**Tourism in Bangladesh: problems and prospects**

Forty years has elapsed of Bangladesh’s tourism industry, yet we still see it in a nascent position in comparison to our neighbouring countries. Despite having all the potential to flourish, tourism in this country has been growing at a very slow pace.
Bangladesh is not known as a tourist destination in the international tourism market. Only 3 lacs foreign tourists came to Bangladesh in 2010, of which more than 70 percent came for business and official purposes. The contribution of the earning from tourism to the country’s GDP is less than 1 percent. The sector got recognition as an industry in 1999. But it never received attention from the government to become a vibrant industry.

Whereas many countries which started much later than Bangladesh, for example – Maldives, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos PDR – have developed their tourism industry much faster than this country. In 1998 Bangladesh received 171,961 tourists and Cambodia received only 96,000 tourists. After 11 years in 2009, Bangladesh could attract only 267,000 tourists and Cambodia more than 2 million tourists. This comparison indicates discrepancy in the degree of initiative by two different countries within a same span of time.
The lack of development of the tourism industry of Bangladesh can be attributed to multiple reasons like less-prioritisation of tourism by all previous governments, lack of budgetary allocation and scarcity of trained people in the industry. There is also a lack of publicity and marketing activities. We lag behind in projecting our attractions to international tourists through advertisements in international print and electronic media, as our neighbouring countries do. We have to do this for enhancing the positive image of our country and for introducing our prime tourist attractions as well as our vibrant culture.

But, there is a lack of sufficient budgetary allocation. We need to develop an effective brand name for tourism. We have never tried to understand that branding not only helps tourism of the country, it encourages foreign investment as well. A tourism branding campaign called ‘Beautiful Bangladesh’ has been developed, but according to the tourism stakeholders of the country it does not wholly reflect the tourist attractions of the country. Tour operators who bring foreign tourists are raising demands to mend it. Bangladesh, which has so many positive aspects, needs to rebuild its brand as a country.

Apart from the meagre budgetary allocation of the government, appropriate plans and programmes for tourism development – short term, long term and medium term – was absent before 90’s. Furthermore, in the planning process there were lots of discrepancies. Due to the absence of proper planning, even some infrastructure developments that require a small budget could not be accomplished. For attracting more foreign tourists, we need to turn tourist attractions into tourism products i.e. finished products to sell. Appropriate infrastructural development, super-structure development, introduction of waste management systems and sustainability of the tourist attractions for our future posterity are most essential.
We name Cox’s Bazar as our tourist capital but recreational activities on the beach are very scanty. Tourists do not find any night-life activities, after spending the day at the beach, but to sleep in hotel rooms. We should understand that tourists do not come here to sleep idly in a hotel. They love to remain busy through experiencing different memorable activities. We need to make the tourists busy in different activities all the time and bring out money from their pockets.
Tourists come to spend money not take it back. On the other hand, whatever development has taken place at Cox’s Bazar is unplanned and uncontrolled. Appropriate regulation is absent there. Still there is no proper water and sewerage system; gas connection is absent; only a limited number of flights land there. Kuakata – a second priority beach for tourists – cannot be reached very easily. Though road communication has improved from before, tourists tend to avoid going there more than once, due to the lack of standard facilities.
The archaeological sites in the north-west of Bangladesh are also popular with tourists. But, due to the absence of interpreters and facilities, tourists do not make overnight stays. Every year many domestic and foreign tourists visit Paharpur – a world heritage site. They can reach Paharpur in the late afternoon by starting very early from Dhaka. But after a short while at Paharpur, the sun sets. So they become worried where to make a night halt, because there are no hotels at Naogaon or Joypurhat district town. At the other famous archaeological sites, proper interpretation signage and educated guides are not found. Sufficient numbers of litter bins are not installed along the sites.

Infrastructure development is sine-quo-non for the sustainable tourism development of any country and Bangladesh is also no exception. Tourism friendly infrastructure is required for smooth and free movement of tourists of all ages, and even for the physically challenged tourists. In view of this, Bangladesh needs to develop accommodations, eateries, good communication and transportation systems, toilet facilities, parking facilities etc. near the tourist spots of the country. It needs to develop international standard facilities at all the tourist spots of Bangladesh.
For promotional campaigns and the marketing of Bangladesh tourism abroad, we need to provide guidelines to the economic councillors and visa officers of the foreign missions of Bangladesh so that they can encourage foreign tourists to visit Bangladesh. Or, we can establish tourism offices in the tourist generating countries like China, UK, USA, Japan, Australia, because these countries produce more than 70 percent of the world’s outbound tourists.
We lack a marketing strategy which causes the absence of proper marketing initiatives for tourism products of the country.

We need to diversify our tourism products to attract tourists and encourage them to make repeated visits. We can segment our tourism regions in different categories, so that tourists can be interested to visit many different places. We need to develop tourism products based on archaeology, culture and monument, river, tea garden, indigenous culture etc.
We may develop MICE tourism as has been developed by Singapore, Korea, China and other countries of Asia. Many multinational companies of Bangladesh hold their AGM and other meetings in those countries, as well as organise recreational activities there. In this regard, we need to develop many condominiums, international convention centres etc in Dhaka and Cox’s Bazar. If we can ensure them these facilities, they won’t fly to other countries.
There is a great potential to promote sports tourism in Bangladesh. We can develop venues and infrastructure in the country.

Some cricket venues have already been developed. But, more venues need to be established in various places of the country like Cox’s Bazar (the world’s longest sea beach), Kuakata, Comilla, Barisal, Dinjapur etc. For the development of sports tourism we can seek both local and foreign investment. This way we shall be able to reap benefits. Also, by developing sports tourism we can help develop many backward linkage sectors in the country. Besides, this will help the creation of many informal jobs like tea vendors, food corners, betel shops, hawkers etc.
A policy framework is necessary to be developed, and strong coordination amongst the concerned departments is required.

We should also emphasise on domestic tourism. Without the development of domestic tourism it is hard to attract foreign tourists. When local people movements start from one place to another, confidence of investors will grow.

Bangladesh should also take initiatives for eco-tourism development in the country especially in the naturally and culturally rich areas. Sylhet and Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT) regions of Bangladesh are paradises for eco-tourism activities. On the other hand, Sundarbans is the gold mine for eco-tourism. It is the single largest mangrove forest in the world. It has been designated as a world heritage site since 1997. The world’s second largest mangrove forest is Mastang in Malaysia, which is only one-tenth the size of the Sundarbans. To develop eco-tourism in the Sundarbans, we can install some world class cruise vessels to take tourists to the forest. But we should keep in mind that the eco-system of the Subdarbans is not disturbed. We can also develop eco-tourism at St. Martin’s island which will help protection of the island. Eco-tourism development will help us preserve our rich cultural heritage for the benefit of our future generations. Different policy approaches are required in this regard. Controls of visitors, enforcement of tourist movement guidelines and waste management facilities are required for eco-tourism development.

Safety and security of the tourists should be given the utmost priority.  Forming only tourist police cannot solve the problem. Proper orientation should be given to police so that they can behave properly with tourists. The local people have to be involved in this process. When local people would find benefits from tourist activities, they would safeguard the tourists as well as the tourist attractions. Local people at tourist sites have always been neglected. We see that local people get little benefit from the tourism activities in their own areas. For instance, the indigenous and ethnic minority people of Rangamati or Bandarban get very little trickle down benefits from the tourism activities over there.

They were never included in the tourism planning and development processes. They have not been properly informed of the value of the tourism resources or to take pride in their own areas. When local people get involved with tourism activities in their localities, a sense of ownership of the tourist attractions grows in them. They become aware of the need to protect and conserve the attractions.
Bangladesh also needs to change its visa policy. It may go for visa waivers for the top tourist generating countries and introduce visa on arrival systems for tourist groups. Nepal provides us visa on arrival but we don’t reciprocate, which hinders tourist to come from Nepal. Immigration formalities at the land ports should also be simplified for foreign tourists.
The foreign currency earning goods of Bangladesh like RMG, shrimp, jute items are now facing stiff competition from other countries. In response, tourism can be an export item to support earning foreign currency for the country. We must know that, in this era of economic globalisation, tourism is considered to be one of the fastest growing and ever-expanding industries and also demonstrates a resilient character. It is a labour-intensive industry that creates hundreds of jobs every year across the world.
Tourism is a great tool for poverty alleviation. It helps reduce poverty to a great extent by involving local people and creating job opportunities. Tourism jobs and businesses are usually created in the most underdeveloped regions of a country which helps to equalise economic opportunities throughout a nation, providing an incentive for residents to remain in rural areas rather than move to overcrowded cities. The tourism industry provides the government with hundreds of millions of dollars in tax revenues each year, through accommodation and restaurant taxes, airport users’ fees, sales taxes, park entrances fees, employees’ income tax and many other fiscal measures.

Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation, since its inception in 1972, has created some tourist facilities in different tourist attractions of the country, and has been carrying out some promotional and marketing activities. BPC currently provides tourist facilities to domestic and international tourists in the form of hotels, motels, restaurants, cottages etc. But, this is not enough. There are a lot of things to do. Creation of hotels, motels is not the only aspect of tourism development. We need to do more, including the creation of public awareness. We need proper planning. And for proper planning, extensive research is necessary.

Continuous research on tourist trends, market segments and diversification and vulnerability of tourism products is required. We should be vigilant so that ugly tourism can not flourish here. Exploitation, prostitution and child abuse in tourism should be checked constantly.
We should follow the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism set by the UNWTO. We should move forward with a holistic approach for tourist satisfaction as well as preservation and conservation of the tourism products of the country. Only a single ministry or department cannot accomplish all these tasks. Cooperation from other departments is necessary.