

Can Border Haats Become Centres for Cultural Exchange, Tourism and People-to-People Connectivity?

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Bangladesh and India in 2011 took a historic step by signing an MoU to set up border haats on their northern and eastern borders to facilitate commodity trade between local communities living on either side of the border.

Under the new reality, Indian and Bangladeshi traders use such haats once a week to trade their goods with customers on both sides. The opportunity for trade is not only the beginning of a new era of communication between local people on both sides; it is also an opportunity for understanding each other's culture and languages.

This Briefing Paper presents cases on how the border haats have been able to glue together communities and people who were apart for many years. The border haats brought them back to the origin – here again, they meet each other, greet each other, and have fun with each other. It is an elegant place for the exchange of cultures, a place to develop friendships, and a place to become a tourist! - a place at the 'No Man's land between Bangladesh and India.

Introduction

The Partition of Bengal in 1947 brought changes in the lives of people living along the borders between Bangladesh and India's current States of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura. These five states surround Bangladesh. While creating the boundary for the-then-East Pakistan, Sir Cyrille Radcliffe wrote:

The province (Bengal) offers few, if any, satisfactory natural boundaries, and its development has been on lines that do not well accord with a division by contiguous majority areas of Muslim and non-Muslim majorities. (Jamwal, 2004)

This depicts the difficulty in defining borders between Bangladesh and India. The final drawing of the 4056-kilometer-long border between India and Bangladesh was submitted to the Governor-General of British India on August 12, 1947, but the dispute did not end there. To narrate the partition, Pankaj Misra wrote in his book *Exit Wounds: The Legacy of Partition*:

Cyril Radcliffe, a London barrister, was flown to Delhi and given forty days to define precisely the strange political geography of an India flanked by an eastern and a western wing called Pakistan. He did not visit the villages, communities, rivers, or forests divided by the lines he drew on paper. Ill-informed about the relation between

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agricultural hinterlands and industrial centres, he made a mistake of enormous economic consequence when, dividing Bengal on religious lines, he deprived the Muslim majority in the eastern region of its major city, Calcutta, condemning East Pakistan—and, later, Bangladesh—to decades of rural backwardness. (Mishra, 2007).

The Radcliffe line went through bedrooms, kitchens, houses, villages, and croplands of millions of people living together at the border. As such, brothers were divided with citizenships in two countries. The initial separation was, however, not a hard one because the borders were soft. Families on both sides could visit each other and the community life went on uninterrupted. One could go to the other side and plough his cropland. Citizenships were different but their lives were the same.

The Turning Points

It was 1965 when the first India-Pakistan war began over the dispute in Jammu and Kashmir. The war ended through a cease-fire agreement between India and Pakistan but the political dynamics between the two neighbouring countries changed. There were infiltrations and accusations of covert operations and

so the two countries began to tighten the grips on their borders (Indo-Pakistani War of 1965, 2020).

As such, the free movement of people between families and citizens of Bangladesh and India were affected. The two countries were no longer ready to allow people on both sides to travel without proper travel documents. Visa regimes began and people on both sides began to realise that they are living in two countries and have got separated permanently.

Restrictions on trade began. While the big picture was no different from other regions and countries of the world, the ground realities between India and Bangladesh were different. People who were families could not visit each other, the markets they used to visit to buy products were now inaccessible, and the doctors they used to share were no longer approachable. On the other hand, many poor people could not afford to visit capitals to get passports and visas for visiting families.

The second turning point on the borders between Bangladesh and India was in 1971 when millions of Bangladeshis crossed the border into India to survive the atrocities of the Pakistani Army and began to fight for their freedom. The war lasted from March-December of 1971 and ended with the creation of

Bangladesh – an independent country. The friendship on both sides of the border, however, did not last long.

By 1974, Bangladesh experienced the second famine of the century. Economic hardships led to the rise of smuggling and there were accusations from the Indian side that illegal migration of people into India is on the rise.

Incidentally, India shares the longest border with Bangladesh. It is longer than that with Pakistan, China, Nepal, and Bhutan. So, finally, in 1986, India decided to erect barbed wire fences on the border between Bangladesh and India (Datta, 2018). This was the beginning of the third turning point on the border relationship between Bangladesh and India. It was the final nail on the coffin. Border people became helpless and were permanently blocked from each other's touch.

By 2014, India completed nearly 2424 km long barbed-wire fences on the border between Bangladesh and India. With the completion of border fences there emerged a new problem as revealed by Datta (2018). He wrote:

.. border fencing displaced many families from their place at the same time many families are still living a restricted life outside the border fencing under the strict surveillance of Indian Border Security Force. (Datta, 2018)

The Border Haats

Over time, however, things began to shift on the ground. Both India and Bangladesh's economy began to experience significantly higher economic growth. The growth was, however, centered on the major metropolis in both countries. The border people – living in remote areas – remained out of connectivity with the mainstream economy.

However, with improvement in mobile telecom technology, internet facilities, it became difficult to keep these remote people at bay. It became evident that the people living on the edges need support and both governments possibly found it easier to support them collectively.

Therefore, in 2011 the governments of Bangladesh and India took a historic step by introducing local cross-border trade centres

through an MoU under which both countries have agreed to open border haats on their northern and eastern borders to facilitate commodity trade between local communities living on both sides of the border.

Under the new reality, Indian and Bangladeshi traders use such haats once a week to trade their goods with customers from both sides. The opportunity for trade is not only the beginning of a new era of communication between local people on both sides, but also led to a new understanding of each other's culture and languages.

As one trader from Meghalaya (Indian) put it – "I never knew how to count Bangla money, did not know about it but now I know it and also know how a Bangladeshi buyer bargains, what they want and I have picked up a part of the local language too".

By now, the two countries have completed the teething phase and agreed to extend their cooperation further and create more such markets. They are new realities on the borders between Bangladesh and India. It is a place where people not only exchange goods, but it is also a window for them to exchange greetings, to see their relatives and friends who once shared the same village, the same market, the same schools, same courtyards, and the same crop fields.

Moreover, the markets are now a showcase of products for each other. On either side of the border, remoteness prevented them to access many goods



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that were difficult to find in local markets because the local market is too small to cater to their needs. The border haats expanded the market-size where consumers on both sides can access the same market and the economies of scale enabled traders to bring these products.

There are products which were not produced on one side of the border due to inaccessible terrains (like sea fish on many Indian borders in the east), These

are now traded in the border haats – allowing people’s access to markets where non-local products are available.

There were also cases of over-supply on one side and so prices were very low, the border haats enabled them to sell their products in a larger market and so prices went up leading to higher incomes. These are the stories of Border haats. The following cases are presented to illustrate some of these facts about border haats.

Border Haats: A spot for a reunion of families

Roksana is a Bangladeshi girl. She has been living in a village near the border, far away from the mainstream markets and the economy. Their closest neighbours are the Indian villagers living across the border. They grew up together, played together.

Finally, at the age of 13, she married a boy from other side of the border. There was no fence at that time. Then the fence was built. She could not visit her mother anymore. She could not afford to have a passport and a visa to see her mother. With a broken heart, she used to gaze across the fences to see a glimpse of her family members living in Bangladesh – mother, father, and sisters.

Finally, the border haat allowed her to see and meet them after 15 years of separation. Border haat – to her – is a place of family re-union, a perfect opportunity to remain connected to her parents, to exchange food, to exchange gifts, and to enjoy the touch of her mother.

‘No Man’s Land’ at Indo-Bangla Border

Basu Miah is a Bangladeshi citizen. He was a freedom fighter. He fled to India during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. His father was under surveillance of the Pakistani Army and so he joined the Peace Committee to protect his family.

During the war, he spent months in India and met Swapan. They became good friends and shared many a thought. They had their secrets too. After the independence, they used to meet at the border, used to shout at each other (there is a 150-yard no man’s land between Bangladesh and India -‘No Man’s Land’ at Indo-Bangla Border, 2010) to share their ideas and exchange greetings. Despite living across the border for so long they are still good friends.

Now they get to meet at the border haat. However, they also meet others who come and visit the markets from nearby villages. They have made new friends – they spend time together and gossip with each other. To them, some people simply visit the haat as tourists – simple curious people who want to see the other side of the border – which is still restricted to them because they cannot afford to travel to cities to get passports and visas. Meeting people from another country is fun, entertaining and also a source of pleasure like travelling abroad!



Respecting other cultures will teach you cultural values

Szario, a Christian woman, has been living in Meghalaya in a remote border village near Bangladesh. Both sides of the border are remote and distant, in terms of connectivity with the mainstream economy. She has an orchard where she grows the best oranges on earth. During the season, it is difficult for her to transport the products to the nearby city in India; with the creation of a border haat near her village, she brings her produce to the market. She gets a much higher price for her products. As a result, her income has increased four-fold.

However, she has also learned to appreciate a completely new culture of the plains on the other side of the border. They are Muslims, they greet you differently, they have a different currency even the languages are different. She learned how to count Taka, how to greet a Muslim, and even tasted their food.

For her, it is like travelling into a new world – a world that was alien to her as she never met anyone from Bangladesh before the opening of this market. It has not only created for her a new place of business, but has also offered her a new place where she can greet a different culture, and mingle and appreciate and share each other's ways.

Conclusion

Border Haats have indeed opened up a new horizon to the people living at the borders. They were the neglected – the distanced citizens who were living under the watchful eyes of the border guards on both sides. They had limited access to markets, entertainment, products, and cultures. They had apprehensions and prejudices against each other as the new generations never met them.

They used to gaze at each other from a distance and yet found them engaged in similar economic activities

like producing rice in the paddy fields, catching fishes in the same river though, on different sides, they also used to share a common heritage. All of these were lost due to the partition and subsequent measures taken by both countries.

The border haats gifted them with a past which they feared was lost permanently – here they meet each other, greet each other, and have fun with each other. It is an elegant place for the exchange of cultures, a place to develop friendships, and a place to become a tourist! - A place at the 'No Man's land between Bangladesh and India.

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Recommendations

The initial experiences of border haats between Bangladesh and India have provided some insights into the future course of actions to promote cultural exchange between people of border regions. Here are some of the recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Bangladesh and India can consider issuing temporary border passes to allow frequent exchange of people for limited time within the bordering districts. It will help regain trust among them and develop a better trust on each other. Such a pass may be availed by the border residents to visit family members across borders for a limited period.

Recommendation 2: Promote free tourism pass for a limited period to promote a greater cultural exchange between Bangladesh and India. This means, Bangladeshis from other regions may be allowed to travel to tourist sites for a limited period (say maximum a week) with a valid passport/travel documents like driving license or national ID. The two countries may also consider sanction of on-arrival passes for tourists travelling to bordering districts.

This will promote investments and also employment in border regions in both countries for tourism.

Recommendation 3: Develop border areas as special economic zones (SEZs) for joint investments. Border areas are often the remotest regions of a country from its centre and hence are less attractive to investors. Creating SEZs in the border areas will help both economies to uplift the economic activities at a minimum cost. It will also allow regions to share resources to benefit each other.

Furthermore, since the two countries have a shared history, stalls could be earmarked at the border haats for dissemination of information about places of strategic and historical importance. This will have a positive impact on the promotion of tourism. It will also facilitate, strengthen and reinforce cultural exchange between the two countries.

These measures, if introduced, will help make the border free from conflict and build trust between Bangladesh and India at the border which has been marred by occasional border clashes, at times resulting in deaths.

[Note: The names used in the document have been changed to keep their identity anonymous]

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