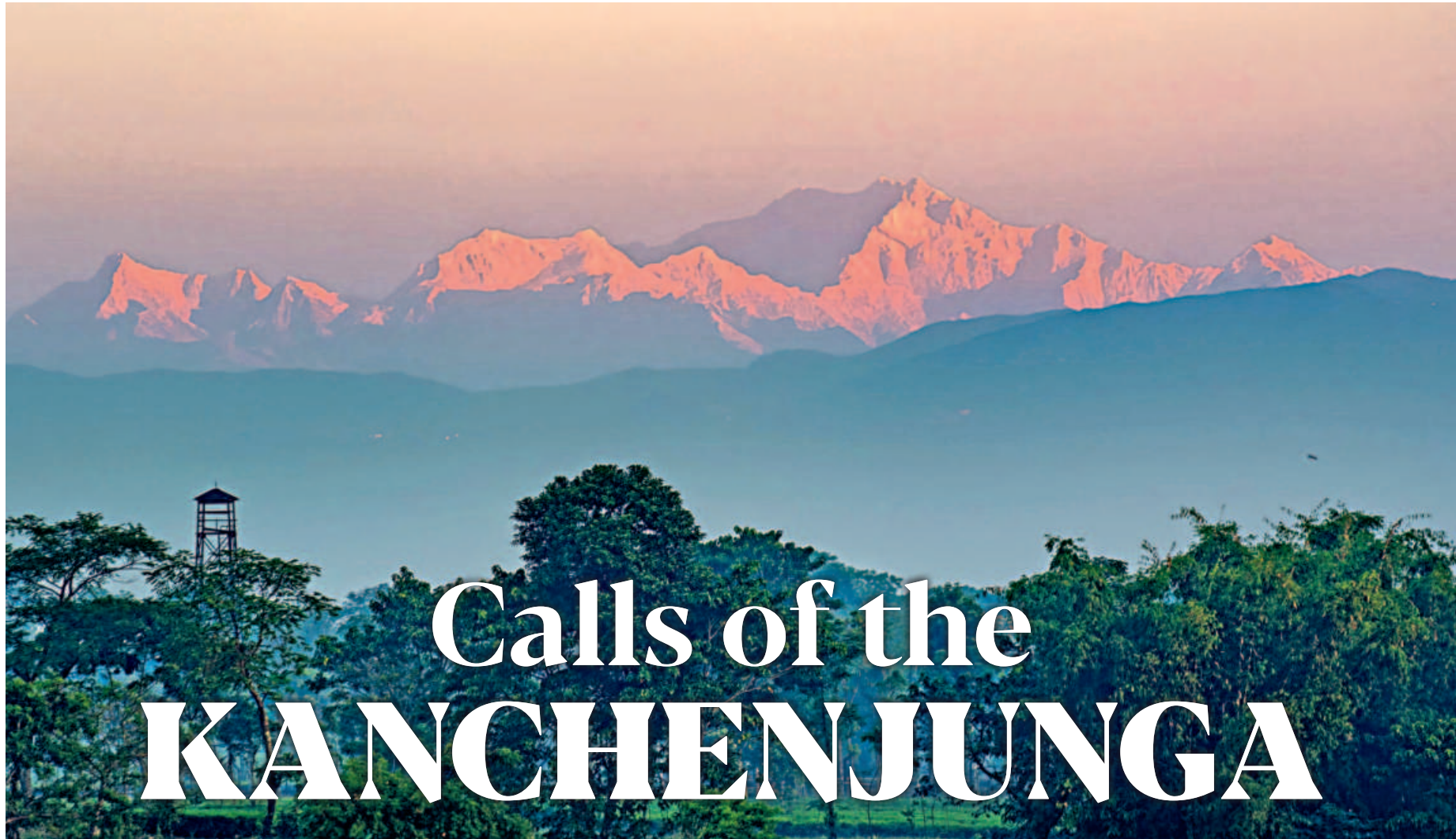


THE PROMISE OF PANCHAGARH



Calls of the KANCHENJUNGA

PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABUJ

Other spots such as Bhitargarh, Rock Museum in Panchagarh Sadar, Bodeshwari Temple in Boda upazila, Mirzapur Shahi Mosque, Imambara Mosque in Atwary upazila are no less captivating.

MD QUAMRUL ISLAM RUBAIYAT AND MOSTAFA SHABUJ

The majestic Kanchenjunga, the world's third highest mountain.

Its peak stands between India's Sikkim and Nepal, and is about 150km from Tentulia of Panchagarh. You can see it with your naked eyes from different spots of Panchagarh when the sky clears up as clouds disappear just before winter.

Every winter, this place becomes a tourist hotspot. People of all ages from across the country flock to the northernmost district to get a glimpse of its "unworldly" beauty. For many it's heaven on earth on display among the vast tracts of tea gardens.

Kanchenjunga usually emerges between 5:30am and 6:30am. As if from nothingness in the blink of an eye, just minutes before the sunlight hits the ground. When the sunlight first touches its peak, the white snow-capped mountain becomes red-like hot lava.

Apart from the mountain's peak, the

view. This is a sight to see, sitting on the bank of the river Mohanada in the evening. Other spots such as Bhitargarh, Rock Museum in Panchagarh Sadar, Bodeshwari Temple in Boda upazila, Mirzapur Shahi Mosque, Imambara Mosque in Atwary upazila are no less captivating.

Given the number of tourists, locals, especially those involved with different businesses, are introducing various new services and facilities, but they are still inadequate compared to the demand.



Social activists working to develop tourism in Panchagarh think the Tourism Board and Tourism Corporation can tap into this opportunity and improve the area's socio-economic conditions by ensuring better amenities for tourists.

During a recent visit, hundreds of visitors from across the country were seen heading for Tentulia just to take a glimpse of Kanchenjunga.

Physician Khadija Begum went with her two sons from Thakurgaon. She said the majestic nature of the peak and the beauty all around it mesmerised them.

"It's an amazing experience to enjoy the beautiful view clearly with bare eyes from our country," said Mohiuddin Ahmed, who went from Naogaon with three friends.

With better and adequate accommodation, quality food and proper safety measures, tourists could certainly enjoy more. Also, there is a dearth of vehicles and sanitation facilities that discourage tourists to plan longer stays.

According to Tentulia upazila administration, around 500 tourists visit

every day and over 5,000 come during holidays in October-November. But there are accommodation facilities for 250 tourists, who want to spend the night.

Farzana Rahman went with her three-member family from Rangpur. Although she wanted to stay there at night, she could not find any accommodation. She had to return home hurriedly.

Many visitors also spoke of putting in place enough security measures, adequate toilets and personal hygiene products for women and children.

Sariful Islam, a government official, said he found it difficult to return Dhaka due to the rush of tourists.

Sohag Chandra Saha, upazila nirbahi officer of Tentulia, said the administration was aware of the increasing number of tourists and was working accordingly to facilitate their stay and journey.

He said there are 18 guest houses and hotels having accommodation capacity for 200 people. Besides, 100 visitors can reside in different houses by paying rents as part of an initiative of "community tourism."

Last year, 30 people were trained for this purpose with the help of the Bangladesh Tourism Board.

Md Muniruzzaman, owner of Doyel Residential Hotel at Tentulia Bazar, said they have too few rooms to handle the pressure during the peak season.

Hasnur Rashid Babu, former head of economics department at Panchagarh Government Women's College and also president of Parjatan Unnayan Parishad of Panchagarh, said there is huge potential for economic development through tourism there.

"But for this to happen, the authorities should take effective steps to increase tourist facilities and awareness about tourism among locals," he added.

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Firoz's photos beckon droves of visitors

STAR REPORT

It wasn't the Bangladesh tourism board or any other government or non-government agency.

Instead, one of the reasons many tourists come to Panchagarh to relish the sight of the majestic Kanchenjunga peak is Firoz Al Sabah's fantastic photography, say locals and those involved in the district's tourism.

An enthusiastic nature-lover, 31-year-old Firoz delved into nature photography and birding when he was just a teenager.

His photographs of the Kanchenjunga peak had become quite an appeal for domestic tourists since he began posting them on social media in 2012.

Even in the face of trolls and rumours, Firoz did not let anything stop him from travelling to Panchagarh's Tentulia to see the beautiful mountain at this time of every year – when the peak is most visible.

Many social media users alleged that he took his photos from Darjeeling in India, claiming "the view cannot be so beautiful from Bangladesh".

Speaking to The Daily Star, he said, "I began photographing and posting photos of the Kanchenjunga peak since 2012 to help bring in more tourists. Locals of Tentulia used to call me mad.

"Once people began responding to my photos on social media, the number of visitors began increasing every year. Since 2018, after another



photograph of mine went viral, the number further went up."

Kabir Hossain, confidential assistant of Tentulia Upazila Parishad for the past 10 years, told The Daily Star that Firoz's photography has played a huge role in the increase of tourists every year. "His pictures of Kanchenjunga have been published in many media and social media platforms. Even India's Anandabazar newspaper and the Indian Times have printed his picture."

During a recent visit to Tentulia, Laboni Islam, 32, freelance photographer and traveler, said, "I came to visit the upazila to witness the Kanchenjunga peak after I saw Firoz's photographs. They were beautiful! I will also be taking photos of the peak."

Restaurant owners in the upazila have been grateful to Firoz as their businesses have been booming.

Azizul Haque, owner of the popular Bangla Hotel restaurant in Tentulia, said, "Even just 10-12 years ago, not many people visited. Firoz bhai used to initially come and take photographs of rare birds to invite tourists. We used to think his work was futile. But when his photographs of Kanchenjunga went viral, the number of tourists increased so much that I can't even feed all my customers!"

Firoz, however, mentioned the lack of accommodation and guides for the tourists.

"The administration or private enterprise needs to have trained tourist guides for the visitors. There are many other peaks that can be seen from here which tourists may not know about. Guides can help them and teach them about the history of Panchagarh. Many people come here to see the Maharaja Dighi [pond], but only a few know the real history, especially of the 1,400-year-old Bhitargarh Fort."

What's the govt doing to promote tourism?

MD QUAMRUL ISLAM RUBAIYAT AND MOSTAFA SHABUJ

Considering the rush of visitors from all over the country, the tourist facilities in Panchagarh are anything but adequate.

Government agencies have been trying to encourage tourism in the district's Tentulia upazila. However, local investors have not done much in this regard, since most visitors come only for a short period in the winter, said Sohag Chandra Saha, upazila nirbahi officer.

"Since tourists come only for a short time, investors haven't shown much interest in the sector here. As a result, a lack of housing and accommodation for visitors has been a problem."

He, however, added, "We are taking various measures to ensure that tourists can come all year round.

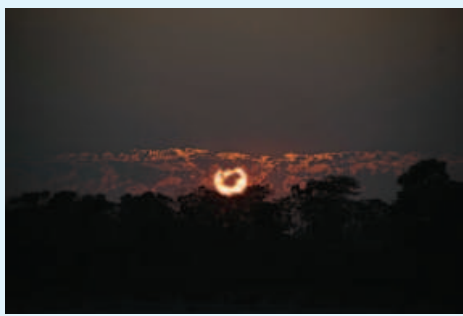
"We have a museum and a library, and we are trying to set up an open stage for artists to perform folk songs and dramas. Meanwhile, we are planting one lakh Tulip

bulbs across the upazila this year."

Referring to the lack of accommodation for tourists, he said the administration has already started "community tourism" to arrange short-term stays at the homes of locals.

"We are training the locals for this purpose."

About security concerns, the UNO said, "The crime rate here is quite low, so the threat too is low. However, we do have a police team to patrol tourist spots."



On the other hand, the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation has initiated a Tk 39.34 crore project – Construction of Tourism Centre – under which a motel would be built in Panchagarh town.

The project work is yet to begin as around one acre of land beside the Banglabandha Port Road in Panchagarh town is currently being acquired in this regard.

Speaking to The Daily Star, ANM Mostadud Dastagir, commercial manager and also director of the project, said, "We



will try to complete our project by December 2024 ... There will be two four-storey buildings, each with 32 rooms that can accommodate around 100 tourists. They will have modern facilities, including swimming pools."

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Tourism Board has framed a master plan to promote tourism in the district.

Contacted, Abu Taher Muhammad Jaber, acting chief executive officer of the Board, said, "We are promoting tourism in around

1,051 places across the country, including Banglabandha, Tentulia and several other places in Panchagarh under the master plan.

"We have started community tourism in Thakurgaon recently and we have trained the locals for it."

Asked about facilities in Panchagarh, he said, "We will construct walkways, set up coffee shops and build [public] washrooms at the tourist spots. We are inviting foreign investors to invest in our tourism sector.

"Apart from those, we are using our websites and five social media platforms to boost tourism. We, however, have no plan to build accommodation structures as that is not for us to do."

About government initiatives, Jahurul Islam, deputy commissioner of Panchagarh, told The Daily Star, "The government has taken up a plan to boost tourism in Panchagarh, centring the mountain peak, stretching tea fields, and archeological sites."

Besides, the civil administration and tourist police are alert regarding the visitors' security.