

Travel through river delights

KOWSHER JAHAN KHALED

RIVERS are delightful places, offering both natural attraction and utility for a vast range of human activities.

Throughout history, rivers have been used as transport routes, as food sources and in more recent times, as places to visit and make merry. But surprisingly, there has been a little recognition of the role of rivers in the tourism industry, a gap which the public and private sectors can fill jointly.

The use of rivers is increasing as people begin to appreciate the amenities of river views and tourism operators are realising the turnover of river cruising. Using rivers instead of abusing those will become an important issue in future as demand for this endless resource goes up with growing population and a shift in their taste and lifestyle.

In many regions, cities and towns and their cultural landscapes intermingle in such a way that it creates a unique urban setting. And in rural and

other less-developed regions, rivers have preserved their natural distinctiveness, creating interest among people as ecotourism and nature-based resources.

The most important part of river tourism is the natural feature of water, which is the most popular natural setting for amusement and rest. Even short periods near water have a useful calming impact on people. This is why, water-based tour operators offer features in different forms of rivers, canals, lakes, waterfalls and beaches. If water is not accessible in a normal condition, man-made landscaping including ponds, fountains, swimming pools and fake waterfalls are offered to appeal to tourists.

Bangladesh is a land of rivers as the country has around 700 rivers including tributaries, according to Banglapedia.

The rivers increase in size and numbers from the north-west of the country to the southeast.

The total length of all rivers, streams, creeks and channels is around 24,140 kilometres. In terms of size and length, some of these rivers are among the largest on the earth.

The country alone constitutes the largest delta on the earth as three of the major rivers -- the Padma, the Meghna and the Jamuna -- run through the land towards the Bay of Bengal, making Bangladesh an ideal place for both riverine and eco-tourism.

The serene lifestyle of the people living on the riverbanks, diversity of fauna and flora and the isolated char lands are the major products the eco-tourism or river tourism market can offer.

The network of the rivers with hundreds of busy village markets, vast green fields, river ports, fishing and cruising activities, plying of boats, and occasional fairs on the banks of the rivers are some common and natural recreational attrac-



Structures such as brick kilns on the riverbanks not only spoil the natural view of a river but also pollute environment.

TRIUNE



Around 700
rivers and tributaries

Total length around 24,140
kilometres

In a country of 143,998
square kilometres

1
river in 205.71 square kilometres

THE GOVT SHOULD

- Ensure navigability of the rivers
- Keep the views of the rivers natural
- Go for proper branding, marketing and campaign
- Strengthen the tourism board
- Introduce on-arrival visas and simplify visa rules
- Ease traffic congestions on roads
- Improve the image of the country abroad

tions.

So ensuring the natural views of the rivers is important to bring more people to river tourism, said Kazi Wahidul Alam, a tourism analyst and editor of The Bangladesh Monitor, a fortnightly travel journal.

In Dubai, Mumbai and other developed cities, the banks of the rivers are arranged in such a way that those really give pleasure to tourists during river cruise.

On the banks of the rivers around the Dhaka city, a huge number of brick kilns and industries have been set up. These structures coupled with indiscriminate sand lifting spoil the natural views of the rivers.

"The government should be careful about allowing these structures and activities on the riverbanks if it wants to develop river tourism as a successful product."

Another major barrier to river tourism is a lack of navigability of the rivers, especially of those around the Dhaka city.

Some companies, who used to operate river cruises from Ashulia, were forced to go to Aricha as the river in Ashulia lost navigability.

Bringing adequate navigability to Turag, Buriganga, Dhaleshwari, Balu and Sitalakshya will help river tourism and river cruises thrive centring the Dhaka city, Alam said.

Traffic congestion should be eased as well.

"If you have to spend two hours to go to Demra or Ashulia from Mothijheel due to traffic jam, you will lose interest in a river cruise."

The government can introduce a separate and jam-free lane for the tour operators to give a boost to river tourism, he said.

The analyst also stressed on-arrival visas and simplifying the visa procedures to attract more tourists.

He gave example of Dubai, which attracts around 4-4.5 million tourists a year.

"Dubai is not even a country

and its population is only 3-4 lakh. The people of Dubai need to take visa to go to the UK, but the UK people do not need to obtain visa to go to Dubai," Alam said.

"Unless the government allows on-arrival visas, the tourist flow will not increase."

The tourism board of the government should be strengthened and run by professionals. The government should also ensure more participation of the private sector while framing any policy for the development of the sector, he said.

The tourism board should have accountability and the board members should have marketing background; they should know how to market a tourism product, he added.

There should be proper branding of the country. The tourism business in Malaysia thrived due to its "Malaysia -- Truly Asia" campaign.

Bangladesh needs such a branding and adequate campaign, he said.

The government should make a promotional video on the features of the country, different tourist destinations and the attractions they offer, and ask the inbound foreign airlines to show the video onboard when the flights land in Dhaka airport, he said.

The national airline of a country plays the most significant role in developing the tourism sector of that country. But the flag carrier along with the tourism board has failed to live up to the expectations, said Alam.

The national airline should have campaigns and promotional offers to portray Bangladesh abroad.

The private sector is not sitting idle, Alam said, adding that little by little, some small initiatives are coming forward.

Now the government should coordinate all these small initiatives and help develop these further, he said.

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Tourism: the next big earner of foreign exchange

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TOURISM can be the third largest sector to earn foreign exchanges after garments and manpower, said the chief of a leading tour operator.

Tourism is a multi-lateral sector. When a tourist flies in, people of diverse sectors are benefited -- hotels, transports, shops and restaurants, said Begum Aziza Selim, chief executive of Green Channel, a tour operator that runs river cruises and arranges tours to one of the natural wonders of the world, the Sundarbans.

The number of inbound tourists is increasing gradually, said Aziza, who is a director of Bangladesh-Malaysia Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

"The number will increase further once we are able to serve the tourists better," she said.

For the development of the sector, she said they do not need financial assistance from the government; they only need policy support.

"We cannot develop roads or other infrastructures or free the roads from traffic jam. It's the government who will ultimately have to do this."

"So the sooner the government comes forward, the better," said Aziza, also chairman of White Castle Properties Ltd and director of East Wood Ltd, and Fish and Company.

"Tourism can bring in as much foreign exchange as the garment sector or manpower does."

On top of that, all the things that are needed to develop the tourism sector are homegrown, she said.

Giving an example, Aziza said: "More than 50 percent of the earnings

from a \$100 export of garments go back to foreign countries. Garment exporters have to import fabrics, threads, buttons and other raw materials to make garments. But in the tourism sector, if we earn \$100, the entire amount stays in our country."

The garment exporters also get incentive from the government. "But we don't want incentive; we want recognition and policy support from the government."

She also urged the government to do proper advertisement and marketing for their products and services abroad so that the foreigners know about Bangladesh and visit the country.

"If we can serve a single tourist from a foreign country, it will be an immense job because we will be able to spread our message to that country through that particular tourist."

"So the government should create that scope for us."

"Foreigners often complain they did not know that Dhaka has good hotels and other amenities. They have a negative feeling about Bangladesh. They do not know Bangladesh is a beautiful country," she said.

The government will have to advertise Bangladesh abroad, Aziza said. "An entrepreneur does not afford advertising his or her product or the features of Bangladesh in the New York Times or Channel 4."

Another important task is engaging the local population with the tourism sector for the development of a particular tourist spot.

In this case, the government should follow the examples of the countries that have developed much in the



Begum Aziza Selim, chief executive of Green Channel, is onboard her ship, MV Mahirah.

sector. Sri Lanka and the Maldives could be the best examples from this region.

Green Channel recently launched the country's first fully air-conditioned luxury tourism vessel -- MV Mahirah -- to run river cruises around the Dhaka city and to carry tourists to the Sundarbans.

Aziza said: "The number of tourists visiting the Sundarbans has increased

over the years."

A total of 40 tourists can travel on MV Mahirah at a time. There are 17 twin share cabins, three single cabins and two 'ambassador suites' with attached baths.

FMC Dockyard in Bangladesh constructed the vessel at a cost of Tk 4.5 crore.

In 2011, the travel and tourism sector in Bangladesh accounted for Tk

18,250 crore or 2.2 percent of the country's gross domestic product, according to a report by the World Travel and Tourism Council.

The amount is forecast to rise by 7.3 percent to Tk 19,590 crore in 2012 and by 6.1 percent to Tk 35,370 crore by 2022, according to the London-based institute.

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