

Riverine Tourism: Untapped Treasure of Bangladesh

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Abstract

Bangladesh being the biggest delta in the world and criss crossed by hundreds of rivers has an immense potential for riverine tourism. But even after 42 years of independence due to many reasons this sector is still in its budding stage. So far government has done very little to promote this sector; private entrepreneurs also have not been that much enthusiastic to come forward in this field. Current paper is an endeavour to explore and understand the prospects and the challenges of riverine tourism in Bangladesh. It also endeavours to understand various types of riverine tourism and their impacts on socio-economic life of the community concerned as well as on environment. Qualitative analytical method based on secondary data has been used in it. It is needless to state that the growth of riverine tourism in Bangladesh can play an important role in sustainable development of rural societies. If a proper marketing plan is formulated for riverine tourism, it could bring lots of benefit to our country and can function as an important tool for sustainable human development including poverty alleviation, employment generation, and development of rural areas. In fine, we have to raise our voice to protect our rivers from erosion, contamination and grabbing and then we will be able to promote our country through river based tourist destination.

Keywords: Riverine Tourism, River Cruise, Boat, River Rafting, Fishing, Bangladesh.

Introduction

Positioned between India and Myanmar, with the entire south edged by the Bay of Bengal, this South Asian country is criss-crossed by hundreds of rivers, making it an interesting delta. The rivers have not only created the alluvial plains of Bangladesh, they have also played an important role while forming the economic, cultural and social life of her people. They are the sources of joy as well as of misery to the people and the land. They have also played a significant role in the history of Bengal. Alexander the Great who marched upto North India and heard about the mighty waves of the Ganges dared not cross into this part of the subcontinent. The Mughals who conquered the rest of India were only marginally successful in their expeditions into Bengal. The rivers were the greatest barriers that puzzled the advancing troops of the Mughals. Centuries later, in 1971, it was the rivers that gave the Bangalee freedom fighters an edge over the Pakistani soldiers.

The rivers of Bangladesh are fascinating places which constitute a significant tourism resource of cultural heritage and natural environment. In other South Asian countries, river based tourism is not vastly developed, so it is a unique opportunity for Bangladesh. Bangladesh being the largest riverine delta of the world still looks like a magical tapestry of green woven intricately by

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unspoiled nature and presents a largely unexplored riverine tourism market with almost 100% of its potential waiting to be explored. Rivers, haors, biodiversity and natural beauty of the country could draw local and foreign tourists and help boost the country's tourism sector as well as the whole economy. Unfortunately, so far policy makers have paid little attention in the development of river tourism.

Literature Review

Bangladesh alone constitutes the largest deltaic formation of the world as three of the mighty rivers, the Ganges-Padma, the Brahmaputra-Jamuna and the Meghna, along with their tributaries flow through the landmass to reach the Bay of Bengal, making the area an ideal place for Riverine tourism. In spite of having tremendous prospects of riverine beauty, the concept of riverine tourism is still overlooked in Bangladesh. Very few papers have focussed on this issue in Bangladesh while quite a good number of studies have dealt with the similar issue from different perspectives from different other countries. Rivers are an important but surprisingly neglected aspect of the global tourism industry, and have apparently been of little interest to tourism scholars (Prideaux et al, 2009, p. 3). Especially in the South-Asian region river based tourism has not been developed yet. It is noted that river tourism comprises tourism *beside* the river and tourism *on* the river (Cooper & Prideaux, 2009, p. 258). Tourism *beside* the river represents hotel, casino and restaurant on the banks of river for instance, whereas tourism *on* the river represents cruise, waterway transportation and some water based adventurer tourism like river rafting. However, vacations are primarily motivated by *going away* from mundane circumstances, while nature-based tourism is motivated by *going towards* something such as the activity itself (Vespestad, 2010). In this regard, riverine tourism can be a feasible way of enjoying vacation as it provides nature and adventure simultaneously. A number of cities are built beside rivers where urban-river activities and lifestyles of local residents living next to the waterway are the interesting attractions to the visitors. In the countryside, rivers appeal to people because they retain much of their natural beauty and offer an opportunity for fishing, boating and other forms of recreation (Prideaux et al, 2009). Several existing direct relationships between tourism and rivers have been identified. First, rivers serve as a source of attractions and aesthetic appeal for tourists and a unique venue in which tourism might take place. Transportation corridor is the second role that river plays. Navigable rivers are a valuable means to any regions or countries for transportation of raw materials and manufactured products. Rivers are playing an additional role of transporting tourists on sightseeing cruises besides being a medium of trade and commerce. In rural and less developed regions, rivers have retained their natural characteristics, creating interest in rivers as eco-tourism and nature-based resources (Prideaux et al, 2009). In our neighbouring country India, some works have been done with emphasis on the river Ganga. Banerjee et al (2011) aims at the exploration of tourism, which acts to promote local economy, socio-cultural changes and life style of the people residing in and around the tourist locations in West Bengal. The study emphasizes renovating heritage coasts along the Ganges as well as developing a Marina with speed boats, village-sailing and cruise boats facilities. Mahapatra et al (2011) addresses the social and environmental impact of river rafting industry with special focus on river Ganges. Sati.V.P. examines the tourism practices and evaluates the possible enhancements

towards a sustainable tourism in the Uttaranchal Himalaya. River cruise and river rafting are identified as the main source of entertainment and complacency in this Indian subcontinent. Ali et al (2010) has undertaken a study to observe effective and efficient utilization of strategic management of tourism sector to raise Gross Domestic Product through which macroeconomic stability over the time period of the country can be improved. Recommendation has been made to develop river based tourism centering around Sunderban forest, Rangamati, etc. Sonoda et al (2013) highlights the Express Boat service between Jinghong, China, PRC and Chiang Sean, Thailand, and finds out both inhibiting and facilitating factors in promoting river tourism in that region. It is worth mentioning that, the express boat service in an untamed and pristine environment en route might be the case since rivers exude beauty, serenity and adventure that draw visitor's attention (Prideaux et al, 2009). To conclude, without any doubt, rivers are fascinating places, because of the natural charm and usefulness for a vast array of human activities; though the charm has not been explored to the fullest.

Objectives of the study

- To collect information on riverine tourism and to highlight different types of riverine tourism in Bangladesh.
- To analyze the impact of riverine tourism in the overall development context of Bangladesh.
- To identify the challenges faced by riverine tourism industry of Bangladesh.
- To provide necessary suggestions for the improvements of riverine tourism sector in Bangladesh.

Methodology

To understand the concept of riverine tourism and different elements linked to its promotion in Bangladesh, qualitative analysis method, based on primary and secondary data, has been used in this article. The primary data are based on observation of relevant sites and views of different agents and experts in this field including tour operators and individual tourists. The secondary data have been collected mainly from the publications of Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BPC), Bangladesh Bank, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Published reports, books, journal, daily newspaper and websites etc.

Riverine Tourism and Bangladesh

Bangladesh, an interesting delta with as many as 700 rivers and tributaries travelling along the water-ways is an experience not to be missed. A total of 57 international rivers, 54 from India and 3 from Myanmar, also snake along the countryside. All of which constitute a waterway of around 24,140 km. This land of rivers could offer its scenic beauty which is parallel to none and the picturesque pristine countryside to attract visitors from both within the country and abroad. Along with golden and intoxicating land, Bangladesh has long and wide beautiful rivers and scenic lakes

making an ideal location for long and languid river based tourism. The foreign tourists in particular are interested in exploring the people, local culture, nature and serene beauty of the rivers. They also show interests to hilly rivers and wetlands like Haor. All the opportunities to get away from the hectic urban life, to relax and revitalise in the tranquility of nature are provided by the rivers of Bangla. No other means is as good for tourism as river way because it provides the most flexible, comfortable and pleasant travel and serves the tourism purpose most. Many countries have already been utilizing the riverine entity as an alternate source of livelihood and employment. Bangladesh is yet in its nascent stage; but surely it has a lot to offer. Especially the blending of lush green countryside and serpentine rivers flowing across the country can offer different types of riverine tourism. The importance of developing waterways for passenger ferries, river cruise, water sport and tourism related activities are generally given emphasis under the headline of Riverine Tourism. Following types of Riverine Tourism can easily be promoted in Bangladesh:

River-Cruise

“River Cruise” is one of the most dynamic and fastest growing components of the leisure industry worldwide. The confluence of the White and Blue Nile rivers near Khartoum marks the beginning of major river cruise tourism and the cultural sites of antiquity traditionally associated with the river (River tourism, p.87). Bangladesh with its vast and beautiful coastline, virgin forests and undisturbed idyllic islands, rich historical and cultural heritage, can also emerge as an attractive destination for cruise tourists. However, despite the troubles, the intoxicating beauty of the rivers of our country is still very much alive and the winter presents the perfect opportunity to go for cruising in many rivers of our country.

Southern Bangladesh happens to be home to some of the most fascinating riverboats in the region, particularly the historic old paddlewheel service known as the Rocket. Built by the British in the dockyards of Calcutta, these four Mississippi-style paddlewheels have been plying the waters since the 1920s. With trips starting from Sadarghat of Dhaka, with stops in nearby islands, the Rocket Steamer cruise provides one of the best ways to experience the rivers of Bangladesh.

In order to satisfy thirst for thrills along with scenic beauty, cruise service into the heart of the Sundarbans should be taken. With all amenities provided, the cruise goes upstream to Herbaria Forest Station and also travels on the canals that snake around the home of the Royal Bengal Tigers. Along the journey, there will be stops at numerous points, including world heritage sites, century-old mosques and forest reserves.

There are also numerous cruises on the Shitalokkha River, the Buriganga and others. If one is interested in sight-seeing and learning the rich history of Bangladesh at the same time, opt for different service, which offers a Meghna Cruise with stops at the ruins of Panam City, Rupshi Jamdani Village and Islands. Shitalokkha river cruises travel upstream to the historic Murapara Palace, Sonargaon-Bengal's ancient capital, and the village of Demra Ghat.

The packages usually cover food, air-conditioned vehicle for transport to and from the boat, experienced guides and the most special attraction - folk music for on-board entertainment. Prices vary according to the number of people taking the cruise, destination, time period, package required, etc.

Traditional Boat

The beauty of riverine Bengal can best be experienced by travels by boat to enjoy the landscape, the biodiversity and the cultural historic features along the rivers. Pleasant boat journeys along the coast of the countryside offer excellent photographic opportunities.

Development of river based tourism can enable preserve the traditional boats in different regions of the country-Dingi, Sampan, Balam, Teddy, Jali, Ghasi, Dorakha, Kathami, Mallar, Panshi, Bedi, Kosha, Bhudi, Raptani, etc. In this regard, it may be mentioned that Tanguahaor of Sylhet is the only water body recognized as a World Heritage Site in Bangladesh. Everyday particularly during June-September period hundreds of domestic tourists visit the haor to enjoy its scenic beauty. They usually use local trawler boat for the trip.

Historically, the boatmen of Bengal make the leisurely boat rides unique. Their slow, uncluttered and philosophical outlook on life has been the subject of rich Bengali folklore. Traditional boat song, Bhatiyali, a form of folk music sung by the boatmen while going down streams of the river adds a flavor of spirituality and rusticity to the boat tours.

Boat races, boat show, seasonal restaurant or some other amenities on a boat can be offered to strengthen the role of boat while promoting tourism. In this regard Bangladesh might follow the neighbouring country India; where house-boat is used as an effective tool for promoting tourism in Kerala or Kashmir. In India, houseboats are common on the backwaters of Kerala, and on the Dal Lake near Srinagar in Jammu and Kashmir. These huge, slow-moving barges used for leisure trips have proved to be a major tourist attraction across the globe. Especially modified boat to serve the purpose of 'home' on water body is quite common in Australia, Canada, USA, Hong-Kong, Europe and some other parts of the world. In Germany the phenomenon of sharing the mode of travel between a boat and hiking or cycling is also taking place which is known as 'bootwandern'. This practice allows the passenger to stay on board during the night. On the Mississippi river in Iowa State of USA riverboat gambling has been made legal considering its growing popularity and its proximity to serve as a means to monitor illegal activities. From our perspective some forms of entertainment could be introduced to make boat an effective tourist attraction.

River Rafting

Rafting or white water rafting is the recreational outdoor activity of using an inflatable raft to navigate a river or other bodies of water. This is often done on white water or different degrees of rough water, in order to thrill and excite the raft passengers. The development of this activity as a leisure sport has become popular since the mid-1970s (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rafting>). With the intricate network of mountain stream flowing through a myriad of different colours of

rocky gorges, forests, flowers and high mountain villages, the hills provide ideal locations for the perfect water adventure.

The Himalayas cradle numerous rivers with slopes which drain them round the year. This abundance of mountain rivers make these locations as white water destination. However, in this subcontinent Bhutan, Srilanka, Nepal and India support some river tourism mainly with white water rafting when conditions permit. In India rafting is commonly exercised on the River Ganges near Rishikesh and the Beas River in Himachal Pradesh (Mahapatra et al, 2011). Several other facilities, such as Beach camping, Jungle camping are offered along with river rafting. The hilly region of Bangladesh is crossed by fast flowing rivers like Karnaphuli, Sangu, where river rafting or some other type of adventurous ride could be introduced. Jafong and Bandormon might be turned out as the ideal place for white water rafting.

Fishing

The Bengali and fish are inseparable. In every district of Bangladesh, there are numerous rivulets, ponds and streams where a variety of fishes are reared. This aspect of life can be well manipulated to attract the tourists. In this regards, Government may consider to adopt a number of measures. First it needs to identify a group of fishing villages for accelerated tourism development. The pivotal idea will be to construct rural fishermen's huts made of straw and bamboo alongside the water bodies so as to provide a rustic look to the tourists. Their unique folk songs and traditions should be showcased using the platform of the fishing village. For the diehard fishing and angling enthusiasts, leisurely boat rides on the water bodies may be encouraged and permission may be granted for fishing in the reserve waters, which will definitely come at price. The most common form of recreational fishing is done with a rod, reel, line, hooks and any one of a wide range of baits or lures such as artificial flies (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fishing>). Fishing equipment may be rented out to the tourists in order to heighten their touristy experience.

The impact of riverine tourism

Like other areas of tourism, riverine tourism also has some impacts, each of which would be multi-layered.

- Economic Impact
- Environmental Impact
- Socio-cultural Impact

As in other areas the impacts would be both positive and negative. The constant objective should be to endeavour to see how the positive impacts may be maximized and the negative impact minimized.

The economic impact

Riverine tourism has a great potential to contribute to the overall economic activities of the country. It helps promotion of business and employment opportunities to the local people. Apart

from this, many people are engaged as guides due to their familiarity and knowledge about the area. It also helps local residents to get job as food servers, retail clerks, and hospitality workers.

It is well known that tourism development has a direct impact on revenue and employment with the economic benefits having a cascading effect flowing down to different levels of society. The sector created 13.29 lakh jobs directly in 2011 or 1.9 percent of the country's total employment. According to the report, it will generate 18.4 lakh jobs by 2022. (Akter, 2012).

Reports suggest that over the years the number of tourist arrivals in Bangladesh has shown an increasing trend. But Bangladesh has not been able to reap the full benefits of it up to the desired level. In the year 2009, approximately 2,67,000 tourists visited Bangladesh (Source- World Bank) and it earned 5762.24 million taka (Source-Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation) whereas in 2010, 3,03,000 tourists visited Bangladesh contributing 5562.70 million taka to the domestic economy. Moreover, approximately 5.28 lakh foreign tourists visit Bangladesh along with 50 lakhs local tourists in 2012.

According to another report published by the World Travel and Tourism Council, in 2011, the travel and tourism sector accounted for Tk 18,250 crore or 2.2 percent of Bangladesh's gross domestic product. The amount is expected to rise by 6.1 percent to Tk 35,370 crore by 2022, according to the London-based institute.

However, it should be kept in mind that although riverine tourism is economically beneficial for Bangladesh, it is a two-edged sword which may damage many indigenous communities. The rural people have to depend on the urban entrepreneur, so the benefit may not reach them. Most of the facilities such as river cruise, house boat, resorts, hotels and tour companies belong mainly to urban investors who take away most of the profit. Moreover, the employment of immediate locals is less and mostly for low paying positions due to lack of sufficient skill related with river rafting, houseboat and other riverine amusement facilities. In Bangladesh developing the riverine tourism industry would demand major capital investment in terms of cruise terminal and other related infrastructural development of riverine landscapes.

The environmental impact

Tourism is generally considered a "clean" industry, one that is based on hotels, restaurants, shops and attractions, instead of factories. Areas with high-value natural resources, like rivers, lakes, waterfalls, mountains, unique flora and fauna, and great scenic beauty attract tourists and new residents (in-migrants) who seek emotional and spiritual connections with nature. Because these people value nature, rivers are protected, and kept away from further ecological decline. However, riverine tourism can also degrade an environment. The major environmental issues which are associated with riverine tourism include-

- Increasing demands on natural resources from development activities, including tourism;
- The inward penetration of higher salinity levels;
- The spread of waterborne diseases due to extensive embankment of former spread-out bodies of water;

- Water and soil pollution because of throwing polythene, wrappers and various kinds of bottles into the river by the tourists;
- Decline in fisheries due to human intervention; and

The socio-cultural impact

As in all other tourism activity Riverine tourism too would have a striking socio-cultural impact on the local community. Influxes of tourists bring diverse values to the community and influence behaviors and family life. Safety and health facilities and staffing tend to increase. Riverine tourism can also improve the quality of life in riverine landscapes by increasing the number of attractions, recreational opportunities, and services. Tourism offers the residents the opportunities to meet interesting people, make friendships, learn about the world, and expose themselves to new perspectives. Moreover, riverine tourism may create opportunity of working in own area which will reduce the proportion of migration along with urban poverty in Bangladesh.

Riverine tourism can appear to a community with a dark social and cultural side, too. Illegal activities tend to increase in the relaxed atmosphere of tourist areas. It is easier to be anonymous where strangers are taken for granted; bustling tourist traffic can increase the presence of smugglers and buyers of smuggled products. As local ethnic culture alters to fit the needs of tourism, language and cultural practices may change.

Marketing of Riverine Tourism

The rivers of Bangladesh are both a cultural and natural resource for recreation and tourism. Clearly, promotion and advertising play a very significant role in establishing riverine tourism in the market place. The recent campaign conducted by the Ministry of Tourism, where Bangladesh as a destination was promoted under the brand of ‘Beautiful Bangladesh’, was a huge success. It won recognition in the form of more tourists (especially, international ones) coming to Bangladesh to seek out its diversity. A similar strategy needs to be worked out to create a brand for the riverine tourism industry in Bangladesh.

Moreover, brochures and other promotional materials carrying the aspects of riverine tourism could be distributed through all foreign missions in Bangladesh. Though Bangladesh missions abroad aren’t involved with tourism-related activities, inter-ministerial coordination between the Ministry of Civil Aviation and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could pave the way for additional responsibility on the part of Bangladesh missions to do riverine marketing. In this regard, it may be noted that Bangladesh is the highest troop contributing country in the world. Thousands of Bangladeshis-both civilians and military-have been working in different United Nations Missions throughout the world. They can also play a very effective role to disseminate information about riverine tourism of Bangladesh to the respective countries. Participation in international tourism fairs, organizing events and exhibitions, publication of features and advertisements in trade journals would also enable the country to promote its riverine tourism products.

Challenges

River ways provide the most flexible, comfortable and pleasant travel and serve the tourism purpose best. But unfortunately this sector has failed to attract appropriate attentions from the relevant authorities of the government decade after decade. While observing the present scenario of several ghats, such as-Paturia, Daulatdia and talking to some tour operators and tourists the following challenges have been identified:

River pollution

Most of the rivers of Bangladesh are polluted because of industrial waste disposal, contamination of toxic and pesticide in the agricultural land, and human waste. Excessive industrial pollution has made the waters of the river so toxic that even the underground water of the areas on its banks has become poisonous. The water pollution also generates bad smell while travelling along the water-body. Some of the tourists, while talking to these authors, expressed their deep concerns about this issue, particularly mentioning about the Buriganga-Shitolokhya part. This is likely to badly affect the expansion of river tourism.

Loss of navigability

Tourism prospects of the country's riverine beauty do not only remain untapped but also face a steady decline of the inland river ways losing navigability and past glory due to lack of maintenance and desired services.

According to the river experts, tree felling, deforestation, drastic change in land use pattern, commercialization, and, above all, environmental degradation have resulted in massive siltation in the age-old rivers with population explosion during post-independent Bangladesh.

Vegetation cover on the land has depleted remarkably to make way for housing, roads, commercial set-up and unplanned industrialization replacing forests. To this added the massive erosion of soil along the river banks that has resulted in raising the beds of the rivers. With reduction in depth, the river current got sluggish causing recurrent increase in sediment deposition rate that ultimately results in loss of navigability in the river ways. Especially during winter travel along Dhaka-Barisal, Dhaka-Chadpur routes get disturbed because of this problem.

Moreover, the river ways channels have also lost navigability due to lack of regular capital dredging and maintenance for a long period of time. The last time that a dredger was procured for BIWTA was in 1975. After nearly four decades, three dredgers were procured and inducted in 2011 into the existing fleet of seven, most of which are rundown.

Neighbour Indian government policy has also been contributing to the loss of river navigability in Bangladesh. A number of rivers are dying out because of some devastating projects taken by Indian Government. In the last three decades more than 80 rivers have dried up due to the Farakka barrage built in 1974 on the Indian side of the Ganges, some 17 km off the border. Additionally, India has arbitrarily withdrawn water of several rivers including Surma, Kushiara

and Mahananda. Moreover, they have constructed a number of sluice gates on the rivers Senoa, Jamuna, Panga, Pan, Hatoori and Sui (situated near Panchagarh). All these have been badly affecting the navigability of the rivers in Bangladesh. Meanwhile, a super-ambitious plan of India to link up the major common rivers flowing from the Himalayas and to divert them to the drought-prone areas in the south is on the drawing board of the policy makers. Experts think that if this plan is implemented, it would cast a serious impact on Bangladesh. They further estimate that even a 10 to 20 percent decrease in the water flow to Bangladesh could leave vast areas of the country dried out for most of the year.

River Grabbing

Encroachment of public property by unscrupulous people is not a new phenomenon, but what is deplorable is that even rivers, canals and waterways, that happen to be the lifeline of a village or a city, are being literally killed by being filled up, out of sheer commercial motive. And this, unfortunately, happens with the connivance and acquiescence of government agencies. The very fact that such a vast tract of the Shitalakkhya has been filled up, and it is not an isolated case, it being a common phenomenon with many other rivers in our country.

Over the years, the total length of river routes has shrunk to around 3,000 kilometers which was used to be 24,000 kilometers four decades ago.

River accidents galore

There have been no less than 390 launch accidents over the last 25 years costing some 3,700 lives; and nearly 500 people remain listed as missing. While these are official statistics, unofficial figures put the number of casualties as high as 5,500. In most cases, major accidents, however, are caused by collisions of passenger vessels with nearly submerged unauthorized cargo vessels at night time. However, rate of accident increases during monsoon. Accidents occur most frequently in Dhaka-Chadpur route. According to some tour operators, due to the risk arising from seasonal factor river cruise services into the Sunderban are organized only in winter.

The latest accident happened in the Mrigmari area of East Sundarbans where an oil tanker, Southern Star-7 carrying 3.58 lakh liters of furnace oil and eight crew members sank in Shela river on December 9 2014. It capsized being hit by another cargo ship coming from the opposite side in dense fog of early morning. All the oil spilled into the river due to the accident. The oil spread towards the deep of the forest through various canals connected with Shela river. The oil moved towards 20 kilometer long area on the east and west of Shela covering one kilometer on either banks. In a word, oil spilled towards 50-60 kilometer area. However, the oil slick will have a severe impact on the aquatic lives and the mangrove plants grown along the shorelines where the thick layer of oil has gathered. Fish and other aquatic lives would start dying in a day or two while the mangroves might start dying after a month. The spill will also cause a huge problem on the shorelines of canals and rivers the animals of the mangrove forest drink from. But the most horrific thing is that the oil would be in the ecosystem for up to 50 years.

Lack of safety and security

Safety and security of the tourists are major concerns to develop any kind of tourism in Bangladesh. People in general and tour operators lament the decline on lack of safe and tourist-friendly river vessels. Most of the river vessels run on private ownership along the waterways are either crowded or in poor condition or perceived as unsafe. Therefore, tourists do not rely on them.

Inadequate and poor passenger service by BIWTA

The paddle-run rocket steamer services of BIWTA had a bright business prospect but the regal legacy of the colonial period has experienced consistent decline over the past century. The foreign tourists in particular are interested in paddle steamers because of its legacy, antique appeal and convenience. Paddle steamer is popularly believed to be safer than propeller vessels. Paddle steamer service along the Dhaka-Khulna route is very few of the inbound services that the local tour operators render. But unfortunately, after nearly a century of plying the rivers of Bangladesh, the once majestic paddle steamers are now pale with worn-out engines and failing paddles.

Moreover, the passenger service now is neither regular nor dependable, as the rundown vessels may break down anytime halfway. The steamers are in poor condition with patchy maintenance and recurrent repair.

Inconvenient schedule of the river vessels

Though private operators have introduced some glitzy launches recently on Dhaka-Barisal route catering day-to-day passenger services, they do not meet tourist purposes of delighting in captivating riverine beauty, as those ply during night time and do not cover an entire route covering Dhaka, Barisal, Morelganj, Mongla and Khulna in one go. A number of tourists mentioned to these authors that just because of the timing of the launch services from Dhaka to Barisal and other southern districts, they cannot enjoy the trip to the fullest as they are deprived of appreciating the riverine beauty of the landscape. On the other hand, the ferry services are also affected by many unwanted hassles like strong water current and traffic congestion for which, sometimes, travelers have to wait for hours after hours to get through to the other side of the river. This causes many people disincline to go to the riverside with their private vehicle to enjoy the serene beauty of nature.

Lack of marketing activities

The lack of development of the river tourism industry in Bangladesh can be attributed to lack of publicity and marketing activities. We lag behind in projecting our riverine landscapes to international tourists through advertisements in international print and electronic media, as our neighboring countries do. The tour operators or travels agents have paid very little attention in this field. One of the tour operators mentioned that they provide river cruise services along the Sunderban only in the winter. Though the websites of the travel agencies advertise about river cruise services throughout the year, they offer it only if any company or office hires them.

Suggestions/Recommendations

It is indispensable to take care of every sector of the developing country like Bangladesh. Riverine tourism is not an exception in this regard. The concerned authority should take necessary steps to identify the problems to single out the shortcomings first and chalk out necessary measures to harness the potential of this sector accordingly. In this regard, following steps are recommended to be addressed by the authority:

- To attract tourists the concerned authorities should take up some measures like dredging the rivers, maintaining water flow through agreement with neighbouring countries, and increasing river cruise facilities.
- Tourists can also be attracted by establishing resorts nearby river banks, discovering char, fishing facility, water biking, and setting up floating hotels and restaurants.
- Safety and security of the tourists should be given the utmost priority. Forming only tourist police cannot solve the problem. Proper orientation should be provided to police so that they can behave properly with tourists.
- The rivers of our country represent Bangladesh, its culture, tradition as well as the geographical nature. To make these rivers suitable and attractive enough we have to encompass some activities like- River protection policy.
- Farakka dam and Tipaimukh dam are two devastating projects for rivers of Bangladesh imposed by India. Our political leadership should take initiatives to get the proper portion of water; otherwise it will be the misfortune for our nation.
- Projects like Ganges barrage can stop the dying effects of the river system in the south-west of the country. It can mainly store waters of the monsoon seasons and then route them into the rivers with lean flows during the dry season.
- Government should undertake different policies and strategies that will strengthen management of flood and erosion risks, and teach local communities to operate and maintain flood and riverbank protection infrastructure.
- National River Protection Commission should work actively to save the river from pollution and encroachment.
- Trained Human resource will be needed to preserve and operate water based tourism services.
- To attract more tourists the positioning and promotion efforts would have to be supported through a proactive media plan which would cover both domestic as well as international markets. The Media Plan will cover audio-visual presentations and films, out-door advertising, organizing events & exhibitions, preparing attractive brochures, leaflets, posters, hand-outs, TV inserts etc. The department of tourism would need to identify the media requirements and provide for a suitable yearly budget for this activity.
- It would also be useful to consider appointing a specialized marketing and brand promotion agency for riverine tourism to draw up the marketing strategies, the media plan, the brand promotion approach etc. in a phased manner. This agency would also take care of advertising and promotion, events and festivals, all audiovisual and publicity

material, advising the state in participating in useful international festivals and forums etc.

- Marine museum can be established in the river cruises showcasing the culture and history of Bangladesh.
- Another important issue is to maintain political stability in Bangladesh to attract tourist. A large number of local and foreign tourists do not feel like visiting Bangladeshi tourist places due to political instability.
- 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.
- Committed efforts are needed from both public and private sectors especially Public Private Partnership (PPP) initiated programs for full development and utilization of the potentials of the riverine tourism industry.

Conclusion

Forty years have elapsed since the start of Bangladesh's tourism industry, yet we see it in a budding position in comparison to our neighboring countries, such as India, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Nepal who attract substantial number of tourists every year and thus generates huge amount of foreign currencies. Despite having all the potential to flourish, riverine tourism in this country has been growing at a very slow pace. Bangladesh has lots of rivers around it. The features of rivers greatly differ from one to another. Compared to other countries we can say that we have beautiful scenery in the bank of the river. It is one of our strong competitive advantages. In other South Asian countries river based tourism is not vastly developed, so it is a unique opportunity for Bangladesh. If a proper marketing plan is done for riverine tourism, it could bring lots of benefit to our country and can be an important mechanism for sustainable human development including poverty alleviation, employment generation, development of rural areas and progression of women and other disadvantaged groups in the country. And finally, we have to raise our voice to protect our rivers from erosion, contamination and grabbing and then we will be able to promote our country through river based tourist destination.

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