

UNESCO has enshrined Bangladesh's 'Baul songs' and 'traditional art of weaving Jamdani' in its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. With such assets, heritage tourism could be a very prosperous angle to tourism in Bangladesh.

A major setback is the political instability. Consider the chaos and violence our nation is currently going through. More or less, every person, organisation and sector is being affected in some way or another, directly or indirectly. The tourism industry is no exception.

Foreigners will of course not want to come to a country and visit heritage sites while risking their lives. "The image of our country among potential tourists faces a blow every time a political turmoil breaks out," Qadir rightly pointed out.

A simple example can be the domestic tourism scene at Cox's Bazaar during last winter. Being the peak season, the longest beach is usually crowded with people coming from different parts of the country -- in addition to foreign travellers. This year, however, the beach city did not see a sizeable inflow of tourists, owing to the ongoing political tension that has claimed many lives and made travelling less desirable.

When local people have to think twice in travelling to a different city, how can we expect foreign tourists?

In order to have a good inflow of tourists - domestic or foreign and for heritage or any other sort of tourism - people must first feel secure. A peaceful, stable and safe country is therefore very important if we want to lure in travellers.

Proper promotion and branding is also very important. "When leaving our country after a visit, the tourists often say that they

did not even know that there were so many things to see and experience here. They leave rather surprised," Qadir shared one of the common feedbacks he receives.

"Many tourists have the perception that the experience and activities in Bangladesh will be similar to those in India, and hence visiting only India should suffice. However, this is incorrect. Bangladesh -- and Bengal at large -- has an entirely unique flavour."

We need to promote the sites of heritage, our history, culture and cuisine properly.

Other than the promotions, the product should obviously be ready. "The government needs to undertake proper policies, build infrastructure and create detailed area plans for cities and regions that are visited by tourists," Qadir opined.

Just blaming it on the government is not enough. The tourist agencies are yet to stand up collectively and lobby this issue in a united and consistent fashion.

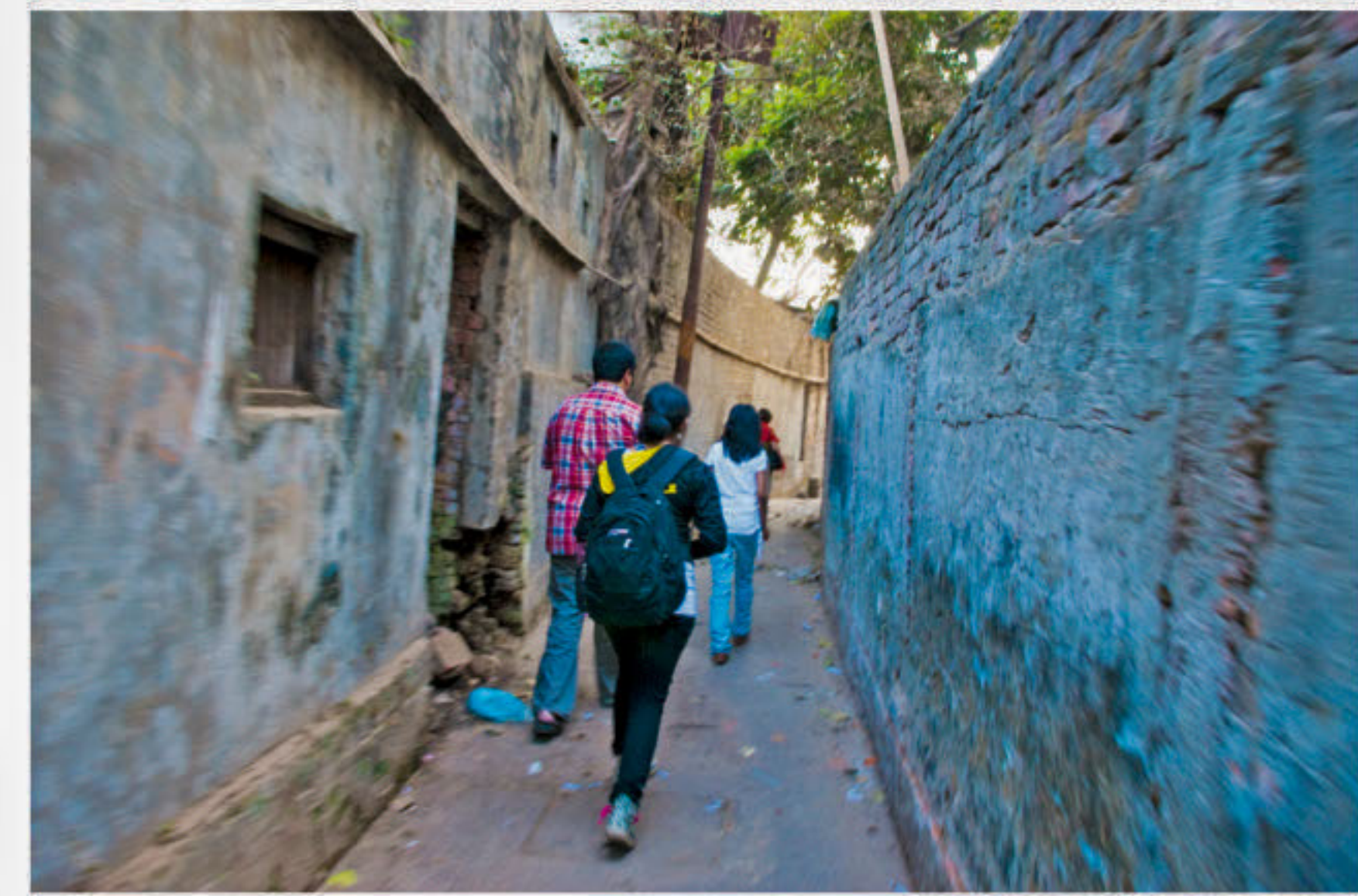
Awareness about heritage among the locals is very vital. It is a way of boosting domestic

tourism in the long run. "Knowing history and being proud of your legacy is important, not just for tourism. Awareness should start from school level," Qadir suggested.

Conservation of heritage is crucial, and it is something the government should be aware of and work towards.

Urban Study Group (USG) is an organisation that campaigns for the conservation of architectural and urban heritage of Old Dhaka. With handling legal issues regarding land ownership and demolition of old buildings, creating visualisations of such buildings and premises had they undergone conservation and raising awareness through conducting heritage walks, holding exhibitions, etc, Taimur Islam, the CEO of the institution and his team, has a lot on their plate.

Taimur believes that Shankhari Bazaar has an immense opportunity for heritage tourism. "Many residences of Shankhari Bazaar are centuries-old. The 'mahalla' (locality) itself is one of the oldest in Old Dhaka. Proper planning can protect the legacy and bring in more number of tourists," Taimur said.



"The numerous shops selling traditional products such as those made of conch shells can remain at the ground-floor, with some relevant renovation to reinforce the experience," he continued explaining, pointing at 3D visualisations of a plan of Shankhari Bazaar on his computer screen.

Take Bara Katra and Choto Katra as another example. The former was built to serve as the residence of Shah Shuja, a Mughal viceroy of Bengal. Meanwhile, Choto Katra was made by Shaista Khan, another Mughal viceroy.

The two grand Mughal monuments are now in ruins, with their magnificent past now gradually becoming inscrutable. Development of new buildings around it, with apparently little regard to the heritage these premises hold, contributes to the encroachment of Choto Katra.

Preserving such monuments will make us realise the true potential of heritage tourism in our country. "These two monuments, if properly freed and restored, could take the ambience and sights similar to that of traditional Turkish bazaars. You can have shops selling Bangladeshi crafts, art galleries, cafes and eateries. You can make this locality a centre for tourists, with the appropriate services and facilities," Taimur envisions.

And that is exactly what we need -- a proper, bold vision. Tourists, as it is, are fascinated by our culture, festivities and monuments. But there lie abundant opportunities that are currently untapped, or, to say the least, underrated. There is a huge potential of heritage tourism in Bangladesh. Realising this potential -- which we can, if we understand its importance and have the proper mindset and planning -- will work wonders for the overall tourism industry of our country.

By M H Haider

Photo: LS Archive/Sazzad Ibne Sayed