

Movement of people and trade between India and Bangladesh are limping back to normalcy two months after the political upheaval in the neighbouring country. The first of a two-part series is a ground report from Petrapole, a border checkpost

# Visa woes slow Petrapole border's road to normalcy

ISHITA AYAN DUTT

Petrapole (India-Bangladesh border), 3 October

A steady stream of passengers is seen heading towards the Petrapole terminal, the largest land port in South Asia, along the India-Bangladesh border, about 80 km from Kolkata. Many bound for Bangladesh are carrying heavy blankets, oddly defying the time of the year. Meanwhile, a *dhaki* crossing into India signals that Durga Puja is just around the corner.

The political upheaval in Bangladesh, which led to the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government on August 5, had weighed heavily on the passenger movement initially. Trade was briefly halted, and the border post on the eastern front remained quiet.

Two months into the interim government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, some normalcy has returned to the border.

The passenger movement at the land port is catching up with normal times on most days. The cargo terminal looks busy with trucks coming in from the other side, some are waiting to be loaded. The ecosystem, bruised and battered till last month, is picking up the pieces. But curbs on visa issuance appear to be the biggest stumbling block.

Immigration authorities of Petrapole said a major drop in passenger traffic was seen between August 5 and August 7. "Thereafter it started picking up, peaking on September 20 at over 6,700. It's been steady since, at around 6,000 on most days."

Most travellers from Bangladesh, however, already have valid Indian visas issued earlier.

Reports indicate that visas are currently being issued only in select categories — medical and emergency cases. Indian visa application centres are said to be operating at limited capacity.

A passenger from Bangladesh said, only medical visas were being issued. "But if 100 apply, 40 are getting it."

Currency exchange shops that dot the area are heaving a sigh of relief. Supradip Biswas says his business had plummeted in August.



A new cargo gate, Maitri Dwar, is expected to facilitate trade

PHOTO: ISHITA AYAN DUTT

"It's a lot better now — almost 50-60 per cent of the normal. Those who had medical and business visas are coming."

Another money changer, however, says things are improving. "But it's not like what it was. Visa is the only issue getting in the way."

Simanta, a small hotel and restaurant, had shut down in early August but reopened a fortnight later as traffic began to improve. "Those who already have visas are coming. Business is generating enough cash to recover the cost right now. But that's about it," says hotel owner Swapan Kumar Dey.

Petrapole-Benapole (on the other side) is the most significant land border crossing for India-Bangladesh trade and passenger movement.

About 30 per cent of land-based trade between the two countries takes place through the Petrapole land port. The passenger movement on either side is about 6,000-7,000 daily. But it surges to 10,000-12,000 during the festival time, especially Durga Puja.

Will it, this time? "Yes, if visa issuance is normalised. But based on the visas already issued, it should be about 8,000 to 9,000 taking arrival and departure into account during

the festival time," says an immigration official.

A massive new passenger terminal, facing the current one, points to the future potential of traffic flow. Spread across 60,000 square metre, the terminal looks like a modern-day airport with steel arches. Constructed by Shapoorji Pallonji group, at an approximate cost of ₹435 crore, it is designed to handle 20,000 to 25,000 passengers on a daily basis. An LPAI (Land Ports Authority of India) official says it is expected to start operations in October.

Meanwhile, at the adjacent cargo terminal, movement of trucks is visible with chassis lined up for dispatch. Cargo movement has picked up, officials say.

About 200-250 trucks are being cleared for exports every day from Petrapole. Sajal Ghosh, general secretary of the Federation of West Bengal Truck Operators Association, said. "Trade flow has improved. But the economic situation in Bangladesh is limiting imports into the country. Usually, the number of trucks is 300-350."

Even as restoration of trade to normalcy along the border is underway, a new eight-lane cargo gate, Maitri Dwar, stands ready in a bid to multiply the flow of goods. But it may take a conducive political climate to realise the full potential of the infrastructure.



**BANGLADESH:  
TAKING STOCK  
PART-I**