

WORLD TOURISM DAY

For the love of sight, sound and...casino?



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

An interesting debate has been swirling around the future trajectory of tourism in Bangladesh after two of its top officials were locked in a public duel of sorts over the legalisation of casino gambling. The illegal casino business, which apparently no one knew about until a few days ago, is the talk of the town this week. Ever since news emerged about the clandestine operation of some 60 casinos in Dhaka amid crackdowns on illegal establishments including some clubs, opinion on the issue has been divided. Some people reacted with ambivalence; some questioned the propriety of such a business in a poor country like Bangladesh. Others, like the two officials in question—Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal and Civil Aviation and Tourism Ministry Secretary Mohibul Haque—were more focused, trimming down the chatter to the basic question of legality.

Mohibul Haque, speaking at a press conference on the occasion of this year's World Tourism Day, which is being observed today, came out in favour of legalising casinos for foreigners in Bangladesh. He drew the example of Malaysia, a Muslim country, where he said there are casinos that tourists can visit upon submitting their passports. "We couldn't provide such facilities for our foreign tourists. We will provide such facilities for them in the exclusive tourist zones," he said. Mustafa Kamal, on the other hand, was dismissive of the idea, saying casinos might be legal abroad but in our country, casino means gambling and any form of gambling is illegal here and, therefore, unacceptable. "An illegal activity can never be made legitimate by enacting laws," he added.

Whether a casino is just about gambling is beside the point here. Our interest in this issue is less about the legal and financial aspects of it, and more about the cultural and socio-political aspects and whether or not Bangladesh is headed in the right direction as it moves to unveil a "master plan" to reinvigorate its stagnant inbound tourism market. Of course, even in its tunnel vision for growth, the tourism ministry suffers from the narrowing of its focus only to the big and the glitzy—building swanky hotels and amusement parks, for example—which might give it a facelift but no substantive change. There is no denying the importance of exploring new ways to attract foreigners to revitalise the tourism sector, given



A scenic location in Rangamati, Bangladesh.

PHOTO: PAHN CHAKMA

its potential for creating jobs and revenue for the country. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), tourism generates 10 percent of world jobs. Tourism was also included in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 8. But grand ambitions for growth in the sector minus a proper analysis of the socio-environmental concerns will be self-defeating, and potentially harmful.

The casino issue serves as a metaphor for how casually we approach the subject of development in tourism. First of all, the tourism secretary's vision for casino, even if the legal hurdles are put away for that purpose, raises a troubling prospect: casinos, among other facilities such as hotels, cottages, beach villas, night clubs and convention halls, will be built as part of the planned exclusive tourist zones in Cox's Bazar, Khulna, Bagerhat, Satkhira, etc. One may ask, where will the land for these zones come from? An equally important question is, will these be acceptable to the local communities? Our previous experience with

undertaking such big infrastructure projects near villages and in the hills shows at least three results: 1) the projects were resisted, sometimes successfully, by local communities haunted by the spectre of eviction; 2) the projects, while creating livelihood opportunities, alienated a large part of the communities by disturbing the balance and harmony of the communities; and 3) the projects left a harmful impact on the environment. Will it be any different this time?

Secondly, the idea of allowing "only" foreigners in the casinos (I have no idea how something like this is possible in Bangladesh where no space is really private or off-limits), and in effect promoting institutionalised racial segregation, reminds us of a shameful colonial legacy. One may recall the infamous sign—"Dogs and Indians Not Allowed"—that used to be hung over the doors of all-whites clubs in British India. It was basically done to keep out the natives, and was a sore point with the nationalist revolutionaries who launched attacks on some of these clubs.

I don't know if Malaysian casinos are really exclusive to the visiting foreigners. But it surely is not an example that we should emulate in any form in any sector, not just in tourism.

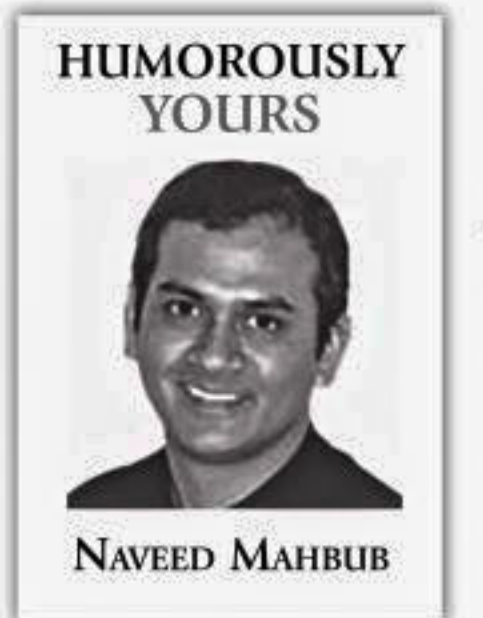
The theme of this year's World Tourism Day is: "Tourism and Jobs: A Better Future for All." Directing policy attention to tourism's potential for job creation is a step in the right direction but it's important that we don't lose sight of the bigger picture. In Bangladesh, despite all the talk about the need for proper infrastructure and facilities for tourists, local or foreign, three important aspects that are not mentioned as enthusiastically are security, integrity of local culture and the environment. The anthropology of tourism is rarely, if ever, discussed. You see our leaders coming up with ingenious ideas to attract foreigners and urging the media to portray the positive aspects of Bangladesh before the world. But rarely do they acknowledge the importance of sustainable tourism which is only possible through a synergy of all external and internal realities geared toward a common goal.

In an article published by *The Daily Star* in August, Zobaida Nasreen, an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Dhaka, talked about how the government issued stamps using the images of members of indigenous communities in the hill tracts to promote the country's rich diversity. But when it comes to recognising their unique identity, she said, "the state has been less than enthusiastic and rather claims that there are no 'indigenous' people in Bangladesh." The contrast between what our leaders want and promote about Bangladesh and the reality on the ground is hard to miss. Can we achieve a sustainable growth in tourism without recognising the reality of the local communities who are the first to gain—or lose—from any development or its fallout? Can we expect our plans for tourism to work on a long-term basis without preserving Bangladesh's beautiful nature and unique local culture (which are, frankly, our only selling points)? Can we expect the tourists to come, from home or abroad, without addressing their security concerns first?

These are questions that will take more than a Master Plan from one sector to address. Tourism is a multidimensional issue, and it involves multiple stakeholders. We need to understand that reality if we want to achieve any degree of success in our growth vision going forward.

Badiuzzaman Bay is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*. Email: badiuzzaman.bd@gmail.com.

What Happens in Fakirapool...



HUMOROUSLY YOURS
NAVEED MAHUB

We go gambling in a rickshaw, dreaming of returning in a fifty lakh Taka car and end up returning in a one crore taka jalopy of a bus. To stay away from this vice, we must be active, we must exercise, but make sure we are nowhere near any sporting clubs as several have adopted the new slogan: "Who wants to be a millionaire?". As a result, the most expensive football club is no longer Real Madrid, but our very own Fakirapool Young Men's Club.

So, why go to Las Vegas? Now, *What Happens in Fakirapool, Stays in Fakirapool...* Panir Tanki! No wonder Bangladesh is 208th in the FIFA ranking—our football clubs are busy practicing football with Lilliput sized roulette balls.

Slot machines are breeding like Aedes mosquitoes. No wonder we can't find any cash at any of the omnipresent ATMs in Gulistan. But thanks to the flood of cash flowing around the casinos there, the five dozen banks in the country can forget those ATMs and just set up branches at the glitzy joints.

Gulistan is the new Las Vegas Strip. Seeing so many casinos, guess who may just show up in town—President Donald Trump! He will make Gulistan great again by building a H-E-E-U-U-U-G-E wall around it. And you know who's going to pay for it? Fakirapool!

But we, the average sports enthusiasts, are hurt. Our beloved sports clubs have been besmirched at the roll of a dice. But why? Were the sporting



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

People hide behind blackjack tables as Rab officials raid Fakirapool Youngmen's Club in the capital.

clubs looking to diversify their portfolios beyond football and cricket by getting into "indoor" sports? Or was it that there was a bid for Gulistan to be the location for the next 007 movie *Casino Loyal* (to the few) or the nearby Fakirapool being ground zero for *From Fakirapool with Love*? Or was it that just as matches between Barca and Real Madrid are known as *El Clasico*, we had this wild urge of coining the matches between Mohammedan and Victoria Sporting as *El Casino*?

No. It's chi-ching. Duh! Money talks. It can sing and dance and it can walk. In fact, it can even roll the dice. Let's not also forget that it is an addiction. And if we really had to go all out to satiate this obsession, did we really need casinos? Don't we have an infinite list of items to bet on? The moment we open our eyes in the morning, we enter the world of the virtual casino—we gamble with the tainted milk at breakfast, we bet in dodging the Aedes without applying the

unaffordable Odomos. As we hit the road, we gamble on not getting hit by a UFO (Unruly Fast Object). We gamble on "an apple a day, keeps the doctor away" with the formalin laden apple, prompting the doctor to actually show up. We wave our hands frantically like the arm of a slot machine while jay walking, expecting all incoming traffic to come to a screeching halt because, we, our royal highnesses, are too lazy to take the foot over bridge. And last, but not the least, there is the highest probability of asking this question: "During the morning rush hour, how many hours will it take to go from Sadarghat to Uttara?" Ok, now what is the number of possible options as answers to this question? See? Even the roulette doesn't have that many section bets (slots).

Casinos are illegal. Hence the stakes here are twice as high—there is the risk of losing and the risk of getting caught. Therefore, gambling in Bangladesh is a gamble. And if one really gets caught at the casino, he can just play dumb: "Oh, I came here to audition for *Who will be Masud Rana*".

But the irony of it all is that despite Dhaka having so many casinos, all that dough from Bangladesh Bank, located not too far away from all the action, had to end up at casinos so far away in Manila...

Well, the legendary names of Mohammedan, Victoria will never be the same. The only consolation, Badda Jagoroni now has a shot at winning the Premier League as many of the other clubs have been busy with casinos, playing Russian Roulette, literally...

Naveed Mahub is a former engineer at Ford & Qualcomm USA, the former CEO of IBM & Nokia Networks Bangladesh turned comedian (by choice), the host of ATN Bangla's *The Naveed Mahub Show* and the founder of *Naveed's Comedy Club*. E-mail: Naveed@NaveedMahub.com

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

27 September, 1937
The Bali Tiger Went Extinct

On this day in 1937, the last of remaining adult Balinese tigers was shot dead. The species, native of Indonesian's Bali island, is said to have gone extinct due to human activities and hunting.

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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

QUOTABLE Quote

KING HENRY VIII (1491–1547)
King of King of England from 1509 until his death in 1547

Of all losses, time is the most irrecoverable for it can never be redeemed.