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## BANGLADESH-INDIA BORDER *HAATS*: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

### Abstract

This article examines the effectiveness of border *haats* (markets) between Bangladesh and India. Border *haats* bear enormous significance for both countries due to their porous borderline length, ethnic-linguistic-religious overlapping, shared historical experience and homogenous borderline economies. There are far lesser number of such *haats* in operation than are required. Yet those in operation merit serious analysis. This study has adopted a case study of two border *haats* situated in Chattogram Division of Bangladesh. It uses both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected from thirty respondents of two border *haats* in Chattogram, Bangladesh. Secondary data sources, such as journal articles, official reports and newspaper op-eds, were also used to supplement the primary data. We have found several challenges to successful border cooperation; namely, *haat* infrastructures, technicalities, safety and security and border *haat* management. Apart from these difficulties, border *haats* have a significant economic impact on the two border *haats* regions in Chattogram. Border *haats* appeared to be a boon to Bangladesh's peripheral communities. This paper also found that it directly affects the total income of the border *haat*'s various stakeholders, including vendors, labourers, transporters, and vendees. Border *haat* has an economic impact on the local population, not just directly on total income but also indirectly through tourism promotion, rural entrepreneurship and infrastructure development. As a result, the borderland has developed into an economic hub for unemployed and poor

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people. This study also found that border *haats* are important for Bangladesh-India relations in the area of economic integration, reducing informal trade and tension in the border and promoting cultural diplomacy. These findings reveal that Bangladesh and India's cross-border collaboration via border *haats* is a successful initiative that should be replicated in other parts of the border.

**Keywords:** Indo-Bangladesh Borderlands, Border *Haats* (markets), Cross-border Trade, Border Cooperation, Informal Markets

## 1. Introduction

*Haat* is a Bangla (Bengali) word. It is a local term for small market/bazar for developing a conventional marketing mechanism for local commodities through local marketplaces. It has a physical space in rural areas where hand-in buying and selling of local products are done on particular days and at specified times. The place remains fixed, but the transactions are time-bound. Border *haat* allows for small-volume transactions between villages in borderlands. They bear enormous significance in enhancing myriad cross-border cooperation for the people on either side of the two countries.

The border areas of Bangladesh and India, which are at the extreme corner of the country, have always remained underdeveloped and neglected. An absence of many necessary facilities like educational institutions, infrastructural developments, employment opportunities, and many more is apparent. Therefore, socio-economic factors can be considered *raison d'être* for widespread illegal trade and smuggling in the border areas, often causing conflicts among both countries' border guards. So, it is pertinent to think that if impoverished remote border areas are not developed, it is impossible to have viable border management for both countries. Hence, in 2010, upon realising the significance of development for the border areas, the governments of Bangladesh and India signed an MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) to promote cross-border trade and cooperation through the creation of the border *haats*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Commerce, *Memorandum of Understanding between India and Bangladesh: Establishing Border Haats across the Border between India and Bangladesh* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2010), [https://ahcichittagong.gov.in/pdf/MoU%20on%20Border%20Haats%20\(F\).pdf](https://ahcichittagong.gov.in/pdf/MoU%20on%20Border%20Haats%20(F).pdf).

The idea behind creating the border *haats* can be understood from two examples: one-sided extra-judicial border killing of Bangladeshi citizens and enormous illegal cross-border trade. According to Ghosh, “India’s border with Bangladesh has historically been a friendly and porous one, albeit not as open as the one with Nepal and not as closed as the one with Pakistan.”<sup>2</sup> Hence, because of the security apparatus in the Bangladesh and India border, violence is often visible along officially friendly borders.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the scope and volume of informal cross-border trades have been enormous and voluminous<sup>4</sup> along the Indo-Bangladesh border for a long time, ever since traditional practices were destroyed through the construction of the new state/region.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, some illicit exercises were the result of the border’s construction.

Given the facts of porous border length,<sup>6</sup> ethnic-linguistic-religious overlapping,<sup>7</sup> shared historical experience and homogenous borderline economies,<sup>8</sup> border *haats* bear enormous significance for the people on either side of the two countries. Initially, both countries allocated 70 areas in five borderlands for the establishment of the ‘border *haats*’ in phases. This would include 35 *haats* in West Bengal, 22 in Meghalaya, 5 in Tripura, and 4 in Assam and Mizoram, respectively.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Sahana Ghosh, "Cross-border Activities in Everyday Life: the Bengal Borderland," *Contemporary South Asia* 19, no. 1 (2011): 49-60.

<sup>3</sup> Sahana Ghosh, *Borderland Orders: Gendered Geographies of Mobility and Security across the India-Bangladesh Border* (Order No. 10927785), 2018, available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (2088904902), <http://210.48.222.80/proxy.pac/dissertations-theses/borderland-ordersgendered-geographies-mobility/docview/2088904902/se-2?accountid=44024>.

<sup>4</sup> Md Anwar Shafique and Mohammad Shofiqul Islam, “Empirical Study on the Informal Cross Border Trade Nexus between Bangladesh-India Land Borders: Bangladesh Perspective,” *International Center for Research and Resource Development* 3, no. 1 (2022):101-123, .

<sup>5</sup> Omprakash Mahato and Ray Nirban, “Reading the Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia,” *History and Sociology of South Asia* 16, no. 1 (2022): 56–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/22308075221083720>.

<sup>6</sup> Baniateilang Majaw, “Indo-Bangladesh Borderland Issues in Meghalaya,” *South Asia Research* 41, no. 1 (2021): 100-118.

<sup>7</sup> Malini Sur, *Jungle Passports: Fences, Mobility, and Citizenship at the Northeast India-Bangladesh Border* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Indranil Bose and Bijaya Roy, “Border *Haats* as a Platform for Cross-border Value Chains,” *The Financial Express*, October 02, 2020, <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/border-haats-as-a-platform-for-cross-border-value-chains-1601480404>.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Boyle and Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman, “Border Layers Formal and Informal Markets Along the India-Bangladesh Border,” in *Borders and Mobility in South Asia and Beyond*, ed. Reece Jones and Md. Azmeary Ferdoush (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 59.

However, from 2011 to 2023, only seven border *haats* were operating between Bangladesh and India's peripheral cities and nine more border *haats* were ready to be set up in the peripheral cities, where the construction of the necessary infrastructure was almost complete.<sup>10</sup> Border *haats* were reopened after being closed for two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Dhaka Tribune report, India has requested to reopen two border *haats* situated at the Tripura frontier and discussion is ongoing at the ministerial level.<sup>11</sup>

The operation of *haats* involves a clear set of rules and norms managed by the Border *Haats* Management Committee (BHMC), which is constituted by both countries. The BHMC comprises administrative and border security personnel, including an Additional District Magistrate, local government officials, a customs officer, local police, and a member of the border guard force.<sup>12</sup> Their role is to oversee the implementation of *haat* policies and procedures. Entry into the *haats* is restricted to vendors and vendees who are residents living within a five-kilometer radius. A maximum of 25 vendors are permitted on each side of the border, and strict procedures set by the BHMC must be followed to obtain a vendor card, including completing an application form and participating in an interview. The BHMC issues non-transferable vendor cards with a validity period of one to three years. The types of products that can be traded are determined by the vendors, as long as they adhere to the official guidelines. Photo identity cards issued by the BHMC are required for entry into the *haats* for the vendors, and the respective border security forces ensure the safety and legality of entry. Border *haats* operate once a week for a limited time, but the BHMC has the authority to adjust the operating hours and frequency. Customs and taxes are exempted for *haat* commodities, and both Indian Rupee and Bangladeshi Taka are accepted for transactions. These rules, norms, and entry management practices ensure the smooth operation and regulation of the Border *haats*.

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Commerce Bangladesh, 2021, <https://mincom.portal.gov.bd/site/page/e3690cae-ae3c-49cd-94e9-1c31c68920a5/FTA-Wing>; "Bangladesh, India: Cabinet approves revised MoU and Mode of Operation between India and Bangladesh for establishing Border *Haats* on India-Bangladesh Border," *MENA Report*, 2017; "India: Union Minister Shri Parshottam Rupala visits Indo-Bangladesh Border *Haat* at Kalaichar," *MENA Report*, 2023

<sup>11</sup> "India Asks Bangladesh to Reopen Border *Haats* in Tripura: Two border *Haats* in Meghalaya were Reopened Last Year," *Dhaka Tribune*, April 10, 2023, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2023/04/10/india-asks-bangladesh-to-reopen-border-haats-in-tripura>.

<sup>12</sup> Government of Bangladesh, *Mode of Operation (MoO) of Border Haats across the Border between Bangladesh and India* (Dhaka: Ministry of Commerce, 2017), [https://mincom.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/mincom.portal.gov.bd/page/973880a5\\_4749\\_4345\\_9687\\_529c657681a2/3.Mode%20of%20Operations%28MoO%29%20of%20Border%20Haats%20between%20Bangladesh%20and%20India%20%282017%29.pdf](https://mincom.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/mincom.portal.gov.bd/page/973880a5_4749_4345_9687_529c657681a2/3.Mode%20of%20Operations%28MoO%29%20of%20Border%20Haats%20between%20Bangladesh%20and%20India%20%282017%29.pdf).

Border *haats* present an opportunity for both countries to maximise their potential and address economic challenges in the border region. The existing number of *haats* between two countries is far smaller than required. Yet those in operation merit serious economic analysis. The purpose of this article is to examine issues, challenges and opportunities of the two border *haats* situated in the Chattogram (Bangladesh) border area, while the other side is in Tripura (India). The reason behind selecting two border *haats* in this study is their geographical proximity. The two border *haats* are situated in the Chattogram division of Bangladesh and India's north-eastern state of Tripura. This study seeks to answer few research questions such as: (1) what are the challenges experienced by local people of two border *haats* living in the Chattogram (Bangladesh) border area? (2) How do border *haats* provide economic opportunities for the local people? And (3) what are the future implications of the border *haats* between Bangladesh and India relations?

The remainder of the article is divided into following sections. The second section discusses the existing empirical research on the border markets between Bangladesh and India. Section three explains the conceptual framework and the methodology of this study. Section four provides an analysis of the existing challenges that are preventing the promised goals of these *haats* and section five portrays the opportunities of the *haats* situated in Chattogram. Section six analyses the border *haats*' implications for Bangladesh-India relations. The concluding remarks are made in section seven.

## 2. Literature Review

Borders are regarded as one of the central foundations to define states and organise international politics. They are at the heart of interstate relations, geopolitics, and security.<sup>13</sup> Border-related studies are relatively a fledgling field, which generally demonstrates US-Mexico borderland issues.<sup>14</sup> Nowadays, numerous scholars illustrate the problem arising in the world border regions comprehensively.<sup>15</sup> Besides,

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<sup>13</sup> Baniateilang Majaw, "Indo-Bangladesh borderland issues in Meghalaya," *South Asia Research* 41, no. 1 (2021): 100-118.

<sup>14</sup> Saleh Shahriar, "India's Economic Relations with Myanmar: A Study of Border Trade," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 37, no. 3 (2022): 599-621.

<sup>15</sup> Dhananjay Tripathi and Chaturvedi Sanjay, "South Asia: Boundaries, Borders and Beyond," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 35, no. 2 (2020): 173-181.

these cross-border studies have become interdisciplinary and global over the past few decades.<sup>16</sup>

Nation-state borders provide both opportunities and threats for a country, and these borders are varied based on the elements presented on the boundaries.<sup>17</sup> The utmost utilisation of the social, cultural, economic, and legal aspects of both sides of the borders could be used to facilitate numerous profitable and innovative businesses. The relationships among neighbouring countries, security outcomes, trade, and population mobilities, are determined by the nature of borders.<sup>18</sup> An open border with neighbouring nations confers major benefits to peripheral cities and urban border regions, such as strengthening their position at the centre of economic networks and enhancing their autonomy as transnational regional entities. As a result, a border might be viewed as a resource.<sup>19</sup>

There is a worldwide trend among countries that are not looking at their international borders exclusively for traditional security but rather as a meeting point where two countries' communities can meet up, interact with each other, and exchange goods. That does not mean security is unimportant or even secondary. Such a meeting place can enhance cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts, improving relationships among border dwellers inhabiting the geographically contiguous area.

Border *Haats* play a vital role in facilitating economic activities and promoting cultural exchange between neighbouring countries. There are various examples of small business-like Border *Haats* (markets) are prevalent throughout the world's border regions.<sup>20</sup> In the South Asia region, some of the border markets

<sup>16</sup> Beth A. Simmons, "Border Rules," *International Studies Review* 21, no. 2 (2019): 256-283; Olivier J Walther, Klatt Martin, and Boedeltje Freerk, "Mapping International Co-authorship Networks in Border Studies (1986–2018)," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 36, no. 4 (2021): 653-674.

<sup>17</sup> Rongxing Guo, *Cross-border Management: Theory, Method and Application* (Berlin: Springer, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> AKM Ahsan Ullah and Asiyah Az-Zahra Ahmad Kumpoh, "Are Borders the Reflection of International Relations? Southeast Asian Borders in Perspective," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 5, no. 3 (2018): 295-318.

<sup>19</sup> Christophe Sohn, "Modelling Cross-border Integration: The Role of Borders as a Resource," *Geopolitics* 19, no. 3 (2014): 587-608, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2014.913029>.

<sup>20</sup> Udaya Raj Paudel, Devkota Niranjana and Bhandari Udbodh, "Socio-cultural and Economic Factors in Cross-Border Purchase: A Study of Customers' Perspective in Sunauli-Nepal/India Border," *Modern Economy* 9, no. 6 (2018): 1089-1102; Olivier Walther, "Border Markets: An Introduction," *Journal of Urban Research* 10, (2014); Alessandro Ripa, "Cross-border Trade and "the Market" between Xinjiang (China) and Pakistan," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 49, no. 2 (2019): 254-271.

are Jaigaon/Phuentsholing (India-Bhutan), Moreh/Tamu (India-Myanmar), Sunauli-Bhairahawa (India-Nepal), Attari-Wagah (India-Pakistan). Border trade reunifies communities in this region that share a common culture and has a long history of trading with one another prior to the demarcation.<sup>21</sup> Border marketplaces between India and Nepal are the best examples of South Asia's small businesses.<sup>22</sup>

In Southeast Asia and Central Asia region, Mae Sai-Tachileik (Thailand-Myanmar), Aranyaprathet-Poipet (Thailand-Cambodia), Lao Bao-Dansavanh (Vietnam-Laos), Sungai Kolok (Thailand-Malaysia), Rawa Bening/Indonesia-Malaysia, the Khorgos Bazaar (China-Kazakhstan) are some of the examples and these border markets serve as lively hubs for trade, cultural exchange, and economic activities. Moreover, similar trends of border markets are also practiced in borderlands of Europe, America, and the African region.

Thus, the governments of India and Bangladesh took a pragmatic approach by opening border *haats* for a variety of purposes, including meeting the special development needs of people living in remote and inaccessible areas near international borders, curbing illegal cross-border practices, easing tensions between the two countries, minimising border casualties, and developing socioeconomic activities in the borderlands.<sup>23</sup> Security experts believe that by opening some of the borders to markets, supplies of commodities become lawful automatically, and the proclivity for illicit actions such as smuggling and unauthorised entry may be automatically checked. Additionally, unwelcome encounters with border security forces can be considerably reduced.<sup>24</sup> Several studies are found on the Bangladesh and India border *haats* and a summary of those previous studies is presented in Table 1.

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<sup>21</sup> Sanjay Kathuria, ed., *A Glass Half Full: The Promise of Regional Trade in South Asia* (Washington: World Bank Publications, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Gyanendra Paudyal, "Border Dispute between Nepal and India," *Researcher: A Research Journal of Culture and Society* 1, no. 2 (2013): 35-48; Rishi Raj Adhikari, *Promoting Nepalese Trade and Investment Relations with India and China* (Institute of Foreign Affairs, 2015); Udaya Raj Paudel, Devkota Niranjana and Bhandari Udbodh, "Socio-cultural and Economic Factors in Cross-border Purchase: A Study of Customers' Perspective in Sunauli-Nepal/India Border," *Modern Economy* 9, no. 6 (2018): 1089-11.

<sup>23</sup> Ashish Nath, "Border *Haats*: New Dimensions in Cross-Border Trade," *Economic and Political Weekly* 53, (2018): 11-15.

<sup>24</sup> Deb Datta Chowdhury, *Identity and Experience at the India-Bangladesh Border: The Crisis of Belonging* (London: Routledge, 2018).

**Table 1: A Summary of Previous Empirical Studies on Bangladesh-India Border *Haats***

Authors and Years	Research Topic/Themes	Main Findings and Conclusion
Alison Brown et al. (2024) <sup>25</sup>	Contested Spaces of Exchange: Informal Cross-Border Trade on the India–Bangladesh Border	This study examines informal cross-border trade (ICBT) on the Indian side of the India-Bangladesh border. It delves into the actors involved, power dynamics, spatial aspects, and vulnerabilities of those participating in this trade. The research focuses on three specific sectors: everyday trade in small household goods, the cattle trade, and cross-border medical/healthcare services. The concept of ‘jugaad, meaning making do’ and ‘instinctive creativity,’ is used to analyse trade activities. The study highlights the influence of state regulation, middlemen, and powerful actors in shaping the trade environment.
Chakraborty & Banerjee (2023) <sup>26</sup>	Negotiating Borders and Borderlands: the Indian Experience	The book explores various aspects of border life, including trade, and cultural interactions, and emphasises the enduring social connections across borders. It showcases how stories, music, lyrics, and indigenous legends foster cross-border unity, yet also addresses the negative implications of transnational networks, such as facilitating illegal activities.

<sup>25</sup> Alison Brown, Bhaskar Chakrabarti, Peter Mackie, Crispian Fuller, Rajesh Bhattacharya, Soumyabrato Bagchi and Debapriya Chakrabarti, “Contested Spaces of Exchange: Informal Cross-Border Trade on the India–Bangladesh Border,” *Forum for Development Studies* 51, no. 1 (2024): 121-143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.2023.2255211>.

<sup>26</sup> Gorky Chakraborty and Supurna Banerjee, *Negotiating Borders and Borderlands: the Indian Experience* (Kolkata: Orient Black Swan, 2023).



Authors and Years	Research Topic/Themes	Main Findings and Conclusion
Vaibhav Verma (2023) <sup>27</sup>	The Understanding of India-Bangladesh Border Haats and Its Benefits.	This article demonstrated a basic understanding of the <i>haats</i> such as the historical background of <i>haats</i> and a brief explanation of their benefits.
Biswas (2022) <sup>28</sup>	Fences, Goods and “Police”: Figurations of the Border in Manjira Saha’s Chhotoder Border	The article analyses “Chhotoder Border,” a collection of children’s drawings and narratives from the India-Bangladesh borderlands, highlighting recurring themes like barbed wire fences and trafficking references to illustrate the border’s materiality and affective dimensions. Through linguistic and visual analysis, it contributes to understanding the cultural aspect of borders, exploring narrative tropes to elucidate the discursive construction of border narratives.
Consumer Unity and Trust Society (CUTS) International (2021) <sup>29</sup>	India-Bangladesh Border Haats: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow	This report examines the evolution of the traditional border markets from the past to the present, highlighting their socio-economic impact on local communities, trade relations, and cultural exchange. Additionally, the report discusses the challenges faced by these <i>haats</i> and proposes strategies to enhance their effectiveness and sustainability in the future.

<sup>27</sup> Vaibhav Verma, “The Understanding of India-Bangladesh Border Haats and its Benefits,” *Research Review Multidisciplinary Journal* 8, no. 3 (2023): 21-25, <https://doi.org/10.31305/rrijm.2023.v08.n03.004>.

<sup>28</sup> Samata Biswas, “Fences, Goods and “Police”: Figurations of the Border in Manjira Saha’s Chhotoder Border,” *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 38, no. 4 (2023): 657-675.

<sup>29</sup> “India-Bangladesh Border Haats: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow,” CUTS International, 2021, <https://cuts-crc.org/pdf/Compendium-India-Bangladesh-Border-Haats-Yesterday-Today-and-Tomorrow.pdf>.

Authors and Years	Research Topic/Themes	Main Findings and Conclusion
Shahriar (2021) <sup>30</sup>	Bangladesh-India Border Issues: A Critical Review	This study has shed light on the cross-border challenges along the Bangladesh-India borderlands. It shows that border <i>haats</i> are the platforms of a multi-layered constellation of goods, people, memories, virtual connections, long-lasting debt relations and affective realms of personal connections. India in consultation with the Bangladesh government and respective state governments identified 70 locations in five border states to set up the ‘border <i>haats</i> ’ in a phased manner.
Tripathi (2020) <sup>31</sup>	Re-imagining Border Studies in South Asia	The authors of this book contend that border security is a crucial responsibility of the state, but acknowledge that in today’s interconnected world, crossing borders and promoting border cooperation is equally important. The book also discussed lives of Bangladesh-India borderland including border <i>haat</i> .

<sup>30</sup> Saleh Shahriar, “Bangladesh-India Border Issues: A Critical Review,” *Geoforum* 124, (2021): 257-260.

<sup>31</sup> Dhmanjay Tripathi, *Re-imagining Border Studies in South Asia* (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2020).

Authors and Years	Research Topic/Themes	Main Findings and Conclusion
Ghosh (2019) <sup>32</sup>	Chor, Police and Cattle: The Political Economies of Bovine Value in the India–Bangladesh Borderlands	The study explores how the India-Bangladesh border is seen as a key aspect of Indian national identity due to concerns such as illegal immigration and cattle smuggling, leading to a push for enhanced border security. It questions the perception of the border as a strict divide by examining the complexities of life in the border regions. By focusing on the movement of cattle and challenging the legal-illegal binary, the essay highlights how border communities engage in diverse activities that transcend national boundaries and resist simplistic categorizations.
Bhuiyan & Salam (2019) <sup>33</sup>	Cross-Border Trade Enterprise between Bangladesh and India: An Appraisal on “Border Haats”	The paper presents a positive assessment of the <i>haat</i> initiatives while also acknowledging certain limitations. Furthermore, the authors offer recommendations to policymakers for resolving the current issues.
Boyle & Rahman (2018) <sup>34</sup>	Border Layers: Formal and Informal Markets Along the India-Bangladesh Border	This study looks at the effects of the multi-layered border control infrastructure on both domestic political processes and cross-border connections.

<sup>32</sup> Sahana Ghosh, “Chor, Police and Cattle: The Political Economies of Bovine Value in the India–Bangladesh Borderlands,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 42, no. 6 (2019): 1108–1124.

<sup>33</sup> S. Bhuiyan and M. K. Salam, “Cross-Border Trade Enterprise between Bangladesh and India: An Appraisal on ‘Border Haats’,” *Journal of Politics and Administration* 4, no. 1 (2019): 125–128.

<sup>34</sup> Boyle and Rahman, “Border Layers Formal and Informal Markets Along the India-Bangladesh Border”.

Authors and Years	Research Topic/Themes	Main Findings and Conclusion
Datt, Nath, Bose & Chattopadhyay (2018) <sup>35</sup>	Bangladesh–India Border Markets: Borders as Meeting Points	This paper depicts the positive outcomes of border <i>haats</i> , showcasing how they boost cross-border connections by providing a platform for people to interact, revive old relationships, and forge new social and business connections. Expanding <i>haats</i> and cross-border markets will reduce resource scarcity and enhance opportunities for less wealthy entrepreneurs.
D. McDuie-Ra (2014) <sup>36</sup>	The India–Bangladesh Border Fence: Narratives and political possibilities	The article explores the contentious issue of the border fence between India and Bangladesh. The author focuses on the complex narratives surrounding the construction of the fence, analysing its impact on the relationship between the two countries. The article delves into the political implications of the border fence and discusses various viewpoints on its effectiveness in addressing border security concerns.
Sikder and Sarkar (2005) <sup>37</sup>	Livelihoods and Informal Trade at the Bangladesh Border,	This paper discusses the significance of cross-border informal trade between India and Bangladesh, emphasizing that it is crucial for sustaining livelihoods in border areas. The research examines the nature and impact of this trade, highlighting both the sources of security and insecurity associated with it.

<sup>35</sup> Debajata Chowdhury, *Identity and Experience at the India-Bangladesh Border: The Crisis of Belonging* (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>36</sup> D. McDuie-Ra, “The India–Bangladesh Border Fence: Narratives and Political Possibilities,” *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 29, no. 1 (2014): 81–94.

<sup>37</sup> M. J. U. Sikder and B. K. Sarkar, “Livelihoods and Informal Trade at the Bangladesh Border,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6, no. 3 (2005): 432–445.

### 3. Conceptual Framework and Methodology

Border studies is a relatively nascent field characterised by a dearth of well-established theories and concepts compared to more established disciplines. Despite notable advancements, scholars within border studies encounter challenges in formulating a comprehensive framework for comprehending the complexities of borders. In order to address these challenges and enhance the academic standing of border studies, it is imperative to undertake concerted efforts towards the development of interdisciplinary theories and methods. Through these endeavours, the marginalisation of border studies within institutional contexts can be effectively confronted and mitigated. As emphasised by Walther, to bolster the position of border studies within the broader social sciences and foster its growth as a mature academic discipline, there is a need to engage in systematic and rigorous theory building, accompanied by the systematic collection and analysis of data to test novel ideas.<sup>38</sup> By embracing these strategies, border studies can pave the path toward comprehensive theoretical frameworks and contribute meaningfully to scholarship in this evolving field.

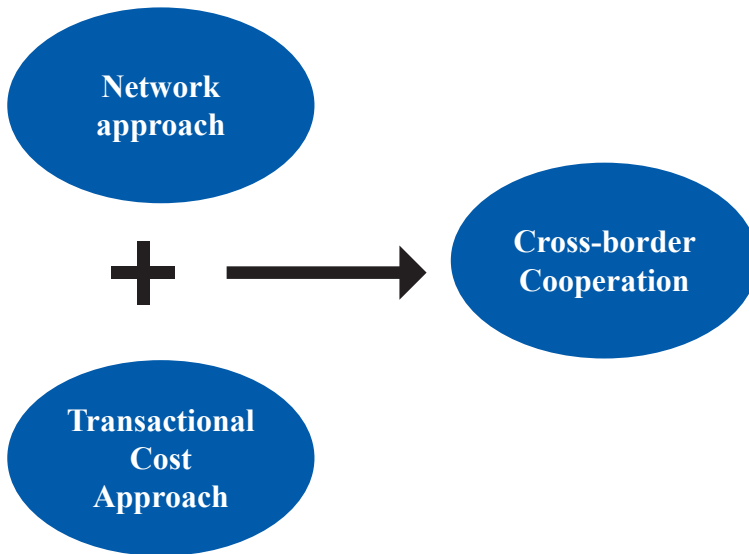
This study adopts the cross-border cooperation approach as the framework of the analysis. Numerous implications refer to cooperation including cross-border cooperation, interregional cooperation, transnational cooperation, and cross-border governance.<sup>39</sup> Although these definitions are interchangeable, there are some distinctions between them based on the opinions of other scholars. Cross-border cooperation is commonly defined as collaboration between neighbouring countries. This suggests that the boundary between the cooperative territories is the most crucial factor in determining cooperation. This study is guided by Van Houtom's model of cross-border cooperation shown in Figure 1. This perspective emphasises the critical nature of the collaborative and networking processes. As a result, dynamic interaction, networking and strategy creation are necessary for countries to establish cross-border collaboration. One example of this network method is the diplomatic effort by Bangladesh and India to expand interstate cooperation through the establishment of Border *haats*. The cooperation between the two countries is intended to foster an atmosphere of mutual understanding and trust between the two

<sup>38</sup> Olivier J. Walther, Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary, Chiara Brambilla, Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly, Martin Klatt, Jussi P. Laine, Inocent Moyo, Paul Nugent, Thomas Ptak, and Steven M. Radil, "Border Studies at 45," *Political Geography* 104, (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102909>.

<sup>39</sup> Yuliya Tkachenko and Pustova Vladislav, "Approaches to the Definition of Cross-border Cooperation: Discussion Points," *Российский академический журнал* 29, no. 3 (2014): 39-42; Saleh Shahriar, "Border *Haats*," in *Encyclopedia of Tourism Management and Marketing*, ed. Dimitrios Buhalis (London: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2022): 337-340.

countries' populations. This border market collaboration will pave the way for other types of cooperation in the future, such as social, cultural and political cooperation. Hence, this study will examine the effectiveness of two Border *haats* in Bangladesh's Chattogram division, using this paradigm of cross-border cooperation to assess their efficiency.

**Figure 1: Cross-border Cooperation Approach<sup>40</sup>**



Moreover, this study has adopted a qualitative approach which is a form of systematic empirical inquiry into narratives on the subject matter. The technique helps in enhancing and explaining knowledge about a phenomenon. This study is based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources were gathered from the thirty in-depth field interviews from the two border *haats* in Chattogram, Bangladesh. Interviews help get the story from participants and pursue in-depth information regarding the topic.<sup>41</sup> This study employed a convenient sampling technique and the snowball technique to obtain information about this research. Each respondent was asked to recommend another participant who might articulate on the border *haats*. The goals and objectives of the research have been informed to the interviewees and they have given consent

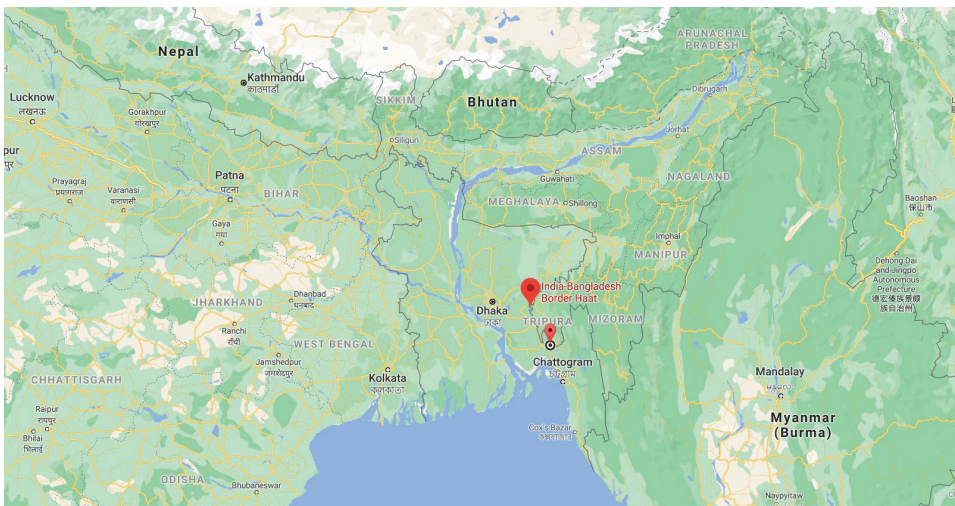
<sup>40</sup> Henk Van Houtum, "European Perspectives on Borderlands: An Overview of European Geographical Research on Borders and Border Regions," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 15, no. 1 (2000): 56-83.

<sup>41</sup> Carter McNamara, "General Guidelines for Conducting Interviews," Arizona State University, 1999, <https://www.public.asu.edu/~kroel/www500/Interview%20Fri.pdf>.

to use their names in the paper. Secondary materials were used including government documents, published reports, agreement papers, joint statements, public officials’ speeches, books, working papers, published articles and media reports. Statistics from different organizations, such as the World Bank (WB) and NGOs, are also used in this research. The interpretation and explanation of the research data are based on materials of the current period as well as past available research.

### 3.1 Case Study of Two Border Haats at Chattogram

**Figure 2: Geographical Map of Two Border Haats in Chattogram<sup>42</sup>**



The selected two *haats* known as the “Kamalasagar-Kasba *haat*” and the “Srinagar-Chhagalnaiya *haat*” are situated in Bangladesh’s Chattogram division and India’s Tripura State. Geographical map of two border *haats* in Chattogram is shown in Figure 2. The “Kamalasagar-Kasba *haat*” is located near the 2039 pillar of the Indo-Bangladesh border, Tarapur in the Kasba municipal area of Brahmanbaria and Kamalasagar in the Sepahijla district of the Indian state of Tripura. It is a one acre by 50 acres border market. This border *haat* is located 19 kilometres away from Kasba, Brahmanbaria and 15 kilometres from Bishalgarh, Tripura. The satellite view of this *haat* is shown in figure 3.<sup>43</sup>

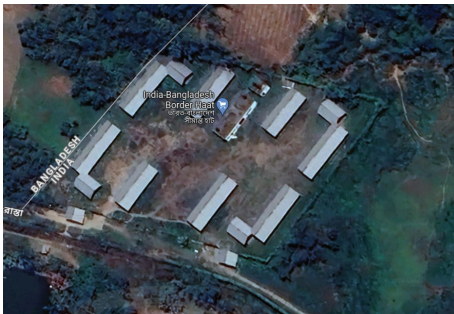
<sup>42</sup> Google Map, 2023, <https://www.google.com/map>.

<sup>43</sup> Google Map, 2023, <https://www.google.com/map>.



The second border *haat*, known as the “Srinagar-Chhagalnaiya *haat*,” is located in Chattogram’s Feni district. This market was established on the border between East Madhugram and Chayagharia in the Chhagalnaiya Upazila of the Feni district, with the Srinagar border in South Tripura, India, on the other side of the Bangladesh side of the *haat*. The nearest cities to this border *haat* are Chhagalnaiya Upazila in the Feni district (Chattogram) (15 kilometres) and Sabroom in Tripura (India) (22 kilometres). The satellite view of this *haat* is shown in Figure 4.<sup>44</sup>

**Figure 3: Kamalasagar-Kasba *haat***



**Figure 4: Srinagar-Chhagalnaiya *haat***



## 4. Challenges of the Border *Haats*

### 4.1 *Infrastructural Challenges*

One of the challenges of *haat* is its allocated area. The existing structure appears insufficient for the local populace. Not only do the vendors, but regular visitors also urge that the *haat* spaces should be expanded. According to Mahin, a local from the Kasba border *haat*:

“The *haat* is very crowded due to the numerous numbers of people. If the *haat* has more space, it will be good for us.”<sup>45</sup>

The desire to expand the *haat* space is regarded to be timely and highly effective during the time of the Pandemic and post-Pandemic situation.

<sup>44</sup> Google Map, 2023, <https://www.google.com/map>.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Md. Mahin, resident of Chapia, Kasba Border *Haat*, October 10, 2021.



Figure 5: Srinagar-Chhagalnaiya Haat<sup>46</sup>



Another concern is limited warehousing space. The existing condition of the *haats* are shown in Figure 5 and Figure 6. Chattogram’s two border *haats* currently have no warehouses available, which is essential for vendors to store their products. The absence of a storeroom nearby adds to their workload and discourages local people, particularly women, from participating in *haat* activities. A study by Bhuiyan and Salam highlights the need for two to three warehouses in each *haat*. According to them,

“Absence of permanent storehouse near to *haat* found another reason for inconvenience for the women vendors who have had to move their *haat* items every day.”<sup>47</sup>

Another respondent said that:

“There are some rental facilities for the vendor from the local people as there is no specific warehouse. The seller can rent storage from the residents. It is an extra source of income for the villagers.”<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> “Border *Haat* in Sunamganj Reopens after 2 years,” *Dhaka Tribune*, April 26, 2022, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/foreign-affairs/2022/04/26/border-haat-in-sunamganj-reopens-after-2-years>.

<sup>47</sup> Bhuiyan and Salam, “Cross-Border Trade Enterprise”.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Anik Mia, Resident of Chhagalnaiya Sador, Chhagalnaiya Border *Haat*, October 24, 2021.

**Figure 6: Operation of Border *Haats***<sup>49</sup>



Moreover, inadequate parking hinders border *haat* success. The *haat* attracts many visitors twice a week but struggles to accommodate everyone. Allocating parking for vendors' transportation may alleviate the issue. Currently, there are no parking spaces for sellers or customers, causing road congestion. According to CUTS International, Petrapole's parking is inadequate where providing sufficient parking in nearby markets can boost *haat* success.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, poor roads and transportation in border areas pose challenges to *haat* success. It hampers access for customers, sellers, and visitors, particularly women relying on public transport. The infrastructure issue affects sellers loading/unloading products and customers purchasing them.

#### 4.2 Technicalities of Border *Haats*

The border *haats* allow entry for those living within a five-kilometre radius, but it attracts visitors from faraway places. Only 1,000 people are permitted entry in each *haat* day, causing long queues and local residents struggling to obtain tickets. The BHMC official finds it challenging to manage the overwhelming volume of applications. Due to the high demand for tickets, whether from vendees or vendors, some individuals are taking advantage illegally.

<sup>49</sup> Shahriar, "Border *Haats*".

<sup>50</sup> CUTS International, *Bordering on Happiness: An Assessment of Socio-economic Impacts of Bangladesh-India Border Haats*, a report published by CUTS International in association with Unnayan Shamannay (Jaipur: CUTS International, 2019).

It has been asserted that the black market for tickets is selling at inflated costs. According to one respondent:

“We stood in line at 8.30 am but did not get any tickets. Many people besides the line have bought 30 Taka tickets for two hundred to three hundred Takas.”<sup>51</sup>

Another respondent said that:

“We used to give our national identity cards to buy a ticket for our guests who come to the border *haat* from far away. Because the authority will not sell a ticket to them who are from more than five km away.”<sup>52</sup>

As a result, it is clear that certain unscrupulous individuals who are associated with the authorities are taking advantage of the great demand for tickets by selling them at a high price. The fixed price of tickets is shown in Figure 7.

**Figure 7: Border *Haat* Entry Fee for Visitor’s<sup>53</sup>**



<sup>51</sup> Interview with Srabon Hasnat Ripon, Resident of Tarapur, Kasba Border *Haat*, October 3, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Anik Mia, Resident of Chhagalnaiya Sador, Chhagalnaiya Border *Haat*, October 24, 2021.

<sup>53</sup> “দুই দেশের মানুষকে কাছে এনেছে সীমান্ত হাট (Border *Haat* has Brought the People of the Two Countries Closer),” *BBC Bangla*, 2015, [https://www.bbc.com/bengali/news/2015/08/150821\\_si\\_border\\_market\\_bangladesh\\_india\\_feni](https://www.bbc.com/bengali/news/2015/08/150821_si_border_market_bangladesh_india_feni).

Moreover, various concerns with women's facilities are impeding the success of these *haats*. The sociocultural environment in Bangladesh's border areas is conducive to women entrepreneurship, and women's participation is particularly strong.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, the border *haat* project should be designed to provide equal opportunities for both men and women. To begin with, one respondent asserted that the bulk selling technique of items discourage women from shopping at the *haats*. According to her:

"Border *haats* sell goods in bulk, which is not good for everyone, especially women and people who are poor. Consequently, people who are in need and women can't buy things for their own use."<sup>55</sup>

Moreover, the difficult application process by the BHMC is also hampering women participation in the border *haats* transactions. The application process appears to be skewed toward those who are endowed with the ability to carry out a year-round business, which requires access to investment capital, valid identity cards, proof of a savings bank account, and the confidence to face an interview panel comprising the BHMC, that is, district magistrates, as well as customs, local government, police, and border agencies. Poorer women tend to be disproportionately affected by requirements such as these.<sup>56</sup>

Another limitation is inconsistent *haat* regulations. The border *haats* are operated by jointly agreed regulations through a memorandum of understanding (MoU), enforced by BHMC members. However, there are allegations of uneven enforcement, hindering *haat* cooperation. For example, the MoU prohibits non-personal consumption sales in border *haats*, yet this rule is not consistently upheld. Some fishermen sell fish wholesale during *haat* operation days, contradicting the MoU regulations.

Moreover, occasionally, local residents obtain access to border *haats* without purchasing tickets, which violates the MoU's obligations. Everyone, whether vendor or customer, must purchase a ticket to enter the border *haats*, but certain exceptions apply. One respondent mentioned:

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<sup>54</sup> Talajeh Livani, Rizwan Nadeem and Kathuria Sanjay, "Inclusive Regional Trade: Promoting the Economic Empowerment of Women in the BBIN Region," *ANTYAJAA: Indian Journal of Women and Social Change* 4, no. 1 (2019): 33-50.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Mahedi, Resident of Kasba, Kasba Border *Haat*, October 3, 2021.

<sup>56</sup> World Bank, *A Glass Half Full: The Promise of Regional Trade in South Asia* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2018).

“We used to go to the border *haats* without purchasing a ticket since the security guards recognised us as local residents and permitted us to enter the *haats*.”<sup>57</sup>

Thus, it was discovered that some of the functions and regulations of the border *haats* are not followed and officials sometimes tend to act arbitrarily with regard to the norms about who is allowed to enter, or what items, and how much product is allowed to enter into the *haats*.

### 4.3 *Safety and Security Issues*

Theft is one of the most frequently stated concerns in *haats* in both Bangladesh and India, as documented in the available literature. Similarly, theft instances in Bangladesh’s sides demonstrated a severe issue among residents, particularly sellers. Shoplifting and petty theft are the most concerning types of theft for *haat* traders. According to one respondent:

“Occasionally, shoplifters will pick up the merchandise and conceal it with their costumes, while blending into the crowd. Thus, detecting a shoplifter quickly is impossible.”<sup>58</sup>

Not only the vendor is concerned about theft, but also the customers. According to two respondents from Kasba’s border *haat*:

“We have to be always concerned about our belongings because the theft cases are rampant in the border *haats*. We need to take care of our belonging ourselves.”<sup>59</sup>

Moreover, the findings of this study are consistent with those of prior investigations. For instance, one study discovered that theft incidents occur not only inside border *haats* but also outside of them. Another respondent said:

“I brought some goods from the Kasba border *haat*. My belongings have been stolen from the nearby railway station.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Interview with Jakaria Habib, Resident of Kasba, Kasba Border *Haat*, October 2, 2021.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Chandu Mia, Resident of Darugahat, Chhagalnaiya Border *Haat*, November 22, 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Farid Hasan, Resident of Kasba, Kasba Border *Haat*, October 2, 2021; Interview with Ibrahim, Resident of Mokamia, Chhagalnaiya Border *Haat*, November 14, 2021

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Shamim Hossen, Resident of Zazisar, Kasba Border *Haat*, October 3, 2021; Interview with Shamim Hossen, Resident of Zazisar, Kasba Border *Haat*, October 3, 2021.

The lack of proper parking spaces on *haat* days is a significant challenge, jeopardising the safety and security of people and their goods. The high influx of people and vehicles in *haat* areas makes it difficult for security personnel to ensure everyone's safety. Moreover, the large crowds create favourable conditions for theft, requiring additional security measures to maintain order and prevent such incidents. It is crucial to develop adequate parking spaces and deploy more security personnel to safeguard people and their belongings in and around *haat* areas. According to a World Bank report, the issue of safety was raised more frequently by Indian respondents compared to Bangladeshi respondents. Concerns regarding theft were expressed by 11 women and 31 males in both countries.<sup>61</sup>

Smuggling and trafficking are significant issues in many countries sharing borders. The establishment of border *haats* between Bangladesh and India aimed to counter illegal activities by providing a controlled trading channel. While *haats* have been effective in reducing smuggling and trafficking, complete elimination is nearly impossible due to the persistence of unscrupulous individuals. Some smugglers and traffickers use *haats* to communicate with their accomplices during operating hours. Despite the vigilance of border security personnel and law enforcement officers, preventing prospective smugglers from communicating is challenging due to the unclear motives of the large number of customers.

According to one of the respondents and a regular customer of the Chhagalnaiya border *haat*, smugglers are active on *haat* operation days with their partners on the opposite side of the boundaries. He said:

“Previously, smugglers did not get a chance to meet with other smugglers at the borders. Nowadays, they have opportunities to meet them and make a plan accordingly.”<sup>62</sup>

Smugglers and traffickers utilise border *haats* to communicate with one another and with their clients and customers.<sup>63</sup> They are extremely sophisticated in their methods, making it nearly impossible for border agents to catch them. The Daily Desh Rupantor

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<sup>61</sup> World Bank, *A Glass Half Full*.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Abdullah al Mamun, Resident of Purba Modhugram, Chhagalnaiya Border *Haat*, October 17, 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Jigme Wangdi, “Undoing the Radcliffe Awards Re-Imagining Border *Haats* At India’s Northeast And Bangladesh,” *The Calcutta Journal of Global Affairs Publisher* 4, no. 2 (2020): 159-173.



reported that, “The border *haats* are located on both sides of the borders. Various products come from India on the occasion of these *haats*. When the border was opened for some time on the occasion of this *haat*, often the illegal traders brought various goods on that occasion. The investigating officer of Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) said, “Using the opportunity to bring and take these products, a gang brought weapons and drugs with Indian products”.<sup>64</sup> The study of World Bank and Bhuiyan and Salam discovered that trafficking and smuggling are two major concerns in border *haats*.<sup>65</sup> However, *haat* officials are serious about law and order and they are determined as well as undertaking measures to put an end to any illicit activity.

Furthermore, this study discovered that at the two border *haats* in Bangladesh, there is a lack of necessary measures to protect women. For instance, some border *haats* lack female security personnel who conduct entrance checks.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, a further concerning fact is that there are no women’s toilet facilities in the two border *haats* in Chattogram.<sup>67</sup> Respondents from the two border *haats* in Chattogram said:

“Unfortunately, there are no restrooms that are solely for women. There are also no female security personnel at the gate throughout the check-in process, which is a concern. As a result, most of the time, women can reach the border *haat* without being stopped by security agents unless they appear suspicious to them.”<sup>68</sup>

Hence, in order to improve the efficiency of border *haats* between the two nations, sufficient safety and security services must be provided for the huge number of women consumers. Lacking adequate amenities and security, women might avoid visiting border *haats*.

<sup>64</sup> “অবৈধ অস্ত্র কারবারিরা সীমান্ত হাটে সক্রিয়” (Illegal Arms Dealers are Active at the Border), *The Daily Desh Rupantor*, September 08, 2019, <https://www.deshrupantor.com/first-page/2019/09/08/166390>.

<sup>65</sup> Bhuiyan and Salam, “Cross-Border Trade Enterprise between Bangladesh and India”; World Bank, *A Glass Half Full*.

<sup>66</sup> Bhuiyan and Salam, “Cross-Border Trade Enterprise between Bangladesh and India”.

<sup>67</sup> CUTS International, *Bordering on Happiness*; Bhuiyan and Salam, “Cross-Border Trade Enterprise between Bangladesh and India”; World Bank, *A Glass Half Full*.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Sohrab Uddin, resident of Paschim Madhugram, Chhagalnaiya Border *Haat*, November 1, 2021; Interview with Ibrahim, Resident of Mokamia, Chhagalnaiya Border *Haat*, November 14, 2021.

#### 4.4 Border *Haat* Management

During *haat* days, the authorities deploy security personnel from local police and border guards to conduct physical checks at the *haats*' entrance. Certain Border *Haats* are typically more congested than others due to a more developed transportation system that attracts visitors from further afield.<sup>69</sup> Thus, two of Chattogram's border *haats* are more crowded than the other two running border *haats* on the Bangladesh border. It is possible that due to the high volume of individuals at the *haats*, the authorities may take some extra time for checking purposes upon admittance. It is said that individuals may occasionally be required to wait several hours in line-ups throughout the verification process, which is exceedingly time-consuming. A respondent said:

"It is tiresome to wait in the queues for a long time for inspection and checking by the authorities. I do not know why they need so much time."<sup>70</sup>

According to a study, single women on both sides of the border have complained about being subjected to significant harassment at the border crossing. Among the 17 consumers of border *haats* from Bangladesh and India, the majority voiced displeasure with the lengthy inspection process conducted by *haat* staff.<sup>71</sup>

Issues with BHMC's transparency and accountability must be promptly addressed to maintain a successful border market. Bias in ticket selection and approval for sellers and customers are prevalent.<sup>72</sup> The lack of transparency and accountability among *haat* authorities results in unequal opportunities, which is concerning. One respondent stated that:

"We wanted to buy a ticket for the *haat* days, but after 3-4 hours of waiting, we could not manage it. Many people were collecting tickets syndicating with others and earning extra money by selling to the black market. In some cases, 30-Taka tickets price of the *haat* are sold to visitors in the black market for 100-200 Taka price."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Joyeeta Bhattacharjee, "Role of Border *Haat* in Management of India-Bangladesh Border," *CUTS International & Unnayan Shamannay Briefing Paper* no. 1, (2020).

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Sohrab Uddin, Resident of Paschim Madhugram, Chhagalnaiya Border *Haat*, November 1, 2021.

<sup>71</sup> World Bank, *A Glass Half Full*.

<sup>72</sup> Jigme Wangdi, "Undoing the Radcliffe Awards Re-Imagining Border *Haats* at India's Northeast".

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Sourav, Resident of Mokamia, Chhagalnaiya Border *Haat* (online interview), November 15, 2021.



However, apart from all the challenges discussed above, border *haats* producing tremendous opportunities both for the residents of the border area but also for advancement of Bangladesh-India relations.

## 5. Opportunities of the Border *Haats*

The majority of Bangladesh's and India's border territories are remote, with most residents living in poverty and agriculture serving as their primary source of income.<sup>74</sup> Those who lack sufficient land or are regarded as landless are more likely to thrive as labourers or migrant workers in urban areas. They have little to do in their suburbs due to a lack of facilities in the impoverished region. However, border *haats* in peripheral regions such as Chattogram, Bangladesh provides a stream of revenue for poor and marginalised residents by providing work opportunities. Those who live in Chattogram, work mostly as vendors, vendees, transporters, and they support services at the designated border *haat* areas. More importantly, as a result of the border *haats* project overall, all local residents in the vicinity of the border *haats* benefit tremendously. In this section, this study will elaborate on the economic impact of border *haats* for various types of people living nearby border *haats*.

### 5.1 Impact on Seller's Income

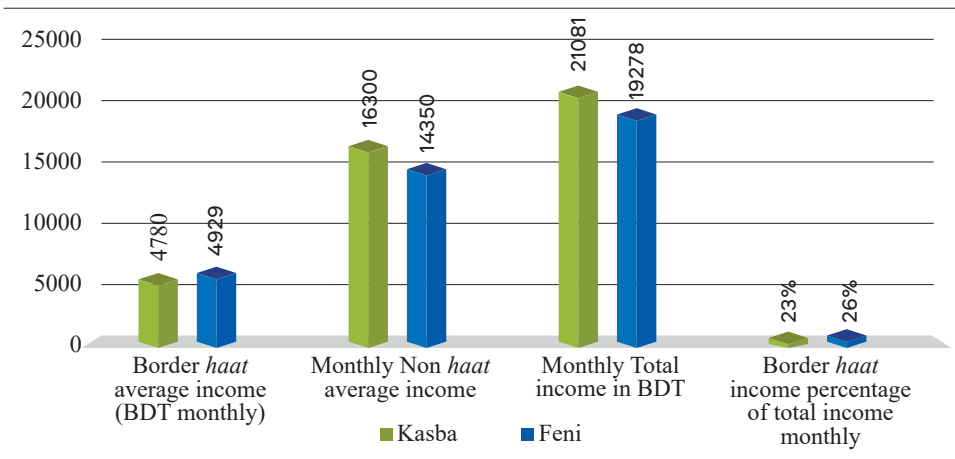
Among the direct beneficiaries of the border *haats*, vendor income has had the greatest influence, as they are also the largest investors in the *haats*. Nearly 50 traders became the major beneficiaries of each *haat* day in two border *haats* in Chattogram, Bangladesh. Due to the limited number of stalls permitted in the *haats*, 25 stalls on each side of the border, vendor tickets are distributed in rotation to ensure that other vendors have an equal opportunity. According to the available data (presented in Figure 8), the average monthly non-*haat* income of a vendor residing in two border *haats* regions in Chattogram is approximately BDT 17,000 (US\$ 140) and BDT 15,000 (US\$ 125) respectively. Because of the border *haat* business, the monthly income of a seller from the two border *haats* added around BDT 5000 (US\$ 40) each respectively to their total income, which is approximately 25 per cent extra income of total income of a vendor per month.

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<sup>74</sup> Vaibhav Verma, "The Understanding of India-Bangladesh Border *Haats* and its Benefits," *Research Review International Journal of Multidisciplinary*, 8, no. 3 (2023): 21-25.

Although Bangladeshi vendors’ profit from the two border *haats* constitute a quarter of non-*haat* income, in retrospect, Indian sellers’ profit comprise three-quarters of average monthly income apart from other sources of income. There is a significant discrepancy in profit margins between the two countries, which frequently causes frustration among Bangladesh sellers. The rationale for the Bangladeshi sellers’ lower profit margin is related to several issues. One of them is that Bangladeshi vendors are less involved in agriculture than Indian vendors, owing to their local businesses. As a result, they are not frequent traders at border *haats*, in contrast to the Indian side, who are very active in *haat* activities. According to the report, people who sell agricultural items earn a bigger profit margin than other vendors. Although Bangladeshi vendors appear to be earning less profit, the majority of vendors are satisfied with the additional cash they gained from the border *haats*.<sup>75</sup>

**Figure 8: Monthly Vendor’s Income from Two Border *Haats* in Chattogram, Bangladesh<sup>76</sup>**



<sup>75</sup> World Bank, *A Glass half full*.

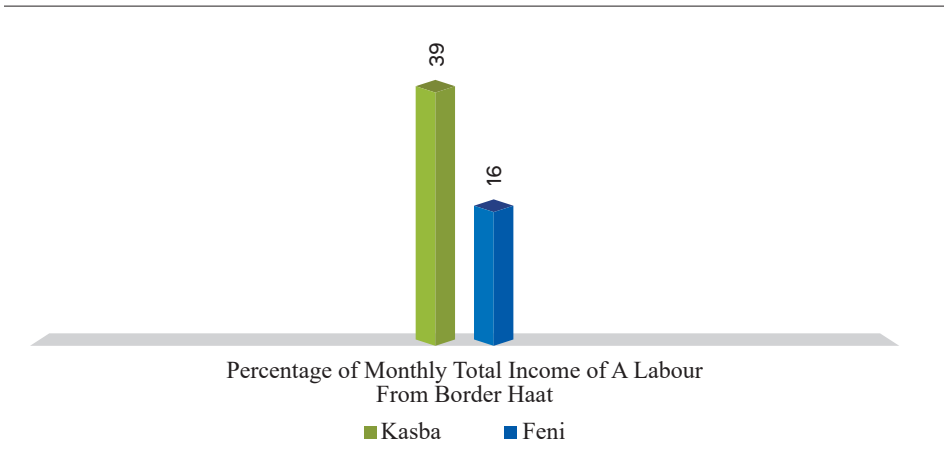
<sup>76</sup> Impact of Border *Haats* on local economy of Chattogram (Converted rate INR to BDT. INR 1=BDT 1.20). Adapted from CUTS International, *Bordering on Happiness*.

## 5.2 *Impact on Labourer's Income*

In terms of direct beneficiaries from the border *haats*, labourers from Chattogram's two designated borderland areas gain a significant share of the revenues because they are integrally linked to the *haats* and thus benefit from their efforts. Their primary responsibility is assisting vendors with the loading and unloading of supplies for the *haat* business. The transportation system in some *haats* has not progressed as well as it could have. In order to transport goods and commodities from the impassable road to the *haat*, it is practically difficult for the sellers to transport their items without a sufficient number of labourers. Among the two border *haats* in Chattogram, the border *haat* in Kasba has better terrain and approachable road to the *haat*. As a result, vendors invest more money in border *haats*, which ultimately increases a labourer's income. In retrospect, the border *haat* in Chhagalnaiya is located in a rugged terrain that makes trading in this border *haat* extremely difficult. People must transport their goods in a variety of ways, including vehicles, boats, and self-carry, particularly during the monsoon season. As a result, individuals investing in border *haats* are typically local farmers selling their limited locally produced commodities. Due to the lack of investment in border *haats*, labourers receive fewer benefits from them.

According to one study (shown in Figure 9) about the monthly border *haat* income percentage of the total income of labourers, it found that among the two border *haats* in Chattogram, labourers from the Kasba border *haat* earn 39 per cent more of the total income per month. On the other hand, Chhagalnaiya border *haat*'s income of a labourer constitutes only 16 per cent of the total income per month, which is almost two times less than the Kasba border *haat*. The possible reasons were already discussed in the previous sections. Apart from that, there are no specified payments for labourers. Labourers negotiate with a customer-first regarding the price for carrying goods. So, it is common to have a different amount of income for each *haat* based on the location.

**Figure 9: Percentage of Monthly Border *Haat* Income of Total Income of a Labourer in Chattogram<sup>77</sup>**



Moreover, the World Bank report cited that the average monthly income for Bangladeshi labourers from the border *haats* is roughly BDT 1,450 (US\$ 12), whereas their monthly wage in non-border *haats* is approximately BDT 5,560 (US\$ 46).<sup>78</sup> This equates to nearly one-third of a labourer’s total monthly revenue coming from border *haats*.

### 5.3 *Impact on Transport Workers*

A transporter’s income is also boosted by border *haats*. There are several sorts of vehicles that transporters use to make money from the *haats*, including trucks, vans, auto-rickshaws, pull-cycle rikshaws, and other similar vehicles. Not only do the transporters who own vehicles earn financially from the border *haats*, but the owners of excellent vehicles also benefit financially by renting out their vehicles on the *haat* days. Across the two border *haats* districts, the majority of the transporters are impoverished, and they must rely on their daily earnings to support their families. Even many of them hire vehicles since they lack the financial means to own a good-quality vehicle. However, those who own rickshaws typically transport passengers and a limited quantity of commodities. Truck and van drivers, on the other hand, typically transport goods traded at the *haats*. Therefore, their earnings are not the same as a rickshaw puller.

<sup>77</sup> CUTS International, *Bordering on Happiness*.

<sup>78</sup> World Bank, *A Glass Half Full*.

However, according to the available data presented in Table 2, Bangladeshi transporters in Chattogram border *haats* earn an average of BDT 600 (US\$ 5) per day on *haat* days, while their revenue from non-*haat* days amounts to around BDT 400 (US\$ 3.25) per day.<sup>79</sup> During the *haat* days, a large volume of products are transported throughout the *haat* day by the transporter. They exclusively transport passengers on other days of the week. As a result, their income during the *haat* operation days almost doubled compared to normal days. When compared to typical days, their income increased by nearly 100 per cent during the *haat* operation periods. In addition, the income of the transporter is dependent on specific *haat* locations where they operate. For example, during *haat* days in the Kasba border *haat* in Chattogram, there used to be a large number of people gathering. As a result, the bigger the number of consumers or the amount of trade in the *haats*, the greater the money a transporter generates.

**Table 2: Average Transporter Income in Chattogram’s Border Haats<sup>80</sup>**

Average Transporter Income	BDT	US\$
Average Income on <i>haat</i> days	600	5
Average Income on non- <i>haat</i> days	400	3.25

Moreover, Table 3 shows that, from the commencement of a border *haat* in Kasba, the percentage of a transporter’s income has increased 42 per cent. That means before the establishment of border *haats*, transporters’ income was only BDT 334 (US\$ 2.78), and due to the border *haat* facilities, their income reached BDT 472 (US\$ 3.93). Similarly, in Chhagalnaiya border *haat*, the percentage of a transporter’s income has increased significantly better than Kasba, which is 62 per cent. This means their income has increased from BDT 361 (US\$ 3) to BDT 583 (US\$ 4.85) after the construction of the border *haats*.

<sup>79</sup> World Bank, *A Glass Half Full*.

<sup>80</sup> World Bank, *A Glass Half Full*.

**Table 3: Income of Transporters<sup>81</sup>**

Name of <i>Haat</i>	Average Income (BDT per Month)		Increased Percentage
	Before the Establishment of <i>Haats</i>	After the Establishment of <i>Haats</i>	
Kasba	BDT 334 (US\$ 2.78)	BDT 472 (US\$ 3.93)	42 per cent
Chhagalnaiya	BDT 361 (US\$ 3)	BDT 583 (US\$ 4.85)	62 per cent

**5.4 Impact on Vendees’ Income**

Border *haats* benefit not only the traders who sell their goods there, but also the vendors who purchase commodities from the *haats* and resell them in their local markets. As a result, they gain a sizable portion of the earnings generated by their local business. However, the majority of the local residents of the two border *haats* in Chattogram come to purchase products for personal consumption. Farid Hasan, whose primary source of income depends on a village shop often comes to the border *haat* to purchase goods for reselling in his little shop. According to him:

“I come to the border *haat* to buy goods because it is cheaper than other places. So, I can earn a little extra profit by selling those products in my shop.”<sup>82</sup>

Similar opinions have been provided by other vendees who also resell commodities from the border *haats*.

**5.5 Prospects of Cross-Border Tourism**

Cross-border tourism is gaining popularity worldwide as a lucrative source of revenue for countries.<sup>83</sup> The border *haats* between Bangladesh and India have also emerged as a significant income generator for local communities. Beyond being marketplaces, border *haats* serve as tourist attractions, enticing urban dwellers to visit

<sup>81</sup> CUTS International, *Bordering on Happiness*.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Farid Hasan, resident of Kasba, Kasba Border *Haat*, October 2, 2021.

<sup>83</sup> M. Kozak and D. Buhalis, “Cross–border Tourism Destination Marketing: Prerequisites and Critical Success Factors,” *J Destin Mark Manag* 14, (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2019.100392>.

the border region due to its proximity to scenic destinations. Consequently, tourists can satisfy their shopping needs at the *haats* while enjoying the local attractions, resulting in a dual benefit. On *haat* operation days, the designated border zone attracts thousands of curious individuals, which greatly benefits the nearby residents without requiring additional effort. The economic gains extend beyond the *haat* premises, enhancing the socioeconomic status of local people in Chattogram, Bangladesh. Moreover, the border *haats* foster cultural interaction and facilitate people-to-people connections between the two countries, serving as focal points for such exchanges.<sup>84</sup>

It is crucial on the part of the governments of Bangladesh and India to devise a comprehensive regional framework to cultivate tourism spots and industries that would positively impact the local economies. This can be accomplished by empowering individuals to leverage the *haats* as platforms for economic gains, such as through the sale of handicrafts or serving as tourist guides. It is evident that during *haat* days, economic benefits extend beyond the *haat* areas, thereby bolstering the socioeconomic well-being of the local people in Chattogram, Bangladesh. Thus, it is imperative for local authorities to formulate an effective strategy for nurturing tourist attractions, which will ultimately contribute to the economic betterment of the local populace.

## 5.6 *Development of Rural Entrepreneurship*

Entrepreneurship opportunities among rural people are limited due to a lack of necessary facilities and conducive environments. Besides, borderlands are heavily dependent on agriculture for livelihoods. Investing in agricultural inputs has the potential to diversify income sources for local residents and contribute to the overall development of border communities. Border *haats* present a promising avenue for rural startups, as they facilitate the formal collaboration between Bangladesh and India in trading locally produced goods. This initiative is particularly beneficial for marginalised residents in the borderlands who rely on agricultural production, as it provides an alternative and cost-effective platform for selling their products.<sup>85</sup> It is argued that borderland people live in a new

<sup>84</sup> A. K. Enamul Haque, "Can Border *Haats* Become Centres for Cultural Exchange, Tourism and People-to-People Connectivity?," *CUTS International Briefing Paper 2* (2020), <https://cuts-crc.org/pdf/briefing-papers-can-border-haats-become-centres-for-cultural-exchange-tourism-and-people-to-people-connectivity.pdf>.

<sup>85</sup> Navine Murshid, *India's Bangladesh Problem: The Marginalisation of Bengali Muslims in Neoliberal Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Haimanti Roy, "Testing Citizenship in the Bengal Borderlands," *Current History* 119, no. 816 (2020): 128-133.

kind of border relations that relied on the humanity and care of neighbors and a sense of solidarity. This is because borders work as a means for their livelihood when neoliberal development bypasses them, and the central government sees the borderlands as the periphery to be securitised.

The institutionalisation of border *haats* has spurred increased investment in locally manufactured goods for trading purposes. Private sector involvement has played a crucial role in promoting high-quality agricultural inputs in rural areas, including the production and marketing of seeds, fertilizers, insecticides, and herbicides in both countries. Private sector suppliers can collaborate with rural entrepreneurs, who act as distributors, to facilitate the export of agricultural inputs through border *haats*, meeting the high demand abroad. By procuring products at dealer pricing from these suppliers, rural entrepreneurs can generate profit margins on goods sold through the *haats*.<sup>86</sup>

Moreover, border *haats* play a critical role in promoting women entrepreneurship. However, women's entrepreneurial participation is socio-cultural context dependent. According to the WB, single women emerged as vendors in Chattogram, Bangladesh border *haats*, with the assistance of local officials.<sup>87</sup> Not only does the sociocultural framework precludes female entrepreneurship, but also the border *haats*' inadequate infrastructure, which needs to be women friendly.<sup>88</sup>

### 5.7 *Infrastructural and Employment Opportunities*

The bilateral trade agreement between India and Bangladesh via the Border *Haats* not only generates a robust economy in the two border *haats*' local areas but also contributes to the growth of several infrastructures.<sup>89</sup> Historically, the borderlands lacked infrastructural development. As a result, individuals had few sources of income, which were insufficient for such a large society. However, following the establishment

<sup>86</sup> Ashish Nath, "Border *Haats* as Centres for Exchange of Agricultural Inputs, Ideas and Practices." *CUTS International Briefing paper* 6: (2020).

<sup>87</sup> World Bank, *A Glass Half Full*; Mahbuba Nasreen, "Border *Haats* and Women Empowerment," *CUTS International Briefing paper* 9 (2020), <https://cuts-crc.org/pdf/bp-border-haats-and-women-empowerment.pdf>.

<sup>88</sup> Jennifer L. Solotaroff, Kotikula Aphichoke, Lonnberg Tara, Snigdha Ali, and Ferdous Jahan, *Voices to Choices: Bangladesh's Journey in Women's Economic Empowerment* (Washington: World Bank Publications, 2019).

<sup>89</sup> Harsh Vardhan Shringla, "Siliguri Corridor as a Bridge to East Asia," *The Daily Sun*, 2024, <https://www.daily-sun.com/post/728639>; Vaibhav Verma, "The Understanding of India-Bangladesh Border *Haats* and its Benefits," *Research Review International Journal of Multidisciplinary* 8, no. 3 (2023): 21–25, <https://doi.org/10.31305/rrijm.2023.v08.n03.004>.



of the border *haats* in Chattogram, numerous infrastructural developments such as storage facilities, transportation facilities, parking spaces, temporary grocery stores, and street vending shops have sprung up outside the border *haats*, providing a source of income for a large number of people. Some respondent stated:

Because of the border *haats*, the Bangladeshi government is building several new highways. As a result, we are receiving extra advantages as locals. Furthermore, some people are constructing storage facilities to be rented during the *haat* operation days, which is assisting them in supplementing their income.<sup>90</sup>

Youth employment facilities and the overall economy of the border *haats* area are aided by these additional infrastructure developments. Residents on both sides of the borderlands face some structural disadvantages, though they experience them quite differently.<sup>91</sup> However, following the construction of *haats*, authorities are concentrating their efforts on enhancing the infrastructural and communication system in those specified locations, which are ultimately benefiting the local populace.<sup>92</sup> Additionally, as a result of the *haats*' increased revenue, the general public is increasing their expenditure on health and education.

## 6. Border *Haats* and Its Implications for Bangladesh-India Relations

Despite being two neighbouring countries with the longest shared boundary and historical similarities, the India-Bangladesh relationship has presented a dismal picture since 1971. Several issues remain unsolved, such as the Farakka and Teesta barrage conflicts, border killings, unkept promises, and others. However, conflicts in the border areas are prevalent among these problems. Hence, to enhance an amicable relationship between Bangladesh and India, social and economic issues need to be prioritised first.<sup>93</sup> The establishment of Border *Haats* has several implications for the Bangladesh-India relationship which are as follows:

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<sup>90</sup> Interview with Jakaria Habib, Resident of Kasba, Kasba Border *Haat*, October 2, 2021; Interview with Anik Mia, Resident of Chhagalnaiya Sador, Chhagalnaiya Border *Haat*, October 24, 2021; Interview with Saydol Hossen, Resident of Nawamura Kasba Border *Haat*, October 9, 2021.

<sup>91</sup> Sahana Ghosh, *A Thousand Tiny Cuts: Mobility and Security Across the Bangladesh-India Borderlands* (California: University of California Press, 2023).

<sup>92</sup> Bhuiyan and Salam, "Cross-Border Trade Enterprise between Bangladesh and India".

<sup>93</sup> Ishtiaq Hossain, "Bangladesh-India Relations: Issues and Problems," *Asian Survey* 21, no. 11 (1981): 1115-1128.

## 6.1 *Reducing Smuggling and Informal Trade*

The 1947 partition significantly impacted the lives and livelihoods of borderland residents, as border-making altered trade dynamics. Overnight, what was once fair and legal trade became illegal, leaving uncertainty about what activities would be tolerated unofficially.<sup>94</sup> Informal trade was the only means of economic activity in the borderland. Survival and fortune became an issue, whereas nationalism or statism appeared to be insufficient to prevent these activities. Instead of stigmatising the borderlands for smuggling, one must attempt to go beyond the blame game and unpack the complexity of the problem.

The establishment of border *haats* between Bangladesh and India has had a significant impact on reducing informal trade and is also thought to reduce smuggling-associated conflict.<sup>95</sup> Another study found that “BSF personnel confirmed that the illegal channel of informal trade has lessened and problems of dacoits and theft have come down perceptibly due to border *haats*.”<sup>96</sup> This is possible as border *haats* provide a formal platform for traders from both countries to engage in cross-border trade, it helps in reducing informal trade, smuggling, and other illegal activities.

## 6.2 *Confidence-Building Measures*

Confidence-building measures are crucial in almost any situation where two or more opposing parties are involved. They are required when there are disparities, lack of trust, or even hostility among the parties.<sup>97</sup> In the borderland, extra-judicial violence is often inflicted by the security forces<sup>98</sup> can be seen as one of the reasons for the mistrust between two neighbours. Border *haats* serve as confidence-building measures between Bangladesh and India. These initiatives have played a crucial role in reducing tensions and resolving disputes along the border. By creating opportunities

<sup>94</sup> Sayeed Ferdous, *Partition as Border-making: East Bengal, East Pakistan and Bangladesh* (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2021).

<sup>95</sup> Alison Brown, Bhaskar Chakrabarti, Peter Mackie, Crispian Fuller, Rajesh Bhattacharya, Soumyabrato Bagchi and Debapriya Chakrabarti, “Contested Spaces of Exchange: Informal Cross-Border Trade on the India–Bangladesh Border,” *Forum for Development Studies* 51, no.1 (2024): 121-143, DOI: 10.1080/08039410.2023.2255211

<sup>96</sup> Dominic Savio, Samrat Roy and Saswati Chaudhuri, *Transforming our World Together towards Sustainable Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023).

<sup>97</sup> Navnita Chadha, *Confidence Building Measures in South Asia* (United Kingdom: University of Kent, 1993).

<sup>98</sup> Sahana Ghosh, *A Thousand Tiny Cuts*.

for dialogue and cooperation at the grassroots level, *haats* have provided a space for both countries to work together on common issues, leading to a more stable and peaceful border region. The study of Sinha, Mistry and Thomas on Indo-Bhutan border markets also expresses similar results in their research. Local trade dynamics and shared inter-dependence of resources among local communities at the border markets hold important lessons for engendering cooperation and the benefits of peaceful, stable and open (yet regulated) borders”.<sup>99</sup>

Moreover, enhanced connectivity facilitated by border markets will ultimately create greater business prospects for citizens of both nations, fostering an atmosphere of trust and friendship organically.<sup>100</sup> It is essential to recognise that economic opportunities and financial incentives often carry more weight than political considerations.

### 6.3 *Cross-Border Connectivity*

The concept of border *haats* has proven to be successful in facilitating people-to-people contact and enhancing connectivity in the northern states of India and the border regions of Bangladesh. As highlighted by Anbumozhi and Singh, these border *haats* have not only stimulated additional economic activities but have also contributed to greater welfare in these areas.<sup>101</sup> This success has even inspired the establishment of similar border *haats* between Mizoram and Myanmar, indicating the potential for this model to be replicated in other border regions as well.

The significance of border *haats* lies in their ability to promote cross-border trade and interaction between communities residing in border areas. Moreover, they foster a sense of camaraderie and trust between neighboring countries by promoting mutual cooperation and understanding at the grassroots level. Furthermore, the success of border *haats* serves as a testament to the notion that initiatives focusing

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<sup>99</sup> Samrat Sinha, Mohan Deepanshu, Mistry Jignesh, and Thomas Ashika, “How an Indo-Bhutan Border Market Has Moved Beyond Narratives of Conflict and Security,” *The Wire*, 2023.

<sup>100</sup> Nazneen Ahmed, “Border *Haats*: A New Horizon of Revitalizing Connectivity and Old Bonding between citizens of Bangladesh and India,” Observer Research Foundation (ORF), 2021 <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/border-haats-new-horizon-revitalising-connectivity-old-bonding-between-citizens-bangladesh-india/>.

<sup>101</sup> Venkatachalam Anbumozhi and Bhupendra Kumar Singh, *Cross-Border Integration of Renewable Energy Systems: Experiences, Impacts, and Drivers* (London: Routledge, 2024).

on economic cooperation and people-centered approaches can transcend political barriers and promote sustainable development. As such, the expansion of border *haats* and similar initiatives hold promise for fostering greater regional integration, economic prosperity, and social cohesion in border regions across the globe.

#### **6.4 *Economic Integration***

The implementation of Border *Haats* will also pave the way for regional economic integration. Through these border *haats*, Bangladesh and India can enhance their economic cooperation not only at the bilateral level but also within regional organizations such as SAARC, BIMSTEC and ASEAN. In geopolitics, connectivity will foster stronger economic ties among countries in the region, leading to shared interests, mutual dependencies, and an overall stronger economic relationship.<sup>102</sup>

Hence, increased economic integration between Bangladesh and India can have several positive outcomes. It will promote stability and peaceful coexistence by fostering greater interdependence between the two countries. As they rely on each other's markets and economies, there is a vested interest in maintaining peaceful relations and resolving any conflicts through diplomatic means. Economic interdependence acts as both a catalyst for peace and a deterrent against hostile actions. Moreover, this economic integration can also lead to the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and best practices between Bangladesh and India. It opens doors for collaboration in various sectors, including agriculture, manufacturing, and tourism. This sharing of expertise and resources can benefit both countries, fueling innovation and growth.

#### **6.5 *Border Haats as a Means for Cultural Diplomacy***

Border *haats* serve as a unique avenue for cultural diplomacy, leveraging the power of culture to bridge political divides and foster mutual understanding between nations. As individuals from diverse backgrounds gather at border *haats* to trade goods and services, they inevitably share their cultural experiences, traditions, and practices. This organic exchange of cultural knowledge and customs promotes cross-cultural understanding, appreciation, and respect among participants. Through

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<sup>102</sup> Shringla, "Siliguri Corridor as a Bridge to East Asia".

these interactions, stereotypes and misconceptions are challenged, paving the way for greater harmony and cooperation between neighboring countries. By nurturing cultural understanding and interpersonal connections, border *haats* contribute to the broader goals of cultural diplomacy between Bangladesh and India. They provide tangible opportunities for both nations to showcase their rich cultural heritage, promote dialogue, and build lasting relationships based on mutual respect and appreciation. Ultimately, border *haats* serve as valuable instruments for promoting peace, cooperation, and goodwill between neighboring countries through the power of cultural exchange.

## 7. Conclusion

This study has tried to provide an insightful analysis of cross-border markets between Bangladesh and India. Border *Haats* are equally important for the borderland area of Bangladesh as well as the North Eastern Region of India which are geographically separated from the mainland. The border *haats* located in the India-Bangladesh border area hold great significance within the strategic framework. These *haats* are more than just regular marketplaces as they represent a novel approach to developing borderlands. They offer immediate benefits and hold the potential for broader economic development in the region. The two sample *haats* in this research shed enough light on various aspects of this local economic institution. The research has found that the *haats* are symbols of political and economic cooperation between the two countries, and they have created many opportunities for the people nearby in terms of income generation, infrastructure development, and local agricultural and small industry development as such. Additionally, they have played a crucial role in reducing informal and illegal trade between India and Bangladesh, ultimately promoting legal trade.

However, there are several challenges that are mainly related to proper management of the institution such as poor infrastructure, policy and procedures, safety, and security and *haat* Committee as well. Moreover, there are far smaller number of such *haats* in operation at the Indo-Bangladesh border than are required. There are seventy areas that have been selected in five borderlands for the establishment of the 'border *haats*' phase-wise. However, complaints have been raised that introducing more border *haats* is not gaining momentum as the interest in India is declining. Thus, it was not materialised to establish the desired number of border-*haats* in the

borderland despite the rigorous plan. This study also found that border *haats* have several implications for Bangladesh-India relations which are reducing informal trade and casualties in the border area, making economic integration viable in this region, and working as cultural diplomatic tools for both countries.

Further research is needed to focus on a comparative study of such border *haat*'s impact on peripheral communities at the regional level. This work makes a couple of theoretical as well as empirical contributions. First, it sheds some new light on the institutional aspects of the Bangladesh-India cross-border economics. Second, enhanced socioeconomic and cross-border transactions might have some effects on peaceful development of bilateral relations among the South Asian nations.