

# From gravel beds to tourists' treasure

Tourism transforms Panchagarh's economy

Panchagarh has undergone a remarkable transformation, evolving into a prime destination for tourism and trade, attracting travellers from Bangladesh and beyond.

**KONGKON KARMAKER**

A couple of decades ago, Panchagarh, the northernmost district of Bangladesh, was primarily known for its abundance of gravel beds. With thousands of acres of land devoted to digging for the resource, the backbone of the region's rural economy was based on those natural resources. However, memories of those days are now found largely in the history books. Panchagarh has undergone a remarkable transformation, evolving into a prime destination for tourism and trade, attracting travellers from Bangladesh and beyond. Historically, the region did not appeal to visitors due to limited infrastructure and long travel times from the capital of Dhaka. However, significant developments in the past



three decades, from improved road networks to enhanced connectivity, have reshaped the district's fortunes. Encircled by India on three sides, Panchagarh's location along the lower foothills of the Himalayas offers unique weather and stunning sights, only contributing to its growing appeal. The region's unique topography offers breathtaking mountain views, while winter's earlier arrival in the district has also made it a seasonal draw for tourists. In the cool season, temperatures drop as low as 5 degrees Celsius, a welcome relief from the heat in most other parts of the nation. In terms of natural beauty, one of the most captivating attractions is the view of Mount Kanchenjunga, the world's third-highest peak.

While the mountain is about 160 kilometres away, its snow-capped splendour can be seen from various spots in Panchagarh between October and November, when the skies are clear. Every year, thousands of tourists gather along the banks of the Mahananda River in Tetulia, one of the best vantage points, to catch this stunning view. Beyond the mountain views, Panchagarh is now known for another unique sight: tulip fields. The favourable climate has allowed farmers to cultivate these vibrant flowers, a rarity in Bangladesh. Since the first tulips were harvested in 2022, blooming fields have drawn visitors from across the country, marking yet another achievement in the district's growing tourism appeal. Tea cultivation is also a major part of the local economy. Panchagarh is the only place in Bangladesh with flatland tea gardens, a feat made possible by the region's elevation from sea level. Tea estates began developing in the 90s, and the district now boasts over 50 estates spanning approximately 10,000 acres. The tea industry here not only generates revenue but has also bolstered Panchagarh's identity as a producer of world-class, organic teas. However, although the focus has largely shifted, stone and sand extraction remain a



part of the economy, supporting the livelihoods of around 50,000 people. Sand collected from the rivers, especially fine sand from Bhajanpur, is in high demand for construction projects nationwide, providing a steady source of income for local families. The region's pride in its humble roots and affinity for geology also shine through in the fact that Panchagarh is home to Bangladesh's only rock museum, which houses ancient rocks as well as artefacts. For history buffs, the region offers numerous old sites, including the Mirza Shah Mosque, Golokdham Temple and the ruins of Vitorgarh, an ancient fort city built around the 5th century. Panchagarh's transformation has been supported by the expansion of accommodations and transport options. With direct bus services from Dhaka, a journey now takes around 8-10 hours. The addition of trains, along with the government and private sector's interest in hospitality, has significantly improved lodging facilities in the area. Entrepreneurs and NGOs have opened new hotels, restaurants, and homestays, creating more options for tourists and allowing them to experience local cuisine and the

rural landscape. The district's economic and cultural transformation has made it more than just a viewing point for Kanchenjunga. It has become a rich blend of scenic beauty, historical significance, and economic opportunity. As Prof Tuhin Wadud, head of the Bangla department at Begum Rokeya University, noted: "Panchagarh's blend of history, culture, and natural beauty is a hidden gem that has yet to reach its full potential." He emphasised the need for a comprehensive master plan from the government to develop the region's tourism and tea sectors, making them even more attractive to international visitors. Panchagarh's journey from a hub of stone extraction to a centre of tourism and trade highlights its potential for growth and development. This shift is not only a testament to the district's resilience but also a promising vision for the future, where nature, culture, and commerce come together to shape a vibrant local economy, he added. Atiqur Rahman had come to visit Tetulia from Khulna and enjoy the views of Kanchenjunga with his friends. In what was his third visit in the past 5 years, he finally found success and caught a glimpse of the peak. He pointed out several reasons for the district's appeal, chiefly a mix of natural and historical attractions. Besides, Kanchenjunga, the hills of Darjeeling and Siliguri are also visible, he said.

## Traditional scenic spots losing out to modern parks

**KONGKON KARMAKER**

Stirring archaeological sites and the wonders of nature across the eight districts in the Rangpur division attracted holidaymakers in droves in the past, but a lack of contemporary infrastructure at those spots has made those days a distant memory. With decrepit facilities in such destinations, the hospitality industry flourished under the private sector in the eight districts under Rangpur division. Nowadays, a majority of tourists are found lazing away at amusement parks, most offering modern residential facilities built in a planned way. Rides for children, as well as video games and even planetarium-like experiences, offer plenty of entertainment for visitors, especially given the alternative. For instance, things are almost the opposite in Ramsagar, one of the biggest tourist destinations just 15 minutes from Dinajpur town. There is only one guesthouse on its premises and that too only has around 5 rooms. But even these are not accessible to the public as they are usually booked by VIPs. Besides, the existing structures, including sheds built to protect visitors from sunlight inside the Ramsagar area, have become dilapidated. Another major factor that keeps tourists at bay is the lack of safety and security. Prodip Chandra, a local of the Ramsagar area, said, "People thronged to the lake during the winter, taking buses from various districts to enjoy picnics. Sometimes, the number of buses in a single day exceeded 300." "It was also helpful for local business, but those days are now in the past."

Locals said that not a single attraction had been built for children over the past two decades, adding that although the waterbody and surrounding highlands still make for an attractive spot, a lack of other facilities discourages visitors. The Kantajew Temple in Kaharol upazila of Dinajpur is in a similarly rough state. Although the 15,000-plus terracotta works installed on the walls of the 18th-century temple remain a sight to behold, the condition of the building is far from perfect. Only eight years ago, the iconic landmark underwent renovation and site development works. Yet, due to a lack of maintenance, many of the old problems have resurfaced. The scenario is no different at the Singra Forest in the Birganj upazila. The Sal forest, an asset of the Dinajpur Forest Department, was among the most attractive destinations for visitors in winter but now fails to draw tourists. "In the 90s, it was the most desirable picnic spot in the northern part of the country," said Abdus Sattar, a resident of the Alamnagar area in Rangpur. Most of the establishments are under the supervision of either the Forest Department or the Bangladesh Archaeological Department. Besides, a few are under the direct supervision of the Deputy Commissioner's offices and the Water Development Board in their respective districts. These state-owned sites can also be a huge source of revenue, but given the current state of affairs, that seems like little more than a pipe dream.



PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN