to offer development support.

2. ABOUT BORDER HAATS, SOME EXAMPLE

Border trade is frequently defined as trade destined for markets within 5 kilometres of the border, and it typically involves nonstandard channels, that is, not through Land Customs Stations (LCS), and it is often done in small quantities rather than in bulk. Border markets exist in both developing and developed countries. The markets are based on distinct local realities and enabling policies, and their size varies greatly. Some of the big national, regional and international bazaars in Central Asia, which have a centuries-old tradition as trading places, are now complemented by a sophisticated logistics infrastructure and are akin to shopping malls in industrialised countries. Khorgos Bazaar, a market near the border between China and

Kazakhstan, once served as a significant stop on the Silk Road. It was regarded as a showcase of Central Asian border trade, characterised by the free movement of traders and the duty-free movement of goods and services. According to World Bank (2007) documents, 1,300 Kazakh traders enter China every day to purchase goods to resell in Kazakhstan, with 46% of them being women. The market and its ancillary services employ 30% of the active population in the Kazakh border town of Jarkent (Kaminski and Mitra, 2012).

At the Indonesia-Malaysia border, the small Malaysian town Serikin has grown into a weekend centre of semi-formal trade, where more than 180 traders, mostly from Indonesia, sell their wares, mostly garments and fabric, food and beverages, furniture and handicrafts, and electrical and household goods, all priced relatively cheaply but higher than in their home country (Awang et al., 2013). Serikin, according to the traders, provides safe business opportunities and simple cross-border procedures. Locals have benefited by providing traders with amenities such as stall rentals, parking spaces at their homes, and storage space. Although traders are permitted to stay on weekends, ancillary businesses such as room stays, restaurants, and motels have sprung up. These services create substantial monthly earnings.

Border markets can be found in South Asia in areas where the border is de facto open (Bangladesh-India and India-Pakistan) or hard (Bhutan-India and India-Myanmar). Border trade in South Asia brings together communities who have historically traded with one another but have been separated by boundary demarcations and law enforcement. Traditional tribes from northeast India's Mizoram state, for example, dwell in both India and Myanmar. They continue to conduct informal trade over the 400-kilometer open border or at the lone official border crossing in Zokhawthar, near Champhai (RIS, 2011). According to the Border Trade Agreement of 1994, border trade between India and Myanmar is permitted on 40 types of products at a 5%

tariff. The entire open border between Myanmar and northeast India is still heavily used for illegal trade and smuggling (De and Majumdar, 2014). Acknowledging ancient economic relations and responding to the demands of communities and political leaders in Mizoram state, the governments have permitted individuals to travel visa-free within 16 kilometers of the border for 72 hours. There are demands to revert to the previous regime of 60 kilometers and 60 days annually (Kashyap, 2017).

1.1 The West Bengal-Bangladesh borderlands: a first appraisal

It is an interdependent borderland marked by symbiotic links between societies on both sides of the border, resulting in a significant flow of economic and human resources across it. In 2011, the first Border haat opened in Meghalaya's West Garo Hills area, in Kalaichar and Kurigram, Bangladesh. Border haats may be minor in terms of trade volume, but they make an important contribution to the bonding of people on both side of the border, by offering local employment, information sharing, and expanding people-to-people contact, all of which are important building blocks in strengthening ties between the two neighbouring countries. According to an Observer Research Foundation (ORF) study, the border haats enabled people from both sides to revive old familial connections. These haats have produced job opportunities, promoted exchanges of information, and facilitated people-to-people connectivity, all of which have contributed to the strengthening of ties between the two bordering countries.

Mridul Barman and Dr. Debabrata Sutradhar examine the socioeconomic impact of Kalaichar border haatin their article "Socio-economic Impact of Border haat in Meghalaya: A Case Study of Kalaichar Border." They demonstrated how the Kalaichar Border haat, located along the Indo-Bangladesh border, has significantly improved the lives of people in the region. This haat has become a significant feature in vendors' daily activities, creating numerous

employment opportunities. The impact of border haats on economic facets is more visible. The positive impact of border haats on local vendors is confirmed by the Likert scale, which confirms that it led to a transformation of socio-economic conditions along the Kalaichar border haat. This success can serve as a role model for promoting similar haats along the Indo-Bangladesh, Indo-Myanmar, and Indo-China borders, promoting local produce from the region that would otherwise be unsold.

Sudhir Chandra Nath in his article titled “Border Haats as Centres for Exchange of Agricultural Inputs, Ideas and Practices” evaluates and explains how border haats are performing like a bridge between both sides of the border community. No doubt, the trade exchange of haats is small in volume, but the way it works in support of the welfare of the remote border population represent a good example of an effective land-based cross-border trade regime for the rest of the world. Border haats have created an environment of fraternity and support healthy border relations, improved economic life and status, expanded local trade, and so on.

Mohammad Fakhrus Salam and Mohammad Shakil Bhuiyan in their article titled “Cross-Border trade enterprise between Bangladesh and India: An appraisal on Border Haats”. They demonstrated how the border haats play an effective role as cross-border business hubs, serving as centres for agro-input and technology exchange. Yet, government and private organisations are playing a vital role in facilitating the cross-border exchange of agricultural produce, implements, inputs, and knowledge on agricultural practises. This continues to have a positive cascading effect, exposing farmers to newer and better inputs and practises, promoting rural entrepreneurship, and creating better income and livelihood opportunities. Creating cross-border

dependencies is essential for creating prosperous borders, co-prosperity zones, and better border management.

Going back to the origins of border haats, the governments of India and Bangladesh made the decision to establish a venue for their citizens to interact and freely exchange goods without having to go through the formal and time-consuming documentation processes that are typically necessary when individuals' cross international borders. These mechanisms would also act as a measure of trust among citizens in both countries. As a result, Border haats was born. Border haats between India and Bangladesh are established to provide livelihoods to the border communities. Furthermore, 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, which are: Balat (Meghalaya) - Sunamgang (Sylhet); Kalaichar (Meghalaya) - Kurigram (Rangpur); Srinagar (Tripura) - Chagnaiya (Chittagong); Kamalasagar (Tripura) - Kasba (Chittagong).

According to the rules and regulations of this border haats, trade, buyers and sellers must reside within a space of 5 kilometers from a particular border haat. The main goals of this are to ensure higher living standards and the growth of local economies. However, people who live much further than the allowed distance are still able to visit the haat and actively participate as buyers. Traders are required to carry a photo ID card and receive a trading permit that is typically valid for one year. The border haat represents an additional location where a number of vendors who have regular shops in their villages can increase their income. Border haats have also created employment opportunities for the local youth, who have emerged as providers of various services: transporters, laborers, and food stall owners. The border haats promote several cottage industries of Bangladeshi manufacturers producing items such as gamchha, lungi, garments, and

mats. There are also plastic and melamine products, processed food items, juices, agricultural produce, and household tools like spades, axes, ploughs, sickles, etc.

Roughly, goods worth US\$ 0.5 million are traded annually in each of these haats. Given that the volume of bilateral trade between India and Bangladesh via formal channels is around US\$10 billion, the percentage of trade that comes through border haats is negligible. 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, as traders are benefiting by selling their products in the haats. The buyers are also saving money as they do not have to travel to buy the products. Again, the haats are providing new avenues of livelihood for local communities since they are also involved in providing services like transport and running tea and food stalls on the haatdays. 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. Previously, women in border areas where border haats are located had limited opportunities to participate in economic activities because, unlike male members of their community, they are restricted to travel outside of their locality. The border haats have also helped to strengthen links between communities on both sides of the border, as people on both side of the border have familial, social, and linguistic linkages. Yet, these ties were disturbed due to the division of the country. The haats helped communities re-energize these bonds by providing a meeting place for families to visit relatives in neighbouring countries; for many, the visa and immigration processes, particularly when travelling to a foreign country, are time-consuming and expensive. The haats become meeting points for the communities and help to develop and promote mutual understanding, which contributes to peace and stability in the border region in no uncertain terms. Besides these, the haats have reduced

informal trade substantially, as items earlier traded through informal channels are now traded through border haats.

The development opportunity provided through border haats is also appreciated in academic research through a variety of publications. This includes Mahbuba Nasreen (2021) in her article “Border haats and Women Empowerment” which explore how border haats along the India-Bangladesh border continue to play an important role in women's empowerment. While Somprakash Dhar and Saptarshi Mitra (2017) in their article titled “Srinagar-Chagnaiya Border haat Tripura: A Trade Pocket, Managed As ‘Peack Kit’ Between India and Bangladesh” discuss the outlook of people about the effect of the Border haat by evaluating the ground situation of the Srinagar-Chagnaiya haat in Tripura. Sudhir Chandra Nath (2021) in his article titled “Border haats as Centres for Exchange of Agricultural Inputs, Ideas and Practices” explore how border haats serve as an important platform for the exchange of agricultural inputs, ideas, and practices such as the exchange of food commodities, agricultural input, access to agricultural equipment, the encouragement of rural entrepreneurship, and so on. Subir Bhaumik (2021) in her article titled “Border haats on India-Myanmar Border: Opportunities and Challenges” explores the prospects and challenges of establishing border haats along India's border with Myanmar. Asjadul Kibria (2021) in her article titled “Role of the Media in Popularising Border haats” emphasises the effective role of media in enhancing the success and popularity of Border haats. Indranil Bose (2021) in her research article titled “India-Bangladesh Border haats in the post-COVID Era” discuss the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on border haats and emphasising the significance of operationalizing border haats. Debabrata Sutradhar (2017) in his article titled “Socioeconomic impact of Border haat in Meghalaya: A Case Study of Kalaichar Border haat” made an assessment of the socio-economic impact of the border haat at Kalaichar has on the

vendors operating there. Jigme Wangdi (2020) in his book chapter titled “Mentalities, subjectivities of the nation-state at the India-Bangladesh Border haats” make an attempt to understand the statist rationale for "legitimizing" and thereby "making official" a specific category of rural spaces of commercial exchange known as "Border haats" in the two northeastern states of India, namely Tripura and Meghalaya, with the bordering regions of Bangladesh.

Though it needs to be pointed out that those researches are focusing on border haats in the North East region while there is, however, no research article that talks and evaluates the border haats in the West Bengal border region. The aim of this article is to study and to examine the potentiality of establishing border haats on the India-Bangladesh border in the West Bengal border region. In doing so a number of specific questions will be addressed: a) is there any potentiality to build border haats on the West Bengal border? b) what are the benefits that will accrue to the people on both sides if a few border haats are built along the West Bengal border?; c) what are the major difficulties to constructing border haats in the West Bengal border with Bangladesh?. This study is based on content analysis and observation methods. Both, primary and secondary data has been included. This article is descriptive, deductive, empirical, and analytical in nature.

3. WEST BENGAL AND BANGLADESH BORDER

West Bengal is the largest state in India that shares a border with Bangladesh. West Bengal and Bangladesh share around 2217 kilometers border. 10 districts of West Bengal and 16 districts of Bangladesh are located in this border zone, where millions of people live. The inhabitants of West Bengal and Bangladesh's border regions share a variety of similarities due to

living in the same country prior to 1947. These include language, culture, food habits, gods and goddesses, customs and traditions, and fundamental necessities. As a result, West Bengal has played an important role in bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh since the creation of Bangladesh, or it could be argued that when the Indian government seeks to reach an agreement with Bangladesh, West Bengal's viewpoint is given significant weight.

A large amount of informal trade between India and Bangladesh comes through the West Bengal border. One of the most crucial causes in this regard, among others, is a lack of employment opportunities in the border region. This region's residents suffered the most as a result of the division since they were separated from their families, lost their agricultural land, and lived in poverty. Partition created misery and distress in these border regions in both directions. In this situation, the people of this region have become dependent on cross-border activities for their livelihood. Like, been involved in various types of smuggling businesses centred on the border, and they are also forced to work as migrant labourers in various states and sometimes outside the country. Even though the prevalence of smuggling has decreased in recent years, the volume of informal trade between India and Bangladesh remains relatively high. Another major reason within this scenario is the lack of opportunity or government mechanism among the residents of this region to trade with each other legitimately. The government restrictions governing trade between the people of the two countries are incomprehensible to the residents of the borderland area. As a result, citizens of the borderland areas have no access to foreign trade.

In 2012, certain areas along the North and South Dinajpur borders with Bangladesh's Dinajpur district, as well as the Malda border with Bangladesh's Joypurhat and Naogaon districts, were identified as viable locations for border haats because they were still unfenced.

The BSF proposes allowing people from both sides of the border to trade in these haats with valid passports for a specific item. These haats will not only cater to the everyday needs of the locals, but generate an additional positive impact by reducing the amount of smuggled good and in extension reduce the risk to life to both, smugglers and border guards. Notwithstanding arguments concerning the necessity and viability of these border haats, in 2013 the West Bengal government approved four areas along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border as free trade zones where traders from both states can sell their wares. According to B.D. Sharma, Additional DG, BSF, the markets would be established near the international boundary, with half of the designated haats area will be on Indian territory, with the remainder in Bangladeshi territory. It will be a closed area with gates on both sides. He stated that all infrastructure, such as banks, will be established. Bangladesh has also planned to construct Special Economic Zones (SEZs) along its borders with India in order to encourage cross-border trade within the state's legal framework. Nevertheless, none of these initiatives were ultimately executed.

Considering the marginalised people of the two countries in this borderland area, if a few border haats are built in different districts of West Bengal and Bangladesh, it will possible solve many of the people's problems in these regions. Locals will be employed, migrant labour will be reduced, informal trade will be reduced, and border smuggling will be decried. Also, marginalised people in the region will get a platform to reunite with their relatives after being separated. As such, border haats in these areas can be considered a blessing to the locals. As a result, mutual understanding and trust will be established between inhabitants of the two countries residing in the border region, which will have a positive impact on the two countries' relationship. Traditional haats, which have been de-legitimised by the state-building agendas of India and Bangladesh, need to be re-legitimised again for the people along the border to live and

earn without fear. If a few border haats are built in this region, the inhabitants will profit in a variety of ways:

3.1 Border Management

Border management between India and Bangladesh has two major goals: firstly, to facilitate the movement of legitimate goods and people across their border; and secondly, to ensure the security of the country by restricting the entry of illegal goods and individuals across the border. Given these objectives, border management requires the involvement of multiple agencies, such as the border guard force, customs, immigration, and local police. The nature of border management policies is determined by the nature of a country's bilateral relationship with its neighbor. Security and peace are key components of border management across the globe. India shares around 4096 Kilometers of border with Bangladesh, which runs through five states, and West Bengal shares around 2217 kilometers of border with Bangladesh. The partition not only divided the nations but also separated families, broke down connectivity linkages, and previous integrated market area. Prior to 1947, in West Bengal, many of the regions that today constitute the border were, in fact, centres of major economic centres, which unfortunately lost their significance after partition. The areas close to the border became isolated and underdeveloped. The border area has become a major breeding ground for the proliferation of cross-border crimes. Major crimes across the Bangladesh-India border include cattle smuggling, the smuggling of arms and narcotics, and the trafficking of women and children. The border is also prone to informal trade. For a long time, the enclaves served as a vital corridor for transnational crimes between two countries and made border management a difficult and dangerous task. The peaceful resolution of the land boundary disputes in 2015 helped to boost confidence between the two countries.

There are numerous opportunities to build border haats in West Bengal, on the India and Bangladesh border. If border haats can be built on the India-Bangladesh border in West Bengal, it will provide a livelihood to the border area communities in both countries. The haats will be a boon to the communities living closest to the border. The traders will benefit by selling their products in the haats, and the buyers will save money as they do not have to travel far to buy the products. The haats will provide new avenues of livelihood for local communities; they will also involve providing services like transportation and running tea and food stalls on haat days. Additionally, these haats can create an opportunity for the empowerment of women in these areas, as they are participating in locale economic activities that will emerge and increase due to the establishment of the border haats. Border haats, once again, can aid in the strengthening of ties between communities on both sides of the border by tipping into existing familial, social, and linguistic ties, which has been strained as a result of the country's division. The haats will allow communities to re-energize these bonds by providing a meeting place for families with relatives in the neighbouring country. For many (particularly women), the visa and immigration process, as well as travel to a foreign country, is time-consuming and expensive. The haats will serve as gathering places for the communities and will aid in the development and promotion of mutual understanding, which will undoubtedly contribute to peace and stability in the border region. Furthermore, the haats will significantly reduce informal trade, as items previously traded through informal channels will now be traded through border haats. A rise in formal trade helped mitigate the risks associated with informal trade, which threatened national security. The border haats can add a new dimension to India and Bangladesh border cooperation and are a clear departure from more conservative measures for addressing border security challenges. The border haats will highlight the close relationship between trade, security, and border

communities, an aspect often overlooked while framing policies. Border haats can emphasise the importance of border communities in border management and security. Expansion of the border haats will help larger numbers of people enjoy its benefits, which in turn will contribute to the development of the region and deepen bonds between people. It will aid in the continuation of border cooperation between the two countries.

4. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL PROSPECTS OF BORDER TRADE

4.1 Promote Trade and Create Employment and Livelihood Opportunities for the Borderland

People living in border areas have limited livelihood options, making it difficult to survive. The border regions of West Bengal states in India have been dealing with these issues since the country's partition in 1947. Prior to 1947, the region was part of a large contiguous geopolitical entity that included modern-day Bangladesh and the rest of India. Trade within this large geographic area was unrestricted, and goods and people moved with ease. After the partition, border villages and towns that had always traded with each other were suddenly asked to stop trading with their neighbours and look for markets elsewhere because an imaginary line, called the international border, now divided them. Because of that, farmers and producers lost access to their primary markets, and villagers were forced to procure their daily necessities elsewhere, often facing far greater levels of difficulty and at a higher cost.

Given the difficulties and often high transaction costs associated with formal trade, informal trade began to flourish - so much so that at one point it was estimated that the volume of informal trade exceeded that of formal trade. As a response to ease the local pressure, border haats were established with the limited objective of providing alternate livelihood opportunities to people living in the border areas of the north-eastern region of India as well as the border

region of Bangladesh, where the haats are located. The existing border haats have performed reasonably well as far as meeting their primary objective is concerned. Considering the success of the border haats so far, it is felt that the border haats have the potential to become an important means for enhancing bilateral trade and to ease local development pressure. If a few border haats can be built on the border of West Bengal, then the local people of this region will get an opportunity to participate in local trade, which in turn will improve their standard of living. The haats will provide new avenues of livelihood for local communities; they will also involve providing services like transportation and running tea and food stalls on haat days. Additionally, these haats can create an opportunity for the empowerment of women in these areas, as they are participating in the local economic activities that will emerge due to the establishment of the border haats. Local people will get the opportunity to sell their products at these border haats, and they can easily collect their necessary products from here. As a result, the amount of bilateral trade will increase between the two countries and border smuggling will decrease, which will have a positive impact on the bilateral relationship between India and Bangladesh. To accomplish this, authorities on both sides of the border must see border haats as tools for improving bilateral trade and local economic cooperation. Initiatives should be taken to achieve this without disrupting the existing framework of bilateral trade.

4.2 Exchange of Agricultural Inputs, Ideas and Practice

Given the various similarities between the two regions in terms of food habits and agricultural practices, border haats could play a significant role in this region as centres of exchange for agricultural products as well as agricultural technologies and practices. Border haats can provide a marketplace where local farmers from both India and Bangladesh, residing in the vicinity of the haats, can exchange their surplus production of agricultural and horticultural

products. Some of the important commodities could be rice, wheat, pulses, spices, and vegetables. Border haats can also provide a platform for the exchange of various agricultural inputs, such as seeds, pesticides, fertilizers, and herbicides. The exchange of these inputs via formal channels necessitates the fulfilment of certain sanitary and phytosanitary obligations. To bypass these often cumbersome and time-consuming processes involved in the formal channels, these agriculture inputs are traded through informal channels and often in significant volumes. Allowing trade in these products via these border haats could lead to a significant decline in the volumes traded through informal channels. People residing in remote border areas of this region either do not get access to the improved agricultural implements or they have to pay amounts higher than the market price (like covering for additional transportation cost) when purchasing the implements.

Consequently, if a few border haats can be built in this region and allow the border communities to get access to various agricultural implements from their neighbouring countries via border haats, it becomes easier to obtain the required service from across the border rather than from distant urban centers. Each seed has a production technology, so proper training is important to ensure production. In both countries, the private sector (especially in the production and marketing of seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides) is working to promote high-quality agricultural inputs in rural areas. The private sector in both countries can help sustain trade in agricultural inputs through border haats by distributing products to rural entrepreneurs and supplying products that have significant demand across the border. This will help the rural entrepreneurs obtain the required products from the company at dealer prices and earn a profit margin on the products sold through border haats. On haat days, small awareness-generation

meetings can be organised at the haat premises, which will help in cross-border sharing of knowledge on agricultural products and related practices.

In addition of providing the potential for economic growth and development, borderland trade also generates additional specific impacts, like empowering women through additional employment and development.

4.3 Empowerment of Women

The empowerment of women is crucial to the promotion of gender equality. Empowerment of women is measured through indicators such as social, economic, educational, and political empowerment as well as access to reproductive health support and resources. Income-earning opportunities are one of the major indicators of women's empowerment in the economic sector, which is a very important criteria in the discourse of women's empowerment. Women's economic empowerment is related to the social, political, and psychological foundation, as well as societal transformation. Women in the border region lag far behind in terms of education, employment, and social establishment due to a lack of adequate opportunities in all of these areas. All of these regions' patriarchal social structures pose a significant barrier to women's advancement. As a result, women in all these regions are primarily associated with domestic work, which is a significant barrier to women's empowerment in border areas. If adequate income opportunities are created for the women of this region, they will be able to improve their situation, which will contribute to the aspirations of women's empowerment in this region. Experience has shown that women in all regions where border haats have been operationalised in North-East India and the North-East region of Bangladesh have earned a modest sum of income on haat days after completing their household chores. They do odd jobs such as offering assistance to vendors in setting up stalls or carrying headloads for a buyer.

Border haats are thus seen to have had a positive impact on gender related income generation. If such border haats can be established in West Bengal's border areas, women from both countries will be able to participate in these border haats, just like within the existing border haats in the northeast, and they will become economically more independent, which will offer them social establishment and accelerate the path of women's empowerment.

4.4 Cultural Exchange and People-to-People Connectivity

Since West Bengal has had a strong linguistic and cultural attachment to Bangladesh for a long time, there is greater scope for enhanced collaboration in new avenues of cooperation, like border haats. Socio-cultural similarities are always one of the key strengths of bilateral relations. During Modi's visit to Bangladesh, "cultural exchange programmes for the years 2015–2017" were adopted. Under Modi's leadership, there has been a noticeable improvement in the sociocultural ties between India and Bangladesh. Cultural exchange encourages people-to-people interaction between neighboring nations, which strengthens mutual trust and improves bilateral relations. The opening of border haats on the India-Bangladesh border represents a fresh effort made by both nations to strengthen their bilateral ties by encouraging people-to-people exchanges. The first border haats were established at Kalaichar in the West Garo Hills of Meghalaya. Currently, India and Bangladesh have four operational border haats, which took on a vital role in people-to-people contact between India and Bangladesh. The region that suffered the most due to partition was Bengal, as a result many people were separated from their families. Even today, this is the picture of almost every house in the border region of West Bengal. We know that following the Noakhali riots of 1946, many people were forced to migrate to India from what was then East Pakistan, where they were separated from their families and didn't get the opportunity to meet with them. If the border haats are built, they will be able to meet their

families' members. It will be a blessing to the citizens of the two nations. Local people from both sides can meet together from time to time, and it will help them exchange their beliefs, values, and ethics with each other. These "border haats" will be anticipated to be crucial in enhancing inter-ethnic interactions between India and Bangladesh. The haats could also provide a meeting place for businesspeople from the two nations to talk about trade and other joint ventures.

Aside from the above-mentioned aspects and impacts generated, in light of the recent COVID-19 global pandemic, border haats gained additional significance.

4.5 COVID-19 and the Significance of Border haats

During the coronavirus, the most contentious issue in our country was the large number of migrant workers in the country. Many people throughout the country are forced to leave their homes in various states in India for the sake of their livelihood, and they are frequently forced to travel outside the country and engage in various jobs in different countries. One reason for this is the region's lack of adequate employment. At present, every state in India has more or less migrant labour. However, West Bengal is one of the states where the number of migrant workers is high. Partition had a significant impact on the people of this region. As a result of partition, many people lost their farming land and became destitute. Since then, the people of this region have chosen a variety of subsistence methods. On the one hand, some people continued to farm as before; others migrated to other states for work; but a large portion of the people in this region chose the border as their source of income. They became reliant on the border for survival. They engage in various forms of border smuggling. However, this has begun to change since the end of the 1990s. As the borders become more restrictive, people's lifestyles begin to change. People are less reliant on the border, and those looking for work sometimes cross the state line to another state and sometimes cross the country to work abroad. A large portion of those are

construction workers who travel to South Indian states to work as construction workers since there is huge gap of proper employment in the borderland areas. Beside these, there is a significant lack of proper action by the government to bring the backward people of this region into the mainstream of society. Since independence, the government's indifference towards the borderland areas is one of the reasons for the increase in migrant labour from these areas. If a few border haats are built in the border areas of West Bengal, then the people of this region will get an opportunity to earn their livelihood locally, by engaging in various activities in these border haats. As a result, they will achieve social recognition and integration along with their financial progress. They will no longer need to move from state to state or country to earn a living. Aside from that, the money they earn from these haats can be used to improve the living conditions of their next generation as well as to fund education, which is desperately needed in this region. As a result, on the one hand, there will be local development, while on the other, the number of people to migrate to find work elsewhere, will continue to decline day by day. That will justify the possibility of building border huts in these areas.

5. MAJOR CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATION

While border haats are offering various economic and development opportunities at the local level, there are associated challenges and difficulties in constructing border haats on the India-Bangladesh border in West Bengal. Among them are: infrastructure challenges; becoming a smuggling hub; a focal point of unauthorized product trade; illegal migration; minimal trade impact.

5.1 Major Challenges

Infrastructural Challenges. A good infrastructural efficiency is needed to build border haats in this region. However, the infrastructure required to construct border haats and effectively manage those haats is severely lacking. There exist a lack of enthusiasm and initiative on the parts of Border Security Force (BSF) and Border Guard (BGB), as well as both governments, which has become one of the major obstacles to the build of these border haats. *Smuggling Hub.* Smuggling across international borders is an important issue in every border region and in many different forms. The West Bengal – Bangladesh border is no exception to this. Indeed, informal trade is greater than formal trade between India and Bangladesh and constitutes a main challenge for trade relations between India and Bangladesh. The construction of border haats on their common border could lead to a further increase of illegal smuggling of numerous goods transported through the haats. Border haats area could become a geographical hotspot for smuggling. *Possibility of Unauthorized Product Trade.* Border haats typically contain a list of products that can be sold, as well as how much a buyer or seller can buy or sell. Some local necessities and home-made goods are typically permitted to be sold in these border haats. However, if there is insufficient supervision, many prohibited products may also be sold in these haats. Beside these, if proper supervision is not provided, then the amount of money that the buyer and seller are permitted to trade is likely to be excessive. *Possibility of Illegal Migration.* Illegal Migration through border haats represent another major issue. Adding to an already existing political challenge as illegal migration from Bangladesh to India is considered a major challenge in their bilateral relationship. Migration from Bangladesh is perceived to have caused a major demographic shift in the bordering Indian states and has been a cause of ethnic and social tension in federal states like Assam. At the same time, Hindu migration has become a sensitive issue in India. While religions become a critical topic associated with illegal migration,

Bangladesh migration to India are driven by search for employment, education, and health. India has repeatedly urged Bangladesh to take measures to control cross-border migration, but Bangladesh has consistently denied India's claims of uncontrolled migration. Yet, India doesn't have any authentic data on the number of illegal migrants it can provide to the Bangladesh government. If Border haats are built in this area, they further enhance the illegal migration issue by becoming a zone for illegal migration. *Minimum Trade*. Another major topic associated with previous border haats is that trade in these haats is negligible. Each of these border haats trades goods worth approximately US\$ 0.5 million per year, for a total of US\$ 2 million across all four operational border haats. Given that the volume of bilateral trade between India and Bangladesh through formal channels is around US\$10 billion, the percentage of trade that occurs through border haats is negligible. If border haats are built along the West Bengal border, the low volume of trade in these haats could become a challenge as well, even they would offer some economic dynamic at the local level.

5.2 Recommendations

To address the potential issue outlined above, to enhance the economic and development effect of haats at the local level, a number of recommendations are offered.

A) For the construction of border haats, appropriate infrastructure needs to be built in the border regions. The governments of the two nations should come forward and take the required actions in this regard. BSF and BDR should play a proactive role in this regard. The governments of India and Bangladesh need to sign an MoU, keeping in mind earlier MoUs, where there will be a detailed discussion on the organisational structure and operational process of the Border haats. *B) Making provisions for a flexible and safe working environment for women.* This can be supported by providing adequate infrastructure such as clean, functional, and separate

washrooms for women, as well as transportation and security measures. Another aspect is providing financial assistance and incentives to women, such as low-interest or no-interest loans.

C) Adequate regulations need to be put in place to ensure biosecurity. A related topic is the approval of the sale of selected agricultural inputs, including seeds, through border haats. Proper precautionary measures, like certification and licensing need to be worked out to allow trade in only genuine agricultural inputs through border haats.

D) Awareness should be created among people living on both sides of the border about border haats. Without the participation of the local population, border haats cannot succeed. Alike, the support of the local administration, from both side of the border, is another requirement for success.

E) Measurements of increasing trade through border haats. To increase the volume of trade in border haats the haats should be allowed to operate at least five to six days a week. This will not only increase the volume of trade but also make it possible to allow a greater number of traders from both sides to participate.

F) Supporting the marginalized and poor. The majority of people who reside on international borders are marginalised and poor, as in most cases, their voices are not heard in official documents or independent research. Yet, media attention may amplify their voices, give them a platform, and sensitise the wider public to the challenges these communities on both side of international borders are facing. Information about border haats and how they have benefited underprivileged residents of isolated border regions can be widely disseminated by the media. The media should take this social responsibility.

6. CONCLUSION

Based on the preceding discussion, it can be stated that constructing more than 50 border haats on the West Bengal border will not even amount to 1% of the yearly trade between the two

nations, because the volume of trade passing through border haats is negligible. Nowadays, bilateral trade between India and Bangladesh is roughly US\$10 billion through formal channels, but each of the four active border haats between the two countries trades goods worth approximately US\$ 0.5 million each year, for a total of US\$ 2 million across all four operational border haats. Nonetheless, border haats are extremely important to border communities. The border haats can serve as a paradigm of generating a shared prosperity for the communities of the border area. It will contribute to greater regional stability by promoting better border cooperation and administration, as well as increasing border security by eliminating informal trade and disruptive unlawful practises. In all of this, the haats contribute to peace by encouraging and strengthening interpersonal bonds. The border haats will offer a new dimension to India-Bangladesh border cooperation and represent a significant departure from more conservative border security methods. The border haats demonstrate the strong relationship between trade, security, and border communities, a factor that is frequently disregarded when policy is developed. The border haats emphasise the importance of border communities in managing and securing the border area successfully. Extension of border haats will allow more people to experience its benefits, which will contribute to the region's growth and strengthen interpersonal relationships. It will aid in the continuation of border cooperation between the two countries. Border haats can also be useful for increasing women's employment participation and thereby empowering them. It should also be highlighted that informal trade will decrease as a result of border haats as they act as platforms for expanding commercial collaborations and endeavors between the two countries, resulting in increasing local bilateral trade. They can generate additional positive, cascading, effect by not only exposing farmers to newer and better inputs and practises, but also by encouraging rural entrepreneurship, which can lead to the creation of

additional income and livelihood opportunities, not to mention the impact on reducing informal agricultural input trade. The border haats have provided the local population with access to a past, to a pre-partition period, they had feared would be lost forever; here, they meet, greet, and have fun with one another. It is an elegant location for cultural exchange, friendship development, and tourist development! - a location in "no man's land" between Bangladesh and India. Finally, border haats could form the basis for Special Border Economic Development Zones. Similar zones in different parts of the world have significantly contributed to economic growth in their respective countries.

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