

Contextualizing Border Haats in India's Border Management Strategy

Reflections from Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh¹

Abstract

The process of political socialization consists of people-to-people connections. Between states, such interactions carry diplomatic meaning and significance. The drawing of boundaries and construction of frontiers have aggravated its importance. Cross-border trade activities are a unique feature of this. Geographical proximity, a need-based approach, and border management are the guiding principles in this regard. Hence, border Haats have strategic significance. However, these are not used only for the trade of agreed items between countries; they are also the hotbeds of several illegal activities. To name a few: drugs and substance trafficking, human trafficking, animal trafficking, and many more. Due to geographical proximity, India's Northeast region is bound to have cross-border trade with neighbouring countries. Formal border Haats were operational earlier in a few districts sharing borders with neighbouring countries, but were later discontinued. However, new ones are proposed too, though the challenges, issues, and problems persist. Within the border management strategy, regulating cross-border activities adds more complexities. Hence, a few do not go comfortably with the concept of the border Haats. Meanwhile, a Constructivist pedagogy insists on pushing for changes in norms, beliefs, and practices to restructure the social construction of the world based on new identities. This new normative framework interprets the relevance, significance, and usefulness of adopting a comprehensive and inclusive approach to border management. This research paper presents a comprehensive study on all these aspects. For a nuanced understanding, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh have been taken as case studies².

Keywords: political socialization, border management, border Haats

Introduction

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Political socialization largely depends on actors, agencies, and institutions that directly or indirectly influence politics or associated activities. Not only within countries, but also interactions with other nations contribute to this process. Cross-border connections are driven by diplomatic channels, networks, and tools, especially since the emergence of the nation-state system, which led to the creation of borders and frontiers. This division created artificial demarcations between territories and people. Inside a country, a place located in the western part is farther away than one located in the eastern part, compared to the distance between a place located in the eastern part and an eastern neighbouring country. The cuisine, dress, lifestyle, appearance, geographical proximity, and sometimes cultural resemblances are the same between two places across the border; these two would be in different countries, yet they are close. Interestingly, these similarities include cropping patterns, climate, basic needs, festivals, past memories, economic priorities, and many more. Also, the export and import of items between the two border districts across the two countries is easier, less time-consuming, and more affordable. Meanwhile, illegal trade is also prevalent and poses several challenges for cross-border activities. Within the framework of the security discourse, regulation and control over such activities are necessary. It becomes more profound considering the growing number of non-state actors in politics; they make international relations more complex and the political process, along with political socialization, more fragile.

The evolution of cross-border small bazaars or markets traces its roots to providing essential items to people at affordable prices with less discomfort. These setups are guided by the principles of geographical proximity, a need-based approach, and border management. The local bazaars are also known as Haats; when they are operational across the border, they are referred to as border Haats. They play a vital role in fulfilling the basic needs of the local people. Also, they have strategic significance, boosting trade, people-to-people contacts, and cultural exchanges. For cultural diplomacy and soft power, such setups function as catalysts. However, these have been informal channels and networks; their significance may be recognized as formal ones. In the process of forming new identities based on shared common interests and experiences, they pave the way for better engagement and cooperation. This interpretation is close to the Constructivist notion.

Constructivism refers to the social construction of the world. It underscores the role of historical narratives, past memories, common interests, shared beliefs, and an inclusive normative

framework as crucial linkages between countries, and they primarily shape and reshape their relations. Since the world is socially constructed, its identity is not fixed; rather, it is fluid. Whether it is about security strategy that emphasizes regulating borders and tightening control over border Haats, it is also a construction carried by a certain normative framework. It tends to perpetuate specific norms, values, beliefs, and practices. Significantly, such identities, theoretical frameworks, and social constructions can be replaced with new ones. It would be driven by the perception-building and image-making process. These are two essentials in the social construction of preferences, priorities, and interests. Significantly, the government and security framework are largely influenced by these identities, perceptions, and images. In other words, how border Haats would be carried away depends on which social construction the authorities believe in. Meanwhile, these are not the only factors determining decision-making. Since theories do not always resemble grassroots realities. Hence, a deviation from theoretical underpinnings is genuine and obvious.

The concept of border management emphasizes the regulation and control over border activities. This particular notion is also a construction based on certain perceptions. Tight and loose borders are also driven by certain identities. In a few countries, borders have become porous. Their significance remains only on the map, while people-to-people contacts face no disqualification or difficulty. The borders of the European Union's member countries are often cited as examples of this. People take coffee in one country and have dinner in another country; no need for a visa, passport, or government approval. Meanwhile, in the South Asian subcontinent, borders between India and Pakistan, India and China, India and Bangladesh, and India and Sri Lanka have different orientations. India faces several challenges in its border areas, particularly in border districts. These include illegal immigration; trafficking of humans and animals; drug and substance trafficking; insurgency operations; terror activities; spy networks; and many more, to name a few.

The border districts in India's Northeast states are more vulnerable. Geographical proximity leaves the limited territorial connectivity of this region with the rest of the Indian states. The difficult terrain, mountains, hills, rivers, etc. make the export and import of essential items at affordable rates from the other parts of the country a daunting task. Hence, border Haat-like arrangements make life easier here. However, as discussed above, the challenges, issues, and problems associated with the border trade persist. The constructivist notion of whether to operationalize border Haats is a social construction shaped by certain identities and perceptions influenced by

grassroots realities and experiences. Previously, in Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh (informal trade), a few border Haats were operational, but currently their number is close to zero. Closing these Haats invites several challenges for local people; it affects their livelihoods and disturbs the local economy. However, their continuation poses a threat to India's security and affects the government's revenues. Significantly, both notions are driven by two different social constructions of identity and perception. None of them can be rejected completely. India's border management strategy in the Northeast region is to have a balanced approach between these two.

This research paper explores all these aspects of border Haats and border management strategy.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Border Haats: Definition and Historical Background in the Northeast Region

In 2012, the Government of India (GoI) defined border Haats as traditional cross-border markets. These are located at designated points along international boundaries. People who reside in the border areas are permitted to trade. They engage in the exchange and sale of locally produced goods and commodities. Dash (2013) categorizes them as institutional mechanisms that facilitate small-scale trade, improve livelihoods, and revive socio-economic linkages among communities separated by political borders.

Baruah (2005) and Rizvi (2013) draw attention towards an important point. They write that the border trade is not a new phenomenon in the North-East region; rather, it existed even before the emergence of modern nation-states. Its origin is traced back to ancient times. Within the Indian subcontinent, this region served as a commercial and cultural corridor, connecting with Tibet, Burma (Myanmar), and the Bengal delta. Centuries ago, when currency was not a common medium of exchange, trade in this region was held in barter. Tribal communities such as the Nagas, Khasis, Garos, Mishmis, Monpas, Mizos, and other indigenous groups engaged in barter-based exchange systems involving salt, forest products, textiles, agricultural commodities, medicinal herbs, and livestock. The traditional routes were used for this. Regular period markets, linking geographically distant communities, promoted interdependence.

Tracing the evolution of border Haats, Baruah (2005) adds that during the medieval period, these arrangements persisted. Under several regional kingdoms, including the Ahom Kingdom, the

Kingdom of Tripura, and the Kingdom of Manipur, commercial and cultural exchanges with neighbouring territories were maintained. Through caravan routes and local markets, they continued. Under British colonial rule too, border Haats sustained. Mackenzie (1884/2015) writes that during British rule; the imperial commercial networks integrated the North-East. It expanded networks of transport and communication infrastructure. It facilitated connectivity between Assam and the frontier regions with Bengal and Burma.

However, the partition of India in 1947 disrupted these trade networks. van Schendel (2005) writes that the reasons for such disruption lie in the division of communities and the creation of rigid international boundaries between India and East Pakistan. It disrupted the old trade routes and connectivity. Also, it displaced the border communities. In 1971, the creation of Bangladesh led to a change in the situation. Haokip (2015) notes that it reopened possibilities for restoring historical linkages between communities on both sides of the India–Bangladesh border. India's Look East Policy and later the Act East Policy facilitated regional connectivity and cross-border cooperation. In this context, the idea of Border Haats was revived as a mechanism to reconnect historically integrated communities and enable localized trade.

According to the Government of India's (2012) inputs, the first modern Border Haat in the North-East region was inaugurated in 2011 at Kalaichar–Baliamari on the India–Bangladesh border. It was followed by additional Haats in Meghalaya and Tripura. Highlighting the significance of this, Dash (2013) argues that these markets contribute to the economy. Along with this, these are also rebuilding trust, strengthening people-to-people contacts, and reviving old trading traditions. van Schendel (2005) argues that people living in frontier areas possess strong ethnic, linguistic, and kinship ties. It transcends contemporary political boundaries, making cross-border exchanges a routine aspect of socio-economic life. Haokip (2015) argues that Border Haats arrangements in India's frontier with Myanmar, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh and other North-Eastern states, reflect continued recognition of the region's long history of trans-border interactions and traditional exchange systems.

Thus, contemporary Border Haats in the North-East are institutional manifestations of historically embedded patterns of trade and socio-cultural interaction that have characterized the region from ancient times to the present.

According to the GoI (2016) records, a total of five Border Haats have been established in India's North-East Region, all located along the India–Bangladesh border in the states of Meghalaya and Tripura. These include the Border Haats at Kalaichar, Balat, and Ryngku in Meghalaya and Srinagar and Kamalasagar in Tripura. Border Haats were conceived as institutional mechanisms to revive traditional cross-border markets, facilitate localized trade, and promote people-to-people interactions among border communities.

Wangdi (2021), Northeast Now (2022), and the Government of Meghalaya (2026) state that all five Border Haats are currently dysfunctional. Firstly, during COVID-19 in March 2020, these were suspended, and later some Haats resumed a few activities during 2022–2023. After this phase, due to some political and security developments in Bangladesh, its activities were halted. Also, a few administrative concerns on both sides of the border added more fuel. Consequently, the five established Border Haats in Meghalaya and Tripura remain suspended as of 2026.

GoI (2016) and Das and Purkayastha (2026) inform that both India and its neighbouring countries have continued to explore the expansion of the Border Haats model in the North-East. Government documents and recent studies indicate that more than ten additional Border Haats have been proposed or approved in principle. These include three proposed Haats in Tripura (Palbasti/Raghna, Kamalpur, and Kathalia), four proposed sites in Meghalaya (Bholaganj, Nalikata, Shibbari, and additional locations along the border), four proposed Border Haats on the India–Myanmar border in Mizoram (Hnahlan, Zote, Vaphai, and Sangau), and pilot proposals for establishing Border Haats in Arunachal Pradesh, particularly around Pangsu Pass to revive traditional frontier trade with Myanmar.

Therefore, the current status of Border Haats in the North-East may be summarised as follows:

- Number of Border Haats established: 5
- Number of Border Haats currently operational: 0
- Number of Border Haats suspended/non-operational: 5
- Number of Border Haats proposed or approved in principle: More than 10

The continuing proposals for new Border Haats, despite the suspension of existing ones, demonstrate the enduring significance of border markets in India's regional connectivity initiatives, border management strategy, and efforts to promote socio-economic integration in the North-East.

2.2 Legal and Illegal Trade in Border Haats of India's North-East Region

According to the GoI (2012) and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (2016), border Haats are regulated markets. These are intended for the exchange of locally produced and locally sourced commodities by residents living within designated distances from the international border. Under the operational guidelines agreed upon by India and Bangladesh, trade is restricted to specified items of daily necessity and products of local origin, and transactions are conducted on a small scale to benefit border communities.

The list of legally tradable items in Border Haats generally includes:

- Fresh fruits and vegetables
- Agricultural produce and spices
- Fish and dried fish
- Poultry and livestock products
- Processed food items
- Bamboo and cane products
- Handicrafts and handloom products
- Traditional textiles and garments
- Jute and jute products
- Forest products and medicinal plants
- Locally manufactured consumer goods
- Tea and other plantation products
- Indigenous products of tribal communities
- Household utensils and kitchen items
- Betel nuts and betel leaves

This list was determined through bilateral agreements and periodically revised, as confirmed by the Government of India in 2012. Dash (2013) adds that only locally produced goods for daily

consumption were allowed to be traded because it promoted livelihoods and preserved traditional economic exchanges.

The list of illegally tradable items includes:

- Cattle and livestock smuggling
- Fertilizers and subsidized food grains
- Cigarettes and tobacco products
- Foreign consumer goods and electronics
- Pharmaceuticals and controlled medicines
- Narcotic drugs, including heroin and methamphetamine tablets
- Timber and forest products
- Wildlife and wildlife derivatives
- Gold and precious metals
- Diesel and petroleum products
- Fake Indian currency notes
- Arms and ammunition

Baruah's (2005) and Haokip's (2015) writings indicate that the difficult terrain and the longstanding informal exchange networks between India-Bangladesh and India-Myanmar have made the border areas more vulnerable and contributed to illicit trade. Chanda (2013) and Rahman and Das (2018) have also supported this view. They added that along with old networks of informal trade, porous borders, ethnic linkages, and price differences in commodities across borders have made the situation more favourable to illegal trade.

Table 1

Price Differences between Legal and Illegal Trade

S. No.	Commodity	If Traded Legally	If Traded Illegally	Price Difference (%)	Reason for Price Differences
1.	Betel nuts or Areca nuts	Yes	Yes	20-40	Lower production costs and lower import duties in neighbouring countries
2.	Fresh fruits and vegetables	Yes	Yes	10-30	Seasonal shortages and transportation costs
3.	Fish and dried fish	Yes	Yes	15-35	Demand fluctuations and local scarcity
4.	Spices and agricultural produce	Yes	Yes	10-25	Variations in production costs and market demand
5.	Bamboo and cane products	Yes	Limited	15-30	Lower labour and manufacturing costs
6.	Handloom and handicrafts	Yes	Rare	10-20	Differences in labour costs and market prices
7.	Tea and plantation products	Yes	Yes	15-30	Taxation and quality premiums
8.	Fertilisers	No	Yes	30-60	Government subsidies in India
9.	Food grains (rice, wheat, sugar)	No	Yes	20-50	Public distribution subsidies and procurement policies
10.	Diesel and petroleum products	No	Yes	15-40	Taxation and subsidy differentials

11.	Cigarettes and tobacco products	No	Yes	30-70	Excise duty and tax differentials
12.	Consumer electronics	No	Yes	20-50	Import duties and availability of foreign brands
13.	Pharmaceuticals and medicines	No	Yes	20-60	Price controls and regulatory differences
14.	Timber and forest products	No	Yes	30-100	Scarcity and high demand in neighbouring markets
14.	Wildlife products	No	Yes	100-500 or more	Extremely high black-market demand and international trafficking networks
15.	Gold and precious metals	No	Yes	5-20	Differences in customs duties and taxes
16.	Narcotic drugs (heroin, methamphetamine)	No	Yes	20-1000 or more	Very high profit margins and illegal market demand
17.	Arms and ammunition	No	Yes	100-500 or more	Conflict-driven demand and black-market scarcity

Source: Taneja (2004), Baruah (2005), Government of India (2012), UNODC (2023), and Rahman and Das (2018).

Note: These price differences are indicative only. The actual price differentials vary across years, locations, exchange rates, taxation regimes, and security conditions.

2.3 Factors Contributing to Illegal Trade

Illegal cross-border trade in India's Northeast region is driven by a combination of economic, political, geographic, and sociocultural factors. Taneja (2004) finds that disproportionate regulations, licensing requirements, customs duties, limits on goods movement, inadequate trading

points, and a small commodity basket are among the few issues in this. They together increase transaction costs and discourage formal trade. Hence, they encourage informal and illegal cross-border transactions.

Baruah's (2005) writing underscores that common identities play a vital link in cross-border trade. It includes ethnic identities, languages, and kinship networks. Communities such as the Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, Garos, and Chakmas facilitate informal trade by reducing transaction costs and relying on trust-based networks. He further notes that the region's difficult terrain, remote settlements, weak infrastructure, and limited administrative presence create numerous unofficial crossing points, while insurgent and criminal groups profit from the smuggling of timber, drugs, arms, and other goods.

Dash (2013) lists a few challenges in the Northeast border districts. These are high unemployment, poor infrastructure, and limited economic opportunities. Together, these have increased the dependence on informal trade and smuggling as alternative sources of livelihood. Haokip's (2015) writing indicates that issues such as political instability, insurgencies, and border closures together contribute to illegal trade. Also, State-led strict security policies are responsible for this. Rehman and Das's (2018) work indicates that structural bottlenecks, including taxes, subsidies, exchange rates, and pricing, encourage illegal trade. Along with this, a few items give high returns when sold illegally: narcotics, wildlife products, timber, metals, and foreign goods. Wangdi (2021) adds that diplomatic tensions and delays in cross-border cooperation impede formal trade and often push commercial activities into informal channels.

Hence, illegal trade in the North-East is not exclusively a criminal activity driven by economic gains. It is primarily driven by some structural factors such as price differentials, restrictive trade policies, historical and ethnic linkages, difficult geography, economic deprivation, and political and security conditions. These factors collectively sustain informal cross-border economic networks despite efforts to regulate trade through formal mechanisms such as Border Haats.

2.4 Role of Border Haats in Promoting Regional Development

Border Haats are significant institutional mechanisms that play a decisive role in regional development. They facilitate economic integration, generate livelihoods, improve social cohesion, and strengthen border governance.

van Schendel (2005) observes that old linkages are revived through common interests and shared identities. The functioning of the Border Haats is largely derived from promoting trust, social capital, and peaceful coexistence. Baruah (2005) argues that this mechanism reduces grievances, smuggling, conflict, and unrest. The reason lies in providing legitimate livelihoods and promoting interdependence, thereby improving human security and border stability. Dash (2013) highlights that Border Haats generate employment through trade and related activities, provide better market access and prices for producers, and promote indigenous products, micro-enterprises, and rural economies.

Haokip (2015) states that Border Haats also led to improvements in infrastructure and connectivity. It has fostered regional development. He further argues that they support India's Look East and Act East policies by promoting sub-regional integration and cross-border cooperation. GoI (2016) notes that Border Haats address the economic marginalization, geographical isolation, and poor market access of North-East border districts by promoting economic inclusion, reducing poverty, and integrating remote areas into broader economic activities.

Chaudhary (2017) notes that the Act East Policy, announced in 2014, includes strategic and security goals. It has wider objectives than its predecessor, the Look East Policy. Additionally, it is inclined to establish institutional mechanisms for better engagement and cooperation. Border Haats are one step toward achieving this. CUTS International (2019) notes that women's participation is higher in Border Haats. This observation is important not in economic terms but also in social and cultural ways. On the one hand, it makes women's labour more visible in the market, and on the other hand, it also gives them some amount of decision-making power. Wangdi (2021) argues that Border Haats create employment opportunities and formalize local commerce. It reduces smuggling and illicit trade and strengthens transparency and border governance.

Chaudhary (2025) writes that initiatives like border Haats are not only economically viable options that meet daily needs but also help in image-building and perception-creation. Chaudhary's study underscores that though border Haats are only local bazaars, they have immense potential to shape the relations between India and other countries. She emphasizes that, in 2026, geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific region has shifted to new games and equations; it is no longer limited to the economic sector only; rather, proactive engagement through diplomatic channels is required. Additionally, to address China's growing influence in the military, territorial, diplomatic, and economic sectors,

India needs to restructure its policies. Finally, institutional mechanisms that leverage advanced technology for better engagement, particularly social media and artificial intelligence, are much-needed steps. Establishing Border Haats will help achieve all these policy objectives, especially the goals of the Act East Policy.

2.5 Issues and Challenges

Taneja (2004) argues that merely institutionalizing the Border Haats is not sufficient. Their functioning has partially reduced informal trade. Cross-border trade is still flooded with illegal trade, with price differences. Also, it could not prevent smuggling. Baruah (2005) notes that the North-East's insurgency, cross-border migration, trafficking, and difficult geographical conditions—including mountainous terrain, dense forests, and floods—raise security and logistical concerns, increase transportation costs, and hinder the regular functioning of Border Haats.

According to GoI (2012), Border Haats are established for limited and small-scale trade. However, this is not viable for income generation and market expansion. Dash (2013) highlights that in Border Haats, the number of tradeable items is less, and administrative delays, weak inter-agency coordination, and the absence of a comprehensive long-term policy framework limit market efficiency, institutional sustainability, and scalability. Haokip (2015) advises that initiatives to improve digitization and communication infrastructure would increase market efficiency and competitiveness. GoI (2016) notes that the number of Border Haats in the Northeast is less in number compared to the length of India's borders with Bangladesh and Myanmar, restricting their developmental impact and limiting benefits for many border communities.

CUTS International (2019) reports that many Border Haats suffer from inadequate infrastructure. To name a few: poor connectivity, storage, sanitation, and banking facilities. Additionally, limited access to credit, information, and training for traders, as well as barriers faced by women and remote tribal communities in participating effectively in cross-border trade. Wangdi (2021) argues that Border Haats are vulnerable to disruptions. In the past, the COVID-19 pandemic, political instability, security concerns, and changing bilateral relations became the causes for this.

2.6 Revenue Generated from Border Haats

GoI (2016) states that Border Haats were established primarily to promote livelihoods, local economic development, and people-to-people connectivity rather than to generate fiscal revenue. Customs duties and taxes are not imposed on items traded in these markets. Also, transactions are conducted in Indian Rupees, Bangladeshi Taka, or through barter arrangements. Consequently, the Government does not derive any noticeable direct revenue from Border Haats operations. According to the Report of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry during the period of 2011-2016, four operational Border Haats along the India–Bangladesh border generated cash trade worth ₹1,686.62 lakh (₹16.87 crore). This figure is important considering their limited scale and restricted commodity basket.

Table 2

Year-wise Sales in Tripura Border Haats (₹ Crore)

Financial Year	Srinagar Border Haat	Kamalasagar Border Haat	Grand Total
2014–15	0.27	–	0.27
2015–16	2.51	3.51	6.02
2016–17	11.20	6.47	17.67
2017–18	7.57	5.46	13.03
2018–19	1.57	4.08	5.65
2019–20	5.44	9.37	14.81
2020–21	No Trade	No Trade	No Trade
2021–22	No Trade	No Trade	No Trade

Source: Bhowmik (2023, as cited in *Journal of Land Ports and Border Economy*, Issue II).

2.7 Border Haats in Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh

Tripura shares an approximately 856 km long international border with Bangladesh, accounting for more than 84 percent of the state's geographical boundary. Owing to its extensive border and long-standing socio-cultural and economic interactions with Bangladesh, Tripura has emerged as one of the most important locations for implementation of Border Haats in North-East India.

According to GoI (2016), the first Border Haat in Tripura was established at Srinagar-Chhagalnaiya in South Tripura district and became operational in January 2015. The second Border Haat was inaugurated at Kamalasagar-Tarapur in Sepahijala district in June 2015. Both Haats were established under the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between India and Bangladesh to revive traditional cross-border markets, generate local livelihoods, and reduce informal trade.

At present, Tripura has two established Border Haats:

1. Srinagar-Chhagalnaiya Border Haat (South Tripura)
2. Kamalasagar-Tarapur Border Haat (Sepahijala)

According to the Government of Tripura, n.d.; India Today NE (2023), the Governments of India and Bangladesh have approved Border Haats at Kamalpur (Dhalai district) and Raghna/Palbasti (North Tripura), while further proposals have been submitted for Kathalia, Khowai, Bamutia, Hirachherra, Raisyabari, Boxanagar, and several other locations.

GoI (2016) states that the Tripura Border Haats operate weekly and permit the exchange of locally produced commodities, including agricultural produce, handicrafts, handloom products, fruits, fish, dry fish, household items, and processed foods. Trade is conducted in Indian Rupees and Bangladeshi Taka and may also occur through barter arrangements. Joint Border Haat Management Committees comprising officials from both countries supervise their operations. The Border Haats in Tripura have contributed to livelihood generation, local economic development, the revival of historical ties, the promotion of tourism, and the strengthening of people-to-people interactions between India and Bangladesh.

Arunachal Pradesh shares a long international border of approximately 520 km with Myanmar and has historically maintained extensive socio-cultural and trade linkages through traditional trade routes, particularly in Changlang and Tirap districts. According to GoI (2017), recognizing the

historical significance of frontier trade, the Government of India signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Myanmar to establish Border Haats at mutually agreed locations along the India-Myanmar border. Among the proposed sites, Pangsua Pass in Changlang district has received considerable policy attention because of its historical association with the Stilwell Road and traditional exchanges between communities on both sides of the border. However, it still remains at the planning and discussion stage. The reason is mainly cited as security considerations. In addition, inadequate infrastructure, difficult terrain, and administrative challenges also make it difficult. Consequently, border trade in Arunachal Pradesh continues to occur primarily through limited traditional exchanges and informal interactions rather than through institutionalized Border Haats.

Table 3

Border Haats in Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh

Dimension	Tripura	Arunachal Pradesh
International Border	Bangladesh	Myanmar
Border Length	Approximately 856 km	Approximately 520 km
Number of Operational Border Haats	2	0
Established Border Haats	Srinagar-Chhagalnaiya and Kamalasagar-Tarapur	None
Proposed Border Haats	Kamalpur, Raghna/Palbasti, Kathalia, Khowai, and others	Pangsua Pass and other proposed India-Myanmar locations
Year of Establishment	2015	Not operational
Nature of Trade	Institutionalized, weekly, regulated markets	Primarily traditional and informal exchanges

Currency Mechanism	Indian Rupees, Bangladeshi Taka, and barter	No formal mechanism
Principal Commodities	Agricultural produce, handicrafts, fish, textiles, household items	Traditional local products and small-scale frontier exchanges
Institutional Arrangement	Joint India-Bangladesh Border Haat Committees	No operational management committee
Level of Functionality	Fully established (though intermittently suspended)	Policy proposal stage
Developmental Impact	Employment generation, tourism, livelihood enhancement, reduction of informal trade, people-to-people connectivity	Potential for connectivity and regional development but yet to be realized

Tripura is the most successful example of institutionalization of Border Haats in the region. There are operational markets and administrative mechanisms. Arunachal Pradesh remains at a preliminary stage, viewing Border Haats as future connectivity tools rather than active economic institutions. While Tripura demonstrates benefits, Arunachal highlights challenges due to terrain, security, and infrastructure issues.

2.8 Contextualizing Border Haats within Constructivism

Wendt (1992) and Hurd (2008) argue that constructivism focuses on the role of ideas, identities, norms, and social interactions in shaping state behaviour. They together determine international outcomes. Also, borders do not merely reflect territorial sovereignty, but are also influenced by historical narratives, shared interests, and common normative frameworks.

According to Wendt (1992), “anarchy is what states make of it,” which implies that the meanings and consequences of international structures are shaped by intersubjective understandings and social interactions. Material capabilities are important but not the exclusive factor. The ideas of borders are shaped by the ideas and practices adopted by states and societies. These are not merely conflictual or cooperative entities; rather, they are social constructions. Wendt (1999) emphasizes the social construction of state interests and identities.

van Schendel (2005) argues that modern political boundaries and the postcolonial state-building process have disrupted the old networks. However, it could not erase shared identities and collective memories. Hurd (2008) emphasizes that international politics is constituted by norms and collectively shared understandings that shape the behaviour of states and other actors. Adler (1997) highlights that Constructivist scholarship also highlights the significance of repeated interactions in producing collective identities and transforming inter-state relations. Finnemore’s (1996) writings find that institutions shape social meanings and identities.

Baruah (2005) contextualizes India's North-East in Constructivist theory. The reasons lie in overlapping ethnic identities and historical memories. They together transcend contemporary political boundaries. Communities such as the Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, Garos, and Chakmas possess cross-border affiliations. It cannot be adequately explained through materialist theories alone. Border Haats acknowledge these socially constructed identities and seek to integrate them into formal frameworks of cooperation and border management.

3. Research Questions

- I.** Does the institutionalization of the Border Haats strengthen their relevance and positively contribute to cutting illegal trade and smuggling?
- II.** Do the Border Haats contribute to sustaining the indigenous industries and women's participation in the labour market?
- III.** What is the status of the Border Haats in Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh?
- IV.** How does constructivism define the Border management strategy and Border Haats?

4. Research Objectives

I. This work is an attempt to examine whether the Border Haats are at par with the border management strategy.

II. It also inquires whether a constructivist notion of Border Haats is able to normalize the cross-border relations.

5. Research Methodology

This research paper has adopted a historical, descriptive, and mainly qualitative research methodology. However, limited use of data has also been presented in table form. This paper has been written in response to theoretical queries with roots in the past. For a comprehensive understanding of the topic, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh have been selected as case studies. Tripura has a comparatively successful story with Border Haats; however, the same cannot be said for Arunachal Pradesh. To study this within a theoretical framework, constructivism has been used. A constructivist description of the borders helps contextualize Border Haats in security discourse, particularly border management strategies. Also, this paper is not based on any primary data; rather, it uses existing data from different sources.

6. Discussion

6.1 Institutionalization of Border Haats

This section is divided into two parts: one, how the institutionalization of the Border Haats took place; two, whether it also contributes to curtailing illegal trade and smuggling.

Baruah (2005) and Rizvi (2013) highlight that border Haats are not a new addition to border trade; rather, they existed in ancient India too. Secondly, tribal communities used to participate in it. Thirdly, several items were traded, and when currency was not common, it took place on a barter basis. Fourth, these Haats were conducted after a particular period. Their study also highlighted that even when currency was not invented, Haats still existed. It indicates that no civilization grows in isolation; there is interdependence and exchanges.

More than a hundred years ago, Mackenzie (1884/2005) also wrote about it. His description indicated that traditional weekly markets and local exchange systems continued to operate along frontier areas and remained important centers of economic activity and social interaction. It

contributed to sustaining the livelihoods of border communities and preserving long-standing cultural linkages. This particular description is from British rule. It shows that cross-border trade continued in that phase too.

van Schendel's (2005) writings indicate that political boundaries cannot separate people's emotional, ethnic, linguistic, and kinship ties. These political borders cannot prevent people from going to others in other countries if they share similarities. It highlights that even when frontier regions have boosted trade activities, political factors still create ruptures. It indicates that common interests and shared identities may not be enough grounds for cross-border relations. Pre-partition perception was different from the post-partition phase. Interestingly, in both phases, it was/is the social construction of preferences and priorities. In the first one, frontier people were convinced they could live together, while in the later one they found it difficult. The reason lies in the political instability that created fear and made people insecure. The contemporary episodes of killing, kidnapping, assassination, rape, radicalization, and many more created tensions in border areas. So, frontier people tried not to engage in cross-border trade at least for some time.

Haokip's (2015) writing finds that the creation of Bangladesh somehow normalized the cross-border relations. Also, India's initiatives such as the Look East Policy and the Act East Policy revived the Border Haats. According to the GoI (2016) records, Border Haats were conceived as institutional mechanisms to revive traditional cross-border markets, facilitate localized trade, and promote people-to-people interactions among border communities. Thus, a formal institutionalization of the Border Haats began from this time onwards. However, it still suffers from several problems.

Baruah's (2005), Haokip's (2015), Chanda's (2013), and Rahman and Das's (2018) studies find the linkages between illicit trade and the terrain of the frontier region. Chanda (2013) and Rahman and Das (2018) accept that porous borders, ethnic linkages, and price differences also play a crucial role in it. Their studies highlight that ethnic linkages cannot be eradicated by politically created boundaries. People would always find a way to meet those with the same identities. The second dimension they highlighted is the price difference of commodities across borders. It is clearer in Table 1.

Baruah's (2005) writing indicates that in frontier regions, shared cultural identities play a vital role in establishing connections. Because of this, they trust each other and trade on this basis. Another aspect is the difficult terrain between the Northeast region and the rest of India that makes transportation costs high, ultimately making products costlier; hence, people prefer to buy them from neighbouring countries or from illegal trade.

Dash's (2013) writing indicates that lack of employment opportunities and poor infrastructure aggravate the problem of illegal trade in the region. Haokip's (2015) writing indicates that issues such as political instability, insurgencies, and border closures together contribute to illegal trade. Also, State-led strict security policies are responsible for this. Rehman and Das's (2018) work indicates that structural bottlenecks, including taxes, subsidies, exchange rates, and pricing, encourage illegal trade. Along with this, a few items give high returns when sold illegally: narcotics, wildlife products, timber, metals, and foreign goods. Wangdi (2021) categorizes two factors responsible for the development of the informal trade channels. These are diplomatic tensions and delays in cross-border cooperation. Taneja (2004) draws attention to the fact that merely institutionalizing Border Haats is not sufficient; it has partially reduced informal trade and smuggling.

Wangdi (2021), Northeast Now (2022), and the Government of Meghalaya (2026) reported that Border Haats were halted during COVID-19, and again that a few administrative challenges led to their suspension as of 2026.

This discussion underscores that the cross-border trade always existed in the Northeast region. Over time, its nature, scope, and the tradable items changed. During and after the partition, its functions were affected but later again resumed. After 2010, when these were formally institutionalized, they could not stop the illegal trade and smuggling.

6.2 Border Haats and Regional Development

GoI's (2012) description of these setups recognizes: one, the significance of cross-border markets; two, that border Haats would be operational at the designated points; three, local people are allowed to trade, not anyone; and finally, locally produced goods and commodities are allowed to trade, not everything that is produced in other parts of the country. Dash's (2013) work highlights the role of border Haats in promoting small industries, livelihoods, and socio-economic

connections. The separation and demarcation that is the byproduct of the drawing of political borders is reduced by it. It also shows that these markets were not merely instruments of economic exchange but also mechanisms for rebuilding trust, strengthening people-to-people contacts, and reviving old trading traditions. Haokip (2015) argues that the Border Haats arrangements in the Northeast region of India show the region's old past of cross-border interactions and traditional exchange systems. van Schendel's (2005) writing indicates that Border Haats led the revival of old linkages, building trust, social capital, and peaceful coexistence.

GoI (2016) underlines that Border Haats address the economic marginalization, geographical isolation, and poor market access of North-East border districts by promoting economic inclusion, reducing poverty, and integrating remote areas into broader economic activities. CUTS International (2019) notes that, on the one hand, it makes women's labour more visible in the market, and on the other hand, it also gives them some decision-making power. Wangdi (2021) indicates that it helps in reducing smuggling and illicit trade while strengthening transparency and border governance.

Chaudhary (2017) writes that the Act East Policy is more focused on establishing institutional mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation. In 2025, she writes that initiatives like Border Haats are helpful for image-building and perception management. Again in 2026, she notes that the changing geopolitical environment in the Indo-Pacific has renewed power politics; to deal with this, India requires proactive engagement with the region. Economic and technological integration are the much-needed steps.

Despite these contributions, it suffers from several challenges. According to GoI (2012), this arrangement is for limited and small-scale trade. Hence, it prevents its expansion, thus affecting the income and revenue. Secondly, considering the length of India's territorial border, the number is inadequate. Dash (2013) highlights the need to improve administrative hurdles that delay trade. Also, there is a requirement to develop a comprehensive long-term policy framework. Haokip (2015) finds that digitization and communication infrastructure must be advanced. CUTS (2019) emphasizes the need to develop infrastructure and logistic facilities.

6.3 Reflections from Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh

Table 3 highlights various aspects related to the Border Haats.

- Tripura's territorial boundary with Bangladesh is 856 km; the established Border Haats are 2, and a few more are proposed. It is institutionalized and helps in regional development.
- Arunachal Pradesh's territorial boundary with Myanmar is 520 km; no established Border Haats; however, a few are proposed. Only informal trade takes place.

Both states, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh, have immense potential to establish the Border Haats. Significantly, with Bangladesh and Myanmar, India does not have greater border tensions or conflicts than with China and Pakistan. Hence, it provides an edge for better institutional engagement. Also, there is less trust deficit between India and Bangladesh and Myanmar. It gives more leverage to diplomatic agents, actors, and institutions. Additionally, there are not many hurdles at the government level to formalizing the old channels, networks, and routes.

By maintaining cordial relations with these two countries, India would be able to push its national interests in the Indian Subcontinent. This would enable India to address China's growing influence in the region, and also Pakistan's strategy to isolate India on the diplomatic front. Strategically, it will be a well-calculated move. On the economic front, it would help meet the local needs. It would not only generate employment opportunities but also support indigenous small-scale industries and lower transportation costs since products would not have to travel long distances. Significantly, small-scale and traditional industries employ many women. It provides women with income and enables them to be financially independent. This gives women more freedom and decision-making too. Overall, it contributes to regional development.

However, all these points are undermined by illegal trade and smuggling. Significantly, more illegal trade also leads to a loss of government revenue. Such episodes create challenges for the border authorities. Most importantly, Border Haats are platforms for lax regulation and reduced scrutiny while crossing the borders. Increased regulation means more checks and control, which would create problems for locals in transporting their products to the markets. They perceive it as harassment. Less regulation and control may harbour anti-national elements. Human, animal, and drug trafficking empty a country from inside. These are non-traditional security threats and must be dealt with caution, as they are strategies to weaken a country; most of the time, they are not driven solely by economic motives, but are sponsored activities by the enemy country. Through

these platforms, spying is also easy. This is why no Border Haat is currently in operation. Though suspending the Border Haats is not a solution.

6.4 Constructivist Understanding of Border Haats

Wendt's (1992) and Hurd's (2008) descriptions indicate that Border Haats are not only economic institutions but also social constructions. They redefine borders from zones of conflict and separation to cooperation and shared goals. It provides an imperative theoretical framework to understand Border Haats in India's North-East region.

Wendt's (1992) work shows that the establishment of Border Haats reflects an alternative social construction of borders. International boundaries are reconceptualized as spaces of economic interdependence, cultural interaction, and mutual benefit. His arguments draw attention to a few really important points. It shows that whatever identities or preferences a state has are social constructions. If a country considers a neighbouring country as its enemy and has hostile relations with it, it is also driven by a particular social construction that has been shaped by past experiences, narratives, and beliefs. It is not a one-day story. It evolves with time. Also, a normative framework can never be a fixed entity; that means today's enemy might have been yesterday's friend, or today's friend might be tomorrow's enemy. It depends on the social construction of identity and interest formation. Hence, if security discourse advises tightening border controls, it is driven by a particular normative framework that tends to believe that loosening them might lead to problems or threats to a country's sovereignty, integrity, and independence. And why is this normative framework considered so dominant in the case of a few countries? Why, with a few countries, is this not a problem? The reason lies in the social construction of identities driven by past memories and present hostilities or cooperation. However, as discussed, this is not a fixed entity; hence, there are always chances to revisit and reshape a particular identity, interest, and normative framework. If a few identities are more inclined towards an exclusive approach and categorize a particular country as an enemy, for the sake of world peace and in particular bilateral relations, that must be revisited and replaced with a new one. It also indicates the need to reinvigorate the security discourse itself, which treats borders as sites of control and regulation. The border management strategy must be for the sake of humanity, not for creating tensions and conflicts. However, it might be a rosy picture since no country can be sure of others' intentions, as Realists believe. Especially when the past has been full of conflicts and tensions. And the present is also full of apprehensions.

Meanwhile, the belief that borders can't be porous with a particular country and tightening control, or in other words, increasing the securitization of border areas, is the only solution to address the threats emerging in border areas, is also a social construction that is not fixed. Hence, this notion can be changed with new norms, beliefs, identities, and interests. Basically, this discussion indicates that within security discourse, the understanding of borders and border management strategies is also not fixed. Border management strategies might also serve as a support system for cross-border trade rather than putting more control. It might be to encourage more people-to-people contacts rather than putting restrictions on cross-border movements. The option to pick which normative framework is primarily dependent on which identity gets priority. Contextualizing Border Haats in border management strategy depends on this. Border Haats might serve as platforms of cooperation and regional development. Both Indian states, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh, have immense potential in this regard. Though illegal trade is still a challenge.

Finnemore's (1996) work highlights that Border Haats work as institutions that reconstruct the meaning of borders. This reconstruction helps in reframing them as mechanisms of connectivity and cooperation. Significantly, Border Haats and their functioning challenge the traditional state-centric notions. The state-centrism approach primarily views borders in terms of security and territorial control. However, constructivism promotes alternative normative understandings that are focused on human security, local development, and people-to-people engagement. Border Haats must be explained in this light.

Adler's (1997) findings indicate that Border Haats create income opportunities. They support the ongoing social engagement among traders, local officials, and communities residing on either side of international boundaries. Such interactions encourage the development of trust, reciprocity, and shared expectations, thereby producing what Adler and Barnett (1998) describe as "communities of practice" and, potentially, nascent security communities. Rather than viewing neighbouring populations as external 'others', Border Haats facilitate the emergence of shared regional identities and interdependent relationships.

Wendt's (1999) work indicates that in the context of India's North-East, border communities have maintained economic, ethnic, and cultural linkages. These linkages do not obey the state-made border lines. A place in Tripura shares close cultural ties with another place in Bangladesh, near the border. On the same lines, a place in Arunachal Pradesh shares more cultural similarities with

another place in Myanmar, near the border. Comparing the cultural affinities and similarities of Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh with Kerala, Tamil Nadu, or Uttar Pradesh would reveal more differences. Basically, these similarities play a role in shaping interests and identities. The sameness in this brings people closer together; it compels governments to formulate policies accordingly.

van Schendel's (2005) work indicates that the process of state formation in the post-colonial phase itself is problematic. After the 1940s, the newly independent states underwent a state-making process, but local and indigenous identities were undermined in it. This process was carried out by the imperialist-colonial powers. They were more inclined to secure their interests and benefits than to consider the local and regional aspirations. In several countries, it has been found that the common people did not want to be part of a new neighbouring country; rather, they were willing to be with their old identities. In the case of the partition between India and Pakistan, there were so many people who did not like this divisive creation by the British Empire. East Pakistan, now known as Bangladesh, is more closely tied to India than West Pakistan, now Pakistan. Territorial boundaries could draw lines on the map but not in people's hearts. The border areas of Bangladesh still chose to trade with neighbouring districts of Indian states. Border Haats seek to institutionalize these pre-existing social relationships by facilitating interactions among communities that continue to share linguistic, cultural, and kinship ties. In this sense, Border Haats represent a process of identity reconstruction and the revival of historically embedded trans-border social relations.

Hurd's (2008) writing shows that Border Haats may be viewed as norm-generating institutions that promote principles of cooperation, trust-building, and peaceful coexistence among neighbouring countries and border populations. Through regular economic exchanges and interpersonal interactions, they contribute to the socialization of border communities and state institutions into cooperative norms, thereby reducing perceptions of mutual suspicion and hostility.

Therefore, from a constructivist perspective, Border Haats are socially embedded institutions. They present the reconstruction of the meanings of borders and the revival of historical identities and norms of interaction. Also, they work towards trust-building and socialization, and promote cooperation. They exemplify the constructivist proposition that international realities are socially constructed through ideas, identities, and shared practices. Additionally, these are not determined solely by material power and geopolitical considerations.

7. Conclusion

India has suspended all the Border Haats. The reasons are cited as administrative hurdles. To elaborate, this is actually a way to tighten control over border areas and put them under extreme regulations. There are cases of illegal trade and smuggling reported in border areas. Together, they threaten India's security. These are non-traditional security threats. However, the constructivist notion presents an optimistic picture about the Border Haats. According to this, institutionalization of them would help in reshaping and redefining cooperation in border areas. It also helps in finding better ways of engagement. These are two narratives: one to tighten control; and two, to make the borders porous. Both of them are extreme narratives. Policy-making must be based on having a balance between these two. So, suspending the Border Haats does not serve any purpose other than making life tough for border area citizens. However, the proposal to establish new Border Haats in several border districts shows that the Government has not understood their role in regional development, hence, did not reject their significance. Though the security compulsions in a few areas led to their suspension, the success story of Tripura and informal trade in the border areas of Arunachal highlight that with an articulated and planned strategy, security-related hurdles might be overcome. Also, places where earlier Border Haats were being operated must be reopened. Both the states, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh, have unexplored potential in this regard; it must be harnessed³.

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³ In writing this research paper, the paid version of Grammarly has been used to fix the grammatical errors.

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