



Tourism enriches

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M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

SEPTEMBER 27 is observed as World Tourism Day. "Tourism enriches" has been selected as the theme of the WTD 2006 by the World Tourism Organization (WTO). The theme has been chosen to launch an awareness campaign stressing the importance of tourism as a powerful economic and cultural instrument which enriches individuals, families, and communities throughout the world.

According to WTO, the aims of the "tourism enriches" campaign are:

- To promote tourism as a basic human right, and way of life which enriches individuals, family, societies and nations;
- To stimulate communication about the benefits of tourism as the most prospective economic activity for the local communities and countries;
- To enhance cooperation between destinations, and the tourism industry with the local, regional and international media; and
- To link individual tourism entities to the larger community of international tourism.

Economic enrichment

International tourism is the world's largest export earner, and an important factor in the balance of payments of many countries. According to a report of the WTO, the contribution international tourism makes to world exports stands at 8 percent, which is more than the respective contributions of the automotive industry, chemicals, or food and fuels.

The advantage of tourism as an export industry is that it earns foreign exchange, which is so vital for development, without encountering the multitude of problems that other export industries experience.

WTO sources reveal that tourism is one of the top five export categories for as many as 83 percent of the countries, and is the main source of foreign exchange earnings for at least 38 percent of the countries.

In the Maldives, in 2003, foreign exchange earnings from tourism accounted for over 90 percent of the services receipts of the balance of payments. Foreign exchange earnings from tourism in India have shown phenomenal growth, achieving an increase of 35 percent in 2004, and 20 percent in 2005 over the previous year, taking India's foreign exchange earnings from \$3.5 billion in 2003 to \$5.7 billion in 2005.

In 2000, foreign exchange earnings from tourism in Tanzania represented around 40 percent of the country's total earnings from the export of goods and services. The Malaysian tourism industry is one of the major foreign exchange earners, second only to its manufacturing industry. More such instances may be cited.

Tourism is an important job factor, employing millions of people around the world. For example, tourism generates about 19 million direct and above 25 million indirect jobs in India. In 2004, nearly 3 million persons were employed, directly or indirectly, by the tourism industry in Thailand. In Gambia, 30 percent of the workforce depends directly or indirectly on tourism.

WTO sources suggest that tourism supports some 7 percent of the world's workers. What is important to note is that there is a greater uptake of jobs by women than in any other sector. The percentage of female employment in tourism industry varies enormously country-wise, ranging from over 60 percent in Bolivia to fewer than 10 percent in some countries.

Rural opportunities

Tourism jobs and business are usually created in the compara-

tively less developed regions of a country, helping to equalize economic opportunities throughout a nation and providing an incentive for residents to remain in rural areas rather than move to overcrowded cities. Tourism can help create important opportunities to diversify the local economy. It can often be developed in poor and marginal areas which have few other export and diversification options.

Tourists are often attracted to remote areas because of their high cultural, wildlife, and landscape values. Tourists, local or international, prefer economic accommodation, with security and satisfactory hygienic conditions, at the tourist spots.

In a well established developing country destination like Gambia an increasing number of tourists stay in locally owned accommodation. In Thailand, the government and the NGOs have undertaken projects aimed at community involvement in tourism through "home stays" as a tool for equitable income distribution and poverty alleviation. Zambian tourism is primarily rural based, therefore, its growth has a great impact on the development of the rural areas in that country.

Travel and tourism stimulate enormous investments in new infrastructure, most of which helps to improve the living conditions of local residents as well as tourists. Infrastructural improvements such as roads, electricity, telephone, public transport networks, better water and sewerage systems, waste disposal etcetera can improve the quality of life for residents as well as facilitate tourism.

The tourism industry provides governments with a huge amount of tax revenue each year, which adds to the national GDP. According to World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTTC), contribution from tourism to GDP in

Thailand will increase from 11.7 percent in 2005 to 12.6 percent in 2014. In 2004, earnings from the Malaysian travel and tourism industry contributed 14.7 percent to the national GDP. In Tanzania, earnings from tourism contributed 9 percent to the national GDP in 1999 compared with only 1.5 percent in 1990. The WTTTC estimates that travel and tourism's direct, indirect, and personal tax contribution worldwide was over \$800 billion in 1998 — a figure it expects to double by 2010.

Cultural boost

But enrichment is not just economic. The local culture receives a boost when authorities restore monuments, open museums and establish natural parks to lure visitors. More importantly, tourism is a human history.

Fa-Hien (405-411) and Hiuen-Tsang (629-649), the earliest Chinese travelers to visit the Indian sub-continent during the rule of Chandragupta II and Harshavardhana, respectively, have left us reliable accounts of the politico-socio-economic and religious conditions of the sub-continent during the period of their visits.

Marco Polo (1254-1324), a Venetian traveler, journeyed through Asia for 24 years, reached China and became a confidant of the Chinese ruler Kublai Khan (1214-1294). He traveled the whole of China and returned to tell the tale, which became "the greatest travelogue." More examples may be cited.

Tourism enriches with cultural, environmental and social awareness. Tourism brings peace and cooperation among nations, and builds bridges. While speaking to more than 60 tourism ministers from Muslim countries in Baku, Azerbaijan in the second week of this September, Francesco Frangialli, WTO secretary general, called on world leaders for strengthening tourism links to promote cross cultural understanding, and to use the power of tourism to build new global bridges of understanding between states.

Now, let us have a look at the tourism sector in Bangladesh. It does not present a pleasant picture. International tourist arrivals in 2001 stood at 207,199. Available sources suggest that the number stood at 207,662 in the year 2005. This means an addition of only 463

foreign tourists in four years. The meagre foreign exchange earnings due to low arrival of foreign tourists, particularly western tourists, represent one percent of Bangladesh's total export economy. Direct and indirect employment in the tourism sector is slightly over 100,000 and 200,000 respectively, and this is a discouraging figure against the country's total labour force of 75 million or so.

The question that arises is: why is there such a low arrival of foreign tourists in spite of the existence of tourism products such as the world's longest unbroken beach, the world's largest mangrove forest, riverine beauty, third century BC archaeological sites, etc.

The answer to the question may be found in the problems and constraints faced by the country's tourism sector, and these are: (a) Bangladesh's image problem abroad as a tourist destination; (b) lack of knowledge among the planners and policy makers about the fast growing tourism industry in the world, and of its role as an important earner of foreign exchange; (c) discontinuity in the implementation of policies and programs for tourism promotion with the change of governments; (d) insufficient infrastructural facilities such as roads, railway, air and riverine communication, and lack of coordination among the government agencies responsible for their improvement; (e) poor investment from private sector; (f) lack of encouragement to foreign investors to develop tourism in isolated islands such as Saint Martin's, Sonadia, etc (especially for the foreign tourists); (g) lack of appropriate steps for promotion of rural based tourism; (h) lack of skilled and professional manpower; and (i) lack of easy availability of visa for regional and international tourists.

If Bangladesh can solve the above problems and constraints on a priority basis, provide incentives to foreign investors to develop island tourism, and promote rural based tourism, she will shortly become an important destination for regional and international tourists. Tourism will enrich Bangladesh, and the observance of WTD 2006 will be meaningful.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary to the government and former Chairman, Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation.

But does it enrich Bangladesh?

FARUQUE HASAN

THIS year the theme of the World Tourism Day is "Tourism Enriches."

Tourism enriches with the economy and the culture of a country. It brings openness and friendliness among the peoples of the world. International tourism is the world's largest export earner, and an important factor in the balance of payments of many countries.

In-bound tourism is an export for a country, as the country earns foreign exchange from the tourists it receives. With the dollars a country earns from the in-bound tourism, it may pay many of its import bills, thus tourism may become an important factor in the balance of payments of many countries. All these important factors about tourism have, unfortunately, been evading us. Till now we have failed to grasp the benefits of tourism.

Our performance in tourism is dismal. In the year 1998, Cambodia, once known as the killing fields, received 96,000 foreign tourists. In that year, Bangladesh received around 150,000 foreign tourists. Last year, Cambodia received more than 1,800,000 tourists, and we, in turn, received a little bit more than 200,000. In the year 2004, Malaysia earned the US dollar equivalent of Taka thirty billion from tourism; the amount is more than half of the total sum of our national budget for the year of 2006-2007. The statistics speak for themselves.

The economies of Jordan, Egypt, Maldives, Cyprus, and many other countries solely or largely depend on the earnings from tourism.

Why are we lagging behind in tourism? The answer is very simple. Our tourism development activities evolve around our desire of getting domestic media coverage; though it does not help us a dime in our efforts to attract foreign tourists.

Why is our showing so poor? What do not we have to attract foreign tourists? The single largest Buddhist monastery of the world, Paharpur Mahavihara, is located in Bangladesh. Two-thirds of the

world's largest mangrove forest, the Sunderbans, is our treasure. This forest has the largest wild population of the Royal Bengal Tigers. We have got the longest unbroken sea beach in the world. Our landscape is evergreen under the sun almost all round the year. Our people are hospitable. Our country is well connected by air with the outside world. The road communications inside the country are good enough to take the tourists to the tourism attractions of the country. In which country in the world can one enjoy such a glowing sunset as in Bangladesh? What more do we need to attract the imagination of the international tourists?

Some of us have the misconception about tourism. Whenever they think of tourism, they think of nightclubs, bars, massage parlours, etc. In the year 2005, the total number of international tourist arrivals was 880 million. The tourists who belong to the eco-tourism and responsible tourism segments of this huge international tourism market do not at all seek nightlife in the countries they visit. They seek only to experience the nature, culture, and heritage of their destination countries. And the volume of these segments of the international tourism market is no less than 150 million at this moment. The number of eco-tourists and responsible tourists has been increasing at the rate of more than 10 percent a year. Our national tourism marketing strategy should make these segments of the international tourist market as the target, not the whole of the market.

Our country has a negative image of a country of flood and famine in the outside world, especially in those fifteen developed countries which generates eighty percent of the total international tourists. The photographs we print in our tourism brochures and posters and put on our websites confirm our image as an extremely poverty-stricken country, as well as a country of primitive society.

We boast of projecting Dhaka as a city of rickshaws. Anybody who has not visited Bangladesh, looking at a picture in brochures, post-

ers, websites, of the Dhaka city swarming with rickshaws, will think that not a single car plies on the streets of this city. This is how we are projecting our country to the outside world, and trying to attract foreign tourists. Projecting our country in such a light for the last 35 years, we have not been able to attract even 5,000 leisure tourists a year. Now it is the high time to change our conception about how to portray our country to the eyes of the foreign tourists. Do we know that Dhaka city is becoming a city of skyscrapers? Why shall we not highlight this feature of Dhaka city in our tourism marketing efforts?

The rally on World Tourism Day (September 27) and tourism posters on the walls in the Dhaka city will not help as to get a single more foreign tourist. We need to take pragmatic steps to increase international tourist flow to our country.

Cambodia has its tourism websites in eight languages; Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia in 12 languages, and we have ours only in one language, in English. Once we were ruled by the English speaking colonialists; it does not mean that this language is good enough to market our tourism products in the non-English speaking countries, which belong to the top 15 tourist generating countries in the world.

If we want to increase tourism in our country, we need to motivate our people at our embassies and high commissions abroad that tourists are our "paying guests," not adversaries, so there is no credit in refusing them visas to come to our country. To get the enormous benefit of tourism, our government needs to shed its "policy of reciprocity" regarding issuance of visa to foreign nationals.

"Tourism Enriches" -- let the theme of this year's World Tourism Day come true in Bangladesh.

Faruque Hasan is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Not asking for the moon

ABMS ZAHUR

REFORM is a continuous process, nothing is perfect in this world. As such, the scope for reform to improve always remains. The apprehension of the BNP-led alliance government vis-a-vis reform in the election commission and caretaker government suggests its lack of confidence in facing the next election because of its poor performance during the last 58 months.

Two-thirds majority in the parliament has given the alliance government a unique opportunity to amend the constitution where necessary to make it more pliable and effective. This was not possible for the last AL government because AL was holding barely a marginal majority in the last parliament. Thus frequent complaints by Khaleda Zia as to why reforms were not considered by AL

during its regime are not at all appropriate.

At this fag end of the 4-party alliance tenure, it sounds puzzling as to why the prime minister is boasting so much about her government and trying to dictate terms to the opposition 14-party alliance who are fully aware of her achievements as well as failures during the last 58 months. Would it not be foolish to assume that all wisdom lies with the 4-party alliance and the rest are stupid enough to believe that she has been able to fulfil the commitments she made, and that only a minor part of her commitments remains to be implemented?

Even if we accept that the government has been able to perform some major development works, how can we ignore the hard facts of unprecedented price hike of essential items (mainly because of government's faith in so called trader-friendly

philosophy) resulting in complete domination by trade syndicates, rather high inflationary pressure, unabated corruption (with non-functional ACC), inefficient bureaucracy (mainly because of extra-ordinary politicisation), increasing police atrocities, miserable failure in separating judiciary from executive, and failure to appoint ombudsmen? And what about the problem of unemployment? Many complain that it is extremely difficult to get job without graft.

Thus poor people are badly affected. If development means only suffering for them, how can they appreciate such development? The clappings she gets are mostly from the hired crowd and the party activists. Very few common people (non-party) attend political party meetings these days.

Thus it is hard to reject allegation of apprehending election engineer-

ing or rigging. In Magura election (during her first regime), it was alleged that Hindu voters were not permitted to vote freely. Thus there was no fair and free election. Such election resulted in the creation of non-party caretaker government.

What we saw and heard about Dhaka-10 by-election under this government compels us to conclude that it is indeed difficult to hold free and fair election even under a caretaker government if it can be influenced by BNP or for that matter any other party in power.

The "incompetent and biased" chief election commissioner has not yet been able to produce an acceptable voter list despite an expenditure of Tk 97 crores. In fact the CEC has already made himself controversial due to his peculiar handling of the voter list. If he really had such sense of dignity as high as expected from a judge of the Supreme Court he would

have resigned at the quickest possible opportunity. Contrary to such expectation he has been able to create three posts of election commissioners to establish himself firmly.

Even though outside observers agree to the need for reforms of electoral roll, Election Commission, caretaker government, the BNP chairperson says that AL's proposal for reforms are nothing short of obstructing the progress of democracy in Bangladesh. BNP's claim for introducing multi-party democracy appears meaningless when we see that even the party itself is not run democratically. Maintaining of Hawa Bhaban office indicates that the party is run by the chosen few and all powers lies with the chairperson.

In parliamentary democracy, it is most unusual if the largest opposition boycotts a national election. In this case, as we see, the opposition is not asking for the moon. Its proposals

aim at reforming the Election Commission (long overdue) and the caretaker government.

The AL struggled hard to include the provision for caretaker government in the constitution in 1996 for free and fair holding of national elections. As long as Election Commission works as a functioning division in the Prime Minister's Office it cannot be independent. Its secretariat must be removed from the administrative control of the PMO. It must be given financial independence. To make the commission really effective, there should be a special unit to prevent the candidates from using black money and muscle. Giving of power to the commission to adjudicate should also be considered so that it may penalise instantly violations in the course of election.

At this critical juncture it would be rather wrong to assume that 4-party

alliance would be able to hand over power to the caretaker government under Justice Hasan who would hold election on the basis of the current voter list (which allegedly includes more than 10 million fake voters) under the present CEC (who already has established himself as incompetent and biased). Instead of adopting Machiavellian technique to fool the opposition, BNP must realise the importance of reaching an understanding on reforming the CEC and the caretaker government, if necessary through mediation of a third party.

The US government, it appears, is showing great interest in Bangladesh election. The US ambassador has already had discussion with major parties about dialogue on reform of the EC and the CTG. She has volunteered for mediation between AL and BNP, and it is

understood that both the parties are receptive to the offer for mediation.

Only five weeks are left for the ruling 4-party alliance to hand over power to the caretaker government. Suddenly the secretary general of BNP had to go to Singapore for medical checkup. We do not know as to whether he would be able to start dialogue soon. Meanwhile, the 14-party alliance is going ahead with its program for making caretaker government (if at all set up under Justice Hasan) non-functional. In this crisis hour, let us hope that patriotic leaders like Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia would carefully judge the situation to refrain from taking measures to push the country to a disastrous situation.

ABMS Zahur is a retired Joint Secretary.

The holy month of Ramadan

SYED ASHRAF ALI

RAMADAN, the ninth month in the Islamic calendar, occupies a unique place in the annals of history. It was in this glorious month that Hazrat Ibrahim (AS) was blessed with the divine Sahifa. It was in this month of divine majesty that the holy Tourat reached mankind through Hazrat Musa (AS).

It was again in this month of sublime excellence that the sacred Zabur saw the light of day through Hazrat Daud (AS), and Hazrat Isa (AS) had the privilege and honour of receiving the divine revelation of the holy Injil in this auspicious month of Ramadan.

And last, but not the least, it was in this month that the revelation of the Holy Quran com-

menced on the sacred night of Lailat-ul-Quadr. Sura Baqara testifies to the sanctity and excellence of this sacred month when it declares in unequivocal terms: "Ramadan is the (month) in which was sent down the Quran, as a guide to mankind, also clear (signs) for guidance and judgment (between right and wrong)." (2:185).

Ramadan is derived from the word Ramz which means to burn, to scorch. The root meaning of Ramadan is excessiveness of heat; the month was so-called because "when they changed the names of the months from the ancient language they named them according to the seasons in which they fell, and this month agreed with the days of excessive heat." Thomas Patrick Hughes in his book, Dictionary of Islam, corroborates this claim when he

says: "The month is said to have been so-called because it used (before the change of the calendar) to occur in the hot season, or because the month's fast is supposed to burn away the sins of men."

Roza is a Persian word. Its equivalent in Arabic is al-Siyam. Although "fasting" and Roza are synonymous, Roza or al-Siyam must not be equated with normal fasting. There is a gulf of difference between Roza in Ramadan and mere abstinence from food and drinks. Al-Siyam is something sublime, much nobler, more exalted and majestic.

"It is an armour," declares the holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), "with which one protects oneself" (Bukhari). It calls for full exercise of self-restraint of all the senses and limbs -- a total and absolute control of all evil acts and desires,

control of not only wrath, malice, arrogance, greed, jealousy, hatred and enmity, but also of all indecent and unholy dreams and desires. The holy Prophet (pbuh) ordains: "So let not him (who fasts) utter immodest (or foul) speech, nor let him act in an ignorant manner; and if a man quarrels with him or abuses him, he should say twice: 'I am fasting.'" (Bukhari).

Al-Siyam or Roza during the holy month of Ramadan, one of the five pillars of Islam, is obligatory for every Muslim provided he or she is in full possession of his or her faculties. There are, however, exemptions for temporary causes. The exemptions clearly signify that Allah never wants His bands to suffer and undergo self-torture. The Holy Quran testifies: "Allah does not want to put you to difficulties. (He wants you) to

complete the prescribed period and to glorify him in that he has guided you; and perchance ye shall be grateful." (2:185).

Al-Siyam, or fasting, is indeed an ancient form of worship, prescribed for the Muslims as well as other nations which preceded us, ever since the time of Hazrat Adam (AS). Islam introduced a new meaning, a new vision, a new idea, a new spirit into the institution of fasting. Fasting was blessed with systematic regulation, a scientific method, a noble justification. In the days before the holy Prophet (pbuh) fasting meant the suffering of some privation in the hours of mourning and sorrow. Islam introduced a revolutionary innovation -- Siyam stood not for mere suffering or abstinence but was an institution for the moral upliftment and spiritual elevation of the human soul.

Fasting, in the light of Islam, helps one to overcome lust and thereby sets him/her at the entrance to the road leading to perfection -- to be achieved through prayers and penance, Taqwa and Tarawith, contemplation and acts of charity, total restraint and abstinence from all evil acts and thoughts.

Al-Siyam is indeed something unique. It enjoys, in the eyes of Allah, a divine grace unparalleled by any other act of piety or worship. According to a Qudsi Hadith (utterances attributed to Allah outside the Holy Quran), the most Gracious and the most Merciful Allah, in his infinite Mercy, declares: "A man's work belongs to him. A good deed is repaid from tenfold to seven hundred times. Fasting belongs to me and I repay." (Bukhari and Muslim).

Salman al-Farisi (RA) told of

Allah's Messenger (pbuh) saying in a sermon which he delivered to them on the last day of Sha'ban: "A great month, a blessed month, a month containing a night which is better than a thousand nights has approached you people. God has appointed the observance of fasting during it as an obligatory duty, and the passing of its night in prayer as a voluntary practice.

If someone draws near to God during it with some good act he will be like one who fulfils an obligatory duty in another month, and he who fulfils an obligatory duty in it will be like one who fulfils seventy obligatory duties in another month. It is the month of endurance, and the reward of endurance is paradise. It is the month of sharing with others, and a month in which the believer's provision is increased. If someone gives one who has been

fasting something with which to break his fast it will provide forgiveness of his sins and save him from hell, and he will have a reward equal to his without his reward being diminished in any respect.... It is a month whose beginning is Mercy, whose middle is Forgiveness, and whose end is Freedom from hell." (Baihaqi in Shu'ab al-Iman).

Ramadan has come back once again with all its pristine glory and spiritual excellence to teach us self-restraint and to provide us with a unique opportunity to receive divine mercy. Let us rise to the occasion and celebrate it in all sobriety and in a befitting way through prayers and penance, charity, and benevolence.

Syed Ashraf Ali is former DG of Islamic Formation Bangladesh.