

TRIPURA BORDER HAATS IN THE POST-COVID ERA

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic not only imposed a catastrophic threat on the health and life security of the human race but has also shattered down the global economies to an unutterable state. The imposition of global lockdown to tackle the spread of the deadly virus suspended all the day-to-day activities resulting in loss of jobs and creating an acute shortage of income opportunities. The lockdown also hampered the export-import process between nations as all the international borders were sealed to prevent the spread of the virus. Following this, the borders between India and Bangladesh were also sealed which hindered the regular export-import process between the Indian States with Bangladesh. Amongst all the North-Eastern states of India that share an international boundary with Bangladesh, Tripura is the most to suffer due to its geographical position and isolation from its very mainland. Tripura shares the largest international border (856 km) with Bangladesh which is higher than any other North-Eastern State (Assam-263 Km, Meghalaya-443 Km, Mizoram-318 Km) sharing a border with Bangladesh. This largest sharing of the international border has made Tripura depend a lot on Bangladesh to fulfill its necessities through imports. Following this improved trade relations, two Border Haats evolved up in between Tripura (India) and Bangladesh both of which are proving to be a boon for those residing in the remote border areas. But the sudden outbreak of the pandemic has put these haats in a standstill position. Thus, the present paper is an attempt to highlight the problems faced by the Tripura vendors operating in the two border haats of Tripura along with some possible measures that can be adopted to resume trade in these haats after the pandemic situation.

Keyword: *Border Haat, Tripura, Bangladesh, COVID-19, Pandemic, Trade.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Border Haat is a special market arrangement located precisely on the zero line of the border shared between two countries. India and Bangladesh have such market arrangements where peoples from both countries can visit and purchase locally produced goods and articles from vendors¹. All the commodities brought and sold in the haat are tax-free where buyers can purchase in reasonable quantities with the currencies of their respective countries. At present, four border haats are operating in between India and Bangladesh. The first border haat to come in operation in 2011 was the Baliamari (Kurigram District) - Kalaichar (West Garo Hills) Border Haat, followed by the Lauwaghar (Dalora, Sunamganj District) – Balat (East Khasi Hills) Border Haat in 2012, both of which are located along with the Meghalaya (India) - Bangladesh border. In 2015, the third and fourth to join the pipeline was the Srinagar (South Tripura District) - Chhagalnaiya (Feni, Chittagong District) Border Haat, successively followed by the Kamalasar (Sepahijala District) – Tarapur (Rajshahi District) Border Haat, both of which are located along the Tripura (India) - Bangladesh border.

Amongst the two, the most popular border haat in Tripura is the Kamalasar-Tarapur Border Haat located in the Sepahijala District. The popularity of the same can be observed with the sales figures of the haat since inception.

¹ Memorandum of Understanding between The Government of The Republic of India and The Government of The People's Republic of Bangladesh: Establishing Border Haats across the Border between India and Bangladesh.

From June 2015 to March 2020, the overall sales figure on the Indian side went to 24.65 crore INR in comparison to the other haat (Srinagar-Chhagalnaiya) which stands at 15.43 crore INR². However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic shattered the trade on these haats for unforeseen time. With this happening, the most to suffer were the vendors operating in these haats. Therefore, it is now most essential that alternative ways must be formulated to continue the trade besides giving due importance to the health and safety protocols.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective of this paper has been to:

- (i) Investigate the problems faced by the Tripura vendors after the shutdown of border haats due to the pandemic.
- (ii) Identify the possible ways and measures that can be adopted to resume the trade.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on a descriptive research design. The required information was collected exploring secondary sources. The secondary data are collected from reports of Economic Review of Tripura, journals, research articles, etc. Besides, various books, websites, local newspapers, articles were also referred for the purpose. However, keeping the objective of the study in mind, an attempt was made to gather some primary data interacting with the Indian vendors of the haat.

4. OVERVIEW OF BORDER HAATS IN TRIPURA

4.1 The Kamalasagar-Tarapur Border Haat

The Kamalasagar-Tarapur Border Haat is located at a meager distance of 27 km from Agartala, the capital city of Tripura. The haat is well connected through road and can be reached using the local transportations. The age-old Kasbeswari Kali Mata or Kamalasagar Kali temple is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the State located close to the border haat. Being a tourist destination, there is an inflow of a huge number of devotees not only from the locale but from the other states as well. As a result of this, the people coming to visit the temple started to enter the haat. Initially, the weekly haat operated on Thursday, and later the same was shifted to Sunday, and Sunday being a holiday, there was always a rush in the populace visiting the haat. As a result, the popularity of the haat went on increasing with each passing year, and that continuing since 2015. There are a variety of items that are traded in the haat (refer Table 1) that are popular among the peoples belonging from both sides of the border.

Table 1: Products Sold in the Kamalasagar-Tarapur Border Haat

Tarapur (Bangladesh) Sellers	Kamalasagar (India) Sellers
Iron & Steel Products [Shovel (Shabol), Dao, Flower Basket, Oil Lamps, Chheni, Axe, Spade (Kudal), Mortar & Pestle, Betel Nut Cutter (Sarota), Hammer, Chimta, Ghutni, Dhoop Dani, Incense Stick Stand, Diyas, Utensils]	Cosmetics and Grooming Items [Mascara, Lipsticks, Eyeliner, Kajal, Shampoo, Conditioner, Body Lotion, Perfumes, Deodorants, Hair Oil, Soaps, Hair Colour, Beauty Soaps, Face Wash]
Melamine Products	Baby Products [Oil, Shampoo, Soap, Towels, Comb, Pads] Johnson and Johnson, Himalaya
Leather Products [Ladies Purse, Wallet, Footwear]	Fruits [Jackfruit, Wood Apple (Bel)]
Dry Fish [Salted Hilsha and of other varieties]	Spices [Cumin, Coriander]
Rolling Board & Rolling Pin (Roti Belni)	Cardamom
Garments [Zamdani Sarees, Cotton Sarees, Lungi, Cotton Vests, Shirts, T-Shirts], Gamcha	Raisins, Mango Bars
Plastic Goods [Household Items, Toys]	Pickles
Door Mats [Made of Jute]	Plastic Toys
Food Items [Biscuits, Condensed Milk, Vermicelli (Sewai), Noodles, Papad, Potato Chips, Pickles, Candies]	Food Items [Biscuits, Chanachur, Bhujia, Fruit Squash, Chocolates]
Soaps [Beauty Soaps and Washing Soap (Bangla Soap)]	Steel Utensils
Talcum Powder	Hurricane Lantern

² Economic Review of Tripura 2021-22, Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Govt. of Tripura

Fruits [Banana, Water Melon, Orange, Date Palm, Apple (both red and green), Dates, Pear, Pineapple]	
Medical Products [Syrups, Tablets, Glucose, Roohafza]	
Items for Quick Consumption [Lemonade, Biscuits, Water Melon, Sweets- Curd, Kheer]	

Source: R. Deb Roy & P.K. Haldar (2019); Trading in Ground Zero: An Insight into Kamalagar-Tarapur Border Haat

From Table 1, it can be observed that a wide range of products is bought and sold in the haat, and the revenue realized from the sales has increased gradually over time which can be noticed from Table 2.

Table 2: Sales Figure of Kamalagar-Tarapur Border Haat

(Figures in INR Crores)

Year	Sales in Indian Side	Sales in Bangladesh Side	Combined Sales
2015-16	2.96	0.55	3.51
2016-17	5.88	0.59	6.47
2017-18	4.25	1.21	5.46
2018-19	3.17	0.91	4.08
2019-20	8.39	0.98	9.37
2020-21	0.00	0.00	0.00
2021-22	0.00	0.00	0.00
Total Sales	24.65	4.24	28.89

Source: Economic Review, Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Govt. of Tripura

As it can be seen from Table 2, the sales revenue generated over the last seven years on the Indian side was almost six times higher than the Bangladesh side. This happened only because the people of Bangladesh were highly interested in the items offered by the Indian sellers. Amongst all the items offered, the most popular item that grossed the highest sales to the Indian sellers were cosmetic products and fruits. The peoples of Bangladesh have a keen interest in the Indian cosmetic brands that are available in cheaper rates and of good quality in comparison to the ones available on their side.

4.2 The Srinagar-Chhagalnaiya Border Haat

The Srinagar-Chhagalnaiya Border Haat is located in Srinagar of South Tripura District which is approx at a distance of 120 km from the capital city Agartala. The haat can be reached availing the local buses and local train. The commodities traded in the haat by both sides of the vendors include dry fish, tea leaves, bakery items, household items made of plastic, spices, vegetables, seasonal fruits, edible oil, pulses, kitchen utensils made of steel, etc³. The sales figure of the haat over the past eight years can be observed from table 3 below.

Table 3: Sales Figure of Srinagar-Chhagalnaiya Border Haat

(Figures in INR Crores)

Year	Sales in Indian Side	Sales in Bangladesh Side	Combined Sales
2014-15	0.18	0.09	0.27
2015-16	1.81	0.70	2.51
2016-17	7.39	3.81	11.20
2017-18	4.28	3.29	7.57
2018-19	0.94	0.63	1.57
2019-20	0.83	4.61	5.44
2020-21	0.00	0.00	0.00
2021-22	0.00	0.00	0.00
Total Sales	15.43	13.13	28.56

Source: Economic Review, Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Govt. of Tripura

As evident from Table 3, it can be seen that the sales on the Indian side and Bangladesh side are almost equal. But if we compare the Indian sales figure of this haat with the Kamalagar-Tarapur Border Haat, the figures are

³ <https://southtripura.nic.in/tourist-place/border-haat-srinagar/>

almost double. The factor that can be attributable to this double sale in the Kamalasar haat is the easy access of the Bangladeshi peoples to the haat as it is located at a walking distance from the Kasba Railway station.

5. PROBLEMS FACED BY THE VENDORS AFTER PANDEMIC OUTBREAK

On 11th March 2020, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) due to the speedy transmission of the disease (Santos, 2020). With that, all the international borders were sealed, and accordingly, the border haats were also shut down to prevent the disease from community spreading. The Govt. of India imposed a total lockdown on all the states to restrict the social gatherings and made sure that no one moves out of their home as the disease spreads quite rapidly through social gatherings. The idea to implement the lockdown was much needed to put a bar on the spread. However, at the end of May 2020, the Unlock 1.0 phase began where the economy started to open up with restrictions and necessary guidelines that were needed to follow while going outside of the home. Later, considering the number of COVID-19 cases, there came many phases of unlocking the economy, and that continued to Unlock 7.0 (December-2020).

The unlock phases did not however apply on the border haat as it was located on the zero line of the border. Due to this, the vendors of the haat started to feel worried about its re-opening as their livelihood was solely dependent on the earnings from the haat sales. Poverty started to hit the vendors very badly and meeting the daily expenses for obtaining necessities became tough for them. However, the State Government provided food supplies and ration for one month after the outbreak of the pandemic⁴. With this happening, there were no other alternatives for the Kamalasar vendors other than to sell out their local produces in the nearby local markets. The 12 km stretch from the NH-8 that connects to the border haat in Kamalasar has four markets namely, Devipur Market, Beltali Market, Kenania Market, and Madhupur Market. The vendors of the haat started to supply and sell their outputs (fresh vegetables, fruits, etc.) in these markets to earn a living. Similarly, the vendors of Srinagar haat also faced the same situation and had to sell their produces in the nearby local markets of Nalua Bazar, Poangbari Market and Srinagar Old Market.

6. POSSIBLE MEASURES TO RESUME TRADE IN THE HAATS

It has been more than four years now that the pandemic broke out but seems not to be ending for the Kamalasar-Tarapur Border Haat. However, trade on the Srinagar-Chhagalnaiya Border Haat resumed after three years on 9th May, 2023⁵ making a nominal business total of Rs. 80.32 lakhs (both India and Bangladesh combined) but the doors of the other haat is yet to open.

However, it is now a high time that initiatives may be taken by the governments of both the countries involved in the trade to find alternative ways through which the trade can be resumed at the Kamalasar-Tarapur Border Haat. The same can be achieved with better coordination of the security forces, border haat officials, and vendors involved from both sides of the border. At the very outset, the security forces of both India (BSF) and Bangladesh (BGB) should ensure that there are no unnecessary movements of people in and around the border haat. Only the licensed vendors of the haat should get access to the haat by providing their official identity cards. The trade will happen only in between the vendors of Tripura and Bangladesh under the strict surveillance of the security forces. The trade can be performed either on a barter system, cash transactions, or on credit. The barter system may be decided upon by the vendors to what they prefer to exchange based on the demand of the product on their respective sides. If purchases are made on credit, the officials of the Border Haat Management Committee (BHMC) should maintain proper documentation against the goods procured on credit to safeguard the return of the money after the sales are realized or at an agreed period as per the vendors' convenience. Additionally, the local banks of the State can come forward as helping hands in these rigid times for the vendors and provide them with short-term financing so that they can obtain the basic raw materials and the same may be returned after they start to gain profits from the sales.

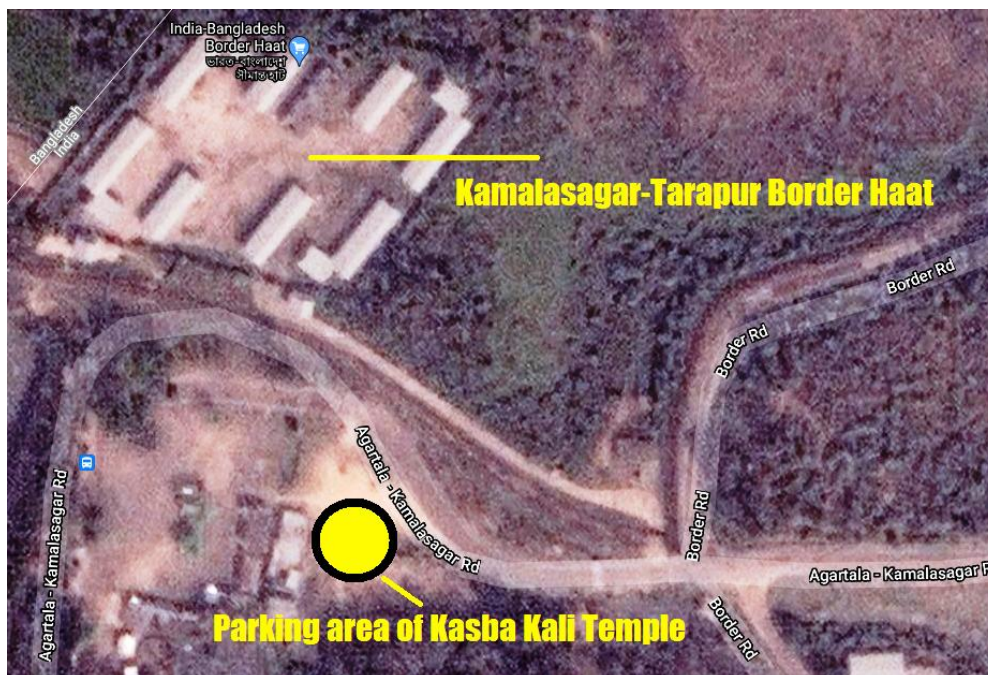
The parking ground of the Kasba Kali Temple (refer to Image 1) has a lot of unutilized free space that can be easily converted to a temporary market set up for the time being where the Indian vendors can sell the commodities procured from the Bangladeshi vendors. In this connection, the authorities may help the vendors to build basic sheds where they can sit and sell. Kamalasar being a tourist spot in close vicinity to the capital city Agartala, chances will be very high that people will visit the temple and while returning home will hover around the market and purchase goods and articles of their preferences. A similar market pattern can also be developed by the Bangladeshi officials for their vendors nearby the Kasba railway station where locals can visit and purchase the goods. Likewise, the same policies may be adopted for the vendors of the Srinagar-Chhagalnaiya Border Haat and

⁴ <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/apr/01/tripura-government-to-provide-free-ration-to-619-lakh-poor-families-for-one-month-2124321.html>

⁵ Economic Review of Tripura 2023-24, Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Govt. of Tripura

provide them with temporary market sheds near the border haat so that they can sell the goods obtained from the Bangladeshi vendors until the pandemic situation gets stabilized.

Fig 1: Alternative Space for Market Shed at Kamalasangar (Tripura)



Source: Google Maps

7. CONCLUSION

The border haats operating between Tripura and Bangladesh acts as an engine towards the growth and development of both the respective economies. Resultant to this, four more border haats are in the pipeline to join the existing two haats in Tripura (Raghna in North Tripura, Kamalpur in Dhalai District, Kathalia in Sepahijala District, and Khowai in Khowai District). Besides that, the haats have proved to be a boon for the people residing in the remote border areas to earn a respectful living. But the sudden outbreak of pandemic disrupted the entire scenario. However, to reap the benefits of the trade, the functioning of the haats should be resumed soon after taking necessary initiatives by both the Governments of India and Bangladesh. Besides, all the safety measures and protocols also need to be given due importance. Operational guidelines should be made such that it doesn't affect the health of the vendors and other officials involved in the trade. Once the trade in the Kamalasangar-Tarapur Border Haat gets resumed in full swing, it is expected to bring much more stability in the income levels of the vendors of both the countries involved. Additionally, it can also be expected that the trade in Srinagar-Chhagalnaiya Border Haat will also get momentum as days pass by which is already operative and functional.

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