The growing threat of unregulated tourism



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In Bangladesh, people generally begin travelling in late autumn, continuing throughout the winter. In recent times, however, the monsoon has also emerged as a season for tourism in the haor and hill areas. The trend of tourism in the country is relatively recent. The remarkable travelogues of Ramnath Biswas, a pioneering Bangalee traveller who journeyed across the world, form part of our early travel narratives. In an agrarian rural society, travelling was different from the way it is in today's neoliberal era. Weddings, festivals, village fairs, pilgrimages, and seasonal trips to distant market towns were once the primary ways rural people stepped outside their localities. Apart from the hajj or pilgrimage to Gaya and Kashi, heading overseas for higher education was rarely heard of in the villages. Later, UN peacekeeping missions and opportunities at overseas labour markets opened new pathways for rural youth to travel abroad.

Today's profit-driven tourism has grown largely out of a colonial legacy. In a manner reminiscent of Christopher Columbus's so-called "discovery" of Indigenous territories as "America", different parts of the country are now being "explored" anew. This obsession with exploration is creating new risks for ecosystems and local cultures across Bangladesh. Until the 1990s, the country's most frequented tourist destinations were Cox's Bazar, Jaflong in Sylhet, Madhabkunda and the tea gardens in Moulvibazar, Madhupur Sal forest and Bhawal Garh, Mainamati in Cumilla, the Sundarbans, Mahasthangarh in Bogura, Paharpur in Naogaon, and Kaptai Lake in Rangamati. Then, all of a sudden, brazen sprees of investment, encroachment, pollution, and unruly crowds began to take over everywhere—from Nafakhum to Hum, from St Martin's Island to Tanguar Haor. This unregulated rush in the name of tourism has spared neither biodiversity and ecosystems nor local cultures. It has piled toxic plastic waste from the mountaintops to haor beds, destroying hills, forests and beaches.

The authorities concerned have never facilitated the civic education required for people to learn how to visit or connect with a river, forest, hill, wetland, landscape, local community or historical site. Conventional schooling doesn't teach us how to be responsible towards our landscapes and habitats. As a result, grotesque infrastructure has been constructed even in Ecologically Critical Areas (ECAs) such as the Sundarbans and sea beaches. In Sajek Valley, hazardous, unregulated infrastructure was built at the expense of the hill ecosystem and local cultural diversity. Social media platforms have fuelled this perilous trend further. Some tourists have separated mother birds from their chicks just to photograph a nest, while some have barged into homes and jhum fields in Indigenous villages to snap pictures without the local residents' consent.

In a country with 30 agroecological zones, eight hydrological regions, more than 1,400 rivers, 37 living languages, the world's largest mangrove forest, and the world's longest natural sea beach, it is imperative to develop a creative and responsible tourism sector that places local nature and cultures at its centre. Although construction is prohibited in protected areas and ECAs, laws and regulations are routinely violated on the ground. Hazardous structures have mushroomed along the Cox's Bazar beach. A Ramsar site like Tanguar Haor is being battered by motorised vessels. A bizarre variety of resorts have sprung up around Lawachara National Park, home to the hoolock gibbon. This has happened under every regime.

Using wood and bamboo alongside plastic, boards, glass and lead-based paints does not automatically make a building an 'eco-resort'. The concept of an eco-resort represents a comprehensive environmental and political commitment.

The cost of reckless tourism

Ruilui Para in Sajek Valley, under Rangamati's Baghaichhari upazila, was an ancestral settlement of the Lushai people. No major fires had ever occurred there before. The trouble began when Ruilui was encroached upon to launch a new tourism business, followed by unregulated construction. On February 24, 2025, a devastating fire reduced parts of Sajek Valley to ashes. Most structures there were built with bamboo, wood, cane and straw—all inflammable. But there was no firefighting facility in the area. But these establishments branded themselves as "eco-resorts".

On October 17, 2026, a fire broke out at Tuptup Resort, a so-called "eco-resort", along the Marine Drive in Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar, killing 10 tourists. Part of the resort was built with wood, bamboo and tin. The kitchen was located on the ground floor, where the fire originated. An investigation revealed that the resort had been built illegally and did not have environmental clearance. From April 2026 onwards, the Department of Environment served notices to 26 resorts and restaurants, including Tuptup, along the Marine Drive; 14 resorts were fined for defying the notice. On May 13, 2026, Tuptup Resort was fined Tk 1 lakh. To obtain environmental clearance for a resort or restaurant in Cox's Bazar, the design must be approved by the Cox's Bazar Development Authority, and the facility must have an effluent and waste management system. The authorities found that 200 establishments along the 80km stretch of the Cox's Bazar-Teknaf Marine Drive lacked legal clearance. Meanwhile, the brazen destruction of coastal dunes to build roads and structures continues unabated.



The Tuptup Resort in Cox's Bazar, which was burnt down in a devastating fire that took the lives of 10 tourists last month, was one of 26 establishments built without proper environmental clearance in the area.

FILE PHOTO: **ABDU RASHID MANIK**

Who is violating the ECA rules?

Under both national and global commitments, erecting structures and destroying ecosystems and species within protected areas and ECAs are prohibited in the country. Under Section 5 of the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act, 1995, the government can declare any area an ECA if its biodiversity and ecological balance are critically threatened or facing destruction. ECAs in Bangladesh include the Sundarbans (including a 10km peripheral zone), St Martin's Island, the Cox's Bazar-Teknaf coastline, Sonadia Island, Tanguar Haor, Marjat Baor, Gulshan-Baridhara Lake, and the Turag, Buriganga, Balu and Shitalakkhya rivers.

Within an ECA, setting up factories, cutting hills, extracting soil or sand, harming biodiversity, hunting wildlife, and undertaking any commercial or development activities that damage the natural balance of soil, water and air are strictly prohibited. These restrictions were imposed under the Environment Conservation Rules, 1997. The Ecologically Critical Area Management Rules, 2016 set out frameworks for ECA governance, formation of national and district committees, and community participation.

Although the government stepped back from destructive projects like a deep-sea port on Sonadia Island, it still remains in bad shape. Over the years, influential individuals have cleared thousands of acres of mangroves to establish commercial shrimp enclosures. The island, a vital habitat for the globally endangered spoon-billed sandpiper and rare sea turtles, is reeling under encroachment and pollution. St Martin's Island has been choked with unplanned construction. Native fish and avian species and rare flora like the wild rose are vanishing from Tanguar Haor. The Buriganga and other rivers surrounding Dhaka are now overrun by the invasive suckerfish. Hazardous illegal structures like Tuptup continue to appear along the Cox's Bazar-Teknaf Marine Drive. Why is there no monitoring, prosecution or punishment for these destructive activities and violations of ECA rules?

Let structures rooted in nature and culture flourish

On November 8, 2020, the Mro community in Bandarban staged a cultural showdown along the Bandarban-Chimbuk-Thanchi road, demanding suspension of the construction of the Marriott Hotel and Resort and calling for the protection of their hills and livelihoods. In 2004, Piren Slan sacrificed his life to stop the construction of a concrete eco-park and protect the Madhupur Sal forest. Why do Indigenous and local communities risk their lives to challenge such aggressive development projects? Because externally imposed architectural designs and construction materials are often incompatible with local nature and culture. The resulting infrastructure creates new forms of disorder, inequality and conflict in local environments and communities.

Using wood and bamboo alongside plastic, boards, glass and lead-based paints does not automatically make a building an "eco-resort". The concept of an eco-resort represents a comprehensive environmental and political commitment. Many of the country's traditional structures and architectural traditions honoured ecological principles. The Arkul Math in Keraniganj was constructed in a manner that makes it the last refuge for green parakeets in Dhaka today. Ancient heritage sites such as Hazrat Shahjalal's (RA) shrine in Sylhet, the Shat Gombuj Masjid in Bagerhat, and the Kantaji Temple in Dinajpur provide shelter not only to people but also to numerous local animal and bird species.

Article 18A of the constitution states that the state shall endeavour to protect and improve the environment for present and future citizens and preserve and safeguard natural resources, biodiversity, wetlands, forests and wildlife. Developing nature- and culture-sensitive architecture and responsible, inclusive tourism, with due regard for the ecosystems in all parts of the country including the ECAs and protected areas, is a constitutional commitment of the state.

Bangladesh must seek the truth behind women migrant workers' deaths



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When 24-year-old Tanzina Akter died in Saudi Arabia in July 2026, her family was reportedly informed she had suffered a stroke. However, her death certificate listed suicide as the cause. This discrepancy, highlighted in a recent *Bonik Barta* investigation, doesn't necessarily indicate a crime. But it does prompt a more immediate and significant public policy question about when a migrant worker's death is disputed and who is responsible for determining the actual cause.

Data from the Wage Earners' Welfare Board (WEWB) and the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) show that the bodies of 1,552 female migrant workers were repatriated between 2017 and October 25, 2026. Suicide was recorded as the cause of death in 282 of these cases, with 112 cases involving women who were working in Saudi Arabia. These figures represent repatriated deaths, not the overall suicide rate among all Bangladeshi women employed overseas. Without reliable data on the number of workers exposed to risk, their time abroad, and independently verified causes of death, comparing mortality risks would be misleading. Nevertheless, these numbers reveal a significant accountability issue.

In a prior study, RMMRU interviewed relatives of 100 deceased female migrant workers. In 11 cases, family members disputed suicide as the cause listed on death certificates, and 48 percent of families did not accept explanations of natural death. In one reported case of a female worker's death abroad, relatives claimed to observe bloodstains on her body when it was repatriated, while the death certificate listed suicide as the cause of death. Such accounts are allegations, not forensic conclusions. But these inconsistencies underscore the need for proper investigation into women migrants' deaths.

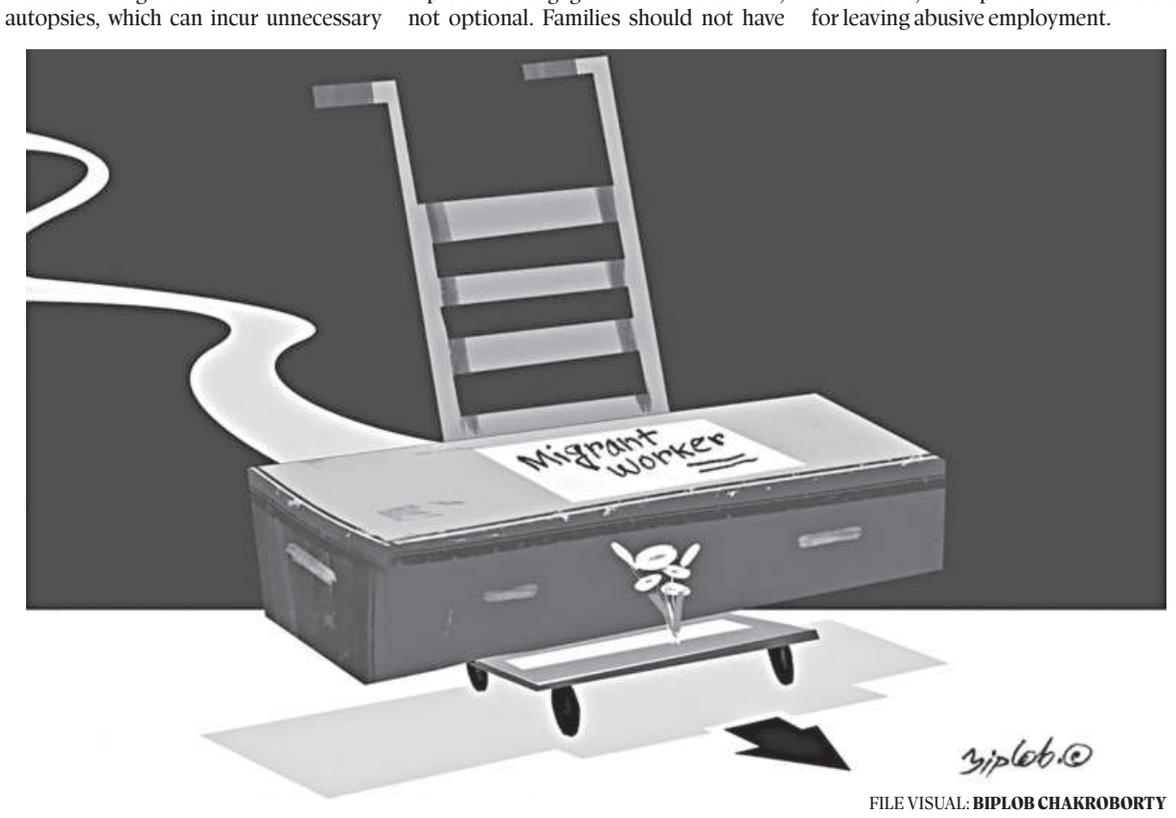
For women employed in private households abroad, risks are particularly difficult to detect due to seclusion, unequal bargaining power, and limited access to independent assistance. Therefore, a robust migration policy must protect workers throughout the employment cycle, encompassing recruitment, placement, emergency assistance, return and, if necessary, post-death investigations.

The Overseas Employment and Migration Act, 2013, with subsequent amendments in 2026, recognises the protection of migrant workers as a public responsibility. But legal reform should ultimately be judged based on its outcomes, not just the number of provisions added to update a law. Can a worker report abuse without retaliation? Will a distressed worker receive timely shelter and legal support? If a migrant worker dies, can her family obtain medical records and challenge an implausible explanation?

Bangladesh should start by implementing a clear medico-legal protocol for repatriated migrant workers' bodies. Trained personnel at the receiving airport should verify identity, document visible markers of injury, review accompanying death certificates, and preserve relevant records. If the cause of death is disputed, injuries are apparent, or documentation is inconsistent, an independent forensic assessment should determine whether further examination, including a second post-mortem where legally authorised, is required. This will necessitate trained specialists, secure evidence handling, adequate mortuary facilities, and a procedure for promptly informing families. The goal is not indiscriminate autopsies, which can incur unnecessary costs and conflict with family or religious concerns, but a credible and transparent process for suspicious deaths.

Bangladesh's diplomatic missions in destination countries should be mandated to open a documented case whenever a migrant worker dies under unclear or contested circumstances. The case file should include hospital records, medical findings, police reports, employment contracts, and any history of complaints. A designated consular officer should maintain contact with the family, documenting what evidence has been obtained as well as what remains missing and why. Since host countries retain jurisdiction over incidents on their territory, formal evidence-sharing arrangements and diplomatic engagement are essential, not optional. Families should not have to finance an international investigation to understand the cause of death of their loved one.

In way of prevention, labour wings and embassies need effective, confidential complaint channels, swift referral processes, trauma-informed support for affected workers, and safe accommodation for those escaping abuse. For workers who have lost access to their phones or documents, a standard hotline is inadequate; recruitment agents, community organisations, and host-country authorities must have clearly outlined emergency escalation procedures. Bilateral labour agreements should include enforceable contracts, guaranteed wage payments, rest periods, the right of workers to retain their identity documents, and practical mechanisms for leaving abusive employment.



FILE VISUAL: **BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY**

Additionally, recruiting agencies should be required to maintain verifiable employer and placement information, address complaints, and cooperate with investigations when a worker is injured, disappears, or dies. Proven misrepresentation, illegal fees, or obstruction should result in proportionate sanctions and accessible remedies, with due process for all parties. Publishing anonymised data on complaints, decisions, and restitution would allow for measurable regulatory performance while safeguarding the privacy of workers and their families.

Relying on a limited range of destination countries and occupations also exposes women to concentrated risks. Expanding accredited training in nursing, caregiving, language, and technical skills, combined with verified employer partnerships and internationally recognised qualifications, would broaden women's access to safer employment opportunities.

Bangladesh needs a unified, gender-disaggregated database for migrant protection that links Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), WEWB, diplomatic missions, and relevant complaint authorities. This database should meticulously record deployments, complaints, rescues, deaths and their stated and verified causes, investigations, and compensation outcomes, all while adhering to strict privacy safeguards. Annual public reports should differentiate between recorded and medically reviewed causes of death and discuss risk using appropriate worker population denominators. An independent review, including forensic experts and migration researchers, could then identify recurring issues and recommend corrective actions. Without such evidence, policy will continue to be reactive to individual scandals rather than proactive in addressing preventable patterns.

Bangladesh should evaluate its migration system not solely on the number of workers sent abroad and the remittances generated, but also on the protection provided and the remedies available when that protection fails. Every unexplained death demands a serious response. For a nation so reliant on migrant labour, establishing the truth is not a diplomatic inconvenience; it is a fundamental obligation of development policy.