

WORLD TOURISM DAY TODAY

Ctg tourism potential remains untapped

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With a scenic sea view, hills, a mangrove forest, waterfalls and lakes, Chittagong city and its adjacent upazilas are blessed by the nature with diverse elements to make it an attraction for tourists.

However, indifference of the government agencies left potentials of most tourist spots untapped. The tourist destinations in Chittagong remain neglected while the world is observing the World Tourism Day today.

For example, Patenga sea beach in the port city attracts thousands of tourists every day. Three government agencies planned to develop its infrastructure since 1997, but no one has implemented its plan yet.

The Chittagong City Corporation (CCC) planned to develop a tourist area on 150 acres of land, spending Tk 650 crore under its Patenga Bay Resort Project in 1997. The project failed to get government approval in 2002. But the CCC built a three-storey building for tourists spending Tk 30 lakh. The building is now abandoned.

Again in 2010, the CCC proposed

another project for developing 40 acres of the beach, spending Tk 93 crore. The project proposal was sent to the tourism ministry for a no-objection certificate in January 2012. However, it is yet to receive the certificate, says CCC Superintendent Engineer Rafiqul Islam Manik.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BPC), the country's tourism promotional body, drew up a plan to build a motel on five acres land of the beach in 2012. That too was abandoned as the proposed land went into the Karnaphuli tunnel project, said a BPC official.

Then again, the Department of Environment Chittagong took an initiative for the development of a two-kilometre walkway, sitting arrangements and forestation on both sides to beautify the beach in 2013. Then Environment and Forests Minister Hasan Mahmud laid the foundation for the Tk 7.14 crore project in February 13, 2013. The project is yet to be implemented.

Two other beautiful beaches are Parki beach in Anwara upazila and Kattali beach in Pahartali in the city.

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Patenga beach in Chittagong is abuzz with tourists. The potentials of the popular tourist spot remains untapped, as several government plans to develop the beach are yet to be implemented. This photo was taken in July.

PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

Disaster written on the wall

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art" technology as being touted by the authorities. Real operations are much more difficult and messy and pollution will endanger the unique ecosystem of the Sundarbans.

Research by high profile international experts engaged by the National Committee for Saving the Sundarbans, a civil society platform that protests the Rampal plant, have shown a scary picture of how the Rampal plant authorities have been feeding "untrue, distracting, elusive, inconsistent and false" information regarding the plant, drawing a rosy picture of the plant's supposed eco-friendliness.

A few glimpses of that scary picture are like this: the project authorities claim using low NOx burners to reduce nitrogen oxide gases. But as experts point out, low NOx burner is not the answer to lowered emission but post combustion NOx technology is, which the project does not include in its tender documents, nor does it have the requirement for over-fire air and adaptive controls in combustion chamber. So the claim of low NOx emission is not true.

The project also does not specify Sulfur gas removal efficiency, making people wary of the emission level.

Also the project plan does not include the use of baghouse state-of-the-art technology to trap particulate matters and mercury, a highly toxic element. Rather it plans to use electrostatic precipitator for this purpose which is much less effective than baghouse operation.

To control coal dust the project plans a much less efficient water sprinkler system, not the more rigorous technologies like chemical surfactants. Not using the right method would likely lead to 2 to 3.8 tons of coal dust escaping into the air and water every year. This dust will be radioactive.

So eventually fish will die, plants will die and mangrove shoots will be covered with a thin layer of dust leading to the destruction of the forest.

There are many other instances of shortcomings in the project including its thermal water release plan.

Moreover, our environmental institutions are one of the weakest in the world. When they cannot even regulate the hundreds of polluting industries such as the dyeing factories and leather units right in the heart of Dhaka city, it would be too much to expect that the same agencies would be able to monitor the Rampal plant so far away from the capital. To expect them to do anything substantial in case the plant causes pollution is equally unrealistic.

INTERNATIONAL BANKS TURN AWAY FROM RAMPAL OUT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN, ONLY INDIAN BANK COMES FORWARD

Because of the apprehension of negative environmental impacts, the project failed to pool funds from any international banks. In the end only the Indian Export Import Bank stepped forward, ignoring all ecological concerns to fund the project with a \$1.6 billion loan.

Three French banks -- Cr dit Agricole, BNP Paribas and Societe Generale--have said they will not invest in the Rampal project.

BNP Paribas is one of the corporate sponsors of the climate summit held in Paris in 2015.

Earlier, two Norwegian pension funds pulled out their investments because of the controversy involving India's National Thermal Power Corporation that is building the project. THE GAS EFFECT AND THE TECHNOLOGY PUZZLE

A coal-fired plant spews out a whole range of toxic gases including Sulfur dioxide and carbon monoxide. The Rampal plant will release 142 tonnes of Sulphur Dioxide and 85 tonnes of Nitrogen Dioxide in the air daily.

The EIA assumes that when the plant will be in operation, the level of SO2 and NO2 in the Sundarbans region will be 53.4 and 51 micrograms per cubic metre of air, which is two to three times higher than the present level.

This quantity far exceeds the standard for emission limit for ecologically critical areas as set by the Environmental Conservation Rule of 1997 of the Bangladesh government, which is 30 micrograms per cubic metre.

Now the project plans to use fuel gas desulfurization technology to reduce this pollution. But the fact remains that while it is a costly technology rarely used in developing countries like Bangladesh, it can reduce 90 percent of the emission. The rest 10 percent will continue polluting and harming the Sundarbans. Over a long time, this will become a critical factor for the survival of the forest.

It is repeatedly being flouted that the project will use "very modern and latest" technology in coal plants to stop pollution. Actually what is meant by this is the plant will use ultra-supercritical technology. There are three types of technology for such plants -- sub-critical, super critical and ultra-supercritical.

Each of these technologies ensures better burning of coal, thereby increas-

ing production of power from the same amount of coal. This in turn means lesser pollution. But what is the extent of this efficiency? How much better can they burn?

In sub-critical technology, the power producing efficiency is 37%, it is 39% for super critical and 42% for ultra-super critical, the technology to be used in Rampal.

So the latest technology only means reducing pollution by only 5 percentage points. In other words, if 100 tonnes of pollutants are emitted by the first technology, the latest technology will cut it by only 10 tonnes. Ninety tonnes of nitrogen dioxide and sulphur dioxide will still be spewed in the air and pollute the Sundarbans.

Coal ash is radioactive and there is every chance that it will contaminate the river system. It will deposit on the forest in thin layers over years no matter how much the plant traps the particles.

From its ash management to water purification plan, all pollution reduction technology of the plant is now questionable on safety grounds.

FISH IN JEOPARDY

The forest is not only one of trees but it also shelters unique and often endangered animals and birds. The Sundarbans is an enormously rich reservoir of fish. The rotting biomass from the forest and the shallow water make it a perfect spawning ground.

According to IUCN, 90% of commercial fish and 35% of all fish in the Bay of Bengal rely on the Sundarbans region as a nursery for their early stages of life. The hundreds of creeks and canals support thousands of fishermen. In recent times, hilsas, a fish of enormous economic importance, have found a way inside the country's river system for laying eggs through the Meghna estuary.

This whole rich resource now faces an existential challenge not only because of Rampal but from the other industries that will come up because of Rampal.

A normal 600MW plant produces about 130 kg of mercury in a year, a highly toxic element for the brain, so much so that one tablespoon of mercury deposited in a 20-acre lake by the end of a year can make its fish unsafe for consumption.

No matter how spoonful you trap the mercury, that one spoonful is always a possibility. It can contaminate the fish.

Other harmful substances to be emitted by the plant include heavy metals like lead and cadmium, arsenic, and carbon monoxide, all biologically harmful.

One observation of IUCN is important here. It says, "Some emissions can

be significantly reduced with readily available pollution controls, but more US coal plants have not installed these technologies. These clean technologies are expensive and as a result, even in the US, power plants have evaded setting up these measures and thus have been identified as the most significant source of pollution."

WHY DOES INDIAN COMPANY PAY NO HEED TO ITS OWN EXAMPLES?

It is interesting that NTPC is going ahead with this joint venture although there are plenty of examples in India where major projects had to be avoided because of environmental concerns or forests.

Take Chhatrapur diamond mining project by diamond giant Rio Tinto in Madhya Pradesh. Some 4.25 lakh trees were to be felled for the mining. But then the \$3 billion project had to be discarded because environmentalists pointed out that felling of the trees would have disturbed a tiger corridor.

It is clear that if NTPC wanted to set up such a plant in India, it would face stiff protests.

The EIA guideline manual for coal based thermal power plants prepared by the Indian environment ministry in August 2010 suggests avoiding setting up coal power plants within 25km of the outer periphery of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries and ecologically sensitive areas.

However, it is unclear why an Indian company, NTPC, does not pay heed to guidelines set by its own government when it comes to setting up a plant in Bangladesh.

Another stark compromise that the Indian company makes in the Sundarbans is that its plant does not require zero liquid discharge technology as is required in India to prevent pollution of rivers.

Earlier this year, the 1320 MW Solapur Coal plant by the same NTPC which is developing the Rampal plant has been asked to use reclaimed water instead of drawing water from river.

EIA UNDER QUESTION Environmentalists question why the government had employed Centre for Environmental and Geographic Information Services (CEGIS), a public trust under the water resources ministry instead of an independent agency to produce the EIA.

Since the government is a party to the project, the best way to avert any controversy was to appoint an international agency.

Questions are also being asked why the government had commissioned the EIA more than two years after issu-

ing orders for acquiring the land and about a year before the joint venture agreement was signed for the plant.

This only implies that the site of the project was chosen first and then came the EIA to justify the action.

And it is only then one may recall what Paul Fishers of International Rivers wrote: "As someone with more than 15 years in the field of development cooperation and as a consultant on EIA projects for some of the major international banks, I have found myself becoming increasingly disillusioned with the process. I entered the field seeing ESIA as a tool that could help bring environmental concerns and local people's perspectives to the forefront of decision-making for infrastructure projects, but over time, have begun to believe the task is often little more than an art of smoothing the way for projects."

EVEN THE EIA RAISES ALARM

Whatever controversy swirls around the EIA and however muted the EIA might be about the possible adverse impacts of the project, it admitted that during construction a large number of workers will be engaged who will generate domestic and sanitary waste. During dredging, if dredgers cannot be managed properly, water quality of the river may be contaminated by oil spill.

Construction work including land filling by dredging, sand lifting, site clearance and physical construction of the plant may have impacts on open water fish habitats, fish diversity and hence to some extent on capture fisheries production, the EIA noted.

Open water fisheries habitats like rivers (Pasur, Mairara), canals and inter-tidal areas may be affected due to dredging, traffic movements, and oil and chemical spilling. But the EIA quickly added that if the proposed environment management plan is implemented then these negative impacts will be absent.

But it admitted that suspended particulate matter to be produced from construction activities may be deposited in the surrounding areas and water bodies including river and may change habitat quality contributing to environmental and social impacts.

"The materials and equipment during the construction period would be transported by river to the project site. As such, the frequencies of the vessels will relatively increase. If navigational, spillages, noise, speed, lighting, waste disposal rules regulations are not properly maintained, it may impact the Sundarbans ecosystem especially Royal Bengal Tiger, deer, crocodile, dolphins,

mangroves etc," it said.

Movement of coal carrying vessels and ship to ship transfer operation may cause disturbance on the fish migratory channel and hence on migration during operations. The high river traffic may also affect fishing activities in the river.

On the other hand, due to low chances of pollution from ships (as IMO conventions and National Environmental Laws shall oblige the transportation operation), impact on fish habitat might also be low.

Even though it glosses over the adverse effects of the power plant, it still contains enough cautionary notes.

The EIA however drew its conclusion by saying that the plant operation will have no or very insignificant impact on the environment in terms of gas emission, acid rain or ash and oil spills.

THE EROSION FACTOR

One of the major concerns for environmentalists is that the plan will increase movement of big cargo ships through the river channel. This will cause waves and erosion of the river banks.

But the EIA rules out such impact saying ships will coast at a slow speed of about seven nautical miles and will cause small waves.

However, there is no guarantee of monitoring ship speed, leaving the environmentalists concerned.

SAVE THE ONLY AND UNIQUE PLACE ON THE PLANET

As debates heat up, it is becoming clear the Rampal project will have far-reaching impacts on the Sundarbans. Even if much of what the project authorities say holds true, the impact will still be there, will accumulate over years and cause some irreversible changes to the forest ecosystem. The effect cannot be felt in a few years, but over a longer time span, the worse will come.

So the most basic question we may ask is: why the Sundarbans? Why risking this unique piece of land you find nowhere else in the world?

We have not even measured ecosystem services from the forest -- all the benefits, which most of us take for granted, we get from the animals and plants. The forest is essential not just for the sake of beauty or biodiversity but also for sustainable livelihood of the people.

Industrialisation is a sure way to improve life but not often sustainably. Some places in the world are not for industrialization but for other kinds of use like ecotourism. The Sundarbans is one such place where industrialization is an assuredly suicidal way of development.

Let's not head that way.

Not merely a forest but life

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"In Bangladesh, the Sundarbans is possibly the last hope for the survival of any unique and great population of wildlife because all other types of forests such as the Sal and mixed forests in the hills have virtually become barren," writes Reza Khan, an eminent wildlife conservationist.

The Sundarbans is a living museum of biodiversity. It has 50 species of mammals, 320 species of birds, 50 species of reptiles, eight species of amphibians and about 400 species of fish. Nowhere in the country such a wide variety of flora and fauna are found, many of them globally endangered.

Those who enter the forest only hope to see Bengal Tigers, the apex predator of the forest. Unfortunately, the number of this magnificent animal has shrunk to only 105 in this part of the forest from an estimated 500 in a span of only one decade.

every inch of the forest contains some kind of interesting living being. As you step on the soft mud, you are likely to step on mudskippers, crabs or say, the non-venomous dog-faced water snake. You will find red fiddler crabs with one giant arm scurrying sideways.

Butterflies, wasps, bumblebees, flies, dragonflies and so many other winged insects buzz around you. Honeybees are the most important insects that make huge honeycombs from where honey is commercially collected by the Moulas.

Spiders, scorpions and centipedes crawl about the forest.

Among the invertebrates, the most important commercial species are shrimps, prawns and lobsters. Crabs are collected in commercial scale.

Through the Meghna estuary, enter schools of hilsas. A major hilsa passageway is through the forest. The most important commercially exploited fishes are the hilsa, loitya, vetki,

lakkha, pomfret and many other commercially valuable species.

Sundarban is also home to several important reptiles including the salt-water crocodile, sea turtles, including the green turtle and Olive Ridley's -- and the critically endangered Batagur turtles.

Some 13 globally threatened and near-threatened bird species live in the Sundarbans.

"For the three of the 13 birds of global conservation concern -- masked finfoot, brown-winged kingfisher and mangrove pitta -- the Sundarban may easily be the largest and the safest home in the world," writes Enam Ul Haque, an eminent bird specialist.

"Masked finfoot is an important bird found in the forest," writes Sayam U Ahmed, conservation biologist working on threatened species conservation in Bangladesh and abroad. "Only a thousand or even less number of mature masked finfoots are left in

the world and our Sundarban supports a considerable number of them."

Critically endangered species like the river terrapin and the white-rumped vulture or the endangered fishing cat and the globally threatened raptor Pallas's fish-eagle live in this forest.

King cobra and Burmese python listed as vulnerable by the IUCN are also seen in the forest. And it is the only place on earth where both the Ganges River dolphins and Irrawaddy dolphins live together.

But there is more. The mangrove forest offers a perfect spawning place and habitat for fish.

The Sundarbans support roughly 196 species of fish, 49 percent of the recorded species. A large number of people depend on this fish. About 25,000 registered fishing boats harvest fish from the Sundarbans and its adjacent bay. The annual catch from the forest water bodies is estimated to be

3,000 tonnes of fish and 18,150 tonnes of crustacean.

However, in Dublar Char alone, about 18,000 tonnes of fish is caught from the bay. Besides 110 million crustaceans is collected from the creeks of the forest.

The forest is already tired in its battle for survival, it cannot take another blow. For millenniums, the forest has withstood nature's fury, during the reign of Mughal emperor Akbar and later during Raja Pratapaditya's rule, it withstood severe cyclones and those events have been followed by many similar calamities.

It withstood human invasions -- those of the Maghs and the Portuguese pirates.

But today, it faces another kind of battle -- that forced upon it by a desire for development. It may as well be its last battle against pollution and encroachment.

Kantaji gets

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bright as newly burnt brick," says visitor Rabiul Islam of Thakurgaon.

Local Krishna Chandra Roy meanwhile says tourist numbers have risen in recent months, especially due to access to the site via the new bridge over the Dhepa river and because of the temple's beautification.

"A handful of people used to visit the site previously, but nowadays nearly 1,000 visitors arrive daily."

Planning for other new facilities including parking, a Parjatan Corporation rest house, a restaurant and shopping centre is also underway.

The construction of the 18th century temple, one of the most impressive archaeological sites in Bangladesh replete with its intricate terracotta depictions of Hindu epics and the contemporary life of the time, was commenced by local ruler Maharaja Pran Nath and completed during the reign of his son Raja Ramnath.