



SPECIAL FEATURE

HERITAGE TOURISM

opportunities untapped

Accounts of Chinese Buddhist pilgrims and many literary and epigraphic records regarding Bengal between the 5th and 7th centuries paint an incredible picture in the mind. According to Dr. Nazimuddin Ahmed's book, 'Discover the Monuments of Bangladesh', they talk of temples, palaces, monasteries and stupas as "high as mountain peaks", obstructing "the very course of the sun with its lofty and imposing towers..." Even Vedic literature mentions the peoples or clans living in Bengal: the Pundras, Vangas, Suhmas, etc.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL sites such as Mahasthangarh -- which date back to at least the 3rd century BC -- are vestiges of a glorious past.

Bengal has seen the rise and fall of numerous powerful empires and eras: the Guptas, Palas, Senas, Sultans, Mughals, etc. Along with land seekers, there were fortune seekers and missionaries who came to Bengal from far-off lands and made it their own: the Portuguese, Dutch, French, Armenians, Greeks and so on. Therefore, Bangladesh has a rich and

diversified legacy, a heritage to be proud of.

And all over the world, tourists are interested in seeing and experiencing the heritage a land holds. "Globally, tourism is one of the growing industries, and heritage tourism is a promising subset," said Syed G Qadir, the Managing Director of a tour agency, Wonder Ways Ltd. Qadir, drawing from his long years of experience in this sector, said, "In Bangladesh, the growth is much lower than what it should have been."

Why is it that? With the rich history our country offers, heritage tourism should

have been booming. There are some challenges to be faced if we want to unlock the 'potential of our past'.

But first, what is heritage tourism? Borrowing a definition from the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the USA, heritage tourism is "travelling to experience the places, artefacts and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past." The scope includes "cultural, historic and natural resources."

The importance of heritage tourism lies in the mindset of today's travellers. People

do not just want to go to a place (historic or otherwise) and simply do some sightseeing. Today's curious tourists are driven by knowledge and experience. They want to understand the significance of a place and the story behind it, and seek to participate in the activities and festivals of the locals.

Hence, culture is heavily linked to heritage tourism. After all, a region or community does not only inherit monuments and artefacts, it also receives belief systems, practices and ceremonies from the forefathers.