

Chapter-VII: Conclusion

The border *hats* which are situated along the foothills of Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills in Meghalaya sector are considered as the most important avenues for sustaining the livelihood of the people living in the border areas. They are the lifelines of the people of border areas. More importantly, they are also recognized as one of the speedy mechanisms for enhancing and uplifting the economic aspects of the people living in these far flung areas of the State.

It has already mentioned and discussed in the previous chapters that in the past the indigenous tribes of Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills were cut off from the rest of the neighbouring kingdoms but border *hats* were the only avenues where they are exposed to different cultures, civilization and society of the people of the erstwhile Bengal and Assam. In the pre-partition periods the people from Khasi-Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills and the erstwhile Bengal and Assam used to exchange/barter locally produce/goods and surplus items through border *hats* only. All the produce from the hills such as various fruits, betel nut, betel leave, cotton, areca nut are bartered or exchanged in the border *hats* while the imported items from the plain areas, that the hills did not produce include salt, rice, dry fish, brass implements and cloth. Moreover limestone, coal and various forest products are export from the hills to Bengal.

The trade relations through these border *hats* used to be the source of earning of livelihood for the people living in the adjoining areas of Khasi-Jaintia and Garo hills and the plain areas of Bengal as well. Apparently these *hats* are the means for bringing prosperity to the people at large. The people living in both the two areas- hills and plains are also inter-dependent for common mutual advantages. Thus, the location of border *hats* especially along the southern parts of Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills with Bengal provided an easy market and easy access for the locally products/goods both from the hills and plain areas as well. Border *hats* used to be the source of the livelihood of not only for the traders/businessmen of border regions but also the producers and

porters from different villages of the hills. Border *hats* used to be the source of revenue for the hill chiefs of Khasi and Jaintia Hills as well as the Zamindars of the estates in the Garo frontiers.

The hill chiefs in Khasi-Jaintia Hills and the Zamindars of the estates in the frontiers of Garo Hills used to be collected toll and tax on products/goods brought into their respective border *hat*. It is pertinent to mention here that till these days, markets/*hats* used to be the source of income for the traditional chiefs of Khasi-Jaintia Hills. The traditional chiefs were also responsible for border *hat* management. In this way border *hats* generated employment opportunities for the people and had a positive impact on the economy of both the areas.

As mentioned earlier that the partition of the country on the other hand has enormously affected the trade relations that existed between Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills and the plain areas of the then Bengal. At that juncture all the border *hats* which were situated along the southern foothills of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo sectors were shut down. The demarcation of a new political boundary in 1947 changed the situation and created an unnatural border between the hills and the plains and the aged-old trade relations were suddenly closed.

The situation further aggravated due to lack of road links between these far flung villages of border areas with the rest of the State. The cost of importing essential commodities as well as transporting of locally produce goods such as horticultural and perishable items was very high and not economically viable due to long distance from the main trading centres of the State. In fact the local cultivators or producers of horticultural products such as betel leaves, betel nuts, oranges etc and also the exporters of mineral resources such as limestone, coal, boulders etc were the most affected people because they cannot export/exchange their local products/ items to then Bengal.

India and Pakistan acknowledged the fact that the partition of the country greatly affected the whole economy of the people living in border areas. The shutting down of cross border trade as well as border *hats* resulted into untold sufferings that the people

living in the border areas faced and encountered at that point of time. Consequently trade agreements were signed between the two countries in 1953 with a view to resolve the problems pertaining with border areas of then Bengal and Assam (including the present Meghalaya) on one side and East Pakistan (present day Bangladesh) on the other. The agreements were essential because it will enable the border settlers to carry on free trade transactions as in the pre-independent era. Thereafter, cross border trade and border *hats* were resumed once again along the international border. The people were very happy about the efforts of both the two countries. Therefore, trade relations were revived again, at that juncture the people of both the two areas started to sell and exchange their local goods/article of daily use such as fish, fresh vegetables, poultry, eggs, fruits, etc. Under the above deals, certain specific *hats* were held on certain fixed days and only a specified number of foreign civilian with permits were allowed inside the *hats*¹⁵³. However as a result of 1965 aggression, cross border trade and border markets with East Pakistan were finally closed.

The emergence of Bangladesh as a new nation was another significant development in the history of the Indian sub-continent. It was a green signal towards closer bilateral economic co-operation between the two neighbouring countries of South East Asia. The first trade agreement between India and Bangladesh was signed in 1972. It was decided by both the two countries to resume border *hats* and border trade in order to alleviate the sufferings of the people living near the border areas of both sides¹⁵⁴. Border trade between the two countries started in the middle of April, 1972 and only after six-month period, the Government of Bangladesh complained of large scale smuggling by unscrupulous traders. Accordingly cross border trade relations between the two countries was finally suspended by mutual consent.

¹⁵³ S.K.Agnihotri, "Border Trade with Bangladesh" in *Journal of North East India for Social Science Research*, Vol.17 No.2, October 1993, pp.29-30.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 30-31

The bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh after the assassination of Shiekh Mujibur Rahman in 1975 was at the lowest point/level due to lots of sticky and thorny issues such land boundary agreement, sharing of waters, illegal immigration, etc. These issues therefore act as hurdles toward mutual economic cooperation between the two nations. As has been discussed in the previous chapter that due to strain relations the proposal and demands for revival of traditional border *hats* could not be conceded easily.

After the installation of Awami League Government under the leadership of Shiekh Hasina in Bangladesh in the late 1990s, an era of cooperation and understanding was emerged between two countries - India and Bangladesh. Her Government was known to be more cooperative towards India despite the fact that she has to encounter many challenges and confrontations particularly from the opposition party i.e. Bangladesh Nationalist Party headed by Begum Khalida Zia. Therefore closer bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh was once again firmly built and established after a gap of many years.

For India, trade relations emerged as one of the major outcome and determinant of her neighbourhood's policy. On one hand it has helped India to gain trust and confidence of a small neighbouring State for greater economic cooperation on the other it had prompted India to alter its attitude of behaving as elderly brother. Above all, India has to permit her smaller neighbouring states to develop according to their own terms and transmitted a clear signal that it has believed in policy of non-interference in their internal affairs. So that lots of sticky and thorny issues such as anti-Indian propaganda, suspicion, deep mistrust and confidence deficits, confrontation etc will be diminished. Hence mutual trust and cooperation will be established.

The exchange of visits between the leaders of both the two countries- India and Bangladesh revealed the fact that the bilateral relations are very much improved and at the right track. This indicated a new trend in the bilateral relations between the two nations. To strengthen the Indo-Bangladesh relations, an Indian delegation led by the

Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh which included all the Chief Ministers of North East India visited Bangladesh in September, 2011. Both the two countries agreed and signed the Framework of Cooperation for Development to harness and coordinate the benefits of sub-regional cooperation in the various areas/sectors such as water resource management, power, transportation and connectivity, environment and sustainable development.

During Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's land mark visit to Dhaka in June 2015, the Guwahati-Shillong-Dhaka bus service was opened. The Government of Meghalaya also intends to open inland waterways with Bangladesh to facilitate the movement or export of goods/minerals such as coal, limestone, boulder, etc. Three common rivers include Kynshi in South West Khasi Hills District, Simsang in South Garo Hills and Jingiram in West Garo Hills are identified to be used as inland water way to connect Bangladesh through water ways. In order to rationalize mutual cooperation in tackling border related issues, the first bilateral meeting between the Deputy Commissioners and District Magistrates of both the bordering districts of Meghalaya and Bangladesh was held in Shillong on January 12, 2015¹⁵⁵. The outline of the bilateral meeting includes trans-border crimes, illegal trespassing, smuggling of contrabands, exchange of information related to border fencing, border pillars along the Meghalaya sector, cultural exchange, proposal for setting up more border *hats*, etc. The main objective of the meeting was to strengthen friendship and cooperation between the two nations particularly between the bordering districts.

Finally the opening up of Kalaichar Border *Hat* and Balat Border *Hat* in Meghalaya sector was materialized due to cooperation between India and Bangladesh. In the past both these two countries are keen and aware of the difficulties face by the border settler due to the shutting down of trade and border *hats*. Therefore the opening of two border *hats* heralded a new chapter for a closer economic tie and also to

¹⁵⁵ Meghalaya Times, January 12, 2015, p.1.

reconnect and bridge the missing links that both the two nations shared historically. The opening of border *hats* has the potential to make the border villages on both sides of the international border more prosperous and develop. These border *hats* provide an easy access of the locally produced goods of both the areas.

7.1-The Findings of the study are discussed below:

1. Prior to the partition of the country, border *hats* which are situated along the foothills of Khasi-Jaintia and Garo sectors are considered as the lifelines of the people. They are also recognized as the major commercial centres where the people used to exchange/barter locally produced goods/products with the counter parts of the erstwhile Bengal and Assam.
2. With the partition of the country in 1947, all border *hats* are shut down and after redrawing of a new boundary between the hills and the plains, the economic relations between the people of Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills with the people of the plain areas of Bengal are cut off. Trade transactions in the border *hats* abruptly came to a halt.
3. The people are deprived of the traditional source of livelihood because of the closure of border *hats*.
4. The emergence of Bangladesh as sovereign nation in the Indian-subcontinent was anticipated for a closer cooperation with India. However it was only in the late 1990s that closer bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh are firmly established. This is reflected in their mutual collaborations in many fields such as resolving border issues, sharing of water of common rivers, energy sector, connectivity, trade relations and the opening of border *hats* along the international border in Meghalaya sector.
5. Ever since the time of inauguration of the two border *hats* (Kalaichar and Balat) in 2011 and 2012 respectively, these two *hats* operate/function uninterruptedly and smoothly without any single report of shutting down. The reason is obvious due to

- mutual trust and understanding between the two nations - India and Bangladesh that has made it possible for the border *hats* to continue to function without interruption.
6. The closer bilateral cooperation and mutual trust between the two countries is reflected by the fact of their common aspiration of promoting and uplifting the economic conditions of the people living in the border areas of both the two countries.
 7. With the operation of two border *hats* the people living in border areas about 5 kilometres radius from the international border of both the two countries particularly those areas near border *hats* have immensely benefitted the people. The livelihood of the people of border areas of both the two countries has improved particularly in those areas adjacent with these border *hats*.
 8. The locally goods/products can be exchanged easily between the people of border areas of both the two countries.
 9. There is a mutual understanding and consultation among the officials associated with border *hat* of both the two countries i.e. India and Bangladesh. This eventually led to successful management and handling of border *hat*. As of now there is no report of any unpleasant incident happen in the border *hat*.
 10. Goods traded in the border *hats* are exempted from tax or custom duties.
 11. The study also reveals that Indian goods are highly demand by the buyers from Bangladesh.
 12. Border *hats* bring the people of border areas of both India and Bangladesh to closer to each other through trade interaction. The people can also hear different languages such Bengali, Khasi, Garo, Hindi spoken by different communities.
 13. Border *hats* have not only helped the economic aspects of the people in these areas but also helped in promoting people to people contact which is a very vital step in strengthening Indo-Bangladesh relations.
 14. The responsibility and accountability of the personnel/officials associated with border *hat* such as *Hat* Management Committee members of both the two countries, has added to the smooth functioning of *hat*.

15. The security personnel of both the two countries are vigilant and strict with the entry of goods/products into the *hat* and there is no report of any illegal activities in the border *hat*.
16. Identity card/pass is mandatory for the buyer/seller to enter into the border *hat*. Identity Card/pass is issued by respective Deputy Commissioner of bordering District for the residents of border areas only within a specified jurisdiction of about 5 kilometres from the international border of both the two countries- India and Bangladesh.
17. At present only the inhabitants/residents both male and female of border areas of both the two countries are permitted to carry on trade transactions in the border *hats*.
18. There is strictness and vigilance of security personnel such as BSF, BGB, Customs and Meghalaya Police. The security personnel monitored by verifying/checking the entry of every person into the *hat*. Respective forces of each country are responsible to look after their own people while entering/ going from the *hats*. They maintain the record of those entering into the border *hats*.
19. There is no report incident that an Indian/Bangladeshi national illegally crosses beyond the *hat* area (zero line) into Bangladesh/India.
20. These two border *hats* have helped to contain illegal trade and smugglings of goods in border regions especially in those areas adjacent to border *hats*.

7.2- Some of the suggestions include the following:

1. Ever since the inauguration of these two border *hats* the number of vendors allowed to trade is limited to 25 only from each country. Therefore the number of vendors/sellers from both the two border regions should be considered to increase by

both the two nations and necessary modalities should be work out to see this urgent need.

2. The resumption of border *hats* has curtailed the illegal trade among the people living in border region particularly those areas near border *hats*. Apparently if more border *hats* are re-opened or revived it would certainly help to improve the economic aspects of the people and also contain smuggling of goods across the international border.

3. If more border *hats* are re-opened it will surely create a kind of secure environment and will also reduce trust deficit among the inhabitants of both nations – India and Bangladesh. Apparently this will definitely help to bring the two countries closer in their bilateral relations.

4. The list of items/products allowed to trade in the border *hat* should be considered to revise in order to meet demands of the buyers. As of now only a handful of commodities are allowed to sell in the *hats* because of constraint of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed between India and Bangladesh.

5. The construction of more market sheds is required in both the two border *hats*. As of now the number of market sheds is comparatively less and not sufficient for the vendors.

6. The construction of warehouses and cold storage at Balat and Kalaichar is a necessity in order to keep the goods/commodities before and after trade transactions.

7. Both the two border *hats* are linked by small roads only. On the *hat*/market day because of heavy rush of market goers it create lots of inconvenient to all. Therefore double lane roads connecting border *hats* are also necessary in order to ease the *hat* goers.

8. There is urgent need for widening the approach road to Kalaichar Border *Hat*. The approach road leading to the border *hat* is very narrow and congested, only light vehicles, two wheelers and bullock carts can be used for carrying goods and passengers. Thus it creates lots of inconvenient to the pedestrians and buyers/sellers as well.

9. The basic amenities for the people such as drinking water, toilets and good tea stalls/ restaurants are absent in both the two border *hats*. Hence basic facilities are the urgent requirements especially for the buyers/sellers and border *hat* personnel as well.

10. Presently there is no parking place for the vehicles near Kalaichar Border *Hat*. Therefore it is an urgent task to construct a parking place for the heavy vehicles, light vehicles, two wheelers, *thela* etc near the border *hat*. At present vehicles are parking in the narrow road sides near the border *hat* which is inconvenient for the market goes especially at the time when the gate of the *hat* is opened.

11. The road leading to the border *hat* from Dangar has to cross through one river (i.e. about 500 metres from the *hat*) without a bridge over it. During summer season it is difficult for the vehicles to cross the river to reach the *hat*. Therefore construction of a bridge over this river is an urgent need.

Conclusion - As mentioned above only two border *hats* – Kalaichar and Balat are opened along the international border between India-Bangladesh 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 for 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 vocal in advocating for opening of more border markets. 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.

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. 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 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. 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 give a feeling of equal partnership and also need to change the approach of influencing and dominating the smaller neighbouring countries.

Given the present conditions of mutual understanding, cooperation and the level of confidence between the two nations i.e. India and Bangladesh, there is enough space for them to collaborate/work together to promote all aspects of mutual interests. The closer tie between the two countries has deepening their bilateral relations between two nations and also strengthening the prospect of better sub-regional cooperation in term of trade and commerce for mutual advantages. A cordial relation between India and Bangladesh would not only serve their interests but would also pave the way for regional security, stability and prosperity. In fact both the two nations- India and Bangladesh has a strong commitment and goal to fulfill the long standing demands of the local people of the border areas to open the traditional border *hats*.