

# Chapter 16

## Tourism Development Agendas in Bangladesh: Exploring Some Policy Considerations



Abdullah Al Muneem, Md. Ashikur Rahman Avi, and Md Ariful Hoque

**Abstract** Tourism as a promising economic sector has gained acceptance globally and endorsed increasingly by apex international organizations such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). Representing the developing world, Bangladesh has a range of tourism resources to attract tourists to contribute to the overall economy. However, the development of this sector within the country is still at its early stage. Accordingly, the country is failing to receive the utmost value from tourism sector. This chapter aims to outline a number of suggestions to develop tourism sector in the context of Bangladesh. In doing so, qualitative research approach has been employed. The data collection strategy encompasses both primary and secondary techniques. The primary technique mainly involves securing opinions from industry experts while the secondary techniques cover reviewing a wide range of published and unpublished materials. This paper identifies a number of issues to be addressed to realize the potential of tourism sector in Bangladesh. These issues include formulation and implementation of tourism friendly master plan, creation of tourism quality assurance cell, development of tourists' facilities and necessary infrastructures, coordination among key stakeholders, proper marketing and promotional campaign, allocation of adequate budget, invitation of foreign investments, and awareness creation to upgrade tourism from the existing condition. This study is believed to be helpful for tourism policymakers and researchers in Bangladesh.

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A. A. Muneem (✉)

Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Faculty of Business Studies,  
University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh  
e-mail: [muneem.thm@du.ac.bd](mailto:muneem.thm@du.ac.bd)

Md. A. R. Avi

Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Pabna University of Science  
and Technology, Pabna, Bangladesh

Md. A. Hoque

Department of Marketing, Faculty of Business Studies, Jahangirnagar University,  
Savar, Dhaka, Bangladesh

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## Introduction

Tourism is an expanding sector which acts like bridges among nations and creates links between different cultures and civilizations. Today, tourism is considered as a tool to jobs creation, poverty abolition, ensuring gender equality, as well as protection and up-gradation of the environmental, natural and cultural resources (Sinclair 1997; Blake et al. 2008; Ferguson 2011; World Economic Forum 2017). The outcome of tourism also results in foreign exchange earnings, economic growth and contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In 2018, the travel and tourism sector contributed 10.4% to the global GDP and 319 million jobs in percentage it covers 10% of global employment were supported by this sector (WTTC 2019).

For many developing countries, tourism is considered as one of the ways of economic development. Bangladesh is one of the most promising developing countries with a lot of tourism resources to attract tourists to contribute to the overall economy. But unfortunately the country fails to operationalise the benefit through proper exploration of tourism potentials. Lonely Planet (2019), the largest travel guide book publisher, ranked Bangladesh seventh position under the best value global destination category in 2019 and the ranking report noted:

“Bangladesh creates astonishingly few ripples given everything it has to offer. The world’s eighth most populated country is home to diverse, exciting cities, the longest unbroken sandy beach of the world with an emerging surf scene at Cox’s Bazar, and the largest mangrove forest of the world Sundarban National Park. Bangladesh has always been an inexpensive destination for travelers, and UNESCO World Heritage sites are waiting to be discovered, such as the open-air museum that is the historic city of Bagerhat, where the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers meet, and the atmospheric Buddhist ruins at Paharpur. Visitors remain a rarity almost everywhere else, giving Bangladesh an ‘out there’ feeling that’s harder to find in many neighboring (Bangladesh’s neighbors – India, Myanmar, Nepal, Bhutan and Pakistan) countries”.

In such a situation it is required to outline the path to develop tourism sector in Bangladesh by identifying key issues which obstruct the development. Available studies on Bangladesh’s tourism are reviewed by the researchers but most of the papers focus on the potentiality as well as challenges of tourism in Bangladesh rather addressing the pathway to development. Considering this fact, the current study aims to outline a number of suggestions to develop tourism sector in Bangladesh.

The main objective of this chapter is to outline the suggestions to upgrade tourism from its current status. In addressing the key objective, this study also covers the following specific objectives: first, to identify the major challenges that impede the tourism development in Bangladesh; second, to understand key stakeholders’

perceptions in regard to tourism development; third, to generate/develop suggestions in regard to tourism development in Bangladesh.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Tourism***

The term tourism refers to the travel outside the usual environmental setting with a purpose, for a particular period of time (at least 24 h and less than a year of stay). The widely accepted definition of tourism by UNWTO as cited by Goeldner and Ritchie (2007: p.7) is “Tourism comprises the activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes”.

### ***Development***

As an ambiguous term “development” depicts both the procedure which a society moves through starting with one level of condition then onto the next, and furthermore the goal of that procedure. As both procedure and goal, the term development embraces economic, social, political, cultural and environmental dimensions (Badan and Bhatt 2007).

Development can be defined as a multi-dimensional course of action which brings changes in several aspects of a society (i.e. socio-economic, institutional and governmental structure). Development can be addressed as a process of acquiring sustainable growth to cope with new incessant changes towards the achievement of some objectives (i.e. progressive political, economic and societal) (Lee 1966). Todaro (1977) also described the term “development” as a multifaceted process for which the structural, attitudinal and institutional changes are needed to accelerate the economic growth, to reduce the inequality and to eradicate the poverty. In a similar note, Sapru (1994) explained the term “development” as a societal process which transforms a society from traditional one to modern (Sapru 1994).

### ***Tourism and Development***

Badan and Bhatt (2007) referred the term “tourism development” as it is not an end in itself, but a way to an end. Tourists’ attractions, facilities, and amenities are not developed by the destination itself but those are developed to invite tourists so that they visit and spend money which can contribute to the economic and social

development of the destination areas. It has received the worldwide recognition that international tourism is an essential means to achieve development and many countries have put tourism as a significant element in their development strategies (Badan and Bhatt 2007). Tourism is being viewed as a significant factor for facilitating community development (Allen et al. 1993; Bello et al. 2016; Colton and Squire 2010). In this vein, alternative governance approach involving multi-level stakeholders other than a sheer dominance by the public bodies for tourism policy formulation and implementation took a noteworthy attention in tourism research (Mikulcak et al. 2015; Moscardo and Murphy 2014; Rahman et al. 2020).

The development of tourism is a continuing process that must be compatible to the overall development goal (Godfrey and Clarke 2000). In addition, in the process of tourism development, the policymakers must have to consider and accommodate informed participation of all related stakeholders (Rahman et al. 2020; UNEP 2005). It is thus important to develop the tourism sector aligning with the sustainability principles while considering it as a tool for development.

### ***Status of Tourism Developmental Planning, Policies, and Initiatives in Bangladesh***

In 1972, just after the independence of the country, tourism development and promotional work started under the aegis of the government. According to the President's order no. 143 of 1972, the first initiative was taken to establish Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BPC) for the purpose of promotion, better operation and development of tourism in Bangladesh (*Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs* 2019). In 1975, as an independent ministry the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism (MoCAT) was formed in order to formulate national policies and programmes for development and regulation of Civil Aviation and the regulation of the Bangladesh tourism industry and the promotion of the country as a tourist destination. Recognizing the contribution of tourism to the socio-economic development, the government of Bangladesh framed the National Tourism Policy (NTP) in 1992. Before 1992, there was no tourism policy in Bangladesh but a strategic Master Plan for tourism development which was prepared by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)/the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1990 (Hassan and Burns 2014). However, The National Tourism Policy identified tourism as a multifaceted industry for the development, which must needs an effective coordination among a variety of government ministries, departments, authorities and regional as well local bodies. Besides, a "National Tourism Council" and an "Inter-ministerial Coordination Committee" governed by the Prime Minister and the Minister of MoCAT respectively were formed according to the recommendation of the National Tourism Policy but both the committees were very dysfunctional (Khan and Haque 2007, p. 19). Later on tourism was recognized as an "Industry" in the National Industrial Policy, 2005. The policy also acknowledged this industry as

a “Thrust Sector” and presented a variety of incentives to the foreign investors to invest in the tourism sector in Bangladesh. Utilizing the notion of Public-Private Partnership (PPP) in the promotion of tourism industry was focused both in the National Tourism and National Industrial policies of Bangladesh. Here, it can be critiqued in the basic point that the promotion of tourism was prioritized over tourism development. However, the National Tourism Policy (1992) was updated for the first time in 2010. To capitalise the tourism potential, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) reframed a new tourism Policy (2010) with a view to developing environment friendly tourism, community based tourism, rural tourism, religious tourism, riverine tourism, archaeological tourism and other new segments of tourism linking Bangladesh’s traditions and cultures. Bangladesh Tourism Board (BTB), National Tourism Organization of Bangladesh, was also established in 2010 for the purpose of marketing and publicity (Bangladesh Tourism Board 2010) but more services and amenities for tourists are essential to keep up with the global trends and tastes (Howlader 2013).

Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BPC) as the National Tourism Organization is assigned the responsibility by the government to develop the tourism industry in Bangladesh. Since the establishment, BPC has passed more than 45 years. Unfortunately, though the tourism industry in Bangladesh has elapsed 40 years, it is still in a nascent situation in comparison to the neighbouring countries (Howlader 2015). Similarly, Parveen (2013) noted that both BPC and BTB are less active in their field of activities.

## Research Method

This study has adopted a qualitative research method to outline a number of suggestions to develop the tourism sector in Bangladesh. The data collection strategy encompassed both primary and secondary techniques. A semi-structured qualitative interview technique was utilized to collect primary data from the key participants from the industry. The researchers interviewed twenty key participants to obtain the relevant information. The participants’ category consists of the stakeholders of the tourism and hospitality industry in Bangladesh. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants. The coverage of research participants is shown in Table 16.1.

The table illustrates that in total 20 interviews were conducted for this study. Here ‘tourism experts’ category includes the participants from tourism academia and hospitality sector, and tourism organizations indicate Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation and Bangladesh Tourism Board. The duration of each interview was 30–35 min. For the purpose of this study, selective transcription was carried out by the researchers from the conducted interviews. Besides, a wide range of published materials mostly journal articles, research papers, discussion papers, and newspaper articles were viewed by the researchers to collect secondary data. Moreover, statistics and annual reports of the UNWTO, country highlights of the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), and Centre for Studies in International Relations and

**Table 16.1** Categorisation and numbers of research participants

Participant's category	Number of interviews
Tourists	05
Tourism experts	08
Government officials from tourism organizations	04
Tour operators	03
Total	20

Source: Developed by the researchers

**Table 16.2** Participants' identification of challenges for tourism development in Bangladesh

Participant's category	Identification of challenges
Tourists	Poor infrastructural facilities
	Security threats
	Poor environment and resources management at the tourist destination.
	Insufficient activities for engagement
Tourism experts	No master plan
	Insufficient education and training
	No coordination among the stakeholders
	Lack of awareness.
	Lack of quality human resources
Government officials (tourism organizations)	High government tax rate
	Poor promotional strategy
	Budget constraint
Tour operators	Lack of appreciation
	Lack of professional tour guide
	No administrative body to monitor activities
	Lack of business friendly loan

Source: Developed by the researchers

Development (CSIRD) discussion papers were used as secondary sources of information. Content analysis technique was adopted to analyse the secondary data (Hsieh and Shannon 2005).

## Findings

A number of issues which impede the growth of tourism in Bangladesh along with several suggestions for the development were identified by the research participants. The following Tables 16.2 and 16.3 portray the key findings.

The study findings indicate that poor infrastructural facilities hinder tourism development in Bangladesh. Most of the participants opined and agreed on this

**Table 16.3** Research outcome based on participant suggestions

Participants	Suggestions for development	Main output
Tourists	Development of existing infrastructure	Touristic experience will be enhanced
	Ensuring safety and security of the tourists	Safety and security of the tourists will be achieved
	Proper maintenance of destination's environment and resources	Negative impacts on environment will be mitigated
	Increase touristic activities at the destination	
Tourism experts (academicians and personnel from hospitality sector)	Formulation of master plan	Master plan will be formulated and the development of tourism industry will get momentum
	Arranging training and development program	Quality human resources will be ensured
	Effective coordination among the stakeholders	Coordination and network among the stakeholders will be built
	Creation of awareness	Awareness about tourism will be created
	Trained human resources	Costs on accommodation and food will be minimized
	Reduction of government tax	
Government officials (tourism organizations)	Effective marketing and promotion	Number of tourists' visitation will be increased
	More budget allocation	Financial constrains will be eradicated
	Introduction of national tourism award	Stakeholders will be motivated
Tour operators	Professional tour guide	Number of professional guide will be increased
	Establishment of tourism quality assurance cell	Quality tourism will be ensured
	Establishment of tourist centre	Issues and problems will be solved Availability of information will be ensured

Source: Developed by the authors

issue that the existing infrastructural facilities i.e. destination accessibility, transportation system, accommodation service are not at the satisfactory level for developing tourism. Khokon (a tourist category participant) shared his experience as follows:

... I along with my seven friends visited Nijhum Dwip (a small island situated in Noakhali District) last year. We faced lot difficulties to find out a hotel for quality accommodation there. There was electricity problem too. In 2019, after visiting Bichnakandi (a tourist destination of Sylhet division), I promised not to go there again. The condition of the road and transport to Bichnakandi is too bad to describe. I also refer my friends and relatives not to go there.

Aligning with this finding Henderson noted that poor infrastructural facilities of any tourist destination contribute to perceive negative image of the destination's visitors (Henderson 2011). On the other hand, a satisfactory level of tourism infrastructure contributes to enhance both efficiency and distribution of tourism services (Jovanić and Ilić 2016). Therefore, development of existing infrastructure is essential for tourism development in Bangladesh. Besides, most of the participants pointed out security issue as another major challenge. For instance, an academican participant stated that safety and security are the prerequisites for tourism development. However, poor environment and resources management, and insufficient activities for engagement at the destination are also notified by both 'tourist' and "tourism experts" category participants.

Most of the academican in the "tourism experts" category and "government official" category participants pointed out that having no master plan for tourism development is one of the vital issues for which the tourism sector is not getting momentum. As mentioned in the earlier section of this chapter the country has no tourism master plan and still she follows the strategic plan for tourism development which was prepared by UNDP in 1990.

In Bangladesh there is lack of well-trained man power i.e. service providers, tour guides, chef, and interpreters etc. to support the tourism and hospitality industry. The need for tourism and hospitality education and training for the pertinent stakeholders is highlighted mostly by the "academic" and "hospitality industry" participants. The participants also emphasised the subjective education, and training, to ensure the quality human resource. Recruiting staffs with tourism and hospitality management educational background was suggested by them. For example, one participant from 'tourism experts' category asserted:

... Quality Staffs play the key role to achieve the success of any organization. Surprisingly maximum employees of the authoritative body of Bangladesh's tourism (Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism, Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation, Bangladesh Tourism Board) have very little subjective education. The authorities should immediately recruit Staffs from the tourism and hospitality management educational background; and different training program should be arranged for the improvement of their existing employees.

Another notable issue identified by the academic participants from the 'tourism experts' category is that there is no coordination among the tourism developing authorities and stakeholders in Bangladesh, though the national tourism policy recognized tourism as a multifaceted industry must needs an effective coordination among a variety of government ministries, departments, authorities and regional as well as local bodies. In alignment with this finding, Hall, Kirkpatrick and Mitchell (2005) noted that lack of coordination among the stakeholders of tourism at central, local and regional level results from having no shared development vision and inadequate communication.

Added to this, lack of awareness about tourism was also pointed out as a major challenge by numerous academic participants. Most of the participants of this research agreed on the point that awareness creation programs regarding tourism are imperative. If awareness is created at the destination area, the local community involvement will be ensured at the same time. The significant contribution of



tourism to community area development is noticed when the participation of the local community people is ensured in the tourism development stage (Drăgulănescu and Druțu 2012). For instance, one research participant stated:

You cannot develop tourism without creating awareness among the residents, key players, and community peoples of host country. We have to clarify the utmost value of tourism to them, how tourism can change their economy and life. We can consider the example of 'Leuser Ecosystem' in Sumatra. Even though the area is technically protected by the government, it's still threatened by poachers and palm oil plantations. There the communities of local people are working hard to raise awareness through ecotourism as they know the value of environment and tourism.

Lack of appreciation in the tourism sector is another important issue to consider which is identified by most of the research participants. An academic participant (Mosarraf) from the "tourism experts" category commented that appreciation from the central government for outstanding work, initiative, performance and activities in the field of tourism and hospitality can create a positive impact. Introduction of national award for tourism and hospitality sector is suggested by most of the research participants. This study also finds that the development of tourism industry in Bangladesh is badly hindered because of poor marketing and promotional activities. A government official category participant (Parvez) from BPC pointed that "we should not promise those things to the tourists which our destinations cannot offer".

Agreeing on the issue, a government official participant commented that marketing and promotional activities must be linked with the tourism master plan and it needs coordinated efforts among the tourism stakeholders. However, bringing all the tourism stakeholders together to collaborate towards developing an integrated marketing plan for tourism is a major challenge (Buhalis and Cooper 1998; Buhalis 2000).

Lack of business friendly loan for starting up new tourism venture and budgetary constraint in the tourism sector are confining the development of tourism in Bangladesh as claimed mostly by the "tour operator" and "government official" category participants. For example, one tour operator (Srabon) commented as follows-

In my point of view, in Bangladesh there is no special loan for Tourism business. If someone as an entrepreneur wants to start a new tourism venture, he/she have to take the loan by following typical bank loan procedure. Moreover, the interest rate of the usual bank loan is also high which discourage many of us to do business in this sector.

Similar opinion is also found in a government officials' interview who asserted that limited financial support together with an inadequate promotional budget in tourism sector restrict the tourism development in Bangladesh. Here, introduction of tourism loan with the lowest interest rate and more installment facilities, and allocation of sufficient finance for tourism sector in the national budget are suggested by "tour operator" and "government official" category participants.

Having no administrative body or cell at the central, local and regional level to monitor the tourism related issues is also pointed out by a number of "tourist" and "tour operator" category participants. For instance, a tourist (Zihad) commented that having a particular authority to check and solve the tourism-related issues increases tourist experiences. Establishment of tourist centre at the district level is suggested mostly by tourist and tour operator participants.

Another issue identified by the hospitality personnel category participants that the government tax rate on the hotel accommodation and food segment is quite high. Similar evidence is also found in a report by Asian Development Bank (ADB) report that, “Hotel rates in Dhaka are high compared to neighbouring countries, reflecting the high taxation imposed on hotels in Bangladesh” (ADB 2004: p. 27). Besides, similar reflection is also noticed in a review writing in the Tripadvisor’s web portal by a foreign business tourist in the title of “Beware the 26.5% tax in Bangladesh- review of White Orchid” (Pett 2017). Reduction of tax on hotel accommodation and food is suggested in this regard.

## Conclusion

This chapter explored a number of issues that act against tourism development in Bangladesh. It has been evident that having no tourism master plan, improper maintenance of destination’s environment and resources, poor touristic facilities, activities, and infrastructures, safety and security issues, no specific cell or body to assure the tourism product and service quality, lack of coordination and partnership among the tourism stakeholders, poor marketing strategy, inadequate budget, limited or no appreciation from the government, high tax rate on accommodation sector, and above all a lack of awareness for tourism are restricting the overall tourism development of Bangladesh. In this regard, the findings of this study suggest that the formulation and implementation of tourism-friendly master plan and policy, proper maintenance of destination’s environment and resources, assuring tourist safety and security, creation of tourism quality assurance cell, development of tourists’ facilities and necessary infrastructures, coordination among key stakeholders, effective marketing and promotional campaign, allocation of adequate budget, invitation of foreign investments, introduction of recognition for the contribution to tourism and hospitality sector, reduction of accommodation tax rate, and awareness creation are vital considerations to upgrade tourism from the existing condition. This study contributes to the broader understanding of tourism development issues and pathways in regard to Bangladesh while demonstrating the practical implication of the findings in that context. Such an understanding could further provide useful insights to the policymakers in terms of locating the existing policy loopholes and the subsequent redesigning of tourism development strategies.

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**Abdullah Al Muneem** is an Assistant Professor, Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. He did his BBA and MBA in Tourism and Hospitality Management from the University of Dhaka. He is very keen to research on general tourism perspectives as well as various specialised segments of hospitality such as revenue management, front office management, housekeeping etc.

**Md. Ashikur Rahman Avi** is a Lecturer, Tourism and Hospitality Management department, Pabna University of Science and Technology, Pabna, Bangladesh. He previously worked at Primeasia University, Dhaka. Avi did both Bachelor and Master Degrees in Tourism and Hospitality Management from University of Dhaka. His research interests include Destination Development, Sustainable Tourism Management, Technology and Tourism, Community Based Rural Tourism, Tourism Planning, and TourismMarketing.

**Md Ariful Hoque** is a faculty member at the Department of Marketing, Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh. He has recently completed the PhD degree from the Department of Tourism, University of Otago, New Zealand. Also, he holds an MBA with the highest academic result and a Bachelor of Business Administration (Honours) degree with a major in Marketing with the Prime Minister Gold Medal Award from the University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh. His primary research interest centred on NGOs, community-based tourism, indigenous tourism and tourism-poverty nexus along with a focus on social sustainability aspects of tourism micro-businesses and women empowerment in developing country contexts. Alongside, his contemporary research interest revolves around tourism crisis management with a focus on the refugee crisis and the crisis recovery issues in the hospitality industry.