

## AN ABSTRACT

Border *hats* refer to the traditional markets which are situated along the foothills of Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills. These markets are held once in week. They are the major trading centres in which the people living in the hills used to exchange goods and locally produce products with the counter parts of Bengal (present day Bangladesh) and Assam. The trade relations through these border *hats* have sustained the economy of the people living in the adjoining areas of the hills and the plains as well. Apparently these *hats* are recognized as tools for bringing prosperity to the people at large.

The people living in both the hills and plain areas are also inter-dependent for common shared benefits. The location of border *hats* especially along the southern parts of Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills with Bengal has provided easy markets and easy access for the products both from the hills and plain areas as well. Historically border *hats* used to be the source of revenue for the hill chiefs and rulers. Toll and tax are levied by the hill chiefs/rulers on the commodities/goods brought in the *hats* within their respective jurisdictions. In this way border *hats* has create employment prospect for the people and has an overall positive impact on the economy of both the areas.

The partition of the country in 1947 severely affected the trade relations through border *hats*. As a result all the border *hats* in the southern foothills of Khasi,Jaintia and Garo Hills were shut down. The partition of the country also created an unnatural border between the hills and the plains and the aged-old trade relations through border *hats* were unexpectedly closed. The situation further aggravated due to lack of road connections

between these far flung villages of the border areas with the rest of the State. The cost of transporting of local produce as well as importing of the essential commodities was very high and not economically feasible due to long distant from the major trading centres of the State. The produce of border areas such as horticultural products as well as mineral wealth such limestone, coal, boulders, chips etc became non-economic in the absence of markets. India and Pakistan recognized the serious problem that the people living in the border areas faced due to the shutting down of border trade and border *hats*. Therefore trade agreements were signed between the two countries in 1948 and 1953 with a view to resolve the problems encountered by the inhabitant of border areas particularly between Bengal and Assam and East Pakistan (Present day Bangladesh). The agreements were important because it provided scope for the border settlers to carry on free trade transactions as in the pre-independent era in a different manner. Border trade and border markets were resumed along the international border. The people were very happy about the efforts of both countries and continued exchange of article of daily use, such as fish, fresh vegetables, poultry, eggs, fruits, etc. Under the above arrangements, certain specific *hats* were held on certain fixed days and only a specified number of foreign civilian with permits were allowed inside the *hats*. However as a result of 1965 aggressions, border trade and border markets with East Pakistan were finally closed.

The birth of Bangladesh as a new nation was another significant event in the history of Indian sub-continent. It was anticipated that it would pave the way towards closer economic co-operation between the two neighbouring countries. Also the initiation of Look East Policy (now Act East) by India in the 1990s is another turning point in quest for making an endeavor into the domain of South East Asia and East Asia including Bangladesh. In 1991, there is a move to forge for greater economic and strategic links with Association for South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) by Prime Minister Narasimha

Rao. Such developments provided the basis for the prospect of opening up of border *hats* along the international border between India and Bangladesh.

The formation of Awami League Government under Prime Minister Shiekh Hasina in Bangladesh from 2000 onwards is another significant development which led to an era of cooperation in many aspects of bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh. The Awami Government was known to be helpful towards India despite the fact that it has to face lots of hurdles and challenges from the major opposition party of Bangladesh. The visits of the leaders of both the two countries show that the relations have improved and indicated new trends in the bilateral relations between the two nations. To strengthen the Indo-Bangladesh ties, an Indian delegation led by the then Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh that included of all 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 synchronize the benefits of sub-regional cooperation in the areas of water resource management, power, transportation and connectivity, environment and sustainable development.

The bilateral relations between the two countries had strengthened 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 stability and prosperity. In fact both the two nations-India and Bangladesh had a strong commitment and goal to fulfill the long standing demands of the local people of the border areas to open the traditional border markets. For about many decades' border *hats* remained closed and the prospect of opening of border markets remained uncertain.

It was only in 2010 onwards that both India and Bangladesh has recognized and realized the fact that in order to develop the economy of border regions along the international border between the two countries, border *hats* must be opened. Moreover

border *hats* are also being viewed as one of the important means to generate growth impulse in the backward economy of the border areas. Eventually India and Bangladesh has opened two border *hats* (Kalaichar and Balat) in 2010 and 2012 respectively. The opening of border *hats* along the international border between India and Bangladesh in Meghalaya sector, are the significance event in the bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh and heralded a new beginning of closer economic cooperation between two countries. In fact the openings up of border *hats* enable the people living in border areas of both the two countries to reconnect and bridge the missing linkages that they used to be shared historically, to buy and sell their goods without any custom rules of international trade.