

Chapter-VI

BORDER *HAT*: CONSTRAINTS AND PROSPECTS:

6.1- Introduction:

The beginning of first decade of the 21st century encountered with new obstacles such as economic productivity, competitiveness, connectivity and opening of borders for trade and commerce. Thus, the developed nations, developing nations as well as poor nations need to prepare themselves in order to face and encounter all these new challenges. Normally, promoting economic productivity, opening up of border for trade and investment, infrastructural development, connectivity, etc among nations are the prerequisite requirements for all the nations.

Trade is considered as one of the speediest instruments for enhancing economic development and economic co-operation in the regions or sub-regions. It is known as the engine of growth. In the context of Meghalaya, if more border *hats* are revived and cross border trade is facilitated and also connectivity is enhanced, then the scope for sub-regional economic collaboration between Meghalaya and Bangladesh will be materialized and the question of uplifting the economic conditions of the people living in the frontier regions can be improved and fulfilled.

Meghalaya being a land locked State and the only access to the sea is through Bangladesh. Therefore it is imperative to note that several points along the international border could be opened as active trading centres. At present only Dawki is connected with Bangladesh by road only. Majai, Balat, Shella and Tharia dotted along the international border are the major thriving centres during the pre-independent period. At present these thriving trading centres of the past are becoming insignificant centres. The justification is apparent owing to the shutting down of border trade and border *hats*; easy access to markets as well as free trade linkages between the people living in both the hills and the plain areas came to an end. Despite the fact that in the past the

inhabitants of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills of Meghalaya and Sylhet, Mymensingh, Sunamgunj of Bangladesh are interdependent based on mutual needs and requirements. Geographical closeness and shared border between the two regions offer an opportunity for trade and commerce. Prior to the partition, our for-fathers never talk of traveling to Guwahati or Delhi; they talk about traveling to Sylhet, Dacca and Calcutta.

6.2- The hurdles towards closer bilateral relations:

As have been discussed in the previous chapters that Meghalaya and Bangladesh share a common international border covering a distance of about 443 Kilometres. It is vital to mention here that due to porous nature of the border, it enables easily passage and entry of anti-social elements like insurgents, criminals including drug trafficker, smugglers of goods and animals from across the border. As we know that border regions of the country particularly with Bangladesh are facing illegal immigration of the people and smuggling of goods and animals like cow from across the international border and Meghalaya is no exception to it. Therefore, it is mandatory for the State Government not only in providing basic facilities to the people living in these frontier regions but also to see that peace and security in these vulnerable regions will be prevailed. At the same time the security personnel of both sides the borders must be cautious to see that no anti-national elements are allowed to enter into the border regions to disrupt peace and tranquility and the broader national goal of securing and protecting the border must be the top priority.

In addition to the above, another goal is to develop and uplift the economic aspects of the people living in these border regions. It will be much easier and effective only through cross-border cooperation between two nations- India and Bangladesh rather than through national efforts alone. Definitely cross border trade and revival of more border *hats* will be is tactical mechanism for sustaining the livelihood of the people as well as long term policy for development of the border regions. Therefore

revival of more traditional border *hats* as well as cross-border trade will be another step to boost up the economy of these remote and isolate areas of the State.

6.3 -The significance of closer bilateral relations:

As has been discussed in the previous chapters that revival of more traditional border *hats* as well as cross border trade will be feasible only if both the two countries- India and Bangladesh is having cordial relationship. Certainly only in an environment of mutual trust and collaboration that border can be opened for trade and commerce. Thus closer bilateral relations between these two countries- India and Bangladesh are the prerequisite models for economic cooperation. If we examine the bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh since 1971 there have been fluctuating according to the tempo of domestic politics. The bilateral relation during Sheik Majibur Rahman era was cordial and India and Bangladesh co-operated with each other. However after 1975 an era of co-operation was substituted by an era of confrontation.

The bilateral relations between the two nations have revealed several contentious issues which have proved to be extremely difficult to be resolved. As has been discussed in the previous chapters, several disputes remained unresolved such as sharing of common rivers, trade imbalances, illegal migration and smuggling, etc. Some of these issues are important from the Indian point of view, while other issues are significant for Bangladesh. Nevertheless, there are also issues which are crucial for both countries. Prominent among these are disputes relating to trade deficit, insurgency activities, anti-Hindu violence and the threat of terrorists.

Dialogue and consultation have been the common aspects for both the nations to resolve and handle all outstanding border disputes. Handling with all sorts of problems and border management is facing with an uphill task. Owing to recurrent and intermittent strains in the relationship between India and Bangladesh, the scope for closer bilateral relations was a distant dream. Due to uncertainties in Bangladesh especially after 1975 onwards it has a strong bearing on her relations with India and all border issues remained unresolved amicably.

Despite all these constraints, India and Bangladesh have no other option but to move towards improving their bilateral relations. Both the two nations should also realize that, while friends can be changed easily but neighbours cannot. Many countries around the world have managed to resolve amicably their conflicts and cultivate friendly relations despite asymmetry in size, economic power and military might. India and Bangladesh too must take initiatives to bring back the lost warmth relations and learn to live in peace and appreciate each other.

6.4 - The Recent Developments:

Nevertheless, with the change in political regime in India and Bangladesh especially in the late 1990s, it has helped both the two nations to realize and identify the need for reviving of meaningful contacts between the two countries. Bilateral relations are in right tracks since 1996 onwards because of more understanding in foreign policy adopted by India in dealing with its neighbours. The election of a new Awami League¹⁵⁰ Government under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh, the relations between the two countries has improved and has created an ample scope as well as favourable atmosphere in resolving all the imminent disputes and conflicts. During this phase, it has also witnessed some significant developments which have enabled both the two countries to resolve all the major outstanding issues which are discussed below:

Firstly, the 30 years old water sharing agreement for the Ganges waters signed in December, 1996. The agreement has offered a new technique and rule for sharing of Ganges waters particularly during the dry seasons at Farakka so that it would be beneficial for both the two countries.

Secondly, the peace settlement with the tribal people of Chittagong Hills Tracts in December, 1997. This Peace Accord was approved by both the two countries- India and

¹⁵⁰ Awami League is a political party in Bangladesh and known to be sympathetic towards India due to many historical as well as political reasons.

Bangladesh. As a result of this accord, all the Chakma refugees from India can return to Bangladesh without any hurdle.

Thirdly, another significant outcome of the closer bilateral relations between the two countries is the deal on Coordinated Border Management Plan signed on 30th July, 2011. The aim of this deal is to enhance quality of border management as well as to ensure cross-border security in order to prevent anti-social elements.

Fourthly, another significant development between the two nations was the opening of Kalaichar Border *Hat* and Balat Border *Hat* in 2011 and 2012 respectively along Indo-Bangladesh border in Meghalaya sector. The motive behind is to uplift the economy of border regions of both the two countries. The border settlers within a specified radius are permitted to carry on trade transactions in these border *hats* in a simple way without any custom duty so that their economic aspects will be improved.

Lastly, one of the latest major achievements of the two governments was the historic deal in resolving of border dispute which comprised about 6.1 km of an un-demarcated stretch of land, enclaves and adverse possessions. There are 111 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in India which are to be exchanged in pursuance of the Protocol of 1974 and Instruments of Ratification. India and Bangladesh formally exchanged 162 enclaves on 1st August, 2015 ending centuries old territorial anomaly¹⁵¹.

No doubt the opening up of two border *hats* have really helped to uplift and improve the livelihood of the people of border regions of both sides the international borders of India and Bangladesh. There is no doubt that these two *hats* have certainly contained illegal trade and smugglings of goods in border regions especially those adjacent with Border *Hats*. But if the domestic interests and security factor of the country is at stake, every nation will be hesitated and reluctant to open the border for trade and commerce. Despite lots of demands from Indian sides especially from the

¹⁵¹ Hindustan Times 2nd Aug, 2015, “Bangladesh, India in historical land swap after nearly four decades” p.1.

state of Meghalaya to revive and reactivate more border *hats*/markets, till date only two *hats* have activated. It is a known fact that opening up of more border *hats* would be achieved only on the conditions that both countries i.e. India and Bangladesh see the advantages of doing so.

One of the major constraints was unwillingness on the part of Bangladesh to open her borders due to trade imbalance. It is important to mention here that Bangladesh trade deficit with India has annoyed over time due to limited export base, backward industries, lower productivity and appreciation of Bangladesh's taka against the Indian's rupee. Bangladesh needs to prove its competitiveness in terms of cost and quality. On the other hand, India is required to rise above its mindset that as a big economy it could influence the course of relationship with smaller neighbours including Bangladesh. India needs to give a feeling of equal partnership.

Table 6.1: Percentage of Goods traded in Border *Hats*

Goods/Commodities	Location					
	India		Bangladesh		Total	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Indian goods	23	46.0	15	30.0	38	38.0
Bangladesh goods	8	16.0	16	32.0	24	24.0
Chinese goods	0	0	0	0	0	0
Local products	3	4.0	0	0	3	3.0
Others	0	0	0	0	0	0
Indian and Bangladesh goods	11	22.0	19	38.0	30	30.0
Bangladesh and Chinese goods	5	10.0	0	0	5	5
Total	50	100.0	50	100.0	100	100.0

The above Table: 3 indicate that Indian products/items are more demand i.e. 38% and Bangladesh products/ items are 24% only. One interest finding here is that Chinese goods/products which flooded in all most all markets in North East India are absolutely not available in these border *hats*.

Bangladesh wants to narrow the bilateral trade deficit with India. Therefore the perception of reviving and activating of more border *hats*/markets can be successful if it is pursued only with the spirit of give and take with the neighbouring country¹⁵². While expecting for the prospect of exporting goods to Bangladesh we should be prepared to

¹⁵² M.P.Bezbaruah, “Liberalization of Border Trade: Prospects and Impediments” in Gurudas Das and R.K.Purkayastha, *Border Trade: North East India and Neighbouring Countries*, Akansha Publication, New Delhi, 2000, p.90.

import more commodities and goods from her. In such a situation, more border *hats* can be opened in the years to come at the different locations of the international border between India and Bangladesh.

As mentioned above only two border *hats* i.e. Kalaichar and Balat are opened along the India-Bangladesh border in Meghalaya sector. The remaining border *hats* are yet to be made functional even though assurance was given by India as well as Bangladesh. The Meghalaya government had urged the Centre to facilitate opening of 22 more border *hats*.

The good news is that India and Bangladesh have already set aside their differences to work for greater mutual benefit of their own people. Meghalaya in particular through its former Chief Minister Dr.Mukul Sangma, has been very vocal with this issue of for opening up of more border *hats*. As has been mentioned that revival of more border *hats* is a political issue to be decided by both the two countries keeping in mind their security and domestic interests.

Bangladesh may not agree to open more border *hats* if the scope is perceived to be advantageous to India only. Hence opening up of border for trade and commerce should not be viewed in the context of enhancing benefit for one side only. The method can be successful if it is pursued only with the spirit of mutual advantages between the two countries. While looking for opportunities for exporting goods to Bangladesh we should be ready to accept more goods from her. If that will be the case, more border *hats* may be opened in the years to come at the different points of the State along the international border of both countries.